

The Quiet Summers of the Turtledoves

A novel

I always wanted to write about this lucid dream but I didn't expect it to become real. In the dream, I take streetcar number 3 from the beach on Venice Blvd. in LA, I get off at the Farmers' Market on Pirotska in Sofia and enter the kitchen where my grandma checks her bookkeeping with a blunt pencil and grinds her teeth: Karl May – 80 stotinki, 2 onions – 20 stotinki, 1 bulb – 30 stotinki...The lace curtains sail in hot dust and moonlight. It can't be more quiet inside me. I can hear the shadows on the sidewalks, as if the night is dreaming me, not the other way around. A raindrop falls asleep on the rails. My grandma was dead, but not that night. My grandpa was dead, we both knew it, but his wings waft.

I sat on the bed where our cat was breastfeeding and where my great grandpa, Peter, snored. It just struck me: he who built this grand house on iron foundations with shops and terraces, while the world was ruined by the 1st World War, spent the last years of his life on the kitchen bed, whereas I had a private chamber with tile fire place, 2 beds, big library, bureau, wardrobe and enough space to dance mazurka. May be because he liked to watch me dance. The dawn of communism eclipsed all the buildings he built in Sofia, except for the house where his sons got to live. Since Peter was a widower the last 30 years of his life, he had no right to private space. The municipality had expropriated the last floor and rented it out to a communist activist from some village. Thus, Padre Padrone of masonry ended up where? In the kitchen of his firstborn, Benjamin. But where did he keep his clothes? In the fridge? The cat was raring her kittens in the bed drawers, because it was soft there, yes, indeed, on his pajamas. All the household's life happened in the kitchen anyway: grandma washing, cooking, baking, counting, receiving her sisters, neighbors, I was doing homework there, grandpa was reading newspaper on the table while munching on salad. The purring city life was with us, just a few meters below we could hear uncle Toshko pouring with a small scoop colorful syrups: mint, strawberry, raspberry,

ocean... all lined up as circus clowns in shiny jars. And there he was, Peter, in the middle of all that, with his curled up long blond moustache rising to the sky of his eyes, veiled by an impenetrable forest of eyebrows. The breakfast: Turkish coffee cup sugar, Turkish coffee cup rakija, Turkish coffee and Bulgarian radio. What was he doing when the doves were sleeping? He smoked The Sun, his favorite unfiltered cigarettes.

We skipped one generation: great grandpa was my grandpa, grandpa was my dad, Tatko, and grandma was my mom, Baba. My mother was a Goddess. For me. She did not enter the kitchen. She did not enter that house much either. But if she did, all had to shine like mount Olympus, which could never happen with the kitchen. My dad, well, he was my grandpa. It was all very clear to me then, a bit less now. Now, I look at life like a sentence in Marsian language - I write treatises about it, theories, hypotheses. But back then, life was a clear sentence with a most obvious syntax: Ball! Hip marmalade! When I say sentence, I do mean both the grammatical category and the juridical concept. Imagine, being sentenced to hip marmalade! Or to play 'rabcheta', a ball game where you aim at the edges of sidewalks! Or to swing a swing until the sky is below you! And yes, I was sentenced to all that. The daylight pushes the blinds of the night out as if bringing down the gavel: hide-and-seek!

Peter had built the family house on such solid foundations and modern technology that it only sneezed from the dust of the falling neighboring cottages during the biggest earthquake of the 20th century. Sitting next to each other on the accumulative stove, last cry of the heating fashion, Tatko and I were hanging our legs and laughing on the account of infamous Armenian heroes. His legs could not reach the ground, so, in order to hang my legs in unison with his, I sat on a thick pillow. He is leaning on his hands, slightly forward, and his eyes are blooming:

- Kirkor and Garabet had to fix a large centrifuge. Garabet entered it in order to fix it, Kirkor stayed outside to assist him. At certain

point, Garabet remembered that he forgot to tell Kirkor to be careful not to start the centrifuge and shouted out to him: 'Kirkor, just make sure you don't start the centrifuge-fuge-fuge-fuge-fuge-fuge-fuge-fuge' – Tatko is clapping his hanging feet while my rare teeth spatter the air with silvery laughter.

Baba is sitting quietly with the cat in her lap and watches television. But for us television was Comedia Divina, every news was an anecdote:

'A group of students sit for an exam in political economy. There comes one out, happily grinning ... His colleagues ask him:

-What happened?

-I flunked.

-Why are you so happy then?

-This is nothing, Stefan got arrested directly'.

And as we burst of laughter again, clap feet and float in a bubble of casual happiness, suddenly the walls start swinging. Everything creaks. The chandeliers tremble as castanets. The cat has already hidden under the couch. Baba jumps up and grabs a package of flour and rice, hidden for black days in her night locker, and asks me to stand under the door frame. I am afraid, not comprehending what's happening, crying:

- But mother, what happens with my mother? I wrote her a poem...

Tatko grabbed my hand:

- Quick, lets hide under the table, it is an Indian transparent tent that makes you invisible, nothing can hurt us.

Wow, what a great idea! What a great new game my Tatko invented! Even grandma is included:

- She will never find us!

Baba stood with flour and rice at the doorway; we were huddled under the shiny table and could hardly contain our laughter but, since we are invisible, yet hearable, we pinch noses and stay quiet.

This is how we met the earthquake of the century. I went out on the street that evening, grinning from ear to ear, and found to my surprise: huge gaps on the streets throughout the city, like giant dog bites; trams chopped into bread slices; houses turned into sand ruins,

homeless people preparing food on candles, like in Sevastopol. What an astonishing game and we won, not one feather was lost! My fellow Indians would love it, on Pernik street, where the chestnuts are still blooming.

Peter's iron entrepreneurial hands were building like magicians, but he and great grandma Kita were analphabets in Bulgarian. Strong and thin as a gun, he fights on the side of Bulgaria during the speedy Bulgarian-Serbian War, at the bloody village Gurgulyat, or Turtledove, and steps in Pirot with an invincible boot of hay ribbons. Despite the victory, Bulgarians living in Macedonia are faced with a dilemma: either they must speak Serbian and change their names or they must abandon their homes, gardens, businesses, neighborhoods, family, friends, pubs, schools and move within the established post-war Bulgarian borders. Peter and Kita load up their one-horse carriage with four small kids, sputter night and day and park on a meadow, outside Sofia, the Capital of the new Balkan order. Quickly, he builds a family cottage. It is green in front of it, it is green behind it and the children clap their hands with a sunrise in their eyes: Football fields forever!

Benjamin, who later became my beloved grandpa, my Tatko, is now the not-so-iron-right-hand of Padre Padrone. The children get to take one dove each from their old dovecot in Macedonia and they start training them to fly letters over to their friends spread around or lost at the borders. Benjamin extends a finger and waits with delight for his winged friend to land. His eyes are melting with tenderness: such silky grey feathers, shining green necklace! What news is he winging to him today? What is happening along the river where he grew up with Vankata? They draw to each other, in rhyme.

In the quiet summers of the meadow, under the tender care of his boys, the doves multiply. They are over 20 males and females strolling gaily on wooden shelves, their necks moving back and forth like Al Jarreau beats. So, close to the cottage, Peter builds a new dovecot. The boys are blooming of content and pride with the new modern home of their winged postmen and baptize the doves with patriotic names:

Yavorov, Bargyana, Botey, Yovkov, Kalina-Malina, Radetsky, Transistor, Television, Radio, AN22....

Every morning before going to school they run out to caress and feed their faithful postilions, plan flight lessons, compete about the speed and flight height and chase the doves in the meadows, forgetting about time, spelling and math.

Certain of his boys' diligence and intelligence, Peter goes to a parent meeting.

- We haven't seen your boys in school for a while, Mr Terziev.

- How could that be, they go to school every morning – Peter is heartbroken, he left his world to offer them literate future and now he can't believe his mustaches.

He lines up the boys like soldiers and gives them an ultimatum: either the doves or the school. With hands behind the back and neck hanging under the guillotine of Padre Padrone, Benjamin defends his brothers and offers a deal:

- We are deeply sorry, Father! We promise to train the doves only during the summer, Father! We write the letters they carry in Bulgarian. Vankata even sends math problems to me on Yavorov's neck. That way we study even during the vacation.

Peter can't read but he can measure: to combine both sounds like a mey level success.

A summer passes by and the teacher calls Peter again. His sons are absent too often and their grades are flying too low, their future looks dark, Mr Terziev. The next early morning, the boys secretly crawl out of the cottage, as usual, with their school bags as camouflage. They have written a new peace treaty during the night, suggesting their Macedonian friends to join them here, in Bulgaria, and want to hang it on the necks of 4 postilions to see which one will bring it faster. Shhhhh, they murmur like feathers, slip-open the low door of the columbiana and

stop breathing; soaked in blood, 28 doves with cut off throats lie dead on the shelves covered with feathers and thin letter paper, dripping.

So blinding was Peter's wrath, that he forgot about the ancient curse on dove killers. Benjamin gets badly sick and doesn't go to school for one year. The illness is contagious, stops his growth and although he is the eldest he remains the smallest. He studies at home, alone. Sometimes, he leans on the low window frame and follows carefully the football game on the meadow, with one hand in the pocket. Vankata visits him daily; they touch eyelashes through the glass.

All the boys become engineers. Peter is now multi-handed, their enterprise builds modern apartment houses in the center of the booming city. He donates and raises a shining golden cross on the top of the magnificent Cathedral St. Nevski in the navel of the Capital. But Hitler's war-shadow blackens the skies over Sofia, ensanguined feathers of peace desires drop one by one over the football fields. Tatko's and Baba's first born boy, little Peter, dies during the first bombardment. My mother and her brother survive in Sofia's chilly undergrounds, she is the older one and chos his clothes in the morning.

The communists invade the swinging halls, lock up shops, exempt private property, and inhum farmers and business owners alive in the ground until they die, sell or give up their property or cattle. Tatko has a dream: to become a lawyer, a defender of justice, the only free from the state profession left in the giant communist prison, and he hangs his lifetime wish on the postilion's neck: Law school. He is accepted, because although not communist, his ancestry is not bourgeois. Works during the day as an engineer and studies law in the evenings.

- I had nightmares in Latin- he used to say, biting his mouth, and then - a garland-of-pearls smile. His feet hang on the accumulative stove.

He is the Chief Editor of newspaper Macedonia, which does not enjoy communistic internationalization but encourages patriotic idealism. The communist concentration jaws bite and hold on jazz, swing, violins,

pianos, books, poems, paintings, and freedom of speech legislations. Vankata, a practicing judge in the City Courts, hears down the dissident grapevine that the caskets are checking the editor's lists in all newspapers. One night, he goes into the editor's room with a candle, erases Tatko's name and exposes his own name as Editor in Chief: to protect his friend, he is ready to take the blow if it comes to that. Not long after that, Vankata disappears without a trace, like thousands of others, after a knock on his door by two caskets in grey rain jackets. Two years later, as Tatko and Baba eat lunch with the family in the kitchen, where the cat breastfeeds her kittens again, the bells rings. Tatko opens the door with a generous gesture, never afraid to meet his destiny, but there is no one. He is about to close the door and sees a thin silhouette in the twilight. Oh, does he imagine again the ghost of his best friend from the football fields forever? This time, however, the ghost murmurs with stoned tongue and shivering body, broken down by hard camp labor:

- Vencho, it's me.

Two dove glances fly towards each other in a quiet embrace. Two hot creeks stream down the cheeks like dew on dry meadows. He returned from the columbia alive, when everybody thought him killed. Every Sunday morning, during that snowy winter, a quiet one-horse carriage arrives in front of Vanka's secret loft and serves wood and milk bottles. No one knows who sends it, only Vankata knows, these are Vencho's invisible postilions of devotion. Until the end of the communist regime, Vankata is not allowed to practice law, he is allowed to clean toilets in factories. Tatko and Baba fix an apt for him and his blossoming youth love Lili. They give their daughters the same names, Ekaterina, like oaths of a sacred union. They take summer vacations at the Black Sea together, in invisible tents, throw each other in the cheerful foam, sing revolutionary songs at the sand campfire, and author apocryphal historical studies together.

Half a century later, years after Tatko's dead, I asked Vankata about his life in the concentration camp. I had installed a camera and a

microphone in front of him. Yes, I was planning this recording for a long time. He was almost 90 and wrote to me in a letter: 'I will wait for you. Don't worry.' When I finally got there, we sat down under the vine symphony of his summer house in a remote twilight village. He immediately described with dew in his voice how he and Vencho built it together.

- Vanka, how did you actually escape?
- My father's student from our village in Macedonia helped me.
- How was your life in the camp? Did they torture you? – i had no idea what i am saying, all i knew is that i had to dare.

Silence. Vankata's gaze was gliding like the full moon in Mahler's Adagietto, beneath a light cloud. It was rising up tenderly, slowly, the quiet eyelids twitched slightly, careful not to startle me, as if tasting the moment when it will first touch my skin. This anticipation lit his face up, gently touching the harp strings. I could feel him arriving, like a delicious memory, and I flinched of this infinite expectation. Although I could not see his eyes, I felt how they hover in the sky with mysterious joy. My eyelids lied down and my breath flew off together with his. The world had stopped. And when, in the eternity of this magical speechless farewell, our eyes finally met, soft and tender, I had no more questions.

In my dream, I sat across Baba, on Peter's bed. The radio was there, next to his pale-green mushroom-like Aladdin lamp with a tiny string hanging under it. He died 97 years old with red wine nose, of pneumonia, but his clothes in the drawers still smelled of cat stern and kittens. In his first lesson to all foreign tongues that entered his public bedroom participates even the lamp: 'dark-light-dark-light, Bottoms up!'

There was a bathroom next to the kitchen, with a bathtub, shower, and a small window. You attach small letters with ding-ling hairpins on the cat's tail and you let it run on the rooftops. That way everybody can hear that someone is playing in the neighborhood, despite the gloomy surveillance times, which I knew nothing of yet. Under the bed, where she was breastfeeding and where grandpa was snoring, there was a shop.

Beneath the shop – a stuffy basement. You sneak in and you throw a thread with attached banknote on it, through the shaft, on the sidewalk. And you stalk. If a hand ventured to take the banknote, you just pull lightly. Bending down, the shoes make a shy step forward, you pull lightly again and again and then oops, the banknote falls into the shaft, blown by a wind of sighs: ‘Damn!’ Empty echoes pass by, hurriedly.

But one day, someone caught the banknote. I rushed out of the basement on the street where uncle Toshko juggled mint, strawberry and ocean syrups: it was a stranger, a man. He spoke a strange language, but he was holding my banknote. He wanted to talk to Bilyana. Oh, but that’s me. Or may be he wants to talk to some other Bilyana, although there are no other Bilyanas here. He took the stairs with me to our apartment, Baba gasped, invited him in the living room and sunk into the kitchen. He sat down on the armchair, I - on the sofa, between us a thin table and silent question marks. Tatko was gasping for air as he entered, warm and grand, as usual. He came directly from the courts, may be had to interrupt a plea. Chilly, but polite nod to the stranger who instantly jumped up: wow, even he looks up to Tatko.

It appeared that this is a dad, not someone else’s, but my dad. I didn’t know him. The syntax got confusing for a moment. I had a father and a dad and they were two different people and spoke different languages. Too complicated. Would he be so kind to return my banknote to its owner? Because a bear with feta cheese is awaiting me and a kilo Cherokee Indians on Pernik street. Under the chestnuts. He gave me back the banknote and added another one, with foreign letters on it. With this banknote one could buy exotic items such as coca-cola, mars and bounty. All Indians under the chestnuts ate and drank from the Korekom that day. I got a sugar bomb in the stomach, could hardly blow the spat paper bullets through the empty pen (Indians never carry a gun) and we lost a battle. That’s it! I will never fish with a thread from the basement again. Instead of sprat, I got a Marsian dad. But I already have a father. No parental inflation occurred because the syntax remained clear and precise: you chase!

According to grandma my decisions are always right. This was odd even for me. But everything has its explanation. One day, the three of us were to visit The Godmother - a hypermodern grandma with short blond hair, dark voice and a boyish gaze, a bridge champion, the daughter of a general, like grandma. She lived in the mountain, Knjazjevo, not far from town. Terrible heat, the moraines were cracking up, the volcanoes were rubbing their eyes, stretching arms, and grandma had prepared my outfit: short lace dress, riband and sandals. To her bewilderment, I insist on wearing rain boots.

- But Bilyanche, one can't go around with such boots, such heavy stuffy boots in this heat.
- No and NO! Boots!

Rascal! The hours pass, the child is a Taurus, it doesn't budge. So, what can one do, with boots up to the ears and a lace riband we finally go to lunch. We are late, 2 hours late. That's OK, everybody storms in the palace with the pointed towers and take solitaire positions around the table. Except Bilyanche. Baba looks around but the kid is gone. She runs out and what can she see: a brown smooth Vipera Ammodytes sissys up on the boot of her girl, who is sitting on a giant boulder and watches it tenderly. The solitaire is in terrible panic, everyone rush to the hill, the child may die any minute. Tatko grabs a long stick and stretches it carefully to the boot. The viper creeps on his wooden finger and he throws it amain into the cooking pot of an invincible summer.

Few of these bewilderingly stubborn decisions and there you go, I had won full diplomatic immunity, as a 5 year old: 'You don't want to go to school today? Of course, Bilyanche, enjoy your rest!', 'You prefer cream cakes for dinner? OK, Bilyanche', 'You want me to read you Hieronimus Bosch as a lullaby? Sure!' 'You want to live at the North Pole and translate Nordic poetry? That's good, Bilyanche!', 'You want to marry unknown man locked in a refugee camp in Kirkegaard's homeland, a son of a communist? Your will is law, Bilyanche!'

Even my Goddess did not have such immunity, therefore she married secretly to a Leif, from Sweden. I, the female Sherlock Holmes on Pirotska street 127, found that out, by noticing her ring during one of her yearly visits. I am not sure how she explained this jewel to Tatko, who actually cared for rituals, but one could hardly hold my excitement when she sent me loving postcards and invited me to the Nordic Olympus. All my classmates had to hear about it and as the date of the visit was coming closer and closer the more mortal I was feeling. And BAAM, we got lice in school. My hair was burning like devil's kingdom and there was no hideout from the shame. Grandma had to cut my long hair, had to wash it with gas 10 times, comb it night and day, gas again, then wash again and again with Aphrodite's perfumes. Finally, I got on the airplane and ended up in Linköpingland. Here, a photo next to a blue Volvo. Dinner with Leif's sunburned parents. One had to spread butter on dry soles and eat wholes with cheese in them, hold the fork in exactly 0,1 mm from the mouth when biting, and never show good appetite.

- Sorry for her behavior, you know, Bulgaria, behind the iron curtain.

The Neanderthal Vulgar had to be put to sleep and right then hell started building up inside me, my body was shaking and crying insanely that the Goddess does not like me because I had lice. All I wanted was to go back to grandpa and grandma:

- I want home! Under the table!

The Goddess came in, after a while, and was pretty angry with her daughter's tantrum. Not only that she ate too much, but also disturbed everybody, when they are to have fun. Few days later, I was on a diet and diligently ran up and down the long stairs from Masthugget to Slottsskogen and finally, after losing 5 kilos, was sent back to Vulgaria. From that moment on, I was preparing my repertoire for our secret dissident X-mas in two languages, because I could get a present if I recite a poem, as the tradition was. Bananas, yes, but no more lokumki, my favorite Turkish delight crescent cookies: I had to look like my Goddess

or, at least, like Monroe. My will and wishes were from now on in brackets.

After reading and writing 10 000 pages of poems, historical events, novel quotes, and analysis thereof, and as I was a high school semi-prodigy, to everybody's surprise, I failed the entry exams to the communist university and was called to the police to respond for my writings. Disappointed or glad, still not sure which, the Goddess took me on vacation to the Black Sea.

- So unfortunate you don't have my hair! Yours is like your dad's, a broom. But he doesn't want you anyway – strange enough, her voice was caring, as if she sincerely worried for my hair.

I shaved my head although I had no idea what Punk means. Anorexia was my middle name by then. That night, she took me to the shiny communistic disco in the basement of the hotel. She was wearing a tight shiny black dress. I was to wear her fabulous silky fairy tale shirt with fluffy pants and looked like Sinéad O'Connor or Lukcho in Genie pajamas. We danced seductively in front of the young guys she met on the beach, they looked at me with honest pity, but I was determined to admire her and grant all her wishes. I saw her once or twice per year and was grateful if she had time for me.

- You are not that smart but you are ambitious, you can make it
- she calmed me down. - I know what bothers you: you are
jealous that Maria passed the tests but you didn't.

Oh, that never struck my heart. Maria and I, we buy even chewing gum together. I was stuffing my throat with tears like a foiegras goose, until I believed all the Goddess said, until my inner dialogue became perfectly suicidal. My last wish was to go swimming with her in the evening or may be just walk on the sand together, but she went out to party and left me to sleep in the hotel room, 14 floors above the Black Sea level. And when I saw her making out with a drummer while poor Leif was freezing in the North Pole, alone, I decided that this world is not worth it. Not only that the communists forced me to think like a robot, not only that my hair was a broom, that my head hurts all the

time, that I am a failure, but, on top of it, my godlike mother will divorce again. So far, the only thing I knew about sex was that my grandparent's underwear hanging on a string on the terrace were quite large and different from each other. And as to kissing, I wondered if what Tatko told me is true, but had no evidence. Rarely couples kissed on TV, but when they did I used to ask him, as we were hanging our feet on the accumulative heater:

- What are those two doing now?

Tatko replied:

- They fix their teeth - and looked mysterious, but competent.

And I believed him. Besides, who on earth likes the dentist office smell!

I went back to the 14th floor hotel room and took all the migraine pills I had with me, casting a last loving look to the Earth Ocean. There, it is done now. I had enough, but thank you for the music. I was sad for Tatko and Baba, they would be sad, but there was no other way: I am a fat, near-sighted, ugly, stupid, jealous, disappointing creature and I don't enjoy this dentist world...anymore...anyway.

Suddenly, I woke up next to a naked female body in apron and pattens in a huge bathroom, pushing a long black viper-hose into my throat and then all became white. The Goddess didn't come to the hospital. I had vomited all my memories. But I remembered Nabokov and read, each line with a ray of fresh sunlight, greeted now and then only by the granny with the viper in pattens, Antony and my soul-brother Raffy Photograffy, who saved me from the Black Whole 14 levels above the Black Sea.

My great grandpa Peter, sold his properties for peanuts to the communists, they didn't even have to beat him up, and then rolled his blond mustache with gusto for one century. He even appeared on TV when he was 90, surrounded by balloons with vitamin names, a symbol of Balkan health and longevity. Of course, no one ever checked his breakfast! The skull of Raffy's grandpa, Rafaelo, was crushed with such

regular brutality that he died young, without selling his airy lands around the coast. The communists deeply regretted that violence... after the restitution. So, Raffy suffered from regular headaches, like me. That evening, we had just parted, after a photogenic walk with our friends, he knew I had headache but he still wanted to tell me something...

Tender, the summer rain steam turns the kitchen into a Turkish bath. Only the rubbing-lady is missing. Baba licked her finger off slightly and scrolled to the next page.

Once a month, we visited the neighborhood's bath. In one hand she carried me, in the other – a bag with sheets to clearstarch. The bath was two blocks away, in the garden right after the canal with a view to the Black Top. You walk on the street casually, around you hospitals, tailors, funeral agencies; you turn your neck and BOOM - a gigantic obese mountain-spirit from Aladdin's lamp explodes in front of your eyes, and you feel light. You slide on your belly and ride on bubbly soap waves of slippery floors. Foam and steam all around you and fog, and in the fog, naked female bodies in pattens, scrubbing one another with soaked sandpaper-like gloves. Giggling. Soft, warm, the objects glide and float on their own, like in a Tarkovsky movie. Shuum, there, a bucket of words skated beside your ear. Echoes submerge in watery fuss. You swim in Delirious Soapium Cloudium of nursing jasmine breasts underneath a chuckling Genie. Patten grannies rub your thighs, shoulders, cheeks and once you start shining, everybody on the street greets you:

- Happy Bath! – you radiate ruddily, because they know that you come from and you go to Heaven, where each of your wishes will be granted, while you sleep like bathed.

I was watching the paper Baba multiplied on - satin, yellowish. She had torn a piece from Tatko's typewriter. He typed his history books and court pleas on it. A small piece. She didn't like to waste. It is hard to

write with a blunt pencil on satin paper, it's not like puncturing it with a merciless Olivetti. The pencil glides like a gazelle glance, slightly smeared. Many years after Baba's death, I found her testament, written on a small piece of torn satin paper, not to waste, yellowish:

My name is Veselina Ivanova Petkova, I am born on November 4th 1914 in Sofia, Bulgaria. My father is Ivan Petkov Bashmakov, born on May 4th 1880 in Ruse. My mother is Dobrina Ivanova Penkova, born on April 3th 1890 in Sofia.

1. Heinrich Mann - 1 piece, I leave this book, which is mine, on the upper shelf of the library to Bilyana.
2. Dr Zjivago – 1 piece, It is also mine and is to be given to Bilyana
3. Wuthering Heights – 1 piece, it is n my nightstand, for Bilyana
4. Karl May – 1 piece, for Bilyana
5. Bed sheets, white, 2 pieces, in the wardrobe, both are mine, from my mother's trousseau, I kept it for Bilyana
6. Quilt, 1 piece, also mine in wardrobe, for Bilyana when she gets married
7. Kelim, 1 piece, large, for Bilyana
8. Land at the Black sea- 2 piece, I bought them with my money, one for Tedi and one for Bilyana

Today it is May 3th 1985.

Signature: Veska

PS. I have prepared soap Camelia in the blue soap dish in my suitcase, to wash my body before the funeral. There are also my departure clothes and a comb, new.

This blunt pencil delivered to me a meadow of satin messages, which I kept finding years after her death, hidden in most unexpected placed. I stare at the void. The year is 2012. They have all died: the cat, the doves, the Iron Peter, Tatko, Baba, the Goddess, her men, uncle

Toshko, all uncles, all neighbors, and I am visiting this Death Valley, called home, as its rightful owner. Suddenly, I see a satin note, glued on an empty glass bottle on the bookshelf, sculpt of a lion's head:

- 'Bilyanche, this bottle was offered to us as a present at our wedding, I saved it for you, because I thought you may like it.'

The emptiness instantly blooms like a bride's bouquet in my hands, which hold the head of a glass lion, saved in my honor for almost 100 years. Grandma and her blunt pencil - glance of a gazelle - perfuse me with a cocktail of Turkish bath, colorful syrups and eglantine marmalade. Fiesta-time! A long chain of polished tables stretch across the living room to the library, 20 meters, the stools solitaire around them, the tablecloths are laden with delicatesses: Russian salad as omnipresent. Grandma is invisible, the dishes are stunning, the chandeliers - swinging garlands, the guests pour old city love chansons into this timeless feast. Everything shines in my eyes and I wolf lokumki. Five days before the feast, I was feeling their fragrance around me, but couldn't find them. I knew they exist, but Baba knew that if I lay my eyes on them they will melt under the power of my admiration and she has to bake again, 200 pieces as they were. I knew she has them somewhere, hidden from the watchful flair of Gargantua and Pantagruel, who both inhabited me at that time. Dare she go to the farmer's market? At her own expense, because, then, I rummage her entire bedroom - all the other rooms have been thoroughly studied already, in and out. Yes, it is clear. They are there, among her hats and shawls, but locked. I have two days to find the key. And after heavy Sher-un-lock labor, taking breathless risks during lunch and her afternoon naps, at last, I could scoff a few lokumki at once, but not all, out of a novel sense of decency. Although, she deserves that I eat them all up, because why is she hiding them so diligently from her only grandchild?!

There were cases, in which the logic pointed to a better solution, namely, to make an official complaint to the Lion in the Savannah:

- Tatko, Baba is not letting me eat!

And then Baba had to feel ashamed and reveal her hideout. Nope. She kept sitting stubborn on her stool with the cat in her lap, in front of the television, grinding her teeth, but no Turkish delight cookies, no gazelle glances.

They never called me gluttonous nor fat. On the contrary, they used to give me a meter, and after I swallowed 5 meatballs, 6 bears with feta cheese, 7 hip marmalade bread slices and 20 lokumki, they stretched me on the sofa to measure how much taller I have become, given the mountain of a belly.

- Oh, you have grown up so much – Tatko clapped his hands making me feel indescribably proud, my cheeks were bursting cherry cannons.
- Daddy's Babanche – he used to exclaim with sparkling marvel.

I ran, biked, swam in the seas, played football, rabcheta-forever, climbed on chestnut trees, built sand castles, squeezed even some accordion and piano-time in my busy schedule, sang, danced and jumped from the Babylon Tower of the wardrobe on the bed, until it collapsed one merry x-mas eve. In some rare moments, I just sat next to grandpa Peppy and measured his mustache, while he was singing about the rise and fall of Ziggy stardust and the spiders from Mars: 'let the children use it, let the children lose it'.

And then: siesta. Summer afternoons slid as swans. Falling asleep in broad daylight the sky coos turtledove lokums. Sparrow string orchestras cheer the city rumble up. My belly - full of goodies, my hands yearn for an evening game of edges, the eyelids slowly fall, as the mountain silhouette starts to lose out through the open wings of the window on a flying carpet...

Baba was almost always with her back towards us, facing the cupboards, oven and sink. But one afternoon, I saw her playing on my piano, in her apron. Secretly. She had stalked a moment when no one was home, the meatball soup was cooking on the stove and she played

Beethoven, not Oscar Peterson's 'night train', I had left on top. Crooked, her fingers danced gracefully on the keys. I didn't enter, didn't let her know I am present. I had forgotten my bag and just stood there at the door, listening. God, all these summers of the turtledoves, when she was for me only the spring of hip jam and bears with feta cheese, she has been indeed a real alive individual, a woman, a pianist, with her own spirit, life, dreams, and feelings. Baba - the eyes of a child, young hazel, squared face with Rodopa cheekbones, and quiet lips. She hadn't played the piano for decennia and still the notes were breathing under her hands, as I was standing stunned by my inner earthquake, under the frame of the door. 20 years had to pass before I could notice her. As if she had predicted this tardiness of mine and therefore left these satin prayers all over the place, so we could communicate from her kitchen, on Venus.

One day, for her surprise and delight, I fell in love for the first time - a smart guy with a shy but straight gaze, Zlatin, studied medicine, dreamt to be a surgeon and listened to Roxy Music. We were an odd cute couple: he - tall and handsome, I - 10 years younger and intouchable. He called me 'la petit'. I certainly didn't feel petit. After all, I understood Kirkegaard and read the journal Society and Law on the tram! A telephone book of diseases' and pills' names in Latin, which he stuffed his brain with, curved his upper back beautifully, but he found time to come swimming with me, lick ice cream with me on Kravaj, exchange his Bryan Ferry's Slave of Love for my Garbarek and The Secret Life of the Plants. Drove me to the university exams at 6 am, my second year. Our 'we' was a quiet, light, Making Music album. So, time to meet the Goddess. She looked at us and cut it off:

- Bilyanche, are you blind or what? Look at him - a God in a mortal sweater, and now look at yourself! Not clear yet? He is with you for your Western passport, why would he be with you otherwise. He can get any woman he wants, why would he be with you?! Poor girl.

I became pensive, mom's mirror, a Divine mirror, did not lie. It showed me the naked truth and I should be grateful for this eye-opener. Of course, he is with me for my passport, my hair – a broom, my face - a sparrow, my eyes – an owl. Sad, I wrote him a long Sledge Hammer letter and included my heart in brackets.

Mom wished me well; I believe she believed it. And now, as a girl free from the Eastern-block seagulls swirling in my otherwise bright EU skies, she matched me with another beauty, an Italian, the son of a plastic surgeon who was to improve her nose. She was proud of her nose, but she wanted to look like Claudia Cardinale, not like the Pope. A dinner was organized at her place where I was staying. In order to help with the nose job, my task was to throw a spell on the son. She dressed me up in her costume, grandma Chanel. As I was getting ready on the bathroom, I dropped the perfume bottle on it and when I entered the Alpha Romeo, he rolled down all windows. Indeed, even I couldn't breathe. Bilyana-from-the-chestnut-street would laugh her lungs out, but Bilyana-the-nose-job-fixer just sunk deep in the car seat. No owl glasses, of course. I had no idea where he is driving me. Once in his house, he invited me straight to the bathtub. To wash off the perfume stench? I am in the front corner of the tub, he - in the other, between us - an ocean of boredom and mutual disinterest. Whist. Without spectacles, he is a foggy smurf there yonder. It wasn't at all like a Turkish bath - shine, rubbing gloves and hot steam of Aladdin's spirits. Shame oh shame, he returned me, untouched, to my owner. Oh, I could breathe out again, but it was clear that I am no good. For anything. I passed him by in cafes, here and there, polite greetings. Years later it appeared that the plastic surgeon's son was a homosexual. Oh, so I was removed from Isis' list on false premises?!

While mom's next project was to book a plastic surgeon to operate my breasts away, 'they are too big for her', she told her friends, I kept sinking deeper into my owl's nest. 'She doesn't even study business, but some off-life literature, philosore'. When I met Leif, after their

divorce, to play bridge, listen to Zappa and read Donald Duck together, as we used to do, my mother of invention blamed me for being his mistress. This time, I ran away. The first nights I spent in the laundry room of a university colleague, lulled by the smell of clearstarched sheets and soap. Then sat down in front of the merciless Olivetti and translated Martin Nilsson's classical study on afterdeath, 'Ancient History of Hell': all Christian imagery of Hell comes from Olympus. I knew it!

Even grandma lost heart. In a letter to my mother, she wrote: 'When is Bilyanche going to get married at last? Cause the American Shuttle is waiting to take me to Venus.' At that time, there were no smileys, she herself never smiled anyway. 26 years she lived with the fear that this little girl with torn up jeans and glasses bigger than her head will never get married. So, when I announced, to the surprise of the entire kingdom, that I am getting married to an unknown to me painter, imprisoned in a five Michelin stars refugee camp in Denmark, only grandma exclaimed:

- Yes! If Bilyanche has decided, he is welcome.

I knew that love will never shine upon me, at least my passport can do some good and I declared a Romantic War to Cold War. But it was much more complicated than that: just signing and going back to the library where semantics and Ekelöf awaited me didn't work. One had to live together as well. So, off we go to present ourselves as a couple.

We arrived in our trashy jeans at the stately summerhouse in Dragalevzi, built by Tatko and Baba themselves. A mirage of sweat. Wow, grandma's ikebana garden is blossoming. A choir of birches sing silence and wave us welcome. Who's napping? The Plum next to the fireplace? In fervor, Vitosha mountain yeasts like Easter. There, the parade door opens up and we face Baba and Tatko holding warm homemade bread, decorated with salt and pepper. They were so grand that we sunk down in our careless pants. She had put on a red dress, her most joyful earrings, her hairdo fresh from the saloon, her cheeks were crimson, after a Happy bath. She even had make-up, green and sparkling. Instead of his funny shorties, in which he liberated the strawberry fields

from weed, he was wearing a grey newly ironed suit with a pink cactus flower blooming in his upper pocket once in 100 years. The house was the Sun and we entered it, dazzled and embarrassed.

- We brought chocolates, Aladdin, three layers – we had to say something.

Baba was glowing, to my complete puzzlement. In this very moment, she was smiling indomitably and I even heard her laugh, like a girl, for the first time in 100 years. And so I joined her, in her happiness, although I had no idea what's the occasion. It didn't really matter, the important thing was that there is joy, after all, her name was Veselina. She couldn't tame her lips nor her feet and ran with Aladdin to the neighbors to share the Great Event of her life. She reached out generously the box of chocolates and fell dead under the blooming cherry tree, bathing in pink blossom.

History is a windy place. It blows from all directions, like on the Bridge of Sighs. But there is more. There are dreams. And she is here. We are together in the moist moonlight kitchen of the unconscious. She is alone. I come to see her with streetcar named Desire from Venice beach. I won't sleep over, I will take the last tram back. I tell her that my love, Dimitri, wants to buy a house. He is a writer from Belgium and he can't live in a rented apartment. Our four-legged boy, Morrison, is the greatest Bernese football player on this green planet! Maradona can eat rhubarb in comparison to him. Morrison's Brazilian dance back swings and kicks earned him a title in the dog league. Baba turned around:

- Benjamin saved for you all his life, so you can buy a home when you are ready.
- Oh, Babo, really? This is incredible! It is not the money, I miss Tatko, so much. It is so desolate without him. How I wish to talk to him, to see him, to laugh with him!

His love tickled the infinity of my spinal cord. Here, 10 years after his death, Tatko was carrying me in his embrace and whispered happiness in my ears. With absolute trust in his dove colored eyes, which, Thank

God, did not see the merciless inflation, which turned their lifetime sacrifices into popcorn, he handed me his savings account – the prayer book of the optimist.

- You are not the only one missing him – she sat down next to me, lonely. It was unusual for her to speak about feelings, but apparently anything is possible in dreamland.

Did she soothe me? No, we were two deserted kitchens. The fact is, that as we talk in our summer night *Laterna Magica*, she has died 5 years before him, but she was still housekeeping here, not on Venus. The street-post lamp was bathing us in warmth. Wet and calm, the breeze caressed. Who is peeping in through the wings of the window? The copper beech, so neighborly curious. We were sitting at the corner of the table, in silence, to feel that we are not alone without him. That joyful feeling of 'us', when he was there, was gone. She and I, can we become 'we' in my dream? Where is the hindrance? What is the name of that hindrance? The answer is short: the Goddess. Between us was she, and we had almost given up. Almost: Baba quietly grinding her teeth, counting all she had to leave when she goes to Venus, and I – in exile at the shores of the Pacific Ocean, mastering surrender in tumbling mountain-waves. None of us gave up completely our invisible love for each other, no matter what wrath the Goddess poured over us. I simply can't remember a moment of harmony between mom and grandma. Mom was always annoyed and angry with her mom. Grandma's response – quietly counting and grinding her teeth. But one fine day, she and Tatko entered my chambers. I was still in bed, morning. He was in official suit; she wore her green dots dress and pearl necklace. They sat down with their coats on, shoes on, across their *Bilyana-pajama*.

- We transferred today half of this apt to you at the exchange of care when we get old and helpless.

I had to rub my eyes to hear better.

- But why are you so official?

- We thought you need to have a place to live if we are gone.

Thunder and lightning! The streetcars rattle, the tree in front of the window is peeping green, the jazzy syrup clowns dingle, and the sunrays' fingers curl the curtains: everything is as it should be. But what happened with my beloved Baba and Tatko? Why are they talking to me about such nonsense: death, senility?!

- It is so kind of you but it's too early, we are together, you are young, and you are alive and kicking. I can't understand why you are talking about testamting your home! And I don't want you to do this, I want to be here with you.
- Yes, but one day we may get old and we want to make sure you have a piece of us.

They were a pretty couple, as if they came directly from the theatre, but, in fact, they have been in the court since dawn. I looked at them and I admired them. He was sitting grandly with crossed legs, leaning back, his hands were holding him on both sides of the couch, busily dreaming. She – also leaning back, somehow relieved, her neat knees al-almost touch each other. Right in this moment, when she is planning life after death she is al-almost smiling. But when we talk about future, present and past.... she grinds her teeth. It was impossible, simply impossible for me, blinking right here, right now, in this young day, in my pajamas, at this shiny window, next to the hasty happy trams on Pirotka street, to dip into her afterdeath myth. But I felt it, like a feather in my neck. And I was irritated. I wanted to impose a denial: there is no such thing as death, there is no such thing as a future or futures. And if there is something as pretentious as a future, it is called BREAKFAST. Full Stop! As the Goddess used to say. Mom was usually critical to grandma and ended her artillery attacks with 'Full Stop'. May be because grandma looked like a comma to her. Indeed, grandma never finished a sentence: she continued her Morse alphabet even from Venus: 1 piece tablecloth – for Bilyana from her grandma Penelope, 1 piece apt. – for my son, 1 kg flower – for black days, 3 pieces shops – for the kids to have.

Once I recovered from the shock, I strolled to the kitchen and asked Baba:

- Why not let the inheritance move naturally, why transfer now?
- Because when we die they will leave you on the street.
- But how can you think like that of your own children!!!
- I don't know why they became the way they are.

20 years later, the very day of Tatko's funeral and 5 years after Baba's departure with the American shuttle, their kids locked themselves up in the houses - gifts from their parents - and left my son and I on the street. What a minute prediction, grandma! Sitting on the table, under shy morello blossoms, my mother and her brother had lined up next to each other on the marble tile terrace, neatly and funnily glued by Tatko:

- Get out of here! Now everything is ours. You have nothing to do here anymore. - she.
- You are like a dog, we chase you away, you wag your tail. - he.

Yes, it hurt a bit, there were mosquitos too, but it was nothing compare to the mourning for Tatko, Baba and hip marmalade. The Goddess suddenly turned into a squeaky chatterbox on high heels. Her bro remained what he always was – a red cabbage Wig with rusty teeth. He let his small finger's nail grow longer and used it for three purposes: to pick his teeth, his nose and his ears, in order. They had talents, could be charming company, street-smart, even warm and funny, both of them – Ostap and Bender. But how could they pop out of the uterus of this wonderful, kind, loving, dedicated, neat, creative, cultural, caring couple mountain climbers, knows as Veska & Vencho? The high heels were tapping on the tiles:

- What are you crying here for? This is my father, you go to your father, he doesn't want you anyway.

Short pause.

- And take the tent and your kid with you! Look at him, what kind of a mother are you! Everybody is disappointed with you.

Pause.

- And why don't you talk to the human? You want to take even my man from me, do you?

She always called her foreign wooers 'the human'. They had no names, they were a collective noun, 'the human', because how can I not talk to a human, how can I be so badly raised up, a tramp. And if I do talk – how dare I talk to her men, do I want to steal them from her, like I stole her father! And if I don't talk – how could I not talk, and if I ... sing? That would be an Exclamation Mark.

After two books, one on mitigation and the other on Ekelöf's Prince of Emgion, I waived my handkerchief to the past and swam over the Ocean in Radiohead's Creep style.

As Marvin Gaye and I were driving my convertible Thunderbird Trans Am on PCH and as I was writing an article on programming of emotions for Virtual Humans, a letter landed on my desk in Marina Del Rey. From the American Chess Association. They awarded the title Grand Master in Chess for 2003 to a Dr. Martinovsky. Oh, there must be a mistake, my coefficient is not higher than Fischer's. I do know the rules and did play as a little girl in competitions for lokumki, but ...

- Dr. Martinovsky, this is the only reference address we have. May be you can talk to his friend, Gary, the Grand Master of UK.

It appeared that Dr. Eugene Martinovsky was the brother of the charming 'thief' who caught my banknote from the basement. He was a psychiatrist and a chess player who died before receiving his title. They were Russians, sons of Simeon Martinovsky, a mathematician and chess player from Odessa. Eugene played with his dad since he started walking, but Simeon was playing aggressive chess, thus Eugene became expert on defensive strategies. They were Counts, who liberated their krestyani quite early. And how did they get this royal title? Directly from Ekaterina the Great. The Empress honored their, dare I say our, great great grandfather General Wilhelm Von Derfelden, founder of the Russian Empire's cavalry, with millions of meters land around Odessa when his horsemen won the battle for Crimea against the Turkish delight. His legend still ignites bedtime moments of so called hope:

- In the final battle, a horse fell over the General. All his soldiers thought their leader is dead; started to retreat. And, BOOM, suddenly he resurrected, with blood, dripping from his mustache and eyes infecting all with courage. He waved to his men: 'Come on, boys! To Victory!' They all loved him and followed him out of joy. Good night, dearest! Sweet dreams of glory!

It wasn't easy come nor easy go, because later, the Red Army kills the royal family and exempts the lands of the Counts. Derfelden's great great grandson, my grandpa Count Simeon Martinovsky, then almost 20 years old, runs from Paris to Odessa to join the White Army and then retreats, back to Paris. He is changing trains at Belgrade's train station and sits on one of his numerous chests - he gathered what he could from the family treasure in these wooden chests, his ticket to the future. Another passenger comes by, looks at him moving figures alone in the twilight and they start a game. When the train arrives, they jump up and hurry but all the chests are gone, except the one they were sitting on, with the chessboard open between them. Simeon is lost and stays in Belgrade; gets a job as young professor in math and astronomy at the Uni. There he meets, in a corridor, a tiny Greek beauty, Penelope, and they get two sons, the psychiatrist and the judge, i.e. the banknote 'thief'. Count Eugene dies in Chicago, champion and a millionaire. The other Count, my dad, becomes a communist and later the best Criminal Law lawyer of Macedonia. Ha, how about that, Countess Bilyanche! Talking about identity crisis. The grandmaster from UK sympathizes with me, he had the same awakening discovery late in his life. So, the heroes in my movie are not only the cat, Peter Bond, Tatko, Baba and the Goddess, but even a bunch of Russian Counts and grand masters on horses. I am invited to visit the pink castle of the Martinovsky-family outside of Odessa, and the light blue church with nipple towers they built for the Russian people.

This was the first time I realized where my mystical surname comes from. I was carrying it as a souvenir of the Unknown; now, it sparkled with unexpected adventurism. The boulder-waves of the Pacific were washing me naked and whole. Now I understand why the communists

were interrogating me about the banknote ‘thief’ on closed doors, with no windows! In order to keep me away from the camp-jaws for my noble Russian ancestry, no one ever uttered a word about it in the kitchen with the kittens. I was transparent, like a beach tent, couldn’t be caught in a lie. What a magical table-invisible! Even mom protected me. And how can I thank them now, when they are all gone?!

As I was wondering who I am, my son Josef was wondering what’s the point with it all. It is one of those endless summer days, we dug toes into the hot sands of the gigantic Santa Monica beach when he asked me The Question:

- What is the meaning of life, mom?

I was ready for it and recited:

- The meaning is to ask yourself what the meaning is.

This was the answer I got from Tatko, when we dug toes in the sands of the Black Sea, and I passed it on. This made no sense to Joshko.

- Well, lets go to the Barnes and Nobles and see what others say.

The philosophy section: how about Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Heidegger, Camus, Nietzsche? Josef got Antichrist and Zarathustra. He closed himself into his chambers, came out only for milk, and on the 5th day he stood as tall as the door frame and spoke: ‘I am not an animal, I am a ubermensche’, and went off skating. Around midnight, the phone rang.

- Do you know where your son is, Mam? – asked the LAPD.

No problem, I am a Columbo fan. They found Josef and his skate brothers in the garden of a church, next to school; threw their skateboards on the Holy ground, spread their legs, searched their teenage bodies, and arrested them. Why? I didn’t ask, I kind of knew and smiled to myself, but the policeman insisted to tell me:

- They were writing satanic messages on the church board, Mam. We will let them free only if you repair the original text on the church garden board.

His friend's dad, an Irish punk, and I, a commi outcast, rush to the church and start our midnight Bible quiz. The boys had moved around the plastic letters on the board, which now announced:

GOD IS DEAD. NIETZSCHE

Our job was to uncover the original message, given the letters left on the board. It became 3 am and we had come up with:

'THE ONE WHO MADE US IS THE ONE WHO IS IN US'.

That should do. The next day: Easter. We slug to the church and the main priest, who is to let us know if we pass the exam and liberate our kids from jail, greets us: a Santa Clause from a Coca-Cola bottle - white beard, bear belly, suspenders, and all. Josef's voice is tall:

- God is dead, said Neitzsche. Why would that be satanic?

The priest:

- I was driving the other day on Wilshire Boulevanrd and I saw a sign: 'Nietzsche is dead. God.'

Our guessing on the board is not correct. What is wrong, for Nietzsche's sake?! Santa's fluffy fingers adjust a few letters and we go 'aha':

'THE ONE WHO MADE US IS THE ONE WHO CAN MEND US.'

Million waves and sighs later, Joe and I stepped back on the old continent with Californian-tan smiles and a Johnny Cash guitar, when the Goddess, in her high-heel slippers, put her last Full Stop. Her last firework. I wasn't listed in her cellphone. The nurses found me after 9 days search and I received an sms:

- You mother is in the morgue.

This can't be true. How can a Goddess die! I opened the yellow pages, as if I was looking for a plumber, and pinned the morgue on the map. Indeed, Death had performed an excellent plastic operation: the facial skin was perfectly tight - not a trace of life, except for the manicure - blood red, and hair - raven black. Mares started riding on my chest from

that night on. She left me a grand gift, Tatko's prayer book of savings, which she masterfully recovered from the deflation.

Before her death, the Wig had broken his sister's heart with terror and chased her away from Eden. She had understood that her bro had tripped her into cutting her relations with her only daughter and grandson, in order to pick himself the fruits of their parents' gardens. When he heard of his sister's death, the Wig occupied the cheery blossom house in Vitosha Mountain's lap, broke the door of Peter's townhouse and lied down on his mom's side of the bed, clothes on. Not for long. Until he woke up, we mixed him a mint & bacteria cocktail, shaken not stirred, and removed him from the house, as he was sleeping. In response, the Wig filled up the shop with roaches - his black tentacles stretched to the kitchen, where 100 cactus blooms ago the cat reared her kittens, grandpa smoked the Sun, and Tatko eves-dropped on radio Free Europe, with a hand in one pocket.

Although his diet was Mediterranean, Tatko got cancer in the stomach 5 years after grandma's departure under the blooming cherry tree and he was crucified in the after-operation department. In a breathless stuffy white dwelling with no windows, the semi-corpses of European surgery lie prostrated in the twilight between Hell and Heaven, fed intravenously. Young chicks changed the pots under the dying men. Tatko closed his dove-eyes, a helpless tear struggled to roll down the desert-face. His lips stirred soundless, like cracked soil:

- What is the season, Bilyanche? Is there sunlight?
- Oh, you, my dearest Tatko, you, who swang your feet on the accumulative stove and exploded with laughter, who saved me under the invisible tent from the earthquake and the jaws, who challenged my chess horses with raspberry smells, who pleaded to Baba for my Turkish delight cookies, who gave me your enormous library, who hid snowdrops under my pillow every March 8th, who stuffed me with sweet-puff strawberries every quiet summer of the doves, on the lap of the mountain, who

played build-marble-tile-terrace; Josif and Benjamin, swinging under the quince, embraced; you, who saved all your life so I can buy my dream-home with my dream man and a puppy; you, who took me to football matches with Slabia; we started a book together on the role of women in Bulgarian history, remember?; you who defended us in front of General Geshev with the sentence 'There are no borders for love' when he blamed us of party betrayal; you, who returned my banknote from the basement 'thief'; we built million afternoon sand castles, showered with Black Sea kisses; you, who let me conquer the Black Top; you, who were the feast of my childhood, how can I let the Sun shine in this dungeon without windows?

- Everybody is dying in here, moaning all night, one can't sleep. Poor people! – his hands hanging on the bed as he spoke, even his veins were dove colored.
- Did you hear the football match, Tatko? Slabia versus Levski. The radio is under your pillow – yes, I am hard rock convinced that he is immortal and soon we will go to a match and demonstrations, together, as usual, again and again.
- Quiet, Bilyanche, the secret services have bugged us. These white aprons are their agents, they pretend to be doctors – the effort it took him to utter all this stopped me by surprise, he who never before mentioned anything about agents or surveillance.
- Tatko, these times passed, even perestrojka passed away. There is a football match, lets listen together! But before that, lets do some push-ups – I mean it.

He looked at me provocatively and lifted one gaunt joint.

- And now the other.

This time he concentrated so hard that it looked as if he forgot the lost hope for drops of sunlight and linden scent; he lifted one more shaky leg. There you go, one more time, I will save him. But he couldn't. His eyes told me: rest.

- Can't I get a lokumka? – he still had humor, but oh, God, how couldn't I think of it?! Auntie Sashka's melt in your mouth...

- Tomorrow, early morning lokumki will breathe powder sugar here next to you and shaving cream and new blue pajamas! How about that? While you take your beauty sleep, I'll go to a class reunion.

I was wearing a tight crimson dress, oily like Turkish delight, chosen by my son. I swam every day to give Tatko a good example. He looked at me tenderly, caressed my hand lightly. His body was ice cold, I – bursting of hip rose energy, convinced that tomorrow we'll make poppy steps to the linden and spring. I kissed him, clasped his hands, let him have the sunlight inside me.

- Bilyanche – his whispering glance sent me through the door.

I peep back in, hide-and-seek, and a kiss flew in the air, although there was no air in Gehenna.

My friends were shooting me with jokes, I giggled and chuckled all night. All I wanted was to tell them to Tatko tomorrow. I can't sleep, if I do, I will forget. No, I stay awake and walk slowly, slowly, to the hospital, in this June dawn, carrying lokumki, shaving cream, and pajamas. I kept rehearsing the jokes as the guys repairing the tram rails whistled after me - they didn't bother me, the thought of seeing Tatko laugh attached wings on my lips. I open the door to the post-surgery department with an invincible gesture and I see his bed without decoration, brown leather cover and empty. 'Oh, at last they moved him to the upper floor, he is doing better!' I peep with a smile in the nurse room and ask where they moved him. The grass turned blue. No linden. Why is there a Sun? Turn it off, I beg you!

One after the other, handsome suitors wanted to turn on the Sun, unsuccessfully. One of them was Dimitri, a tinderstick, heavily smeared with brilliantine, 'a cherry blossom splashing against the window'. The grass got greener when he and I flew thin letters to one another, without

even knowing each other. It turned out that he had a wife, who he wanted to leave, for me, in her sleep. Hm. That didn't sound good to me. I looked at the skies and hung all our letters on the neck of a most tender and brave bird, back to the shores in Barcelona, where we met for a few hours, licked ice-cream and watched a football match together. To my surprise, he reappeared at the door one life later: hardened, chubbier, and with a book under his arm, entitled *Retardée*. He had become a father and an immortal writer.

- The mere thought of your existence makes me look with gratitude to the skies. I am ready now. Please, please! I rowed to you for 15 years, you are my harbor, I come to follow you, lead me! I have no past, it is only you and I from now on. – his words, his fireworks.

He stepped out of the literature media screen like Tom Baxter from the *Purple Rose of Cairo* and decided to live with me in the real world, mortal as I was. He showed me his old house:

- This is my favorite bike, my Ernesto. It is yours now, my love.

For a Belgian, his bike is Holy. That must mean something! I bloomed of gratitude, delight and endearment, sprinkled him with poppy kisses: spring is here! love exists! Flying of happiness is actually not a metaphor.

- You are my angel, wings of desire – exclaimed Dimitri and wrote 'I love you' with my red lipstick in the wooden elevator, as I was ironing his shirt with steam of love.

A long eyelash fell on his left cheek. I kissed him and the child in me was so excited:

- Make a wish, my love!
- I wish that we get our house and live together forever. – he said with a loving gaze and pointed to the left.

I bloomed of joy each time and we cocooned in the tender nest of our eyelashes. Using Tatko's prayers account, which appeared to be real, we secured a home loan and bought the house of our dreams, next to a lake.

- Tatko, babo, mom, this is the man I will buy a home with, the man I love, the man who truly loves me, we flew towards each other for 15 years and now our waters finally merge.

Well, there are some middle age details to swallow: He is divorcing, so why hurry to announce us in front of cameras? I don't speak his dialect, nor French – is that a problem? Why does he want me to take pictures of him all the time? And why such a hurry to call Josef his son? I am not allowed to ask about the past.

Summer at last. Hot, like a hot tub. Morrison, our beloved Morrison, is kissing us, running in the lake, jumping in the forest - training for the World Cup! Our friends are pouring us over with bubbles of joy. Josef is playing guitar for us and sparkling with optimism. Tokyo calling. Tour de France, again! The Dutch book-week present floats on Amsterdam's canals! Guests line up from all around the world, friends, publishers, editors, artists... The angel spirits of the house, who sold it to us on the condition that we feed the birds, changed the roof before we move in: no hurricane will bother us for centuries to come. They gave us books for gardening our 2000 sqm Eden delight. I got presents for my first birthday in our new home: biking equipment from my love and a green canoe from sweet Ina and Bengt. The Sun was shining and I was sending my winged gratitude to Tatko, Baba and mom. In all that euphoria, I got meningitis; my spine was punctured in order to extract liter of brain liquid. Oh, not now! Tour de Vättern, we have to squeeze in 180 km biking around Lake Vättern! As we move in, the boxes still labeled Kitchen, Living room, Bedroom, Office, my sweetheart arrived from a short meeting in Holland where he worked on EU sponsored Hieronymous Bosch opera. Showing him my punctured back, we stretched arms to embrace each other when he all of a sudden jumped on me like a machinist, forced my knees over my eyes like powerboat handles, my spine bun-curved, locked, and he pinned a stalactite inside me, in dark silence. Instead of eyes, two black holes starred at me, madly, as if he wanted to puncture my soul, as if he was a Bosch caricature. In complete perplexion and horror I try to breathe but I can't. Open mouth helps. Breathe. Pain. Pain. With wide-open eyes I

begged him to stop while he was raping me. Sunken red flames appeared in front of eyes and I departed my body. Morrison followed me, left in silence. Why, for God sake, why? No, it doesn't matter. Who is he actually? It doesn't matter anymore. Who am I? A blood soaked cloud of dove feathers and thin letter paper, dripping.

- So, what do we do in Sweden? Ejaculate and sleep! – it looked at me and laughed.

Slowly, the Prince of Gent turned into an 'It'. I was an immobile dear sitting on a chair with crushed legs across a demanding black hole. My body was stoned from the navel down, but my ears could hear the birds, I could smell the pines. A sparkle of warmth and friendship reached me when Morrison walked around me, happy to be together but confused as I could not run with him. The black hole continued banging on me:

- You are more interesting then I thought. Don't you get it? All women find me ice cold in the end. And don't you dare contact media! Remember, all ads are good ads!

It turned its back, farted at me and fell asleep, while I drowned in a lake of shock and mortality. Masque off, it met my son:

- I crushed your mom and I am waiting for her to commit suicide, but as you know, she is difficult. – it looked up to check his reaction. – So, pay attention! I am going back to Belgium to watch the World cup. Bottoms up!

Josef locked himself into his childhood room, blinds down.

Our friends – trees with large branches, begged the skies with shocked eyes, couldn't hold me standing.

I count: 28 teeth – grind, 1 piece of neck – shaking, 2 pieces of hands – trembling, 2 pieces of eyes –staring, heart - 1000 piece, 1 piece of memory – for Joshko...

Morrison looked at my remains with love and compassion larger than the sky and died. He wagged his tail as I asked for his noble paw in his dead bed. Turn off the Sun, please, or I will smoke it dead!

On the orders of the Truman show director, the writer, which is also the main actor, a brigade of journalists fly over from Brussels to film it rowing in my birthday present, under a Jupiler flag in Häll's lake.

- Swedes are xenophobes – it burps out in immortal Flemish.

Back on stage, still seated in my green canoe, it announces its plans to buy a new house with a new bride:

- Life can't be more beautiful. How grateful I am that you appeared in my life....

With a proud gesture, it shows her what it accomplished: a deserted house of crushed dreams, a graveyard of beauty.

- Look what I left for your sake!

Déjà vu! As I was coming down like a dum dum girl, it took not only Ernesto but even my bike helmet, left me its unpaid bills and unflushed toilet. Indeed, a retarded 'vision thing', yet, the Dutch and Flemish audience clap hands: 'Bravo! Sadism, deception, shame! What a talent!', while his daughter cries at home because her father told her that he didn't want her anyway.

I close my eyes, gently touching the light, like harp fingers in Mahler's Adagietto. I step on the yellow streetcar at Venice beach, get off at the Farmer's Market on Pirotka and enter the kitchen where grandma does her bookkeeping with a blunt pencil on satin paper, glance of a gazelle. The lace curtains sail. It smells of dust and moonlight. 'Hello'- the copper beech dips in her giant honey lashes. Baba is dead, but not tonight. Tatko is dead, but the grey postilions are wafting through the open wings of the kitchen, like manes of flying stallions.

Bilyana Morrison