

Anna Bolavá: Into Darkness

Translated by Graeme and Suzanne Dibble

Chapter One

The small-leaved linden flower

I can't resist heading out into the yard again. It's already in the shade, but the cracked concrete is still warm from the hot day. I look up. There's still a beautiful sky falling down in the west and in the distance it's all bathed in orange light. Dark clouds are coming in from the east. They look threatening, but they're moving slowly, so I can't make up my mind what to do. There's definitely going to be a downpour, no doubt about it. Marcela shouted that over the fence an hour ago and she's stashed all her plant pots and tubs in the cellar. Right now she's locking up the house. It's not even six o'clock yet, but that's the last anyone'll see of her today. Because it's coming today. It's just a matter of when. How much you can get done before then. How many bags I should take and whether I'll need pruners. I'm really hot and I feel weak in the legs. The sun is still harsh and hurts my eyes. I'd best take my dark glasses and a headscarf wouldn't go amiss either. Though I'm still in two minds about that. After all, I'll be going really fast, so maybe it's better to let my hair stream out behind me. The main thing is to move fast. I can't waste time. I get the bike out of the shed and stick three big paper bags in the basket. I weigh them down with a stone so they won't fly out along the way. Whether I manage to fill them up remains to be seen. I'll cycle to the square and come back along the low road by Buben. Marcela has battened down the hatches, but she still has one window open to let in some air and behind the billowing curtain you can see the weather forecast on TV. It can't be all that bad if she hasn't unplugged the electrical appliances yet. Maybe it'll be a decent haul. If I step on it. All these rapid movements are making me dizzy and I feel like I might be sick. Too much luck has suddenly come raining down on me in a single day and it's impossible to take it all in. I'm anxious to be off and the restlessness inside me is growing.

The heat outside is unbearable, weighing down on my whole body even when I cycle fast. A hot breeze flows through my hair, which is a good thing. At least my hair will dry and I won't freak out at night. The road to the square is straight and safe, and when I'm not pedalling like a lunatic, I let go of the handlebars and stretch my arms out into the air. I'm flying through a space that's been scorched by the first days of summer and in a few hours will be cooled by torrential rain. I take the band out of my hair and let it flutter out in every direction. I want to close my eyes and soar, but I have to control myself – after all, there can sometimes be people in the street and then there'd be more talk about me behaving inappropriately. Small-town

mortals will never understand what a nymph needs to live. I grab hold of the handlebars and start pedalling. There's no time to lose. The wind is picking up, but it's not because I'm barrelling along as if my life depended on it, tearing down the main road past the mill-race towards the square, where I'll begin collecting linden leaves for the first time this year. Something really is brewing. It's going to rain and it's going to be intense. It could hardly be otherwise on such a weird, sultry day. Marcela doesn't hesitate. She's just seen the ominous prediction on TV. All sweaty and sticky, she kneels down by the electric socket and pulls on the plug. It won't come out, so she redoubles her efforts and jiggles it from every angle. Even if it means more plaster falling off, that plug is coming out. She's going to do the same in the kitchen and bedroom. If she could, she'd unplug the streetlight in front of her house as well. She's gone bright red all over and her temples are throbbing nervously, but she's not going to get washed tonight. She lies down on the couch and pulls a furry blanket over her. It's not the first time she's gone to bed unwashed out of fear, and there's nothing for it but to lie there quietly, smelly and alone in the dark. At least close her eyes and get it over with. God willing, tomorrow will bring another day and she'll open the window. Until then, she can wait it out underneath her blanket. In the coming days she's not going to be left with any other option, because summer is here with all its storms and torrential downpours.

I'm at the square and the sun is beginning to make its exit. Two of the linden trees aren't flowering yet and two are just starting, but so far they're only halfway there. The last one, the oldest one, is nothing short of a miracle, coated in open blossoms, its heavy branches reaching almost to the ground. I plonk my bike down into the uncut grass by the wall and I'm there. I'm greeted by the first black beetles and tiny flies. Clouds of mosquitoes show up in the rays of sunlight. So here I am, you've got me. I open the bag slung over my left shoulder and use my right hand to grab a flower-coated branch. I pull it towards me and set to work. The bees have got here before me, so I have to be careful. Most of them are high above me, swaying with the tree in the warm breeze. Like the scent of the linden, their buzzing is ubiquitous and as impressive as ever. It takes me a while to get a feel for the place and the size of the flowers. I also have to shift the bag from time to time to find the best position for it on my arm. In the end I leave it on my wrist because it keeps slipping off my shoulder and that slows me down. Now it's important to get a rhythm going, with each movement following on from the one before. Plucking linden flowers is a noble and beautiful thing, but it takes years to get into the swing of it. Harmony and coordination between branch and hand means a bag half-full in no time – easily within ten minutes. If you don't know how to coordinate your movements when you're on the hunt for flowers, you'll only come away with enough for your own needs. I'm the only one round here who knows how to do it, which pleases me. The local lindens are mine. The trees alongside the roads leading into the village are left unpicked, at the mercy of the bees and aphids and dust, but these ones are mine! We've known each other since I was born and we're destined for each other. I know which branches I can lay into and which ones I should take it easy on. For years now I've been able to tell the difference between the flowers and even from the road I can guess their future weight. The smaller ones are better for infusing, while the bigger ones go off to the collection centre in a sack.

Something's stung me on the shoulder. I swat it away and realize that it's still roasting and I'm thirsty. I can't stand this hair any longer. I have to go back to my bike for the hairband; I left it

wrapped round the handlebar. I hate it when I'm working and something gets in my mouth or falls in my eyes. How come I don't have that headscarf? My view is obscured by all this long hair and all these insects around my head and I've lost my bearings. I stop concentrating and start to panic. I wipe the sweat from my brow and my bag drops down into the grass. I try to fix my hair using just my hands, which are all sweaty and covered in linden pollen. A huge bun bound up several times with the band makes me feel calmer and now I have a clear view of what's in front of me again. When I get home I'll untie it and let the last damp bits under the heavy mop of hair on top dry off. I don't go to bed with wet hair. I can't stand that feeling or the pain. I pretend it's not there, but it's actually getting worse and that spells danger. Just like that fickle sun. It's about time it set and left us all in peace, but it's still there. I'm standing in a bad position and occasionally it shines through the branches right into my eyes and a knife goes through my forehead and stabs deep into my brain on the right-hand side. Then darkness comes over me, but it only lasts for a moment. The light gradually returns and it's a dark-blue colour. Then it fades and is gone. Those fickle rays. Why haven't I got my glasses? I always bring them with me – I wouldn't leave home without them. Maybe they fell out on the way here. So I keep on picking. Blossoms galore, but I'm not satisfied. I can't concentrate. I cast a nervous eye over the other branches in case they have better specimens, because I'm no longer convinced this is the best spot. It's not going nearly as fast as I'd hoped and there's always something getting in the way of that graceful interplay of movements I'd hoped for. Sometimes the flower's torn in half or it's a puny little one; sometimes the blossoms are stuck together and have little black specks on them. This isn't a good spot. I can't afford to waste my time here. I keep moving on till I've made my way round the entire tree. I take a sample from each place, but the bag isn't filling up much.

I go on to the next tree. The branches are higher, the flowers closed; some of the little balls haven't opened yet, it's too soon. But I pick a few anyway as I want to linger here a while and enjoy the bountiful fragrance from above. Naturally, three metres up and everything's flowering all at once in the fierce sunlight, but you'd need a ladder to get close enough. If only I had a ladder... And if only that linden was in our orchard and not here in full view of everyone... How long would it take me to pick the whole tree? Until there wasn't even one little flower left on it? And where would I put it all? I'd have to cover the whole loft in several layers. And it'd have to stay warm with a slight draught so everything would dry out quickly. Maybe I'd climb into that pile of herbs and die. Could there be a nicer death? No-one would ever find me there. I'd dissolve in the pungent smell, shrivel up there in the dark, lying on the newspapers on the floor like a curious human flower. How long would it take the linden and how long would it take me? What is the drying rate for a human being... In actual fact, if I did pick the whole tree, I'd have to get Marcela to take me to the collection center by car, and then she'd pocket half my earnings in petrol money. I swallow very dry, bitter saliva and try to drive away these unpleasant thoughts.