



**Sasha Marianna Salzmann**

**Beside Myself**

Novel

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## Characters

Anton

Alissa, Ali – sister, brother, me

Valentina, Valja – mother, Mum, Mummy, and everything

Konstantin, Kostya – father, something like it

Daniil, Danya – father, grandfather

Emma, Emmotshka – grandmother, sometimes mother

Shura, Sasha, Alexander – great-grandfather, grandfather, father, hero of the Red Army

Etya, Etina, Etinka – mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, superhero

Katho, Catherine, Katyusha – dancer, multiple rocket launcher

Aglaia – mermaid

Cemal, Cemo, Cemal Amca – uncle

Elyas – friend

And all the other parents, and the parents of parents in Odessa, Chernivtsi, Moscow, Istanbul, Berlin

[...]

## Timeless

The tiles of the toilet at Atatürk airport were cooling Ali's left temple. The image in front of her eyes didn't come into focus, heels blurring to pieces of coal in the gap between the cubicle wall and the floor, scrawling black in the air, scraping past, she heard voices, without language, all muddled together, announcements like echoes. Ali tasted chicken. Even though she hadn't eaten any during her flight, hadn't eaten any for years, rotten fowl was stuck in her throat. She was here before. Exactly like this. She had lain on a floor exactly like this before, a dead bird in her throat, and shoe laces crawling towards her like insects. But when? When had that happened?

Her eyes were dry from the flight, the eyelids scraping across the eyeballs, the doctors had diagnosed her with a chronic lack of lacrimal fluid a long time ago. »And what am I supposed to do, use eye drops?«—»Just blink when it hurts, when it itches, just blink a lot, then the fluid will come on its own.« Didn't help, though. She was breathing slowly, listening. Stiletto heels and rubber soles set the rhythm outside, everyone was in a hurry, in a hurry to get out of the terminal area, out of the non-air, there were people waiting for them after the long flight, just go to the bathroom real quick, powder the bags under their eyes, wet their lips, brush their hair, and then jump into the arms of the waiting like into warm water.

Ali had no idea whether someone would be waiting for her, she hoped so, but she didn't know. She lay on the floor and batted her eyelashes like a fly flapped its wings. She wanted to smoke, urgently, smoke away the taste of boiled, flabby fat in the back of her mouth. This wish was what pulled her up by her collar and out of the cubicle. She darted for the sink, avoided looking in the mirror, placed her lips under the running water, a woman nudged her and pointed, she mustn't drink this water, holding out a bottle of water to her. Ali pressed her lips to the narrow bottleneck and drank without making any sound, the woman took back the empty bottle and ruffled her curls, seemed to straighten them out. Then she moved her thumb across the thin skin underneath her eyes, and across the pointy chin, holding it for a little while. Ali smiled, the woman did too. Then the two of them walked out into the terminal area with slow steps. Ali followed the woman, followed the others, who knew where to go, walked along the traveller on which people were pushing into one another, followed the echo of the marble floors, queued in the line in front of passport control, grew impatient, wanted to move the

queue along, but she was stuck, and there was nothing left to do but look left and right. Her head was rotating. The whole world was queueing here. Miniskirts, burkas, moustaches in all fashions and colours, sunglasses in all sizes, plumped lips in all shapes, children in prams, children on backs, on shoulders, between feet, the crowd was keeping Ali surrounded on both sides so that she couldn't fall. A little girl was pushing against the plexiglass wall at the barrier, a pane burst out, the child screamed. The mother shoved through the crowd to her child and shook it fiercely.

Ali tasted chicken very distinctly at the back of her throat once again, and rummaged around in her bag for her passport.

For a long time, the officer looked at the spot where Ali assumed her picture to be, and then back up to her, and back to her passport, again and again, as though he was able to look deeper and deeper, a young man, younger than Ali, but already with shoulders like old people have, sunken in and hardened. In his light blue shirt, which his small chest could not fill, he seemed to look far beyond his cubicle, far beyond the airport, far beyond his country through the earth's mantle and back to Ali's face from there. Out of a reflex, she wiped her chin, she hadn't thrown up or had she, now she wasn't sure, was there something stuck to her chin, she felt like she had thrown-up chicken hanging from her mouth, she pulled up the corners of her mouth with all her might, and the left eyebrow went up with them.

The boy on the other side of the windowpane looked at her, climbed off his chair, and stepped out of the cubicle, went to the back. Ali leant on the small counter in front of the window, looking after him with scratched up eyes as he showed her passport to a colleague, tapping at it with his finger, shook his head, came back, and said something she didn't understand, but she knew what it was he was doubting. Whether she was herself. She no longer looked like she had on the passport photo, her hair was cut short, and a few other things had changed in her face as well. Everyone said so, even her mother admitted to not recognising her in photos, but what did that tell you. The other officer came into the booth and asked Ali the usual questions. Ali lied so as not to confuse the two men even more, said she was visiting a good friend, the usual.

»For how long?«

»Don't know.

»You're not allowed more than three months.«  
»I know.«  
»First time?«  
»Is there a problem with my passport?«  
»The woman on the picture looks like you.«  
»That's because I am that woman.«  
»Yes, but there's another possibility.«  
»What's that?«  
»That this is a bought passport and you –«  
»And I?«  
»We have a problem in this country with imports from Russia. Women, I mean. Trafficked women from Russia.«

Ali opened her mouth wanting to say something like »But I'm from Berlin!«, or »Do I look like I was trafficked?«, instead she broke out into a fit of laughter, which she tried to suppress, the laughter spouted from her and hit the windowpane, the two officers behind it looking at her in disgust. Ali pressed her fingers to her mouth, her bag fell onto her feet, she looked down and back up again, looked around her, the entire queue, all the miniskirts and glasses and moustaches, turned to look at her and whispered. The officers waited until Ali had set her reddened head straight again, her eyes were moist with tears of laughter, she looked into the men's confused faces and tried to stop grinning.

»Is there a way for me to prove that I am not a Russian hooker?« she asked.

The officers looked at her as one, looked right through her, then one of them lifted his hand, hit a stamp onto the table three times without letting her out of his sight, something buzzed, she grabbed her bag and pushed the door open.

Uncle Cemal was standing at the very front of the crowd of waiting people bending over the barrier like a palm tree. He had obviously fought his way to the front, and had shoved his elbows into the ribs of the men surrounding him, you could see it in their faces, and now, when he saw Ali come through the doors, he lifted one of his arms up in the air, giving a small man, whose moustache covered half his face, a blow to the jaw. The man

staggered, but couldn't fall in the crush of people, Cemal looked at the screaming moustache briefly, irritated, and then quickly back to Ali, beamed, and pointed to the side with his index finger, she should exit the terminal to the left, that's where he would be waiting for her.

Cemal, Cemo, Cemal Amca was an uncle of Elyas's, with whom she had sort of grown up, or rather grown together, and so Cemal was also an uncle of hers, even though she was seeing him for the first time. Elyas had never told her about his uncle, but when Ali said that she would be going to Istanbul, he had shoved his telephone number into her hand and said that Cemal would be meeting her at the airport. That's what he did. He hugged her, as though he had done just that all his life, he took her suitcase, they went outside the door and rolled cigarettes. Ali kept silent about why she was so late coming out of the arrivals hall, she didn't say that she had locked herself in the toilet cubicle, with her head on the tiles, that her circulation couldn't keep up with the speed outside her ribcage, that's not something you say by way of greeting someone, you share cigarettes like old friends, which, from that point onward, you are.

With the first drag of her cigarette, Ali collapsed again. Cemal carried her to the taxi, and then up to his apartment. She woke up on Cemal's sofa in a blue-tiled room with nothing but a flickering, silent television on the wall and a heavy desk in front of the window, ivy seemed to be growing into the room from the outside. She felt like she had slept for years. Cemal was sitting in front of the television, smoking, his hands on his thighs, his silhouette a lot of curves, his chin moving slightly as though he was speaking with his mouth closed. The ash of his cigarette fell to the floor next to his shoe. He had a big face, bigger than his head, it spread out in all directions, his nose protruded from the face, his eyes did too, he had long, thick eyelashes that curved towards his forehead. Ali looked at him and thought that she would never go anywhere else ever again.

Cemal got up, fetched steaming çay from the kitchen, held out a bulbous glass to her and pointed to the table by the window. »There're the keys to your apartment. But you don't have to. You can also stay here.«

The next day, Cemal showed her the apartment, and she fell in love. Especially with the small roof, onto which she could jump from the terrace and which overlooked the Golden Horn all the way to Kasımpaşa. She fell in love with the room full of nooks and crannies, and with the steep road in front of the house, which you could slide down standing up.

But most of all she fell in love with the empty evenings in which she and Uncle Cemal smoked as much as they could in his office, until the scratching in their throats became audible, until their eyes fell shut, until they both fell off their chairs but still kept talking. Ali went for walks heading towards those evenings, she roamed the streets around Cemal's house until she grew tired, knocked on his door carefully, lay down on the sofa, and got used to falling asleep over volumes of photographs and Cemal's endless stories, woke up in the middle of the night, searching for her shoes in the hallway with reddened eyes, and waited for Cemal to take them out of her hands again.

»Where are you going, you can't go home at this hour, it's far too late.«

»No, I'm leaving, I can still walk.«

»Yes, you can still walk, but the others are faster. You can't walk to Tarlabaşı now.«

Then they sat back down again, smoking and talking without content, talking to hear each other's voices.

Since she had arrived in Istanbul, she was told how dangerous Tarlabaşı was, for a young woman, for everyone in general, »all those Roma and Kurds, and the transvestites, and the whole world is evil, you know that.«

»Yes, I know, the whole world is evil, but not in Tarlabaşı.«

»Sleep here, kuşum. I'll get you a blanket.«

And usually, Ali stayed, not even the red spots on her wrists and underneath her chin could keep her from it.

Some looked for the old Istanbul in the mosques and on the steamboats moving between Europe and Asia, bought plastic nostalgia on the bazaar and stood it next to their pieces of the Berlin Wall in cabinets in San Francisco, Moscow, and Riyadh. Ali found her Istanbul on Uncle Cemal's rust-brown sofa with bedbugs in the upholstery that began to suck her blood around four o'clock in the morning and were done by about five o'clock. She woke up around eight with increasingly bigger red itching spots on her

lower arms and in her face, and when she asked Cemal about it, he said that it was because of the water. »Those old pipes, I have to do something about them, the water's running brown, I know.« Bedbugs he had none, impossible.

She sprayed the entire flat in Aynalı Çeşme Street with poison from the pharmacy, sat on her balcony and smoked, hoping that the Veteranyi-book she was currently reading wouldn't be finished until all the bedbugs were dead. When she was sure that none of the bugs had survived the attack, and that she wouldn't have any more red spots, she began to visit Uncle Cemal again, slept on his sofa and brought small vermin back to Aynalı Çeşme in her hair and in her clothes again.

Today, Ali didn't care about anything. She pressed herself into the sofa cushions, trying to immerse herself as deeply as possible, and encouraged the bedbugs to suck her dry and leave nothing of her behind. They should eat her up and carry her out into the whole city piece by piece. Then she could just keep lying here, wouldn't have to do anything else ever, not have to move, and would disappear between the sofa cushions like a stale biscuit. Her eyes were open wide and hurt from the dryness. Ali blinked every now and again to wipe away the thin layer of dust. That didn't help, it came back every time, falling from the ceiling, trickling down from the air conditioner above her, swirling from her mouth in tiny clouds.

Anton wouldn't get in touch. Anton probably wasn't even in the city. The projections said that a disaster was going to happen in Turkey very soon. Yılmaz Güney was long dead, and Uncle Cemal jumped around his desk and told her the story he told her every time. That of Yılmaz Güney's wife and the state prosecutor who had insulted her and whom Yılmaz Güney shot in his right eye in response. And he, Cemal, had been there. No, he hadn't been there, but he had represented him in court, back when he was still a famous attorney. He had also represented Öcalan, no, he had wanted to represent him, but it never came to that, and now Öcalan hadn't been in touch in six months, despite the fact he was always making announcements as the prophet of resistance, which could mean that he had died in prison, and if that was so, a civil war was most certainly going to break out in this country soon, which it had actually already done, but now it would reach the cities, and then the whole world, but then, even then, he, Cemal, would not give up. All of this he told Ali, or rather himself, while he was busy dusting,

as though that was about more than dust bunnies. She hardly heard him, observing his hasty movements through the apartment, and got the feeling that he was a top spinning on the tiles and hitting table legs in the process. His spinning made her laugh and had he not been so fast, she would have liked to put her arms around him, but she couldn't, so she let him talk. Talk about himself endlessly, his own life story in different variations.

Seventy or seventy-two years ago, he was born in Istanbul, in Zeytinburnu, a district built on sand, which was going to disappear underneath the tectonic plates at the next earthquake, his ninety-year-old mother was still living there. Cemal was the second youngest of eight children, all of them living in one room with a corrugated iron roof, all sleeping next to each other on the floor, all of them washing in the same bathwater, he was the second one to use the bathwater, followed by the next bigger child, and so on, the father could then wash himself in a grey-brown soup. Cemal never saw where his mother washed.

Cemal was the first of his family to have gone to university, the first to come home in a suit, and who was laughed at by his siblings for it. He represented important people in court, was arrested a few times himself, when and under which circumstances was subject of many different stories, all of which ended with Cemal coming home to his mother after eight months in prison, who sat at the kitchen table veiled all of a sudden, after fifty years without wearing a headscarf, and with them getting into such a huge fight about Cemal's life that he never visited her again. She met neither his first nor his second wife, sometimes he also talked about three marriages, the end was always the same: They loved him, but he had to work.

Sometimes Cemal began to say something about his father, but he never got further than opening his chapped, broad lips, he breathed in dryly, moving his tongue along the inner walls of his cheeks and wetting the corners of his mouth, more was impossible. And Ali didn't press the matter.

In recent years, had left his apartment, which also served as his office and his hammam and who knows what else, less and less, and why should he, the boy from the shop downstairs brought him everything he needed up to the first floor—milk, cigarettes, meat—, and the ivy in front of his window protected him from the sun, and that way, he could still believe in things and didn't have to see that all around his office cafés with their specials boards written on exclusively in English and that advertised free

Wi-Fi everywhere had opened up long since, and that even his vegetable guy had moved away, Oğuz, his friend for forty-two years who had been selling peaches the size of boxing gloves in the narrow doorway between Cemal's office and the butcher's shop. Cemal didn't know why he hadn't been in touch in such a long while, he didn't know that Oğuz now stood at Taksim Square with a vendor's tray and sold colourful birdsong-whistles to tourists. Cemal also didn't know that the Hotel Zurich had opened up in the house next door and that the streets were crowded with hordes of tourists who liked to buy a samovar at Madame Coco's at the corner to take home with them, and that the shop downstairs, in which little Orhan was helping his father, who was way too old, wasn't doing well, and that the two of them would also be moving away soon and that a Wi-Fi-sign would most likely be painted on that shopfront as well. Why should Cemal go out into this world when he had the old sofa and the floor with black and white tiles and the walls with turquoise blue ones.

Cemal needed something to believe in. He believed in the Peoples' Democratic Party, in Marx, in young women who showed up at his place once a month and demanded money, crying and laughing. He believed in love, and he believed that Ali was going to find Anton in a city with close to fifteen million people, without any sign of life from him, without knowing whether he had ever even been there, just because a postcard had been sent from Istanbul, it didn't have to mean anything.

He went to police stations with Ali to put up missing person flyers of Anton, and in one of them, he ran into an old friend from school, who had been a few grades underneath him, and a few heads shorter, and whom Cemal had watched out for on the schoolyard. While they kissed, hugged, and drank tea for hours, Cemal kept pointing at Ali with his outstretched hand: »Like her, he looks just like her!« The schoolfriend scrutinised Ali from head to toe, her short, brown curls that she didn't comb and whose matted tips were standing up in a triangular shape, the thin skin with a bluish shine underneath her round eyes, the hanging arms, he hugged Cemal, kissed him left and right one more time, and said that there were no chances of success, unless fate or God willed it so, that's when both men let out a breath and lit their cigarettes. Ali followed suit, without knowing what they had been talking about, and Cemal reassured her that everything would be alright one way or another.

And for everything Cemal believed in and because he had picked her up off the floor of Atatürk airport like a small child, she would, this she was sure of, never leave him. That's what she was thinking about while he stumbled through the room nervously and clumsily, as though he wanted to bring order into the three items in the room.

Ali thought that the reason for his restlessness was the lack of rakı in the house or the misfortune that would soon befall this country, and of which Cemal talked ceaselessly. He said, »soon, something is going to happen in this country, soon. Nothing good«, but then you could always say that. Then he switched gears, saying that people might be evil, but that meeting them was always worthwhile, and that you would most certainly be disappointed by them, but that that was exactly the reason why you should fight for them. Cemal contradicted himself perpetually in his arias of a better world that would come to be, even though everything was going downhill right now. Cemal believed that people returned to you because they loved you.

Lately, he was letting a woman Ali's age make a fool of him and insisted that she was serious with him, it was just that right now, she needed money, time, peace and quiet, her phases, her travels, different experiences. »She's still young.« And it didn't matter how much Ali tried to make Cemal see that what the young woman was doing to him had many names, but that love was probably not one of them. Cemal was not to be deterred from his belief in something for which Ali didn't even have words. She couldn't fathom what made Cemal believe this story, but she thought it was beautiful that the old man blossomed like that in his grief, how he peered at the green telephone on the table furtively from the corners of his eyes, an old telephone with a cord, because Cemal had a proclivity for the old-fashioned, he thought that it made him attractive, what with his hair having fallen out almost completely, and Ali thought it was beautiful that she could see his heart racing when the telephone rang, and break when it wasn't the girl because of whom he couldn't sleep on the other end. It was never her on the other end. It made him restless. A good reason for being restless, maybe the best, Ali thought.

On the photograph of the two of them, which Cemal showed Ali almost every evening until she asked him to please stop, the red-haired shiksa hanging on Cemal's shoulder had almost no nose, just a thin line with small, dark wings, and freckles everywhere, which looked as though a strawberry had burst in front of her face. The mouth was shapeless, endless, and crooked, and was smiling towards the camera. Cemal,

hand around her waist, breast pumped up, was looking serious. The young woman's red hair, static from the heat, was sticking out every which way, especially into Cemal's face. Ali could understand Cemal's yearning to dive into that hair, and she told him so, upon which he changed the subject and talked about the election in this country that was right at the brink of a civil war breaking out, and then about the fact that there wasn't enough rakı in the house.

[...]

When Cemal knocked against the sofa she was lying on for the third time while running around the apartment aimlessly, Ali called after him: »Why are you jumping around like this, don't you want to sit with me? Come here, let's look at pictures of Ara.«

He didn't want to. Ali sat up straight.

»Your girl. Tell me about your girl.«

»My girl?«

»That girl that you're so in love with.«

»Leave me be, kuşum.«

Ali was about to jump up and kiss Cemal on both temples to calm him down, when a beige suit appeared in the doorway with a bottle of rakı in his hand.

»Mustafa! Thank God, we're been waiting for you all night!«

Ali squinted her eyes. The guest's sun-tanned face grinned broadly, and Uncle Cemal was beaming.

Mustafa Bey greeted her enthusiastically, and declared, in dizzyingly fast German, that he had heard a lot about her.

»What did you hear, there's nothing to hear,« Ali retorted and considered whether she should excuse herself immediately under a false pretext—the bedbugs, the time, the dust in her eyes—, but Cemal was beaming and she knew that she couldn't leave now, while the uncle put out white meze bowls on the newspapers scattered across the table. His voice cracked.

»White cheese, olives, just a sec, I also have green ones, now, now, sit down, I'll fetch water and ice, I told you to sit down, here's an ashtray, would you like some pickled tomatoes with that, or would that be too much acidity?«

Ali sat up, slipped her feet into her sandals, and watched as Cemal's face softened, one stubble of his beard after the other, with each sentence it became softer and more childlike, suddenly she knew what he must have looked like as a young man. How proud, how silly, how lanky, before he had put on weight. She saw him down by the water in Karaköy, reaching for the air rifle and shooting at the colourful balloons trembling on the water's surface, a bleak tourist attraction where young men showed their girlfriends what they had accomplished during their two years of military service, save the masturbation competitions. Cemal had promised to teach Ali how to shoot. »First, we're going to practice taking aim on the balloons, then we'll see,« he laughed, and Ali couldn't help herself and laughed too, and wanted to hug him again and again, and press her forehead on his shoulder, but she didn't.

Ali puckered her brows and examined the man in the beige suit who had, rakı-bottle still in hand, sat down at the table with the spread-out newspapers and was exchanging pleasantries with Cemal. »I'm well, thank you, how are you, that's nice, that's how it should be, and how are you, thank you, I'm well, that's nice, that's how it should be, thank you.«

Cemal set down three rakı glasses on the newspapers and pulled Ali off the sofa. She stared at the clay ashtray, which had contained yogurt from the islands a long time ago and which was now holding a layer of damp ash. She didn't want to look up. They drank to various things. »To Demirtaş's life« was among them, and Ali's health. Ali stared at the newspapers. The little bowl with olives was standing on the chest of a singer who gave a statement on the war in the neighbouring country. Ali saw the words refugees ... them coming here ... At ... hunger and ... of my blood.

Ali filled the gaps silently in her head, and wished back the times when she hadn't known any Turkish. Nor German. She asked herself whether it would be easier to sit, dumb and silent, in Russia and sing love songs about the president. »Of course she'll come with, won't you, Ali?« That sentence tore her from the jukebox in her head playing the Russian pop songs she would sing. She looked up.

Mustafa Bey had large, tobacco-coloured teeth, and in this light, filtered also by the second rakı, she thought about the fact that all men she had met in Aynalı Çeşme so far had worn those suits that looked like they had been born in them, as though they

had slept and drank in them, fucked and fought, had been to the mountains with them in order to take up arms there.

»I'm going to come with where?«

Ali imagined Mustafa as he sat, knees touching, on a low stool, a tasbih in his hand, he would only sip half of his tea, then get up, wrap the tasbih around his fingers a few times, and get into his car, feel around to see if the weapon under the seat was still there and hadn't been stolen by the neighbour's boy to impress the girls, and the drive off, wind in the little remaining hair on his bald head.

»Why aren't you coming too, Uncle Cemal?«

»What's the point, you have a good time, you young folk. It's not my thing.«

Ali looked at Mustafa and asked herself who the uncle was referring to when he said »young folk«, and why he sent her out of his apartment and into the unknown with a man with such big teeth, but then she saw Cemal beaming and nodded.

It felt good to sit in a car and be driven through the city. It was one of the few activities she never had to be convinced to do. She plumped down on the passenger seat, rolled herself into a ball, only her head sticking out, pressed against the window, and off they went.

Elyas had done this often, when she wouldn't come out of her room for days, pushing her shoulder blades into the mattress, her gaze searching the ceiling silently. That's when he would throw his car keys onto her stomach, which meant: get out of here and into the car. She climbed, paw by paw, up the door, rolled down the window—that's the kind of car Elyas had, one with windows you had to roll down, and it had a cassette deck, what are you going to do with a car like that except drive it as often as possible—, stuck her head far out the window and smoked, the cigarette smoke wafting into the car, past her ear, towards Elyas, who was changing the cassettes and talking to himself. Then she became calmer, smiled at some point, and when she began to talk, Elyas knew that they could slowly make their way back home, and that in the end, they would drink espresso from paper cups at the petrol station, espresso that stained their lips like squid ink, and they would have to tell some naughty joke at the end of the night, like proper lorry drivers, but Mustafa Bey didn't know any jokes.

Ali had no clue how Mustafa or Cemal knew that a car ride was the best medicine for this girl with a head of matted curly hair on a squashed child's body. She didn't think that Elyas called his uncle regularly and asked about her. She couldn't imagine him saying in a confiding tone like a doctor: »If she does this or that, then all you have to do is put her in a car. Roll down the window, let her crawl out halfway and smoke, and it'll be okay.«

Actually—why not, why didn't he call, why wasn't he here, where was Elyas when you needed him?

Mustafa and Cemal had said something about a visit to the theatre, that's where they were supposed to go. Dance theatre, very special, Mustafa had been there before, and could only recommend it, she hadn't been listening, she had been staring at the newspaper spread out in front of her, soggy with rakı and the brine from the white cheese, and had tried to project herself into the photographs.

When they drove past the Sultan Ahmet Camii, it became very bright in the car very briefly, a floodlight, strong as moonlight, illuminated them, then it became dark abruptly, the street vibrated. Occasionally, the yellow light from the street lamps pierced the grey of their profiles.

»What else did you see of Turkey, apart from Istanbul?,« Mustafa asked after a period of silence. »Did you see anything at all?«

Ali was quiet, pressed her nose and forehead against the windowpane and left behind grease stains.

»I can show you the entire West coast. I've done that for years. For German and English tourists. All the places: Pergamum, Troy. I'll show you Mount Olympus, if you'd like.«

»I thought that was in Greece,« Ali breathed onto the windowpane.

»This used to be Greece.«

»Ah, I see.«

»Do you like things like that?«

»Like what?«

»Mount Olympus. Travelling. Would you like to take a trip like that together? We'll rent a car and drive up from Antalya.«

Ali pulled her face off the window like foil, and turned it towards him. Mustafa's remaining grey curls resembled her own. Was this what she was going to look like when she was fifty? Possibly. If she kept smoking like that, and started to wear suits, this could be a version of herself in twenty years. She would invite young women onto her passenger seat and offer them Mount Olympus, not too bad, when you think about it.

»I'm not here on holiday.« She let her gaze drift through the interior of the car in hopes of finding a cassette deck after all, or something else that would shut Mustafa up.

»Cemal told me why you're here, but if you need a distraction, I mean. Would surely be good for you. Just don't tense up, if you tense up, you're not going to find anyone, and if you're here anyway, you could see more of the country while you're at it, or don't you want to see anything?«

Ali smiled. »I would like to see Kurdistan. Do you know that area?«

Mustafa looked at her. He had very tired eyes, very tired skin, it formed teardrop-shaped bumps that slowly pulled downwards from the cheek bones, his skin dripping from his face in slow motion. Big, round pupils like maelstroms resting on Ali without any kind of expression.

They spent the rest of the drive in silence.

When they got out of the car, Ali found herself surrounded by advertisements in Cyrillic letters. The neon signs promised a discount on furs and the best quality of almost everything possible in Russian. Dimly lit mannequins shimmered clad in snake skin, faceless, with arms reaching out in front of them, fingers spread wide. She stopped in front of a bridal store, the mannequins in white dresses had veils pulled over their heads, their faces turned backwards.

It was too dark to make out what kind of theatre it was they were entering now, or whether it was one at all, there were no signs outside, but inscriptions were unusual, you often didn't know which bar, which club, or which office would be waiting when you were climbing up the winding staircases in the old side streets of Beyoğlu. Ali had gotten lost among strangers a few times, had let herself be carried away in hopes of finding Anton, or finding anything at all. People didn't dare to come closer than right up to the tips of her feet, the guys talked about their jobs, the beauty of Almanya, and that they should be married, some said outright that they wanted to sleep with her, but

they were scared of her eyes, said something about the evil eye, and that she had an evil look, nothing but superstition, but it didn't help against unwanted arms around her shoulders.

A young man in a suit was sitting in the doorway playing a game on his mobile phone which emitted noises that sounded like he was smashing up glass bottles. He looked up briefly, mumbled a good evening, and looked back at his display. They climbed up the stairs, Mustafa walking ahead. From the second floor onwards, the greenish neon light changed into a red, warm, blinking light, and the basslines travelled through the railing like electricity. The walls were shabby and had been scribbled on, another young man in a suit was standing in front of the door, looking at the two of them. Mustafa said they were on the guest list. The bouncer said he knew nothing about a guest list, to which Mustafa replied that he knew the owner, Hafif should come outside and say himself whether they were on the guest list or not. Ali lit a cigarette and leant against the scribbling on the wall. On the opposite wall, it read »I am Ulrike Meinhof« followed by something she didn't understand. She reached out her arm to the sentence, then the door above her opened. »Gel,« Mustafa said. It was the first time he said something to her in Turkish. He sounded irritated.

It looked like the set of one of the movies from the seventies that Cemal sometimes had on in the background. The room consisted of a large stage and polished parquet floor on which a couple of plastic chairs had been set up in rows. The entire ceiling was mirrored, colourful chandeliers looked like trussed parrots, flashing faces were steeped in red, Bülent Ersoy was purring something from the speakers, the mirrors reflected the patches of silver on the disco ball. The few guests, moving indecisively between the bar and the chairs, all wore suits, the waiters were clad in tailcoats, and white masks were covering their faces down to the wings of their noses. Ali cocked her head and followed them with her eyes. She looked down at herself, on her jeans and the sweater, then to Mustafa, his wrinkled jacket, and back to the waiters.

Then she moved towards the bar, Mustafa followed her, calling out to her, something like: »What would you like to drink?«, but it was too late for that question, Ali had already ordered a vodka and tonic, asked Mustafa if he wanted one as well in return, he nodded, rummaging around for his wallet, but did this too late as well, Ali paid and was pulling on her straw before Mustafa had found his money. He rested both

elbows on the counter and asked if she knew who Bülent Ersoy was. Ali didn't respond. Mustafa set out on a lecture about gender reassignment surgery, the military coup d'état in the eighties, and Bülent Ersoy's exile in Freiburg im Breisgau, she turned away from him, left the bar and strolled through the room. She found a seat in the back from which she could see the stage, on a sofa with red, velvet upholstery, curving outwards, and a metal pole on the platform that served as the back, she tilted her head back and looked at the bilious green plastic crystals on the chandeliers above her head, her eyes between them, broken apart and scattered across the mirror. Then she saw her face once more. A body, just like hers, in the same black sweater, in jeans and white sneakers, slender and gangly, setting the vodka and tonic down on the sticky parquet floor, sitting down next to her, leaning backwards, their shoulders touching, nothing else, their heads thrown back, resting on the back of the sofa and looking up into the mirrors above them. Their curls stuck out the same way, corkscrews growing upward from their temples and down the ear lobes, scratching small tears into the ceiling.

Ali looked into Anton's face next to her and smiled, and Anton smiled, an exact mirror reflection, she moved her pinkie towards him on the upholstery, hoping to find his finger, but didn't look away, pinning him to the ceiling with her gaze. Then something flashed in Anton's face, a crystal detached from its socket in the chandelier that distorted his and her face, and fell down, directly into the vodka glass in Ali's hand. She jumped up, staring at the green stone in the clear fluid, swivelled the glass, took a sip, and tilted her head back again. No Anton in the mirror, no pinkie next to her on the upholstery, she observed the room in the reflection on the ceiling without blinking.

The show started, or something like a show, nothing like a play at all, the conferencier wore a golden dress and a white mask that hid his face completely. The dress reminded Ali of her first Western dress which her mother had gotten in exchange for her entire month's salary somewhere in one of those shops, at the risk of losing her life, on the black market. It was entirely golden and had puffy sleeves, Ali would rather have died than wear it, she cried, screamed, even bit, but it was unavoidable that pictures were to be taken, why else all the hassle, and she was only quiet when Anton put on the dress, without being asked to, even lifted his hands and swayed his hips as though he was dancing in the dress. Ali could still see the photograph in front of her mind's eye: her tear-stained face, she in leggings and a vest, and Anton in the golden dress.

A drag queen welcomed the audience and announced a programme bristling with jokes and innuendos that Ali didn't understand. In any case, she doubted that anyone in the audience was listening, the clinking of glasses revealing the tension, the anticipation—whatever it was people had come here for. On both sides of the stage, left and right, thick, dark red fabric fell from the ceiling and two women in black underwear began to writhe upwards on it, the air in the room seemed to become thick as tar, a round, young woman in a velvet dress danced across the floor and sang »Sex Bomb« two octaves too low. Ali sat up, blew into her straw, and raised her eyebrows, furrowing her brow. Her mother had always counted the wrinkles by tugging at them in front of the aunts. »One, two, three, four – don't do that, Alissa, don't do that, don't pull faces, you're still young, but do you know how you're going to look when you're thirty-five?« »No, I don't. How?« »Like Uncle Seryosha.« Ali swatted her mother's hand from her face, and so that no uncomfortable silence would arise, the aunts added: »Girl, if you stopped running around looking like a lesbian, you could really be a looker.«

A waiter with a mask that hid the left side of his face bent down towards Ali and whispered in her ear, asking whether he could bring her something to drink. She thought that, close as he was, she should tell him, yes, I would like to disappear into the bathrooms with you, but said instead: »Votka, lütfen.« The drink arrived immediately, she paid. The room was full by now, the air had an acridly moist smell about it, Ali couldn't see Mustafa and hoped that he had driven off, sulking, or was at least getting drunk at the bar with the other, hungrily watching men. She asked herself whether Uncle Cemal would shoot his friend in his right eye if he knew where Mustafa had taken Ali. Like Yılmaz Güney had done to the state prosecutor.

When »99 Luftballons« by Nena started playing, a horde of scantily clad bodies in golden hot pants and with black afro-wigs rushed into the crowd and began dancing towards Ali between the rows of chairs. Ali suddenly understood that the thing behind her, which she had thought to be an unclad piece of metal—a faulty design left over like those pipes on the façades of the houses in Tarlabaşı that lead nowhere or had led somewhere at some point and that were nothing but a memory now, decoration, something for the ivy to grow over, and that looked beautiful to tourists, or worse: authentic—, that this construction was a dance pole that was very much still in use. One

of the girls stood right in front of her in order to climb up onto the platform which Ali had assumed to be the back of the sofa. The dancer's hipbones, covered with golden fabric, stared into Ali's eyes expectantly. Ali didn't move, stared back, and sucked on her straw, the girl climbed over her, putting her right foot on Ali's knee, the left one on the back of the sofa, pulled herself up, and pressed herself against the metal pole. The spotlight was burning Ali's eyes, the audience had turned, everyone wanted to see what the young woman's knee pits were going to do to the dance pole. There was nothing left for Ali to do but press herself into the upholstery and look up. The dancer was thrashing her legs about, like white toothpicks they flew around Ali's ears, and the black synthetic wig ruffled her curls. Ali chewed on her straw slowly.

Only when it had nothing left to give and the toothpick legs had disappeared, when the light grew milder, dark and milky, and Ali could be sure that no one was looking at her, did she push herself off the cushions. The audience in the room had dispersed into groups of hoping, laughing, waiting people, she found the bathroom, but was sure that she wouldn't be able to get into the stall, because someone, along with their company, was hanging off the cistern by their nose, and the two of them were probably going to have some fun afterwards, that's how Ali imagined the bathroom in this place, but the cubicle was vacant, and clean, and strangely sterile with a gleaming white neon lamp above Ali's static head and her reddened eyes. She didn't blink. She washed her hands for a long time, then the face, then she held her lips underneath the cold jet of water, tasted chlorine on her tongue and checked the mirror again. Anton looked back at her angrily. A woman entered, she seemed to have laughed or cried a lot, her make-up was smeared. The woman began to repaint her face, and Ali observed how she spread dashes of colour on her skin, how she drew lines around her eyes, then around her mouth. The lipstick was black. When she was done, she turned her head to Ali. Ali asked if she could borrow the lipstick, took it, and wrote »Anton was here« on the white tiles with it. The woman started yelling, something along the lines of »you ruined my lipstick, do you know how expensive it was«, Ali took a step towards her, reached around her neck, pulled her face close, kissed her on the repainted mouth and walked past her.

Find the door, just walk out, you don't have to be here, she tried to convince herself—that's when Aglaia entered the stage.

She carried an accordion, or it carried her, her upper body was consisted of the heavy instrument, she played on it as though she was ripping up her own bony body, a round head with short red hair sticking out at the top, at the bottom, two legs in fishnet stockings melted into flat, long, black shoes like a mermaid's tail. Her arms, clutching that monster of an instrument, were enveloped up to the elbow by black fish scale gloves. She threw her head back as though someone had smacked her in the face, her red lips devouring the entire ceiling, her tongue sticking out like a finger pointing upwards. Her voice vibrated from her throat to the crystals on the ceiling and into Ali's guts. Ali stopped because of the intense vibrato, then she saw Aglaia's face. Ali's eyes widened, tears shot up, she started to blink, then she stared again.

The crystals over Aglaia's head swung back and forth, the long fingers covered in fabric pushed the accordion's buttons slowly. Ali could have sworn that the woman's scent reached far into the room. She could smell freesias and bergamot, pineapple, oranges, cedarwood, and vanilla. She opened her mouth and imagined the red hair growing into her mouth now. She imagined running onto the stage and taking this woman somewhere, anywhere. She imagined everyone else leaving the room immediately and nobody would ever have been here except the two of them.

The accordion player received subdued applause and left the stage. Ali sat down at the bar and waited. She craned her neck looking for the mermaid, saw Mustafa crawling towards her instead, and quickly looked for something to occupy herself with. A woman with a bald head, in golden shorts, her synthetic afro tucked under her arm, stood before her suddenly. She didn't know if it was the one who had stripped at the metal pole above her head just then.

She had parted her lips to say something, but looked away suddenly, down at Ali's hand that rested on the packet of P&S, and asked if she could have one of the German cigarettes. She said her name was Katho, Catherine, Katyusha, like the song *Выходила на берег Катюша*, Katyusha set out on the banks.

»Do you know it?«

Of course Ali knew that song, there was no child whose mother tongue was Russian who didn't know that song, Ali knew it, Catherine knew it, but then she had already come a step closer, stood between Ali's legs that were trying not to shake bent on the bar stool, and quietly sang into her ear a few lines of that song, which, of course,

wasn't about a woman going down to a river bank and »Расцветали яблони и груши«— apple and pear trees were a-blooming—, but about a multiple rocket launcher, developed during the Great Patriotic War between '41 and '45, lovingly called »Katyusha« in Russian, and the rest of the song was about grand emotions, granted, but different ones than those of which some thought that it was the Russian soul howling for love.

Catherine sucked on the cigarette, Ali could hear the hoarse intake of breath and the faint smack when Catherine filled her mouth with smoke and her lips let go of the cigarette. As if something was bursting. Ali's ears turned red, especially the left one next to Catherine's cheek, then she laughed out loud, pulled her head back and looked into that woman's face, which was wide open, as though someone had ripped open a window. Her eyes were wide-set, appeared to be almost plunging down over the broad cheek bones, so that Ali was tempted to catch them with her eyes. She followed the lines of the corners of the eyes and the cheek bones to the mouth and noticed a pulling sensation in her jaw. They spoke Russian, it made everything flow better. This Katyusha, this rocket launcher, was kissing Ali before they had ordered the second drink. Ali tasted thick, oily clumps of paint in her mouth, and nothing much after that.

Catherine studied Ali's face, traced across her eyebrows with the fingertips of her left hand, Ali looked down and saw a thin gold band on the fourth finger of Catherine's right hand.

»A deterrent,« she said, »so the men will leave me alone.«

»Do they?«

»'Course not.« She stubbed out the cigarette on the counter of the bar without taking her eyes off Ali. »Doesn't matter. Everything that could happen to me has happened already.«

»I hope not, Katyusha.«

They had stopped counting the vodka. From the corner of her eye, Ali saw Mustafa come closer and vanish again like a pendulum. The ceiling seemed to sink lower and lower as well, the crystals above them jingled.

»Can I ask you something, this accordion player, is she—«

She felt dizzy. Catherine grabbed her by the arm and pulled her off the stool, they staggered into the staircase together, where Catherine left her and vanished into the

changing room. Ali was leaning against the Ulrike-Meinhof-scribble, smoked and managed to start a conversation with the bouncer. When he thought that he could touch her thigh, Catherine appeared in jeans and a shirt and lead her down the stairs. Ali didn't know how, but she found the way to her apartment, Catherine squeezed her arm, over and over, they stopped in doorways and sucked each other's faces off their heads, pressed their pelvises against each another, and stopped when they heard footsteps, then Ali pulled Catherine forwards, down the steep streets, tripping over grey cats, needed an eternity to find the right key to her front door, threw her onto the bed, or Catherine threw her onto the bed, and then time stopped.

The moon was hanging over the Süleymaniye mosque and shone onto the long, slender body next to her on the bed, the pale toes sticking out over the end of the mattress, the head, shaved almost bald, pressing against the wooden frame. Like a marble-coloured line she lay on the sheets, like an elongated question mark. Breasts rising and falling, face turned away.

Catherine's nipples shone in the moonlight, and Ali was tempted to touch them with her forehead, but resisted the urge because she was scared of waking the body, which would then move, unwind from its question mark position, and start to talk. The mobile phone had slid under the bed when Catherine had pushed her onto the mattress, or had it been the other way around, she remembered the rest of what happened in a series of flashing images. Ali set her feet down on the cold, linoleum covered floor and pulled the curtains aside. It was night outside.

Catherine was cooing quietly, her mouth half-open, her eyes moving underneath the lids, Ali couldn't see it, but she was sure that it was so. The muezzin called out his morning prayer. The insides of Ali's eyes were pulsating, the moon confused her, she let go of the curtain, went down on her knees, rested her forehead on the floor, and felt around for the mobile phone among the dust bunnies under the bed. As far as the vodka between her temples would let her, she tried to remember what Katyusha, who was breathing quietly on the mattress above her, had told her, who she was, or any of her other stories, but she only remembered the few Russian sayings she had mentioned between the forth and the seventh shot.

She was lying with her head among the dust bunnies on the floor underneath her bed and didn't know which of the sentences and images of last night, of recent nights, of the past weeks, had been lost. She got to her feet, hit her head on the edge of the bed, and looked at her mobile phone helplessly, the display had cracked last night, she was staring at the time and had difficulties to understand it. She found a half-empty packet of P&S in her jeans. Strange that it worked still, German cigarettes, put some German cigarettes on the table and people will come and ask you how you're doing, just as Catherine did, this question mark on her bed. Ali suspected her to be an au-pair from Ukraine, or a student of political sciences from Romania, they all knew Russian after all.

Ali lit her Player's and looked at Catherine's body. It seemed to be made from pure oxygen, oxygen and a bit of moon, she wondered what her real name was. Anna, Elvira, Zemfira, Petka, all possible, she found nothing that fit this face, it could all be true. She looked back out the window. The muezzin's interrupted each other's calls arrhythmically.

The muezzin to the left side of her balcony had a cold, and today he was bellowing more than he was singing, the second one kept joining in a little later, he enjoyed it, savouring the fact that he was better than his neighbour. Ali imagined him in an Elvis-Presley-look, he would grab the sunglasses rimmed with sparkling silver lightly at the bottom of the frame, smile revealing two rows of white teeth, maybe with a gold tooth that would flash, tap the microphone, and sing his morning prayer. And he was good. He knew that he was the best around here. God is great, and prayer better than sleep.

Catherine screwed up her pale face when she smelt the cigarette, she opened her eyes, slightly cross-eyed. She had puffed up her cheeks, her lips puckered, looking like a chrysanthemum, and she blinked multiple times until she realised where she was, or until she realised that she didn't know where she was. She curled up into a crescent shape, head tilted to the side. Ali held out a cigarette to her.

»What time is it?« she asked and sat up.

»The clock says it's five. Can't be, can it? Look outside, the moon is shining like it's the middle of the night, but the muezzin is singing the morning prayer. It's all mixed up.«

»Yes.«

»They got rid of time.«

»Did you get any sleep?«

Ali had slept, she could even remember her dream, something that happened more and more often ever since she had come to Turkey. In this dream, she was dancing with Uncle Cemal in the midst of a crowd of people so thick that their bodies moved to the music from a seventies movie without their doing. They stood, embracing tightly, and the crowd swayed back and forth. Then Cemal saw somebody, looked over all the heads, fixated on a redhead somewhere way at the back of the room, and let go of Ali's hips, he just walked away from her, shoving past the other couples, left her standing there, swaying back and forth on her own. For a brief while, Ali kept her arms where his shoulders had been just moments ago, her head bowed as though it were resting on Cemal's chest, and then she dissolved into a puddle in the crowd.

»No. I don't like to sleep.«

»I do,« Catherine said and yawned. »I love sleep. I wish I could sleep all my life.«

»Oh, Katyusha.«

Catherine clasped her knee and looked serious all of a sudden, she cut through the room with her eyes, and said with a voice that was maybe more hers than the one she had used before, when they had celebrated the exchange of Russian vulgarities, a deeper voice than the one that had whimpered and screamed when she ejaculated in Ali's mouth:

»I have to tell you something.«

The thought that she was in exactly the situation her mother had always warned her about flashed through Ali's mind.

»I am not Katyusha.«

»I didn't think you were,« Ali laughed nervously. She hoped that there was nothing more to come now. If it was only about the name, it was okay, she was scared of more revelations, infectious diseases, and feigned financial difficulties.

»I'm Katho.«

»Okay,« Ali said and thought that she needed more words than this »okay« urgently. Because she did not know what was »okay«.

»I am not a She.«

»Uh-huh.«

»I'm a He.«

»Yes.«

»Do you understand?«

»Do you need money?«

»What, why money?«

Ali wasn't sure whether she had forgotten her Russian, or was still drunk, or just hadn't understood correctly. Katho got up, reached for the packet of cigarettes and went outside, Ali stayed sitting on the floor and looked out the window. The city lights tore at her eyelids. The windows in the Gecekondular were pushing out of the foam of colours. The string of lights around a parking lot on the roof drew a white line through the piece of black in the sky that consisted of yellow, orange, red, and purple squares otherwise, some flickering in the synthetic light of the television sets. Three minarets loomed from the anterior house façades, lit yellow, clay grey during the day, with loudspeakers like thorns way too small for such a big stem.

Katho came back with the gleaming cigarette and sat down at the edge of the bed. He placed his legs far apart on the floor.

»Strange, how the moon is always lying on its back. It's never upright like the crescent on their flag, it lies there like an orange slice, look.«

Katho didn't look, he looked down at Ali, she turned her head to face him.

»Would you like some breakfast?«

He stubbed out the cigarette on the window frame, pulled up his legs, crawled under the blanket, and murmured through the sheets: »It's night. Let's sleep.«

Something was ticking in Ali's throat, she looked up at Katho's body, whose shape she could make out somewhere, but couldn't see properly, climbed into bed, went looking for it.

She pressed her eyes shut and waited until it was light enough to get up and out of bed. Red curls and a tongue sticking out towards the mirrored ceiling kept appearing in front of her closed eyelids, she opened her mouth and snatched at them. Suddenly, she tasted something salty and opened her eyes wide, Katho's lips had made their way up from her neck and were lying on hers, Ali awoke with a start, spun around, and jumped out of the bed. The linoleum was so cold that the soles of her feet burnt at its touch. Katho turned onto his stomach and said something into the pillows. Ali put on

her slippers and locked herself in the bathroom. The water heater emitted a whistling noise, a lukewarm stream of water flowed thinly over her cold limbs. She looked down at herself, observing the hairs on her lower arms, they were very light, long, and soft, almost invisible. She squatted and looked at her calves. The calves of a cat with white fur. She lathered her head sitting down and thought about what Katho had said to her during the night: She was a He. Katho was a He. Her scalp was itchy, she scratched at her temples with the inside of her lower arm, soap ran across her face and her back, she put out her tongue, opened her mouth wide, tried to rinse the vodka from her head. Just as the scent of the accordion player, the smell of freesia, bergamot, pineapple, oranges, cedarwood, and vanilla reached her nostrils again, the whistling noise coming from the water heater cut out and it was dark. The water turned cold abruptly, and Ali was awake just as abruptly. She jumped out of the tub, wrapped a towel around her body, and stumbled into Katho's arms, who was standing in the hallway looking around, confused.

»Power cut. Happens all the time when I shower.«

Towel pinched under her arms, she climbed down the stairs to the cellar where the fuse box was, on the way she ran into her next-door neighbour who avoided looking at her, she greeted him amicably, soap still in her eyes, blood pounding against her forehead, she wasn't sure if the neighbour had heard them last night, judging by the expression on his face he had, and now she was running through the stairwell naked. She pushed the flat black switch in the fuse box up and ran back into the apartment. Katho was standing in the kitchen, the light from the fridge illuminating his bald head.

»I wanted to make breakfast, but there's nothing here but a piece of old butter.«

»And a bottle of tonic.«

»And a bottle of tonic.«

»Come on, let's go out.«

The streets were empty, as empty as they were during summer time. Holiday time, when people fled the hot city, but it was November now, and the light didn't observe the clocks, or the muezzins. It was strangely quiet, the air was tense. The half-crumbled façades looked like a frozen movie set, chairs still standing in the abandoned bars on the ground floor, many houses were ruins, but not all. As though a wrecking ball had hit the house façades once and then moved on. People were still living in some of the

apartments, the curtains were drawn, but they didn't hide the torn-up walls spewing electrical wires. Two cats crawled out of a burnt-out car, interlaced into a ball. At the greengrocer's, balloons were hanging next to the brownish bananas on a pillar, along with a flag of the Peoples' Democratic Party, their symbol a tree, its trunk made up of purple hands, green leaves, and among them stars, vote, vote, vote, the entire area was full of them.

There was a smell of washing powder and paint in the air. When they turned the corner at the Armenian church, Ali stopped in front of an old, red graffiti of a woman with birds coming out of her head. Ali stepped closer, scrutinising it, Katho pulled her along quickly. Boys were kicking a leather ball against the church doors in the semi-darkness, it rebounded, Katho managed to intercept it and kicked it back, the boys' mocking voices echoed through the streets for a long time afterwards. Ali and Katho could still hear them in the park where they sat down on the damp grass.

The trick fountains were dry, the urban motorway looping above their heads, it was empty as well. Ali dropped down on the grass, her stomach growling, Katho was talking, and his voice sounded tinny, like the echo of the boys with the ball.

He told her about the hormones he was taking, and that he would soon be overgrown with black hairs. Looking at his clean-shaven head, it was impossible to discern what his hair colour was, his arms and legs were still smooth as well, but his angular eyebrows were black, like they had been painted on with eyeliner. Ali imagined the line from the eyebrows down to his chin, imagined him with a beard, drew a frame around the broad, open face that reminded her of someone, but she couldn't think of who it was.

Katho said that he was going to lose his job as a dancer soon, because of the beard, and then the legs with black hairs too, they wouldn't look all too great in golden hot pants, then someone else would be wearing them, and he, he would go back to Ukraine and show himself to his family, especially his father, look, Dad, that's it, this is me now. He told her about his father, the drinker. Ali was barely listening, her thoughts wandering, she asked herself why all fathers had to be drinkers, always, couldn't they be chess players, or notorious maté drinkers, and, by all means, mute, couldn't they just be mute, never utter a sound. Katho's mother appeared to be a heroine, a working class heroine, just as Lenin had imagined, and he also had two younger siblings, he wasn't

sending them money, he wasn't sending anything to anyone, but sometimes he thought about them and wondered whether they were thinking about him. He talked and talked, and the sky above them became as white as dishwater.

I've missed Russian, Ali thought. But you can't think »missing«. She didn't know what else she missed, and only when she began to think it, there would be room for it, so why do that. Her mother had once said it, something about thoughts being parasites, but she couldn't remember the exact wording.

Katho had fallen quiet and looked at Ali. She realised that he had asked her something. He leant over her and repeated the question.

»А ТЫ?«

And you?

There was nothing expectant in his gaze, he wasn't going to kiss her, he was actually serious about this question, he really wanted to know. And you? Ali looked past him and thought: Tarlabaşı is going to be torn down. Everything is going to be torn down. I'm never going to find Anton.

A street vendor was pushing past them with his cart, behind the glass a layer of rice, glistening with oil, big, boiled, pearly chick peas, then another layer of rice, and boiled chicken as a brown layer on top.

»Pilav! Tavuklu Pilav!,« he yelled. »Would you like some, girls?«

Katho looked away, Ali shook her head. She looked at the greasy layer of chicken, the water in her mouth mixing with bile.

»That's fresh chicken! Pilav gives you a feeling of security, sisters.« The vendor was towering above them, fists on his hips, the small head on a thin neck bending down towards them.

The chicken was staring at her, Ali tried to hold its gaze.

[...]

## 36 Hours

[....]

Valentina und Konstantin, what kind of names, why would you call people that, except if you wanted to hide the fact that they were Jews and should actually be called something like Esther and Shmuel, but who would call their children that in the Soviet Union in the sixties, unless you hated your children or hated yourself. In the case of Valentina, Valja, there was at least a good reason for giving her an ugly, honest, socialist name, because on the day that her mother, almost losing her own life in the process, catapulted her into the world, the first woman was sent to outer space. Valentina Tereshkova broke through the earth's atmosphere at eight kilometres per second and flew to the stars, Valentina Pinkenzon tore through the tissue between her mother's vulva and anus, and landed in the hands of a doctor who was covered from head to toe and who ordered that the mother be operated on immediately through his face mask.

Konstantin's parents had no excuse. Konstantin was just called Konstantin, Kostya, nicknamed Kissa, there was nothing to argue about. So those two Russified children were introduced to one another as though there existed such a thing as love on order, and as though there was no other choice anyway if you didn't want to be beaten blue and black, as Valja had been in her first marriage.

Valja made the first mistake when she was young, much too young to think, but not too young to get married. Where were the parents, one could ask, when she decided to marry a goy, the girl with the black hair, so much more beautiful than cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, and with this surname, Pinkenzon, you could just as well have called her Esther Rahel, what use was Valentina, but the parents hadn't been careful, neither with the name nor with the husband. The parents were staring at the mountains of Kislovodsk, they were at a health resort, when little Valja decided that graduation went hand in hand with marriage. Not because the boy had such a big moustache—that she didn't like at all—and not because he played so convincingly on his trumpet, for which virtually everyone liked him, or rather for which the girls liked him and the boys envied him—»what's with the attitude, does he think he's Armstrong«—, jazz wasn't Valja's thing, it rather annoyed her, it was the prospect of finally being able to move out of her parents' house that was alluring to Valja, to many girls, to everyone.

So she watched a few Soviet movies about love to learn what that kind of thing is supposed to look like, how you are supposed to look, maybe even how to kiss—that didn't happen often in the movies, usually at the end, you press your lips against each other, while the man usually grabs the woman by her shoulders and presses her against his face, the woman looks taken by surprise and desperate—this had little relation to what happened when you were actually kissing nor with anything that came after. Why a fat tongue had to be inside her mouth was something Valja learned only later.

When the parents were out, she practiced looks and gestures. Good student that she was, she sat cross-legged on the floral carpet, close to the television, and took notes. She liked going to school, liked reading books, had Tolstoy and Akhmatova hidden under her notebooks, but the books said nothing about what you should do when the man grabs you by the shoulders, at least not those that the Pinkenzon family had on their shelves.

And because, on top of it all, Valja also looked unusual, one could say: unusually pretty—but first and foremost, she looked different than the other girls with long, straight hair, her hair was kinky and thick and short, since she had been a child, her mother had made sure her daughter wore a proper Socialist haircut that differed little from the boys', and then the straight nose and the firm mouth, you could also mention her hips—, in any case, the trumpet player with the big moustache thought it a good idea to watch Valja's black curls crawling across a white sheet and out of bed every morning.

The two of them did not ask their parents, ignored all the wise words of advice, locked themselves in their room, and then it became clear that the girl was a girl no more and had to be married. The wedding dress was sewn by the groom's mother, from tulle with a tulip design which she had bought too much of for her living room curtains. The bride fabricated the headdress herself using papier-mâché. She glued a round pot together and stretched white silk over it, even though the shade of white of the headdress didn't quite match that of the dress, Valja beamed like a photo model, and each of her movements crackled like sugary cake.

The marriage lasted almost a year. After seven months and a few days, Valja got into her grandmother's car, the two of them wanted to drive to the dacha, the nineteen-year-old girl had bruises on her face. The grandmother, Etina, called Etinka by those

who loved her, grabbed her granddaughter's chin, who looked neither distraught nor sad, but neither did she look taken by surprise or desperate, on the contrary, she was smiling because she was happy to see her beloved grandmother, whom she missed more than everyone else. Valja beamed at Etinka and almost forgot about the fact that her grandmother's worried, very dark eyes read a bit more on her face than the anticipation of the days by the Volga and her candied jam. She had tried to cover the bruises with make-up, but she was surrounded by doctors, everyone in her family was going to know exactly what was shimmering underneath her fair skin, no camouflage was going to help with that. Etinka's eyes became even darker, and she traced her rough fingertips over the contusions on Valja's face.

»You're getting a divorce,« was the only thing she said before she started the car.

Valja was shocked. Maybe this was because the car sped off so quickly and the tyres skidded, an old Lada, what could you expect, or maybe because Etinka had sounded so determined, but everything that came out of Etinka sounded determined, she hated superfluous sentences, and she especially hated the men's chattiness. Etinka strongly believed that the less you say, the smarter you look. And that's why almost everything Etinka said was true, in this case, that Valja was getting a divorce. Above all, Valja found the whole situation to be one thing: embarrassing. She didn't want to sit before her family beaten black and blue, and most of all, she did not want to move back in with this family. She was still holding her breath and realised that Etinka wasn't going to ask any more questions.

She would have liked to talk, she would have liked to tell her grandmother that the trumpet player, who had a ridiculous name, and it was only now that she noticed how ridiculous it was, so much so, that she didn't want to say it again, not ever, because it was Ivan, like the hero from the Russian fairy tales, the national hero, the idiot, anyway, that Ivan had also watched movies in order to know what it means to be a man. The kind of man he wanted to be. Then he had learned a few things by watching and listening to his father and his uncles, and that's when he realised two things, this young man, only twenty years old at the time: firstly, a man drinks. A man drinks before he talks and afterwards. In between, he may shed a tear, that's alright, but only if he drinks. If he doesn't drink and cries, he's either a faggot or a Yid, which lead him to the second realisation. Because he had also noticed that the black curls that Valja was tossing across

the white bedsheet, along with her surname, which she had kept after they were married, could be a reason for why everything that ever happened to him was her fault. In his vodka-soaked brain, these insights lead to conclusions like this: »You Jewish sow, go and rot in your Israel, you won't break me—«

Soon, yelling those insights wasn't enough to satisfy Ivan. Wasn't enough retribution for everything this young man might have suffered, and Valja, terrified, had never heard things like that, well she had, but not like this, not this close, not with his breath on her cheek, she had grown up with all sorts of rhymes to the word Yid.

Два еврея третий жид по веревочке бежит. Верево́чка лопнет и жида прихлопнет, many things like that, but what made her speechless was the sheer force with which Ivan, the trumpet player, yelled stuff at the back of her head out of nowhere when she was bent over *History of Medicine*. She was studying medicine, so Akhmatova had to wait, and anyway, Akhmatova had been wrong in many points, she had lied, or Valja had missed something, this she understood now. She had missed something.

Nobody in Valja's family ever yelled, atypical for families, but Valja couldn't know that, her parents love one another, and her father prepared breakfast for her mother, not because he had to, but because he wanted to. The father had changed Valja's diapers when she was a baby, and had taken her to school when she was older, and the mother went to have massages while he prepared Valja for university, and there had never been a bad word spoken between the two of them, at least not as far as she could remember. She didn't know that people could hit each other, she knew that wars were waged, she knew that the neighbour's wife often yelled after midnight, but all of this was far away from young Valja, and had no relation to her own life, until Ivan started to behave like a proper Russian man.

Если бьет – значит любит, an ancient Russian saying: If he beats you, he loves you. That's what Valja remembered when she saw her husband come staggering towards her, sometimes she mumbled it to herself.

Neither in the movies she had watched nor in the books she was reading could she find anything instructive on what to do when someone is beating you, except to bear it. Another Russian saying that came to her mind was: If you can't prevent the rape, relax and try to enjoy it. They say that many experienced this, meaning it was normal, meaning Valja now belonged, belonged to the circle of those that were loved. Maybe she

was really so important to Ivan that he had to scream with desperation, maybe he was really trying to understand something of what was going on in the world. For her part, Valja tried to relax, and didn't think about the future, didn't think about whether the rest of her life was going to be like this, she was too young for that, she couldn't fathom something like the rest of her life. She didn't think anything, crammed for her medical studies, felt grown up and important, because she was carrying a secret inside of her and because a certain severity spread over her face, the severity of adulthood, she thought, adulthood itself settled down underneath her eyes. But before this adulthood could corrode and disfigure Valja's face as it had that of her namesake Tereshkova, Etinka decreed that she would leave that pig, and if he should ever raise his hand to Valja again, she would get a butcher to solve the problem once and for all, that she promised. This and more Etinka said later, in front of the courthouse where the divorcees-to-be had made an appointment, but now, in the car with the skidding tyres, Etinka said nothing, and did so with a determination that filled the small blue Lada completely. Valja thought that Etinka didn't inquire because she was scared that Valja would start to cry and sob something like »but I love him so«, or »he's actually not like that«, but Etinka didn't inquire because she was faced with her own images resurfacing, her jaw suddenly beginning to hurt, as did her right cheek bone, she pressed as much air as she could get from inside the Lada down her throat, and so now it was very important to be silent and not ask Valja anything in the car.

Etinka was close to tears, she hadn't expected that at all.

With Etinka's help, the parents were at a health retreat somewhere again, Valja was divorced quickly, just wasn't meant to be, some said »Fate!«, and the girl with her hair even shorter, by now she had started to cut it herself, in bellbottom jeans and a polo-neck jumper and carrying a small suitcase, as though it held nothing but a record-player, moved back into the walk-through room in her parents' house, her father's study. The parents didn't say much, asked her about her studies, praised her for her good grades, said she could be even better, she lay down on the innerspring mattress that felt like Valja was fifteen again, put a book across her face, the comedy *Woe from Wit* by Griboyedov, who had died way too young and way too stupidly in Teheran, what else he could have written, Etinka used to say. So she set the book down on her face and didn't

move until the parents came into Valja's room after conspirative conversations at the kitchen table and said that in Moscow, Moscow, Moscow, the city everyone in the Soviet Republic, nay, the whole world was dreaming about, there was a distant cousin who was still single, and, most importantly—Jewish. He would never hit her and call her a Jewish sow.

That's what they assumed, they were wrong.

What the parents didn't seem to realise was that despite the distant relation to Valja's family—the brother of Konstantin's father's cousin was a brother's cousin and so on and so forth—Kostya came from an entirely different background than his future wife and mother of his children, with whom he would decide to leave the country when, in the early nineties, tanks were rolling onto the Red Square which didn't have its name from the colour of blood, but because red and beautiful are the same word in Russian. Valja's parents thought little about such things, they wanted to see their daughter well provided for, who could have guessed back then that tanks would be rolling onto the Beautiful Square and that the family would file paperwork to leave for America and would end up in Germany, with Uncle Leonid and his puke-covered shoes.

Kostya's parents were from a village, but not a shtetl, those didn't exist near Moscow, they came from a good Soviet village where a man's beard reached all the way down to his hips, where women wore floral headscarves and floral housecoats, and where you downed a shot of vodka every morning before going to work, work which was done by hand, so hands were strong there, the men's as well as the women's. Only Kostya's father's hands weren't, even though there was plenty of butter in the porridge in his house, his hands never became strong either, whereas Kostya's mother's hands could work for two, and so they had come to an arrangement. Both carried surnames for which you got a good beating in the good Soviet village, at the very least, the two of them had to run from time to time, and that united them, the running, even though Kostya's father couldn't even do that properly.

»Look, the Jewish sow, he runs like a faggot.«

Kostya's father was lanky and small and ran as though stones were stuck to the soles of his shoes, toes turned too far inwards like a small limping animal about to stumble and fall. Neither the butter in his porridge nor the fat in the soup could change

his gait, and defending himself was definitely something he could not do, which made him a toy to the whole village, especially to the boys, once they were done gouging out the cats' eyes. All of this changed when Kostya's father went to do his military service, which is where he learnt a few tricks, and from that point onwards, he was able to defend himself with cans of hot oil that he poured into the others' faces.

Kostya's mother was a sturdy young woman who had never been a child, even when she was a child. Since she was six years old, she had to take care of her mother, destroyed by drink, and her five siblings, since she had been able to stand she knew how to wash babies, make soup, pull splinters from the bottom of a foot, and bury relatives. Why she had gotten involved with Kostya's father remains a secret, because she had always been out for security, and you would have thought that she would choose a proper Russian farmer, take a proper Russian name, and leave the whole Torah-thing to be forgotten in the back of some wardrobe, at least then the children would have had a chance for a decent life. But she decided against that, or maybe it hadn't been a decision at all, because she had no dowry to offer, except the Torah, that is, and a large family riddled by diabetes and dementia. There was no butter in the porridge in their house, sometimes there wasn't even porridge. Kostya's mother decided all on her own that she wanted to be strong despite that, and that she wanted to leave as soon as possible. She wanted to get away from her family, away from the slowly rotting house, she wanted to go to Moscow where she knew no one and would never have to wipe the arses of semi-decayed corpses. She knew that she could do this neither alone nor with a Russian farmer who had no reason to leave his village, and so she married the only other Yid in the village.

Even before they were married, Kostya's parents decided to move to Moscow, which was only fifty kilometres away, which, for Russian standards, is right on the doorstep. When Kostya grew older, he kept asking about the village his parents came from, and couldn't they go there together one day, it was so close after all, but the parents declined, and Kostya didn't press the matter further, because he saw that something pained them and Kostya loved his parents.

His father became a tailor. As clumsy and shaky as the rest of his body might have been, his hands were nimble and precise, he rose quickly, possibly also due to his business sense which he had adopted during his military service as a survival strategy,

so that soon he was sewing suits for important men, as he emphasised, maybe even men in the Kremlin. He managed to rise to the position of head of department, even though he had never learned how to read and write, and he ran through the hallways with his slide rule which he used, banging the wooden balls against each other, to enumerate the employees' mistakes and faults, rattling it like a tambourine. The mother stayed home after the child was born and prepared soup with butter for Kostya, and ate from it greedily herself. Kostya had been born quite thin, as thin as his father, that wouldn't do, you didn't want to bring any sick people into the world, »I can see your ribs, it's a shame, is that supposed to mean I'm not a good cook!« Kostya's mother was a very determined woman and made sure her son put on weight early.

Kostya loved food. He loved toy rifles, and he loved music. When Uncle Vasya came over to the tiny two-bedroom apartment with cardboard walls, on the fourth floor of a house with thirteen floors, in a neighbourhood at the edge of the woods, where the young family had moved to, and heaved his accordion onto his shoulders, Kostya wiggled his ears, and his mouth watered. There, in the Chertanovo district, at the edge of Moscow, Uncle Vasya sang as though they were in the countryside still, in that vastness where the songs were sent across the fields and echoed like a wisp of wind, as though nobody cared that you were roaring, as though nobody would knock on the ceiling with a broomstick and yell, »Oi! Are you fucking or mothers, or what's going on up there?«

When Uncle Vasya set down the accordion afterwards in order to drink with the father and to eat and to talk about things, weltschmerz mostly, and salaries that weren't even enough to keep you in tobacco or proper booze, »you'll go blind drinking the spirit here, yuk«, and the thighs of the cashier in the shop across the street, and the horrible, all encompassing, bittersweet stench emanating from the rubbish dump behind the house, »it reaches even here, the fourth floor, don't you open the window, better to rot in your own dirt«—so when the men were being men and nobody was looking, Kostya crawled behind Uncle Vasya's accordion, put his thin arms through the broad leather straps, pushed his little potbelly against the instrument, he couldn't lift it, so he lay behind it, disappeared completely, and traced the smooth, black buttons, which felt like marbles, with his fingers. At some point, the family noticed the boy snuggling up to the accordion time and again, so Uncle Vasya sat him on his lap, and that monster of an

accordion he put on top, and he placed his fleshy fingers over Kostya's small ones and pushed the keys with him.

What Kostya's parents didn't know was that two things began to take their course then, they couldn't know, because such things weren't part of their world, meaning they simply didn't exist for them: firstly, that Kostya would, eight years later, when he was sixteen, decide to become a musician, piano and accordion, with utmost conviction and fervour: »Mum, Dad, that's what I want to be, I'll do my military service and go to university, but I'll become a musician and perform all over the country«. His mother's laughter was so loud that Kostya wouldn't forget it until the day of his (untimely) death.

And the second thing was that Uncle Vasya didn't put Kostya on his lap unselfishly, and wasn't ashamed to do so in front of the child's parents, they couldn't fathom after all what it was that Kostya felt moving underneath his coccyx, such thoughts didn't occur to them. Uncle Vasya made slight, circular movements with his hips when he pressed the accordion's weight into Kostya's lap, and rubbed his trousers on the boy's small, bony backside. Pressing both the accordion and Kostya firmly to his body, he breathed heavily through his gaping mouth, and the pungent smell confused Kostya, because it wasn't the smell of booze, he knew the smell well, it was tart and smelt of eggs, and still he kept climbing onto Uncle Vasya's lap to push the keys and feel the cool air that was pressed out of the heavy accordion when it was closed on his cheeks. Neither the pungent odour nor the uncle's quiet moans could deter Kostya from his resolution to spend his life with this musical instrument. But now Kostya had been introduced to a feeling that would stay with him forever. A feeling that smelt of eggs and returned often, he could taste it tartly on his tongue, he held everyone and everything responsible for it, Socialism, the state, politicians, his parents, his wife, and all the other arseholes, may they all die a miserable death—the feeling of abuse.

[...]