

MOTHERS
by Theodora Dimova

translated from the Bulgarian by Francine Giguere

ANDREYA

She watched her mother going down the stairs, her movements in slow motion, in white second-hand clothes—mama didn't want the clothing that Pavel bought her, because Pavel doesn't give me any money to buy my own clothes but comes with me to the shop. Her white second-hand clothes, which she hadn't even bother to wash, exuded the characteristic smell of poverty, of misery, of otherness, of want, of the superiority of those who donate these clothes, the superiority of those wealthy people from Europe, their nice smell, the nice fabrics they wore, the self-confidence of their smells. Her clothes were white—some kind of symbol was printed on the front of her tee-shirt, similar to the hippy sign of a hundred years ago, the emblem she had followed and no doubt confused with the one on the tee shirt, and that was probably the very reason why she'd bought this tee-shirt, she'd paid a whole two leva¹ for it, because she'd mistaken the obscure sign on the tee-shirt for the hippy symbol. But if Andreyka had asked her—you thought that it was a hippy symbol and that's why you bought this tee shirt, didn't you? Nonsense! Christina would have retorted, glaring with her huge blue eyes and the even huger bags underneath them, give me a break, Christina would have continued, how would you know about the hippy sign, you, my fourteen year old brat, what do you know about the hippies, I know everything, mama, Andreyka would have replied, everything, I know everything about them, their sloppy clothes, their rugged pullovers, that there weren't any jeans, your school uniforms, how they cut your hair at the school entrance like a herd, I know about your meetings to smoke in secret, the "Stolichnaya" vodka, I really wonder how you could stand to drink it, the parties that they allowed you to attend until eleven o'clock, that there weren't any tee shirts, that there weren't any records, in those days you called them "LPs", "LPs" Christina almost cried out, that's right, mama, I know, in those days you said: I've got the newest "Bad Company" LP, for example, how do you know about "Bad Company", I know, mama, from your conversations with papa,

¹ The unit of currency in Bulgaria is the 'lev' (plural form: 'leva'), divided into 100 stotinki (singular form: stotinka).

with your friends, isn't it true that at some point, whenever you're visiting people or when you have visitors, it's all you talk about, mama, about the LPs, the parties, the uniforms, communism—please, mama, don't go out, why? asked Christina and her eyes froze dead somewhere in space, in one of those torpors that were so scary and Andreyka wasn't able to answer her, she had the feeling that her mother was dying during the few seconds when she froze, she wasn't sure that she would move again, why shouldn't I go out this evening? Christina asked again, bewildered, as if nothing had happened, I'll only take a walk, Christina shot an even stranger glance at her, I'll just have a walk in the dark streets, you know, I know, mama, Andreyka replied, and I'll follow you and I'll hide and I'll be afraid of the streets you walk along, I'll be afraid to go down the underpasses after you, to slip into the parks at your heels, to watch out for you, to follow you, to turn my back to you in the all-night stores while you pass near me not even suspecting that I'm around, to see how you look around, how you put a bottle of vodka in your pocket, how you look around again, so afraid, so petite, so slight, blue-eyed, with the huge bags under your eyes, I'll shake with fear that they'll catch you with the vodka, I'll see how you sit down on a bench, how you take a swig, how you light your first cigarette, how all sorts of characters keep passing by and you offer them vodka to drink and some of them sit with you, stoned, drunk and you'll all drink from the very same bottle of vodka, then I get tired of standing in the dark, in the bushes, behind some tree, I get tired of following you, I start to hate you, to hate you so much that somehow my stomach starts to hurt and I manage not to burst into tears and not to shout with all my strength into the silence, into the night, a few meters away from you and your accidental company, why, why, why, Lord, did you give other children mothers, when you gave me this wreck, this trash infected with an incurable disease of the soul, why didn't this trash manage to cope with this wound in her soul, while others were managing, why was she drinking so much alcohol, what was she lacking, what did she want, she had me, papa, her work, isn't that enough in the end, what more can a person want from life and where did her disease come from, all of the anguish that emanates from her, the degradation, the decay—why do you suffer, what are you lacking, Andreyka once asked her, aren't you satisfied, we have everything, papa works and earns enough, why are you always so sad, mama, why don't you ever laugh, why do you put on such a horribly long face, tell me, I'm begging

you, tell me and Christina answered: I wake up in the morning, as if I've been pulled out of a tar vat full of sorrow, I can hardly even breathe, I feel a physical exhaustion, as if I've been working all day and everything is black, black, black and I don't want to get up and I don't want to breathe any longer and nothing can cheer me up, every new thought just weighs me down more and pushes me further and further down into the tar vat of despair, but don't I make you happy, Andreyka asked her, no, you don't make me happy, Andreyka, you don't make me happy in the slightest, you know, the more you grow up, the more I regret that I had you, I regret that I married Pavel, I regret that I'm alive, I regret that I was even born and Pavel and you are both such a terrible burden on me, I have to admit to you, my darling, that sometimes I secretly imagine the two of you being run over by a tramway at the same time, how I'm crying at your funeral and I'm wearing dark glasses, but deep inside me I'm happy, because now I'll be free to commit suicide, without worrying that my suicide will weigh on your soul, your life, your destiny, but mama, how can you speak to me like that! asked Andreyka as she ran her hand over her mother's long blonde curls, how can you be so beautiful and so unhappy, mama, do you really think I'm beautiful? asked Christina, everyone thinks you're beautiful, papa, your friends, your colleagues, papa claims that all of them were once in love with you, once, once, Christina repeated, once, but not now, now they don't give me their mobile phone numbers, they don't open their doors to me, they hide when I go to their places, when I give them a phone call, they just listen and keep quiet, and when I do happen to talk to them they just look at me. Where did this sorrow come from, Andreyka, this lack of joy, it's a disease, Andreyka, this absence of the will to live, this rejection of heaven and earth, I don't know, Andreyka, I'm thinking of paying someone to shoot me, of renting myself a killer, you can't talk to me like that, mama, you don't have the right to talk to me like that, if you agree to shoot me, Andreyka, my child, it will be the best thing you can do for your mother, will you do it, Andreyka, you'll be proud that you've done a really good deed for your mother, no, please, crying irritates me, you know that crying doesn't achieve anything, only killing achieves something, and everything they say about crying is nothing but fiction, there are medicines for crying, if you continue, and you've already been crying all night, I'll give you one of my drugs that stop crying, that kill crying, just like I asked you to kill me! If you kill me, Andreyka, if you kill your mother, you won't

be a matricide but a mother rescuer, I'll work out a plan for you to kill me, of course, I'd prefer a professional to do it, but you see, your father doesn't even leave me five leva to have in hand, do you think that I haven't tried, that I haven't contacted anyone, I have, Andreyka, I've tried, five thousand Euros is the going rate, half before the killing and the other half after the killing, but in my case the whole amount in advance and Andreyka slides out of bed, choking on her tears, with reddened eyes, her face tear-stained, with that amnesia that stems from the throes of crying too much for too long, that obliteration of the causes, that torpor, as if Christina had succeeded in tearing out a part of her daughter's soul, at long last, after a long battle, she had succeeded in tearing it out and now she was consuming it greedily, she was chewing it perfidiously, she was gnawing this piece of Andreyka's soul, perhaps she thought that it would give her some strength or at least that she would infect her daughter with her disease and both of them would suffer together and together they would go into and out of the tar vat of despair and doom and misery, as if Christina bore a cross that was invisible to others, as if she were expiating a sin that was incomprehensible even to herself. The voices of Pavel and his friends were echoing in the entrance-hall where Andreyka was seeing her mother off on the incomprehensible nocturnal trajectories over which she had ranged for years while dreaming of her own death, her movements were slowed down by the medication, she was going down the stairs slowly, concentrating, she was holding on tightly to the railing, she stopped on the landing at the elevator, she opened the door, she didn't have enough strength to squeeze into the elevator quickly and deftly before its enormous iron door slammed into her, bending her shoulders and making her stagger and Andreyka was watching her from above and her heart was aching with pity for her mother, her medication, her nocturnal wanderings, because the metal elevator door crushed her and bent her shoulders and as she staggered, she turned towards her daughter apologetically and her eyes were saying: I'm sorry, forgive me for being like this, I can't even get into an elevator normally and she pressed the button and went down. Outside it was the height of summer, it was the World Cup football final and her father and his guests were laughing in the living room and the refrigerator was packed with beer and nobody noticed or worried about Christina's departure. Pavel and the others looked upon her as an inanimate object or a boring detail that they had got used to a long time ago and they

could deal with her fixed stare, her silence, her presence as she crossed the room in slow motion. When she stayed with them, Christina—numbed, almost immobilized by the medication—meekly lowered her eyes and looked down like a shy schoolgirl, but in fact she was falling asleep, drifting off into those sterile and troubled dreams of hers from which it was even more terrifying to wake up. Pavel had had a mistress for a long time, his first girlfriend from high school, his only love, his great love, she had married and then divorced and for a few years now Pavel and Ina were together again, yet Pavel didn't want to divorce Christina, as he had explained to Andreyka, not because he loved her but because he felt sorry for her, because there were elementary rules of ethics that did not allow him to leave her on her own in this state. He had said this to his daughter. He had taken her out to a restaurant with him one evening and had explained to her that he'd never loved her mother, that he didn't know why he had married her. Actually yes I do, I do know, continued Pavel and now I'll tell you why: it was because Ina, the great and the only love of my life got married after we broke up and I was terribly jealous, and she had a child, and I wanted to have a family too, a wife and child, to be like Ina, a serious person with a family and responsibilities, just like Ina had become, I wanted revenge, I wanted her to be jealous of me and just as unhappy as I was and I married your mother and you were born immediately and I became a serious person with a family and responsibilities and didn't stop thinking about Ina, keeping track of her life, seeing her from time to time and loving her more and more, being jealous of her, wanting to inflict pain on her, to get even with her, to have her, to make love with her, to live with her, to have children, many children with her. I'm sorry, Andreyka replied, I'm sorry that you have only one child and that it's not with Ina but with Christina, I'm sorry papa that I happened along, I'm sorry that I was born, no, don't cry, Pavel had said ashen-faced, you misunderstood me, Andreyka, really and truly, everyone's looking at us, please keep your voice down, please, go outside and Andreyka shakily left the restaurant, under the dumbfounded and sympathetic gaze of the clients and Pavel left shortly after her and caught up with her and grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her and Andreyka saw that he too was crying, that he couldn't talk, that he was choking on the words that he had just pronounced, Andreyka, my child, Andreyka, my child, and he was stroking her hair, will you be able to forgive me, tell me, will you ever be able to forgive me and his sobbing

made his shoulders shake and he was pressing her to his chest and any minute now I'm going to break in two and the pieces will remain in his arms, thought Andreyka and his beard was scratching her eyes as he covered them with kisses, I promise, he declared before heaven and his child, I promise that I will never, ever, ever have another child than you, if only you can forgive me, Andreyka, my child, and the pair set off along the summer streets, hand in hand, hugging, serene and pure, as if they had just met and found love. From that day on, Ina was introduced to both their friends and gradually she became the closest family friend, the favorite friend who would take Christina's place on birthdays, week-ends, Christmas and Easter, Christina stayed home, by her favorite cactus, dazed by the medication, staring at the same spot, with the steady rocking typical of the insane, with the voices from the bottom of the ocean that spoke to her, with the visions from the hell of grief that moved around her, with the black hole of her bottomless depressions that were infiltrating the house like poisonous spiders, clinging to it, the armchairs, the rugs, the wall-paper, Christina's eyes, once so blue and transparent; her inconsolability and terror, her grief, her disease drove Pavel and Andreyka out of the house and they would get into the car and go to pick up Ina and her child and go out for lunch far, far, far away from the city and from Christina; Andreyka and Ina's child amused themselves, trying to outdo each other as to who belonged to which gang, who was a member of what Counter-strike clan and how many admirers they had and where they'd been on trips to the sea and the number of links they had on the Net and who they chatted with and meanwhile Pavel and Ina were finishing the bottle of red wine, smoking and invariably holding hands and staring into each other's eyes and the children didn't dare to venture near the table so as not to disturb the cocoon of love around Pavel and Ina, which was the only thing that made them feel warm and secure. When they returned home after lunch, they would find Christina in the same position, the same state, staring at the same spot, sometimes you could only tell the passage of time by the number of cigarettes she had smoked and then invariably Andreyka would start begging her father to stop the strong medicines, to keep her only on mood-stabilizing medication, so that she could at least move, talk, so that they wouldn't numb her movements and her brain to such an extent, but in that case they'll put her in hospital, Pavel would say, and of course no one wants her to be admitted to hospital, no, Andreyka would shriek, no one wants her to be admitted

to hospital, in which case we have to give her the large doses of strong medicines that fight her attacks, she'll be in the same state for one more month, the attack will pass with the start of winter and we'll decrease the dose to the standard level, alright, papa, Andreya would murmur and together they would start to undress Christina like an old ugly doll, to pull the legs of her pajamas on, to stick her stiffened hands into the sleeves of her pajama top, to lead her to the bathroom and to give her the toothbrush, to tell her to brush her teeth, and she would stand motionless with the toothbrush in her hand, looking at her reflection in the mirror above the sink, clean your teeth, clean your teeth and Pavel started to shout, Christina, do you hear me, clean your teeth, you stink, you reek, you never change your underwear, you don't bathe, it's become impossible to even be around you, mama, my dearest little mama, clean your teeth, please, Andreya was whispering in her ear, papa is furious, papa can't stand you any longer, because you smell really bad, he can't sleep in the same room as you because you stink so much, he's been sleeping on the sofa in the living room for a long time, because you don't clean your teeth and he can't get enough sleep and he's very, very irritable and hearing these crushing arguments Christina would take out her false teeth, turn on the tap and woodenly start to clean her teeth with the toothbrush and you have to put toothpaste on the toothbrush, Pavel would say and his voice was broken, his voice was broken in two and his eyes wretchedly and slowly followed Christina's movements, the painstaking movements of her hands, now she was scrubbing, and scrubbing, and scrubbing her pink dentures, she was turning them and continued to scrub them on the other side until Pavel wrenched them out of her hands, rinsed them out, shoved them back into her mouth, that's when terror showed in Christina's huge blue eyes, when Pavel grabbed her dentures, terror at his strong hands opening her mouth, the incomprehensible words, his loud voice, Andreya's soothing whisper, the echo of voices in the bathroom, they would merge into a gigantic, heavy ball that bounced inside her head, the ball of voices was howling and bouncing inside her head and reminded her of the bathroom in the hospital where they washed her with a hose, where they would shove her in naked—her and a few others like her—undress them roughly, leaving them naked and one of the hospital attendants would start to spray them with the hose, a powerful stream, a long brush, with which they were soaped, then the water was turned on to maximum strength, they all screamed because the stream was

getting strong, they all instinctively turned their backs to it and the hospital attendant was hosing their backs with the stream as if lashing them with a whip, under their armpits, between their legs with the powerful stream, on the soles of their feet, over their hair, then they'd be wrapped in white sheets, because there weren't any towels and they'd be marched off to their room and told to dry themselves off and go to sleep.

Andreya listened closely to the sounds of Pavel's voice, to the full-toned voice of Ina who always made people laugh, she would tell even the saddest story in an amusing way, things were light, cheerful and breezy with Ina and once again there was a burst of laughter, it was getting close to eight thirty, when the World Cup football final was going to start, yes, the refrigerator was crammed with sweaty Beck's bottles, with ice-cold *mastika* and vodka, salads, appetizers, cheeses, juices, presently Andreya was going to enter the living room and they would all ask her how school was going, what grades she would get for the end of the year, how were things going in French, and in English? Did she have a boyfriend yet or was the whole class still hanging out together and there would always be someone to exclaim: My gosh, what a generation! take us at their age, we! ... yes, we were changing girlfriends and boyfriends like we changed hankies, that was the expression in those days, do you remember? we deflowered girls at thirteen, at eighteen they were already women and had already had a few abortions, at which point someone else would portentously add—illegal abortions, yes, of course, illegal, there was no other way, because you had to turn up for an abortion with a parent, but what parent in those days would have put up with an abortion, what parent in those days would even allow talk of abortion, those were shameful things, shameful, vile and indecent and should never be discussed, at that point Ina would invariably draw closer to Andreya and tell her in her deep voice, with all of the sincerity she could muster: Andreya, if ever you have a problem of that sort, the first person you must tell is me, my child, and then Andreya left the living room and silently went down the stairs after her mother, like a little dog following its mother, she would trail her mother for a while, then she'd leave her to go and meet Yavora and the others, at least I'll see Yavora, she thought and the very thought of it was enough to cheer her up already, but for the time being she would follow her mother because it was still early for Yavora, she would trace her mother's footsteps along the empty streets, she would endure the intense pain in her chest, she would feel

overwhelmed with sorrow at the sight of her mother's frail figure walking around the empty streets as if she were walking in space—lost, small, miserable, with somber eyes, with a listless and cheerless gait, dragging her life behind her like a rag, tramping on the shreds of her daughter's soul, lost in the dusty streets of the summer, in the declining light of Sofia, in the cafés where in an hour everyone would be watching the blue screen of the television, and the exclamations, the shouts for goals and misses, the summer, Andreyas joyless, hopeless summer, the joy killed, Andreyas broken heart, her sick mother who was moving ahead of her like a child, her dejected father who was devotedly trying to bring her up, who was concerned about her grades, who tried to find tutors for her, followed her progress in English, French, Bulgarian and mathematics, regularly attended parents' meetings, bought her sanitary napkins, backpacks, running shoes, necklaces.

Were you ever happy mama, she had once asked Christina who had sincerely laughed, and her eyes had even lit up with a playful glint—yes, when I was a child—I liked to collect lady-bugs in a match box—I liked to bury myself in the greenery of bushes—there's a different stillness there—the stillness of bushes—you can hear all kinds of noises, the buzzing of flies and bees, the flit of a beetle, the flutter of a sparrow in the leaves—I was very short and I stood with my face lifted towards the sky—the green and the blue of the sky blended and I would see a lady-bug, I would pick it up and put it on my finger, it would leave behind a kind of yellowish liquid that smelled of earth, grass, forest and then I would carefully put the lady-bug in the match box and, yes, then I was happy.

Do you love me, mama.

I don't know whether it's love, Andreyas. When you have no desire to do anything for your child. When the only important thing in the world is your own misery.

But did you love papa?

No, of course not.

Then why did you marry him?

Everybody was getting married. And I had to do the same thing.

And weren't you ever happy with him?

And after thinking about it for a long while: No, I don't think so, I think I was only happy in the bushes, only when I collected lady-bugs.

Andreya and Christina keep silent. They stare into each other's eyes. They feel their attachment, their dependence on each other. Each one of them has to do something for the other. Christina needs to look after Andreya or at least to tell her that she loves her. Even a cuddle would do. Even lightly touching her arm. Andreya has been skinned alive. She doesn't take her eyes off her mother. She waits for the slightest sign. Christina averts her eyes, looks away from her. You can't expect anything from me. I don't exist. I was born into this world without existing. I'm no mother to you. I'm nothing to you. I'm just a wreck. Go and look for a mother. Get Pavel to find you one. One of the many mistresses of his who hang around here.

He only has one.

Is that so? Ina? She's very nice. She can be your mother.

You have no right to say that, mama.

I don't owe anybody anything. I'm entitled to everything. I'm entitled to my pain and my illness.

Mama, everything hurts. Everything. It's like I'm carrying a huge weight. I think that, like you, I won't be able to live either.

And what's the reason for that?

You. You're a wound inside me. I love you so terribly much. I don't want another mother.

I see. That means I'm the guilty one.

I didn't say that you ... You can get over it, mama. Please get over it for my sake. Kick Ina out. Start living with papa again. Start smiling. Going out. Start working again. Stop going out alone at night. Do it for me, mama.

And then Pavel would enter—with his tall athletic figure, his confident gait, a man in the prime of his life, strong and healthy, he'd come to his family—to his crazy wife and his miserable daughter, he'd enter into his house where time had stopped, a house of cobwebs and sadness, a house of darkness, he would sit next to them, exhausted, strong and devoted, unloved and guilty, dissatisfied, he would sit next to his ruined life, next to his hopeless love, Andreya would notice how his beard was beginning to turn

white, how his hair was thinning, how the wrinkle between his eyes was getting deeper and deeper, she would notice with amazement how all of this was making him more and more handsome, he was endowed with a magnetic charm, an olive complexion, with almost coal-like eyes that would undress women in an instant, stir their passions, drive them wild, desire them, roam over their breasts like a red-hot iron, send them into a frenzy, Andreyka loved to bury her face in Pavel's beard, she loved his smell, she loved the coarse thick hairs of his beard, she loved her father with all her girlish, unbalanced, barely nascent sensuality, but she only half-loved him, all her life she would only half-love him, because he too was unable to help her mother, who could help her mother, who could get around her fundamental loneliness, the darkness and silence around her, as though Christina dwelled in the phantasmagorical depths of the ocean, rather than on dry land, as though she were part of some subterranean world of darkness, water and air, but not part of the light and the sky, she wasn't a part of the space on this earth.

I killed my father, Christina whispered one afternoon as she stood in the light of her bedroom, enfeebled, livid, motionless, she wasn't sure whether the room was full of people, whether there was someone near her, whether Pavel was in the bathroom, having a bath, whether Andreyka was studying for her maths test, Christina—immobile, transpierced by the light of the waning day, transpierced by the memory of her father, transpierced by her guilt, by her life, enclosed in her medication-induced state, she suddenly put her face in her hands, she wasn't speaking to anyone, except perhaps to God, but in that moment he wasn't in the room, her daughter, Andreyka, was in the room, she was rummaging in the mess of the wardrobe, trying to find her tee shirt, sorry, mama, I didn't hear you, I killed him, Christina repeated in a very strange tone of voice, when I was five years old, that's when it all started, before I killed him there were lady-bugs and the blue, and the green, after that there weren't any colors any more, I killed the greatest contemporary composer, my father, I killed him, because he left us, my mother and me, because he abandoned us, because he fell for that woman, because that woman had his child, Katalina, that Katalina must then be my half-sister, that Katalina, with the wide almond-shaped eyes, with the body of a panther, the scent of a female, whom my father was crazy about, that Katalina, the daughter of the whore, the whore in black, who made everybody swoon, my father included, the greatest composer who worshipped the whore

in black and forgot about me and about my mother, he forgot about us, as though we had never existed, he threw us out of the house we lived in, so that Katalina and the whore could move in and take our place, we would bump into each other on the streets and he would feel uncomfortable, barely managing to say how are you, how are things with you, and my mother would scream, at night she'd scream and writhe and rip her night-gown, and rip her sheets, and tear newspapers and scream, at night my mother would collect newspapers and set about shredding them, because there was nothing else to tear except for the rugs and she'd cut them with the Turkish knife that my father had brought me from Turkey, mama, my dear sweet mama, what's happening, Andreyka had dropped to her knees in front of her, mama, you're delirious, Andreyka had said to her, and Christina looked at her with her Christ-like eyes, with the purest part of her soul, with the clearest look in her eyes, I'm telling you the truth, but Christina didn't know who she was speaking to, to the daylight or to the close of day, or to the mountain that you could see from their window, to the lilac bush and its indescribable perfume, while Pavel was indeed in the bathroom having a bath, your father's been in the bathroom for an awful long time, said Christina, as though she were really worried about the water they could hear flowing, the water that was becoming more expensive, the water on the planet must be conserved, said Christina to Andreyka who had crept to her side, the planet is running out of water and it has to be conserved, and yet your father always spends such a long time bathing and she smiled a sad, heart-rending smile, like a person who has been sentenced to death, what water, mama, Andreyka murmured, confused, what water indeed, darling, what water indeed! And what happened later, Andreyka managed to utter, after your mother, that is my grandmother, whom I don't know, just like my grandfather whom I've never met, cut the carpets with the knife from Turkey, then the starvation began, said Christina, as though she wanted to tell a very titillating story, we were hungry and all we had was bread and when there was cheese, we'd devour it and in big chunks too, I'd eat a brick of cheese with bread, Christina continued intriguingly, I can't believe it, said Andreyka, you never eat cheese and Christina burst into laughter, I haven't eaten cheese since then, darling, since then, and one day my father, the great composer, whom I'd only see in the newspapers, came to see us one morning and mama had spent a long time bathing and a long time putting on her makeup and a long time doing her hair, and she

had spent all night long with ivy leaves on her face, a mask, a mask for beautiful skin and when I saw her in the morning, I couldn't believe my eyes, mama, your grandmother, whom you don't even know, looked like a ghost, like a dead person, all she lacked was the coffin and the flowers, she looked so frightful, so cold, that I felt the urge to open the windows, although it was winter outside and my father, the great composer, whom I had not seen for a long time now and that you can't remember at all, because he died immediately after that, appeared at the door, elegant and fresh, full of life, radiant, tall, olive-skinned, handsome, like a character in a story-book, by the way your father looks a lot like him, that's why I married him, his only advantage was that he looked so terribly much like my father, the great composer with his shitty music that he stole from everyone, he shamelessly and brazenly stole the music of the other great composers, there's nothing original in his music, Andrey, there's only communism, only flattery for the bigwigs, only fawning, only theft, if ever you happen to hear your grandfather's music, you should know that no part of it is his, that it's a mongrel breed of music, just like your grandfather himself—a mongrel who wasn't even worthy of my killing, Andrey stood at her feet feeling faint, she was looking down at the ground, studying the patterns in the carpet, praying that her father would come out of the bathroom as soon as possible, that he'd come and join them, because then Christina would stop talking once and for all, she'd fall silent like her mother had when opening the door to Andrey's grandfather, on that sunny winter morning when he had rung their doorbell for the first and only time since he had thrown them out of the house. Then he rang the doorbell for the first and only time since he had thrown us out of the house, Christina continued aloud, as though she guessed her daughter's thoughts, and I assure you, he was more handsome than in the newspapers, than on TV, than any great American actor, he was so smashingly elegant and sure of himself, so well-fed, I remember thinking then that he must have had a lot to eat and all kinds of things too, because you can't look so handsome, so olive-skinned, so tall, if all you eat is bread and cheese, he rang the doorbell and mama opened the door and he presented her with a flower, probably a rose, but I don't remember and she asked him what this rose was for and what he wanted and he said: I want to see Christina.

And me, mama asked him, don't you want to see me, no he replied and I felt so sad, because mama had spent the whole night with the ivy leaves on her face, the whole night, and she'd put on some makeup and she'd sprayed herself with her unbelievable perfume and everything stank of that perfume and you couldn't stay in the room and maybe that's why I wanted to open the window, and the dishes in the sink were always unwashed and I was sure I had seen a rat in the kitchen that climbed over the dirty dishes in the sink at night and gnawed on the few crumbs of bread and cheese left on them. So you could smell the rat, the unwashed dishes, the dirty sheets, the neglected house and the perfume—a heavy, nauseating, cheap, suffocating perfume, that emanated from mama, so that even the rat in the kitchen had probably fled then, as I didn't see it any more, neither did I see my father ever again as a matter of fact, the big, dark-skinned, elegant composer, who abandoned us, to go after that whore, that bitch that everybody fawned over, the whore in black who bore him the almond-eyed Katalina, Katalina with the voluptuous hips and fine waist, with the big tits, all of which she inherited from her mother, with her bitch's predisposition, also acquired from her mother, to piss on her territory, to not let anybody in, the olive-skinned, elegant and overfed man had gone crazy over Katalina and her mother, over the whore in black and her illegitimate daughter, because mama didn't give him a divorce and never would, I'd rather die, she'd say, than give that bastard a divorce, that skunk, that coward who destroyed my life and she was constantly haunting the courts and arguing with lawyers and talking on the phone with her girlfriends and explaining even to people she happened to meet on the street what a bastard the great composer really was, what scum, what trash, what a good-for-nothing, what a pig, what an impotent, what a philistine, what a fart, what a low-life, what a disgusting, insufferable individual, what a music robber, what a bum, what a doormat, what a sycophant her husband was, who, for a few years already, had been living with the whore in black and the illegitimate Katalina who was my half-sister. It was a Sunday morning in January, Christina went on, when he rang the doorbell, and Andrey was shattered by her mother's tongue-lashing, by her mother's unusual gaiety and talkativeness, she was listening to the water flowing in the bathroom, she knew that her father was filling the bath to the top, that he'd stay in the bath-tub for a least an hour, he'll never come out to save me, Andrey was thinking, it won't even occur to papa now

to come out of the bath to save me and the doorbell rang, Christina continued with that masochism that compelled her to tell the story, my father, your grandfather that you only ever heard about from the newspapers, magazines and celebrations, because since then his birthdays and the day of his death have always been commemorated, as you know, concerts are organized in his memory, monuments to him are unveiled in the towns around the country, you know that, don't you? I know, Andreyka replied feeling faint, I know and she would have liked to die that very instant, so that she wouldn't hear her mother's so unexpectedly animated voice anymore, so that she wouldn't hear the unusually logical and coherent story that was about to be told, so that she wouldn't hear, know, remember, so that she wouldn't be alive, to die at the feet of her mother, Christ's namesake, at the feet of this crazy Madonna with huge blue eyes, a face bursting with sorrow and wrinkles of disappointment all over her frail, tiny body that looked like a completely dried-out raisin. Then he rang the doorbell on the sunny January morning, for the first and last time, like I told you, since he had thrown us out, he was wearing black leather gloves and against their background the flower, most probably a rose, was sparkling, the rose was sparkling as if it were made of crystal, as if it were transparent, really, I tell you, it was an unusually bright flower against the background of the black leather gloves, against the background of the black felt hat, against the background of that warm, elegant, most likely English-made overcoat and he offered my mother that flower, which was probably a rose, just as I mentioned a moment ago, and he said: I want to see Christina. And mama, your grandmother, whom you don't know, threw the flower onto the floor and started to stamp on it and started to scream, enraged by his elegant appearance, by his splendid dark tan, by his overcoat, by his black gloves, by his self-assured stance as a great composer who toured the world with Katalina and the whore, because he took them everywhere with him, the thought of being without them even for a few days was unbearable to him, at least that's how he explained it to the musicians of the philharmonic, whose wives relayed his words to my mother, mama with her face that was waxen and taut like an ancient Greek mask, with her old-fashioned curls and bleached hair, with her perfume that had made the rat flee from our kitchen, with her ridiculous summer suit on that wintry January morning, because this ash rose, linen suit was her only presentable one, as she put it, her only presentable garment, poor mama, so

brutally wounded by the whore in black, by her almond-eyed illegitimate daughter, driven mad by the bitches who took possession of her husband, driven mad by his complete detachment, by his fame, by his wealth and inaccessibility, by his smooth glossy olive skin and his black gloves, by his English overcoat which almost certainly cost a lot more than our annual coal bill which we barely managed to afford, poor mama started screaming and trampling the flower with her feet. This scene was predictable, I knew it well before winter came, before that sunny January morning when he rang the doorbell. The scene took place in the entrance-hall. I was in the only room with a stove. He walked past mama and entered into the room.

Hello, Christina.

Good morning, papa.

Silence.

Do you mind if I sit somewhere.

No, papa.

And he sat on one of the two wooden chairs that mama and I sat on to eat.

It became unusually quiet and sunny. Mama was standing behind the door, eavesdropping.

He took off his gloves. He left them on the wooden table with the oily spots and covered with crumbs. Then he took off his hat and also put it on the table.

I wanted to ask you, he said and suddenly stopped.

And an even longer silence followed.

The room filled with that light from the days of the lady-bugs.

He was examining me with his ebony eyes, with his thick black hair that came down around his forehead, handsome, unearthly, warm, tender, dark-skinned and happy.

I couldn't stand the silence any more, I couldn't stand the look in his eyes as he examined the room, he'd doubtless already noticed every single improper thing, the smells, the stains, the crumbs, the torn curtain, the lacerated carpet, the bit of dirty sheet that stuck out from underneath the blanket on the bed and I threw myself on him and started to kiss him, papa, papa, my dearest papa, love me, take me with you, take me away, save me, don't leave me alone, please, papa, take me! And I clung to his cheeks and stroked his hair and kissed his eyes and I cried like no child should ever cry, do you

hear me, Andreyka? Are you listening to me or are you crying? Are you crying too, my child, like no child should ever cry? Pavel had obviously filled his bath because the noise from the running water had died down. He was probably leafing through the thick weekly magazine, Andreyka even had the impression that she could hear the turning of pages. He grabbed me by the shoulders, Christina continued in the paroxysm of her hideous confession, and pushed me away from him. He was seized with panic. His eyes were filled with horror. You kiss like an odalisque, he finally said. And please sit on the chair across from me. And he sat me on the chair facing him. Sit properly, he said, properly, and he pushed my chair away from his. There we are. I sat properly and I leaned back on the chair in order to do exactly as I was told, so that he would like me, and to show that I was obedient and my legs were dangling. Now everything is in order, isn't it, he asked. Yes, I replied, everything is in order, although I wanted to ask what an odalisque was and whether he would take an odalisque with him, but I didn't dare. Something important was about to happen and there was no point in bothering with mere words. Good, he said once again, good, good, good. Of course, he was calming himself down, not me. Tomorrow I'm leaving for London and somehow, in that moment, the January sun seemed to perch on our window and lit up his eyes – enormous, black, preoccupied with the panic he had just experienced.

Will you take me with you to London, I asked.

No, Christina, you know that it's impossible.

But when you get back from London, will you take me?

Your mother won't let you go.

I'll run away from her, I replied.

She'll find you and she'll take you away again.

So you don't want me?

That's not true, Christina, you're my child.

Then you don't love me enough?

I love you enough, Christina, it's just that there are things you can't understand.

If you explain them to me, I'll understand them, I promise.

No, I can't explain them to you.

So you don't love me? Because you don't love mama, you don't love me either?

Christina, I forbid you to ask such questions!
So what questions can I ask you?
At the moment, I'm the one asking the questions. When you grow up ...
When I grow up, it'll be too late, papa. Then I won't be asking you any
questions, and you won't be alive to answer me.
How do you know I won't be alive?
You won't return from London.
Why?
Because you'll die there.
Is that so, he laughed out nervously. And why will I die?
Because you don't love me, papa.
It's not true.
Then take me with you to London and for good.
You're just as brazen and insolent as your mother. You're as alike as two peas in
a pod! Did she prompt you to talk to me like that?
No, papa.
You can't talk to anyone like that, especially not to your own father!
Yes, papa.
Do you know how hard it is for me?
Yes, papa.
How do you know!
I don't know how I know, papa.
Christina.
Yes, papa.
What do you want me to bring you from London.
Nothing, papa.
Presents. What presents do you want from London.
I just want you to die there, papa.
And he looked at me. I don't know how to describe it to you, Andreyka. He just
looked at me. It was very sunny and very quiet. Everything stopped. It was just a few
seconds, no more. He understood that he would die. And I understood. And mama, who

was eavesdropping behind the door, understood it. We all understood. But nothing could be done about it now. Neither he nor I could do anything about it. Then I felt the pulse of fate, Andrey, do you know what fate is?

No I don't, mama.

Fate is ... something that happens within a few seconds, no more. You can't turn these few seconds back. Like arrhythmia. Like a sudden interruption. Do you know what arrhythmia is?

No, mama.

To wish for your father's death.

I would never wish for my father's death.

You, no. You never would. You aren't a patricide. But I am.

Nothing that you're telling me is true, mama.

Yes, it's true.

You want to find a justification, a reason. You're making it up. I don't believe in a single word of your story.

A few days later, one morning, Christina continued, that was just as cold and sunny, the phone started to ring, I hid under the table because I knew what they would announce. An icy voice from the Ministry announced to the official spouse of my father that he had had a heart attack during his tour in London. The doctors had made every possible effort to save him. He died on the way to hospital, in the ambulance. A young lady was with him, my mother was undoubtedly aware, together with her little girl. The daughter's name was Katalina. They hoped that my mother was aware of it. They were sorry for the loss of such a great European composer. They regretted that they had to tell her all of this. Still, they hoped that she was aware of it. Respects could be paid to his mortal remains at the central military club on Wednesday from ten in the morning to twelve noon. The Chairman of the State Council and many members of the Politburo were expected to be there. The chairman of the Union of Composers, as well as his close colleagues and friends, were to make a funeral eulogy. They wanted to know whether my mother and I would be among the official mourners? They didn't want any disturbances to violate his memory. The whole occasion needed to be dignified, with the necessary respect for a musician of such caliber. What did my mother think? Would she

attend as his lawful spouse among the official mourners? My mother hung up the phone without answering a single question. She sat before me and it became quiet again, very quiet and sunny, just as before papa's departure. Mama stared at me for a long time, then she went into the kitchen to make some soup. Then the two of us had the soup for lunch on that wooden table with the oily spots and the two chairs. Then I prepared my school bag. When she was seeing me off, mama said: for tonight, I don't know what to cook for tonight. I said: don't cook anything, we'll have soup again for dinner. She said: alright, do you have any tests today? I replied: yes, for sure, in geometry.

When I returned, I found her hanged in the room with the two chairs and the table, the only room that had a stove. She was hanging from the beam on the ceiling by the belt of her pink dressing gown. Her dressing gown, just like the table, was covered with oily stains. There was a puddle beneath her. It smelled of urine. Her body was swinging slowly from side to side, probably from the draft that I had caused when opening the outside and then the inside door. I closed the door and sat in the living room that only had an electric heater which we only allowed ourselves to use on holidays. I turned the electric heater on. I warmed myself up. I realized that I was hungry. I went into the kitchen and saw the soup. I heated it up. I poured myself some into one of the dishes from the sink because I couldn't wash it, because there was no hot water, and it was terribly cold – it was probably in mama's dish that I poured the soup. I ate it up. There was a partly eaten slice of bread, almost completely dry, perhaps it was my mother's. I crumbled it into the soup, it was nice, hot, steam rose from the dish. I got even warmer. I went into the living room again. The electric heater was on. It was warm. I sat on the floor in front of her, I curled myself into a ball, I felt a terrible weariness, they had tested me on the hardest geometry problems, they gave me a 5.² And they told me that on the following day I would be tested in algebra and they gave me problems to solve. That's how Teodora, the whore in black, found me. She had come with the almond-eyed Katalina to take me away. They didn't even ring the doorbell, they just opened the door. I saw them for the first time while I was solving the algebra equations for the following day. Teodora said: your father loved you madly, from now on I'll look after you, just like I'll look after Katalina. From now on you are my child and I am your mother. And she

² A grade of 'very good'. In Bulgarian schools, the best possible grade is 6 or 'excellent'.

hugged me. She hugged me sincerely. And she kneeled before me. And she burst into tears. And Katalina was turning around and examining the things in the living room. And I said – alright, I just have to take my algebra books. And Teodora said – you have to take everything. You won't be coming back to this house any more. Take everything you want to take. And I started to gather my textbooks, my school bag, the compasses, the squares, the quilt, because it was very warm, I said – we have to take the coal too from the basement because it is supposed to last until the end of the winter and she said – alright we'll come and get it tomorrow, I said – and the soup that mama made this morning and I brought the saucepan with the soup into the middle of the living room where I was piling up all of my belongings and said – and mama too, she's in the other room, we have to take her too and Teodora, the whore in black who wasn't dressed in black at all, said: your mother and your father are dead, we can't take them, we have to leave them and the three of us must keep going, and then I replied: I don't want to have another mother, I don't want to keep going with anyone, I don't want us to gather my textbooks, nor my quilt if we can't take mama with us and Teodora said: then you'll have to live in an orphanage and I told her that it was better to live in an orphanage than not to take mama and then Teodora started to make phone calls and a lot of people came and they took mama away. And as a matter of fact Teodora is your beloved grandmother, whom you know, your only grandmother, the woman who looked after me like her own child, my mother, Andreyka, are you listening to me or are you asleep?

I'm asleep, mama, I'm not listening to you.

Teodora isn't your real grandmother, she isn't my real mother, Andreyka, these are important things, why are you sleeping?

I'm not pretending to sleep, mother of mine, my one and only mother, my insane, possessed, certifiable mother, I don't want to listen to your madness, I don't want to know anything about you, I don't want to know about your stories, about my numerous grandmothers, about my famous grandfather, without you, I am nothing, there is no me, I'm nowhere on the face of the earth, you are the link between heaven and me and this earth, don't ever leave me again, mother, don't leave me alone.

Andreyka was crying, she didn't know whether she had really pronounced these words or whether this was a prayer, she was crying at the feet of her mama who was

dried up like a raisin, her frail, blue-eyed mama, who was puffed up from insanity and unhappiness, she was crying at the feet of her mother, who was named after Christ, she was crying because of the suffering imprinted forever on her face, she was crying because her smile was taken away forever by her own mother, she was crying because of her fate, and yet she was only fourteen years old and what was your mother's name, mama, the one who hanged herself, I won't tell you, I don't want you to know, suicides have no names.

And you went to live with Teodora and Katalina?

I was my father's only legal heir and I went to live in his huge, spacious apartment that he'd thrown mama and me out of, so that Teodora and Katalina could come in our place. In fact they had no right to live there.

And you began to live with Teodora and Katalina?

Yes, I began to live with them.

Did you hate them?

Yes. No. I don't know. My daughters, my daughters, Teodora used to say, my two daughters are alike, just like two peas in a pod. But that wasn't true because Katalina was becoming beautiful, graceful and tall like her mother, with voluptuous hips and a narrow waist, she was only twelve years old when she was chosen for the first time to appear in a film and only fourteen years old when everybody who saw her fell in love with her, it was crawling with men who didn't know whether to fall in love with Teodora or with Katalina, I was like their little, ugly servant and I stayed cooped up in my room and never went out with them, because I was ashamed, the two of them looked like panthers side by side, I was ashamed of my shortness, of my bow legs, of my short arms, I had exactly my mother's figure, I'm so happy that you're tall, Andreyka, that you inherited your father's physique, slender and strong, I'm really happy. I think I've told you enough this evening, I can't go on, Andreyka, I shouldn't have done it, forgive me.

Andreyka continued to hear the laughter of the guests—the World Cup football final was going to start any minute now—the well-known voice of the sports commentator, from time to time Ina's laughter; when her father's lover laughed, her gums were bared and her teeth showed, they were kind of long, that was probably why she didn't like Ina, because of these long teeth, Andreyka was afraid that someday Ina

would come down and bite her with her long, sharp teeth, she even told Pavel once, and he burst into laughter, are you really afraid of her? Pavel asked, no, of course not, I'm not afraid of Ina but when she laughs, she could start tearing anyone to pieces with her teeth, no, Andreyka wasn't going to go out tonight trailing her mother, she was going to the garden to meet up with Yavora, with her friends who were surely there already and Andreyka wasn't going to tell anybody, anybody at all, except maybe Yavora, because they all confided in Yavora, they all shared with Yavora, she knew everything about everyone and she never revealed secrets, Yavora took everything upon herself, like a well, Andreyka liked to remember the first time she saw Yavora, she felt the desire to get up and rush to Yavora, as though she had known her for a long time, as though she had dreamed her, expected her, when Yavora appeared in class for the first time, a complete silence fell and Yavora smiled as if she reigned over this silence, she was accustomed to inciting it and commanding it and she slowly walked between the desks, looking at everyone directly in the eyes, smiling, Yavora doesn't look into your eyes, but into your heart, her eyes are pale blue around the pupils, and almost black on the edge of the iris and maybe because of that nobody can take their eyes off Yavora and everybody wanted Yavora to look at them, to fall within the gaze of these eyes, no matter whether they were a student or a teacher, boy or girl, Yavora attracted people like a magnet, being close to Yavora was enlightening, soothing, watching her laugh, looking at her eyes was magic, and she was always laughing, actually she wasn't laughing, she was happy, she was happy about everything and Andreyka wanted to introduce her to her mother, because she was sure of it—Yavora would cure her mother. She had asked her several times, mama, I want to introduce you to Yavora, to my best friend, she's in my room and, from her armchair, her mother would shake her head, annoyed, and fix her gaze on the nightmare of her life, because she loved it, because she took great delight in that nightmare, reliving it over and over again, she loved being killed by it slowly and slowly to be consumed by the sunny January morning when she had killed her father, when she had seen her mother hanging, when Teodora, the whore in black, had become her second mother, when Katalina had grown up and become the most talented and famous actress, with her almond-shaped eyes, already beautiful and famous as a child, although she was her father's bastard, the illegitimate one, the misbegotten child, the mongrel. She wanted to

take revenge on everyone because of Katalina, because it was her due, it was Christina's due to be almond-eyed, to have her father's wide olive-shaped eyes, and to be tall, to have his dark complexion, his tall forehead, she, the legitimate one should have had the beautiful Teodora, known as the whore in black, as her mother, she, the first born should have been the talented and famous one, rather than Katalina the bastard, Katalina the bitch, that's why Christina didn't want to be introduced to Andrey's best friend, because she wanted revenge, she wanted to take revenge on the whole world and herself, that's why she always averted her eyes from her daughter when she begged to introduce her to Yavora, that's why she always impatiently waved her away.

Yavora, Yavora, Yavora.

She need only touch Yavora.

She need only gaze into her eyes.

*

Her hair was long, like the grass all around, straw-coloured ... sunburnt and thick... I got closer to her, Yavora looked up and said: tell me the words you know ... And then she looked down again. She was following the meanderings of an ant on her arm. In the west, the sun was casting its soft, weary light as it set behind the hills ... a long time had passed, I expected her to leave, to go back where she came from ... and then in the stillness she suddenly looked at me and repeated: tell me just a few words whose meaning you know ... her fingers were playing with a blade of grass and the ant was crawling on it to and fro, I was looking at her hands, her age, her youth ... something was stabbing me like a knife, she was sitting right on the ground, at my feet, as though she were washing them ... and once again her voice, persistent and soft: tell me a word then, a single word and tell me what it means ... I picked a word at random: snow ... it was the first thing that sprang to mind ... snow ... something that disappears as soon as you touch it, something that disappears in summer ... I think she laughed ... as if she remembered something ... she said: that's beautiful, we couldn't take our eyes off each other any more... her eyes were blue and unfathomable like the sky above us ... and terrifying ... like the sky ... and it was absolutely quiet all around ... except for the

buzzing of the bees, of the summer ... she, unique on this earth ... in this silence all around, was quite innocently going to take everything upon her shoulders ... and she was waiting, who knows why, for my answer ... you, what are you, who are you ... with that kindness in your eyes ... And I told her: you know, I've always wanted to understand what you're asking me, but I don't know, I don't know anything either ... she had grown pale, she was deathly pale at the meeting place, bent over the rock from pain, her hair falling over her face ... her shoulders shaking as she sobbed ... I could go now ... I had started off, when I turned around and it seemed to me that the last rays of the sun illuminated her alone ... her eyes, her face, her hair ... everything else was slowly being engulfed by darkness ... since then, that's how I always dream of Yavora, that she was talking ... talking ...

What was she saying?

She was talking about dreams, that ...

Go on.

That dreams are ... that if some day she were not around, we were not cry ...

Get a hold of yourself! ... Thank you ... Go on.

Yavora was saying that in fact ... no one abandons the people they love, that it was a human invention.

Excuse me, Andreyka, could you be more precise? What according to Yavora is a human invention?

Unhappiness, pain, what happens to us.

She didn't know what was going to happen.

No, she didn't.

A short while ago, you said she knew.

I beg your pardon.

That dream you just told us about—how exactly do you see Yavora? Was it she who was persuading you to see her in that light?

No. Yavora was ... was ...

Next time you come before us, I would ask you to take tranquillizers ahead of time. We can't work like this. You promised me.

Yes, I'll really try to talk ...

I'd be most grateful. Can you explain in a nutshell exactly what Yavora used to tell you?

That we must remember everything, that we'd remember it one way or the other...

What are you to remember?

I don't know ...

The more you tell us, the better it will be for all of you. We were talking about the dreams. What was Yavora saying about dreams?

That they're signs, that ...

Yes? ...

That she'll send us signs, that ...

I implore you to get a hold of yourself ... Please, don't start crying again ... Thank you ... At the psychologist's request, you're free to go for today.

LIYA

It's a disgrace! This country is an absolute disgrace! A fresh perversion—made in Bulgaria! A complete depravity of the mind! Yet another humiliation of artists in Bulgaria! Do you understand what that means! Do you understand what they want to force me to do! Intellectual, artist, man of letters—these are nothing but dirty words in Bulgaria! And because some of us still manage to preserve our integrity and not wade up to our necks in excrement, well, they've found another way to deal with us: we'll carve them with a fine chisel, they think, they're made of thin ice, the better to get at them perfidiously, in depth and from behind! You bastards! You bastards! You bloody bastards! You've destroyed us! You want to wipe us out completely, is that it!? You want to crush us?

Kerana had created a draft, so all the windows and the balcony door were open, seeing as they lived on the top floor and during the summer the apartment got hot and became unlivable, but somehow they survived; inside the temperature would reach 50 degrees because there was no insulation in the roof and as a result of the heat Yordan often had fits like these, so that both Kerana and Liya as well as the neighbors were used to them, especially as their neighbors also had similar fits in the heat of summer, except that they quarreled and fought among each other, whereas in principle Yordan and Kerana rarely quarreled, first of all because of Liya, because in Kerana's mind it was absolutely inadmissible for Liya to witness any altercations and it was also by habit, because as a rule they didn't quarrel, they were used to agreeing or reaching an agreement about everything, and if they couldn't, they would go out for a walk and stay silent, but since both of them liked to talk and share their thoughts, the silence didn't last more than one evening. Liya always figured out when her mother and her father were on bad terms and when they were on the best of terms, when her father was in love with one of his students, when he was in low spirits because of his writing or depressed by politics and the international situation, Liya didn't go by their words or their behavior but somehow, with a child's internal antennae, she felt her parents' mood, the degree of anxiety, of equanimity and of happiness. Liya was a strikingly beautiful creature, she provoked the same reactions everywhere, they would caress her, pinch her, stroke her hair, lift her chin up, examine her, and the eyelashes! what unusually long eyelashes she

has—as if they’ve been drawn! and her eyes! and her hair! she looks like an icon and a fire-dancer at the same time, “Christianity and paganism merge in your daughter”, as some of his father’s female colleagues put it, and who then does she take after? You aren’t exactly handsome and we won’t even mention your wife! they’d hiss cattily and they’d start staring at Liya again, they’d turn her around, look her over, touch her, as if she were for sale. And some of the older women, her grandmothers’ friends, would start to wail their incantations, pretending to spit, and in fact sometimes they sprayed Liya’s face with spit: “pfu, pfu, pfu, ugly little girl! What an ugly little girl! see how the hens have soiled her! pfu, pfu, pfu, the hens’ve soiled her!” With these magic spells and the spitting, the old women and their friends defended Liya from the evil forces that were also undoubtedly attracted by her beauty because, at school, it wasn’t unusual for scuffles to flare up between Liya’s protectors and her enemies, who included not only her classmates but children from the other classes, including from higher and lower grades, so that Liya swept everyone up into the battle, so to speak, and quite often there would be cracked skulls, broken arms or legs, pulled hair, upturned handbags, stolen manuals, tearful eyes and thumb-tacks on the seats and all manner of other goings on. As for Liya, she was extremely fond of her looks and spent hours in front of the mirror to study the medley of hues in her eyes, the color of her hair, various hair-styles, different smiles, different looks to suit all manner of flirtation. She especially liked what she called her haughty look, she would straighten her whole body and crane her neck, raise her chin, half-close her eyes, hardly able to see because of her thick eyelashes, she would arch her head back and give the eye to the poor imaginary wretch who was trying to persuade her to let him walk her home after school; her stare was intended to make his blood run cold and to nail him to the spot but, more often than not, the poor wretch was just as insolent and he merely feasted his eyes on Liya who was walking ahead and turning back to look at him, the usual result of which was for her to bump into a column or into a pupil or a teacher who was coming towards her—Liya would be the first to burst out laughing and then the others would join in. While standing in front of the mirror, Liya would break into laughter after each rehearsal of a look and most of all she liked to look at herself laughing, as that’s when she was really at her prettiest, not when she smiled self-consciously but rather when even she found herself funny and the more she looked at

herself in the mirror, the more she amused herself and laughed and was pleased with herself. She had an exquisite, slim, shapely body, as taut as a violin string that looked as if at any moment it could break, her movements and her straight posture were so beautiful and natural that everyone around her would start to feel clumsy, coarse and awkward, she unwittingly created another order and another harmony. She was tacitly acknowledged as the class beauty and favorite before Yavora's appearance, then everyone started to argue as to which of the two was more beautiful and they split into two groups, and since this was silly, it lasted precisely one recess and at the following one someone said that if Yavora were a child, she would be like Liya and that when Liya grew up, she'd become like Yavora and this Solomon-like solution put an end to the silent competition between the two teams, about which, however, the two interested parties were blissfully unaware. So Liya was accustomed to her beauty and she enjoyed it or rather she was amused by it without ascribing any special significance to it, because there was something else, something that was of the utmost importance to her, it was dancing and ballet that occupied all of her attention, because more than anything else in the world, she loved to dance, when I dance, I become someone else, there's something inside of me, she'd say to her mother and father who were trying to make sense of it all and looking for an explanation for this excessive dancing, there's something inside of me, when I'm standing straight, right here, in the solar plexus, a kind of silence that makes me see the music in terms of movement, I don't know whether you understand me, the link between the silence right here, above my solar plexus, and the music spurs me on to move and invent all of these movements, is it clearer now? Apart from that, I feel some light, when I dance there's light inside of me, I'm absolutely certain of it, the only way for me to go through life is to dance it, mama, papa, do you hear me?

But remember two years ago they flunked you when you took the exams at the school of choreography, you can't go to private ballet lessons forever, that way you won't become a real ballerina but, at best, a dancer in a bar.

Mama, papa, I'll become a real ballerina, not a dancer in a bar, I'll be famous and you'll be proud of me.

You can't, child, the teachers said that your bones are too big, that you don't have the necessary qualities ...

Mama, papa, the teachers are idiots, don't believe them ...

The only way for you to study ballet professionally is at the School of Contemporary Dance in Paris, at least that's what those who stood up for you said, those who insisted that you be admitted to the school, because there were indeed some teachers who pressed for you to enter the school, but the others, those who wanted to flunk you were more numerous so they prevailed, and now you have to forget dancing, ballet, the light and you have to devote yourself to languages and literature ...

And the School of Contemporary Dance in Paris?

But you need money to go there, lots of money, Liya, and I don't know where we'd find it.

and they'd been having this conversation for two years, and Liya would dance all day and exercise in her room, warm-ups, first position, second position, refusing to accept the horrible truth, that she did not have access to the schools, to the teachers, mama, papa, it's when I dance that I'm most alive

but that's what you heard your father say, darling, that isn't your own idea and you're still too young to understand these things and her mother would always put her arms around her and start to caress her face, always silent and sad, at such moments Kerana would experience a troubled feeling that she never expressed, something very deep down inside that struck at the core of her motherly love, for she had already calculated a thousand times the minimum amount of money they would need for the School of Contemporary Dance in Paris and the sum was never less than twenty thousand Euros, even if Liya were to win a scholarship; they had nothing to sell, neither property nor jewelry, and there was no way they could earn the amount of money needed and Kerana's heart ached unbearably and she didn't want to show it, she wanted to hide it and she'd hold her daughter in her arms and start to caress her hair, because somewhere deep inside, her motherly instinct knew: Liya would become a famous ballerina.

But that dancing is starting to take up all of your time! her father tried to reason with her, he couldn't understand how anyone could prefer to hop around and flit here and there instead of writing poetry and novels, there was no way in the world that her father, Yordan, could understand people who weren't occupied with novels and poetry, for him, people who weren't devoted to literature were only half human, or not human at all. I

don't get it, Yordan often said to his colleagues, his friends or just to Kerana and Liya, and I'll probably never understand what someone who doesn't write does with himself, how does he comprehend the world? when is he happy? by what means does he transform life or imagine it? just by observing? absurd! for a writer, life and writing are interlinked, writing is a way of living more fully, more profoundly, more clearly, more internally, to put it simply, of living more, because when a writer writes, he lives even more intensely than in real life! And her father's colleagues would nod in agreement with what, to them, was a well-known truth about the link between life and writing, the link between the blind and the white cane; okay, let's take a normal businessman who works all day, who already has a legitimate business and goes around clean-shaven, respectable, in a suit, okay, he makes money and that's his goal, and then what? the time for his private life comes afterwards, after work, right, what does he do? how does he live his private life? by going to tennis, by taking care of his wife, his children and his mistresses, by climbing mountains? according to her father, an artist—and especially a writer—was a prophet and a holy man, a man of God, endowed by the Lord with a talent for which he is responsible and that he must tend to tirelessly, he didn't understand his colleagues who squandered their talent, especially by drinking it away, or sold it to rulers, or mortgaged it for a political cause, that is for some stupidity, he felt contempt for those who obviously couldn't bring themselves to believe in the importance of that gift, which only gained meaning in the service of others; Yordan encouraged his young colleagues, he stimulated them, nurtured them and looked after them with the conviction that he was looking after his brother prophets, that he was creating and fostering that very community on which the future of the world depended. He was considered by both readers and critics as the most talented young writer, his books of short stories and his novels were already being translated into many languages, his name was on everybody's lips, he was invited to sit on selection committees, to give his opinions about burning issues on television, the radio, in the newspapers, everybody wanted to meet him, to have him autograph their copy of his book, they hoped he would have discussions with them, join their circle of friends, come to their parties, to their pub, his friends were slipping away like an avalanche, while his acquaintances were growing in number and his enemies were shooting their poisoned arrows at him in the dark with increasing accuracy, hitting their

mark and drawing blood, because he didn't think there was any sense in quarrels, in confrontation, in speaking evil of others, he knew deep inside himself that they weren't as talented as he was and he felt sorry for them, he told himself that he wouldn't know what he would do if he were in their shoes and, from the bottom of his heart, he forgave them and didn't bear a grudge. He couldn't get used to the social events he was invited to more and more often, the cocktails and official soirées that he was embarrassed to attend, he wasn't able to talk and hold a friendly conversation with everyone, to talk just for the sake of talking, on the contrary, he talked scarcely, in rather short sentences, with long pauses, laconic answers, embarrassment made his interlocutors break into a sweat, they felt like idle chatterboxes, they didn't understand what he had in mind, yet he was intimating that one should only talk about important things, great, noble things, that when two people meet it is a grand event, because every individual can reveal to others the mysteries and wonders of the universe and of his soul, which amounts to the same thing if we refer to the wise men of antiquity. Yordan was always ready to listen and keep on listening, he was the best listener, everyone came to him to recount their whole life story, their loves, to confide, to ask for advice, because whatever they shared with him could be converted into a novel or a story, while they could become the heroes of his stories and novels and thus be transformed into something unique, deep and real, because most of the people were unaware of their own uniqueness and literature was the only thing that could impress it upon them. Every so often, his eyes reddened from the cigarette smoke and the quantities of coffee he drank and at such times he seemed other-worldly and vulnerable and he attracted people's attention even more because, in actual fact, isn't that precisely what a real writer is supposed to be like—other-worldly and vulnerable, how else would he be able to grasp mysteries, then relate them and make them accessible to mere mortals? Yordan meticulously prepared his lectures on the classics of Bulgarian literature, he revered them, nothing could be more important for a Bulgarian than Sofronii Vrachanski, Zakhari Stoyanov and Vazov, he quoted whole passages from the "The Epic of the Forgotten", reciting it so rhythmically and authentically that they'd beg him to read it again and again, as though they were discovering for the first time the poetry and the music of this verse, the heroism, the drama and the other clichés of literary theory, they'd listen, dazzled, to their teacher's brilliant delivery, no actor could achieve

his insight and mastery, his lectures turned into performances with a packed audience, there were people standing, enraptured, enthralled with the words; inspired, he revealed to them the magic of words, because they would save the world, they were the intoxicating source of a deeper and secret life. Yordan had the effect of a miraculous boost on his students, they came out of each of his lectures as better people, less stupid, ennobled because, with great joy, he infected them with his sense of mission, with a sense of the greatness and nobility of spirit that could be discovered everywhere and at every minute of the day, literature gave a name and a form to something that was invisible to the naked eye, it was through words that the invisible became visible and that was the purpose of words, such was the awe-inspiring significance of creators and of art.

He, Kerana and Liya lived in a very small place—one bedroom, a living room and a kitchen, the bedroom was Liya's, as for Kerana and Yordan, they would unfold the sofa in the living-room in order to sleep, and the only place left to write was the kitchen which was extremely inconvenient, because you couldn't set up the computer there, at best you could carry the typewriter over but it made such a racket that it would prevent Kerana from sleeping, so Yordan wrote by hand with a ball-point pen. I'm surprised it hasn't occurred to anyone to offer me a goose quill, he'd say jokingly, though he wasn't really in a mood to laugh, because everything had to be ready, all editing, corrections and rewrites done, before he could copy the text onto the computer, which was then specially installed in the kitchen and for no more than a few days.

Now, Liya's father was pacing to and fro between the kitchen and the living-room, while Liya and Kerana were huddling on the balcony and pretending that they couldn't hear, that they didn't know, that they weren't participating, because two hours ago Yordan had received a telephone call to notify him that as of this year a big literary prize was being established, that the selection committee had nominated him as its first winner and they were calling to inform him and to ask him—he didn't have anything against receiving it did he?

And who is establishing this prize? Yordan asked innocently.

"Intrafax," replied the member of the selection committee.

Silence followed.

Hello? asked the member of the selection committee, do you hear me, Yordan?

Yes, I hear you, replied Yordan.

So why don't you answer, asked the member of the selection committee.

Because ... Yordan replied but he was interrupted.

Who else would be able to give that kind of money for literature, you fool!

How much money is it? asked Yordan.

Twenty thousand Euros, replied the member of the selection committee.

This time the silence was even longer and deeper.

Hello, the member spoke up again, what's happening, aren't you pleased?

Euros, huh? Yordan asked in a hollow voice.

Yes. Euros. That is forty thousand leva.

Forty thousand leva? repeated Yordan even more quietly, as though he didn't know the exchange rate of the Euro.

What's the matter, Yordan, are you alright, is Kerana with you, hello! hello! shouted the member of the selection committee into the receiver.

And what will they expect from me?

Come on, they won't be asking anything of you, they're just awarding you a prize, they think highly of you, they're reaching out their hand to you.

Why are they holding out their hand to me?

Oh, please, don't be so suspicious! You digest the news and tonight I'll call back to get your confirmation, because they want to make a big splash of it on the media so they want us to be sure that you'll accept the prize. Because heaven forbid you should make up your mind to take a superior stance and publicly refuse the prize, that's why we're calling you in advance. The member of the selection committee hung up and Yordan became aware that his extremities were numb.

"Intrafax" was the largest of the notorious groups in the country; its bosses, who had nicknames like the Beak, the Sniper, the Eagle and such, fired at each other at intersections, their cars were blown apart, the thunder of attacks resounded from their offices, their children were kidnapped, and their mistresses threatened, every last one of them drove a Mercedes with tinted glass, they were escorted everywhere by bodyguards with dark glasses and thick necks, they had houses on the coast of California, islands in the Aegean sea and fat bank accounts in Switzerland, they were bandits who got rich

from trafficking narcotics, human flesh and weapons, they had a prostitution network throughout Europe; they had been the avowed, barefaced operatives of the former State Security cops and the Party had handed them the biggest pieces of the pie and they were brazenly, vulgarly putting the fat pie on display, at the same time as they brazenly exposed their thick necks and stubby fingers covered with gold chains and rings. And these were the people who were awarding him a literary prize! These people had appreciated his work! Why, they didn't even know how to read! And the moment Yordan put down the phone, he burst into laughter—a deep, bubbly, heart-felt laugh. Kerana and Liya joined him and they too started to smile, while he was splitting his sides, spinning like a top around the living-room and laughing his head off, and mother and daughter were waiting expectantly to share in the mirth, the merriment—ostensibly brought on by the latest absurdity in the literary customs or university life, but obviously it was something even funnier because he simply couldn't stop, his laughter would die down just for a second, increasing Kerana and Liya's desperate impatience to find out what was so funny, but alas, he'd think of the telephone incident once again and once more he'd be swept up onto the crest of a giant swell of laughter. Finally he managed to tell them what had happened. Kerana's face froze. Even Liya, who was always moving and stirring about, stood motionless. A strange silence descended. He was looking at them, astounded. What's the matter? he asked, as if nothing had happened. Why are you so quiet?

And you, what do you find so funny about it? asked Kerana, though she wasn't really asking, rather she was stating categorically that she didn't wish to hear the answer.

What do you mean? Yordan asked, bewildered.

I for one don't see anything funny about it, only something to be happy about, Kerana announced with forced gaiety.

What is there to be happy about? Yordan asked in astonishment.

Well, it's so much money ... Kerana said hesitantly ... such a lot of money. We'll send Liya to the School of Contemporary Dance in Paris! ... We'll be able to convert the attic upstairs into an office! So at last you'll have the right conditions in which to write!

It was as if Liya had been struck by lightning. Every one of the unexpected words was magic—contemporary, School, dance, Paris. Their combination, suggesting that they would send her to study in Paris, made her dizzy. She was short of breath. She went into her room. Closed the door. Started to dance—just as she'd always done in her saddest or happiest moments. Or rather, she was endeavoring to translate the trembling of her body into dance. The result, without even trying, was something that she hadn't seen anywhere before and she didn't know whether it could be repeated. She was trembling, dancing, vibrating, she was like a leaf in the wind, the wind and the dance were striving to seize her and sweep her away, but she was resisting, swerving, bending, the wind, the dance and Paris were tossing her around like a ball, spinning her, playing with her, turning her into a doe that raced through the forests, or into a cloud with the shape of a human face, or into a ball of intertwined snakes or a raging bull, or into a fast-flowing river, everything was overflowing with life and rapture and meaning and the dancing that was awaiting her! the dancing that the teachers in Paris would teach her! From now on she would dance forever and give people pleasure, that was her destiny and it was going to be fulfilled now that they were awarding her father so much money!

Yes, Kerana repeated as she slowly sat down on the sofa that served as their bed at night. No doubt about it, it's a huge amount of money ...

What! Yordan yelled out and Liya literally froze in her room; the trembling dance ceased abruptly. She had never heard her parents scream. You think that I'm going to accept their fucking money? You think I'll take it? Is that what you want to tell me, that you think I'll accept the money?

Liya collapsed onto the floor. No one heard her. Like those puppets. Something had broken now and she was just a mound of Liya's parts—a head, arms, legs and the body of Liya, thrown helter-skelter. She wasn't breathing.

Aren't you going to accept it? she heard her mother's voice say and then the silence again which she felt she couldn't bear.

Are you really not going to accept it? Kerana asked again after a while and, completely resigned, she looked down fixedly at the ground.

Yordan looked at her and was just about to answer when suddenly he seemed to remember something and he kept quiet.

A silence fell, the kind of silence through which chance conversations could be heard from the street, someone was inflating the tire of a car, some children were playing footbag³, from time to time a beetle flew over the geraniums on the balcony, from the other end of the street a woman's voice was calling more and more insistently for her child to come home for lunch, Kerana instinctively went out onto the balcony because the space in her home had suddenly contracted and she started to water the flowers in the window-boxes again, even though she had already done so that morning.

The puppet strings tautened again and straightened Liya out, led her from her bedroom, took her through the living room and left her on the balcony next to her mother who was staring at the geraniums like a sleep-walker.

Yordan appeared on the balcony, lit a cigarette and leaned against the door-frame. He looked intently at Kerana whose back was half turned to him and who was pretending that she hadn't noticed him. He looked fixedly at Liya, at her frail and taut body that seemed even more elongated to him now, and at her hair gathered into a pony-tail. Liya had her eyes glued on her father, transfixed.

You decide, he articulated slowly as he looked directly into his wife's eyes.

Decide what, asked Kerana, panicked, and Liya, like a cat, hurriedly slipped away from the balcony that was too small anyway.

You get to decide whether I should take the money or not, Yordan said quietly.

Is that so, was all Kerana managed to utter, as she hadn't expected that at all, such a fateful arrangement hadn't even crossed her mind. She buried her face in the flowers, checking to see whether there were any decaying blossoms or leaves and nervously pulling them out, unable to gauge whether there were any advantages to the situation or not, because on the one hand it was ideal, but on the other hand it was catastrophic, he had found the perfect way to extricate himself from the decision by leaving the choice up to her but, ultimately, she wasn't the one receiving the prize, he was, it was his name and his money they were talking about, and not hers, he didn't have the right to do that, she told herself suddenly, he didn't have the right to dump his dilemma on her and, just as she was about to tell him so, another sudden, heart-warming thought crossed her mind: she was unlikely ever to get a greater expression of love and trust; her husband was

³ A sport using a small round bag that must be kept aloft with the feet.

entrusting her with the deepest part of him, she could sell it or preserve it intact, she held his soul in her hands and that feeling was overwhelming, she started to tremble, just like a short while ago her daughter had trembled alone in her room, she could feel her husband's soul inside her, in her body, it too was trembling, it was fragile and fearful of the impending catastrophe all around, Yordan's soul was fragile and fearful and weighed down by his love for her and for the world, weighed down by responsibilities, sorrows and bursts of enthusiasm, waiting to be decapitated or allowed to live, Lord, what an idiot I've been! What was I going to do! I came close to selling everything for a bowl of lentils, to ruin everything for the bloody Euros, what saved me, who helped me, was it an angel who passed near me in the form of that beetle and raised the shrouds in which we've become entangled, thank you, Lord, thank you, and she turned to her husband and tears were falling from her beautiful eyes, he was still smoking and looking at her and knew that she wouldn't betray him, he was sure of his wife, he knew that she would always stand by him, no matter what happened, she would be there for him and would never betray him, she put her arms around him and whispered: of course you'll turn the prize down and he held her so tightly in his arms that she couldn't breathe, he was pressing her tightly against his chest, I fell in love with your name first, Kerana, with the originality of your name and then with your curly waterfall of hair and then with your strong and flexible body, but first it was your name, Kerana, and then your hair, your breasts, your body, whenever I can't write any more, whenever I can't live any longer, I start to write out your name, Kerana, I write out Yordan, Kerana, Liya, I repeat them in my mind, this music of our names, Kerana, and not only of our names but of all the music between us, Kerana, and not just between us—the music, the words, the tenderness, Kerana, and the sense of God's presence and enlightenment, the feeling that He is watching us, the miracles of our life, Kerana, of our daily life, so many divine voices around us, Kerana, and we don't hear them, we don't see them, it hurts, everything hurts, Kerana, sometimes everything makes me suffer, if I didn't have you, I'd fall apart, Kerana

and from the street you could still hear the shouting of those who were playing footbag and the voice of the mother who was calling her child. Liya was observing their movements from the kitchen, their similar, almost symmetrical movements, her father's

were composed, deep and virile, her mother's—scattered and unsure but parallel to his and synchronized, that has to be made into a dance, thought Liya mechanically and she could see the dance and the dancers and the music, she even saw the beetle that was still flying around them. They stood embracing, crying and kissing as though they had found each other again after a long separation and Liya understood that her father had turned down the prize, that she wouldn't be leaving for Paris, that she wouldn't know, she wouldn't be able to develop her gifts nor to follow the pathway that had been mapped out by her destiny. She wanted to go to them, to fall on her knees before them and say, I beg of you, I implore you, take the money, send me to Paris, it's the most important thing for my life, I'm begging you, don't take it away from me, she wanted to stay on her knees in front of them and to beg them until they agreed to take the money and send her to Paris, it's my last chance to become a ballerina, to dance, because the local school already rejected me, because there's nowhere else for me to study, because in any case I'm already behind and I have so much catching up to do, and I can only do that in Paris, with the kind of teachers we don't have here, with teachers who will look after me and help me along my path, they'll teach me to discover my own movements, modulations and music.

mama, papa, help me, send me there, don't leave me here, life is hard for me here, it's hard for me to live without dancing, mama, papa, help me

but she couldn't pronounce the words, she could dance them but couldn't pronounce them, words were powerless, colorless, weak, she went into her room, undressed and lay down with her head buried in her arms, she would pretend to be sleeping all afternoon but in fact she was crying underneath the sheets, crying and crying for the schools and the teachers in France, mourning for her dancing, for her path, for her movements and the modulations that she would never learn

towards evening, her mother came into her room, worried, what's the matter, are you sick? aren't you feeling well?

no, there's nothing wrong with me, I'm going out now, I have a meeting with Yavora and the others

she was going to quietly close the door of her house, where her mother and father were rapturously preparing to watch the World Football final; she would go down,

dancing on the stairs, stopping at every floor and searching for the movements of a wounded bird that was slowly tumbling to the ground.

*

Give us an answer, how do you dream about Yavora!

Liya, please, you must snap out of this silence!

Speak up! Talk to us! You have to tell us!

You can't keep this silence up!

Open your eyes! Open them, I tell you!

Look at me!

Liya! ... Liya! Please, tell us anything about Yavora, some incident or memory...

For the hundredth time, I'm asking you how you dream about Yavora!

Snap out of it!

She can go! We'll call her in tomorrow. Take her out!