

# Ireneczka

Bozorg 'Alavi

*from Nânehâ, a collection of nine stories.  
Translated by C. Lindley Cross*

I don't know anything about her except this name; a blackness, pure of color, is all of her that remains. Even her name, I don't know precisely. When I asked her, "What is your name?" she said *Irena*. It became clear from her as she spoke that others called her *Irenka*. In that world of oneness and duplicity, in which our bodies are mixed together and our souls flutter in ominous landscapes, I called her *Ye-re-nechkaa*. Was it last night, or a month ago? Or some years ago? What happened? A shadow was flickering before my eyes, elusive, fragmented, interrupted, washed out. When I stretch out my hands to grasp this formless vision, the tips of my fingers, my elbows, my temples, the marrow of my bones, every place on my body burns. An exhausting pain torments my soul, I pant. I shake myself and think, *what has happened? what took place? what remains for me?* Nothing!

That night was also like the other nights. That night also was like the other nights in the insomnia that tortured me. Perhaps I was moaning from a higher fever. But since the morning after until today, the name *Ireneczka* has been swimming in the neverending ocean of my limited mind, and I, however much I try to ensnare the owner of that name, I cannot. The only solid thing that I have is that very name, *Ireneczka*, and a Russian poem I hadn't known before:

*I loved you and I kissed you  
But you, you laughed at me  
O eyes of black,  
What have you done, just look at me!*

I didn't know this poem. I have never known Russian poetry. I don't know where I learned it. But this poem shares a connection with *Ireneczka*. Who was she?

She appeared once in my life. She was with me for a few moments, and then disappeared. I don't know where she had come from... I don't know where she went... I don't know when she came to me.

Was she Polish? She might have been. Did she go to South Africa? Perhaps. Did they throw her in prison? Possibly. Is she dead? No... Irenezka was a spirit without form. People see them while dreaming, in acute fevers, in the space between sleep and wakefulness. There are many of them... We see them in everyday occasions, but we do not recognize them. They show themselves to us, but they do not make themselves known.

It was the month of Tir. The sweat was boiling out of our bodies. Two roosters in two different directions had started to crow. One of them was farther away. He was calling to his friend in his shrill voice. The other answered, politer but with more grandiloquence. Beyond the window, some sparrows were chirping. One of the gadflies droned, madly beating himself against the glass. I was sprawled across the bed, leafing through Nezâmi's *Haft Paykar*. I came to the part where King Bahram saw the faces of the seven princesses in the palace of Khavarnaq, and I read these lines:

*Such is the seven stars' decree,  
that such a conqueror come to be.  
Seven princesses in seven realms  
shall he embrace, like single pearls.  
Love for those princesses so fair  
his heart invaded, hair by hair.  
Such fecund mares, a stallion bold:  
a lion-brave youth, and seven brides:  
How should desire not fire his heart,  
and, waxing, not attempt the mark?  
When the prince left that chamber, he  
locked the door; gave the steward the key,  
Sometimes, on drunken whim, the king  
approached that chamber, key in hand,  
And, entering into Paradise,  
on those angelic forms would gaze;  
And like one who, near water, thirsts,  
would sleep, still moved by his desire.*

Have these verses just come to my mind? Or was it truly that day, that hot

summer day, while I was gasping with thirst, that I was reading that poetry? Even supposing I'm imagining things, what do these lines have to do with Irenezka, the Polish girl? I haven't been well for a while—I know—but I imagine that these haphazard thoughts have not been brought together by chance.

Suddenly, without warning, without precedent of any kind, Irenezka opened the door to my room and stood before me like a statue. *Nobody* had the courage to enter my room. My room was far from the city, for I had brought trouble upon a family. Their lives had been disrupted. As I didn't want to see anybody, I had gone far away from the city and made my home in a garden. Throughout the day, members of my family came to the garden, but nobody dared enter my room. And I didn't leave my room; but if my foot occasionally stepped beyond the threshold, everyone in the garden would flee from me. Perhaps they came and told me that someone had reason to see me. I don't remember at all. Irenezka's courage and boldness astonished me. I got up and looked at her, and she looked back at me, staring. My room was dark. Only from the depths of the shattered doors did a few golden rays of sunlight, reflected on the black curtains, bring a little of the day's laughter to my somber cell.

Irenezka left the door open and a slap of the warm sun descended upon my bed. She also pushed the curtain aside with her hand, and waves of pure gold enveloped her. I don't recall her customary words; I asked her, "What's your name?"

She said, "Irena."

—Irena!

I am right to say I don't know where she had come from!

She pulled out the curtain and threw it away, the dazzling rays of sunlight were blinding my eyes.

I was terrified. If someone else had done this, I would have either killed myself or him.

But in the face of this air, whirling and turning, I felt small and powerless. I rose, took her hand, and sat her down. My flushed face and bloodshot eyes frightened her, she tried to calm me down. I suddenly squeezed her hand so tightly it hurt, and she panicked and let out a cry. She struck my chest and threw me on the bed.

I grabbed her locks of black hair, or blond—I myself don't know—and pressed her lips upon my chest. My entire body was in turmoil. My vision was going dark. It was if a jackhammer was pounding in my head with thudding beats.

“I wanted to go to Avaz.<sup>1</sup> I got thirsty. I came inside the garden. I shouted. Nobody answered. Then, I went inside this room.”

Then she left. Where she went, I do not know.

She appeared again at night. In everyday life, people scrape together explanations for happenings of this sort.

I needn't say that I was waiting for her. I knew that she would come.

She had said to me that she would not see me again. She had said that today, at three o'clock in the afternoon, she would be going to South Africa. She had said that they would arrest her if she wasn't in Avaz by three o'clock. She had already spent a year in prison—she couldn't go there again! Nonetheless, I knew that she would come.

It was ten o'clock at night. Again, she opened the door and stood like a statue over the threshold, staring. Irenezka had a garment of black silk over her body. Her blond hair also seemed black. The black veins in her white legs, the sign of a great deal of walking, was like a black frame that has enclosed a white page.

*‘From what deep fear or dread’, they asked,  
‘hide you your silvery form in black?  
‘Tis best you share your tale with us:  
whiten this blackness; now, you must  
Tell us, from your goodwill, the truth:  
what means the marvel of this black?’*

I had nothing at home. She put on my black dressing gown. She set off down the path that led to the city. After a half hour, she returned with a basket full of food and drink. I no longer had the courage to close the doors of my room. I was distraught and helpless within and without; I did everything she asked of me.

She was saying, “Isn't it a pity that people stay in their houses?”

We were floating on the moonlight together.

—How is it that you came here tonight? Aren't you afraid of me?

—Of you? I wasn't even afraid of the soldiers of the SS. I escaped from their prison. So what? All Polish girls have this kind of story.

The moon had stopped in the corner of the sky, mocking us. Some frogs were croaking. The monotonous, piercing cry of the screech-owl reminded humanity of

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<sup>1</sup>A Polish word meaning “refugee camp.” —*B.A.*

the pitiable tragedy that is our lot. I had taken her hand and stole with her through the intoxicating delicacy of this cool summer night.

She asked me, “Why is your hand hot?”

—I have a fever.

—Why?

—I don’t know.

—Why are you so sad?

What answer did I have to give?

Then I asked: “Ireneczka, did you go to Avaz at three o’clock today?”

—No.

—Why?

—I didn’t want to go to South Africa.

—What’s going to happen now? Won’t there be trouble, now that you’re going late?

—I’m not going tonight. Tonight, I’m staying with you.

—I don’t have room. You can’t stay with me.

—I’m staying. I’ll do you some good. I’ll give you all the joy and freshness of my body.

She hung her hands around my neck. She caressed my face. She kissed my eyes and rubbed her cold cheeks against my hot, melting face. But my lips were cold and dry and dead.

Her pitch-black hair shone in the whiteness of the moonlight. Her marble neck and breast which cast a bolt of desire upon me from under her black shirt, her delicate and dancing hands which moved in the air with twists and turns, her fire-scattering eyes behind black eyelashes, the buds at the tip of her breasts, all called out to me. But I didn’t want her, *I did not want her*, and that night my soulless body and her bodiless soul could not be joined.

I didn’t want her. Because Ireneczka was a malicious spirit who had only appeared in my mind with the intention of torturing me that warm summer night. So I imagined.

Her body was scalding, and tongues of flame flashed out from her like a furnace. But I was trembling, not from any ailment, no—I was cold, cold.

Ireneczka stripped and went into the water. In the rays of moonlight, the drops of water fell from her body like quicksilver. Not yet dry, she clung to me, cleaning my entire body with her warm lips. With her hands, her delicate fingertips, and her soft hair tickling me, she smelled me from head to toe, trying to kindle me. But I was cold and there was no fire that could work on me.

I mustered my courage and got a hold of myself. I overcame all my nerves. With both hands and feet and all the energy of my youth, I held Ireneczka firmly and quieted her.

—Ireneczka, Ireneczka, you are beautiful and kind, you are so good... Why? Why do you make a slave of yourself and throw yourself at my feet? Why don't you offer your body to someone who loves you?

She had become quiet. Tired and overwhelmed, she had fallen upon the carpet at the edge of the fountain. I brought a pillow for her, I threw a blanket over her. She had goosebumps from the cold. She closed her eyes shut and drops of tears, like a necklace of pearls, gave her eyes and her innocent face an appearance of holiness.

She said something in response to me. Her words were the most beautiful poetry I have ever heard in my life. She was saying, "You will not understand."

I didn't understand, and for that very reason, repeating it is impossible for me.

I still remember that Russian poetry.

*I loved you and I kissed you  
But you, you laughed at me  
O eyes of black,  
What have you done, just look at me!*

She was saying—no, she wasn't saying, she was singing:

"I am in mourning. My black shirt is a witness to my bad fortune, for I have lost my own beloved. Perhaps he is still alive. Nothing can console me. That existence which I once was, I am no longer. I am a ghost of what I was, and in the wake of his ghost I follow. That which was human in me has been scattered. Disgrace and slavery have no more influence over me. The day I was a human, the Fascists killed me. You can be dishonorable with me. You can drive me like a dog from your table. I am no longer human. Everything that you saw is up to the time when I have not revealed myself."

She fell asleep. Ireneczka was my mate, she was my shadow.

When I woke up in the morning, Irenezka was no longer there. She had gone. Where she had gone, I don't know.

Irenezka was the very thing that I was searching for. Irenezka has made my dark days darker still.

Every time I see Polish girls, I remember Irenezka. Every time these trucks filled with Polish girls pass in front of my eyes, I turn my head to watch them. However, I know that I will not see Irenezka again. Irenezka is one of those who has entangled us; Irenezka is a spirit that has fled from a lifeless body.

Irenezka is my shadow.

—*fin*

## Translator's notes

Bozorg Alavi's *Irenezka*, it should be clear, is deep in conversation with a famous episode of one of the great epic poems of Persian literature, the *Haft Paykar* of Nizāmī Ganjavī (d. 1209). The story is entitled "The Tale of the Princess of the Black Dome," and revolves around a King who is visited by a man who is clothed entirely in black. His curiosity aroused, the King presses his guest to reveal the reason for this garb, but the man refuses, claiming "None knows the secret of this black, save he who wears it on his back" (Meisami, 109). Finally, the King has his way, and upon obtaining the information he desires, sets out on a journey that will literally take him to the heights of Paradise, yet he is ultimately returned to Earth by the same lust for knowledge and possession that drove him to abandon his kingdom for this mad quest in the first place. It is only with the knowledge of what he has lost that he may also don the black raiment of mourning and fully understand what his visitor meant and why he was so adamant to dissuade him from his folly.

Nezami's tale is a work of structural complexity and philosophical richness on par with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and here the author seeks to explore its psychological dimensions in the light of his own personal exile to Germany and the events of the Second World War. When passages of the *Haft Paykar* were cited in this story, I turned to J.S. Meisami's masterful translation, for the Persian is difficult to translate and she introduces a second narrative voice that is far different in register and tone from Alavi's uncomfortable and disoriented narrator.

## References

Ganjavī, Niẓāmī, *The Haft Paykar: A Medieval Persian Romance*, trans. by Julie Scott Meisami (Oxford University Press, 1995).