

Memphis

CHAPTER 5.

By then, the country was in the grip of a serious economic crisis, and public transport was so infrequent as to be effectively non-existent. Anyone who disliked waiting endlessly on an unlit pavement for a packed bus to come along, only to have to hang on like the last grape on the bunch, chose to walk instead. It wasn't just me; almost everyone in the city chose to walk, heads bent forward, striding quickly along.

But the women I was watching seemed different from the other passers-by. There were six of them, and all six wore floor-length dresses and jet-black head-scarves.

I had just walked from Vake to Didube and was sitting on a bench outside the church. Suddenly six women filed out of the churchyard, one after the other, and floated slowly off like black-sailed ships, out into a street that throbbed with bustle and triviality. They were dressed like nuns – they probably were nuns – yet, when I saw them I was aware of a strange sensation inside me. Something about the women – the way they were dressed, their gait, the unusual length of their skirt tails, the sadness in their footsteps – reminded me of a scene from my not-too-distant past and of that blind visitor... In an instant, before my mind could even register what my body was doing, I leapt up and, almost without realising it, began to follow the procession of women, as if in a trance.

The women had nothing on their feet. As I watched them walk along, I caught sight several times of the whiteness of their bare soles flashing from beneath their long dresses. But although they were barefoot and on unpaved earth, they walked in a very orderly manner, never falling out of time with each other. It looked almost as if they were floating across the surface of an invisible lake. They were like otherworldly dancers whose movements spontaneously determined the rhythm of some mystical music that nobody else could hear. I did not really understand why I was following them, nor what I hoped to achieve by doing so, but I followed them anyway, as if under a spell, trying not to lose them in the fast-flowing stream of passers-by, and I became more and more convinced that these were indeed God's handmaidens. There was something so strange, so mysterious, so dream-like in their appearance and in the way they moved....

The women soon turned off the main road and headed down a cobbled street which gradually narrowed and rose to become a slope lined with low, flat-roofed houses, before turning into a steeper, uninhabited dirt-track. The nuns did not alter their speed or gait at all; they strode forward like God's own soldiers, heads bowed forward as if the very weight

of their flesh hung like anchors round their necks. As they walked along, their bare soles left twelve faint but consistent im-prints in the dirt.

The ascent seemed endless, infinitely long. I found it more and more difficult to match the nuns' pace. The landscape was unchanging, too, and I felt as if I were in some huge pavilion where an unseen film director had ordered us to walk in front of a rotating backdrop that showed a never-ending dirt path and parched, sun-scorched hills. As I walked along the middle of the path, I was suddenly over-whelmed by a dreadful, inhuman weakness, as if something inside me had been scorched and parched like the grass on those hills. For a moment I was blind. I collapsed, exhausted, onto the ground. By now the women were nothing more than black dots on the summit of the hill, where I could see an old stone basilica silhouetted against the uneven outline of the setting sun.

And I sat there and knew that hunger and fatigue were not the only things that lay behind my weakness. A desperate melancholy seemed to rush forth like a chill wind from the women's bodies, those black birds with their clipped wings, leaving me utterly exhausted, broken and drained.

Nowhere and never before had I experienced such heart-rending sadness, nor have I since. It was as if the women had brought me to a soul-destroying void, where in an instant everyone and everything had abandoned me, including my own body. Everything around me was obliterated, destroyed...and in its place had risen a wall of dense, impenetrable silence. A solid wall of total, absolute, inviola-ble silence... I have no idea how long I lay there, motionless, alone, afraid...

* * *

When I came to it was already dark. I could make out what I thought must be bats flying around in the sky above me. The dry grass crunched under my legs and slowly I began to pick out sounds and images again. I got to my feet and brushed myself off. I gathered my strength and followed after those visions that had ap-peared before me in the darkness. Thinking back I find it hard to believe that strange day ever really happened; maybe it was my imagination, nothing more, some kind of waking dream on a moonless night.

At last I reached the end of the slope. The landscape opened out into a wide, barren field dotted with electricity pylons, like the skeletal remains of prehistoric beasts beneath the moonlight. A few metres away stood the partial ruins of a small basilica. As I drew near, it dawned on me that no one, neither worshipper nor passer-by, had set foot inside this basilica for many years. Its roof had fallen in, weeds covered the ground, its walls had been eaten away by the sun and the rain...

I leaned against a dilapidated wall and let out a deep sigh. I wanted to go home, home... I wanted to see Neliko's face peering at me through a cloud of cigarette smoke, to hear her muttering at me with that tone of eternal dissatisfaction in her voice... Poor, wretched Neliko... I wanted a hot cup of tea, I wanted my room, I wanted to sleep in its warmth and calm... My books by the bedhead, my easel against the wall, my Siamese cat by my feet... A picture of my mother by the mirror, Nika breathing two floors below...

I was almost in tears. But then I heard something. I stood stock-still. It was the sound of footsteps. Somebody was coming. They were heavy footsteps, heavy and lumbering. I moved away from the wall slightly and in the light of the moon caught sight of the silhouette of a tall, awkward man. He must have seen me, too, because he started walking straight towards me. I almost passed out with fear. God, I prayed, God, if you're there, please help me... I dropped to my knees, felt around on the ground for a broken piece of the basilica wall and gripped it as hard as I could, like a drowning man desperately clinging to moss to stop himself being swept downstream. The man came closer, and I clung to the wall like a shadow.

* * *

"Hello."

His voice was hoarse.

"Hello," I managed to mumble. "What are you doing here?" "Nothing... I got lost..."

There was no point making anything up; he could see perfectly well that I was alone in this dark and deserted field.

He asked anyway: "Are you alone?"

I said nothing. I was so scared I could barely move my lips.

He shook his head. Thoughtfully. Heavily. The moon was behind him and lit only the back of his head, so that I was unable to see his features. He was probably around forty years old, maybe more. He looked tall, imposing, with broad shoulders and thick arms.

"Where do you live?" "Down there."

I waved my hand in the vague direction of the city, and hid my other hand, with the rock still in it, behind my back. How laughable. As if a rock, a piece of an old ruin, could help me now. This man would have his way with me and then crush me like a gnat.

He moved closer towards me, looked at me carefully, and laughed.

"Don't be scared. I'm not going to hurt you. Where do you live? Come on, I'll take you home."

I could not believe I would have such an easy escape, or that this man did not have some

ulterior motive. I stood there, still paralysed, listening to the blood pounding in my temples.

“Come on! Just follow me... I know these paths like the back of my hand. I work up here, at the power station. I’m on my way back into town now. Don’t be scared... And you can throw that rock away, too,” he said, walking past me. “My God, what have things come to? Nobody trusts anyone nowadays...,” he muttered under his breath as he set off down the hill.

I followed slowly behind. But I kept the rock. I stuffed it into the pocket of my jeans. We walked half way down the path in silence. The man walked confidently, sure-footedly. I followed not far behind. When the houses down the hill came into view I relaxed, and started to feel ashamed of my earlier fear and mistrust.

“I was up there looking for my mother,” I said suddenly, and swallowed the lump in my throat which had welled up under the stress of what I had just been through.

“Your mother?” He looked at me in surprise.

“Yes... Did you see the nuns? There were six of them. They were barefoot. Like pilgrims.”

“No. What would nuns be doing up here? The monastery and church are over that way.”

“I don’t know... Is there a village round here, maybe? Or a main road?” The man shook his head.

“I’ve been up there all day. If anyone had gone past I’d have seen them. And listen, don’t go up there at night again. I’m scared to walk around the city at night; a girl of your age... well...”

“Thank you...”

“Let’s take the metro to Didube. Whereabouts do you live?”

CHAPTER 6

That summer, Neliko decided to do something nice for me, and threw a big party in our empty flat to celebrate my enrolment at the Academy of Fine Arts. People weren’t giving much thought to parties at that time. There was a war going on in Abkhazia, and not a day went by without the television news showing pictures of hacked-up corpses and the Black Sea red with blood. There were shortages of basic essentials like food and drink, and the stations and hotels were full to the rafters with whole families of refugees sleeping on whatever belongings they had managed to grab as they fled from their homes.

To this day, I cannot fathom why Neliko went mad like that; she put all of society’s woes out of her mind along with her migraines and the frayed nerves I’d caused her over the years, ignored my protestations and withdrew a “good chunk” of the money she’d put aside after

the sale of her one-bedroom apartment; she used it to buy a chick-en from the Dezertiris Market to make satsivi, and a basketful of sour cherries which she hauled home to use in an enormous cake.

Maybe Neliko hoped that by doing all this she might manage to hide her dismay at the prospect of me becoming a student. She really could not believe that the Academy had opened its hallowed portals to a wilful and frivolous girl like me. Her pessimistic prophecies about my prospects turned out to be entirely unfounded; Neliko admitted she was wrong and to mark the end of hostilities and the start of our ceasefire she planned a party for her sole worthy opponent. Of course I knew that deep down my great-aunt, who in her old age had little love or joy left in her, actually loved me very much, but I knew, too, that she would not admit this to herself, let alone me, in a thousand years. But now she had been given the perfect opportunity to express her love for me indirectly. She bustled about excitedly in the kitchen, invited friends and relatives with the reckless compulsiveness of a little girl and set about decorating the cake, and seemed through all of this to be making amends for her previous mistakes. She was seeking my forgiveness; spent, exhausted by old age and grief, she had struggled to take my mother's place, struggled to ease my pain by taking the weight of my sorrow onto her own shoulders...

In the event, the cherry gateau was sublimely delicious and the party a raucous triumph. The guests particularly enjoyed Neliko's rendition of an old love song. Nika provided the accompaniment. Neliko, leaning on the piano, raised her shrill, mature voice, dragging on her cigarette in its holder between verses, filling that tense, hot summer night with the scent of Parisian decadence and naphthalene.

After Neliko had finished her love song to thunderous applause and received calls of "Encore!" from the guests, I went into the kitchen to brew some coffee. I mixed the coffee grounds and sugar in the copper pot and put it on the gas stove. The kitchen was a short distance away from the general mayhem in the living room, near the front door. Because of this I was the only one who heard the keys turning in the door. And I was the only one who saw a man open the door and come into the flat...

The man looked like someone I had known a long, long time ago and had not seen since that night he read me a fairy-tale before bed, and I kissed him on the cheek, as I always did. That was eleven years ago. I probably shouldn't even have recognised him, but as soon as I saw him I knew who he was.

He was just as I remembered him: tall, imposing, with broad, solid shoulders, his fair hair already showing signs of grey, and combed back over his head. All the things he had not had a chance to say for eleven years were stacked up in his heart and in his throat, like some invisible ladder I had already begun to climb, and from where I looked down and saw eleven

long years of sadness stretched out between us. And it was from this vantage point that I looked down on him now, and saw him standing in the half-open doorway seemingly unable to speak or move, staring at me wide-eyed as if staring was the only thing that might redeem him, as if he could fit eleven years of energy, love, grief and concern into his gaze. I could hear our guests laughing in the other room, and someone playing the piano. Seeing his face, hearing that music, I was transported back in an instant to my childhood. But there was something even more painful about it this time; as if I longed to go further back still, to the time before I became a person; it was a senseless, absurd wish to go back to the warm waters of my mother's womb, spilt many years previously. But this was reality, as cruel and relentless as ever, and there was nothing I could do but face it.

"Who was it you wanted?" I asked him at last, when I had got my bearings again.

"Ana..." From the way he mumbled I could not tell whether he was answering my question or addressing me directly.

"I'm Ana. Who are you?" I said, and my own voice sounded strange to me. It was probably one of the hardest moments of his life. He was still staring at me, devouring me with his eyes, still reeling from the shock of seeing me. It's not surprising. After all, even though I looked a lot like my mother, he hadn't seen me since I was a child. What was he expecting? What had he been hoping for? Did he really think he'd find a little girl standing there before him? Did he think I'd feel the same way I'd felt years before, as if my heart had been locked tightly shut all those years?

"I... I'm your father. You probably don't recognise me... I'm sorry..."

I had imagined this scene before, imagined meeting him again a thousand times, a hundred thousand times, and each time I imagined it I took great delight in my cruelty. First, I fantasised about revenge, hellish revenge. I thought of the most devastating, hurtful words I could, words that might express the extent of my loathing for him, and I turned them over again and again in my mind, arranging them and rearranging them a hundred thousand times, each time with a different tone, a different cadence. I perfected an expression of mocking hatred. I longed for the moment to come someday, for fate to give me my chance to demand an explanation for my childhood, for the shattered dream, the fairy-tale that had no happy ending, for our ruined lives, for my poor, broken mother.

And now the time had come, and I stood there staring at my father, the man who had tried to sneak into his own home like some shamefaced thief, and I felt the desperate hatred that had ruled me and gnawed at me for so long fade away. I looked at him standing there, still gazing at me, like a humiliated magician whose tricks have gone wrong but who clings to the hope that the audience will still be won over by the magic of his gaze, and I realised I did not want to waste a single word on him. I realised that if I let him see my emotions, experiences,

feelings – even the upsetting, challenging ones – it would be almost like rewarding him...

I said nothing. He would get nothing from me but indifference. You can't rea-son with indifference. I turned my back on him, my expression one of calm and no emotion, as if the only question I had was why, after so long, he had bothered coming back at all.

CHAPTER 9

It was one of those mornings when even waking up and lifting your head off the pillow seems like too much effort. It was a silent, foggy, monochrome morn-ing. There was joylessness in the air, the weariness that usually comes with long winter evenings. I looked at the alarm clock. It was ten past eight, but it was still dark. I had stayed up drawing until midnight and at that moment I would rather have died than get out of my warm bed, get dressed and go out into the cold, dreary street. "You've been really lazy recently, Aniko," I remembered Nika saying, but I didn't care. "Sod lectures," I thought, and went back to sleep. When I opened my eyes it was already noon. The cat lay purring by my feet, and outside raindrops soaked the earth like the tears of a woman weeping for no reason.

I went into the dining room and put the kettle on to boil. Hot tea, cheese, hon-ey, toasted bread... I was glad I'd spent that cold December morning asleep, and that now I was sitting in a warm room tracing shapes on the steamed-up mirror and not freezing to death in a lecture theatre... I did not know that I was to face a new trauma that day. I did not know that after a quiet, unremarkable start the day would take a dramatic turn, only to culminate in another awful, painful loss...

The first act of this harrowing drama takes place right there in my flat on Bar-nov Street, with its old grand piano and disused fireplace. The main characters in this play are Nika and Nika's friend Archil. The sole spectator – or to be exact, the sole listener – stands frozen by the bathroom door, unable to move... The heroes made their stage entrance just as I went into the bathroom. Nika opened the door with his key and led Archil into the flat.

"There's nobody here. I told you, at this time of day she's at lectures. Come in, come in..."

"Wow, nice place..."

"Look in the wardrobe drawers." "Does she still keep her money here?" "Yeah. Stupid girl."

"Beautiful women are always stupid. She's a great girl, mind. What's she like in the sack?"

"You have no idea..." "You lucky bastard..."

"You're a lucky bastard, mate – cadging drugs off me for three months solid." "There's

nothing here. Fuck it..."

"It'll be somewhere else. I'm sure of it. She's just had a new commission." "Well, where? You know better than I do... Oh man, what a great drawing..." "Never mind the drawings, I need a fix, you bastard. Get a move on, will you?" I could hear them rummaging around in the next room. There was a nasty smell of piss and depravity, of foul, long-corrupted junkie flesh...

"Did you look in the bedroom?"

"Yeah, and there was nothing there either. Just how long do you want me to poke around in her knicker drawer for?"

"Fuck it... Looks like she hasn't had any money from them yet. I'll find out this evening. Dammit..."

They leave. I hear the door closing. The curtain comes down...

* * *

I lay down on the bed. I stared at the ceiling. All I remember is this: a flat, white expanse and, in the corner, a little black stain where water has seeped through from somewhere in the roof. Everything else – faces, voices, feelings, thoughts – was wiped from my mind, switched off, disconnected. It was as if somebody's kind hand had cut me free from the web of existence so as to protect my psyche from collapse, conflagration and insanity.

When I lifted my head my body felt heavy, as if made of stone, and I felt as if my heart had been smashed to pieces and scattered throughout my body. Maybe one of those pieces what was making that sound I heard coming from my stom-ach. Thump-thump... A brief pause and then... thump... thump-thump... There was something inside me, irritating me, kicking me. Hitting out at me with its feet, or fists or head. There was something alive in me. Something inside that pale, dead body that lay pinned to the bed like some dried butterfly in a museum. It was unimaginable. Illogical. Like telling someone who was mute to sing, telling some-one with no arms and legs to dance, or someone who has been dead for a hundred years to stand up. It was something I had to put right. I had to fix this, right now.

I went out of the house. It must have been Tuesday or Wednesday. The tenth or eleventh of December. Morning, or midday. What did it matter? All that mattered was that when I got there the clinic was open and the doctor was able to see me. My gynaecologist came out in her white coat and greeted me with a smile.

“An abortion?! Have you lost your mind?! How can you have an abortion? You’re already eighteen weeks gone. Do you want to kill yourself as well as the baby?”

Only a few moments before she had been smiling, but now the doctor was visibly upset.

“It’s not a baby. It’s an embryo, just cells, water, placenta... and I want you to get rid of it before it becomes one!”

“It’s already too late. It could go very badly wrong.”

“I don’t care! If you won’t give me an abortion I’ll slit open my belly and do it myself.”

“Listen Ana... Calm down. Has something happened? Have the two of you had a fight? It’s not that bad. It’ll all blow over. And even if it doesn’t it’s not the end of the world. Just please don’t do something you’re going to regret for the rest of your life.”

“My life is nothing to do with you. Just mind your own business and give me the abortion!”

She looked at me. She was pale. She could see from the look of anger in my eyes that there was no point talking anymore.

It was that anger that gave me the strength to go through with it.

To lie on the gynaecologist’s bed. To let them inject it, kill it, carve open my stomach with shears and take my child out piece by piece - the head first, probably, and then the arms and legs, shapeless flesh mixed with slime and blood.

And then... the strength to see that bowl of pulped flesh mixed with blood and foul fluid. I felt sick. My stomach churned and rose, acrid, into my throat and the back of my mouth. I clenched my teeth together hard and covered my mouth with my hands. But it was no good, I was flooded with unbearably rancid, musty vomit; the ground started to shift under me, my legs gave way...

The world turned upside down, and everything changed. And when I left the clinic the overwhelming feeling I had was of being a cruel, callous killer, but one who had feelings, moods, a context, and I realised that destruction serves at least one purpose. It creates space. I was free. Empty! Emptied of the mental burden I’d been hauling around for so many years like some stupid mule: emptied of that non-existent, imagined love, of blind patience, of false morality and useless complexes – emptied, in other words of everything I’d used to sculpt myself into a silly, sentimental girl.

It was still raining. I was so cold my teeth were chattering. I boarded a bus; it was a circular, and my five minute journey stretched out to a full hour. But that didn’t bother me. I sat by the window and watched reflected landscapes flash past back to front. The other passengers and the people walking the streets outside – all strangers to me – seemed loathsome, featureless, completely lifeless. And I was glad that the child who just a few hours earlier had been inside me would now never be born... It would never breathe this poisoned

air, would never walk these foul streets, never live alongside these strange two-legged creatures.

The bus went down Peking Avenue, then turned into Kavtaradze and headed towards the tower blocks on the university campus. It pulled up at the last stop outside the university buildings and all the passengers got off. Twilight had crept in unseen, further darkening the grim, despondent landscape. I had a few min-utes' wait ahead of me until the driver turned the steering wheel and started his round-trip again.

And in the middle of that frozen second I saw them, in the distance, at the end of the empty road: that strange procession of women, barefoot and dressed in black. They walked in time with each other as they had done before, heads bowed, the hems of their heavy, rain-soaked dresses brushing along the asphalt. Beyond the tower blocks stood the skeletal carcasses of houses left half-built. In among these huge towers of iron and concrete there stood a rusty crane, frozen, lit by a large yellow spotlight that shone like an artificial sun. As I stared at the women's black-lacquer silhouettes against this urban backdrop I once again felt a strange turmoil inside, as if I was stranded on some far, unknown shore of existence, as if everything that was happening was completely outside reality.

But this time I felt something else, something more than a mystical, limitless sadness. I felt the existence of a great, unattainable and unexplainable truth. With their bowed heads and bare feet the women showed me a wisdom I had never been aware of before, the Christ-like wisdom of devotion, self-sacrifice, forgive-ness, the wisdom of overlooking the shortcomings of one's fellow man. I would probably never fully understand the depths of this wisdom, but I realised this much at least: amid the distortions, deception and turmoil of this world there ex-ists the possibility of salvation and of new beginnings...

* * *

When I got home everything was just as I'd left it. But why would things be any different? Ever since my mother had weaved that invisible web of sadness across the walls and ceiling of the flat nothing had changed... The cat was meowing hun-grily. I poured her some milk and put the coffee pot on the gas stove to boil.

The coffee tasted even better than normal. I lit a cigarette and went over to the kitchen window. Hot coffee, the courtyard I'd played in as a child, my drawings... What else would I be sad to leave, I wondered. Nothing! The answer slipped out, almost too easily, like cigarette smoke escaping from between my lips. I opened the window and threw my cigarette butt down into the courtyard below.

As the fresh air streamed in from outside I breathed it in like a man con-demned to death – quickly, greedily, in huge gulps. Then I closed the window, went over to the stove and

turned the gas on all four burners onto full. The infra-structure in Georgia was so shoddy that gas poisoning was an everyday occurrence. It happened so often it would never occur to anyone that this might be a suicide. Not that it really matters – but I didn't want to be buried in unconsecrated ground. I don't want to be on my own in the afterlife, too.

I sat there on my chair, leaning against the wall, a thousand thoughts and ideas running through my mind. Stupid things... Like the fact that I never managed to finish my father's commission and that the bakemono monster would be my final work. And then I thought about the fact that the nightmare of my childhood had finally been revealed, so many years later, and that the exhausting, marathon battle that had taken place in these rooms between myself and that terrible black devil had ended with my defeat.

I was too weak to hold myself up and slipped down from the chair onto the floor. I lay on my back and looked up at the ceiling. I knew that the last judgement would be delivered up on high, but I thought there might be something written down here too... But there was nothing on the ceiling. I closed my eyes. A line from a poem by Rumi surfaced in the darkness of my mind: "Fearful of separation, I choose to run from love..." "If the price of love is separation, the price of life is death," I heard somebody say, and I found myself agreeing...

I was very, very sleepy. The smell of gas no longer bothered me. It was a very good thing. A warm sluggishness engulfed me, a soft, loving fog. Every now and then pictures flickered across this fog like serial images on a white screen. I saw hands hovering above our piano, playing a familiar yet discordant, unpleasant tune, and that blind woman sitting on the stool, fixing me with her cloudy eyes. Terrified, I ran into the kitchen but found the blind woman there, too, holding out her empty cup towards me. Down in the yard there were children playing, digging away with their little hands and burying a dead pigeon in the dirt. They jumped up and down on its grave, gleefully stamping the earth as in unison they intoned the playground rhymes of my youth:

"Rosy apple, lemon tart,
tell me the name of your sweetheart.."

She stared at me blindly and I sank into the cruel whites of her vacant, dead eyes, the words of the children's choir sounding a monotonous, never-ending echo in my head. Like a choir of fallen angels singing an endless, tortuous, childish requiem...

"Onniker bonniker super soniker, onniker bonniker
split..."

Eventually these voices faded, too. Only a weak, mumbled echo remained...

Onniker bonniker super soniker...

Onniker bonniker... super soniker...

And that's it. It's all over...

And when the curtain came down I saw my mother. Mum's back! She's back! Even if she has come back just as I've gone, just as I'm no longer able to stand and walk over to her. And she's still so young. So beautiful. With that same tobacco-coloured dress and leather handbag. She opened the front door and came into the flat. She started looking for me. "Ana! Where are you, Ana? Why haven't you locked the door? Lock it, darling. Surely you know what time it is..."