

A SHORT TALE OF SHAME

by Angel Igov

translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

(from Chapter 5)

Irina passed away in January. It had been four months now: just as long as she'd been in a coma, still alive, without knowing it. Krustev remembered his wife's body, shrunken, thin, worn-out and misshapen, bound by unquestioning tubes to mysterious devices which allowed it to exist a bit longer on the threshold between life and death. He felt like tubes had been stuck into him, too, pouring first fear into his blood, then hope and finally a colorless, watery liquid, the very essence of futility. You do understand, don't you, the head doctor had told him some time in October, when it was already clear that there wouldn't be any quick recovery and that they could only hope for a miracle, but miracles like that do happen, don't they, in these kinds of cases, yes, but you do understand, he told him, that if your wife recovers, it is very possible that she will not be the same person, right now it's difficult to say how disabled she might be. Irina could come out of the coma drained of her identity, without memories, without thoughts even, without taking in anything around her, a vegetating presence in a wheelchair. Yet he nevertheless nursed hopes until the last, he had clung to his wife after all that creeping marital coldness, after they had lived almost separately for the past four years, her boyfriend, the theater director, also came to see her as often as Krustev did, but they had asked the hospital staff to stagger their visits, neither one wanted to see the other, Krustev now remembered that there had been a similar story in one of the books he had read in the early spring, only there the husband and the lover took care of their shared wife together, it wasn't like that in his case, perhaps both of them blamed each other at least a bit for what had happened. Krustev was constantly wondering about guilt, not just whether he himself was guilty, but whether guilt even existed at all as something you could touch or feel or whether at the end of the day everything was a sea of dreams and wakings, which we all will drown in some day, a sea like that one down below, he lifted his head and saw the kids looking at him rather worriedly, so he suggested they get a beer and this time he wouldn't take no for an answer, went over to the ferryboat's concession stand and came back with four cold cans.

So why, Spartacus asked, abruptly jerking him into a completely other time, did Euphoria really break up? Good question, why had they broken up really, perhaps because the singer had started acting more and more like the head, heart and ass of the group, or because the keyboardist was against the more commercial sound of their final years, or maybe – and this seemed the likeliest answer to Krustev – because nobody felt like playing anymore. When he stopped to think about it, they had only been around thirty – thirty-something, pretty early for exhaustion, but the rock-band life had sucked them dry unexpectedly quickly, they needed to be reborn as new people, they still had the strength and opportunity to do it, and yes, well yes, they did just that. Krustev suddenly felt, or at least he thought that he felt as if not only his mind, but his very senses were beginning to run on memories, he felt the pain from the metal strings running through his fingertips, the pain that had been so persistent in his early teenage years when he was just starting to play, later, of course, his fingers had calloused over and didn't hurt anymore. Man, you're a serious rocker, he told the boy, and he really was impressed by his taste and knowledge, the boy shrugged his bony shoulders humbly. Only here, on the deck where the four of them were standing together, upright, only here could Krustev get a clearer idea of what his fellow travelers looked like: the boy, tall and skinny, taller than he was, with a constantly distracted expression; the blonde Maya, who had a rather ordinary face, but lively eyes and a compact, athletic figure; and finally the slightly mysterious and distant ringleader of the group, with curly black hair and blue eyes, Krustev guessed she had lots of admirers and then immediately wondered whether that word was even still used, the truth was that at times he felt like a old man in their company, even though he had gotten used to always being young, both in his life as a musician and in that as a businessman, he was always the youngster, they didn't take him seriously at first, then suddenly they'd be shocked at how much he'd accomplished for his age, what are forty years, he could still live another forty, and he was sure that within a week he could get back into shape after those months spent in the empty house, that he could once again feel energetic and healthy, but hey, his body would never be as quick and flexible as the bodies of these people around him ever again. He could feel the beer filling his bladder insultingly quickly, impudently squeezing his prostate, he excused himself and found the grimy toilet down below by the cars, poorly lit by a yellow bulb, his stream gushed with gurgling relief, he zipped his fly and slowly started back up the stairs, climbed up on deck and stood by himself for a while before going back to the trio.

The strangest part was that he had gradually *gotten used to* it all: the visits to the hospital, the silent Irina tangled up in plastic tubes, the white sheets, the nurses, the smell of bleach in the hallways, where men and women padded around in green pajamas. Krustev sat by his wife's bed and talked to her in his mind, that way the words weren't left hanging in the startling absence of an answer. He talked to her about Elena, about the dog, about the house, sometimes about business, a few times he tried to clear up how exactly, imperceptibly and secretly, like the rotting of a seemingly sound fruit, their relationship had gone cold. Her coma couldn't turn back time, he still knew that he no longer loved Irina the way they had loved each other in their wild and sunny younger years, but now, when she inhabited the space between life and death, when she was so far from him that he couldn't reach her with words or touch, he suddenly felt close to her again, or rather he felt close to her in a new way, almost as if she were a sister. Irina was now the only person who didn't want anything from him. And even though he secretly hoped for a miracle up to the very end, sometimes he caught himself fearing that possible moment when Irina would flutter her eyelids, heavy from sleep, the long sleep of the sea, when he thought about the dead current that was sweeping her along, Krustev shuddered and suddenly imagined how, if he put his ear to his wife's body, he would hear the sea roaring inside her, as inside a shell. She really was a shell, the form of a living creature, emptied of her soft, slimy and slithering substance, at once alluring and repellent. And he would talk to that shell, sensing how everything around him withdrew and he was left alone with her in the white silence of the hospital room, as if time had stopped. But before Christmas, Elena came back from the States again, pale, thin, with circles under her eyes, she burst into tears when she saw her mother and the thread was broken, the whole quiet harmony that Krustev had built up day after day fell apart. At that moment he felt hatred for his daughter, that intruder from out of nowhere, a part of both of them, who had cunningly leapt into the world and come between them. Then he told himself that he was probably going crazy, but he couldn't shake the feeling that this young woman was a stranger to him, now much more than ever, and the shell in the hospital bed could not fill up the chasm between them, on the contrary, it opened it all the wider. And after that, shortly after New Year's, which he and his daughter spent at home, staring at the television, almost without speaking, Irina died. As if during that whole time she had been hesitating and had finally made a decision. Sepsis, the head doctor said, poisoning of the blood, her liver couldn't hold out, I was also hoping until the last, I'm sorry. And he really did seem sorry, perhaps he, too, had gotten used to the

empty body and its plastic tubes, perhaps he had even clung to the possibility of her coming out of the coma so as to reaffirm his belief in the power of his work and his science, except that Irina died and Krustev suddenly felt his whole life withdrawing, his senses, his memories, as if he were once again in the silent white room, only now there was nothing inside it, nothing at all, so much so that he couldn't even be sure whether he himself was there. Now, when he thought back on those days, he would tell himself that he had been on the edge. He didn't remember the funeral. He remembered how he had shut himself up at home and had sunk into the TV, watching sports channels from morning until night, he had taken his blanket out to the sofa in the living room, where he had also spent the nights, lulled to sleep by the figures running back and forth across the screen, Elena hovered around him, they only spoke about everyday household things, she made clumsy attempts at cooking and Krustev gulped down her dishes without even noticing whether they were any good or not. And so several days passed, then she suddenly appeared at the start of some football game, sat down next to him and said *Barcelona's going to win*, Krustev suddenly sprang out of his apathy and looked at her amazed, she had never been interested in football and he could've sworn she didn't even know how many players were on a team, but now here she was talking about *corner kicks, off-sides and poor performance in the Champions' League*, she was talking about things that sounded strange to him, as if coming from some world beyond, he perhaps wouldn't have even noticed that volleyball had been replaced with football, she mentioned the players' names, reacted more quickly than the commentator, kept track of who had gotten yellow cards, and when the game indeed ended with a win for Barcelona, Krustev said, yes, Barcelona won, moved his crackling joints, gingerly got up off the sofa, took a bottle of scotch from the bar, poured two glasses, set them abruptly on the table and said, so now tell me what's going on with you.

(from Chapter 6)

Around the time she started high school, when she became a *fake*, she started drawing certain conclusions and suspecting that her mother was having an affair, there were those hushed phone conversations, business trips and cold silences in the living room, and Maya instinctively took her father's side, even though, thinking back on it logically, he surely was having an affair,

too, at that time. By the end of the summer, her father and mother avoided sitting down at the table together and she was sure that if they had had the space at home and an extra room, her father would have moved out of the nuptial bed (but why her father, actually, why shouldn't her mother be the one to move out?). And in the end the evening rolled around when she came home from school and caught sight of her brother watching cartoons on TV, she suddenly felt a rush of affection, he was still a kid, he had no idea what he was in for, she sat down by him and they watched cartoons together, where are mom and dad, she asked and he shrugged and said there's a note in the kitchen saying they're going out and will be back around eight-thirty, Maya was quite surprised, because the last thing she would've expected her parents to do at that point was to go out together, but, as it turns out, they wanted to sit down in neutral territory, at some nearby restaurant and, with the help of a nice dinner, admit that there was no point in being together anymore and that yes, the kids were already old enough, they would understand... Maya made sandwiches for herself and her brother and sent him off to play on the computer, while she sat down to read, she had started in on *Tender Is the Night*, now there's another ruined marriage for you, but at least her mother wasn't crazy or at least not that much, she jumped when she heard the click of the key in the lock and went to meet the awkward expressions pasted to her parents' faces, her brother ran up and asked them where they had been, but they asked instead whether he and Maya had eaten, praised her for the sandwiches, went into the living room and began coughing nervously. OK, they're going to tell us now that they're getting a divorce, Maya thought, and froze in absurd, anxious expectation, as if she were about to witness some extremely solemn, holy ritual, and indeed, they clearly had decided to do it, they started out with some general chitchat, beating around the bush and surely-you've-noticed, well yes, they had noticed, Maya thought to herself, they had even discussed it and her brother really was only a child, but he was old enough to understand. At a certain moment, everything hung in an abrupt pause. Then her father started in again, you are both old enough, I think you'll understand, actually, her mother finished off in a tired voice, your father and I are thinking of getting a divorce. The lack of dramaticism was shocking. In films, in books, people suffered, broke down, screamed and smashed china. But this wasn't a film, nor a book, this was real life, colorless and dull, and the sacred ritual crumbled to the floor like dust, the earth did not tremble and the world did not blaze up in supernatural conflagration, their parents looked at them helplessly and Maya, too, could not find anything to say, while her brother shifted his gaze between the three of them, unfairly thrust

by their silence into a position which he should never have had to be in at all, finally he got up and with a slightly quavering voice said well, I already knew you were gonna get divorced, it's not news to me, for your information, so fine, if that's what you want, go ahead and get divorced, so be it. *So be it*, he must have gotten that from some film about epic battles and wise sorcerers.

Sirma showed up with her nipples. You're gonna grow flippers, Spartacus said. Maya was watching Krustev, he was obviously trying not to stare at Sirma's tits, wondering where to look and in the end his gaze found refuge in hers, and then, when their eyes met, his suddenly became impenetrable, until that moment this man had seemed quite simple, gloomy, suffering and sweetly uncertain, but now all of that suddenly disappeared, the warm dusk of his brown eyes stepped aside and in its place something emerged that could only be called nothingness. The nothingness had captured those exhausted, melancholy, slightly elongated Slavic eyes, but her father had a Slavic girlfriend, too, he lived with her now, and from the very beginning Maya had taken it as a double betrayal, a Slav of all things, what did these Slavic women have that made them so much better than her mother, and even Maya herself, she thought of Elena again, it was impossible not to think of Elena as she looked at her father, and in the end she looked away, so as not to think about Elena, but she kept thinking and remembered how when they were both little, her parents had treated her friend with some reserve, yes, now she very clearly recalled her mother once telling her that Elena was half Slav and to Maya that had seemed very strange, how could you be *half* something, apples could be divided in half with a knife, peaches only when you twisted them, as long as you were lucky, but even then the halves were still more or less identical, perhaps with slightly different outlines, but with the same taste in any case, so what was this mysterious half of Elena that was so different than the other one? She watched her friend with curiosity as she carefully wrote out her letters in her notebook, looking for some kind of visible difference in the two halves of her face, but when they sat together at their desk, she could usually only see one side of her, while when they stood up, Elena's face suddenly evened out and became as normal as can be, but for a long time Maya was convinced that in those instants when she could not see her, the left half of her friend's face was different from the right, that it was *Slavic*, whatever that might mean; later she came to understand what this meant, and also that this halving of Elena was not visible to the naked eye, and surely then she had buried her silly childhood fantasy so deeply that now she was suddenly shaken by the memory, at once happy and frightened, like a prospector who has glimpsed a shiny gold flake amidst the pebbles in his sieve;

but now her father was living with a Slav and Maya mused that if they were to have a child, which was not completely out of the question after all, it, too, would be a *half*-Slav and what's more, it would also be her *half*-brother or -sister, and for an instant she was stunned by this play of halves, after which she felt ashamed, as always happened when she caught herself thinking stupid things, and besides, she was mature enough, and the times had changed enough as well, to not pay so much attention to who in Thrace had Slavic, Illyrian or Macedonian roots; the Dacians, of course, were another question entirely.

The sun was already clearly setting and all at once it grew cold; Sirma went over to the tent and finally threw on a t-shirt. They sat for a while longer on the beach and Krustev, suddenly chipper, told them about his first trip to Thasos, he had been seventeen and was playing in a band called Tatul, his first more-or-less serious band, he, of course, was the youngest, they set off hitching en masse and made it to Thasos, back then things were completely different, this campground didn't exist at all, there was another one, totally primitive, but that was all they needed, back then they were living in a different world and didn't even notice the sand beneath their feet, one evening they ended up as part of a big gang gathered at the port, somebody shoved a guitar in his hands and he started playing; as he was telling it, it was clear that his pride was struggling with his desire to play it down; the guitar belonged to an elderly fisherman from Thasos, who finally went over to him, grasped him firmly by the shoulder, looked sharply into his eyes and snapped: the guitar is yours, my boy. He tried to object, after all, he already had an electric guitar at home, but the fisherman would hear none of it, he just kept repeating it's yours, but you had better play it only when you're near the sea, and the seventeen-year-old Krustev gave in. Over the next few years, whenever he set out for the seaside, he always took the fisherman's guitar with him, then brought it back home and didn't dare play on it so far inland, but once he said to himself come on, what's the big deal, he was at his place with friends, he grabbed the guitar, but she wouldn't obey, she resisted, he tried to force her, Maya liked the eroticism in the way he put it, and in the end he broke a string, then he got scared, set her aside and didn't change the string; and so for twenty years now he'd been keeping that guitar with the broken string. Maya imagined how in the instant when the string snapped, far from the guitar, perhaps out on the open sea, the fisherman suddenly collapsed onto the deck of his boat and died. It all sounded like something from a novel, there was a Macedonian author who wrote stuff like that and Maya suspected that Krustev was making it up, but even if that were the case, it was still a good story.

Sirma and Spartacus also looked impressed. You and I have got a lot of talking to do about music, Spartacus remarked and satisfaction visibly washed over Krustev's face. Sirma got up, stood on her tiptoes and stretched her arms up, raising her t-shirt and revealing her ass in her tight-fitting bikini bottoms. I say we go get a drink, she suggested. A mojito would do me good right about now. Ouzo, Krustev countered with a smile. Ouzo, mojito, pick your poison, Sirma said.

Only a disheveled foreign couple was sitting at the wooden bar, drinking beer. The guy had a shaved head, was shirtless and had a little dragon tattooed on his shoulder, while dark-blond, very well-done dreads stuck out of the girl's head, on her ankle, perched on a rung of the high stool, she wore a big blue clay anklet. Maya decided they were Germans, but soon she heard the buzz-cut desperately repeating *pommes frites, pommes frites* to the girl behind the bar, the brunette was looking at him with a patient smile, Maya went over and explained French fries, ohhh, the bartender said, thanks, the guy and the girl turned their heads towards her at the same time, staring, you speak French, uh yeah, Maya said, we're sitting over there, Spartacus, who didn't like chatting with random tourists beyond his professional duties, nudged her side, I'll be there in a second, Maya told him, but the French couple were so excited by their find that they drowned her in a stream of words. Nobody speaks French here, the girl complained, and our English isn't that great, Maya agreed, you're right, French people don't come here too often so the locals don't usually speak French, however, the guy started explaining that they had been traveling around the region for two weeks now, they had arrived in Thasos only last night, and everywhere it had been really hard to get by with French. He was already a little drunk, he was talking loudly and quickly, they'd started their trip in Ephesus in Lydia, all the stone shit there was really cool, the girl with the dreads chipped in, yeah, the guy agreed, we had a great time in Lydia and after just a week we even started picking up some of the language, you know, a word here and a word there and it works out and you say to yourself cool, now in Phrygia it's gonna be even easier to get around – yeah, right! – fucking Phrygian is completely different, even the fucking alphabet is different, so I tell them, you use the Macedonian alphabet, and they get all offended, oh come on, it's not Macedonian, it's from Chios, right, 'cause it was supposedly thought up by some St. Whoever-the-hell from the island of Chios, I can't even fucking pronounce it – he imitated the velar “ch” as if choking – and so the Macedonians, right, they supposedly got it from the Phrygians: totally fucked up! Well, that's what I've heard, too, Maya smiled. Well, we'll go to Macedonia, too, the girl shrugged, to see what they'll tell us there. So

here we are now in Thasos, in this Thrace of yours, the Frenchman with the dragon on his shoulder continued heatedly, and your language doesn't have a damn thing in common with Lydian, nor with Phrygian, for fuck's sake, I can't understand you people, why the hell do you need all these different languages? Maya started getting annoyed, well, then why is French so different from German, she asked, but they just stared at her in confusion, well, 'cause we're different nations, the guy said, well, okay then, so we and the Phrygians and the Lydians are different nations, too, Maya laughed, but the guy kept stubbornly insisting, what's so different about you, he kept protesting, I can't see any difference at all, you've divided yourselves up into a pile of countries and on top of everything, every county has this or that minority, Slavs in Thrace, Thracians in Illyria, I don't know what they have in Phrygia, Patagonians, maybe, and everybody speaks a different fucking language, but at least here y'all write with normal letters, he added as a compliment, sensing, perhaps, that he was starting to get carried away.

Maya mentally noted how lucky it was that none of the others spoke French, the bald guy was really pretty drunk and quite sincerely indignant over the fact that in the different countries nearby there were different peoples who spoke different languages, we're just getting totally confused, said the girl with the dreads in a diplomatic attempt to put an end to the topic and fortunately the black-haired bartender reappeared with their French fries. Maya went back to the others, who were already drinking: Krustev – ouzo, Spartacus – beer, Sirma – a mojito; she ordered a mojito as well from the black-haired bartender and settled onto the stool, what were you talking about, Sirma baited her, I was arguing with the bald guy, Maya said, about whether his basic problem was being drunk or being stupid. Still I wonder, she thought to herself, how things were during the Macedonian Empire, everybody was part of the same country, yet they were still different peoples, back then that poor French guy would've been even more confused, since he wouldn't even have had the basic signpost of national borders, incidentally, European travelers had come back then as well to map the different ethnic groups, Spartacus had told her – he was interested in history – how all of their maps were completely different, in the center of Seuthopolis there was a street named after an Austrian ethnographer, whose map showed the Thracians occupying nearly the whole Balkan Peninsula with the exception of old Hellas, while according to Spartacus in Illyrian cities they named their streets after another ethnographer, an Italian, whose map had spread the ink-blotch of their ethnicity all the way to the delta of the Danube. Maya imagined the Austrian and the Italian yanking each other's beards and furiously

tearing up the painstakingly painted maps. Afterwards, after the Macedonian inheritance had been distributed, every nation had waved the corresponding map, drawn by some European sympathizer, and thanks to those maps they had waged far too many wars, but hey, the Frenchman with the little dragon was right that there were still minorities of the neighboring peoples left in every country. The mojito smelled cool and crisp, and Maya gazed at the freshly cut mint in satisfaction. They make a mean cocktail here, believe you me, Sirma noted, and that's not all, yeah, Spartacus chimed in, they have sex on the beach and triple orgasm, Krustev started laughing, sex on the beach, Sirma said, I could do that by myself, and immediately corrected herself, well, not exactly by myself, but I sure wouldn't need a bartender. Yeah, but Spartacus likes the bartender chick, Maya teased him, and he went along with it, man, I was so nervous, he said, I knew I should ask for something way more chichi, but what do I end up ordering – one pathetic little beer. Elena's father was sitting at the end, listening to them kidding around and smiling. This is where it's at, Maya said to herself.

(from Chapter 8)

In the greenish light two boys were skillfully playing pool and she was staring at their table, she liked the rhythmic clicking of the balls, her cousin was smoking silently and anxiously chewing the cigarette between her lips, Sirma looked her over carefully, she was heavily made up, her hair was bleached platinum and for the moment, despite her anxiousness, she seemed relieved not to have to walk, because she was wearing shoes with monstrously high heels that were clearly wrenching her ankles. Sirma had presciently left her army-surplus backpack and worn-out jean jacket at home, but she still sensed that she looked out of place there, her cousin had wrenched her feet from her shoes, they were clearly digging into her, her toenails were painted purple. Sirma had never gotten a pedicure. She and Sparacus and Maya made fun of the decked-out poodles at school, who made fun of them in turn. She felt ridiculous. She had no reason to be there. The drinks were expensive, there was no one she could talk about music with, she was used to sitting on the grass in the park and though she still liked the rhythmic clicking of the billiard balls and the boys with their skillful, confident movements, she started feeling smothered. At the other end of the café, beyond the pool table, there was something like a raised

upper level with a single solitary table, from which several older boys were contemplating them lazily. They were good-looking guys, and with their absent-minded expressions, with the apathetic superiority that radiated from their table, they seemed to lift it even higher, into some cloud-filled dimension from which they watched the mortals' games with the distant, languid interest of Olympians, or perhaps it only seemed that they were watching, when in fact their divine minds had wandered off somewhere else entirely, into the unseen and the unfathomable. The glass door of the café opened and another girl came in, with tight jeans and a leather jacket, she was pretty, with blonde hair and soft features, everybody livened up at her entrance, her cousin straightened up and puffed on her cigarette more energetically, one of the boys lazily slapped the newcomer on the ass as she walked by the pool table, and she made as if to kick him. The girl came over to them, Chloe pointed at Sirma, this is my cousin, but she didn't say her name or the name of her friend, the girl sized her up with a smile, but didn't say anything, she sat down by Chloe and they started a conversation that Sirma couldn't understand at all, they were talking about some guys with funny nicknames, about scag and A-bombs, about Nero and how an eighth kept him floating for three days, you know, and about some other guy who was probably a narc, so if Chloe saw him she should keep her distance. Then they started murmuring quietly and Sirma guessed they were talking about her, her cousin frowned when the new girl turned to her and asked her if she wanted a jay. Sirma gaped at her. A joint, man, you know. Aaah, why didn't you just say so, girl, she tried to get into their style. She had only smoked a joint once, Spartacus had scrounged it up somewhere, dug it up from the bottom of his backpack, hidden among the little plastic figurines and dead pens; and since unlike her friends, she had experience with cigarettes, she had managed to not cough while they smoked it, but nothing happened to her at all, nor to them, either. The girl in the leather jacket took out a joint and handed it to her cousin. You guys can have it, she said, my throat is killing me, I can't smoke right now. The others saw the joint and started milling around them. Are we gonna smoke it here, Sirma asked incredulously. Of course, her cousin replied, the bartender is down, so don't freak. She lit the joint and took a drag, the sweetish scent of weed wafted heavily in the air, they passed it around twice and it was gone. Sirma waited for that mellowing she'd heard about, but after a long time she still didn't feel anything and decided that she must not have smoked it right again. Her cousin, however, had mellowed out, it was as if the shared weed had lowered her guard a bit. Looks like Chopper's gone horse-riding, the girl in the leather jacket said and nodded towards the

raised table at the other end of the café. Yeah, looks that way to me, too, her cousin replied, looking impressed. They fell silent for a while. C'mon, let's go hunting, said the girl with the leather jacket. Her cousin took a deep drag off her cigarette. But now I'm feeling all peaceful and shit, she said, from the weed. Don't give me that, the other girl said. You need the money. True, Chloe said, but still, you know. She had her back to Sirma so she couldn't see what kind of gestures she was making to the other girl, but she figured that again they had to do with her. But her friend just kept smiling, completely calm. Chloe turned to her and looked at her carefully. Sirma, I can count on you, right? How about making some money, huh? Whatever you say, Sirma shrugged. *Whatever you say*, she mimicked her, and Sirma suddenly realized that her cousin was drunk, she had obviously been drinking before she met up with her, she was slurring her words and looking through her towards something, so much so that she herself was tempted to turn around to see just what was so interesting behind her back. C'mon, said the other girl, come with us and we'll show you how it's done.

They went outside and started walking quickly. It was already getting dark. Sirma hurried after them, annoyed, and wondered whether the pot hadn't gotten to her at least a little this time. They stopped two blocks later and turned down a side street, there was a school a bit farther up and the kids were walking home in little groups. One lone chubby girl with a big backpack passed by them, the girl with the leather jacket shot out and grabbed her by the shoulder. Hey, she said softly, gimme your money. What money, the girl with the backpack mumbled. Sirma was stunned. She, too, had gotten jumped on the street, they'd demanded her money, and she, too, had instinctively answered with the same stupid and pointless answer: *what money?* This kind, the girl with the leather jacket said and shoved her prey up against the wall. She brought her face close to the girl's and for an instant Sirma felt like she herself was up against the wall, she felt the other girl's aggressive breath scalding her lips, then suddenly things turned around and now she was the girl with the leather jacket pressing her victim's shoulders hard, she could do whatever she wanted to her, and in the next instant she came back to her real place, standing and watching, hypnotized by the sight, by the power and the aggression streaming from the girl in the leather jacket, she suddenly raised her knee and hit the fat girl in the stomach, she let out a little moan, then mumbled, c'mon, let me go, she was on the verge of tears, and Sirma suddenly hated her for that powerless sniveling, then her cousin went up to them and said softly, come on, give us the money and nothing will happen to you, come on, don't beat her up, she's a good girl and she'll

give us some cash, isn't that right, and the girl finally reached into her pocket and thrust some crumpled bills in her hand, yeah, she really is a good girl, said her cousin's friend, the other girl looked on helplessly as Chloe went through her pockets looking for more money, but there clearly wasn't any more, look in her backpack, her friend ordered, Chloe rifled through the backpack nervously and hurriedly, there's no wallet, she reported, I don't have any more, that's it, groaned the fat girl, but the blonde girl with the leather jacket kept holding her and repeating "oh, what a good girl" and suddenly she kissed her on the lips and laughed loudly, then she roughly spun her around and launched her up the street with a slap on the ass, come on already, what are you waiting for, her cousin hissed and pulled her into the street, her hand was warm and wet, the girl with the leather jacket appeared calmly from around the corner, she was still laughing, three fivers, said Chloe and hesitated for a moment, before adding, exactly even, she turned towards Sirma and handed her one of the bills, Sirma stared at the dirty, crumpled piece of paper, come on, take it, Chloe insisted, you're in on it, too, right? her hand was shaking, whether from adrenaline or from fear that she had shown too much without knowing whether she could trust her, and Sirma realized that she had no choice, she reached out and took the bill, it was old, greasy from the hundreds, perhaps even thousands of fingers that had passed it around. Her cousin sighed. Keep mine, the girl with the leather jacket said, you need it more than I do. Are you sure, Chloe said, yeah, of course I'm sure. They went back to the café with the pool table and her cousin ordered three vodkas at the bar. Sirma drank hers in one gulp and earned a round of applause. She felt keyed-up, her skin was prickling. Do you do that a lot, she asked her cousin. Oh yeah, she said. You ought to see us at a club. You won't believe how that chick can fight, she nodded towards her friend. She's a real witch, lemme tell you. She ripped out half of some chick's hair. See, she pulled down the collar of her shirt and showed her red scratch marks. That's from the last time we went clubbing, we got in a fight. But if anybody asks, I tell people some dude scratched me. The only problem is that weed is counterproductive for fighting, it makes you all mellow and stuff. Just look how nice we were tonight. Sirma started scraping her nails on the table her empty vodka glass was sitting on. One of the guys from the pool table, the better-looking one, sat down at their table and started making out with the third girl, whose name they still hadn't bothered to tell her. All of a sudden she was sick of it all. I've got to go, she told her cousin. Really? Too bad, she replied. Call me some other time. Yeah, OK. Hey, Chloe was suddenly serious, what happened tonight stays between us, OK, we're on the same team now,

right? Absolutely, what, do you think I'm a squealer. No, no, of course now, it's just that... OK whatever, you get me, right? No worries. She got up and went towards the door. Even if she was a squealer, that greasy bill guaranteed her silence. She turned around and saw the other girl licking the guy's ear, their eyes met and she winked at her. Sirma didn't react. The boys at the raised table kept watching them indifferently, as if they didn't exist at all for them. She opened up the glass door and stepped out into the dark, she quickly set out for home, but no matter how fast she walked, it still seemed too slow, as if her legs were sinking in some sticky swamp of disgust and euphoria, and she again entered the scene with the girl backed up against the wall, sometimes she was in her skin, sometimes she turned into the other girl, the attacker, and afterwards she melted down into nothing more than the touching of lips, into that unfathomable yet enchanting kiss of violence, she tried to blame her dazedness on the weed or the vodka, but she knew that wasn't it at all, that physically she was totally sober, and that she was spellbound by what she had seen alone, now she was imagining her cousin and the girl with the leather jacket tearing out other girls' hair, raking their faces with their nails, and then flying at each other, swinging their fists like boys, falling on the ground and, as they were fighting, they would suddenly start kissing in the noisy half-darkness, checkered by multi-colored lights, then again and again she would go back to the scene near the school, sometimes playing one role, sometimes the other, and that kept going until she finally fell into a pitch-dark, dreamless sleep. The next morning she woke up early for school, went to the kitchen, got herself a bowl of cereal, poured milk over it, and while she was waiting for it to soak in, she went over to the window and looked outside, down below there was a run-down playground with a few surrealistic jungle gyms and a dilapidated horse spring-rider, all of a sudden she heard the blonde girl's voice in her head saying clearly *Looks like Chopper's gone horse-riding* and she suddenly realized what it meant, her stomach clenched and her diaphragm jumped, she heaved over the table, over the bowl of cereal, but she didn't have anything to throw up, only a stream of bitter stomach acid trickled into her mouth, she spit it into the sink and turned on the water.

Her uncle and aunt had clearly realized, they had figured out what was going on far too late and had come up with the completely stupid idea of finding new friends for their daughter, all of a sudden they had remembered that, hey, she has a cousin, well, of course, why not have her hang out with her cousin, who goes to a good school? Bent over the kitchen sink, Sirma felt rage, she had no desire to save her cousin, now she needed to save herself, to dissolve herself in water

like a tablet and to drink herself down, she now hated her cousin for cracking open that door, which should have stayed shut, she had shown her vileness, which she had in fact liked, as if someone were teaching you to eat your own shit. On the bunk of the ferryboat to Rhodes, Sirma was suddenly paralyzed by a deeply forgotten memory, from when she was little and had been playing with a little boy in the neighborhood park, their grandmas were sitting on the benches and not keeping much of an eye on them as they played and chased each other, Sirma suddenly caught a strong whiff of shit, she grabbed the little boy by the hand and told him he'd stepped in poo-poo, he lifted his foot and looked at the sole of his shoe, it was smeared with a reeking yellow mess, now watch this, he said, sat down on the ground and with the natural flexibility of small children lifted his leg, brought the shoe towards his face and licked it. In the bunk, Sirma again sprang up in wave of nausea, just like that morning over the cereal, and just like then, she had nothing to throw up, only a stream of stomach acid stung her tongue. Back then, that morning over the kitchen sink, she had decided to reduce her world to Spartacus and Maya. Before going out, she quietly went back to her room, pulled the dirty, rumpled bill out of her pocket and stuffed it in the bottom of the cupboard where she had kept various important things ever since she was a kid, the fiver sat there up until she moved away from home. When she was gathering up her stuff she found it, she had almost forgotten about it, and since a lot of time had passed since then, she gathered the strength to reach towards the cinnamon-scented candle she liked to light in the evenings and to burn it up.

But her cousin sank and miraculously surfaced again, and Sirma was thankful to her for the latter, because, even though the two families had never really been close, they surely would never have forgiven her desertion if Chloe had died of an overdose, as seemed to be the case with many of her friends. She simply got lucky. Her father, Sirma's uncle, found a job in Austria and they left; once cut off from the café with the pool table, where the barman was *down*, Chloe became a perfectly normal girl, she had already learned German and was studying some sort of economics. Sirma never did figure out how seriously her cousin had gotten *hooked* on heroin, but since the people around her were dying off, it clearly was no joke, and if that were the case, then she really had needed money, and that *shakedown* by the school was surely no isolated incident, she had done it regularly with the girl with the leather jacket, whose face Sirma could not recall for some reason, but she would remember her from time to time and would also remember that on that evening, she hadn't smoked the joint, she hadn't taken the money they had snatched from

the scared girl on the street, she hadn't even sipped the vodka Chloe had bought with the money. After her uncle's family left for Austria, some long-forgotten kinship ties had suddenly reawakened, the fathers started writing emails and talking on the phone (Skype hadn't yet become a mass phenomenon) and one day, right around the time Elena had appeared in their midst and Sirma had met her with instinctive hostility, because she threatened the inviolability of their trinity, her father triumphantly announced that they were going to visit Vienna. Sirma had nothing against setting aside a week of her vacation for Vienna. But when the day came for them to leave, Elena had already launched her attack dizzyingly fast, she had jumped from Maya to Spartacus, she was drowning him in sex and in doing so seemed to have lost Maya, who understandably was sincerely jealous, but she had driven a wedge between the two of them and Spartacus, and Sirma left for Vienna with the bad feeling that in her absence things would get even worse. Dance a Viennese waltz for us, Spartacus joked before she left, and at that moment everything was just as before, but she knew that in the evening he would meet Elena and she imagined his hands unzipping her jeans, his fingers sinking into the yielding pink flesh. Her cousin really had become a perfectly normal girl and Sirma was happy for her, she realized that until now she had always been ashamed of that evening and of the fact that she had never called Chloe again, despite her parents' urging. The two families strolled the streets and took photos of themselves in front of the extravagant, cream-pie buildings, Sirma had bought herself a new digital camera and one evening it occurred to her that she could show Chloe pictures of her friends, they hooked the camera up to the computer and she tried to explain to her, insofar as it was possible, her relationship with Spartacus and Maya, and Elena was in one of the pictures, too, Sirma groaned and explained that she was just some annoying chick who was trying to glom onto them, but her cousin abruptly fell silent, Sirma looked at her, she sat frozen, staring at the screen with unblinking eyes, hey, said Sirma, what's the matter, she did not take her eyes off the picture, that's Elena, she said finally. Yeah, Sirma said in surprise, her name is Elena, do you know her, of course I know her, Chloe said at last, don't you remember her? Some powerful wave hit her in the head and sent her back to that bizarre and repulsive evening, she heard Elena's voice, *oh, what a good girl* and felt her strange kiss on her own lips and only now could she reconstruct the image that had buried itself somewhere deep in the corners of her memory, the face of the girl with the leather jacket.

(from Chapter 9)

That night he couldn't fall asleep for a long time, listening to their steady breathing, truth be told the bed was too narrow and the mattress sagged, plus his dinner wasn't sitting well in his stomach, he suddenly realized that he had chalked up his sleeplessness precisely to these everyday causes, while only a few days earlier he would have known that the reason was actually something else and he would have gone out to look at the birch trees, white as hospital walls; lying on the sagging mattress, he asked himself whether he should feel guilty that he was a few thousand miles from home in the pleasant company of young people, having thrown off his grief and depression like flannel pajamas, but wasn't that why he'd set off aimlessly in his car, to slip away, at the time he hadn't known either where he was going nor when he would come back, because he wasn't thinking of returning, he just needed to go somewhere else, to go far away, and now it was ridiculous to feel guilty in front of his dead wife, she certainly would have approved. Krustev sighed and thought about how Irina had always been smarter than him, even in her death she remained smarter, surely some change was taking place within him now which he didn't quite fully understand, but she would've figured it out, just as she had figured out before him that their marriage had gone cold and she had accepted it with that strange calm with which she took in everything, even in the wild years when they had met. He was always a step behind her, and eight years ago was no exception either, when they had come here to Rhodes and had not made love even once, yet he had desired another woman, he remembered her all of a sudden, blonde and slippery, sitting at the hotel bar, Irina and Elena were out shopping, he had gone to have a drink, they started talking, she was from Belgium or Holland, what is an attractive woman like you doing here all alone, God, how stupid and banal, it's like stepping in something sticky in the fallen leaves and saying to yourself god damn it I just stepped in shit, but it turns out that it's only soft mud, he wanted her lazily, with the superiority of a successful man, and after all that's why she was sitting alone at the bar, and while she spoke to him slowly, purring, he imagined taking her to his suite and tossing her down on the double bed or better yet, on his daughter's bed, why not, screwing this easy woman on his daughter's bed, and amidst the astringent taste of this vision he suddenly felt ashamed, not from any sense of fidelity, not because he had decided that it was disgusting, but because it was not disgusting *enough* and that made it ridiculous, he hadn't stepped in shit, but in mud, and every day men and women like the two of them sat at that bar,

and they would continue sitting there until the hotel got old and was torn down, and after a new one was built in its place, those men and women with their repulsive smiles and worn-out lines would continue sitting here, and he started backing off, she sensed it, turned away, his phone rang, it was his partner from the promotional agency, who ecstatically roared in his ear dude, we got Rammstein, that was amazing news, they had been fighting Thracian Entertainment for that concert, they had turned somersaults to get this deal, and now they were becoming a leading player in the industry and Krustev barked into the phone *wunderbar!*

But, as he came to realize years later, around the time they had won the Rammstein gig, his wife had already started seeing her director, he never did find out where she'd met him, whether he was blond or dark, whether he did Shakespeare or Pinter; she simply mentioned him once, when it was already completely clear to both of them that their relationship was more that of roommates, otherwise polite and considerate of each other, she mentioned to him that for five years she'd had a boyfriend who was a director, a theater director, she said, as if saying in passing that last night she'd been to a restaurant with her girlfriends, an Italian restaurant, and Krustev was stunned by his lack of jealousy, well okay, he replied, but I don't want to see him, Irina agreed, afterwards he felt hurt, even though he knew he had no such right, he himself also had mistresses, and not just one or two, and perhaps that was precisely what changed things, he had scattered his sexual instinct, which was in any case blunted by work, among many women, while Irina had simply replaced him with another, she had found herself another man and she surely even loved him, it was just that she didn't live with him, but no one mentioned divorce, Krustev's first thought was that his wife, of course, did not want to deprive herself of the house, the car and everything else, of her secure and comfortable life, and that very well may have been part of it, but besides that she was surely afraid that if she got divorced and started living with her director, sooner or later their relationship would wither just like her marriage had. Does Elena know, he asked her, I've only hinted about it to her, Irina replied, Krustev suddenly wondered whether he would be expected to move out of the nuptial bed, but in fact, this foreign object, his wife's body, did not bother him and she did not leave the bed, either, presumably the force of habit was too powerful, and with such an obvious act of separation, they would have had to give their daughter definite explanations. This conversation had taken place only three years earlier, so that meant, Krustev calculated, that Elena had been seventeen then and sufficiently tuned in to sense what was going on even without her mother's hinting. At that time, Krustev sometimes stared at his

daughter in astonishment, momentarily stunned by the memory of that erstwhile baby in his arms and unable to understand what the pretty young girl in his living room could possibly have in common with that surprised little tuft of life, two so very different creatures, who by some coincidence bore the same name. Elena seemed to be going through some teenage crisis, from which she recovered on her own and he made sure not to grill her too much, he felt ill at ease rummaging around in his daughter's life with his rough, manly paws and he certainly wouldn't have understood anything of her problems and worries, the parade of pimply boyish faces, the staggering, terrible meaning that even the most casual words take on at that age, maybe six months before that, yes, that's about how long it had been, he had started becoming seriously worried about Elena, she was out and about way more than she should be, she would silently lock herself away in her room, and when she would come out or come home, she looked steel-plated in her leather jacket, scornful and – in some vague and disturbing way – evil. What more could she want, he would sometimes ask himself the question of all parents from all continents and eras, and when he would catch himself thinking such thoughts, he would sullenly decide that he was starting to get old, not physically, but in his perceptions, in the automatic schemata through which you think about the world, and he would even tell himself that if he hadn't become a father and husband so early, he would surely feel younger right now, he wasn't even forty. But right when Irina had casually mentioned her theater director, her tagliatelle with gorgonzola, he had stopped worrying about his daughter, because she looked a lot better, she was sociable, as the doctors loved to put it, the two of them would talk, and nothing seemed strange or wrong to him, and besides, back when she was still out and about, she had never come home drunk and Krustev simply could not believe that was possible. And still listening to the three young people's steady breathing, lying in the dark on the uncomfortable mattress, he wondered which Elena they knew, what had happened between them and whether he wanted to know or rather not. It was not Elena but he who was doing something wrong, chumming up with her friends, albeit her former friends, secretly, through the back door, he was sneaking into her personal life, so carefully hidden from her parents, just as it should be, and having once ended up inside this forbidden house accidentally and in the absence of its master, perhaps it would nevertheless be best not to act like a bull in a china shop, not to break or rearrange things, not to leave muddy footprints on the floor and not even to look around, but simply to sit with his eyes closed, until the time came to leave. He sighed. He had lost both his wife and his daughter, and if the loss of the former was in large

part his own fault, the loss of the latter could not be helped, it was the natural result of the mechanical march of time, from a certain point onward our own children belong to us less than any other person around. He suddenly felt like sitting down with Elena again, like they had during the winter, when with her football banter she had unexpectedly wrenched him from his stupor, he wanted to bring out the bottle of scotch with two glasses and say with his unused voice, so now tell me what's going on with you, back then she had told him some things, hinted at others, it seemed that leaving for the States had been very important to her, not just because of the university and the opportunities, but because it allowed her break away from something or someone here, where her life to date had passed, and now her mother, her mother's body tied up in its tubes, had called her back at the beginning of beginnings, Elena didn't want to stay here. So he had assured her that he would be all right and sent her off to America, after which he proceeded to read all the books in the house and lose sleep. He knew he should be very grateful to her. In fact, she really didn't know anything about football. She had read a pile of articles about the upcoming match and had learned the players' names from pictures on the Internet, just to be able to talk to him.