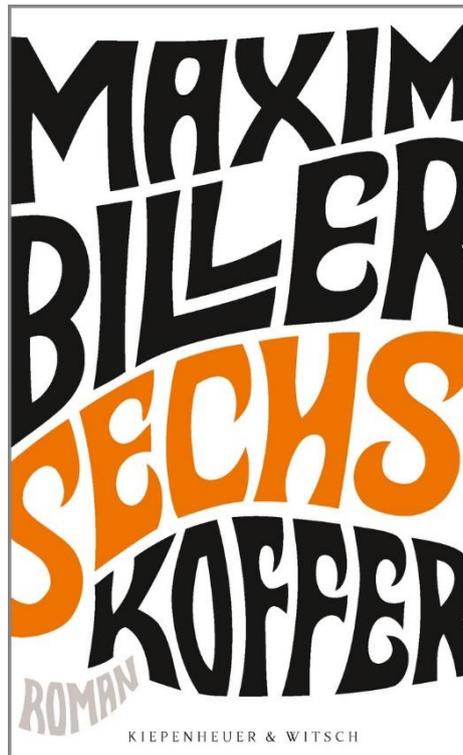


# SIX SUITCASES

NOVEL

by

**Maxim Biller**



**Parts I – IV (out of VI)**

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The noblest part of a human being is the passport.

—Bertolt Brecht

## I.

### *Before Fleeing the Country*

On a hot day, much too hot, in May 1965, my father woke up even earlier than usual. He'd been working until four in the morning on *The Good Soldier Schweyk*; he was up to Part Four, which he didn't like as much as the first three, when he'd taken two Acylpyrin and laid down with a terrible headache on the nice new Western couch, so as not to wake the three of us in the other room. When he woke up two hours later, he thought he'd only closed his eyes for a few seconds. The light outside was different than usual—yellow, almost orange. There had been a short fierce downpour for a few minutes but even so the sky wasn't dark and the strange morning sun behind it shone into the room almost red, cloaking the desk and the typewriter, the manuscript pages and the two open volumes of his Czech-Russian dictionary with a delicate bloody shimmer.

As my father wondered if he should quickly finish translating the chapter before my mother, my sister, and I got up, he ran his fingers contentedly over the rough, slightly scratchy Danish fabric of the expensive new couch. He and my mother loved this couch. They'd bought it from Tuzex on Ondříčkova from the advance he'd been paid for his *Schweyk* translation; with the rest of the money he'd bought two suits, shirts, a trenchcoat, a couple of light-brown Budapest shoes and a small black-and-white-checked fedora in the clothing department for Uncle Dima. My mother disapproved but had, as so often, simply kept an arrogant, superior silence. To which my father finally said, softly: "Five years in Pankrác, Rada, do you understand what that means? He'll be happy to have new things..." And then he'd shouted: "Yeah, shit! Of course he'll be glad to have them! Fashions change everywhere, even in our shitty Communist

country!” But still she didn’t say anything, and he knew exactly what she was thinking: that it was Uncle Dima’s own fault he’d been in prison, and that five years wasn’t nearly enough for what he might have actually done.

Only when my father, still groggy from his short sleep, sat back down at the desk did he realize that his headache wasn’t gone. He typed a sentence, then another one, then pulled the page out of the typewriter and threw it in the garbage and slowly rolled a new page in. He almost always got headaches when he worked too much, but this time it surely also had something to do with the Armenian cognac he’d drunk the night before in Café Slavia with Natalia Gelernter. He never drank but she’d talked him into it, and every time they toasted, Natalia had cried not “Cheers!” or “L’chaim!” but “To our dear stupid Dima—we both forgive him for everything!” And her big dark eyes would fill with a cold gray poison, or at least that’s how her sudden tears seemed to my father. Maybe he too was just being fooled.

When he got home around midnight, we were luckily already all asleep and he could disappear right into his study. My sister and I were in our bed lying head to foot, foot to head, like the Queen and Jack on a playing card; we were breathing even more quietly than my mother, who was lying diagonally across the sofa bed in the living room that was folded out for the night, with her eyes open but fast asleep as well.

The red morning sunshine now crept across the desk ever faster, and across the dented, uneven prewar parquet floor, and after my father watched its path for a while he tried to write another couple of sentences but couldn’t get any farther. How do you say “putrid smell” in Russian, but so that it sounds funny? The “putrid smell” that made Schweyk laugh came from a mass grave containing a few dozen fallen Austrian soldiers, and since the other, surviving soldiers hadn’t been strong enough to shovel the dirt back into the large hole properly, a few arms and legs were even sticking out. How could anyone laugh about something like that? Or maybe that’s exactly what a person should do? Only these goddamn Czechs could be so gruesome. Maybe Dima

should laugh about his five years in Pankrác? Should they both laugh about the death of their poor father—their beloved, strict, and usually much too generous Tateh?

“Papa, are you taking me to school today? Or is Yelena? I don’t want her to take me. She always makes me hold her hand. Like I’m still a little kid.”

He turned around and there behind him, in the door opened just a crack, I stood in my new blue-striped pajamas that Uncle Vladimir had sent me from Brazil. They were still way too big for me. I often looked too grown-up for my six years, the way I did now. I had the dusky, serious, almost Asian face that everyone in the family had—my father’s father, whom they always called by the Yiddish word Tateh, but also my father and his three brothers, Dima, Vladimir, and Lev. The children in Rieger Park and on the street often called me a gypsy child, and I always told my parents, very earnestly, and pretended it didn’t bother me but no one believed me.

“I don’t know if I can drive you to Vlkova today,” my father said. “I have to translate a whole other chapter and then go to the publishers and turn it all in. Then later I have to pick up Uncle Dima.”

“Yelena says Uncle Dima killed Tateh,” I said. “Is that true?”

He said nothing. Then: “Of course not. Did she really say that?”

“No,” I said. “I made it up.”

“Why did you make that up?”

“Because that’s what I think.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“Because Uncle Dima’s in jail. And I don’t know any other kid whose uncle’s in jail. And because you’re only sent to jail if you kill someone. Right?”

My father said nothing and thought about what I had just said. What’s going to happen to this child when he’s older? he wondered. Why does the boy always see the world as such a dark and ugly place?

“Are you picking up Uncle Dima from jail?” I said. “What are you going to do with him? Will you have work to do together? Or maybe you’ll go for a walk in Stromovka Park? Papa...”

“Yes?”

“Can we see him too, or will he have to go back into jail?”

“You know what, you little chochem? If you let me do a little work now I might be able to take you to school. Okay?”

“Have you ever killed anyone, Papa? Uncle Lev and Uncle Vladimir must have, they were in the Red Army.”

“All right, that’s enough now,” my father said. “You go right back to bed. I don’t want to hear another word from you for two hours.” He bent over his manuscript, tired, and started thinking over the sentence with the “putrid smell” again, and when he quickly turned around again and saw me still standing in the door behind him, he yelled like crazy: “Get out! Get out!” and I finally disappeared.

Dima had booked a trip to Albania through the Čedok travel agency but planned to sneak away from the group at the stopover in Belgrade and illegally continue on to West Berlin, where his brother Lev had been living for years, instead of to Tirana. Unfortunately, not only Dima knew about his plans—half of Prague knew, since he’d been going around for months selling friends and acquaintances the things he couldn’t bring with him: his Russian library, which Tatch had spent years sending him (and my father) in the mail, book by book, from Moscow; furniture; carpets; even the equipment from his little private chemistry lab, where he used to retest the inventions from the Metallurgical Institute that he later wanted to sell in the West, with Lev’s help. At some point the Interior Ministry got wind of Dima’s plans too, and the only people who probably didn’t suspect anything were my father and Dima’s wife, Natalia Gelernter. Natalia was furious with him, of course. The first time she and my father were allowed to visit Dima after he was arrested at Ruzyně Airport, she said, quietly, without hugging him or even saying hello: “Did

you really want to go without me, Dima? I thought we were a family.” And while he was still planning an answer, with that sad, slightly dense-looking Dima expression on his face, she said, loudly this time: “You idiot, you weren’t careful in Bratislava and now I’m pregnant.” Then she slapped him, and the two short blond guards he was standing between gave a bored laugh and led Dima away again.

Outside it started to rain. Within a few moments it was dark; the bizarre red light vanished from the room and from the corners of the enormous old double windows, and the facades of the buildings across Laubova Street took on a gray color, almost black. My father noticed only now that the desk lamp had been on since the night before, and he turned it off. Then he sat there, stock-still, bent forward, like the Jan Hus statue on Old Town Square, in this amazingly warm silvery morning light, and thought about his stupid brother.

Was he mad at him? Sometimes yes, but usually no. When he himself was still with Natalia, in Leningrad where they were students together at Zhdanov University, they’d both wanted to escape to the West too, but of course they’d never spoken a word about it to anyone else. Later, in Prague, they still wanted to but they’d split up soon. Then, after Natalia married Dima, my father and she had stood next to each other on the steps of the big old registry office in Smíchov, smoking in silence, and at some point my father said to her: “Maybe you’ll manage it with him.” She said: “Yes, maybe. But you mustn’t ever tell him what we were planning. That would make him sad.” And my father said: “You can’t either.” Never again had they talked to each other about their great dream of the West.

“Are you still working? Or working again?”

Now it was my mother standing behind my father in the door to the study. She was already dressed—in a short red dress, a green plastic belt with a giant buckle, her black hair combed up like the actresses from the Viola Bar—and he realized at once that she had a headache too. Whenever she had a headache she looked especially good, her compact facial

features, like a Richard Fremund drawing, relaxed more and the look in her dark blue eyes, otherwise always so serious, lightened up.

“Why don’t you turn on your lamp? Seven diopters isn’t enough for you?” she said.

“How would you say ‘putrid smell’ in Russian?” my father said. “But so it makes you laugh.”

“I don’t know,” she said, “I’m tired. I braided Yelena’s hair but she’s still asleep. There’s breakfast on the table and I’ve laid out clothes for both of them. I need to be at the Institute by seven-thirty. Are you and Dima coming here first?”

My father nodded.

She closed the door from outside the room, softly and carefully, but then opened it again and said: “You know how you are. Just stop thinking about it or you’ll be on the same sentence for three days. Maybe it’ll come to you tonight. Or will that be too late?” The door closed, opened again, and my mother said: “Or why don’t you ask your ridiculous brother. The two of you used to translate together.” My father said nothing. “Don’t worry, I’ll be nice to him.” Still he said nothing. “Did you have a good time with Natalia last night?” she said in a surprisingly nasty and cold voice, and shut the door behind her for good.

Probably, my father thought as he turned the desk lamp on and off a few times like a stubborn child, they’d made Dima sign something in Pankrác. Not probably, definitely. He’d definitely told them everything they wanted to know. The only question was whether they’d already known about Tatch’s business dealings beforehand, and if so, who’d told them. Ultimately it could have been anyone who supplied Tatch with old American sewing machines or French perfume, anyone who owed him money or even was just mad at this quiet, friendly Jew from Ruthenia for making it, for providing for his family better than most Russians could. No, when Tatch was arrested in Moscow, Dima was still free and busy with his impossible escape plans, and so it couldn’t possibly have been him! Still, the fact that my mother thought it was him—even though she obviously never said so—made my father furious. What made him even

angrier was that Dima and he and we had to live in a world where someone could be hanged over a few illicitly made dollars.

“Papa, I want five spoons of sugar in my tea but Yelena says I can only have three.”

“Five spoons of sugar? He should just eat candy for breakfast!”

“Why not? Why can’t I?”

“Because then by the time you’re ten you’ll be like an old man with all your teeth fallen out.”

“Like you yesterday, both your incisors at once?”

“That’s different, you little idiot!”

My sister and I were standing in the door together; we’d gotten dressed ourselves and looked as cute and pretty as the Czech child movie stars from the Barrandov Studios. Last year my mother had even been considering whether to send us to screen tests for *Distant Worlds*, *Distant Lands*, but then my father had told her no way, he didn’t want any stuck-up children who did badly at school, and so that was that. Secretly, though, they were both sure that we would have instantly gotten the starring roles if only we’d wanted them.

“Do you realize how much you two get on my nerves sometimes?” my father said, in a perfectly serious voice, almost like he wasn’t scolding us, just informing us of a very important fact. “Do you realize how hard it is to work in this house and make money for you all?”

We were both shocked and took a step backward, expecting him to start yelling. But he stayed calm and said: “Yelena, you need to take your brother to Vlkova today! I can’t do it, I need to work. And if he doesn’t want to hold your goddamn hand then he doesn’t have to. Leave him alone. It’s his business whether or not he gets run over!”

“Yes, Papa,” Yelena said, grinning.

“Yes, Papa,” I said sadly.

“See you this afternoon,” my father said. “Uncle Dima’s coming back from his big trip today.”

Now we both grinned, then slammed the study door harder than we needed to and ran into the kitchen, laughing out loud.

When Dima was arrested in Ruzyně Airport in the summer of 1960, the StB secret police found seven hundred-dollar bills on him, which he'd hidden in two empty ORWO film canisters. My father had heard that from Natalia, and she'd heard it from Dima, whom she'd gone to visit almost every week for the past five years, more than anyone else. Or at least my father always thought that Dima must have told her about the dollars during one of their many short sad meetings in the Pankrác visiting room, always freezing, under glaring lights. But then, the night before at Café Slavia, after their fourth or fifth cognac, she put her hand on his and said: "Those goddamn dollars from your father! I never understood why he was allowed to smuggle them out from Moscow to you guys in Prague, for years, without the StB doing anything about it. Without his dollars they might never have been able to lock Dima up." My father picked up the bottle, poured her and himself another glass, and said: "Natalia, how do you know the StB knew about it for all those years?" She stared at him, shocked—very shocked—and said, suddenly uncertain: "They know everything. Don't they?"

My father very quickly and nervously turned the desk lamp on and off a few more times until it gave a loud sharp crack and the bulb burned out. "Shit," he muttered. "Shit!" He thought for a moment about whether to get up and go get a new bulb from the kitchen, but then he would have seen us again, and he didn't want to because he knew perfectly well that he would yell at us for some new tiny thing or another, the way he always felt compelled to yell at us or our mother whenever he thought of his father's death.

Why hadn't he thought of that yesterday? And why didn't he throw Natalia's cognac right in her face when she'd lied to him so shamelessly and badly? Why, instead, did he kiss her goodbye the same as ever? Really, Natalia, "they" know everything? Or do they only know it because one of us told them? Yes, of course, it was she who'd told the StB everything about Tateh's illegal deals years ago, not Dima, and she must have been meeting regularly with one of

them on Bartolomějská Street or in one of the StB's many secret apartments! How else could she rise so quickly to be a lecturer at the FAMU Film Academy and deputy chair of the Film Union, despite not even being in the Party? Oh, Natalia, my father thought as he lay back down on the beautiful new sofa, exhausted, and pulled Vladimir's old Russian military blanket up over himself—so Rada hates you for cursing the Communists so loud and so constantly? You of all people? Or is it that she's always sensed you were a liar? I thought it was just her perpetual jealousy.

His eyes fell closed, by themselves, and when he realized he was about to fall asleep he quickly opened them and looked around his beloved study. Outside it was still half dark, from the rain and the clouds, but even so he could see everything. Here, between the countless dictionaries, piles of manuscript pages, the two large Fremund portraits of women, and his little collection of menorahs on the old dark-green tiled stove, he spent at least twelve or fourteen hours a day—the biggest, and probably the most interesting, part of his life. Who would have thought that he would ever have such a large and lovely workspace in the best neighborhood of the most wonderful city in Europe? How was it that he had never realized that before? And why did it still, even now, not make him happy?

All four brothers had grown up in a single room in a giant kommunalka building on Pushkin Square, and when Lev and Vladimir left Moscow for Prague after the war, he and Dima, the two younger brothers, were jealous. Two years later they'd finally been able to follow them, but almost as soon as they got there Lev and Vladimir moved farther West—one to West Berlin, the other all the way to Brazil. My father himself was back in Russia then, in Leningrad, with Natalia, studying history. But then he was kicked out of the Party and had to return to Czechoslovakia, and so now he'd lived and worked here, in this room, in this city, for almost twenty years. No, he hadn't become a historian, even though he'd wanted to even as a precocious, humorless ten-year-old in Russia. He'd become a translator and interpreter, and actually that was much better—he made much more money and had the chance to meet the

most important writers and directors in the country. Still, he wondered almost every day when he and Dima would follow their two older brothers farther West, and whether that was even a good idea. Poor Dima had tried it alone, without him, in his helpless childish way; he'd probably have to help Dima next time if it was actually going to happen.

Dammit, how do you say "putrid smell" in Russian but so that it sounds funny? And why had he still not managed to think of anything? My mother was right: He needed to stop racking his brains over it otherwise he'd never get anywhere; maybe he *should* ask Dima. They'd worked together a lot in their early years in Prague—machine blueprints, physical chemistry tables, military reports—and Dima had been pretty good at it. But at some point he'd gone to the Metallurgical Institute, and then he'd been thrown in jail. All right, fine, he'd ask Dima, my father thought, arranging the hard sofa pillows so that they stopped hurting his neck. He closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe slowly and calmly, and no sooner did he partly succeed than he felt his migraine coming back. The pain paralyzed the whole right half of his head—of course, he was left-handed; he felt sick and his arms and legs felt like they were slowly burning up.

He tried to open his eyes but could do so only for a second or two. He opened them again but they snapped right back shut, and before he finally fell asleep, my tired, sad father thought: Strange, it was so dark in my wonderful study just a moment ago, and now it's all sinking into a fountain of bright, glaring red shimmering blood.

My parents always spoke Russian with each other, and with my sister and me, too. They could speak Czech, of course, but not as well as Yelena and me; we often felt ashamed of their Russian accents. We were allowed to speak Czech to each other but never to them, and when we didn't know a Russian word we had to ask them or say what we wanted to say in Russian circumlocutions. As a result, we always spoke very good Russian—Yelena speaks it perfectly to this day—and that is probably also why we learned German so quickly after we fled Czechoslovakia for Germany in the summer of 1970.

When we came home from school on that hot, much too hot day in May 1965, during which it had kept raining in short heavy bursts, Yelena and I were singing a famous Czech campfire song, very loud and very well. It was about the Apaches and Manitoo and their battle against the whites, and of course everyone died in the end but they died as proud Indian heroes. Yelena had learned the song the year before at Česká Lípa summer camp and taught it to me. We both still know the song today and sometimes, over the phone (she lives in London, I live in Berlin), we sing the first verse or two in chorus and laugh, and I can't help thinking back to that afternoon when Dima came home.

Almost the moment Yelena unlocked the apartment door, we could hear the grown-ups' voices from the living room. We instantly fell silent. First we heard my father, who seemed to be in an amazingly good mood, telling a story in Russian. Then we heard another male voice, which sounded almost exactly like our father's but a little higher and unsteadier. Then my father said something else, and then Aunt Natalia said something—also in Russian—and then my father again. And suddenly they all laughed, and we could hear my mother laughing longest and loudest of all.

My sister and I stared at each other, solemn and overly grown-up. We both made astonished faces and slowly put our schoolbags down on the floor right under the coatrack, where a light-colored trenchcoat and a small checked hat that we'd never seen before were hanging. Then, before we finally ran into the living room, I whispered in Czech: "I think Uncle Dima *did* kill Tatch, Yelenka. Do you think so too?"