

THIS IS THE WAY IT HAPPENS

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This story considers itself the story of everyone. I do not know if this is true. You will be able to tell.

I myself am certain that all stories are love stories, so I have refrained from giving it that qualification.

It is simply the story of women and men who are mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, loved ones and friends...

or to put it in a nutshell, who are tigers and lions, lemons and oranges.

This is not a funny story, nor a sad story. It is simply a story which takes place somewhere on the border between the world we know and the world we are no longer sure about.

1. Boys and Their Parents

In the beginning, Boris was unable to think about the surrounding world. Things just happened to him and he had no way of avoiding anything.

His parents, for example, meek as they were, looked like a grandpa and a grandma rather than a mother and a father, and that always startled him. His sister was eighteen years older than him and people mistook her for his mother.

Later he devised a way to escape. He tried to abstract himself into uninhabited worlds, where relationships of the family kind were hard to establish.

For the first time he outlined his own perimeter with bees.

Before going to the English language school in Plovdiv, he disposed of much time on his own and had no work to do. At this stage, he made it his job simply to spend time. Afterwards the opposite came about: he learned to stretch time to fit the required job. And to stay in his room, while his sister's family, with which he was supposed to be living, carried on a life of its own.

When he started wearing glasses, his childish face, acknowledged until then as painfully different, acquired seriousness. The glasses somehow set everyone at rest, as if things had finally slipped into place. Wearing glasses had the effect of calming the vague fears the family harbored about Boris. Not that now they knew him better than before. But an introvert boy with glasses was less worrying than an introvert boy without glasses.

Boris could feel the change and immediately saw its advantages. Later, when he grew a beard, he could see how it, just as the glasses before, took the place of whatever in him made others fearful. One thing substituted for another. And behind it all stood the child named Boris.

He never asked himself how others coped. His only care was his own inviolability. He could always tell when he happened to become inviolable.

He learned to do things no one paid attention to. Or to do things in such a way that no one paid attention to him. For instance, he was willing to eat something he did not like, rather than give himself away and make his dislike known to everyone. To realize that his mother felt anxiety, without understanding why she did, he felt, was enough effort on his part.

2. Christening

Then the eight-year-old grandson of the old woman died. She lived in the neighboring house and the boy used to come and spend the summers with her. His father and his mother drove him there in June, then, several times during July and August, they would visit him, bringing some food, and finally they would take him back for school in September. The boy and Boris were the same age and knew each other vaguely. But since Boris never played with other children, the city boy had more friends than he did.

Fishing occupied their time in the summer. The dam was dull with ooze and stale water but generations of carp lived in it. Boris could see where the boys gathered by the smoke columns of their fires. The air smelled of dry timber and food. Or rather, of what they called “food”, their catch. Boris did not want to have anything to do with them. Neither the boys, nor the fish, nor what the boys did with the fish had any appeal for him.

Nobody could explain how the little boy drowned. One evening he simply failed to come home to his grandmother.

Grief fell like a cloud over the entire summer. Boris was taken by his mother to see the boy. Even later in life, he still could not understand why that child was dressed in white and laid in a flower-covered coffin, by which everyone in the village stopped to bow.

When he passed by the coffin, leaving a flower inside it, as his mother had instructed him, he felt everything was a kind of punishment. People bewailed the boy as if they had killed him themselves.

It was the first time Boris had seen a dead person. A child. He stared at the calm face and suddenly thought that the boy had managed to hide somewhere. At that moment he experienced something akin to jealousy, imagining he also could become invisible to others.

As usual he never mentioned a word about this to anyone.

For the rest of the summer, the children were not seen in their usual playing grounds. The weather became unbearably hot. Storms rose every now and then, blowing down twigs and leaves. The old woman never left her house again. Sent by his mother, Boris brought some soup and bread to her sometimes. The old woman always sat or lay on a pile on the floor. All doors were open. But all windows closed.

Boris liked visiting her. She never looked at him or spoke to him. He never found her asleep. He always noticed first her open eyes. She looked past him into the distance. Her gaze was beautiful, Boris thought. Attentive and sweet, as if smiling. She never appeared dazed, or scared.

He would leave another bowl and a piece of bread wrapped in a cloth on the table, taking the old ones. The woman never touched them. Boris then would sit on the edge of the bed, chasing away the flies. For some reason the kitchen was much cooler than the rest of the house. Or at least, it seemed so to him. The old woman had also found a way to hide herself - and Boris wanted to know how to reach that place himself. He felt good sitting with her, even better than with his bees. It was difficult to leave. His mother once came looking for him. He saw her entering the garden and got up to meet her. If she had seen him sitting on the bed with the old woman, he would have felt ashamed. To sit with her was something that belonged to him only and he did not want his mother to know. He rushed outside, while his mother stayed in the house for a while.

3. Upwards

At the end of that summer his parents decided to baptize him. Why they had not done it earlier, only God knew. Boris felt terribly ashamed; he did not know why this had to happen to him, since it never happened to others. But the comparison here was unnecessary, as Boris did not measure his life with the same measuring rod as others. His panic at this mysterious event whose main protagonist he was about to become was increasing. He understood, however, that he was doing something for his parents, something, whatever it was, for their good.

He allowed them to dress him in clothes he had not seen before and he walked in a procession with the adults up the path in the woods leading to the chapel. They forbade him to carry anything with him. He felt good moving along the path, while observing how his feet followed each other on the ground. One foot, then the other, and again, as if moved by their own volition.

Traces of other silences, other movements, of someone walking next to someone else, hovered both in the woods and outside. Every bend revealed another bend and made one expect the next: an expectation free from fear because it lasted only a second under the dome of the indefinite woods, dimensionless as a house never visited.

Everything required silence. Stepping was almost like walking. Yet not quite. He discovered that stepping on the path was a careful pleasure, belonging both to him and to the others, a common pleasure. They stepped side by side and moved towards the next bend, a little further up, up the slope, hand in hand with silence.

Boris and they. It was possible as long as they were silent. Together in the twilight of the dome. The place opened up to welcome the procession.

Then Boris learned that the world could be this way too. Without rudeness. Without disturbing the increasingly dense silence, now become a permeable environment. Behind them, he could hear a sound like the rustling of a snake's tail made of a thickening layer of rust-colored leaves. There was no need to turn back to look. Before them lay the same full-bodied stream of leaves, from all these different years, and his feet sank to his ankles. Many autumns under their

feet, now invisible, driving them down the same path, along the same steps, already made by others. Where others had walked. Later, Margarita would try to explain a similar thing about her grandmother's lamp and only Boris, to an extent, would be able to understand her.

He pictured the chapel from time to time. He had no idea how far it was. Or if it was white or if it was small.

They stepped on the leaves and were silent. In their silence there wasn't anything they wished to conceal.

Boris began to love this walk, just as he had started to love the old woman.

The steps followed one another, alone and together, sometimes simultaneously, according to no rule. But the steps were not made, they made themselves. The walking did the walking itself and he was there, knowing the chapel was at the end of the road. A place in a big house, in which they found themselves together.

Then he saw it, when he was already in front of its door, a door almost as big as the chapel itself. They told him to open it.

Boris pushed the door with the tips of his fingers and it opened beautifully. To reveal in the coming light a small space where someone was sitting. A tiny woman in black, whose eyes he was to meet again years later. Eyes the color of fog. He drew back his fingers and the door gently closed.

4. Bees and Their Friends

Boris cohabited with bees; and they cohabited with him. The very first time his father took him to the beehive, not too far from the house, the bees and Boris immediately took to each other. The interesting thing was that his father pulled the honeycomb frames and pushed them back like drawers. They made the same sound. To the child it all seemed to be a game.

Later his father would say that the bees did not swarm around himself, but flew buzzing around Boris. His father's head was covered with a net, propped from below by a wide-brimmed hat. The shape of half a planet. But Boris would learn this only later in school. That there were

celestial bodies, spheres, some of them with rings. Saturn. His father's head at the beehive was like Saturn. Boris liked Saturn very much.

When Maria read ancient Greek myths to him, he learned that Saturn was the father of Jupiter. Or rather, that Chronos was the father of Zeus. Saturn and Jupiter were their Latin names.

Maria had become his wife by then. But at the beehive he had no idea she even existed.

After that first time, Boris regularly went with his father to visit the bees. He did not like the taste of honey. Perhaps that was the reason why the bees liked him. He ate honey sometimes, because he had to comply with his mother's wishes; but he never enjoyed it. He knew from the very beginning that honey belonged to bees, and his father rattling the drawers seemed silly.

When he found a wild beehive for the first time, he saw how imperfect the artificial human bee nests were, with their little human roofs. Doll houses, in which the bees were forced to do what they did naturally anyway. Such thoughts and the like crossed his mind.

At some point he learned that there was a queen bee, drones and swarming, and was filled with admiration. The worker-bees were working; they were doing the work without thinking. Boris decided that human beings were very imperfect in comparison with bees, because they would think while doing things. And they became tired. Whereas bees never became tired. They simply reacted to changes in temperature. They stopped being bees below such-and-such degree.

He gathered honey and filled amber jars. Other people in the village also had beehives, but everyone relished Boris's honey, as if he was born into honey making.

He never put on the veil of a beekeeper. Not a single bee ever bothered him or stung him. Boris found bees to be perfect and tried to learn everything there was to learn about them. Then he became the bees' man. And they became Boris's bees.

Year after year the same thing happened. Boris would lie down in the tall soft grass between the beehives. At first he would hear them moving along their flight paths, then a wave of information signals, which he could sense clearly, would traverse the air. The bees would start hovering above him, and he knew that they were deciding which ones should descend on him. Then they would begin to land on him, covering first the naked parts of his body, his hands and

face, and afterwards his entire body. They would stay until he stirred to get up. They would lift off at once like a cloud of sound and he would walk away. Gradually he would leave them behind and they would busy themselves about their bee work again.

No one knew that there was something special between Boris and the bees. Or perhaps no one wished to know. The bees, just as the glasses later, provided enough explanation for the boy's absent-minded wandering, his lack of interest in what was in his plate and his reticence.

5. Brothers and Sisters

His reticence never improved. Since he learned faster than others, he had the small privilege of taking his exams in writing. They had suggested to his parents that he should take some tests and be sent to a school for gifted children. But his parents seemed unwilling to listen. What difference did it make that the child could learn faster. Sending Boris to a different school meant acknowledging that he was different. And that would have been too much.

But when he came first in the entry exams for the English language school, there was nothing to be done. Boris had to move to live with his sister in Plovdiv, where his room was already prepared.

He did not want to leave the village. Here he had won his territory, and he knew he could be left alone. There he would have to start everything from the beginning.

In any case, he had no choice. He had to continue school. He was glad he was older, because the older he became, the more possibility he had of building barriers between himself and the others.

His life in Plovdiv began with observing his sister's family. A husband and two children, to whom he was an uncle. They all behaved as if being a family was the most natural thing in the world. The family seemed to engender and maintain itself on its own. Maybe that was the way things happened.

He quickly managed to discourage his sister from accompanying him anywhere. He found his own itineraries and began to like this city where he could be even less visible.

He liked the amphitheater the most. People were there at all times, like everywhere else in the city, but the space allowed it. It was designed for many people. Even when almost empty, the amphitheater seemed inhabited by voices, echoing with a distant din. He found this ghost-like quality very moving. The human race appeared to him remarkable as long as one did not have to collide with others.

The idea of apartment space, for example, was feeble-minded. In the kitchen one cooked, in the sitting room one sat. In the bedroom one slept. In the children's room one played. And in order to ensure this division of space and legitimize it, people put the required pieces of furniture and appliances in each room. But that was not all. The shapes themselves simply drove him to despair.

They were all the same. He could see it from the outside. A mere glimpse at the façade and one could picture the hive inside. A hive which was not a real hive, much worse than the little human-made houses for the so-called domestic honeybees. What human beings considered rational was very far from the living economy of bees. Between the act of pressing the washing machine button and the mood of the person pressing it there was an entire universe of folly, which people called their life.

But houses were a different story. When they were not contaminated by the desire to transform them into modern apartments. They revealed unexpected spaces which welcomed human beings the way a glade in the woods welcomes them. But that was rare. He had looked carefully at all the houses in the old part of the city, but they all resembled stuffed animals. Even if they had had life in them before, today these houses were dead. And their external colors hurt his eyes.

His sister was in the habit of coming into his room in the early morning to wake him. Even when she realized that Boris was always awake by the time she came, she continued to do it. He decided not to deprive her of this privilege, allowing her to keep this tiny harmless territory so he could gain much larger terrain. For example, the right to absent himself from the evening gatherings of the family. Or the right not to watch television.

His sister began to feel peculiar awe towards him. Once he had openly acknowledged his idiosyncrasy, Boris could no longer surprise her. He functioned like clockwork, always doing the

same things at the same time of day, without showing any impatience or boredom. He never talked about school or friends. How was he? – He was fine. Was everything alright? - It was.

This burdensome difference was compensated by the lack of any serious problems. His behavior suggested that everything was under control, and people around him could only reassure themselves that indeed “everything was under control”, believing they had reached that conclusion on their own. Meanwhile Boris kept reading more and more books, his inner and outer age overlapped less and less, and he was thinking, he was constantly thinking, but about what– no one knew.

6. Ghosts

Something did happen once, however. Or, to put it differently, something which escaped his control did happen once.

Because of his calmness, Boris could often join a small group of classmates walking part of the way in the same direction. Since he could accommodate both their conversation and his own thoughts, he decided to domesticate his classmates enough to accept his silent presence. He nodded, replied in monosyllables, and smiled if necessary, so they would not consider him a complete stranger. Also, for some inexplicable reason, he looked like an athlete and was as fit as the other boys could be only with much exercise. One time he took part in a group fight and that, once and for all, confirmed his right to be there doing nothing.

There was a girl in the group who drew his attention despite his resistance. He could not explain this phenomenon in any rational way. The girl wore a pleated skirt, spread out like an umbrella above her two legs thin like walking sticks, and that was that. Boris never looked at her, but was somehow constantly aware of her position or movement, which he felt like a spatial relation he could not overcome. He rebelled against this awareness forcing itself upon him, mobilized all his strength to destroy it, but it inevitably remained intact, as if some part of his mind, insusceptible to reason, kept registering the girl’s presence. Perpetual motion. She was there, she was not there, she was approaching, she was moving away, tick-tick-tick – the skirt with the little legs.

The record of warmth waves expanded like a file. The information, most of it monotonous and unvaried, kept accumulating, and Boris felt he now lived with it, as if it was his second heart.

A year passed, and then another. The girl had stopped wearing the umbrella skirt, but he never even noticed. He was collecting the data of her movements, her appearances and disappearances. An oscillogram. Until the day she vanished from his life.

Late one evening, having wandered around the streets for a while, he saw her walking up the front of a white house. With her skirt and her thin little legs. Like a fly, like a bee. He saw her and that was that. He blinked in the moonlight, but he still saw her. She climbed to the eaves and continued over the roof, reached its top and disappeared on the other side.

Boris stood motionless in the silence. It never crossed his mind to run to the other side and watch her climb down. He knew she was climbing down ~~on~~ the other side. And thus he left, carrying the image of the girl who was walking down the wall on the other side of a white house.

7. Digital worlds

He kept reading until it was time to discover computers. Then he felt he met his own expectations – he found a new way of creating order. A new way of possessing what he called his own. Entrances were designated by icons.

There was nothing friendlier in his life than these icons, behind which sparkled his treasures. The icons multiplied, and the electronic beeps his computer emitted in response felt closer to home than any other sound.

Then he began to create virtual civilizations. Primitive, improbable, medieval, all kinds of civilizations. Their populations grew and people slaughtered each other, always destroyed themselves, enjoying short or long lives. The civilizations which quickly declined were not his favorite. He learned how to keep an archive of their history and return to it. Gradually he began to see the mistakes he had made. If these could indeed be called mistakes. He was not using all he had.

His first virtual worlds were as short-lived as explosions. Later they began to resemble pyramids, then spirals. The graphs of their development showed their level of stability. His goal

was to create a kaleidoscopic civilization. He tried setting chaotic parameters. But his creations did not submit to such operations.

Then he started to feel some kind of responsibility for them. And fear. Their durability and their death depended on him. At first he liked the idea, but then he changed his mind. Events were taking place in his computer even in his absence. Whenever he peeked inside, he was astounded to see how much his creatures had progressed. He began to realize that his task was to slow their development. And slowing it meant adding more parameters. This, in its turn, meant more variables. He searched for an optimal relationship between input parameters and the predictability of outcomes.

And at some point, towards the end of his high school studies, he decided what he would do later in life.

8. Fathers and Their Professions

Philip met Maria at a friend's house. Although he never liked to admit it later, he did not notice her at first. She was sitting in some part of the room, watching him. He felt her gaze, but could not identify where it came from.

For a long time afterwards, he was unable to say why this human being stood there, draped in black cloth, as if in a crowded film scene.

Philip was a pathologist and that was both a headache and a relief to him. He was the only one among his friends who could say in a word what he did for a living. For a twenty-seven-year-old man, it made things easier. But when people asked questions out of curiosity, he was not good at explaining.

The voice in the receiver produced such an intense sensation in him that he nearly hung up. He could not remember what they said to each other, just as later he could not remember any subjects of conversations with Maria. He could recall situations in which her presence or her voice obliterated everything else.

No one could say no to this voice calling to him in the receiver. Why to him and not someone else, he never understood. Here I am, Lord.

He proposed to her almost immediately, not fully aware of what he was doing. He knew for certain only that he could not do otherwise. She nodded, as if she had foreseen, a long time ago, that this was bound to happen.

Something had changed in the way time unfolded. The days were shamelessly short, the nights blended into one. Something was ripening in Philip in nervous spasms but he paid no attention. He was galloping with Maria in some kind of maelstrom. He turned into a boomerang, meekly landing at her feet, no matter what he thought, no matter what he did, no matter whom he met.

Before Maria's appearance, he was simply Philip, a doctor, a pathologist. He could describe himself in a word.

After meeting Maria, his center of gravity was transposed outside his body and in the beginning this gave him strength. Strength which flowed towards Maria.

9. The Hero's Prize

There was no wedding, only the signing of a certificate. She never allowed him to see her passport. The civil servant could see it, but not her husband. He did not know when she was born, nor who her parents were or whether she had any siblings. Whenever he asked her, she laughed, as if his questions were the most inappropriate in the world. He was surprised at how easily he could lie to his friends and his family when they posed questions to him. And he lied to himself in being certain that one day he would find out, as soon as Maria stopped playing this funny game. Then he forgot about it and remembered again only when it was too late.

She did not simply give herself to him – she offered herself as a gift to him. He sank into her with the feeling that he had never experience anything like it before. He stopped thinking and questioning. Maria was a world he inhabited. He knew he must have done things before, he must have eaten and drunk water. Later when the doctor asked him, he could not remember anything, only that he had felt strong and indefatigable.

She sat at home and knitted jumpers. There was always something cooked to eat. Maria always had money and the food was always tasty. So tasty that after dinner, his only wish was to take her in his arms and bury his face in her long hair.

She became pregnant almost by magic. Philip was certain it had happened the very first time. If happiness was to be able to stop thinking, Philip was happy. Things just happened and he was part of them.

Twins were born. A boy, Valentin, and a girl, Margarita. Philip could not recall ever discussing what names to choose. As if the two were born with their names.

10. After the Fairy Tale's End

Then Maria began to frighten him.

One night, he woke up and looked at the sleeping woman next to him. He looked at her for a long time. He was convinced she was not sleeping. She did not stir, as if she was no longer inside her body.

For the first time he wondered whether a human being had a beginning and an end. He could see her. Maria was sleeping naked, enveloped in her hair. Her breath was barely perceptible. He was unable to describe her with any adjectives. Kind, for example, or anything like that. This creature had simply appeared and in the face of this fact Philip was powerless. He was overwhelmed by despair. What were his or her feelings? Only star dust, dispersing.

Suddenly he realized that Maria was watching him. Perhaps all people had this look when just awakened. Maria looked at him evilly. At last something definite. Philip had grasped something and he could see that she did not like it. Her eyes, as if having no eyelids, stared unblinking.

He got up from bed and left the room.

After the first rush of fear, Philip tried to talk to his brother. What he heard was that Maria could break any codes.

At first he could not understand what this meant. Gradually he realized that he was being accused of disloyalty. Towards himself, towards his family, towards his friends. The sound of these trivial words, which he had not heard spoken aloud for a while, shook him.

The same night, Maria refused to sleep with him, and he knew that was how it was going to be for a long time.

Philip began to lose himself in his work. From then on, he often slept in the hospital, he worked night shifts and became better at his job. He was called more often for criminal cases. He discovered courtrooms.

But then he also began drinking. And drinking brought back his ability to speak.

11. The Twins

Valentin's anger towards his sister knew no boundaries. She was the same as him and she was different. He felt ashamed to have a sister. He invented and did all kinds of things, and she just sat there, dull, watching him. He did not want this languid creature, who was so similar to him, to sit there and watch him. He did not want to have a sister.

When they started going to school, his mother was no longer there to come and take her whenever she was weeping. It quickly transpired that Margarita could not stay in the same school. This solved the problem, and after resisting the idea for a year, his mother agreed to send her to a different school, for children like her. But what exactly his sister was like, no one knew. Except perhaps his mother, yet she never said anything.

Thus Margarita disappeared from Valentin's life. At least for a while. She reappeared during weekends, but he had other things to do, he had friends, and his mother would simply take her out.

He could recall his father once becoming very angry that Maria was going out with Margarita. He had insisted on joining them, he had insisted on being told what they intended to do together. Maria had ignored his shouting. When the two women were ready to leave, his mother whispered something in his sister's ear, and Margarita remained by the door waiting. His mother went into the bedroom with his father.

Everything then quieted down as if enclosed in a box. The two children fixed the bedroom door with their eyes. Valentin looked at Margarita. Something peculiar emerged and crossed his

mind, but by then his mother had reappeared. Without a word, she grabbed Margarita's hand and took her away.

Valentin waited for a while, then gently opened the bedroom door. His father was snoring quietly and happily in his bed.

When they brought the piano to the house, his mother said it was for Margarita. Valentin could not believe it – such a big and important object meant for this miserable annoying little thing which was his sister.

In the beginning, Maria herself was teaching Margarita to play. Valentin discovered that his mother could play the piano. He felt extremely proud and expressed the desire to also learn to play. But she would not have it, the piano was for Margarita.

He remembered that later a blond woman used to come to the house and play the piano with Margarita.

Then Margarita started playing the piano by herself and Valentin lost interest in it. One day, when they were older, about fifteen years old, a friend of his heard Margarita play by chance and he said he wanted to see her. They tip-toed into the semi-dark living room and listened to her, unnoticed, for a long time. When she stopped, she saw them and ran away into her room.

His friend, however, who was the son of musicians, kept insisting. He wanted to see the sheet music, he wanted to know if Margarita studied at a music school... They searched for the sheet music everywhere, but found nothing. The boy insisted that he had heard the finale of a very special sonata by Cesar Franck, which people studied for the entry exams of the Conservatoire. And that Margarita played it like a virtuoso.

12. Raya

Valentin thought that Raya was an incredible woman.

Her family was everything which his family was not. Grandmothers and grandfathers from all different branches of the family tree kept appearing, either in person or on portraits hanging on walls.

In this open and overpopulated house, Raya chirped like God's little bird.

The house echoed with laughter and music. The radio boomed loudly and piles of newspapers and magazines lay under armchairs or in the middle of rooms.

Valentin, like all other visitors, was welcomed as part of the house. In it, children, whether the family's or other people's, played hide and seek and blind man's bluff, they knocked over half empty tea cups and threw newspapers, already read by someone and left lying around, in crumpled balls. Beautiful little pictures surprised one in unexpected corners. But this chaotic place was not at all filthy or shabby; it was the receptacle for the peculiar life they were leading in this incomprehensible and wonderful house which attracted Valentin like a magnet.

Raya was less the child of her parents than the offspring of the house and its life. To win Raya meant to become accepted in the house. Whether they were in love, whether they slept together – such things passed unnoticed in the general absent-mindedness of life's flow. No one, neither the children, nor the adults, were interested in such details.

From the very beginning it became clear to Valentin that being with them in their house came first, and being with Raya came second. Perhaps that was why he did not take any precautions – some urge to leave a trace, to win a place for himself in the common picture. Gradually he became anxious, feeling that he was after something which was important to him but not to others. Not to Raya and to the rest of them.

The sense that it was doomed to failure was taking over him. He was not able to fight it. And no one around him seemed to notice. The sisters, the cousins and the little brothers, the grandfathers and aunts, the parents and their parents, no one seemed to suspect, even for a moment, that Valentin, once become part of this harmony, could ever cease to be in it.

Valentin was approaching a steep edge. He felt misunderstood. Raya could not understand why he felt this way, and he, although not sure how, was trying to erase the overlap between their being together and their being with the family. A game of blind man's bluff, but a different one. He adored Raya for her unique ease at being: she did not have to try to be this or that, she did not need to take decisions and stick to them, she did not need to have a direction. But he also hated it and wanted to destroy it.

The rupture came with her becoming pregnant. Everyone felt betrayed. The sense that it was all an endless joyride vanished. Valentin knew that in this house, everyone loved everyone else and did what was best for them. The best for Raya could not be putting an end to her childhood; the best for the pregnant Raya was to marry Valentin, but leaving the house was out of the question. Valentin had slept with her, but she was a child of the clan, her baby would be a child of the clan, and so Valentin was invited to become a child of the clan.

He closed his eyes and imagined the entire picture. After a brief silence, the Ferris wheel swings again for another ride. One more sweet little baby crawls on the floor, vomits over the rare thick carpets and everyone laughs. Raya's older brother hugs the baby as if it was his own, her younger brother plays with it as if it was his baby brother, her father throws an absent-minded look at the baby, not sure whether the tiny creature is his grandson or some kind of great grand-nephew, or even, why not, his own son. At this point in his imaginative reconstruction, the water content in Valentin's body reached boiling temperature.

From then on Valentin could not help acting stupidly. He knew he was destroying something, but he no longer desired anything else. Raya cried at his wickedness. And she became increasingly miserable, because she could not understand it. He himself could barely understand what he was doing, but it was his turn to move. He was possessed by the idea that something in Raya belonged to him and him only, and he had no wish to share it with anyone. Within the communal Garden of Eden that was her family, this seemed disgusting. So be it, then he would be disgusting.

He laid down conditions and made demands which he knew Raya could not meet. For example, that they should live separately, just the two of them. There were strong logical arguments against it – they could not support themselves. They were still at school. They were still only children. And why should they not work like every normal family. Raya did not understand the meaning of “normal family.” She imagined work as some kind of hobby which had nothing to do with earning money. And she imagined herself as a molecule of some precious substance whose chemical formula was her family's secret.

Then Valentin disappeared. From her life and their life together, from the future life of his baby, from his own life which had barely begun to take some definite shape.

Or, to be more precise, he tried to disappear, going back to the house in which he had always lived – the house of his mother.

13. Maria's Baby

And he discovered that his mother was also expecting a baby. ...