



A
GIRL
IN
EXILE

ISMAIL KADARE

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About the Book

Rudian Stefa is called in for questioning by the Party Committee. An unknown girl - Linda B. - has been found dead, with a signed copy of his latest book in her possession. Rudian remembers writing the dedication at the request of Linda's friend, who has since become his mistress but has now disappeared. He soon learns that Linda's family, considered suspect, were exiled to a small Albanian town far from the capital, and that the girl committed suicide.

But what really happened to Linda B.? Through layers of intrigue, her story gradually unfolds: how she loved Rudian from a distance, and the risks she was prepared to take so that she could get close to him.

A Girl in Exile is a stunning, deeply affecting portrait of life and love under surveillance, infused with myth, wry humour and the chilling absurdity of a paranoid regime.

About the Author

Ismail Kadare is Albania's best-known novelist and poet. Translations of his novels have appeared in more than forty countries. He was awarded the inaugural Man Booker International Prize in 2005, and the Jerusalem Prize in 2015.

John Hodgson studied at Cambridge and Newcastle and has taught at the universities of Prishtina and Tirana. This is the fourth novel by Ismail Kadare that he has translated.

ALSO BY ISMAIL KADARE

The General of the Dead Army

The Siege

Chronicle in Stone

Twilight of the Eastern Gods

The File on H

The Three-Arched Bridge

Broken April

The Ghost Rider

The Concert

The Palace of Dreams

The Pyramid

Three Elegies for Kosovo

Spring Flowers, Spring Frost

Agamemnon's Daughter

The Successor

The Fall of the Stone City

The Accident

*Dedicated to the young Albanian women
who were born, grew up and spent their
youth in internal exile.*

Ismail Kadare

A GIRL IN EXILE
Requiem for Linda B.

*Translated from the Albanian
by John Hodgson*



Harvill Secker
LONDON

1

UNTIL HE REACHED the end of Dibra Street, it seemed to him that he had succeeded in thinking of nothing at all. But when he found himself next to the Tirana Hotel on the north side of Skanderbeg Square, he felt a sense of urgency, even panic. Only this square lay between him and the Party Committee building. Now he could no longer pretend to be more composed than he was, or reassure himself with the thought that his conscience was clear. He had only to cross this square, and however huge it might be, it was too short a distance for anyone who had been summoned to the Party Committee without explanation.

With frenzied repetition, as if this were the only way he could make up for lost time, he rehearsed the two possible issues that might, unknown to him, have got him into trouble: his latest play, which he had been waiting two weeks for permission to stage, and his relationship with Migena.

At any other time the second matter would have worried him more than the first. As he drew near the National Bank, the final scene of their quarrel replayed itself in his mind with excruciating clarity. The setting had been the same as that of their previous spat: the corner in his apartment where his bookshelves met the window. They had exchanged almost the same words and her tears had been the same. In fact it was the tears that had scared him. Without them he might have broken off their relationship two weeks earlier. He would have taken her for an overexcited girl from the Art College, who herself didn't know what she wanted. Every time she wept he hoped to

find out what her tears concealed, if anything. He had been sure that this was his last chance. 'What's the matter?' he had asked hoarsely. 'At least tell me.' 'I can't. I don't know myself,' she replied. 'You don't know yourself? Really? You think you're so complicated? With all those Marlene Dietrich messages - I love you, I don't love you? Is that what it's all about?'

He felt she was not in control of herself. 'Listen, you're not complicated at all. You're only . . .' An airhead from the provinces, he wanted to say, but restrained himself. 'You're just schizophrenic, or a spy . . .'

He bit his tongue, but the word was out.

'No,' she replied, yet less sharply than he'd expected. 'I'm neither of those things.'

'Then out with it. What the hell's got into you? Tell me, and don't keep saying you don't know.'

He had stretched out his hand as if to seize a girl by the hair two or three times in his life, but he had never actually done it. Now it happened with unexpected ease. He thought his grip would loosen at once and he would let go of those strands as if they were flames, but his hand did not obey him and angrily he pushed that lovely head, which he had caressed so sweetly only a short time ago, against the bookshelves. A comb fell, and after the comb a pile of books whose names for some reason forced themselves up onto his frantic eyes: Scott Fitzgerald, *Toponyms of Albania and Kosovo*, Plutarch.

It was a mere forty seconds to the door of the Party Committee, but enough time for him to realise that, if she had reported him, he couldn't care less. In fact he would prefer a denunciation by her, even with the word 'spy' in it, to any hitch to his play.

He chided himself as a hopeless idiot, unable to see how dangerous a denunciation could be. But this denunciation not only failed to worry him, it seemed to him that he secretly desired it.

As he crossed the threshold of the main entrance, he understood the reason why: he hoped that, whatever trouble it caused him, it might bring its own consolation, as they say every evil does. It might enable him to fathom something that had tortured him now for weeks – the enigma of that girl.

The U-shaped table was familiar to him, but this was the first time that he had sat down alone on its right-hand side. The second secretary and an unknown man had taken their places at the section that connected the two arms of the U. What was this summons about? Why no prior explanation? There was no question of a glass of water or a coffee, but they might at least have said, We're sorry to trouble you, or asked irritating, vapid questions, like: How's the creative process?

He braced himself against the chair back, bristling with the obscure sort of anger that at least helps you keep your dignity, as his friend Llukan Herri would say.

As if reading his mind, the second secretary spoke without preamble and said that the Party valued his work for the stage. This was why the Party Committee had summoned him here to explain a matter for which other people would have had to answer to the Investigator's Office. Before the second secretary had finished speaking, he turned his head towards the stranger, who could be supposed to have come from that office. The investigator's expression was calm, almost benign.

'We require an explanation, or rather two or three simple explanations,' the investigator said, looking down at some sheets of paper in front of him. 'I think you will help us.'

'Of course,' he replied. It must be Act Two, he thought, where the ghost appears. He had noticed that any slip-ups generally happened at the end of Act Two. But still he didn't understand why he should answer for this to an investigator rather than to the theatre's Artistic Board, as was usual.

'It's a sensitive issue,' the investigator continued.

'I still don't see why I have to explain it here.'

The two officials looked at each other.

'Comrade,' said the second secretary. 'I explained to you that this is because of the Party's respect for you. If you would prefer the Investigator's Office . . .'

The investigator bit his lip and made an unintelligible gesture with his hand. He was clearly uneasy.

The Investigator's Office, he wondered. Had it gone that far? 'I'm listening,' he said.

The investigator studied his notes.

'It's a matter of a young girl,' he said, calmly and very slowly.

Aha, he thought. So it is the other thing. Not the auditorium with the red velvet seats, the silence of the audience before the prolonged applause and the shouts of 'Author, author.' They weren't the problem. It was the girl. As if suddenly illuminated by lightning he saw the cleft between her breasts and then her incomprehensible tears.

Maybe she'd known that something was wrong, he thought with a twinge. That it would turn out badly.

'So, do you know this girl?' the investigator asked, and said something else, perhaps her name, but in his confusion the playwright couldn't concentrate. How had she foreseen this blow while he hadn't? he thought to himself reproachfully.

'So you do know her,' the investigator continued, leafing through the file.

He nodded, and tried to summon up his anger, which for some reason was now subsiding. So what? Where was the crime? At one time, affairs of this kind were punishable, especially when they involved well-known people who were supposed to set a moral example, but nobody paid any attention to them anymore. Only when there were scandals, broken families, or connections to the former bourgeoisie. Or when the girl herself made a complaint.

Why might Migena have lodged a complaint? He thought of his brutal behaviour by the bookshelves, and the word 'spy' that had no doubt incensed her more than anything else. Did you use the word 'spy' or not? We'd like to know in what sense. A spy for whom, against whom? You know that our state does not use spies . . . Why had he used that bloody word? He hadn't been asked about it yet but he had his answer ready. He hadn't meant it in a political sense. He had said it in a flash of anger, as it's used in daily life about people with loose tongues.

'I'm sure you won't take offence if I ask you about the nature of your relationship,' the investigator said.

'Of course not,' the playwright replied, relieved that the girl had not maligned him. 'I've nothing to hide. It was, or rather is, a love relationship - what you would call intimate.'

'Really?' the investigator replied. 'So a love affair, with dates and all the rest of it . . .'

'Yes,' said the playwright.

The second secretary and the investigator looked at each other in clear astonishment.

'Is there anything hard to believe here?' the playwright said. 'If I'd denied it, as people often do, and had said I didn't know her, had never seen her and so on, you'd have every right to be suspicious. But I'm not hiding anything. I admit we were having an affair. A love affair, you called it. Where's the harm?'

Still they stared at him.

'I mean, is this really serious enough to make a case out of it?'

He wanted to add that of course it was nothing to boast about, when the thought of Albana struck him like a lightning bolt. My God, he thought, how could he have forgotten her? How could she have vanished from his mind that morning, when he should have been thinking especially of her?

'Perhaps you know,' he said hesitantly, 'I . . .'

Perhaps they did know, there was no way they couldn't, that for some time he had been living with a doctor, whom he would certainly have married that summer if she had not gone to Austria on a four-month internship. To study sedatives. 'Anaesthetics' was the medical term. Perhaps he was now adding unnecessary details, burbling nonsense that was of no use to anybody. But perhaps it did provide an explanation. In cases like this, a woman's long absence could cause complications.

It wasn't easy to explain. He tried somehow, but gave up and repeated the words that he least wanted to say, that there was no harm in it. The Party secretary frowned.

'There is some harm in it,' he replied at last, leafing through the file. 'According to our information, this girl never came to Tirana.'

The playwright laughed.

'Excuse me, but I know this better than anyone.'

The investigator also attempted a smile.

'And we know a bit about our business too.'

'I don't doubt it,' the playwright said. 'But I don't understand what's going on. There's something weird about this story. You summon me to ask about a girl. I admit I have a connection with her. But now you tell me that this connection is impossible because she's never been to Tirana. I'm not contradicting you, but let me ask you, if this is the case, why have you summoned me?'

'To be frank,' the second secretary replied, 'I think there's a misunderstanding here. We may be talking about two different people.'

The investigator searched for something in the file. Rudian and the second secretary watched him, until finally he found what he was looking for.

'I think you will recognise this,' he said, putting a book in front of him.

Rudian slapped himself on the back of the neck.

'I know it very well,' he said. 'And I also remember the dedication with my signature.'

His eyes paused a moment over the inscription: *For Linda B., a souvenir from the author.*

'This is my handwriting and signature. But I've forgotten the name of the girl.'

'So you see now?' the investigator said.

Oh hell, thought the playwright. The letter 'B' had reminded him of something. 'I might say that *you* can see,' he said, not hiding his irritation.

'We've been talking about two different people,' the second secretary repeated.

The playwright felt ready to explode. For no reason at all, he had revealed a secret. Idiot, he thought. He remembered something else, that his unknown reader never came to Tirana. She was someone who read his books but couldn't come to the city, and for this reason wanted a book signed by him.

'I don't understand,' he said. 'You summon me to the Party Committee to ask me if I have a relationship with a girl. Like a fool, I tell you the truth, thinking that the Party is interested in all of this. Then you tell me that this girl can't be the one I love because she's never been to Tirana, and I don't know what to say. Then you show me a book signed by me for another girl, this time one I don't know. I still don't understand what I've done wrong, what the crime is, or what the hell is going on—'

'Slow down,' the second secretary butted in. 'True, there was a misunderstanding on both sides. No harm was intended, but I must tell you that the girl for whom you signed this book and wrote "a souvenir from the author" has, or rather did have, a problem, indeed a serious one.'

The playwright felt a void open up inside him. 'May I ask what kind of problem?'

'Of course you may ask,' came the answer. 'And in fact you should know. The girl is . . . or rather was . . . interned.'

Aha, he thought. He wanted to ask about the strange use of the two tenses, present and past, but a sudden exhaustion suppressed any desire to speak. Of course, he thought . . . being unable to come to Tirana . . . that hindrance . . .

The void inside him expanded. He heard a distant knell toll.

And so? he said to himself, as if in response to that knell.