

THE EIGHTH LIFE

For Brilka

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PROLOGUE

or

THE SCORE OF FORGETTING

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This story actually has many beginnings. It's hard for me to choose one, because together they all constitute *the beginning*.

You could start this story in an old, high-ceilinged flat in Berlin – quite undramatically, with two naked bodies in bed. With a twenty-seven-year-old man, a fiercely talented musician currently squandering his talent on moodiness, alcohol, and an insatiable longing for intimacy. But you could also start this story with a twelve-year-old girl who decides to say NO to the world she lives in, hurl rejection in its teeth and go off in search of another beginning for herself, for her story.

Or you can go way, way back, to the root of everything, and begin there.

Or you start the story with all three beginnings at once.

As Aman Baron, whom most people knew as 'the Baron', or simply 'Baron', was confessing that he loved me – with heartbreaking intensity, unbearable lightness, screamingly loud, speechlessly silent; with a slightly unhealthy, enfeebled love, with no illusions, with a resolution to be tough – my twelve-year-old niece Brilka was leaving her hotel in Amsterdam and heading for the train station, taking with her nothing but a small sports bag, almost no money, and a tuna sandwich. She intended to go to Vienna. She bought herself a cheap weekend ticket valid only on local trains, having left a handwritten note at reception saying that she did not intend to return with the dance troupe to her homeland and there was no point in looking for her.

At precisely this moment I was lighting a cigarette and succumbing to a coughing fit, partly because I was overwhelmed by what I was hearing and partly because the smoke went down the wrong way. Aman (whom I personally never called 'the Baron') immediately came over, slapped me on the back so hard I couldn't breathe, and stared at me in bewilderment. He was only four years younger than me, but I felt decades older; and besides, at this point I was well on my way to becoming a tragic figure. Without anyone really noticing, because by now I was a master of deception.

I read his disappointment in his face. This wasn't the reaction he'd anticipated to his confession. Especially after he'd invited me to accompany him on the tour he was due to leave on in two weeks' time.

Outside it started to rain softly. It was June, a warm evening, with weightless clouds that decorated the sky like little balls of cotton wool.

When I'd recovered from my coughing fit, and Brilka had boarded the first train of her odyssey, I flung open the balcony door and collapsed on the sofa. I felt as if I were suffocating.

I was living in a foreign country, I had cut myself off from most of the people I'd once loved, who used to mean something to me, and had accepted a guest professorship that, while guaranteeing my future, had absolutely nothing to do with who I really was.

The evening Aman told me he wanted to *become normal with me*, Brilka, my dead sister's daughter and my only niece, was travelling to Vienna, a place she had envisioned as her chosen home, her personal utopia, all because of the solidarity she felt with a dead woman. In her imagination she had made this dead woman – my great-aunt, Brilka's great-great-aunt – her heroine. Her plan was to go to Vienna and obtain the rights to her great-great-aunt's songs.

And it was in tracing the path of this ghost that she hoped to find redemption, and the definitive answer to the yawning emptiness inside her. But I suspected none of this then.

After sitting on the sofa and putting my face in my hands, after rubbing my eyes and avoiding Aman's gaze for as long as possible, I knew I would have to weep again, but not now, not at this moment, while Brilka watched *old, new Europe* slipping past her outside the train window and smiled for the first time since her arrival on the continent of indifference. I don't know what it was she saw that made her smile as she left the city of tiny bridges, but that doesn't matter any more. The main thing is, she was smiling.

At that moment I was thinking I would have to weep. In order not to I turned, went into the bedroom and lay down. I didn't have to wait long for Aman: grief like his is very quickly healed if you offer to heal it with your body, especially when the patient is twenty-seven years old.

I kissed myself out of my enchanted sleep.

And as Aman laid his head upon my belly my twelve-year-old niece was leaving the Netherlands, crossing the German border in her compartment that stank of canned beer and loneliness while several hundred kilometres away her unsuspecting aunt feigned love with a twenty-seven-year-old shadow. All the way across Germany she travelled in the hope of moving on.

After Aman had fallen asleep I got up, went to the bathroom, sat on the edge of the bath and started to cry. I wept a lifetime's worth of tears over the feigning of love, the longing to believe in words that had once defined my life. I went into the kitchen, smoked a cigarette

and stared out of the window. It had stopped raining, and for some reason I knew that something was happening, something had been set in motion, something beyond this apartment with the high ceilings and orphaned books. With the many lamps I had collected so eagerly, a substitute for the sky, an illusion of true light. Illuminating my own tunnel. But the tunnel remained: the lights had only been able to comfort me briefly, temporarily.

Perhaps it should also be mentioned that Brilka was a very tall girl, almost two heads taller than me (which at my height isn't that difficult), that she had buzz-cut hair like a boy's and John Lennon glasses, was wearing old jeans and a lumberjack shirt, had perfectly round cocoa-bean eyes constantly searching for stars, and an infinitely high forehead that concealed tremendous sorrow. She had just run away from her dance troupe, which had been invited to give a guest performance in Amsterdam; she danced the male roles, because she was a little too extravagant, too tall, too melancholy for the gentle, folkloristic women's dances of our homeland. After much pleading she was finally allowed to perform dressed as a man and dance the wild dances; her long plait had fallen victim to this concession a year ago.

She was allowed to do jumps and swordfighting, and was always better at these than at the wavelike, dreamy movements of the women. She danced and danced with a passion, and after being given a solo for the Dutch audience, because she was so good, so much better than the young men who had sneered at her in the beginning, she left the troupe in search of answers which dancing hadn't been able to give her, either.

The following evening I received a call from my mother, who always threatens to die if I don't return soon to the homeland I fled all those years ago. Her voice trembled as she informed me that 'the child' had disappeared. It took me a while to work out which child she was talking about, and what it all had to do with me.

'So tell me again: where exactly was she?'

'In Amsterdam, goddammit, what's the matter with you? Aren't you listening to me? She ran away yesterday and left a message. I got a call from the group leader. They turned everything upside down and...'

'Wait, wait, wait. How can an eleven-year-old girl disappear from a hotel, especially if she...'

'She's twelve. She turned twelve in November. You forgot, of course. How could it be otherwise.'

I took a deep drag of my cigarette, preparing myself for the disaster that awaited me. Because if my mother's voice was anything to go by, it wasn't going to be easy for me just to wriggle out of this and disappear, my favourite occupation these past few years. I armed myself for the obligatory reproaches, all of them intended to make clear to me what a bad

daughter and failed human being I was. Things I was all too well aware of without my mother telling me.

‘Okay, she turned twelve, and I forgot, but that’s not going to get us anywhere right now. Have they informed the police?’

‘Yes, what do you think? They’re looking for her.’

‘Then they’ll find her. She’s a spoilt little girl with a tourist visa, I suppose, and she...’

‘Do you have even a spark of humanity left in you?’

‘Sorry. I’m just trying to think aloud.’

‘So much the worse, if those are your thoughts.’

‘Mama!’

‘They’re going to call me. In an hour at the latest, they said, and I’m praying that they find her, and find her fast. And then I want you to go to wherever she is, she won’t have got far, and I want you to fetch her.’

‘I...’

‘She’s your sister’s daughter. And you will fetch her. Promise me!’

‘But...’

‘Do it!’

‘Oh God. All right, fine.’

‘And don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.’

‘Aren’t I even allowed to say “Oh God” now?’

‘You’re going to fetch her. And then you’ll put her on the plane.’

That same night they found her in a small Austrian town just outside Vienna, where she was waiting for a connecting train: she was picked up by the Austrian police and taken to the police station. My mother woke me and told me I had to go to Mödling.

‘Where?’

‘Mödling, the town’s called. Write it down.’

‘Fine.’

‘You don’t even know what day it is today.’

‘I’m writing it down! Where the hell is that?’

‘Near Vienna.’

‘What on earth was she doing there?’

‘She wanted to go to Vienna.’

‘Vienna?’

‘Yes, Vienna. Sound familiar?’

‘I heard you.’

‘And take your passport with you. They know the child’s aunt is picking her up. They made a note of your name.’

‘Can’t they just put her on a plane?’

‘Niza!’

‘Okay, I’m already getting dressed. It’s all right.’

‘And call me as soon as you’ve got her.’

She slammed down the phone.

That’s how this story begins.

Why Vienna? Why this, after the night of my flight from the tears? There’s a reason for all of it, but for that I’d have to begin the story somewhere else entirely.

My name is Niza. My name contains a word: a word that, in our mother tongue, signifies ‘heaven’. *Za*. Perhaps my life until now has been a search for this particular heaven, given to me as a promise that’s accompanied me since birth. My sister’s name was Daria. Her name contains the word ‘chaos’. *Aria*. Churning up, stirring up, the messing up and the not putting right. I am duty bound to her. I am duty bound to her chaos. I have always been duty bound to seek my heaven in her chaos. But perhaps it’s all just about Brilka. Brilka, whose name has no meaning in the language of my childhood. Whose name bears no inscription and no stigma. Brilka, who gave herself this name and kept insisting that people call her this until the others forgot her real name.

And even if I never told you: I would so like to help you, Brilka, so very much, to write your story differently, to write it anew. It’s in order not just to say this but to prove it as well that I’m writing all of this down. That’s the only reason.

I owe these lines to a century that cheated and deceived us all, all those who hoped. I owe these lines to a prolonged betrayal that settled over my family like a curse. I owe these lines to my sister, whom I could never forgive for flying away that night without wings, to my grandfather, whose heart my sister tore out, to my great-grandmother, who danced a *pas de deux* with me at the age of eighty-three, to my mother, who went off in search of God... I owe these lines to Miro, who infected me with love as if it were poison; I owe these lines to my father, whom I was never really permitted to know; I owe these lines to a chocolate manufacturer and a white-red first lieutenant, to a prison cell, but also to an operating table in the middle of a classroom, to a book I would never have written, if... I owe these lines to an infinite number of tears shed, I owe these lines to myself, who left home to find herself and gradually lost herself instead; but above all I owe these lines to you, Brilka.

I owe them to you because you deserve the eighth life. Because they say the number eight equates with infinity, perpetual flow. I am giving my eight to you.

A century connects us. A red century. For ever and eight. Your turn, Brilka. I've adopted your heart. I've cast mine away. Accept my eight.

You are the miracle child. You are. Break through heaven and chaos, break through us all, break through these lines, break through the ghost world and the real world, break through the inversion of love, of faith, shorten the centimetres that always separated us from happiness, break through the destiny that never was.

Break through me and you.

Live through all wars. Cross all borders. To you I dedicate all gods and all rosaries, all burnings, all decapitated hopes, all stories. Break through them. Because you have the means to do it, Brilka. The eight – remember it. All of us will always be interwoven in this number and will always be able to listen to each other, down through the centuries.

You will be able to do it.

Be everything we were and were not. Be a lieutenant, a tightrope walker, a sailor, an actress, a film-maker, a pianist, a lover, a mother, a nurse, a writer; be red and white or blue, be chaos and heaven and be them and me and don't be any of it, above all dance countless *pas de deux*.

Break through this story and leave it behind you.

I was born on 8th November 1973, in an otherwise insignificant village clinic near Tbilisi, Georgia.

It's a small country. It's beautiful, too, I can't argue with that; even you'll agree with me, Brilka. With mountains and a rocky coastline along the Black Sea. The coastline has shrunk somewhat in the course of the past century, thanks to a multitude of civil wars, stupid political decisions, hate-filled conflicts, but a beautiful part of it is still there.

You know the legend all too well, Brilka, but I'd still like to mention it here, to make clear to you what it is I'm trying to say – the legend that tells how our country came into being.

It was like this.

One beautiful, sunny day, God took the globe he had created, divided it up into countries (this must have been long before they built the tower at Babel), and held a fair, at which all the people tried to outdo one another, shouting at the tops of their voices, vying for God's favour in the hope of snaffling the best patch of earth (I suspect the Italians were the most effective in the art of making an impression, whereas the Chukchi hadn't really got the hang of it). It was a long day, at the end of which the world had been divided up into many countries and God was tired. However, God – wise as ever – had of course kept back a sort of holiday residence for himself: the most beautiful place on earth, rich in rivers, waterfalls, succulent fruits, and – he must have guessed it – with the best wine in the world. When all the excited people had set off for their new homelands, God was just about to take a rest beneath

a shady tree when he spotted a man (doubtless with a moustache and a comfortable paunch – at least that’s how I’ve always imagined him), snoring. He hadn’t been present at the distribution, and God was surprised. He woke him up and asked him what he was doing here and why he wasn’t interested in having a homeland of his own. The man smiled amiably (perhaps he had already permitted himself one or two glasses of red wine) and said (here there are different versions of the legend, but let’s agree on this one) that he was quite content as he was, the sun was shining, it was a gorgeous day, and he would settle for whatever God had left over for him. And God, gracious as ever, impressed by the man’s nonchalance and non-existent ambition, gave him His very own holiday paradise, which is to say: Georgia, the country you, Brilka, and I, and most of the people I will tell of in our story come from.

What I’m trying to say is: bear in mind that in our country this nonchalance (i.e. laziness) and non-existent ambition (lack of arguments) are considered truly noble characteristics. Bear in mind also that a profound identification with God (the Orthodox God, of course, and no other) does not prevent the people of this country from believing in everything that has even the slightest hint of the fairytale, mysterious or legendary about it – and that’s by no means restricted to the Bible.

Giants in the mountains, house spirits, the evil eye that can plunge a man into misfortune, black cats and the curse that goes with them, the power of coffee grounds, the truth only cards reveal (nowadays, you said, people even have new cars sprinkled with holy water in the hope it will keep them accident-free).

The country, once golden Colchis, that had to surrender the secret of love to the Greeks in the shape of the Golden Fleece, because the king’s wayward daughter, Medea, so lovestruck she’d lost her senses, commanded it.

The country that encourages in its inhabitants endearing traits like the sacred virtue of hospitality, and less endearing traits like laziness, opportunism and conformism (the majority aren’t remotely aware of this – you and I agree on that, too).

The country in whose language there is no gender (which is not at all the same as equal rights).

A country that in the last century, after a hundred and thirty-five years of Tsarist and Russian patronage, managed to establish a democracy for precisely four years before it was toppled again by the mostly Russian but also Georgian Bolsheviks and was proclaimed the Socialist Republic of Georgia and thus a constituent republic of the Soviet Union.

The country then remained in this *union* for the next seventy years.

After which came numerous upheavals, slaughtered demonstrations, several civil wars, and finally the long-awaited democracy – though that designation has remained a matter of perspective and interpretation.

I think that our country can really be very funny (not just tragic, I mean). That our country is also very capable of forgetting, along with repressing. Repressing our own wounds, our own mistakes, but also unjustly inflicted pain, oppression, losses. In spite of which we raise our glasses and laugh. I think that's impressive, I really do, in view of the not very pleasant things the past century brought with it, the consequences of which people are still suffering today (even if I can already hear you contradict me!).

It's a country from which, apart from the twentieth century's great executioners, many wonderful people also come, people I personally loved and love very much. Some have fled, some left in search of something and lost their way, some are no longer alive, some have returned, some have already seen their best days or hope yet to see them: most are unknown.

A country that is still mourning its Golden Age, from the tenth to the thirteenth century, and hopes one day to recover its former glory (yes, in our country progress is always simultaneously retrogression).

Traditions seem a pale reflection of what they once were. The pursuit of freedom is like a senseless quest for uncertain shores because, these past eighteen years especially, we haven't even been able to agree on what exactly it is we mean by freedom.

And so the country where I came into the world thirty-two years ago is today like a king who still sits in a glittering crown and magnificent robe, issuing commands, presiding over his realm, not realising that his entire court has long since fled and he is alone.

Don't cause any trouble – that's the first commandment in this country. You said that to me once, on our journey, and I made a note of it (I made a note of everything you said to me on our journey, Brilka).

To which I'll add:

Live like your parents lived: be seldom – better, never – alone. Being alone is dangerous and unprofitable. The country idolises community and mistrusts loners. Appear in cliques, with friends, in family or interest groups – you're worth very little on your own.

Procreate. We're a small country and we have to survive: this commandment is equal to the first commandment. Always be proud of your country; never forget your language; find foreign countries, whichever they may be, beautiful, exciting and interesting but never, never, never better than your home.

Always find quirks and characteristics among the people of other nations that in Georgia would be scandalous at the very least, and get worked up about them: general stinginess, i.e. the reluctance to spend all your money on behalf of the community; lack of hospitality, i.e. the reluctance to reorganise your entire life whenever someone comes to visit; insufficient willingness to drink and eat, i.e. the inability to drink to the point of unconsciousness; lack of musical talent... These sorts of characteristics.

Let your behaviour tend towards openness, tolerance, understanding, and interest in other cultures, provided they respect and always affirm the specialness and uniqueness of your homeland.

Be (again, these last eighteen years) religious; go to church, don't question anything in any way related to the Orthodox Church, don't think for yourself, cross yourself every time you see a church (very *en vogue*, you said!), so about ten thousand times a day if you're in the capital. Don't criticise anything sacred – which is pretty much anything that has anything to do with our country.

Be bright and cheerful, because that's the mentality of the country, and we don't like gloomy people in our sunny Georgia. You'll be all too well aware of that, too.

Never be unfaithful to your man, and if your man is unfaithful to you – forgive him, for he is a man. Live first and foremost for other people. Because in any case other people always know better than you what's good for you.

Finally, I want to add that in spite of my longstanding struggle for and with this country I haven't managed to replace it, to drive it out like an evil spirit that afflicts me. No purification ritual, no repression mechanism has yet been able to help me with this. Because everywhere I went, moving further and further away from this country, I was searching for the squandered, scattered, wasted, unused love I left behind.

Yes – it's a country that doesn't want to demonstrate any ambition, that would ideally like to have everything handed to it on a plate because its people are so lovely, so nice, so happy and cheerful, and able (on a good day) to conjure a smile to the face of the world.

In this country, then, I came into the world on 8th November 1973. A world that was too busy with other things to pay much attention to my arrival. The Watergate scandal, the anti-war campaigns against Vietnam, the military coup in Greece, the oil crisis and Elvis were keeping the western world on its toes, while the eastern part was mired in numb stagnation under Brezhnev and the Soviet *nomenklatura*. A stagnation that consisted of preserving power by all possible means and thus rejecting any kind of reform, while people increasingly closed their eyes to the burgeoning corruption and the black market.

One way or another, people in both parts of the world were listening for the first time to Pink Floyd's *The Great Gig in the Sky*. Openly in the West, secretly in the East.

And Vysotsky was to sing about those times:

The eternal circus

where promises burst

like soap bubbles:

cheer, those who can.

Great change?

Nothing but words.

I don't like any of this,

it makes me sick.

Apart from my birth and my sister's fall, nothing special happened that day. Except perhaps for the fact that, on this day, my mother lost patience in her eternal battle with her father and her eternal hope of understanding from the female members of her family, and began to scream.

'Are you a whore?' my grandfather is said to have yelled at her; and my mother, weeping, is said to have screamed back, 'If anything, I'm the daughter of one!'

Two hours later she went into labour.

Parties to the conflict: my domineering grandfather, my infantile grandmother, and my mother, increasingly losing control of her own life.

The other unusual event that day, immediately before the contractions began, was the concussion of my two-and-a-half-year-old sister.

A few days earlier she had visited the nearby stud farm with our grandfather and fallen in love with the Arab horses and Dagestani ponies there, such that on the day I was born my grandfather had sat her on a pony and was just holding her lightly around the waist when the pony suddenly broke free and threw the little girl off. It happened so fast that my grandfather failed to catch her.

She fell, and crashed like a heavy pumpkin to the ground, which was lined with straw but still hard enough for my soft and rosy sister.

As my grandfather was throwing himself on his granddaughter in desperation, blaming the horse breeders and threatening to close 'the whole club' down, my mother, upset by the fight and the hurtful words that would echo for a long time in the 'Green House', the house of my childhood, began to groan. My grandmother, who during this kind of noisy argument – and there were many – between her husband and her daughter would make a show of acting as a kind of umpire, but only inflamed the anger of both parties by refusing to take sides, immediately ran into the kitchen, where my mother was sitting, and reached, without speaking, for the massive telephone hanging on the kitchen wall.

The labour lasted precisely eight hours.

At the same moment that my mother, accompanied by her corpulent mother, was heading for the hospital in the village, my sister Daria, usually called Daro, Dari or Dariko, was also being rushed to hospital.

'Ow!' screamed Daria. 'Owwww!' cried her mother. 'Mamaaaa!' howled Daria, and her mother groaned, 'Mamaaaa!' My grandfather leapt into his daughter's white Lada – because his beloved collectors' car, Chaika (the 'Seagull', officially called GAZ 13 and reserved for

the Soviet elite), which he loved and cared for like a child, was too slow for the country roads – and raced to the best Tbilisi hospital, where it was certified that Daria had slight concussion. And, a few kilometres away and a few hours later, that I had come into the world.

My noisy crying compelled my exhausted mother to raise her head, look at me and realise that I didn't resemble anyone before she fell back again on the provisional-looking birthing stool.

My grandmother was the first to hold me while fully conscious. I was, she declared, a 'baby with an unnaturally developed need for harmony': after all, I had come into the world in the middle of an argument.

As far as the need for harmony was concerned, she couldn't have been more wrong.

My grandfather, who had transported my sister home again from the hospital – she was prescribed bed rest – received by telephone the news that I, 'scrawny and dark-haired', had now arrived and was blessed with 'robust health'. He sat down on the terrace, wrapped himself in his old sailor's jacket that my sister and I would squabble over so often, and just shook his head.

While his mother baked a welcoming cake, fetched her beloved fruit liqueur (sour cherry flavour this time) from the cellar and planned a birthday party, my grandfather carried on sitting there, motionless, aghast at his daughter's repetition of this scandalous act, unable to do anything but shake his head repeatedly. My birth forced him once again to bestow his own family name – Yashi – upon a granddaughter, because I was conceived out of wedlock. And this time not just with a deserter and traitor, like the progenitor of my sister, but with a man who was, quite simply, a criminal – in prison at the time of my birth.

'This child is a product of Elene's shamelessness, her depravity, and seals my conclusive defeat in the battle for her honour, so I have absolutely no reason to be happy, or to celebrate anything at all. Even if it's not her fault, the girl is the embodiment of all the ills her mother has brought down upon us.' This was his first sentence, uttered at last after repeated demands from his mother – my great-grandmother – to please show some reaction to the arrival of his second grandchild.

Well, in this he wasn't too far wrong, and given the circumstances into which I was born, I can't hold his words against him.

During the five days I spent in the hospital with my mother, when my grandmother visited her daughter every day in her confinement, bringing chicken soup and pickled vegetables, my grandfather stayed at home and kept watch at Daria's bedside. She couldn't understand why she wasn't allowed to get up, so he kept her entertained with all sorts of stories, games, cartoons (he put a television set in her room specially): and Daria knew nothing of my existence, while my mother knew nothing of her first-born's concussion.

Daria was the idolised, adored child in the kingdom of our powerful grandfather, destined to be worshipped and gazed at in wonder. Until she... But I'm getting ahead of myself – many years were to pass before then, in which she would perform brilliantly in her role of universally admired jewel.

However, despite these circumstances – the extreme contrast in the division of the roles our grandfather, the head of the family, assigned to us from the very beginning – I had secured one advantage forever the day I was brought home from the village hospital: I had the mad, unconditional love of my great-grandmother Stasia all to myself. She belonged to me and me alone. Great-Grandmother gave me the love she'd denied everyone else for decades; had given only frugally, in small doses, covertly, almost hesitantly, above all not to her own son. But she gave it to me now: belligerently, loudly, almost obsessively, childishly, extravagantly. As if all these years she had just been waiting for my arrival; as if she had been saving herself for me.

The day they brought me home, scrawny, shrivelled and not in the slightest bit sweet, was the day Anastasia, to give her her full name, left her soundproof castle and emerged into the daylight to greet my ugly, humble self. No longer was she half-hearted and unworldly, as had been her wont for so many years; something changed abruptly the minute she took me in her arms and closed her eyes.

And when she awoke from this somnambulistic state and finally inspected her great-granddaughter, she said: 'This is a different child. A special one. She needs a great deal of protection and a great deal of freedom.'

And everyone slapped their palms to their foreheads and groaned. The crazy old lady had come back to life, and they weren't really sure whether this was a good thing or a disaster.

Initially, I too was permitted to idolise my older sister.

In my former life I was often asked whether I suffered from her beauty, her popularity, the general admiration she received. But it wasn't like that. Despite all the difficulties that accompanied Daria and me in our childhood and adolescence, although we tormented, almost tortured each other and found it very hard to forgive each other's failings, it was all simply because of our incandescent love for one another.

When I was little I always fell silent as soon as Daria appeared, as soon as she contemplated touching my head or tickling my nose. I couldn't have done anything but idolise Daria, just like everyone else around us. Perhaps at this point I ought to try to explain her cruel, self-evident allure by saying that Daria had golden hair. And I mean really golden. Or perhaps that Daria had two dissimilar eyes, incredibly dissimilar and incredibly fascinating, one a crystalline blue, the other hazelnut brown. That she had a captivating smile and an

unusually deep, throaty voice for such a golden child, like that of a pudgy, sulky little boy. But that would make it all too easy; it wouldn't be enough.

Although my grandfather loved Daria so very much and saw my birth as a kind of effrontery because it threatened Daria's sole dominion, and although I too sensed this, right from the beginning, it made no difference: I sought and needed Daria's company.

I was an ugly child (and as such you quickly learn to fight to acquire beauty).

Stasia, as Anastasia was always called, had been a striking woman, not as unusually and dizzyingly beautiful as her younger sister Christine, but by the time I was born my great-grandmother's beauty had transformed into something surreal, somnambulist. She had started to rediscover ballet, and in doing so to become young again.

We really made a great couple.

Stasia... I owe her so much, even if there were certainly moments in my childhood when I would have liked to reverse her awakening. When her love felt like a curse; and I often wished not to receive this love in strange compensation for the many other deprivations of my childhood. But all in all she taught me to live, to dance on a tightrope when everything around me was going up in flames, on a tightrope stretched taut, higher than the highest trees, higher than every tower, poised and fearless – because when you fall all you do is stretch out your arms and you're flying. Thanks to her I learned to curse (a very underappreciated skill: the ability to curse well in times when the world around you is falling apart). Thanks to her I learned to look for ways of escaping when there is no escape, to climb the walls when bridges are collapsing, and to laugh *like a soldier*. Always and especially when there's nothing to laugh about.

Thanks to her I was able to slough off many curses like inconvenient clothes, and thanks to her I was able to break through hypocritical haloes. I owe all this and much more to Stasia, with whom it all really began...

One thing Stasia gave me, the thing that perhaps made the most lasting impression on me, is the story of the carpet.

One rainy morning – I was in the second or third year at school – when I'd stayed at home in the Green House because I'd caught a cold, I came across Stasia in the attic, where they'd never finished building the extension. There was an open balcony, wide as a terrace but without a railing, which we children were always forbidden to set foot on but which was nonetheless our favourite place to spend our time, as secretly we often did. Now Stasia was standing on this balcony beating out a moth-eaten carpet, beautifully patterned in various shades of pomegranate red. I'd never seen the carpet before.

'Stay there. Don't come any closer!' she commanded when she saw me standing there.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’ve decided to have this carpet restored.’

‘What does restored mean?’ I asked. I stopped in front of her, fascinated.

‘I’m going to make the old carpet new again and hang it on the wall. The carpet belonged to our grandmother and Christine inherited it. She never liked it, so she gave it to me, but I never appreciated it either, not until I was old. It’s a very ancient, very valuable tapestry.’

‘You can’t do that, can you, make something old new?’

‘Of course you can. The old thing will become new, so it’ll be different, never quite what it used to be, but that’s not the point of the exercise. It’s better and more interesting when something transforms itself. We’ll make it new, hang it up, and see what happens.’

‘But what for?’ I wanted to know.

‘A carpet is a story. And hidden within it are countless other stories. Come here; be careful, take my hand, yes, that’s it, now look, you see the pattern?’

I stared at the colourful ornamentation on the red background.

‘Those are all individual threads. And each individual thread is an individual story. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

I nodded, spellbound, although I wasn’t sure I did understand her.

‘You’re a thread, I’m a thread; together we make a little ornament, together with lots of other threads we make a pattern. The threads are all different, differently thick or thin, dyed different colours. The patterns are hard to make out if you look at just one individual thread, but if you look at them in context you start to see all sorts of amazing things. Look here, for example. Isn’t that gorgeous? This ornamentation – absolutely marvellous! Then there’s the density and number of knots, then there are the different colour structures – all that creates the texture. I think it’s a very good metaphor. I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately. Carpets are woven from stories. So we have to preserve and take care of them. Even if this one has spent years packed away somewhere for moths to feast on, it must now come to life again and tell us its stories. I’m sure we’re woven in there too, even if we never suspected it.’

And Stasia beat away at the heavy carpet with all her might.

It’s a lesson I’ve never forgotten.

I don’t know whether I should thank Stasia at this point, because with this knowledge she more or less condemned me to become addicted to stories and spend years looking obsessively for the stories *behind* the stories, like the different layers in a precious carpet.

So I’ll begin here, comforting myself a little, like a scared child hugging her favourite toy as tight as she can. Because I am scared. I don’t know whether I can do myself justice with what I want to try and tell you; whether I can do you justice, Brilka.

And I’m scared of these stories. These stories that constantly run in parallel, chaotically; that appear in the foreground, conceal themselves, interrupt one another. Because they

connect and break through each other, they evade, they overlap and spy on one another, they betray and mislead, they lay tracks, cover them up, and most of all they contain within them hundreds of thousands of other stories.

I don't know whether I myself have understood everything and recognised the connections, but I have to hope and – if I must, if the ropes fail and all the bridges collapse – stretch out my arms once again: I have to hope that, if the worst comes to the worst, I will, somehow, fly.

I'll start with Stasia in order to make my way to you, Brilka.

She came into the world – so I was told – in the coldest winter at the dawn of the twentieth century. She had a headful of hair, they could have plaited it, they said. And with her first cry she was actually already dancing. They said she laughed as she cried, as if she were crying more to reassure the adults, her parents, the midwives, the country doctor, not because she had to.

And they said that with her first steps she was already sketching a *pas de deux*. And that she loved chocolate, always. And that before she was able to say 'Father' she was babbling *Madame Butterfly*. And that she discovered the gramophone at an early age and owned the latest records before she could write and read properly, yet would sing and dance along. And that Eleonora Duse was her favourite. And that she was defter and more eloquent than either of her sisters. And the cleverest and most cheerful.

But people say all kinds of things when telling stories like these.

She loved books and the fine arts, they said, but above all it was in dancing that she spent her days. And they said it was while dancing that she turned the head of the lieutenant of the White Guard, at the mayor's New Year's ball, her first ball: impudent and gamine she was then, they said, one might have thought almost provocative. And the plaits: she had braided her long plaits about her head, they shone around her slender head like a halo, around her porcelain brow. She shone, they said, so brightly that he fell in love with her. Undying love, of course; forever, of course.

And they say that of all the women she was the best at riding astride, and that this impressed the lieutenant. Considerably. And that she was interested in bluestockings and wanted to train as a dancer, in Paris, at the Ballets Russes. She was seventeen then; he asked for her hand, then the Revolution came and threatened to tear them apart. Shortly before he left for Russia she became frightened and forgot the Ballets Russes and the bluestockings, and married him. In the little church, in the presence of her sister and the priest Seraphim. They spent the wedding night in a guesthouse on the edge of the steppe, near the cave monastery, just the two of them, the night, the cave, the stones. That's how it was, they said.

Of course she should have fallen pregnant immediately, that's usually what happens in stories like these, but not in this one.

Before this, they said, she had repeatedly asked her father the chocolate manufacturer to give her permission to go to Paris and study the fine art of dance. He had always replied that it was improper to ride astride, and most certainly improper to perform vulgar bodily contortions in a foreign city.

So she travelled to Petrograd, to her husband, and not to Paris.

And it was only much later, they say, after many peregrinations and much suffering, that she returned to the warmth of her homeland.

To the land where, decades later, I too would be born, and you, Brilka. And this is where, for now, legend ends and facts begin. Their child, the eldest child she bore, grew to manhood and fathered a daughter. The daughter grew to womanhood and bore Daria and me. And Daria had you, Brilka. The women, the lieutenants, the daughters and sons are dead; the legend, you and I are alive. So we must try to make something out of this.

BOOK I

STASIA

*No, not under the vault of alien skies
And not under the shelter of alien wings –
I was with my people then,
There, where my people, unfortunately, were.*

(Anna Akhmatova, tr. Judith Hemschemeyer)

The doorbell was ringing and none of her sisters answered. Someone kept yanking at the bell-pull, and she continued to sit motionless, looking out at the garden. It had been raining all morning, rendering her state of mind accessible, visible to the whole world. The rain, the grey sky, the damp earth: they exposed her, allowing the whole world to gaze upon her wounds.

Her father was not yet home, and her stepmother had taken the little one out in Papa's magnificent new carriage to buy fabric. She called her sisters. No one answered, so slowly she stood up and forced herself to go downstairs and open the door.

A young man in a white uniform was standing outside. She had never seen him before, and she stepped away from the heavy oak door, feeling slightly annoyed.

'Good morning. You must be Anastasia? Allow me to introduce myself: Simon Yashi, first lieutenant of the White Guard and a friend of your father's. We have an appointment. May I come in?'

Not an ordinary officer, then; a lieutenant, a first lieutenant, even. She merely nodded silently and proffered her hand. He was well-built, tall and broad-shouldered with slender limbs and bony hands: the latter were rather hairy, which seemed incongruous in such a dapper gentleman, as if Nature were forcing its way through the uniform.

He removed his perfectly-angled headgear, which she found ever so slightly ridiculous, and stepped inside. She wondered where all the others were: it was only now that she noticed the whole house was silent as the grave.

The smell of coffee and cake wafted from the kitchen, but no one was there. She led the guest through to the reception room, where the door to the garden stood open. Rain was blowing into the room, the white curtains flapping in the damp wind. Quickly she ran to the door and closed it. The rain was a danger for her: seeing it, she felt the urge to cry again, which in the presence of this strange man was inconceivable.

It occurred to her that he had recognised her and addressed her by name, although they were four sisters. Yet he had never been to their house before; she could tell that from the way his eyes kept darting curiously about. It was a trap. Yes, that was what it was. Now she understood the sudden emptiness of the house. So it was him. He was the one. He was the

wrathful god who was to mete out her punishment. He was the guarantor of her future. He was the slaughterer, he the executioner. She turned pale and stumbled out of the room.

‘Is everything all right?’ he called after her.

‘Oh yes, yes. I’ll just fetch us some coffee and cake. You do like coffee?’ she called from the kitchen, leaning against the wall and wiping away her tears with her sleeves. Nothing would ever again be as it was. She had suddenly understood this; suddenly she had received confirmation that her childhood was over. That her life would, at a stroke, be another; that everything, all her dreams, desires, visions, would be reduced to this one man in the white Russian uniform, probably a subordinate of the fat, uneducated governor of Kuttaissi – how frightful!

She felt like throwing up, but the coffee was steaming in its pot and the chocolate gâteau from Papa’s confectionary shop, cut symmetrically, was waiting to be offered to the guest.

And so the chocolate gâteau became her first offering to her executioner. For his consumption. Just as she would have to offer up to him all the promises of her future, which Life itself had whispered into her ear night after night: offer them up for him to kill, in that she would start to live his life where she would not find her place, where she would be an outsider, where she would never be at home. She bit her lips and stifled the pain.

She carried out the silver tray with the steaming coffee and the porcelain cups and saucers. The man was sitting in Papa’s armchair, legs crossed, staring at the green garden that was being drowned and buried by the heavy rain, along with the little spring flowers that had forced their way up through the earth, greedy for life and warmth.

‘Oh, that’s delicious. Your father is a true genius. And such a good man. So modest; a man of humility. One seldom finds such men nowadays. Someone plants a tree and the whole parish has to hear about it. Nobody does good deeds any more nowadays, at least, not without shouting it from the rooftops. Your father’s not like that. I’m very proud to be able to count myself one of his circle. And your *Maman*. She is enchanting.’

‘She’s my stepmother.’

‘Oh.’

‘Do take a slice. We have plenty more cake. There’s never a shortage of sweets in this house.’

‘Yes, I’m familiar with your father’s creations. Those delicious little almond tarts – and his plum mousse is magnificent! An absolute dream.’

‘And how do you know Papa, may I ask?’

‘I... I once did him a favour, if one may put it that way.’

‘You said just now that when one has done something good one should not speak of it. That, if I understood you correctly, is true greatness.’

‘You’re very exact.’

‘I am indeed.’

‘The cake is divine. Why don’t you try some?’

‘I eat enough of it every day. Thank you.’

‘I did him a favour, that’s all. I didn’t say it was a good deed that I did.’

‘It’s in the nature of a favour that it should be good.’

‘That depends entirely on how you look at it, wouldn’t you agree? Everyone sees things from their own perspective, which is not necessarily shared by others.’

‘That’s not what I meant. There are some things about which all people should feel the same. And see in the same way.’

‘And what would those things be?’

‘For example, that the sun is wonderful and that spring can work miracles; that the sea is deep, and water soft. That music is magical when it is well played. That toothache is a dreadful business, and ballet the most beautiful thing in the world.’

‘I understand. You love to dance, don’t you?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘And you don’t like me, because you think I don’t share this view?’

‘How should I know?’

‘It’s what you think. It’s what you suspect.’

‘I don’t suspect anything at all.’

‘That I don’t believe.’

‘All right, I admit it: no, I don’t believe you share many of my opinions, not least because you’re in the army and I am not fond of the army. Why are you laughing?’

‘I’m sorry. You amuse me.’

‘Oh, splendid. At least one of us is in a good mood.’

‘Do you ride?’

‘What?’

‘I said: do you ride?’

‘Yes, of course I ride.’

‘Side-saddle, I presume?’

‘I prefer to ride astride.’

‘Excellent! Would you venture on a ride across the steppe with me tomorrow?’

‘I have a ballet lesson tomorrow.’

‘I can wait for you.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Or are you afraid?’

‘What would I be afraid of? Certainly not of you.’

‘It’s agreed, then?’

‘Listen: I don’t know what my father has told you about me. But it’s bound to be untrue. I don’t know what he’s promised you, but I’m certain I am unable to give you that, either. I will happily risk your and my father’s anger, but I have no intention of deceiving you. I will not love you. Why are you laughing again?’

‘You’re even better than your father’s description of you.’

‘What has he promised you?’

‘Nothing. He just said that I might visit you from time to time.’

‘So that later on I’ll marry you and won’t be permitted to dance any more?’

‘So that we can get to know each other.’

‘You’re much older. It’s inappropriate.’

‘I’m twenty-eight.’

‘You’re still much older. Eleven years is a big age gap.’

‘I look very young.’

‘You know nothing whatsoever about ballet.’

‘I saw you dance at the private performance at Mikeladze’s.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘And?’

‘You were quite good.’

‘Quite good? I was very good.’

‘Perhaps. You just said I know nothing about it.’

‘Well, every layman has the right to an opinion.’

‘Oh, how generous of you.’

‘You don’t have a moustache.’

‘And what does that mean?’

‘It’s not the done thing.’

‘According to the latest fashion it is.’

‘I’m very conservative.’

‘That’s not my impression.’

‘You don’t know me.’

‘I saw you when you were fourteen, listening to the Maxim brothers’ violin concert. We sat side by side, and you were so moved that you wept, and you wiped away your tears with the sleeves of your dress. You didn’t use a silk handkerchief. I liked that. And then you stormed out of the concert hall. And months later I saw you at the circus that pitched its big top up there in the hills. And you were eating a baked apple and licking your fingers. You didn’t use a silk handkerchief. *As is the done thing*. And later I saw you at the New Year’s Ball, your first ball, given by the mayor. You were enchanting, dancing your first dance; only

your partner was an idiot, incapable of leading you. He kept treading on your feet and every time he did you pulled a face. You came out and wiped the little pearls of sweat from your brow with the edge of your dress. No silk handkerchief. Then you sat down on the stone steps and looked up at the sky. And I decided it was time for me to get to know you.'

'Why should I want to get to know *you*?'

'Because I'm another one who never uses a handkerchief.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Someone who needs a veil, an object, even one made of silk, between themselves and the world is afraid of life. They're afraid to experience things, to really feel them. And I think life is far too short and far too wonderful not to really look at it, not to really grab it, not to really live it.'

'By which you're trying to say that we are similar?'

'No, I just think that we have a similar attitude to life.'

'Nonetheless, I am not going to marry you and move with you to Moscow.'

'I'm not in Moscow. I'm here.'

'You serve the Russians, and I don't like Russians. They say that soon there will be uprisings. That things are unsettled in Russia. There are rumours. Anyway, Papa went to Russia, too, and brought his wife back here with him when he married the second time. I know how things work in this world.'

'And how do they work?'

'Not exactly to the advantage of us women, shall we say.'

'A real bluestocking, then.'

'Now what are you talking about?'

'In Europe there are women who believe they and men are equal. And who fight for these rights. Bluestockings, they're called.'

'And they're right to fight. But it's a very stupid name, in my opinion.'

'In that case, we can go on a proper ride across the steppe. Then we can see just how equal men and women are.'

'I don't believe they're equal. I believe women are better.'

'Better still. I'll see you tomorrow, then.'

'Wait... You don't even know where I take my ballet classes.'

'I'll find you. And send my best wishes to your father. No need to see me out. A truly emancipated lady should always remain seated.'

'A what lady?'

'One who fights for her rights.'

He left the room, with quick, light steps and a mischievous grin. Stasia remained seated, as if turned to stone, unable to believe what had just occurred. It wasn't permitted to like your

own executioner; it wasn't permitted to flirt with him. It wasn't permitted to offer him more sacrifices than were necessary. It wasn't permitted to go riding with him astride. And then she laughed out loud. The rain had stopped and the flowers were springing up out of the earth. Life was pervading everything again, with its sweet multitude of promises. Stasia opened the door to the garden and ran out. The earth was damp and her feet stuck in the mud, but that didn't stop her from dancing a *pas de deux* in the sodden garden.

(...)