

Pelican Feather

novel

Translated by Bistra Andreeva

To Mom

Hope is the thing with feathers

Hope, Emily Dickinson

-1-

First my father left us. Or rather, first Monica moved in with us. Monica is my Mom's childhood friend. One evening Mom told Dad that she had called from Burgas. She wanted a new life. She wanted to come to Sofia and look for a job. So she asked him if Monica could stay with us for a while, for a month or two tops, until she settled down. My father knitted his brows in complete silence, like he always did when a decision had to be taken. It made whatever he said afterwards sound heavier, so as he opened his mouth it seemed to me that his words dropped down like the pebbles I used to throw in

the Bistritsa river. They would follow their trajectory and then they would fall where they meant to.

‘Okay. But for not more than a month,’ Dad ruled. Mom, who had frozen up awaiting the verdict, let out a sigh of relief, smiled, and kissed him on the lips.

‘Thank you, Vanko, you know how close we are. I hope her life finally takes off’

During this discussion (which later turned out crucial for our family) I was reading *The Brothers Lionheart*. But part of my mind was paying attention to the conversation. Suddenly I felt butterflies in my stomach, I dashed to the bathroom and I threw up.

‘Martin, are you okay?’ Mom showed up at the door.

‘He probably ate some junk at school,’ said Dad in his know it all way. Mom tried to give me a hug, but I slipped away from her arms and went to my room.

This happened in the beginning of April.

A month later Monica arrived.

-2-

The first thing Granny said when she saw me was:

‘Martin, how you’ve grown! Give me a hug!’

She said nothing to Mom. She just hugged her and held her a little longer. When she let go, I saw Mom’s eyes were wet.

My grandmother’s apartment is in the centre of Burgas. It is in the long block of flats to the side of the Free University. It’s on Vardar Street. Ever since Granddad went up to Heaven three years ago, she has been living there alone in three rooms and a kitchen. So I get to have my own room again. I haven’t been here since last summer, but I stayed just a little then. Mom, Dad and I used to go on vacation to the Golden Sands and

Albena each summer and we would just pass through Burgas to see Granny, and before that Granddad too. But we never stayed for more than a night.

Granny has made some potato stew for us.

'You must be hungry from the trip!' she says and it seems to me that she is trying to be cheerful.

I am not too hungry because only an hour and a half ago the bus stopped for a break and I had a ham and cheese sandwich. Mom didn't have anything and she is mostly pushing around her potatoes now. Since Dad left she hardly eats. She used to cry a lot in the beginning. She took some days off work and she just lay down and cried. She didn't eat at all back then. She just came in to check if I had eaten and she quickly fixed something for me. She also had long phone conversations with Auntie Ana, her best friend. I heard her explain that she didn't want to live any longer and how she kept on living just for me. That scared me a lot. If my mother left me too, what was I going to do? Were they going to put me in one of those homes for children without parents, like the one Granny grew up in? I didn't want to go there. Once we passed by its building in Burgas. The fence was really high and the children looked out from behind the bars like monkeys in a cage.

I guess Auntie Ana was also scared of all that talk, because she came home and made Mom go to a doctor about her nerves. Mom didn't want to go, but Auntie Ana insisted until Mom gave in. After she came back from the doctor, Mom started taking these little pills. She also started to cry less and eat a bit, and she was even asking me how I was doing with my homework. She went back to work.

Granny called often too. Much more often than before. They talked a lot one evening. At first they were arguing and Mom kept saying she was doing fine. Then she

started crying. Finally she said: 'Okay, we'll come'. When the conversation was over, she came to me and said:

'In the end of the month, after you finish school, we will go to Burgas. We'll stay there with your Grandma for a while.'

I didn't know what to say. I really wanted to go to the seaside and spend some time with Granny, but at the same time all of my friends, and most importantly Alex, were in Sofia. But I didn't want to upset Mom again, so I just tried to smile and said:

'Okay.'

'Are you happy?' She said it like she was asking herself, and not me.

'Very,' I said and she hugged me. She pressed me really tight against her chest and I got worried because she hadn't done that in such a long time.

-3-

Mom and Monica go back a long way. Before Monica moved in, Mom told their whole story to Auntie Ana who listened carefully and finally just said: 'Hmm...'. They knew each other since they were kids. First they were in the same nursery group, then they went to school together, then they both applied and got into the English Language High School, but then they went different ways. Mom came to study in Sofia and later she met my father here. And Monica married my Mom's high-school sweetheart, just like that, out of the blue. He had become her sweetheart. By then Mom went back to Burgas less and less often, plus it was kind of awkward with that shared love interest of theirs (I didn't really get that, I thought Mom was with Dad already), so they gradually lost touch. However, a few months ago Monica tracked down my Mom on Facebook and sent her a message. She said she was divorced from the high-school sweetheart,

she had no kids, she was working as a secretary in some office and she wasn't happy with her life. This is the story that Mom told Dad while we were having dinner one evening, her voice full of excitement. However, she didn't mention anything about the high school sweetheart. Dad listened distractedly, checking out from time to time what was happening on TV, behind Mom's back.

Over the next few days Mom kept talking about the messages that she had started to exchange with Monica regularly. She recalled things that had happened in their childhood and in school, and she even looked like a bit of a schoolgirl when she talked about it. She said that when Monica was a little girl she liked to eat and was pretty chubby. Once on a school trip they passed by a bee garden and she bought a honeycomb. But there was a bee (or was it a wasp?) which stung Monica's tongue. Monica started crying, her mouth was swollen and the boys started to make fun of her, calling her Greedy Little Teddy Bear. My Mom, whom they supposedly respected because she was the Chair of the Class¹, whatever that means, reprimanded them and they got embarrassed. Wow, who would have thought Mom was like that! Later, though, Monica started hanging out with some other, older girls from the neighbourhood, and she became very "hip". She gave my Mom some banned books to read, she made her hair with henna, like Monica herself had (this almost gave my Grandma and Grandpa a heart attack), she helped Mom meet the boy she liked, only I didn't understand if that guy was *the* high school sweetheart. And in return, my Mom did Monica's English homework.

¹ During the Soviet period in Bulgaria, all children between 9 and 14 were part of the mass youth Pioneer movement. It was organized in "squads", which often coincided with class groups. The "Chairman" of the squad (or class) was elected by the children to be in charge of the group's activities.

Honestly, it had been a while since I had seen my Mom as excited and eager as this. I listened to her and I just couldn't help but wonder how come such a solid friendship fell apart at all?! I just don't understand women and that's it!

And so it went, until that one evening when Mom asked Dad if Monica could live with us.

-4-

The day Monica was expected to arrive Mom went to the hair salon. They had not seen each other in fifteen years and she wanted to show her friend that she 'hadn't changed much'. I heard them come in some time in the early evening. They were talking in the vestibule. Then they entered the room. Mom turned to me and said:

'Martin, meet Monica.' Her voice was somehow different. Like she was going to recite a very important poem, the kind they teach us at school.

Then Monica came in. She wasn't very tall and she had fair hair that was cut and styled after the latest trends. A little longer in the front, a little shorter in the back of the neck. Her face was the colour of a candle and her big smile was the flame. It revealed even white teeth. Her eyes were the colour of violets and they were smiling too. She was wearing a tight light blue top with an open neckline, and a short black skirt. She had fishnet tights on, as well as black shoes with high needle heels. My Mom never put on short skirts, fishnet tights, and such heels. I looked at her standing next to Monica. Her dark auburn hair looked unnaturally lifted up, like a helmet. She was smiling too, looking very happy. But you could see the fatigue behind her smile. She wore a brown knee-length skirt and a brown jacket. And a white blouse, buttoned almost all the way up. She

was elegant, my Mom, but in an auntie way. And Monica, she looked more like someone's big sister.

And not only that, she was the prettiest big sister I had ever seen.

'Martin, has the cat got your tongue? Come on, shake Monica's hand.'

I got up and stretched out my hand somewhat nervously, looking away:

'I'm Martin.'

Monica took my hand and I began to blush.

'What a nice name! Great to meet you, Martin. I'm Monica. And you can just call me Monica. Don't you start 'auntie-ing' me, please.' Her voice was very caressing, the kind that those women hosting wedding ceremonies have. We had been to a wedding a few months earlier and the lady who was reading the speech had exactly the same voice. I really liked it back then. Monica laughed out and I liked her laughter too. I liked everything about her.

'And now you can continue with your homework,' Mom said and they went off to the kitchen. I could hear their voices from a distance. Mom's dovelike voice and Monica's melodious one. I couldn't make out the words, as much as I tried, so they started sounding like a duet to me. I wondered if they were talking about me? I wanted to know that more than anything.

After an hour or two I heard Dad come home. I went to the other room to say hi. This is how I witnessed the moment Mom introduced Monica to him. I was behind her back and couldn't see her face, but I saw his. It had an expression on that I had never seen before. Stunned. Like Monica was from another world and he didn't know what to say. And my Dad always knows what to say. It lasted for about an instant, but I felt a tingle in my stomach, like the first time I heard about her. Only this time I didn't throw up. My father smiled and took Monica's hand.

‘Ivan, glad to meet you. Welcome to our house! Make yourself at home.’

I saw how happy Mom was to hear these words and how she lit up.

‘Hello, son. How was your day?’ Dad came closer to me and stroked my hair.

I was absolutely puzzled by this question since my Dad never asks me anything. Usually, he just asks Mom: ‘Did he do his reading? Did he do his homework? Is he better? (that’s when I am sick) – all like I’m not even there. I didn’t know what to say so I just went back to my room.

Before long, Mom called me out for dinner. I remember dinner that evening because everything was different. Mom was glowing and she was very pretty. She was smiling all night, talking with excitement. Dad wasn’t eyeing the TV the whole time and he even told us a few jokes that Monica laughed a lot at. And I bathed in her laughter and I felt like singing and hugging all three of them and asking them if Monica could stay with us forever.

-5-

After we had lunch – a second one for me and a very symbolic one for Mom – Grandma gave us one of her determined looks that always scare me a little. When she looks at me that way it means that she is up to something and it is not necessarily what I want. I saw my Mom’s face getting tense with anticipation too.

‘I have a rehabilitation programme planned out for you. It starts tomorrow morning,’ Grandma announced.

‘What programme, Mother? We don’t need any programmes, we came here to rest,’ Mom tried to resist.

‘Precisely! A rest! But a restorative one. And I don’t want to hear another word about it! You and your son both need to gain some strength, so what is it with the long faces?! Certainly the world is not over yet?!’

The world was not over... yet. But when Grandma woke us up at six the next morning, at least to me, it certainly felt like it was over. And like my summer holiday – which had just started – was over too.

-6-

Those were the happiest days of my life. In the morning, Mom and Dad would go to work and I would stay home with Monica to do my homework. Monica would get up late and come to my room to say good morning, and then she would ask me with that caressing voice of hers whether I wanted to keep her company while she was having her coffee. I didn’t wait for her to ask twice. I would just dump my homework and join her. She would make coffee and the smell of it would fill up the whole kitchen, and the living room too. Then we would sit on the sofa, she would take long sips and ask me stuff. About my school, my friends, if I liked any of the girls. Mom and Dad never had the time to talk to me like that. I wasn’t cross with them because I knew they were tired and had too much work. But now, even if they tried to talk to me that way, I wouldn’t want that anymore. I wouldn’t feel comfortable. But I was comfortable with Monica. I could tell her everything. Not straight away. Little by little. She would listen, nod, take a sip and smile. I told her about Alex, how we sit next to each other on the same desk, how she smells of violets and has the cutest dimples in the world.

‘And does she know you like her?’ Monica asked me once.

‘No. She doesn’t. No one does. And please... don’t tell Mom and Dad.’

‘Of course I won’t.’ Monica stroked my hair and I blushed.

Around noon Monica would fix us something, eggs or sandwiches, and we would eat together. Then I went to school.

All of us came together for dinner. Mom and Dad were always in a good mood. They told Monica about things that had happened at work, she listened and nodded. Whenever they were nervous about something she told them not to worry about it. They, in return, asked her how her job hunt was going and she replied that she was waiting for a call from this one place, that someone had promised her something, and it was pointless to apply for jobs in ads because the salaries were too low and she wasn’t going to be able to afford her own place. I secretly wished for Monica to never find a job again and to stay with us forever. And be my second Mom. Or older sister.

And so time went by, until that unfortunate day at the cinema came. And before it, there was the F in literature.

-7-

The best thing about vacations is that I can sleep late. I don’t have to get up early, like when I go to school. Mom and Dad would just let me sleep away. Both when we were in Sofia or on vacation. Especially if we were on vacation. We would get up around 10, have breakfast at the hotel and only then head to the beach. Like everyone else on vacation. This is what I was thinking that morning, when Grandma woke me up at the break of dawn and I got confused, thinking I had to go to school. But then I saw her face and I remembered we were on vacation, in Burgas, that... But why is Grandma waking me up so early then?! What’s gotten into her?

I heard Mom try to resist her as well, but Grandma was relentless.

‘Come on, sleepy heads, rise and shine! Come on, it’s just about noon already!’ she said loudly.

Yeah, right, noon. It was hardly the break of dawn outside. But we didn’t have much of a choice, so we just got up. I did it because she is my Grandma and I have to show respect to her and do as she says. And Mom did it because she hardly had any strength to resist anything lately and she just gave in.

‘Put your swimsuits on!’ Grandma ordered.

We obeyed. And then followed Grandma to the Sea Garden, which is actually just an average park by the sea, so I really don’t understand why they call it a garden here. The minute we entered that park-garden, I realized that not everyone who is in their right mind sleeps late during the summer. Unless all these people were not in their right mind. But they couldn’t have been all mad, there were too many of them. And so, mad or not, they were riding bicycles, walking on the sand or in the water, exercising, and some even swimming. It had never occurred to me that it was an option to swim at that time of the day. We always went swimming during the day. And during the day only. We got down to the beach. Grandma stopped at a place near the shore, away from the umbrellas, tossed down our towels on the sand and said:

‘Off you go into the sea! The water is as warm as tea.’

Mom refused to get in and Grandma didn’t insist. The salty water was warm indeed. We swam in the sun path which gradually faded in the increasing daylight. Meanwhile Mom was lying on her back, on her towel, looking at the sky. So far I liked Grandma’s programme. But I was really sleepy.

‘Now we will do a few simple exercises. We learnt those in yoga class,’ Grandma said when we got out on the beach.

‘What is yoga?’ I instantly wanted to know.

‘Yoga is an ancient Indian system of exercises which strengthen your physical and mental health. The exercises are called asanas,’ Grandma recited. ‘You are about to see their amazing effect for yourselves.’

And she started showing us, telling us when to breathe in and breathe out. To my joy, and, I believe, to Mom’s joy, there were only five exercises. And they weren’t hard at all. We had to repeat each of them five times. Basically, we had to twist our bodies in different directions. Mom tried to cheat, but this time Grandma was adamant. When we were done with the exercises, I thought that was it. But it wasn’t. Grandma energetically spread our towels on the sand and said:

‘Time to meditate.’

She saw the puzzled look on my face, so she was quick to explain:

‘When you meditate, you relax and think of nothing. That’s what we are going for – we want to stop the train of thought and let our minds rest. Enter a state of deep relaxation.’

We sat down on our towels and crossed our legs. I pressed my eyes really tight and tried hard to meditate. I tried to not think about anything and so I was thinking about how I should stop thinking and then I tried again and I felt like smoke was coming out of my ears with all my efforts to stop thinking that I should stop thinking. And then I saw Monica all of a sudden, her big smile and even white teeth, and I felt her stroking my hair like she used to. If that was meditation, I liked it a lot already.

I was supposed to write an essay on the question ‘Why is Ivan Vazov’s² poem *I Am Bulgarian* timeless?’. Mom and Dad were at work and I was sweating over my notebook in my room when Monica showed up, still sleepy, her first morning coffee in hand. When she heard the topic, she sat on my bed and asked me to read out loud to her what I had written so far. I wasn’t too eager to do it but her eyes really insisted, so I started reading:

‘The poem *I Am Bulgarian* is timeless because of the universal values it extolls – love for the homeland, patriotism and the joy of being Bulgarian. It’s a poem professing the poet’s love for Bulgaria. This was as far as I had gotten and I had no idea how to continue. Plus, what I had written was not really mine – it was what our literature teacher had told us in class, and I could think of nothing else. I looked at Monica with anticipation. She stared back at me with her beautiful eyes and said in her typical drawl:

‘What a load of rubbish’. I felt the blush come on. Monica had never criticized anything I had done so far. And her opinion mattered more than anyone else’s. Except for Alex’s, maybe.

‘Do you really mean all that?’ she asked. I kept silent, eyes down.

‘No.’

‘So why did you write it then?’

‘That’s what the teacher said.’

‘The teacher is just pumping your heads with nonsense. If Vazov could walk out of his grave and get to a computer, he would delete this poem forever. Are you proud of being Bulgarian? And do you think our native land is *dear*?’

² Ivan Vazov (1850 – 1921) was a Bulgarian poet, novelist and playwright, often referred to as “The Patriarch of Bulgarian literature”.

I had never heard Monica talk with such resentment and it felt increasingly awkward.

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘You don’t know because you’re still too young to know and life in our dear homeland hasn’t chewed you up yet. Just look at me – I am 34 and out of work. I have to rely on some miserable benefits that won’t get me anywhere. I don’t have health insurance. Thank God for your Mom and Dad. And God forbid I came down with something! I almost died in a hospital two years ago from appendicitis... Those knuckleheads couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me until it was almost too late. Can you believe their bloody negligence and recklessness! To hell with that healthcare we supposedly have! I have worked for fifteen years straight. I am computer literate. I speak English. But so what? I can’t even get a job to make a living for myself. Because no way I am working for a salary of 300-400 levs. What are you supposed to do with that kind of money? Pay the rent, pay energy bills, or pay the water bill? You can’t even cover the rent with that... It’s a country of chalga³, corruption and criminals. It’s a nightmare on the roads. *Everything native Bulgarian / I cherish, observe and adore?!* Yeah, right! A country where a young and capable woman’s only chance for a normal life is finding a man to support her deserves nothing but to be left behind. I would pack my bags today if I could, and I would never come back...’

Monica uttered those final words quietly, as if they were not meant for me, but for her. I just kept quiet and sweated. I guessed what she was saying was true, but it wasn’t anything I had ever contemplated. I could hear how bleak the news were every day, but I was so used to them. They were just like a background noise. But now the whole idea

³ Chalga (also known as pop-folk) is a lowbrow music genre, criticized for its lewd, sexually explicit lyrics and videos.

of Monica packing her bags and leaving for good bothered me and I did not like it one bit.

‘I can’t write that down.’

‘Why?’ Monica raised her eyebrows.

‘Well... the teacher won’t like it.’

‘So what? Do you want everyone to like you or do you prefer to have your own position?’

Monica kept stunning me. I had no idea what my position was. But I did have the very clear idea that I didn’t want to disappoint her. She got up and left the room without another word. I tore out the page and turned a blank sheet. All of a sudden my pen was moving on its own.

‘If Vazov was alive today he would have hardly written the poem I Am Bulgarian. If he lived in contemporary Bulgaria he would have never said that to be called Bulgarian is the greatest joy for me. If he could hear chalga or had to be hospitalized, maybe he would have had second thoughts before he wrote Everything native Bulgarian / I cherish, observe and adore. That is, if he even survived the hospital or managed to stay away from road accidents. In our country of criminals and mobsters, the lines in a place of liberty I live make no sense. If he worked hard for a salary of 300 levs he would have probably emigrated, never to come back, like most educated and capable Bulgarians. This is why the poem I Am Bulgarian is only relevant for the times when it was written and the times before that. But nowadays it sounds like the songs our parents used to listen to when they were young – obsolete and sentimental’.

This time Monica was happy.

‘Well done!’ she said. And I blushed again, with joy.

-9-

I don't know how long we meditated. It felt like a very long time to me. When we opened our eyes Granny looked content. My legs had fallen asleep. I was really sleepy too and I couldn't wait to go back home and lie down in bed.

'So, what did you experience?' Granny wanted to know.

'It was very nice,' I replied, but I didn't mention Monica. It was embarrassing to talk about her anyway, plus Mom was there, so I didn't want to make her burst into tears and have another nervous breakdown.

'Nothing,' Mom said listlessly and looked at the sea.

'Considering it's your first time, that's good,' Granny concluded. 'You will see how the experience will get so much deeper and greater with regular practice.'

This bit about regular practice really alarmed me. Was Granny planning to wake me up this early again?

More importantly, I was going to be in bed soon, to get some proper sleep. But right at this moment Granny said:

'Alright then, let's get going because we have a long way ahead of us. We need to get over there,' and pointed at some cabins very, very far away ahead of us.

-10-

I didn't expect our literature teacher to be delighted with my essay, but I was not prepared for what happened. She came in with a grim face and she said she had our essays and that some of us put in a lot of effort and did really good. She said that like it was something truly unpleasant. Then she pulled out a notebook, held it with two fingers like Mom held dirty rags and said:

'However, one of your essays made a very strong impression on me.'

Everyone's eyes got fixed on that notebook and then I realized it was *my* notebook. I just wished I could shrink and vanish under my desk. Next thing I know, the teacher's dark eyes, with the thick, black pencil lined eyebrows above them, are fixed on me:

'Martin, would you come out to the front and read out your essay, please!'

I shuffled out of my desk and headed towards the teacher's desk with trembling knees. Now *everyone* was looking at me. I turned the pages to find my essay and started to read with a dry throat. Right where the essay ended, there was a perked up, neatly written, well-rounded and self-content F. My first ever. I wanted to cry.

It was interesting that my classmates didn't laugh like they normally would. They could probably sense how grave the situation was.

The teacher started to talk again. She tried to sound calm, but I could feel the tension in her voice:

'Martin, do you really mean what you wrote?'

I remained silent.

'What is it with this nihilism? Where did this renegation come from? Is that what they teach you at home? Tell your parents they have to come and see me this week!'

I didn't dare look up until the end of class. But then I noticed that my classmates treated me differently. There was something in their eyes that I hadn't seen before. Alex looked at me with sparkling eyes and said:

'Still, I really liked your essay. You are so brave!' and her dimples winced. My heart did too and I felt so, so very grateful to Monica, despite the F. But then I remembered what I had to tell my parents and suddenly my heart was in my mouth.

-11-

We both tried to resist.

'I am sleepy. I want to go home,' I said.

'Mom, where do you want to take us now?! Wasn't that enough? Let's go home, the sun is already high,' Mom protested with as firm a voice as she was able to produce. That was definitely progress there.

'Listen, you slackers,' Granny got mad. 'You are staying with me now, so you will follow the rehabilitation programme I have prepared for you. After all that you have been through, it is quite obvious that you can't be trusted to deal with things on your own. You need help. Which is why you are here. Come on, get up!'

We hesitated just a bit more, then stood up and followed Grandma, walking a few feet behind her to show just how reluctant we were. Granny however bolted ahead and couldn't care less.

We walked along the beach, splashing our feet in the water. We passed by countless bars and cafes. Then the beach changed. There were no more umbrellas and lifeguard booths anymore. There was grass instead, and the sand was black. Most people lying in

the sun were stark naked. We passed huge, dead, washed up jellyfish. We walked and we walked and we walked... At some point we saw some naked men with white baseball caps who were sitting in a circle, on small stools, and played cards on a small table. Next to them I saw something spelled out with stones. It was the date. And then, as we walked on, we started seeing black people. But they weren't niggers... Ouch, Mom said I couldn't use that word. African-American. They weren't African-American, because sometimes I could see their white skin. But they were covered with something black. From head to toe.

'Granny, what is this?' I couldn't help it.

'Mud,' Grandma said tersely.

'Why are they covered with mud?'

'Because it's very good for you. Both for your skin and your health.'

'So how come no one does it in Sofia? We have mud there too?'

'This is a special one,' Granny chuckled. 'It can cure. You don't have that in Sofia.'

Soon we got to a place with many muddy people. They were standing in the sun.

'Why are these people standing like this?'

'They are waiting for the mud to dry. That's how it works. Then they wash in the sea.'

I looked at Mom. But she looked like she wasn't even there and she was certainly not following the conversation. She was just staring straight ahead – not at the sea, nor at the shore, but at something me and Grandma couldn't see. I wanted to pull her and tell her: 'Mom, I am here! Mom, do you love me? Mom, are you mad at me for Dad and Monica leaving us because I lied to the teacher about going to the cinema? Mom... '

I didn't say a thing. I wanted to cry all of a sudden. But I took it like the man that I am and swallowed my tears.

-12-

‘Marty, I don’t get it. How did you come up with these things? Your father and I don’t talk like that. Nor do we see things that way.’ Mom looked stumped, which was not her usual state. At least not back then.

I remained silent. It was turning into a habit of mine. Looking down to avoid her eyes. We were alone, Monica was out to see someone and Dad was working late.

The last thing I wanted to do was to tell on Monica. I knew the situation was not positive (yet_another word that Monica likes to use – for her something is either complete rubbish, or it’s positive,_meaning Bulgaria must be complete rubbish). Plus, something was telling me that if Mom found out Monica had helped me write my essay, the consequences for her stay with us would not be positive either.

‘Marty, please answer me. Let’s talk like we’re friends.’

Hm, when have we ever done that? My mother is not my friend, she is my mother. Monica is my friend because she talks to me every day. And I don’t need to have an F for that. So I remained silent.

‘Why these thoughts? Don’t you like our life? Aren't we giving you everything you need? Don't we get you everything you want, if possible? You have a mobile phone, you have a computer... What is it that you miss?’

I was just sitting there quietly and when the silence became unbearable I asked:

‘Can I go to my room now?’

Mom sighed and shrugged.

Later that evening, when Dad was home, Mom told him about my F. I heard her say:

‘What is wrong with this kid? Should we take him to counselling?’

‘He’s fine. He’s just entering puberty, that’s all. He doesn’t need counselling,’ Dad snapped. ‘Plus, he is not stupid, he sees things, he can understand.’

I was super surprised by Dad’s reaction. I thought he was going to get mad. A bit later he opened the door to my room. I was already in bed and the lights were out. I pressed my eyes shut and pretended to sleep. Before long, Monica came back too. Just the thought of her being home worked on me like those little pills that Mom takes when she can’t sleep, and before I knew it I was sound asleep.

-13-

That day I tell Monica that I really want to see *Alice in Wonderland*. She says she has never been to a 3D film and that we can go together. She starts Dad’s laptop and checks the listings. They are showing it at 4pm, but I only finish school at 5.

‘You could say you don’t feel well and leave earlier,’ Monica suggests.

I look at her in disbelief.

‘Mom and Dad will flip.’

‘This will be our secret,’ Monica gives me a wink.

And I don’t hesitate too much. We agree to meet by the side of the school.

The teacher gives me a suspicious look when I tell her that I don’t feel well, but she lets me go nevertheless.

And so I go to the cinema with Monica.

-14-

We swerved by the people drying their mud in the sun and found ourselves on a dusty road. We crossed it and took a wooden path. There was black water on both sides of it and people waded in it up to their knees, sticking their hands in it, taking out mud and smearing it on their bodies and faces. I thought it was an unpleasant sight to see. I don't know why Granny brought us here and what was it that she wanted to show us so bad. There were reeds and you could spot the apartment buildings of Burgas in the distance, but I didn't think they were very interesting. We kept walking along the wooden path over the black water. The planks were muddy and slippery.

'Watch out so you don't slip!' Granny warned us.

We made baby steps and tried to be extra careful. Finally we reached the end – there were two more pools there. The water was the colour of rust and there were many people inside. They were relaxed, but they they were floating on their backs, like relaxed crocodiles. We stopped and Grandma said:

'This is salt pool. It's very good for you. We will go in here, since the concentration of salt is higher.' And she pointed at the pool to the left with authority.

'I will wait for you outside,' I said insecurely. I didn't want to go in that red water. Plus, there were no kids, just aunties and old men. If it was as good as Granny claimed it was, I am positive there would have been kids too.

'I'll have none of that!' Grandma stated. 'All three of us go in.'

Mom looked like she didn't have the strength to fight anymore. She obeyed and took off her beach dress. But I decided to stand up for myself this time.

'I don't want to!'

'Marty, please, no arguing about this. We've come all the way here, we are going in,' Mom said sounding tired.

I kept silent and stared at my feet.

Then someone spoke out of the water:

‘You just don’t know how good it is, that’s why you’re trying to skip it. Lye (see above) will make a real man out of you.’

I looked up towards the voice. It belonged to an adult man with grey hair and a moustache. He looked a bit like Crocodile Dundee. Among the crocodiles. Then I saw the crocodiles were all gazing at me, waiting to see what I was going to do. So it hit me that it was a question of honour now to get in. And I did – I got in first, before Mom and Granny. The crocodiles all started to applaud. The water was almost up to my waist. The bottom was hard, with some lumps prickling my feet. I tripped.

‘Well done, you! We don’t want you to look like a fool now, do we!’ Dundee spoke again and laughed out. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Martin.’

‘That’s a very nice name. A real man’s name. And what’s your sister’s name?’

I saw him looking at Mom.

‘She is not my sister. She is my mother!’

And then I no longer wanted to speak to him. Right then Mom and Granny got in.

‘Now let’s lie down!’ Granny said and relaxed in the water.

I crouched and the water covered my body. Then I relaxed and I didn’t sink at all! It kept me afloat on the surface like I had a swimming ring. I loved it. Mom and Granny had relaxed too. I dipped down my hand to check what was that prickly thing. I took out a handful of crystals.

‘That’s salt,’ Granny said. ‘It’s very good for you.’

‘How?’

‘In many ways. But you should spend no more than 20 minutes a day in it.’

‘And what if we stay more?’

‘Nothing, but it won’t be as good.’

A grey-haired woman with sunglasses on chimed in:

‘There is a joke about lye. Two women met in it. One of them said: ‘Oh, salt pool has helped so many people, may God rest their soul.’

Granny laughed out loud. Even Mom smiled. I didn’t see what was so funny about it.

People had crystals on all sorts of places – on their bellies, shoulders, backs and knees.

‘Granny, why do they put it on their bodies?’

‘Because this is where they feel pain. So they apply some salt, to extract the pain. You don’t have to do that, it’s too early for you.’

Granny puts some salt on her shoulders and Mom – on her back. I don’t put salt anywhere on me. I just inspect the crystals against the sun. They shine in different colours. There is blue, and yellow and purple.

Soon Granny says:

‘Alright, that’s enough.’

The three of us head to the exit, which is actually a wooden step with some sort of a handrail, only not that reliable. We get out. Our whole bodies are shiny and slimy. And with traces of salt.

‘How are we to put on our clothes now?’ Mom starts fussing.

‘What clothes?! What about the mud?’

-15-

I will always remember the time I went to the cinema with Monica. The slight guilt from the lie, and the huge excitement from the conspiracy and the fact that me and

Monica were a team. We went to the mall and Monica bought us tickets. She also got us popcorn and Coke. She looked as happy and excited as I was and I simply could not imagine how she and my Mom had ever been classmates. Monica was full of something bubbly and alive, with her it was all fun and games. And Mom was tired, worried, concerned. I felt sad for her.

I didn't know anything about meditation at the time, but I decided not to think about Mom and to just enjoy the double occasion for celebration: a 3D film and a 3D film with Monica. It was absolutely brilliant! Like we were part of the film too and Alice was among us. It was the coolest thing I had ever seen. Monica liked it a lot too.

After the movie she asked me again:

'This will be our little secret, right?'

'Yes,' I quickly replied and blushed, because to share a secret with her felt very, very good.

When we got home, she announced with a smile:

'And look who I found on the street on my way back from the Employment Agency!'

She smoothed my hair and I almost died with pleasure.

'How was school today, Marty?' Mom asked me.

'Good,' I replied and hurried out to my room.

-16-

No way! This is just too much! No one can ever make me put this filthy mud on my body. Mom also said: 'No' and 'Enough,' but Granny was unwavering.

'I am not moving an inch until you two apply some'.

'Mother, please, what are these juvenile tricks! The sun is too strong, let's go.'

‘You can leave me out here alone, if you wish. I am not going anywhere unless you put some mud on your bodies.’

‘But how can you blackmail us like that! You can’t just force people into it!’ Mom said.

‘When you get to see your child wither away in front of you, then you’ll tell me what I can and can’t do,’ Granny snapped.

Mom looked around helplessly and quietly said:

‘Come on, Marty. We don’t want to upset your Grandma.’

And the three of us stepped into the mud.

LINA

The sun is too strong. My brain is melting like ice-cream. The one that we used to buy from the Labour Day Candy Shop for 25 stotinki⁴, vanilla. Do you remember that? They don't make it like this anymore. It tasted different. I can't think. I don't want to think. I want to switch off my thoughts. Shut down, at least for a little while... Leave myself alone.

How did I end up here? Where am I heading? How did I get here?

I want to find out, but I can't. I always tried hard to be good. To live by the book. To not reach for anything that is someone else's.

His hands on your body. Your lips. Him penetrating you. In our home, in front of my very eyes... Why? Passion had left, passion always leaves. It will leave you two one day as well... What am I saying? One day? One day means many, many days. Many days in his hands, holding you. Hundreds of nights and waking up together. Thousands of kisses and moans. Countless hours in my empty home.

The sea. People are swarming up like bees. Crawling and filling out the sand. Huge, sweaty insects.

We went to Bristol with Ivan a few years ago and saw Camera Obscura. Has he told you about it, Monica? We were there in the dark little room, looking out at the park, at the people passing by, at the dogs running around. Through the lenses of that camera. It was like Big Brother – you see, yet remain unseen. This is how I feel now. Alone in my dark little room, observing everything and everyone. Outside. A black-and-white world that I can't connect with. Depression is like Camera Obscura.

⁴ One Bulgarian lev is divided into 100 stotinki.

But it is thoughts that hurt more than anything. Thoughts that wouldn't leave me alone. Neither will bewilderment. How, why did this happen? Why, whenever we do good, it is punished? God, is there good that remains unpunished?

I took you into my house. I gave you everything. Why wasn't it enough? Why did you reach for my most precious – my family? Was I blind? Or just very, very stupid. Yes, I am very, very stupid. To let you in my house... God, what was I thinking?!

Ever since we were little, I was always helping you. I watched over you like a hawk. You were white, soft, blond... You matured early, your breasts grew. The boys were already crowding around you. They pulled you, poked you, always tried to grab you and squeeze you.

We are in sixth grade. The big break. Remember that? I am in the yard, I have bought myself a snack and I am looking for you. Mona, Mona... I can't find you. I enter the school building and I go up the stairs to the chemistry room. The door is closed. I get in and quietly close it behind me. The room is empty. But it still seems to me I'm not alone. The door of the teacher's office is slightly ajar. I approach it to hear heavy breathing. As if someone is climbing the stairs and they're short of breath. I take a peek in the dark and I discern the back of that hooligan from 9th grade. He is sitting on a chair. You are in front of him. Standing. Your little shirt is unbuttoned, and your panties are down around your knees. One of his hands is stroking your breast, the other is under your skirt. Your lips are slightly apart and you don't move. Only your hand squeezes his shoulder. You stare right at me. I step back, quietly get to the door, leave and run, run, run to the other end of the hallway. Straight to the Doctor's office. I say I am not feeling well. You're red hot, do you have a fever? I go home and lie down, with a thermometer that Mom put under my arm. I keep seeing the hands of that good-for-nothing and you – still and out of breath. You came looking for me, I found out later, but

my Mom told you I was sick and asleep. Actually, I toss and turn all night. My body is feverish and I feel like it's me, and not you, that the boy's hands are touching...

I spend the next day in bed too. I don't know how to go to school and look you in the eyes. I only muster the strength on the third day. You give me a bear hug, tell me you missed me, ask me how I am. We don't talk about what I saw. We never do.

You have always been a slut. Why did I let you into my house? What was I thinking?!

Three years later. We are sixteen. The boy I've liked for a long time has asked me out. You help me choose what dress to wear. Then you put some make-up on me. We are alone at home. I am nervous. What if he tried to kiss me? I've never kissed anyone. Will he find out? Will I make a fool of myself? Come, you say, I will show you. You prop my cheek up with your hand and kiss me on the lips. I can feel your tongue spreading them apart and touching mine. Instinctively, I respond to the touch. It all lasts just an instant, but electricity darts all over my body. Very good. You'll manage.

That's what you are, a slut!

But I still don't get it. Why my husband out of all men? You could have had anyone. Why mine? His hands holding you...

And my body, untouched and floating like a buoy in that stinky red water. What do I need it for? What should I do with it?

The boy who kissed me first and made me a woman is seeing me off at the train station. You are there too. We've often been together, the three of us, over the last two years. But I am going away to study. And you two are staying. The boy is giving me a long kiss, whispering he loves me. You give me a tight hug. Your lips are quivering and your eyes well up. I wipe a tear with the tip of my fingers. Wave to you from the train. The wind is drinking my fingers dry, did it dry your eyes as well?

Asen comes to visit in Studentski Grad⁵. We sleep on my bed in a room that I share with two other girls. When they leave for classes in the morning we make love, all passion and out of breath. After that we exchange letters and speak on the phone ever more rarely. Seeing each other even more rarely. You write letters to me too – long and emotional ones. Every week. Nearing the end of my first year of studies, I am getting ready to pack up and go home to Burgas for the summer. Just days before I leave, your letter arrives. You say that you finally fell in love, that you are so happy. But your happiness would not be complete without my blessing. Blessing? What is wrong with you? When did you ever need my opinion on the men that pass through your life, one after the other, like passengers changing trains at an intermediate station? But this time it's different. I don't know how to tell you that. You know him well. Actually very well. My eyes widen with wonder. Who could it be? Asen. It's Asen. I laugh. Yeah, right. Whatever! My Asen! But you're not laughing. It's not a joke, Lina, it's Asen. Does he know? You are together. You're getting married. Please, don't be mad, please, please, please. You are in Sofia, you have another life there. You two had no future. It is missing you that brought us closer. We both love you so much. You two had drifted apart, hadn't you? You were thinking of leaving him this summer, weren't you? Yes, that's true. But then why does it hurt so much?

So Monica told you. She did. Why didn't *you* tell me? Since when? Seven months. No, six if we count it since... Shut up! I don't want to know. Why didn't you tell me? You were nervous about how I would react? But you weren't nervous when you slept together and lied to me? Don't say that. You're being cruel. What am I supposed to say? You know we had no future. We had drifted apart. I know. Mona told me. You don't need her to know that. It's not her fault.

⁵ Literally translated as Students' Town. A Sofia district where the student campus for most universities are located.

No, it's never your fault. Never, ever, ever. And now, as you're falling asleep and waking up with my husband, it's not your fault either.

All that filth makes me sick. I prefer the other one. The one I am slapping on my body right now. All of a sudden I want to get myself really, really dirty. And then let's just hope I can wash away the dirt that's pent-up within, along with the mud outside.

Has life taught me nothing? Why did I let you into my home? Good Lord, what was I thinking? If you did it once, you'll do it again.

Martin is asking me something, but I can't hear him. What? He looks so much like his father.

You seduced his soul as well. You took everything away from me, all my men – my boyfriend, my husband, my son. Were there no more men out there, so you had to come after mine?

The sun is starting to sear the mud on my body. Muddy scales. I feel like a reptile.

I never wrote to you again. I didn't come to the wedding. I didn't offer congratulations. You wrote, and wrote, and.. stopped. Until you showed up in the inbox of the bloody Facebook.

I know it wasn't just you. If it was, we wouldn't be here now. We would have been home. With Ivan. You seduced him, didn't you? With these lips, eyes and tight clothes of yours. But he gave in. He gave in. In our home.

When does love leave? Ours - when did it leave? When did he stop looking at me when I talk to him? When did he stop seeing me? I don't remember. The job, the child, the house. Fatigue builds up day after day and in the evening all you need is a hug to fall asleep in. We wanted each other less this past year. Passion turned into convenience, knowledge, tenderness. Is that love? Is love intimacy? Knowing? You seduced him, that much I know. But is sex all there is? Are men this primitive? Mine too – and he was

supposedly not the easy type. Oh, he'll have enough of you and come back. For the child, if not anything else. But what if he doesn't? The thought is suffocating, it leaves me breathless. I want to take it all off with the mud. Leave the sea wash away my thoughts, my pain, and me...