

**Two excerpts from the novel “Stars Under the Eyelids”
by Nikolay Terziyski**

1.

Martina started dying on a late August evening, in her mother’s childhood home in Bansko.

No one could explain why. Nothing had visibly happened to her. She had been lively until evening, hiding the sorrow in her eyes from everyone. But today she was lying in bed on the second floor of the old house. It had come out of the invisible, this unexpected illness had washed the color from her face and turned her into a still portrait.

Her grandmother Marga – the same woman whose husband had been killed as an “enemy of the people,” while she herself had been sent to Dryanovo with her three children – that grandmother was still alive and well, and so she had howled over her granddaughter and then dashed away, not to fetch a doctor, but to visit the church, which turned out to be locked.

The poor child’s eyes were rolling back in her head. God had to help her. Who else? Yet how can we explain the fact that a woman who had lost her husband so young and had been thrown out onto the street with three children in tow still believed in God? But there you have it – for people like Grandma Marga misfortune deepens faith, just as absence deepens the feelings of those who truly love each other. But Grandma Marga didn’t know that her granddaughter was in love with a married man with two sons. And that’s for the best. If she did know – how could she light a candle and cross herself before the icons? Ама баба Марга не знае, че внучката ѝ обича женен мъж с двама сина. И по-добре! Ако знае – как ще пали свещи и ще се кръсти пред иконите?

In her haste, Grandma Marga did not notice the man in the gray suit at all.

Martina’s father Kostadin, that blue-eyed Party secretary who despised Bansko and his mother-in-law’s house, did not see him, either. He had gone to fetch a doctor, but as he was hurrying down the street, tears began pouring from his eyes. His child was in a bad state, she was dying. He didn’t even dare think that terrible word, especially not now when his other child Simeon had just escaped from the clutches of the People’s Militia by some miracle. He wouldn’t have been able to save him, since the Party did not forgive such intransigence, but for unknown reasons, the Blagoevgrad militia had let him go free. If he had realized

that the man in the gray suit was to thank for his son's freedom, would Kostadin have paid him more attention?

The man was already standing in front of the house when that very same Simeon, whom he had saved, came out of the gates. Simeon, however, also did not know who had helped him. But the man, of course, recognized him. And so he stopped him: "Excuse me, comrade" – he purposely emphasized *comrade* – "you're Simeon, aren't you?"

"Yes," the young man said, breathing heavily and hardly glancing at the man.

"Is your sister Martina here?"

"Yes, she's here.. But she's dying... I'm in a hurry."

Those last words were said with his back turned, as the young man rushed up the street.

During that time, Martina's mother Angelina was staying by her daughter's side. She had grown up in a monastery cell, she sometimes went into churches, but she had never truly believed in God. Thus she couldn't pray, not even now, in the face of death. Yet she placed her hope elsewhere.

She had told Simeon to run to her cousin's place on the next street over, he was sickly and didn't touch alcohol, but he had a Moskvitch, so he could drive her son to Razlog. For what? To find Zhana, the seeress. Angelina knew that only a seeress – and not just any old seeress, but namely Zhana, who wandered between the worlds – only she could set this business right.

Martina herself had fallen somewhere on the border. Between the worlds. Just a short time ago her eyes had been open and rolled back, showing the whites, but now her lids had snapped shut. Her breath came in sudden, jerky gasps. Her body did not respond to touch. She did not hear their moaning. She did not smell the scent of her mother's sweat, nor the taste of blood from her bitten tongue. She didn't move.

But she could see.

Another world.

There, beneath her eyelids.

*

She sees herself in a window, which the dusk has turned into a mirror. She is an old woman. Dressed in black. With a black veil. In mourning.

It is dark outside, yet she senses that the town is unfamiliar. She also cannot tell at all what year it is. And yet... she knows that outside in the yard, brick-red rhododendrons are blooming.

She turns her back to the window and sees a door in front of her. And she knows she needs to knock on that door.

So she does – lightly, unobtrusively. And the boy quickly opens it. He looks surprised, because he is not expecting anyone. Because until now no one has ever visited him there. Especially not at this time, on the border between day and night.

Is this *him*? And why is he so young?

She looks at herself again – this time in his amber eyes. A mature woman, a step beyond middle age – around fifty-five or even sixty. All in black. But she knows, she can sense that to him she is unrecognizably attractive. With that wavy hair, whose color reminds him of the nuances of fall leaves, shaped into some completely unfamiliar style that reaches to just above her shoulders. With her pensively sad blue eyes and a sweet, pretty face that shows trace of make-up, but whose paleness only adds to its beauty, despite the two small wrinkles beneath her cheeks, which, like the year-rings of a tree, bear witness to time passed.

Is this me? And what is going on with time?

But she says something else to the boy: “It’s you, I know it.”

But she doesn’t realize how she knows it. And he nods, clearly he feels obligated to confirm her words. Even though he does not recognize her. He has never seen her before.

“Look at me. I’ve gotten old. I’m in mourning, but...”

She tries to remember who the deceased is. Could it be him – her husband, so many years older than her, the love of her life, whom she met on that train? But how could she be with him here, and why, why...

“I am old, but you are so young.”

She drops the words into the air between them lightly, like paper birds. As if she is saying the most obvious things, like the sky is blue, flowers smell fragrant, and stars shine, but he cannot confirm these words of hers. Could he be thinking that his attestation that time has passed could offend her?

What is time?

She begins to move her pensive (or rather, dreamy?) gaze around the corners of the walls and the ceiling, as if expecting someone to answer her from there. Like an actress who has forgotten her lines and listens for the voice of the prompter. Like a sorceress seeking the limit of the worlds.

I don’t believe in time.

With this thought she looks again towards the boy. Only then does she see that he is wearing just a tank top and pajama pants, and she says with a smile: “I hope I haven’t interrupted anything important?”

A foolish question. As if from a bad movie.

But he says, no, she has not interrupted anything, and who knows why, she replies that she should have warned him in advance of her visit, but she didn’t

know how. Because he is young. He could have been with some beautiful girl... He replies that there is no girl, he was simply studying.

But she sees the pale-red guitar. With an inscription that looks like a scratch. Leaning against the wall in the hallway.

Why did I have to come here?

“If you need anything...” the boy says, and she gives him a smile, wide and sincere like a child’s. That smile makes her face thirty years younger, and it is dazzling – she can see it in the boy’s eyes.

Do I need anything?

Her voice is now as gentle as a sea breeze: “Of course I need something. But I can’t tell you what. You have to figure it out for yourself. You won’t understand a single word, but... sometimes that is for the best. Come with me.”

Do I know where we are going?

She turns and heads down the stairs with confidence. The boy follows her. In his tank top and house slippers. And she knows that he isn’t wondering where she will lead him and what will happen there. He simply follows her, having forgotten all else.

“I’ll take only a bit of your time.”

But what is *time*, she thinks as she utters the words on the landing between the fifth and the fourth floor. She keeps going down the stairs, with the boy following her.

“Just the time it takes for a single song.”

She says this on the next landing and now knows that time is a song. Not just any song. That song.

“We’re going to the second floor. You do know, right?”

She says this with a smile, but the boy can’t see her face. She can sense that he trusts her, even though he must be wondering

how it’s possible. The second floor?

He has never seen this woman before in the apartment building. And he knows all the neighbors here. Two families with small children live on the second floor. The little ones run up and down the street outside every day and like to tease him. As soon as they see him coming, they yell:

the student, the student,

he also knows those children’s mothers, who do not look anything like this lady in black who is going down the stairs and leading him after her.

As they go down, she continues to toss piercing and dreamy gazes at the corners of the walls and the ceiling, with one hand she gently touches the railing, while the other swings slowly by her body – a small palm with slightly spread fingers.

When they reach the second floor, she invites the boy inside the apartment. The place he is sure belongs to one of the families with children. But look, she opens the door and leads him into a wide entryway, lit up by a lamp on a tall stand, which gives off a reddish glow. In this lighting, their two shadows on the walls look like part of a ghostly dream.

I am not dreaming. I know.

Then the two of them go into a rather spacious room. She switches on the large chandelier, and the space is bathed in the same reddish light. The boy looks around the room.

The left wall is completely covered by shelves with many books; there, too, is that book which has yet to be written, yet it exists and its title is visible:

Stars Under the Eyelids.

On the right wall, above the wide dark-brown sofa, a picture has been hung, that picture which has not yet been painted, yet there it is, there are the girl's blue eyes, beneath whose eyelids stars also shine, there is the man next to her, there is the checkered wallpaper behind them.

And the song is coming from an old gramophone. The song which he would write one day, so as to create the world. Because art does not recreate the world, but rather creates it. And art saves the world precisely by creating it.

If you believe in the illusion that is time, this song also does not yet exist, it has not been written, but this is not so, she knows.

Everything is inside you.

The third wall is completely covered with red curtains, behind them are the windows, or at least that's where he thinks they should be, and she knows that they are there.

The floor is covered with soft carpeting, and on the carpet, in the middle of the room, exactly under the chandelier there is a small round table, with two carved wooden chairs on either side of it, while on top of the table is a gramophone, an ordinary His Master's Voice gramophone with a horn, most likely brown, but in the light from the chandelier it looks like a blooming red flower.

"Come, sit here," she tells him, sitting down in one of the carved chairs by the gramophone.

Now he'll hear another song. Their song.

Her gaze is now relaxed, no longer seeking the corners of the walls and the ceiling, instead with calm and focus she glances from the boy, who has taken the seat opposite her, to the record playing on the gramophone.

Now he will hear and understand. He will remember that he will know me by this song. He will foresee that he has known me by this song.

Yet he seems to know. Already. Because he says: "I won't understand the meaning of the words. But it's better that way, isn't it?"

She smiles and changes the record. She drops the needle in place and closes her eyes. He is also not looking. She knows.

The song starts to play.

They are there. And they both know it.

We will know each other forever, there, in the beyond.

At the end – she knows that she will light up a cigarette. The boy will still be sitting with his eyes closed, but he will catch the scent of tobacco. When he opens them, he will see how the smoke rises straight up, towards the reddish sun of the chandelier. The boy does not like cigarettes. Despite the fact (or perhaps precisely due to the fact) that his father smokes three packs a day, the first thing he does in the morning is reach for a cigarette, and only then does he open his eyes.

“You’ll get smoke in your eyes.”

She will utter these words gently and sweetly, like a mother to a child. Without coquetry.

And that will be the last thing he will hear from her. Before closing his eyes again and sinking into his own dream.

Dream-world.

Dream-time.

Dream-song.

From which there is no waking.

What about me? Where am I?

*

“She’s not here.”

That’s what Zhana, the seeress from Razlog, says. The names of towns change. Worlds change. But there are things that remain here forever. Those are the things which we do not understand and which we will never understand.

Zhana has agreed to come to the house in Bansko to see the girl. She has seen her before as well. She can sense where she is. Just her. Beside her are her mother, father, brother and grandmother. The cousin has stayed outside, in the Mosvitch.

The doctor has come and gone, without being able to help. He told them to find a priest – it was hopeless. But the church is already locked up, the grandmother saw that for herself. The candles have been put out, the icons are sleeping, the bell has fallen silent. But that’s why they call her a seeress, because she sees.

She sees.
The girl is dying.
She is not here.
She doesn't say "anymore". She also doesn't say "still," either.
Because she knows what time is.

* * *

Why did I think up death? This is what Yosif Boychev asks himself as he strides alone down the main street of the town. When and where did it happen? And how did she slip out of the picture to come here?

Shouldn't something else have happened?

They should have split up, and she would live out her life.

Or... I should have given up everything and gone away with her, as I had decided when I found her letters in the chest. So that someday, when the time comes, she could see me off. Is it possible that everything that happens to us is simply a moment between two burials?

And could it be that the prophesy is true, could this possibly be its meaning? That she really will die. Of love. For me.

When the man coming towards him smiles, Yosif does not recognize him. Is it someone he's done business with? A distant relative?

"So you don't recognize me, eh, Mr. Artiste from Thessaloniki?" the man laughs.

Vulkan.

The Volcano. It's him, the Volcano. Bald and forty pounds heavier, but it's him.

The two men share a heartfelt hug. They haven't seen each other since their last year of high school in Thessaloniki.

"How about getting a drink tonight, my dear artiste? I know you're a big man these days, but you can spare an evening for an old friend. What's more, Elena and I are staying at your hotel."

Elena?

"Don't tell me you don't remember Elena. My Elena, from Thessaloniki. I described her to you and then you painted her, remember? If you only knew how much she loved that picture when I showed it to her. She said you'd made her much prettier than she is, but I don't agree."

"But she... she's dead. Murdered by her own husband. After she told him that she had a chi..."

“We have three kids. But they’re not kids anymore, the oldest is already married! And all three are beauties like their mother. You got any offspring?”

“Two boys.”

“You don’t say! We ought to introduce them to my daughters! The youngest is the prettiest, but I’ve told her that there is a time for everything. A time for marrying, and a time for dying.”

Yosif looks at his old friend and finally gets up the courage to say: “I thought that your Elena... that her husband... you told me about her death...”

“Oh! That story that he killed her? Nonsense. There’s no death, my dear artiste.”

There’s no death? Could I have saved her? In the painting?

“Some neighbor of hers told me all that baloney. She had decided to break us up once she found out what had happened. But there was never any death involved – her husband sent her back to her mother and father after she told him about our child...”

There is no death.

“Yes, but Elena managed to run away and come back to me. Don’t you remember how suddenly I left school?”

Yosif remembers, yes.

“I’ll tell you the whole story tonight, since I’m in a hurry now. We’ll have a drink in the pub across from your hotel! Tomorrow Elena and I are taking off for Smolyan. I bought a wonderful house in the Rhodope Mountains dirt-cheap.”

With these words, the Volcano takes his leave of Yosif, whose mind has registered one thing only.

There is no death.

Yosif is already sure that this is exactly what is missing from the latest picture he had begun painting after he learned of the green-eyed girl’s death.

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The day after his dinner with the Volcano and Elena, Yosif Boychev realized for the first time that something important was missing from the plot of his life. Something which he himself had initially rejected. And which death had then taken away from him.

He didn’t know whether he would forgive his wife Bozhia, or whether he would do the exact opposite – blame her for the death of the girl he had met on the train. Would he say: “If you hadn’t hidden those letters, she would still be alive”?

Was he capable of saying this? Softly and calmly. But with loathing, which Bozhia would read in his dark-brown eyes. What would she reply?

“I saved you from a scandal! I saved all of us.”

Yes, Bozhia would surely start yelling. But... was it possible that she might burst into tears? No. Yosif knew. Nothing was left of the Uranovsky’s teary-eyed girl. And for that reason he would continue to reveal the painful truth to her.

“Did you know that for my whole life, I was only with you out of pity? And you never saved anyone besides yourself. And me – you saved me from the love of my life.”

He already knew what she would reply if she heard those words.

“You’re out of your mind! You’ve gone mad! And you went looking for my brother down at the police only because of this girl and that communist brother of hers!”

“Yes, that’s why I did it. I was prepared to do anything, even to become a communist myself, I was ready to leave you and the factory and the hotel, all because of her.”

“And your sons? Would you have left them, too?”

Yes. Them, too. Is Yosif capable of going that far? Of speaking those words as well?

He opens his mouth, only to realize that words do not exist. They are gone. Even if he stands in front of his painting, he will not be able to call the colors by name, if he tries to say the words for “gray” or “black,” a sigh will slip from his mouth like a sudden gust of stormy wind that brings rain.

But who needs words now? When Yosif realizes this, it is already too late. Time only flows forward, right? And death is its end, unless...

Unless we live in someone’s painting.

Yosif picks up his brush. He doesn’t need words to deny the very existence of death.

* * *

If there is one thing the seeress knows about time, it’s that time is nowhere near as simple as it looks on the clockface and in the pages of the calendar.

The seeress also knows something else. There is no death. Something that only a poet can grasp.

“There is no death – and there could never be.”

Zhana tells this to the sobbing parents shortly before Martina takes a deep breath and opens her eyes.

Angelina and Kostadin trade stunned glances, then shortly thereafter start sobbing with joy.

The seeress tells them something else before leaving the house.

“Don’t turn your back on her. Don’t be afraid of the letter you found under her pillow. Don’t scold her; instead, help her. Tell her to stay away from the man in the gray suit. And make sure she knows that her best years are the next one and the one after that. Don’t dare to think any farther than that.”

They thank her, but she tells them that she hasn’t done anything. She is not a healer who heals. She is a seeress who sees.

2.

My father died at the end of June. The day after I turned thirty-seven. And exactly forty years after he met my mother.

Strangely enough, I saw him for the last time at the cemetery. At a memorial service forty days after my grandfather's death.

It's sad, but I have to tell this story.

* * *

I don't remember the first time I saw him. An absurd quirk of memory. Who built human memory in such a foolish way? God would not make such a mistake. The devil? How could he meddle in such a thing, after all, isn't man God's divine creation? Incidentally, he didn't believe in either God or the Devil. He went into churches only to admire the beauty of the woodcarving and the icons... or simply to smile and enjoy the silence. He believed in silence.

But isn't God in the sound of silence?

Yes, sometimes he was forced to enter a church for someone's wedding. Or funeral. Baptism? Yes, I remember that, the most important thing he and I did together.

I remember many more of our shared moments. Hours. Days. Years. I've heard about other moments of his, other hours, days and years, I have even tried to retell them.

Every story has a beginning, but how could I begin to tell about how I met my father, the first time my eyes saw his face, the first touch, the first kiss, the first hug, the first tear, when I don't remember them, I simply know that they happened, somewhere there in the beginning of time, shortly after the creation of my world, boom! the big bang, stars, light, crying, joy, love, no...

I don't remember any of it.

And therein lies my sadness.

I don't remember the first time, but I will never forget the last time.

* * *

The last time I saw him. At the cemetery.

He had brought a newspaper from the previous Saturday to sit on while my mother covered the grave with a white paper tablecloth and set the meatless dishes out on it. Before the service began, the priest had talked to me and my uncle about politics, while my father sat silently off to the side.

The grave of my grandfather, who had died exactly forty days earlier, is in the highest part of the cemetery. On the hill. Where my father loved to talk walks amidst the pine forest and the abandoned villas, where every spring my mother gathered lilacs, narcissuses and primroses.

Spring is gone. The day is hot. At the very end of June. The scorching wind blows out the candles and carries the priest's chant towards the weedy orchards surrounding the cemetery.

There is my father, he has gotten to his feet and picked up his newspaper, he has taken off the blue baseball hat that shades him from the sun. His hair, which he has died black since he met my mother, blows in the wind. He is standing there alone, a bit aside from the rest of us.

The priest leaves, and my mother starts handing out the boiled wheat and bread. The sweets made without milk or butter. My grandfather's face in the photo on his gravestone is not looking at me nor at his own children. His gaze is focused somewhere to the side. Towards the place where my father is again sitting down and slowly eating his boiled wheat.

An unwanted, likely even despised son-in-law, who in the last years grew so close to his father-in-law that my grandfather would go so far as to cry if my father fell sick – even if it was only the commonest of colds. When grandfather died, my father broke down in a way no one had expected. Both before and after the funeral he was not himself at all.

A week later he ended up in the hospital with a bad case of pneumonia. The illness had affected even his speech, his reason. Visitors were forbidden – due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Having so recently seen death up-close, I talked to dad on the phone and tried to smother the fear that I would never see him again.

But he got better. In early June they released him – fully recovered from pneumonia, with the same sharp mind and sense of humor I'd known since childhood. We celebrated his birthday. We watched a football game together. We even got into an argument once. We hugged several times – upon meeting and upon parting. He started going to a dentist to fix his rotten teeth. He started taking walks up the hill again and often passed by grandfather's grave.

And now here he is after the memorial service, we leave the cemetery together and go our separate ways. He smiles at me and waves, without either of us knowing that it is for the last time. It is Friday. I get in my car. I'm rushing, because I have to be at work that night, and the next morning we are taking off for

vacation. I turn on the air conditioning and close the windows. I think about putting on music, then decide against it. We'll listen to music tomorrow, when we head for that little village with the mineral water, which some elderly people still call Zhezhkia Izvor, the hot springs. I'll celebrate my birthday there on Sunday – with a cold bottle of prosecco. We'll talk on the phone for the last time so he can tell me yet again about how he was going up the stairs towards the hospital in my hometown of Smolyan when they told him:

it's a boy.

And then those stories about how he met my mother, about his divorce, about how she ran away from home. I've heard them so many times.

I'll remember them again on Monday evening, when my phone rings and I hear my mother's upset voice.

On Wednesday we will go to the graveyard with him again.
Once again for the last time.

* * *

1981, Blagoevgrad

The world is a painting I live in. A song I write. A book that will be written someday by someone.

This is what Yoan Borisov is thinking as he once again strolls around Blagoevgrad's City Park on his own. Autumn has come, but summer doesn't seem to want to leave. "The Sound of Silence" is again in his thoughts, along with that girl who once appeared here –

When was it?

Years ago?

Days ago?

Hours ago?

and then left for good, sealed up in the envelop of a letter.

Yoan has left his wife, however. Perhaps, if Bogdana had cried, if she had shown weakness, if she hadn't flown into a rage... Be that as it may. His sons have threatened to never speak to him again. He has also lost his job, but they didn't expel him from the Party.

Vulkanov saved him – his friend he went to school with first at the votech, then later at the institute in Sofia, and finally at the Higher Party School in Moscow. His friend who was born on the same day as he was, and in the same

year. It was none other than Vulkanov who had invited him to go to Smolyan, because they were building a new city center there – to welcome the international Diplomatic Corps. And they needed specialists like him. Everything was already settled and arranged, even an apartment for him. Yoan had already been to Smolyan and had met Milena and Angel Sevdini, a nice couple, architects who would be working on the redesign of the city center.

Now, the day before leaving for the Rhodope Mountains, Yoan has gone out for a final walk in Blagoevgrad, in the City Park.

He walks and looks at the people, but does not see them – not the old men playing backgammon on the benches, not the mothers pushing young children on the swings, not the couples with their babies stuffed into strollers like miniature boats. A few neighbors from the old quarter nod to him in greeting and pass by, while he walks slowly and looks from the trees to the sky woven of translucent clouds colored baby pink by the sunset, but he does not see the trees or the clouds or the sunset. He recalls the sky over Sofia, patched up with the cobwebs of streetcar and trolleybus cables, an older sky, shabby, not like the babyish sky here, but he doesn't miss that sky, either.

He knows. Understands. With his whole being he senses that which will haunt him for days, months, perhaps even years.

A feeling cannot be described by words.

Anyone who thinks it can is a fool.

Anyone who never stops trying is wise.

Yoan walks.

He feels like an infant who has just left the warmth of the womb, blinded by hostile light, frightened by the air trying to enter him.

He feels like an old man dying in some distant hospital, blinded by the encroaching eternal night, frightened by the fact that nothing comes after death.

And between that infant and that old man he strides, Yoan, forty-five years old, not belonging to his own world.

Where is he going?

Quo vadis, Yoan?

Could there possibly be hope of another world, your world, a real one where everything starts from the beginning, from birth, from the discovery of fire, from the Big Bang?

Yoan sees the university students – they have come back, their lectures have begun. They are gathered around a bench, talking noisily...

Even before Martina turns around, Yoan recognizes her.

What would we have heard if we had been able to enter the chaos of his thoughts? Back then. At that moment. Perhaps a soft exclamation of surprise? Or a quiet cry of joy? A sigh? Of relief? Or of fear of what is to come?

No. At that moment everything in Yoan's thoughts is muted by three questions:

Am I writing
or am I part of what has been written?

Am I living
or am I part of what has been lived out by another?

Is this world mine
or am I a particle of someone else's world?

* * *

Months have passed since the day my father died. We are learning to live outside his time.

But we are like shipwreck survivors tossed up on some strange, deserted island.

Memories warm us. Memories pain us.

Here is the first and – of course, one of the most vivid. The memory that comes back to me just as the priest chants over his body in the church.

I am four or five years old when the sea tries to take the sun away from me.

An average, ordinary inflatable ball, not particularly large, yet huge because it reaches to my knees, and I am already a grown man. And to me, this is the most wonderful ball in the world. The only one. My ball. Orange. With white polka dots. For some unknown reasons I have called it *the sun*. That's what they both call it, too, my father and mother.

I don't know which year it was exactly, nor which beach we were at, but look – I can see it even now, the wind blows my little sun and it heads towards the sea, my father and mother are lying under the umbrella while I take off after my favorite ball, which has been scooped up by the waves and starts floating into the sea. Which is enormous and contains millions of worlds and suns.

I hear my mother yelling at me to stop and I freeze in front of the wild waves. By the time my parents reach me, the sun is already out to sea, so far out that I can barely see it amidst the white foam of the waves and I just say

dad

of course, I am already crying, so I don't hear what my mother says to him, likely

don't do it

but no, he hurls himself into the sea and starts swimming out towards the sun, which has completely disappeared, other people start crowding around us, kids are looking at me and my mother, while the men watch my father with squinting eyes – as he swims against the waves.

He's not much of a swimmer. Front crawl, but not your classic crawl, instead he keeps his head above water, I can see it, his head, his black hair, somewhere out there beyond the buoys, I don't know how far away the sun is at this point, surely on the other side of the sea, where I've heard there is another shore, even a city by the name of Batumi, which my father has seen, but I haven't, because it is on the other side of the world.

I watch him. And cry. But I realize that I am no longer crying for my sun. I am crying for him.

And I close my eyes so as to see the stars, the phosphorous stars under my eyelids, stars made of sun, sea and tears.

I don't know how much time has passed before I open my eyes. And I see him. Returning to me.

My little sun is in his hands.

He comes out of the sea.

And hands it to me.

I take it in my arms.

He says something to me, I don't remember what.

After that, everything continues as it had always been, life, more infinite than the sea, rocks us in its embrace, I grow up, he grows old, I go to college and start a career, he is now retired, and I am married and have a child of my own, we get together on holidays, over summer break, we celebrate birthdays, Christmas and Easter, and so on until the end, until the other shore, until today when he is no longer here.

I realized it there. In front of the coffin holding his body.

Yes.

That is what he is to me.

The man who swam across the sea to bring me the sun.

Memories warm us. Memories pain us.

The wreckage of his world is here, reminding us every day of what has been lost for good.

The book, my book, which he read over and over, marked on a page which should not have been the last; left on top of the other books crammed into our overflowing bookshelves.

His car in the parking lot in front of the apartment building.

The cupboard full of papers.

“Grandpa’s cup,” a gift to him last Christmas.

A bouquet of dried orchids, which he had given my mother on her birthday.

A bathrobe, clothes, toothbrush, pens, cologne, a hat, that hat he had worn before we said farewell.

The icon from his coffin – on his nightstand, where he had left his sudoku.

The sofa where he lay down for the last time.

The apartment he had lived in for the last thirty years, there everything is him. After he died, first the pipes started leaking and we flooded the neighbors downstairs, then the electricity stopped working, my uncle said he saw lightning above the kitchen cupboards. This place does not want to exist without him.

But he is there most of all under the bed, in that cardboard box tied up with twine, full of photos, newspapers, postcards, autobiographies, handwritten poems by long-forgotten poets, some perhaps penned by him. And those letters from my mother.

A parcel of memories.

A life-parcel.

A world-parcel.

During that June he had told me about it. Who knows why he had opened it and had mentioned over the phone to me that he was looking through his archive.

When we have time, I’ll come and you can tell me all about it.

That’s what I told him.

But our time ran out. Or did it?

Now I’ve opened it up on my own.

And somewhere there, amongst our cupboards, is his record collection, bought over the years while he was searching for... what? That song? Is the record with that song there, the one he heard fifty-six years ago in Batumi?

* * *

1981, Blagoevgrad

Everything is like in that song. Written by him. And heard afterwards, years later, by a man in Georgian hat in Batumi.

Am I writing, or am I part of what has been written?

Martina turns to Yoan – just the same as when he met her on that train, the very same girl he had invited into his home, his heart, his world, the very same girl he had once met and would meet again

in other times.

She is here, in front of him. Alive.

It is not love, but death that is the deceptive word, sealed in an envelope. There is no death.

She smiles. And he doesn't know whether he smiled or trembled – from fear, from excitement, from happiness,

am I going mad?

but he doesn't stop looking at her, her blue eyes are smiling, they don't speak, they know.

They don't ask whether he has forgiven her. They don't ask whether he has left his wife and abandoned everything in his life. They don't ask whether we will run away together without telling anybody, and we'll go somewhere where no one knows us, to the Rhodopes, to the very ends of the earth, and there, there we shall sit every evening, until death... it'll be just you and me, we will watch television, in a small room just for us... or not,

no,

let it be an apartment, even if only a panel-block one, but let it be on the edge of town, close to the woods, or near the orchards that will bloom every spring and which will blaze up in dozens, no hundreds of bright hues every autumn, and you and I will gaze at them together, from our balcony, every evening, until death...; but the apartment will not only be for us, there will be a child's bed in it as well – because when you have a child, you begin to live in two worlds – and some day, when our child grows up, when television no longer interests us, we'll set that child's bed on the balcony and we'll sit there just the two of us, and we'll talk, we'll look at the forest and the orchards in front of us, we'll listen to the birds' songs, you will be an old man, I won't be quite as old, but that doesn't matter, with me you are forever young.

No. They don't speak. Her blue eyes know. Because a seeress once said that her best years would be the next one and the one after that –

but how could these two years be good if she is not with him, with Yoan, if they don't have a child who will sleep in that bed upon which the two of them will grow old together, even if a different number of years separates them from old age. Till death do us..

Yes.

Sometimes two years are more important than twenty-two.

On the scales of happiness two years often outweigh centuries.

* * *

And so my story ends. Happily. Yet not quite.

The evening after my father's funeral, I sit with my mother there on the balcony, we gaze at the orchards and the forest, we listen to the birds' songs.

We talk.

And despite the pain of loss, I also feel joy. Because I realize that we think up worlds. We create them with

ideas,

desires,

dreams,

with our longings.

They remain somewhere there, between the beginninglessness and endlessness of time, they exist so as to create more new countless worlds. So that there will be no death.

This is why I told this whole story. First, because every one of us is created, written, made, drawn, composed – somewhere there in the chaos of boundlessness. But most of all so that we realize that

everything is inside us.

And nothing can exist without us seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling it. Not the hands of the clock, nor the laughter of our children, nor the touch of our beloved, nor the taste of wild strawberries, nor the scent of fire burning in a stove at night. Unless we imagine it.

A girl, for example, has thought up a world war and after that communism just so that she can have the chance to be with her beloved. He, on his part, has painted a picture where he can be with her, where they can be together, beyond death. There, another girl imagined the end of communism, again because of love. And her beloved composed a song in which a woman writes a book, while a young man thinks up viruses, crises, wars, just so he can be with her.

And so on.

Until infinity.

Because the Earth is an eye, and the sky is an eyelid that opens and closes countless times.

Because time is not a sentence, it has no capital letter or full stop; time is not a circle or a line, it is a complex curve that continues towards infinity, but at the same time also returns to beginninglessness.

So that we can

continue

creating our worlds.

Unto infinity, until we finally realize that

there is no death.