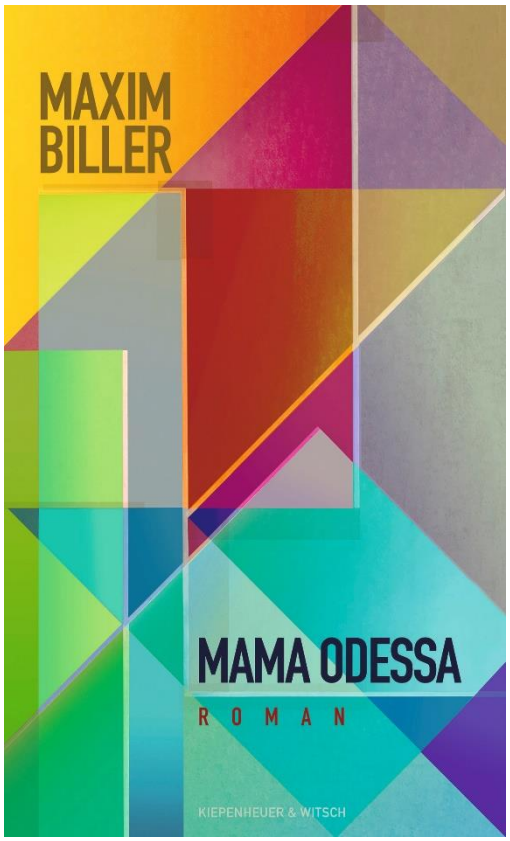
MAMA ODESSA

by Maxim Biller

Sample translation by Damion Searls



[chapters 1–7, 9, 11–12, 14, 25]

Literary Fiction / Novel, 240 pages

Publication date: August 2023

Foreign rights with: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG

Contact information: https://www.kiwi-verlag.de/verlag/rights#contact

Only he who meets a tragic end is truly a poet.

— Vladimir Vysotsky

1

In May 1987, when I was twenty-six years old, my mother wrote me a letter on an old Russian typewriter but never sent it. It started right in with how lazy she was, how ashamed she was, again, of chain-smoking her long thin Kim cigarettes all day lying in the living room on the gigantic red Rolf Benz couch she had bought when she was still with my father. How she sat in the kitchen playing solitaire and smoking more. Or stood at the living room window, smoking, looking at the newly budding leaves on the still bare black branches of the linden in front of our building on Bieberstrasse.

Then came a few short, nasty thoughts about people in the West, who always act like they're so busy. Like her "aggravating" neighbor on the ground floor—"I can never remember her idiotic name with that *von* like she's a countess!"—who'd recently told her how bad she felt when she'd spent a whole day doing nothing but reading thrillers. And then, as I read this letter thirty years later, after her horrible, lonely death, she sprang her rage and grief on me—feelings I'd never known about. Or had I? They were about her father, my grandfather, who'd been arrested in Odessa in the mid-Seventies for having organized with two friends a secret exhibition of anti-Soviet art in the basement of the art academy; he'd had a heart attack in prison, and then another one at home, and then another, and then it was over.

"To this day, *synok,* I feel guilty for not having flown to see Papa in Odessa, not being with him and not burying him, and I'll feel that way for the rest of my life," my mother wrote to me. "If I'd known that this terrible feeling would keep coming back all my life then of course I would

have gone to him and stroked the back of his hand, the way he always did for me when I was at the end of my rope."

The important thing to know here is that we—meaning my mother, my father, and me—had left the Soviet Union a long time before most of the other Jews, in the early Seventies. My father, with his long-winded studies of the history of Russian Zionism (which appeared only in samizdat), his plan to hijack an Aeroflot plane and fly us from Odessa to Tel Aviv (seriously), was always one of the most zealous refusenik followers of the new Moses, Natan Sharansky. That's one thing. The other is that none of us was allowed to ever again set foot on Soviet soil. Henry Kissinger had personally negotiated our departure in 1971, and, my father often said, "If the eternal commisars get you into their clutches again, they'll never let you go."

And yet my mother would have gone back? I asked myself over and over again as I read the letter that had lain in a desk drawer in her study for so long, already addressed, already stamped. Did I matter so little to her? Did she really care more about looking into her dying father's dimming eyes one more time than about seeing the whole life before me in mine? "Also," she scribbled by hand at the bottom of the typed letter, "I've been thinking for a long time about finally throwing out this huge horrible sofa I'm lying on now as I write this, and getting something nice and new for the living room. I'm sure your father used to lie on it with his German whore when I wasn't here."

Could it really be true, I suddenly thought, that I'd turned into another sad and confused grown-up like my parents? Because now it was me, in Hamburg, on Bieberstrasse, sitting on the fifty-year-old but still

pretty sturdy sofa that looked almost good as new, feeling the typical Kachmarian feeling, as my mother used to call it—she knew it too. What did she mean by calling it that? My handsome, cheerful Armenian grandfather's name was Kachmarian—Yaakov Gaikovitch Kachmarian—and even though according to Mama he never let it show, he used to think about suicide as much as other people thought about sex and food. Maybe even more.

2

The first time my mother read me one of her short stories over the phone, she was in Hamburg and I'd already been in Munich for a couple of years. I had just rented my first real adult apartment—two rooms, up under the roof, too cold in the winter and too hot in the summer but at least there I didn't have any more scary roommate-strangers to share the bathroom with, and the kitchen, and all their moods and various disasters. One bright summer morning I was standing at the window, looking out at the big black block of the Nordbad behind the empty grassy field still shimmering with dew and holding the phone between my head and my shoulder because I was trying to scrape a *Nuclear Power? No Thanks!* sticker I hadn't noticed when I moved in off of the windowpane.

"How are you doing, my darling boy?" my mother had asked, sounding friendly, when I'd picked up the phone, in a bad mood and still in my pajamas. Then, sounding unusually hard and unfriendly even for her: "But please don't start telling me about your problems and your girls again! You know I'll just spend whole days thinking and worrying about it."

Without saying a word I made an annoyed face like a sixteen-year-old.

"So," she said, "what's new?"

"Nothing," I said, "absolutely nothing. I'm just running late, I should have started working a long time ago."

"That essay you wrote on Cynthia Ozick was great, I bought five or six copies of *Der Spiegel* and handed them out to all the ladies in the

building. They may all be dumb as a rock but they can at least go green with envy!"

"What are you talking about, Mama? I'm not eight years old anymore. You can't go around bragging about me."

"I know, you're right. Sadly."

"Do you remember how back in Odessa I had my picture taken for Women's Day with all the other kids in my class?"

"I still have the picture somewhere."

"They stuck each one of our photos on the paper in the middle of a drawing of a bouquet of flowers, and then wrote above it, in ridiculously swirly italics, 'International Women's Day 1968' and 'Congratulations, Mama!'"

"You looked so mean in your picture that it seemed like you hated me for even giving birth to you."

"Mama, no."

"Are you sure about that?" my mother said, with her beautiful, horrible, explosive laugh. And then she asked me if I felt like listening to a story she'd dashed off yesterday, in Dr. Felosof's, our old family doctor's, waiting room.

"It's called 'The Compass,'" she said, "and it almost brought me to tears more than once while I was writing it."

3

They were lying in bed in Karagul, fifty miles west of the Kirghiz Mountains, when they heard on the radio that Hitler had died like a dog in Berlin and that lots of soldiers would be returning home soon. Then they heard on the radio the gunshot salutes coming direct from Red Square and at the same time the clopping of a horse's hooves in the yard. Ela knew at once that it was Papa. He had gone off to war on a huge young white horse, and when she looked out the window, she recognized his tall thin shape at once on the horse's back. Then she saw that the horse was just skin and bones now, white like a haggard wraith. That made her very sad.

That night, after Papa had bathed and locked himself in the kitchen (where the grownups' sleeping couch was) with Mamulya for two hours, he unpacked the presents he'd brought back from Germany. Mamulja got a man's gold watch, Omega or Doxa, Ela couldn't remember anymore since they'd had to sell it on the Karagul black market before long, as well as very nice white underwear, a meat grinder so new it still shone, a whole set of sterling silverware with soup ladle and cake spatula, and a wooden box filled to the rim with paper-thin, pale chocolate cookies. Ela got just a silver compass, tarnished all over, that felt too smooth and worn down. Naturally she was not very happy with her present. She'd been hoping Papa would bring her toys, colored pencils, and a short blue silk dress like the one she'd seen once in an old German or Dutch painting in the museum in Odessa.

When Papa saw how disappointed Ela was, he said: "Come sit on my lap, Ela djan. I will tell you why this compass is worth more than a hundred tins of caviar and three thousand chocolate cakes." Even though she stubbornly stayed sitting on her kitchen chair, he told her anyway, about how, near Berlin, he had lost all his comrades and even his horse. They had come to a forest, at night, planning to sleep for a couple

hours. When he woke up he was alone. The forest was very big, and even though Papa usually had a good sense of direction in strange cities and unfamiliar countryside, he couldn't find his way out. He was in the forest for three or four days, but it felt like many more nights than that. He was about to give up and lie down in the woods when one morning, after he'd spent the night in a deep, damp hole in the ground, he suddenly saw a sleeping German soldier lying next to him. The soldier had a sunken, almost chalk-white face, a tattered uniform, and huge funny white ears. Papa was about to strangle him with his bare hands when the German opened his eyes and said, "Please, don't, I don't want to die! That's why I'm hiding here as long as I need to until the war's over." Then he asked Papa if he was hiding from the war too. When Papa said that he'd gotten lost and wanted to get back to his comrades and his horse, to capture Berlin with them, the German smiled happily. He took a compass out of his old green army rucksack, the same compass Papa had just given Ela. "Here," he told Papa, "I don't need this anymore. But it'll help you get out of the forest. Thank you for risking your life for us! Please, don't ever stray from the right path."

Ela, who was sitting in Papa's lap by that point, smiled and looked expectantly at him. "Someday, when you're as old as me," Papa said, "and you realize you can't find your way in life anymore, all you need to do is look at this compass and everything will turn out all right." And little Ela shook her head sadly, as if she knew that later in life Papa's compass would only rarely be able to help her.

4

The compass from my mother's story really existed: it had belonged, first, to a Wehrmacht soldier, then to my grandfather, then to my mother. Later she gave it to me, but I haven't been able to find it for years. Little Ela was, of course, she herself, whose real name was the very Russian Alyona and sometimes Alyonushka. The big, magnificent white horse that my grandfather rode off to war on existed too. She had told me about it many times, and I'm sure that everything else in the story was also real—my mother could never make things up when writing, at most she could sometimes keep something unmentioned. For example her fits of rage—rare, but all the more furious as a result—when she could no longer ignore something unpleasant. Or the many lovers that her frivolous, melancholy father, handsome Yaakov Gaikovitch Kachmarian, used to have. Or her own strange relationship with Lassik Stein, one of my father's oldest friends, thanks to whom we ended up in Hamburg instead of Tel Aviv or Beersheba.

Lassik Stein—Slavicist, journalist, author of supposedly more than a thousand aphorisms—was short, fat, and very intellectual. Whenever we went to see him in his large, bright corner apartment on Abendrothsweg in Eppendorf during our first years in Hamburg, he would be sitting in the kitchen wearing a blue track suit eating borscht or the thick green pea soup he used to make for himself. We usually ate some too, and when we were done and the white tablecloth was covered with dozens of purple or green spots, we moved into the much larger corner living room, where I was

allowed to watch soccer and *Star Trek* with the sound off on Lassik's color TV.

While I did that, the grownups talked about Lassik's great topic: the massacre at Tolbukhin Square in Odessa, or "little Babi Yar" as Lassik called it, and his fight for a monument which would have the names of all twenty-five thousand Jews who were set on fire like kindling there on one single night by the Germans and Romanians. And, every time, they talked about the five years in the camp that Lassik had gotten from the Communists for his bravery. Back at home I would ask my parents if Lassik had eaten so much and been so fat before. As my mother looked away, silent but smiling, my father said: "Lassik saw how these animals ate the flesh of other prisoners who had frozen to death before their eyes. Back then he preferred to starve."

I also knew, of course, despite still being in my very long transition from childhood to adulthood, that Lassik's enormous appetite extended to women—practically every Russian émigré from Hamburg to Brighton Beach to Haifa knew that. And we often used to discuss in our kitchen, laughing about it, that despite his gigantic belly, his height of barely five foot three (or was it less?), and his angelic face shining with fat, he always managed to have several girlfriends at once. When my mother said one day that she was going to stop coming to see Lassik because he had secretly asked her, during our last visit, whether she would be willing to start a "little *mésalliance*" with him, as he called it, my father laughed especially loud. From then on he would always go to Abendrothsweg alone, without me as well, and would usually come home late and a little drunk.

The only mention my mother ever made of what really happened with Lassik Stein was in one of the letters I later found in my mother's desk. There it all sounded very different, and much more interesting. Mostly the letter was about me, because I had apparently told my loving but faraway mother yet again about one of these Munich girls who loved me and didn't want me. "I thought some more about everything you told me on the phone," she wrote to me in Russian, "and I called you back. But the phone was busy, my boy, you probably were talking to one of the girls right then. You must never tell your father what I'm writing you now! When I was as young as you, I was in love with a boy at the university who had long hair, wrote poems as long as novels, and refused to look professors faithful to the Party in the face. But when he wanted to sleep with me I got scared, like he was a wild animal who wanted to rip me into a thousand pieces. So I cursed and insulted him like a streetwalker! I never have this fear with your father, who thinks a thing over a hundred times before doing it, you understand. He never gets worked up about anything, he even stays calm when a German insults him in the supermarket or at the immigration office. How else could he have gotten us out of Russia? He even acted like he hadn't heard anything when I told you two about Lassik's lewd comments, because he knew of course that Lassik was another one of those boys with long hair and long poems that he never used to stand a chance against." Then came a couple of lines with *x*'s typed over every letter, and then just one, mysterious sentence: "Even so, today I wish I had the young poet from the university back, someone like you or Lassik!"

Of course my mother had written this letter before she found out about my father and his new German girlfriend. And even though she never sent it, her confession now made me very happy. This was her way of showing me her love.

5

Mama was born to be a writer, but she started too late to really become one. Even as a child she loved books, like everyone in Russia. She could read and write at five years old, and apparently she told her parents—my grandparents—every day that she was going to write books herself someday. When, in August 1941, the three of them had had to flee Odessa from the Germans and the Romanians—people were running helter-skelter through the streets; military marches came out of the loudspeakers along with, over and over, Stalin's famous morale-building speech—her mother and father packed the whole family library in two large crates that my grandfather carried all by himself to the train station where a couple last trains were departing for Asia. Even in the last Kirghiz hut, the dirtiest Mongol tent, their little Alyona was going to have reading material. In Karagul, where they found a simple, pretty two-room apartment in an old military barracks, the first thing they unpacked were the book crates, and Mama kissed each individual book my grandmother took out: the thirty-one yellow volumes of the complete Maupassant, the endless dark-green volumes of Tolstoy, the thick blue Pushkin volumes, *The Jungle Book,* and her favorite book by Kataev, with the white sailboat and the view of her hometown of Odessa on the cover.

What happened during summer vacation one and a half years later, though? Little Alyona, almost fifteen by that point, opened a real library with her own books and her parents' in the empty shed behind the barracks. She'd even made her own loan cards for the books, and found an old Returned stamp at the Karagul market, probably from Czarist days.

The children who lived in the military housing, who came by over the next few days and weeks and borrowed books, never brought them back, of course, and that was just what she wanted to happen. When her mother asked her, at the end of summer vacation, what had happened to the family library, she answered severely: "It doesn't exist anymore. In times like these there are more important things to do than read!" And before her mother could slap her, her father said: "Let it go; she may even be right." I know all this from another one of Mama's short stories, which she called "The End of Literature in the City of Karagul," although I would have preferred "The Library": clearer, not so histrionic, not so Russian.

On the cover of my mother's first and only book—called, of course, *The Compass*—there is a photograph of her from the early Fifties. She looks young, intelligent, and utterly innocent. Her curly black hair hangs down to her shoulders, she's smiling, and despite her innocence she's shaping her lips into an almost invisible but lascivious pout. The photograph was taken when she was in Moscow, studying Geography at Lomonosov University. Had she started reading again by that point? Definitely. But I don't think a single one of the few stories she wrote in the next thirty years came from this period—the life of a young Soviet woman after the war was much too hard and too sad for that. Maybe she started writing during the first years of the Thaw, when people between Brest and Vladivostok learned to like the word "tomorrow" again; maybe she even had fleeting dreams of seeing a story of hers appear in *Novy Mir,* authorized by Khrushchev personally. But of course I'm just imagining that.

In Hamburg—and this I know for a fact—she wrote mostly in the car, outside the Toom supermarket in Winterhude, before she got out to

do the whole week's shopping for the three of us every Saturday and, little and delicate as she was, carry all the bags up all the stairs to our apartment by herself. There was always a pad of letter paper sitting in the backseat of her red Fiat Panda, and whenever I took a peek into it, there would be another page or two covered with her giant handwriting. One time when I was still in high school, sleeping in my big dark room with a courtyard window on Bieberstrasse and dreaming too much and not knowing what I was going to do with myself when I grew up, I asked her what it said—I couldn't read the Russian handwriting very well.

"Nothing special," she said. "Whatever comes to mind."

"And what comes to mind now?" I said.

"How I was standing on the Odessa Steps, in the harbor, looking at a giant white steamship gently swaying on the water. A giant white cloud of steam came out of its smokestack, and a couple of sailors were arguing down on the promenade, and suddenly a baby carriage hurtled past me down the steps and the baby's mother was screaming in a panic: 'Help! Help me! My baby! Somebody help!'"

"Mama," I said, "that's from *Battleship Potemkin*. I recognize the scene."

"I know," she said.

"So what were you really just thinking about?"

"I was wishing I was Nina Agadzhanova, the director who thought up and wrote the scene."

"Ah," I said, but at the time I didn't yet understand what she meant.

6

A few days ago, there was a long article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* about the burning of the Jews on Tolbukhin Square and a German organization trying to set up a monument there. I couldn't help but think of Lassik Stein, of course, who was long since dead by then, and the whole time I was reading I kept waiting in vain for his name to come up. A few pages later, there was a piece about the history of Soviet chemists and poison-makers that opened with the the Red Army's and Reichswehr's secret mustard-gas experiments in a couple of dilapidated huts near Saratov. Even though I usually couldn't care less about coincidences, this time it was different, because these two pieces of history fit together in my memory.

The thing is that when my parents and Lassik on Abendrothsweg weren't discussing their plans for a memorial in Odessa, they often talked about a particular Sunday in August 1967 that played an important role in our family mythology. On that Sunday it was very hot and humid on the north coast of the Black Sea, but maybe it was raining, my parents told the story differently every time, and I myself could only remember a few isolated moments of that summer. In the spring my father had rented a small, white-painted dacha for my mother and me in Bolshoi Fontan, where we would go to the beach without him during the week, eat endless okroshka summer soup and watermelons, start dozens of chess games without finishing them, and almost never argue. On Fridays, he would come from the city by tram or car, I still remembered that, and he would stay until Sunday, and I think he would usually be in a very bad mood. As a

little boy I thought that he'd also like a holiday, just like us, instead of staying stuck in the blazing summer city and squabbling with his unintelligent supervisors at the Institute. (A word that was always spoken with great respect in our family: Institute.) Ten years later, though, I would learn in Lassik's kitchen that he was so gloomy because he was already running into trouble with the security agencies (another typical phrase of the Soviet branch of humanity) as a Jew. It had to do with the group he'd founded back when he was a student, which had met every Saturday in a side room of what used to be the Yiddish Theater on what was now Lenin Street.

The Young Israelites, as they called themselves, discussed at great length whether they should try to emigrate to Israel, or whether it mightn't be more courageous and important to stay. They spoke with admiration of proud Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who had himself buried not in his hometown but in neighboring Uman, because there, shortly before his birth, thirty thousand Jews had been killed by the Cossacks. They excitedly read out loud to one another the Jewish gangster stories by Isaac Babel, which were prohibited, and went into raptures over the Israeli generals' cunning strategy in the Six-Day War. And of course there was always someone there who secretly told the KGB everything. My father knew, because during the interrogations he was often summoned to in the massive building of the former Peasants Country Bank, they would often read to him, word for word, what he'd said on Lenin Street.

On the Sunday in August 1967 that my parents would never forget, my father asked my mother to drive him back to the city. He'd spent the whole day sitting hatless on the beach by himself, saying nothing, thinking.

He probably had a mild sunstroke and so didn't feel strong enough to sit behind the wheel himself.

"We'd just left," my father said to Lassik, "when Alyona suddenly screamed I needed to hold the wheel because she couldn't move."

"Yes, terrible," Lassik said, very flustered. He had heard the story a hundred times before.

"And so that's how we drove all the way back to the city. She worked the gas and the brakes, and I steered."

"You could have died," Lassik said.

"We should have died," my father said. "I should have died!"

And my mother said: "I couldn't move my hands and arms, my whole body was paralyzed. Except for my feet!"

"Yes, luckily," my father said, "except for your feet."

"Were you sick, Mama?" I said, even though I had already asked that many times at this point in the story, but as a child you quickly forget such things.

"The next day, it was almost like nothing had happened," she said. "I could move normally. The only thing was that I didn't have any appetite for a week, and was pale as death. And my eyes stayed red for a long time."

"Why didn't you just stop the car?" I said, but no one heard me.

"Shikhany!" Lassik said. "That garbage came from Shikhany. They'd kill lots of people with it later."

"Shikhany?" I asked.

"A small town near Saratov with the Red Fascists' secret chemical weapons factory," my father said.

"What does that mean?"

"That those KGB bastards smeared some kind of radioactive dirt or neurotoxin, manufactured there, onto the steering wheel or driver's side door handle, so that I'd hit a tree on the way from Bolshoi Fontan back to Odessa, my boy."

"Or I would," my mother said, laughing her explosive laugh.

"No, Alyonushka, no," Lassik said, suddenly much too sweet, as he gazed sadly at my mother. "I'm sure they didn't mean you. You've always been much too adorable for that."

"No," my father said, "of course they didn't."

"Still, it just about took care of me," my mother said, and her voice, usually soft, was strange and hard for a second.

Last week I read the *FAZ* article about the sneaky KGB killers twice in a row, underlining a few passages in the paper. What I thought was most interesting was that the men and women of Shikhany were trying to develop a poison that would remain invisible. Did they also want people who touched it to die from it long afterward? Most likely, but they probably were thinking in terms of weeks or months, not decades. Either way, decades was how long it took before my mother developed a lung problem that even the pneumology specialists at the Asklepios Clinic in Hamburg had never heard of. She called her mysterious illness "the loathsome plague" but was clearly not especially surprised by it. Even when she and my father were just starting to fight, in the first few years after they'd emigrated, she said that he and his little Zionist games would someday be the death of her. It may well be that she was thinking about their crazy drive in the summer of 1967, and its consequences, though of course I can't be sure.

7

The building on Bieberstrasse we moved into soon after we arrived in Hamburg dated from the late nineteenth century. It was large, bright white (at least every ten or fifteen years, when the Jugendstil façade, long since missing various pieces, got repainted), and to us it seemed like a palace—we couldn't believe that in 1972 as foreigners we had ended up with this huge apartment on the bel étage. My father, dark-skinned as a Persian or Afghan, had learned German quickly, probably because he'd heard Yiddish from the old people as a child in Moldovanka, but of course he constantly made mistakes and his pronounciation often baffled the Germans. Plus, despite being in general a quiet and cautious person, he would constantly put his hand on someone's arm when he was talking to them, or hug them hello, and in Hamburg back then that was the kind of thing they'd shoot you for. My mother, who stood out in every shop and restaurant with her deep black hair and her soft feminine movements and gestures, and who came from a proud Soviet intellectual family, spent a long time not wanting to speak any German at all, even though, from practically the first day, she would read the newspaper every morning and listen to German radio every night, after reading her Akhmatova, her Babel. For many years she would speak to people in a mixture of Russian and coquettish, half-made-up German, sporadically interrupted by her loud laugh, and act like the only words of German she actually knew were for "Please," "Thank you," and "How much does that cost?"

And despite all of that, we were allowed to move into the building on Bieberstrasse.

What my parents didn't know, and what most of the Germans who lived between Rothenbaumchaussee, Hochallee, and Rutschbahn back then didn't suspect either, was that the Grindel neighborhood in Hamburg—our new Little Odessa—had been full of synagogues, kosher cafeterias, and rabbinical schools before the war. But Frau Ould knew it. She lived on the third floor of Bieberstrasse 7 and owned the building because it had always belonged to her family. She'd lived there since she was born, and when my father tapped her arm and tried to slip an envelope with a few hundred-mark bills into the folder holding her application forms, she looked at this tall, somehow bony old man, in a friendly way but a little condescending too, and said: "That is not necessary, Herr Grinbaum. We need people like you and your family in our neighborhood again."

Frau Ould lived right above us but always left us alone; it was enough for her to chat with my parents about the weather every now and then in the stairwell, or get worked up over the eternal Social Democratic mayor of Hamburg. She never once complained about me and my piano playing. A bit younger and moodier was Frau von Lernet-Fabinger—her whole complicated nobiliary name stood resplendent in gold letters on her door's nameplate—who lived below us on the ground floor, she too with the whole six-room apartment to herself. Sometimes she would bring over the rest of a homemade sacher torte that she couldn't, she said, a little embarrassed, finish on her own. Sometimes she would plant herself outside our door, press firmly on the doorbell (and not let go even when one of us opened the door), and say in a soft, threatening voice: "I hear every footstep inside my skull, you understand—ev-er-y sin-gle foot-step."

That's just what she did on a day, shortly after we moved in, when I was alone in the house. I had just gotten back from summer camp in Wyk auf Föhr, where I'd had to go during the move so I wouldn't be in the way. I had already spent the whole afternoon sitting in front of our big new color TV watching the live broadcast of the Olympic Games in Munich, and when this little old lady with blue hair and way too much makeup on her face was done with her little speech she finally took her finger off the doorbell and said: "You seem to be a very clever boy, but also impudent, no?"

Then, in the apartment next to ours—I still remember it perfectly—there were two lawyers with their two little girls, both with pale blond Hitler Youth hair and adorable, sincere smiles. On the top floor, in the attic apartment, lived Dr. Mohammed Farsi from the University Medical Center. He was Jordanian—Palestinian—and "a genius diagnostician," my parents always said. And eventually, after Frau Ould died and the building was sold, Martha and her husband Erik moved in upstairs from us. Tall, thin Erik was a psychologist or something along those lines, and when my mother's health started really failing he drove her to the clinic in Harburg a couple times, even though that really should have been my job. There he would wait for her, sometimes for hours, reading or making phone calls or talking to her between the tests, and then he would bring her back. Martha—tall, serious, beautiful, her white blouse always unbuttoned one button too far—made short films for NDR's culture department. She volunteered at the Hamburg domestic violence shelter and fought alongside other people in the neighborhood to turn the dangerous intersection of Grindelhof, Rutschbahn, and Hartungstrasse into a nice

safe roundabout. Actually, though, she'd been writing a novel for many years, and she was, as I later discovered, a Jew who was not properly Jewish. And probably the most lying, evil person I've ever met in my life.

But I found that out only after Mama was already dead.

[…]

9

In the winter of 1966, when Anna Akhmatova died—she spent half her life wanting to die, although everyone always thought she was much too strong to have such thoughts—more people came to her funeral at the St. Nicholas Naval Cathedral in Leningrad than the church could hold. Her friend Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote later that there were thousands of people waiting out in the March cold while inside they sang and spoke and a priest carried an icon before him as if in slow-motion, pompously crossing the dark nave. Then the people poured out of the church and the people outside pushed in so that they too could pay their respects at the beloved poet's open coffin.

Akhmatova lay there deader than dead, her famous crow's-beak nose once more as sharply edged as it was in her youth, her powerful ancient face stiff and white from her last makeup, ignoring those who hadn't yet died. Later, the men carrying the coffin across the white, snow-covered Komarovsky Cemetery with its bare black trees stumbled and swayed, sometimes dangerously, and a little old woman in a short black coat and bright summer shoes walking ahead of them supported herself on her walking stick as unsteadily as a circus clown so that she wouldn't slip on the icy snow. The group of Akhmatova's fifteen or twenty closest friends and fellow poets who eventually crowded around the open grave looked as serious and outraged as the Amsterdam barbers and surgeons in Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*—but relieved, too.

"Look," my mother said to me shortly before her own death, when we were watching for the third or fourth time in Hamburg an old Russian

documentary, black-and-white of course, about Akhmatova's life and death. It opened with the funeral and ended with it again. "Look, all the way on the right there is Brodsky."

I nodded and said in Russian, "Yes, you're right. But it looks like he has black hair."

"He had red hair," my mother said, also in Russian.

"I know, Mama," I said.

"And do you know what Akhmatova said when they sent him off into exile?"

"No."

"'What kind of biography are they sentencing our ginger to?' A famous sentence back then."

I didn't say anything, since I didn't think the sentence was especially impressive.

"But they didn't dare try anything with her biography," my mother said, rewinding the movie to the place where the procession with the coffin left the church and a voiceover recited something by Akhmatova. "Strange, don't you think?"

"Mama, they killed two of her three husbands. That was her life too. They shot one, and the other was probably eaten by other prisoners somewhere in some stinking gulag."

"She didn't care. She didn't like either one, not really; she endured them for years, then outlived them by decades."

"And they arrested her son twice, and deported him, and only brought him back years later."

"She always lived how she wanted," my mother insisted. "She was a strong, elegant woman. People will be talking about her when they're not even saying about her Red enemies that they've been forgotten."

As Brodsky and the others stumblingly carried Akhmatova's coffin yet again up and down a narrow, snow-covered cemetery path, I thought about my parents' failed marriage. And about how it was perfectly appropriate for my mother, just like everyone else in the world, to relate everything she read and heard to her own life. Did she wish she'd been like the great Anna Andreyevna Akhmatova, maybe not as famous but an independent woman, wife, lover, and artist? Would she have preferred to move from apartment to apartment, like Akhmatova, instead of having one of her own—preferred to have no fixed job or housewife obligations but instead go around armed with a large notebook where she could write down her stories whenever she felt like it? And did she wish she could also say in public for once, ideally in a poem or a story, that she liked her son's father but didn't love him? The answer was three times Yes.

I could understand what my mother saw in her great role model. In the portraits that Modigliani, Altman, or her brief lover Boris Anrep painted of her, she looked beautiful and ugly at the same time. That too must have appealed to my mother, who like every beautiful woman doubtless had days when she didn't like herself. In Akhmatova's youth when the portraits were painted, she was still "as thin as a birch"—in my mother's oft-repeated words—and she was able to touch her forehead with the tips of her toes even when lying down. Even after the war, when she was suddenly fat and clumsy, no one could resist her: no women, no men. Stalin's dog Zhdanov calling her half whore half nun, her sins full of lying

prayers, after her affair with the young Isaiah Berlin impressed my mother most of all. "Half whore, half nun," she softly repeated when Zhdanov was quoted in the Akhmatova movie we were watching. Then, even more softly, to herself: "Better that than *just* a nun… like some of the people in this room here." And when, a few scenes later, the topic was Brodsky, her last disciple, student, worshipper, follower, and so on, she said, "I think it was only platonic between them, but what does that mean anyway, 'only.'" Then she abruptly turned to face me and beamed at me as no one has ever done since. "Did you know that Brodsky took year-long trips to Siberia, just like me?"

Now the mourners were struggling along with Akhmatova's coffin again. Now they were crowding around the open grave. And now they were lowering the coffin a second time down into the very approximately rectangular hole and quickly shoveling dirt over the famous poet.

"Mama," I said, "why do I need to watch this again? It's morbid. And boring."

"Wait," my mother said, "it's coming soon!"

And then at last came the spot which was the reason my mother had rewound the movie: the invisible woman speaking the voiceover quoted Akhmatova herself. "Poems, even the greatest, do not make their author happy," she said, pronouncing every Russian word so carefully, so tenderly, circling around it like nothing so much as the way one touches a lover, in the beginning. "Pushkin, for instance! He knew perfectly well that he had written 'The Bronze Horseman.' And yet he was not happy—no, he was not. But we can know with absolute certainty that what he wanted, more

than anything else in the world, was to keep writing, more and more and more."

"You understand?" my mother said, turning abruptly away from me again—but not quickly enough that I couldn't see the tears in her old blue eyes.

[…]

11

Ela actually wanted to be a doctor, but due to the quota for Jews she was not accepted to study medicine. So she decided to become a geographer, because that was easier for people like her to do. Plus she'd heard that students in the Geography Department in Moscow often went on expeditions. That would definitely be almost as good as trips to London or Paris, she thought, which at the time were forbidden to most of the inhabitants of her large country.

It took a long time, though, before Ela was asked if she was interested in taking part in a field trip. Before then, she had to give another student a year ahead of her several kisses that she didn't enjoy. And when her favorite professor invited her for tea at the pastry shop on Gorky Street, twice, she bravely thought: well that's how it has to be. The student had said, during their rendezvous, that he would bring her along the following summer to Eastern Siberia—to Yakutia, the dream of all the geographers. When she told this to the professor, he immediately started enthusing about the mighty Lena River, the softly breathing permafrost, the endless difficulties. And he said that he would give Ela all the signatures she needed for the trip. Unfortunately, neither man could remember their promises later. And so Ela had to wait another whole year until a couple of students she didn't know took her with them to the Kazakh Steppe.

At first Ela was scared of the steppe, which seemed to her like a bottomless sea. Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, there was just dry grass. Dead thistles swayed back and forth in a gentle wind and rustled eerily, often at night, when the black sky, full of unfamiliar bright stars, threatened to topple down onto the ground. But then something surprising happened. One time, after Ela had fallen asleep alone under that giant black sheet sparkling bright, and woken up in the middle of the night filled with a feeling of infinite safety and security she couldn't explain, she suddenly knew that she

would have to come back to this place again soon. Then she thought about Mamulya and Papa, for a long time. She thanked fate that she was still alive and in good health, despite the war and "the people in charge." When she realized that she'd never had such forbidden thoughts before, she knew that it must be this enormous, endless ground beneath her in the steppe that had made her so confident and fearless.

The next summer, the last one before she graduated, she went with her new friends to the former Republic of Kalmykia, where they had to map out the vegetation and, therefore, ask questions of the last Kalmyks not resettled by the Party. They needed to find out from these natives where the old water sources were, and the winter and summer meadows for their haggard goats. The expedition was connected to the Volga-Don Canal that everyone was constantly talking about. Ela was clearly the only one of her friends who felt no pride in participating in Stalin's audacious project, but obviously she didn't tell anyone that. Doing so would have been dangerous for her.

They had already been traveling for several weeks, sometimes going 125 miles in their rickety old military truck to get from one district capital to the next, when they met a very old man with rotten teeth and a visored cap much too big for him. He and his people lived in a little gray hut in the middle of the steppe, and he wanted to tell them everything about his region that was not on any map or in any book. He had just started speaking when behind him a white mushroom that looked made of thick fog rose up into the sky and stayed hanging in the air. Ela and the others had no idea what it was. The old man just said that they had those here a lot, that was why he and his family were also going to be removed from here soon. "But we never hear an explosion," he murmured between his brown teeth, half of them missing, "it's so far away. Even so, we get scared every time it happens again."

Ela and the others exchanged glances in silence. They stood up and ran back to their truck. As they were driving away, they turned around. The gigantic while

mushroom floating above the steppe was turning red in the setting sun. Suddenly, Ela's love for the steppe vanished and was replaced by a terrible fear that the white mushroom would never again leave her life.

That was in the summer of 1957.

12

When my mother came to Berlin for her very first reading from her only book—the event at the Nelly Sachs Salon was later—she was put up at the pricey Savoy Hotel on Fasanenstrasse, probably because her publishing house was expecting great sales for her book, partly because of me. This was in November or December 2006. It was already freezing cold and a thick wet snow had been falling for days. I went up to her room—it might even have been a suite—to fetch her and I still remember how I immediately noticed her perfectly combed-back black hair. She'd been dyeing her hair for years, so she wouldn't look like "all the other old biddies with their gray scalps," as she put it.

Again she looked much younger than she was—over forty but not yet fifty. Her tight black leather skirt, shiny pumps on rather high and dangerously thin heels, and the wide Armani or Jil Sander blazer she'd bought out of her advance. Only the heavy, sweet, but not actually unpleasant perfume I could smell everywhere in her room at the Savoy reminded me that she was almost seventy and that she'd first reflected on how a woman should look and walk and think in the old Soviet Union. She gave me a kiss, took me in her arms, then gave me another kiss, and as I inhaled the perfume, much too deep, and its name suddenly came back to me—*Krasnaya Moskva*, "Red Moscow"—she said: "So. All ready. Let's go to my hanging."

"I'm sure it'll go well," I said, meanwhile thinking: where can she still buy this watered-down Soviet stuff?

At the end of that evening, my mother read her story about the atomic bomb test she had seen in the Kazakh Steppe almost fifty years before. It was called "The White Mushroom." Before that point she'd used her pulpit to read half the book, it seemed to me. The publisher had had it translated from Russian into German, not badly, I thought, but not well enough to let German readers see how close my mother's language was to Chekhov's or Tsvetaeva's. Mama couldn't care less. She couldn't stop reading. There was a young blond woman from the Center for Literature sitting next to her onstage, nearly invisible in her gray dress like a bug in a dark crack in the wood, but no matter how many times the woman looked at the clock Mama just kept on reading: slowly, carefully, as if afraid of every German word leaving her mouth as though forever. Every now and then a phrase or whole sentence of Russian would slip into her talk; she didn't notice. "Should I read more?" she would say whenever she'd finished a story, and the people in the room—many older women, a few students, and half the Berlin Jewish community—had no choice but to quietly say yes. After almost two hours, she herself couldn't keep going, although I was probably the only one there who could tell, from her almost imperceptible strained smile and unusually stony facial features. Not only that, but in the icy halogen light of the Center for Literature she had suddenly aged decades, like Dorian Gray. And yet she still had to have a short conversation with the invisible woman next to her. When this woman asked her how long she'd been writing, Mama woke back up.

"My whole life," she said.

"You're sixty-nine now?" the interviewer said.

"Sixty-eight," my mother interrupted, with a sweet and dishonest smile.

"And will you keep writing?"

My mother thought about it—not too long, but long enough for everyone in the stifling, low-ceiling room to realize that it was hard for her to answer this question, but it was important. "You'll have to ask fate," she finally said, and her heavy Russian accent made it sound even more dramatic. "After all, it was fate that made me publish my first book so late." And then came another of her explosive laughs.

She then had to write her huge sprawling signature into many copies of the book, but she didn't want to go to the dinner she was invited to in the loud Center for Literature café downstairs. When I took her back to the hotel she clung to my arm, because she was so exhausted and because there was still lots of snow on the ground that her heels kept sinking into. The sidewalks had been cleared, but a thick solid layer of snow remained. I thought it was beautiful how it reflected the lights of the shop windows.

We walked slowly down Fasanenstrasse, without talking, then down Ku'damm, where we had to wait an extremely long time at a red light. After we'd crossed at last, I said: "So are you writing more or not?"

"Right now I'm reading," she said. "I'm reading Chukovskaya's book about Akhmatova."

"A memoir?"

"It's from her diary, about the last months of the war. They go for walks around Leningrad, wait for the war to end, discuss Pushkin and Kuzmin, talk about Akhmatova's poor health. And they wonder whether it

was Stalin's idea to give her permission after fifteen years to publish a book of her poems."

"Fifteen years," I said, "that's forever." I tried to imagine how it would be for me if I spent that long not knowing what was going to happen to me.

"I waited longer than that," my mother said, slipping slightly on the snow as she said it. I held on tight and pulled her back toward me, and she said with a laugh, "But Stalin had nothing to do with it in my case."

Please, I thought, please no, don't talk about my father now. Every second I didn't have to think about him was a gift.

"One time they walked alongside the Fontanka," my mother said, "past the Circus, past the Engineers' Castle, and Akhmatova was cursing and complaining about Leningrad the whole time. Too much space, she said, too much suffering."

"Ah…"

"And one time she heaped terrible curses on Tolstoy. She hated him because of *Anna Karenina.* Because the whole thing's about how an independent woman is really just a better sort of prostitute, she said. You understand?"

"Yes, Mama."

We were now on the corner of Fasanenstrasse and Kantstrasse, and even though the light was already yellow we crossed the street, as fast as she could go. When we got to the Savoy not long afterward, almost the whole hotel was dark. Only a couple of small table lamps were lit in the empty breakfast room, where the tables already had their white tablecloths for the next morning; the bar to the left of the entrance was empty too,

except for a single waitress who stood behind the bar and vanished into the half dark like a tormented Edward Hopper figure.

"Are you happy here in Berlin?" my mother said as I bent down to kiss her goodbye—this old woman getting ever shorter and ever more beautiful.

"Mama," I said, "we've been over that."

Now she kissed me back and gave me a big hug. "I'm not going to stop writing, *synok,*" she said, "don't worry."

"Of course you won't," I said.

"But I don't have much more time."

"Why do you say that?"

"Thank you," she said. "This never would have happened if it weren't for you." Then she went inside, and it started snowing again, and a curtain of thick snow fell closed behind her and the Savoy.

Mama sold almost six thousand copies of her first and last book. Those were very good numbers, enough to truly earn herself a room at the Savoy. And there were a few good reviews, too. The one in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* took up half a page, and said that she had more sense for the poetry of biography than I did, or something like that. Not long after that, Martha the upstairs neighbor rang our doorbell on Bieberstrasse. They had barely sat down in the kitchen with their cups of tea when she asked my mother if she could make a movie about her for NDR. They would go to Odessa and Moscow together, she promised, maybe even the Kazakh Steppe. Forty-five minutes, a good length for a broadcast, all my mother had to do was say yes. "And oh," she said at the end, "it would be good if your son would be part of it, my dear Alyona."

When my mother called me that very night and excitedly told me about it over the phone, I said no at once. But why?

[…]

14

As I'm writing this I realize that the stupid itching has come back on my chest and neck. I'll try to ignore it this time but I'm not sure if I can. I've been through this before. First I'll just scratch a little, forget about it, scratch again. Then I'll scratch more and more, stand in front of the hall mirror and look at the reddened parts of my skin and look closer and find a ring of many little dark-red dots in several places, each one with a bigger dot in the middle that looks more like a crusted wound, and I'll be horrified. Even though I know what's coming next I'll rebutton my shirt and go back to my desk. I'll try to keep working, but I won't be able to, because now I can't stop scratching and can't have a single coherent thought anymore. At some point, with a panicky pounding and burning in my chest, I'll go back into the hall. I'll unbutton my shirt and look in the mirror again, certain that more small and large dots will have appeared in the last half hour, and then before I know it I'll have my phone in my hand and I'll be dialing my doctor's number.

The first time this happened to me was three summers ago: the unusually hot summer when a rare African species of mosquito invaded Germany and my mother began dying. I had just come to Hamburg, and even on my first night in the hotel before falling asleep I felt itchy in several places, but I didn't care, because I thought they were normal mosquito bites. I always stayed at the Four Seasons now—I couldn't spend the night on Bieberstrasse anymore because there'd always be another sad silent woman sleeping in my old room, from Poland or Moldavia or

Ukraine, and so every morning I would take the bus or a taxi to see my mother.

When I went by bus, I would walk slowly down Grindelhof, past the Abaton movie theater, where many years earlier I had seen movies like *Alice's Restaurant* and *In the Realm of the Senses*, and which stood next to the big empty square where the large Portuguese Synagogue had been until 1938. Just past the theater, on the right, was the Talmud Torah School, with a little gray police kiosk in front and an endless row of low pale-gray granite traffic bollards meant to protect the children and teachers in the giant red-brick Wilhelmine building from car-bombings.

By then I could see, on the corner of Grindelhof and Bieberstrasse across from me, the tables and chairs of Café Abigail, all full on this hot summer morning. My mother always said proudly that this was a Jewish café, and on the menu there really was shakshuka, and falafel, and chicken broth, but also fried calamari, halloumi, and hamburgers. The dark-brown bookshelves in the café held books by Kisch, Zweig, Wassermann, Robert Schindel, Barbara Honigmann, and me, and of course my mother's book too. Whenever I went to the Abigail I checked to see if one of her fans had stolen it, or at least left coffee stains on it while reading, and at some point it actually was gone. There were also occasional talks or readings in one of the dim back rooms of the café, always about Jews—Jews of earlier times, Jews today, Jews tomorrow. The Nelly Sachs Salon had rented the back room: this was a small group of Hamburg Jews and young Hamburg goyim who actually only ever did what their founder and president wanted, this being Martha, Mama's upstairs neighbor.

That day my mother was waiting for me as usual on the big red couch in the living room, where it was so dark, even by day and even in summer, that she had to have both of the floorlamps next to the couch on. This was mainly because a giant ficus or rubber tree or something had by then grown to cover the window with its heavy thick leaves. One of the women who'd recently been staying there to help my mother opened the door for me. After a short quiet hello she immediately went back to my old room, where she lay in bed and called someone in Chișinău or Gdansk with her huge Samsung or Huawei phone. This morning, too, Mama was sitting in front of the TV watching something in Russian, probably a talk show with a lot of screaming, or a dating show. Or her favorite program, in which children dressed and made up like grownups, stiff as marionettes, sang famous old and new Russian hit songs, none of which I knew.

I bent down to Mama and kissed her cheek. She put her weak arms around me and that's when I noticed that she hadn't gotten dressed properly; she was sitting there in her heavy dark-brown nightgown, her short dyed hair only badly combed and a bit tangled in the back. She smelled as sweet as ever, but also different somehow, more bitter. Before I had a chance to think more about what the smell was, she pointed to a pile of handwritten letters and typed pages on the low coffee table in front of her, right next to the long white plastic box with her many pills.

"I've found an old letter your grandfather sent you from Odessa," she said, muting the TV. "You were twelve at the time. I've kept it for you for so long. Shall I read it to you?"

"Later, Mama," I said.

"I need to read it to you! It's written by hand, you can't read it. Who'll read it to you when I'm gone?"

I inhaled deeply, shocked, but it probably sounded like I was annoyed. "Later, Mama, I only just got here."

"Okay," she said, turning the sound back on. A short man in a tight blue suit stood holding a microphone in front of a much taller, fatter man, who was furiously explaining to him that all Ukrainians were fascists.

"How can you watch that?" I said.

"I'm not stupid," she said, "I can still always tell when something's true and when they're lying."

"No you can't."

"Do you want to watch something else?"

"I don't know… No, I guess not."

"There's a good series on now about Yevtushenko and Akhmadulina and the others."

"OK, maybe."

"Now?"

"I need to go to the bathroom for a minute," I said.

I quickly stood up and walked down the long dark hall, almost to my old room with the nurse on the phone. As soon as I'd shut the bathroom door I unbuttoned my shirt and started scratching everywhere my skin was red. Deadly African mosquitoes, panic, both? When I'd finally scratched enough I slowly buttoned my shirt and sat down, exhausted, on the edge of the bathtub. I saw that there was a little white plastic stool in the tub, and several new handholds made of sparkling, seemingly unused chrome next to the shower, and there were diapers on the medicine chest

above the sink. I was horrified and shut my eyes and tried to remember the place I'd stopped writing in my new book, before I came to Hamburg. Whenever I interrupted my writing I absolutely needed to know how it was going to continue, so that I wouldn't get anxious about the break.

My new novel was more or less about my grandfather—the time had come—but here he was Jewish, not Armenian, and he was a KGB general about to retire, not a painter. The last chapter I'd written so far was about the protagonist when he was still a boy and ended with a barracks door being locked behind him and a couple of other Odessa Jews, and them hearing the spraying and splashing of water of the outside walls of the barracks, not realizing that it was gasoline, not water.

I more or less knew that the next chapter should be a scene in the Odessa airport, thirty years later, where the semifictional grandfather would say goodbye forever to his daughter, her son, and her meshuggeneh refusenik husband. He would slip his daughter a roll of dollars and Reichsmarks, a currency that had long since collapsed, and whispered: "I took this out of a dead German soldier's pocket, back then. I hope the goddamn capitalists will exchange them for you!" Yes, I thought, exactly: it really could continue like that, I had to make sure not to forget this while I was traveling for my mother and couldn't work. My eyes sprang open, I leaped up from the edge of the tub, and I dashed for the door: I have to get back to Berlin as soon as I can, I thought, otherwise I'll lose the thread of the book forever!

When I got back to the living room and sat down on the couch next to my mother, I realized only after a few moments that she'd fallen asleep.

Without moving, she opened her eyes and said: "I wrote a new story. About Martha and her evil Jewish mother. Do you want to hear it?"

I thought about it—really I did—and then I said, "No, I'd rather hear the letter from my grandfather."

"Good," she said. She shut her eyes and went back to sleep.

[…]

25

From spring through autumn, there were two long wooden tables set up next to each other in the main courtyard of the Odessa house on Gogol Street with lots of old, mostly wobbly chairs. No one cleared them away, even when it rained. I still remember them. The grownups would sit there almost every day—evenings too—and like all the other children I was allowed to stay with them until I fell asleep on my mother's lap, or my father's, or one of the neighbors', and was carried up to bed. When I woke up it would be morning again, and I'd usually run downstairs to the others. But no one would be in the courtyard, it was still too early for an alarm clock to have gone off in any of the gigantic black houses around the courtyard, or for anyone to have turned on the radio to do their daily exercise to the morning news. Only from an open window above the entrance to the second courtyard did I once here the desperate sighs and screams of a man and a woman. I immediately ran back upstairs to my parents, jumped into their bed, terrified, and told them they needed to go get the police, someone was being murdered. They laughed and turned over and went back to sleep.

In my memory, it was always summer in our courtyard. Music was playing—lots of modern Soviet hits; even more old Odessa tangoes by Utesov or Vertinsky—and the lovely warm sunbeams only barely made it down to us through the thick cover of leaves. When it slowly got darker in the evening, the grownups turned on the long chain of lights running from tree to tree throughout the courtyard, and turned the music up a little bit louder.

Of course I don't remember what they were talking about as they sat there. My mother told me later that there were few fights or arguments, because it was almost exclusively Jews who lived there, who, like almost all Jews, drank very little, and when they did go after one another it was usually about Israel and everything to do with Israel. We had a lot of Jewish war veterans living in that house, she said, who would put on their uniforms with dozens of medals on their breast and go march in the big May 9th parade on October Revolution Square, and they thought anyone who could imagine a life in Tel Aviv or Haifa was an anti-Soviet traitor. There were others who lived in that house too, somewhat younger, for whom the word "Communist" was as empty as a glass someone had drunk all the not very good wine out of. They knew perfectly well that as Jews they owed their nice life as a Party functionary or scientist or factory manager solely to Stalin's death—if he hadn't died right at the start of his Jew hunt in the glorious March of 1953, they'd be dead themselves, or chopping wood in Birobidzhan. And then there was my father, who did more than just dream of Israel a little like other people: he studied Hebrew like a man possessed, secretly wrote for *Maariv* and the Russian-language émigré newspaper in Israel, debated with his Young Israelites in the old Yiddish Theater about the Torah and the false messiah Sabbatai Zevi and the rightness and brutality of Jabotinsky's harsh line against the Arabs—and every so often he had to go get interrogated on Bebel Street. "He was always the first one to get angry about something," my mother said when describing the evenings in our courtyard in Odessa.

Sitting under the old chestnut trees that allegedly dated back to Deribas's time, I sometimes got so bored by the grownups' conversations

that I couldn't stay still. But I never wanted to play with the other children; to this day I don't know why. So I would either pick up a book and sit right under one of the brighter lights on the chain and read, or I would get my soccer ball from upstairs and smash it again and again as loud as I could into the rusty garage door, which hadn't been repainted in so long that you could still see the bullet holes from the war in it. Obviously this was insanely annoying to everyone else, but usually they didn't say anything. Only one time did my father, who almost never shouted, suddenly scream at me: I should take my ball and get out of here, take it to the other courtyard, he roared, there nobody would hear me, nobody would see me, and anyway he'd had a very hard day already and didn't even know how it was going to end. Or at least that's how my mother told me the story. Today of course I know what had made him so nervous, but back then I had no idea what it was about, and I wasn't there when two guys in pale summer suits showed up in our courtyard later that evening and took him away.

On the other hand, I remember exactly what happened in the back courtyard that evening. First I sat on my ball next to the dark entrance, my feelings hurt. Then I picked up the ball and went a bit farther in, to look for a free wall where I could keep playing. But it was much darker there than in our yard, so I could hardly see anything. There were no lights in almost any windows and after a few seconds the courtyard lights went out again. There was just a single old extravagantly ornate streetlamp flickering helplessly in the middle of the yard—the kind of streetlight I otherwise only saw on Pushkin Street and Primorsky Boulevard. Suddenly I had an idea: I would try to hit the lamppost, one point for every hit! Perfect. I put

the ball on the ground, taking a long time to find the exact right spot, like one of the players about to take a penalty kick at Chornomorets Stadium, where I'd often been with my Armenian grandfather. Then I took a few steps back, ran up to the ball, and shot—hitting the streetlamp so well, unfortunately, that it gave a loud buzz and went black. The few lights still on in the courtyard's window went out simultaneously, and when I pressed the switch for the courtyard light nothing happened.

What had I done? Had I blown the fuse for the whole building? I peeked back through the passageway into our yard—and there too it was pitch-black! I cautiously ventured a couple of steps through the passageway, far enough to hear the grownups. I could see only their shadows, and when someone said "These goddamn Bolsheviks know as much about electrification as they do about sex!" I ran out to the street, keeping close to the wall. Everything there too was totally dark. All the buildings on Gogol Street stood silent and dead like the giants in the Afanasyev fairy tale, and when I looked toward the sea and the harbor, I saw only more scary darkness. All I could hear was the tooting of a steamship every now and then, like a siren, from even farther away. Even the big lighthouse had gone out.

I cried, first softly then loud, then I just sniffled and sighed, and then I started running again. I had to get away! Away from here, I had to disappear forever, because I had done something so bad that there couldn't possibly be any punishment invented yet for it!

First I scampered down the street toward the water, then to the long metal bridge we always crossed on Sundays when Mama and Papa wanted to stroll along Primorsky. But when I was on the other side, I made a

mistake and turned right, into a neighborhood I didn't know. Here too everything was dark. A bit farther on, there was a huge building whose high, majestic roof was barely visible against the black sky, with not a single star in it that night. I was still sobbing softly, and then I was crying more heavily again. When I finally stopped, exhausted, and leaned against some statue I'd never seen before—a big plinth with several figures crouching close together on it, I could tell that much—I simply slid to the ground and tried to figure out what I should do next. In a few seconds I had already fallen asleep.

The watchman who found me the next morning, next to the famous Laocoön statue outside the Archeological Museum, took me home. He was young and badly shaven, with his gray smock covered with stains; he had the remains of some food on his face near his mouth, and presumably he was a little slow, which even as a child I noticed. When I admitted to him—now crying again—that I had run away because I had broken all the lights in the whole city, he laughed at me. "Power outage, m-m-my boy," he stuttered. "M-M-Malyi Fontan all the way up to Oleksandrivka!"

"You mean it wasn't me?"

"You?" he grunted, and then he laughed, since I was clearly more feeble-minded than he was. "With a l-l-little soccer ball? That was just a coincidence." And he laughed again, a loud jerky laugh, like the crazy person he indeed was.

When we got back to Gogol Street ten minutes later and he explained to my mother what had happened and where he had found me, she was barely listening, and she wasn't mad at me either. "Go wash up fast, Mishka," she said, "and change clothes. You've got dirt and grass

everywhere. There's two slices of bread and butter in the kitchen, and milk on the windowsill. Then we'll think about whether you should go to school today. Papa can't bring you, I'm afraid, because they've…" She cried, but only briefly, then she wiped her face with a handkerchief and crouched down, holding me tight by both arms, looking me much too deeply in the eyes. She said: "Promise me that when you grow up you won't be such a dummy like him, Mishenka! Okay?" I nodded, even though I didn't know what she was talking about. She covered my face with a dozen awful sloppy kisses that mixed with her tears—and at some point with mine too.

This time my father had to spend three days and two nights on Bebel Street. When he came back home—sleep-deprived, in a good mood, with a long red whip scar on his high forehead—all the neighbors were soon gathered in the courtyard again. It wasn't entirely dark yet but the chain of lights was on, and something by Utesov was playing on the radio: I think his most famous song, "Mishka, The Boy from Odessa." Papa sat next to Mama and me, not saying a word, and hugged first me and then her. She pushed him away but took him into her arms again right away and said "You idiot!" and "I love you!" Someone immediately turned up the music, and the lovely, treacly, Soviet superstar Leonid Osipovich Utesov, born with the much more dangerous name Leyzer Weissbein, sang for the hundred thousandth time:

You're a boy from Odessa, Mishka,
You fear nothing,
Not sadness or grief.
You're a sailor, Mishka,

And so don't you cry,
For a sailor never loses heart.

This song about brave Mishka from Odessa was written in 1942, right after the city was conquered by Hitler's soldiers. The defeat hurt especially badly because no one in the country had ever believed it could happen—not the generals, not the civilians, the Russians, the Jews, the Armenians, the Greeks. If Moscow and Leningrad could hold out against the Germans, how was it possible that Nazis and Romanians would suddenly be marauding through the magnificent unconquerable city on the Black Sea? So everyone wailed and lamented. Mishka, the Boy from Odessa, was the only one who wasn't allowed to cry. He was going to get Odessa back, he was going to dance on the enemy's corpses and soon walk again through all its old streets and alleyways… and only then, perhaps, shed a tear or two. It took almost three years before that happened.

Why, even now, do I feel so strange whenever I hear this song? Why do I suddenly remember so clearly the night when I turned out the lights in all of Odessa, and all the horrible hours that followed? And would more of these memories come back to me if I wrote more about my mother's long dying? Yes, I believe they would. But is that what I want?

[END OF SAMPLE]