

**Guarding Hanna, novel by Miha Mazzini**

*He was born a freak. With above-average intelligence, which soon realises that a body bent on destruction cannot live among others. The only person who can help him is a Mafia don, who has enough money to isolate the monster. But nothing comes free. And now, the moment when the freak has to repay the favour has arrived. He has to come out of isolation and become a bodyguard of a woman named Hanna for a week.*

"I'm sorry about earlier," she starts. "I've got to explain."

I put the hamburger down and wait.

"My mother...How shall I say it...Did you see how she was looking at you?"

"Yeah."

"There...I have to explain that..."

I remember that Hanna had spent most of the time standing behind her mother's back and couldn't see her eyes, but I didn't dare interrupt with questions.

"...this lust," she finishes the sentence.

A long pause. I say goodbye to the last hamburger and the apple pie I'd ordered for dessert. I'd tried eating them cold once, but they were completely inedible. Obviously the chemicals used to make the meal only taste good when they're hot.

"My mother...likes...sex. It's so hard for me to talk about this! She...is a collector of sex. But...how can I explain...she doesn't collect quantity but variety. How shall I put it...She's had sex with men with blond hair and men with dark hair. With blacks, Asians, American Indians—she's been through all the races. Then she went through the fat and the thin, the tall

and the short ones. The ones with just one arm, one leg, without both arms, without both legs, without either arms or legs. With midgets and giants. Not to mention the various professions, have you any idea how many of those there are in this world? And I mustn't leave out illnesses. I remember once, when she found out about a neighbor who had cancer of the prostate, she immediately ran to him. She hadn't done it with somebody with that particular problem before. That's why she was looking at you like that. Because..."

She tries to catch the right words with her hands.

"I know," I say, "I understand."

"...because you are a bodyguard with such distinguishing features on top. It's best if I start at the beginning. I was brought up by my grandmother. I also occasionally stayed with my aunt here, in this flat. My grandmother lived in a village and oh, how unhappy I was there. She didn't know where she'd gone wrong with her daughter, I just had a feeling that she blamed it all on her husband, who did nothing else wrong but died soon after my mother had been born. She certainly tried to ensure, by being as strict as possible with me, that her granddaughter, who was also growing up without a father, didn't turn out like her daughter. Not that my mother came anywhere near us. Not for quite a few years, there were so many things happening in the world. San Francisco with flowers in her hair, Woodstock, free love everywhere.

She'd had me somewhere on the way, had brought me back to her home village, deposited me there and disappeared again. I think I was eleven when I first saw her. My grandmother didn't even have any pictures

of her. She never spoke about her daughter. Not a word.

"Well, my mother came and they had a terrible fight. I shut myself into my room and trembled. My mother won, dragged me out, we went around a few bars in the nearby town. I was eleven—I should remember everything, but I don't. Only that I wanted to go home, to bed. I kept nodding off at the table while my mother giggled with some strange guys. I can only remember one of them, a beer-bellied biker. In the morning, she delivered me home and disappeared for a few years again. I admit, next time she came I gladly went out with her, but I still found all the men around her repulsive.

"She used to come every few years, sometimes every year, for one night. My mother is constantly on the move, and wherever she is, she's always just passing through, on the way to somewhere else. When I was seventeen she brought me here. She had a wild romance with Erwin, the guy you saw on Monday. He then took me on as an apprentice. I lived with my aunt, who died after a year and left me this flat. My mother was already somewhere else. She comes occasionally, to have her hair done, as you heard.

"Every time, she shouts 'Hanna, Hannichka.' It really annoys me! As if we really did have some Polish blood. Yes, I've got a birth certificate and I know my father's name, Leopold Woyczik, but I've never seen him. But from what I've heard, I can't help feeling that my mother had a moment of feeling guilty, and when a Polish immigrant came past, a newcomer who couldn't speak the language very well and didn't understand what he was signing, she turned the

opportunity to her advantage. Do I sound nasty? I do, don't I? But I'm only nasty to myself, sometimes. I can't help it. That's how it was. That's how my mother and I got our surname and that's how I got an official father.

"You know what I can't forgive her for? The apologizing, looking for excuses. Instead of saying, 'I like sex,' she'll say, 'I'm studying Tantric Yoga with the best teacher of our time.'

Or something like that. Why can't she say, 'Wow, I love sex, it feels good.'"

She taps on the table with the end of the spoon handle.

"Tantric Yoga! The group feeling of aura! Free love! The free-flowing of cosmic energy! Why not just call it a fuck?"

She stops.

"I'm sorry, I got carried away. It won't happen again. Go ahead, eat."

I pretend to chew my hamburger. She can't really see what I'm doing under the shelter of my hand.

"I know, I'm obsessed with my mother. No. I'm obsessed with proving that I'm not like her, which is what I had to do all my childhood. My grandmother's beady eye followed me all the time. When I was still very little I used to think that she was watching over me to stop me from falling over, hurting myself or something. But later on I understood. She was waiting for the first signs to appear, just like they had with her daughter. She died five years ago, and even right at the end, when she was in hospital, she didn't want to see me. She didn't trust me. I'd gone with my mother, become like her. I'd disappeared, as far as my

grandmother was concerned. The look in her eyes...I remember it so well. A look of somebody who'd had a tiger cub forced on them and now they were waiting for it to grow up into a wild animal and attack them. I had to prove that I was different from my mother to everybody else, too. The rumours about my mother reached the village, of course. Nobody knew and nobody cared what was true and what wasn't. But with Kristina Woyczik you never know anyway; I'd learned that if nothing else. When I was at school boys approached me differently than other girls, I was supposed to be easy. That's probably why I was the only girl in my class who didn't lose her virginity at school. I lost it here, in town. After I got married. Yes. I was so pleased when I got away from that village. Really I was. I was the only virgin in the class and at the same time the only girl with a reputation."

She gets up from the table and goes to the kitchen. She's making one of her teas again. She comes back with a steaming cup.

"Then one day, when I was sitting where you're sitting now, I was looking at that Mercedes sign going round—my aunt was already dead, the salon owner had stopped pestering me—I said to myself, 'This is it. You're grown up. You're in town, nobody knows you, what now?'"

"Yes, what now?"

"I didn't have to battle with my mother's reputation anymore. She would come for a visit, once every one or two years, for five minutes, all elated and blooming. She'd mention a few of the latest achievements in her passionate pursuit and then move on. Oh, I nearly forgot: the year before last she mentioned to me that

she didn't hold out much hope of adding to her collection. Quite simply, she'd had everything that could be had. She'd changed direction and started collecting locations, she said. She described to me having sex in the crow's nest of a replica pirate ship. There you are. That's why she couldn't take her eyes off you. Obviously, she had never seen a bodyguard close up."

She sips her tea.

"Nettle," she says completely out of context, "purifies the blood."

Is that the reason for her confession? I ask myself. Another sip.

"Yes, I was sitting there, saying to myself, is this all that's left?"

A stab in my heart. How I remember asking the same!

"I realized that something was missing in me. Not something, so much was missing that I thought I didn't exist at all. I started thinking."

She blows on her tea.

"First, I got divorced. From my first husband. The others don't count, as they were only on paper.

"Things were a bit better, but not as much as I thought they would be. I got a lover, then another one, but it didn't make any difference. So it wasn't men I needed. I was obsessed with that question. I would sit there looking at the rotating sign, thinking, 'Should I go to college? Leave hairdressing?' I didn't have the courage. I didn't have to do anything difficult there, I got paid. Obviously I'm a coward, always playing it safe. I started making pottery figurines. But that didn't

help. I thought more and more about religion. Don't laugh!"

I showed no inclination to.

"But I didn't want to go to the church, the main, Catholic one. Another shadow from my mother's past—she'd had to leave the village because she was caught with the priest in the confessional. He'd hung himself after. My work mate Mary used to go to some discussion group as they called it. She'd been trying to talk me into going with her from the first day I started working there. I used to resist as hard as I could. I have to say there's one thing my mother had left me with forever. Before I make any decisions, I always think what would she do, and then I do the exact opposite. My mother is a veteran of every possible and impossible discussion group and religious sect. 'You can always find good sex in the newage spirituality,' she'd said once to me. To join Mary's group would have meant following in my mother's footsteps. But there was less and less of me, I was more and more empty. I didn't even feel like combing my hair in the morning and wandered around looking a total mess. Even now, I don't like

sitting in that chair, believe me. There's nothing sadder than looking at a Mercedes sign that doesn't take you anywhere.

"So I went with Mary. We held hands and the energy flowed. The leader of the group was a replica of Erwin, the salon owner, and I asked myself why Mary would want to go there. She could look at Erwin all day at work. In the evening, we all went to a restaurant and, faithful to the idea of healthy living and the new spirituality, ordered soya bean sprouts.

Only the leader had a doubly thick T-bone steak, rare. He chewed and chewed while we watched him. Oh, I forgot to tell you, he was the only man in the group. Then I asked him, 'Erwin, excuse me, but how do you explain this? You talked so much about cleansing ourselves, then we go and eat bean sprouts while you devour tons of meat.' He said he'd already cleansed himself in the previous life so he didn't have to be careful anymore, whereas we were just starting out on our journey through reincarnation. And he went on eating. I got up and left. Last year, I read a book by one of the women I vaguely remember from that meeting. The scene I've just described is quoted in her book as a proof of why we have to make the effort to cleanse ourselves—so that we can do what we like in the next life! Eat steaks or whatever. She mentioned my departure when she talked about the dropping out of non-believers who don't have the intelligence to comprehend the secrets of mysticism. Just imagine! "Mary kept giving me angry looks for a long time after that. 'You didn't even go through the initiation,' she blurted out once. 'And what was that like?' I asked. She squirmed and squirmed and then admitted that the spiritual leader slept with each new convert. After that, I looked on the salon and Erwin in a completely new way—as a sect. There too, the owner had to sleep with everyone. I said this to Mary and she thought for a bit. Obviously she hadn't seen the connection before.

The next day she offered to shake hands, asked to make up and not talk about it anymore. And we haven't.

"I said to myself, 'A Catholic priest with my mother in the confessional, the esoteric leader with each new

convert after dinner. I just don't have any luck. But somewhere there has to be the real spirituality. Everything can't boil down to just sex.' Am I boring you?"

I shake my head.

"I won't go on for much longer. I'd heard about the Forest brotherhood sect. I gave that up because I couldn't make myself drink the priest's urine. That was what the beginners got there. Those with a longer service were allowed to reach for the temple, the very source of that magic juice, called 'Jesus' treasure chest'. More sex. I stopped going. I'd already heard about Tantric Yoga from my mother, and I was becoming more

and more desperate. I was sick of all those meetings in deserted gymnasiums and small rooms at the back of bookshops. At all those gatherings I saw the same faces—not the same people but the same types of people. One type really—the middle-aged housewife. 'Where were all the men?' I asked.

'Didn't they feel this emptiness inside?' Men were always the teachers and they always led their pupils to sex. I asked myself, 'Is everybody like my mother, does everybody need an excuse? Why don't they just go to bed with each other if they feel like it? Why must a middle aged housewife accept the role of a pupil on the way to enlightenment and the man become an apostle of the Great Spirit, so that they can have sex?' And what I saw with my own two eyes wasn't called sex but the flowing of cosmic energies. I realized everyone knew what was meant by all those words, except somebody as naive and innocent as me, who was then

made to look stupid. Fuck it." I nodded that I excused her language even before she could apologize.

"I went to the library and brought home a book this big and this thick."

She indicated the measurements. Quite impressive.

"The History of Sects. I read it and what did I find out? It was always a man who thought up a sect and the women who came running. And in most cases, the founder of a sect was a tailor. I could just imagine him sitting there, sticking his needle into various things all day, thinking how nice it would be to stick something else into something for a change, and then proclaim himself a prophet. From my own and other people's experiences, I know that prophets always try and get on top of you. But in spite of that, or because of it, every idiot finds a flock of followers. Usually middle-aged housewives. I don't know why. Maybe because of this emptiness inside us."

She sips her tea and shaped her lips into a, how shall I say it, a square—I'd never seen anything like it before.

"As if a prick could fill that emptiness," she said. The square falls apart, and she gives me a confused look.

"Sorry, that was vulgar. What I wanted to say was that most women go to these gatherings to fill physical holes. And they get precisely what they came for. But there's a problem with a few like me, who have holes in our souls."

She stops talking for a while and turns towards the window.

It's getting cloudy, the rotating sign has already lost contact with the sunlight.

"So I finished with spirituality."

We sit awhile in silence.

"And as for my emptiness...It's still here, it's no smaller, it's just somehow faded."

She adds more to herself, "I've met a lot of prophets but there wasn't one saint among the lot of them."