

# Inga

*Sára Zeithammerová*

Karel knew that Inga wasn't in love with him when they married. A practical man, he knew that she would grow to love him in time and if not, respect would suffice. During the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, obedience and hard work was what was important, not romance, art or infatuation. Inga was the best wife he could have chosen. Beautiful, quiet. Seemingly, she was devoted solely to standing by her husband, but she felt imprisoned in their flat, crushed between its walls and sleek furniture. She greeted Karel every evening with a bright smile, spotless apron and a full plate. When he wanted to make love, she submitted without protest. Although she didn't hate him, she still felt like a prisoner.

Two months into the marriage, Inga was alone in the flat. That night two men came, grubby, unshaven, their eyes swollen. They told her that they had escaped from a work camp and were attempting to cross the border. They hoped that Karel, their former friend, would help them. When Inga told them that Karel was not there, she saw something crumble inside of them, as if all their hopes were dashed by her words. So she took them in, allowed them to wash and shave; gave them some money, maps, clothes that Karel no longer wore.

"You were never here," she said, as they thanked her.

Two days later, Inga was arrested and interrogated. She denied everything. When they struck her, she didn't speak a word. Then they brought in one of the men she helped. His jaw hung limply; blood pouring down his lips.

"Yes, that's her."

Inga eventually confessed, even to things she had nothing to do with. She was sentenced to ten years.

She had expected Karel to be furious with her. Instead, he looked at her with disappointment, which was worse.

"May I hold her?" he asked. They said he couldn't. Karel laughed desperately. "You lock her up for ten years for something she didn't even mean to do and I can't even hold her?"

"I'm sorry," Inga whispered from her side of the table. She then told him that if he wanted a divorce, she would understand. But Karel shook his head firmly and reached for her hands.

"I will wait for you. It's alright. What can happen in ten years?"

Inga nodded, feeling relieved but at the same time she felt a kind of dread. Anything could happen in ten years. She would grow old; she may not be able to have children that Karel wanted so much. He may stop loving her in ten years. She might start hating him.

In prison, Inga was placed in a cell with a dissident named Laura. She had been sentenced to twenty five years, a terrible punishment, since she had so much life in her. She took part in every hunger strike and was emaciated like a gutter child. Her resistance was pointless. They always overpowered her, fed her by force, beat her until her skin turned black, put her in confinement for weeks on end. Inga had been told that Laura was dead to her family, since her father had lost his job and her brother was unable to attend university following her arrest. Laura acted so recklessly because she had no one to return to, nothing to lose.

Inga knew nothing of writers or artists that Laura talked about. It was dangerous to have an opinion on such things. At first, she spent every free moment thinking of Karel, who was allowed to visit only once a month. He hoped that Inga would be released sooner for good conduct. Inga was good. She obeyed orders, never spoke unless spoken to, like the dutiful woman she was at home. But after Karel left, Inga had a feeling that he had not come at all.

“You don’t understand how difficult it is for him!” she would snap at Laura, whenever she would ask about her husband. “I should be grateful to him that he’s going through all this, all because of me.”

Laura was hurt. “You did nothing wrong. You were brave.”

“I was stupid. And so are you! If you want to change something, you have to get out first and the way you’re going, you’re going to stay in here for the rest of your life!” said Inga cuttingly.

She noticed that Laura was shaking. When she went to the bunk and turned her over, there were tears streaming down Laura’s face. It scared her, seeing her look so weak.

“I’ve been cruel, I’m sorry. I don’t think you’re stupid. I think you’re the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

“I’m scared they’ll get rid of me. They get rid of everyone that gets in their way.”

“I won’t let them,” Inga whispered.

Laura looked at her with her determined salty eyes and suddenly kissed her on the lips.

On Karel’s next visit, she longed to tell him what happened. The guilt she felt, the rush. But instead, Karel told her that he had a mistress. Inga wasn’t surprised, she knew he would not be satisfied with one embrace a month.

“It meant nothing, I swear, it meant nothing. Will you forgive me?” he pleaded.

And she found herself saying: “Of course. It can happen to anybody.”

Laura had fallen silent. She began eating again. She stopped rebelling, as if she had someone to return to now, something to lose. The overseers continued to provoke her but Laura kept her mouth shut. Inga started to miss her voice. She found herself looking at her one morning, when she took off her clothes and washed before a mirror flecked with rust. Her skin had become smooth and full, like on a statue that you long to touch in a gallery but are forbidden to do so. And Inga walked towards her and pulled her into her arms.

In their ten years together, Inga changed. She expressed her opinion on ordinary things and formed an opinion on things she never thought she could. With Karel, she told him her feelings, her fears, her hopes. She wanted them to be equals. Karel was confused and guilty, seeing the woman he had fallen in love with change before his eyes. He could not decide whether it was for better or for worse and he didn’t yet know the reason.

Laura was the reason. Her love for Inga was what changed her and Inga loved her back. They lay together at night, free to express themselves behind the locked door. They worked side by side, told each other stories, laughed together. Every morning, they brushed each other’s hair and every night, they would tend to their bruises and cuts. Inga hadn’t expected that she could become free in prison.

In the last tenth year, she told Laura that she would soon be released. The response was tears and anger.

“You’re not going to be any freer out there!”

“And what do you expect me to do? Stay here with you?”

“There’s talk of amnesty. I’ll get out and we can be together!”

“I can’t leave Karel. How could I? After everything he’s been through, after all those years of waiting, I *can’t* leave him. I’ll stay with him and nothing will change that.”

“You don’t love him,” Laura implored.

“We barely know each other. He never left me, although he could’ve had. He has suffered, like me. He loves and respects me. I will not be a prisoner anymore. I will learn to love him. That’s all he deserves.”

They lay close that night, arms around each other, Inga gazing at her in the light of the dying candle, whose wick struggled against the burning wax. Inga felt that she was drowning, too, being pulled under and she clung on Laura’s body, as if they could somehow be saved.

But the next day, Karel took her home. He told her that they will easily pick up where they left off years ago, but they couldn’t. He thought about what can happen in ten years. A war can begin and end. A government can change three times over. And a wife can return without a trace of her former self. She still waited for him every day with a smile. She became pregnant. But when they made love, he was troubled by her sudden boldness and sometimes, he saw that she had closed her eyes, as if she didn’t want to see him. And he sometimes caught her crying, when she thought he couldn’t hear her, or ripping up a letter she didn’t know he glimpsed.

The State Security only asked to see her once in those later years, about her former cellmate Laura, who had managed to cross the border after being granted an amnesty. When Inga returned, Karel asked her nothing, as she sobbed and smiled in his arms.