

Translated excerpt

**Nataly Elisabeth Savina**  
***Meine beste Bitch***

Fischer KJB Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2018  
ISBN 978-3-737-34139-4  
pp. 126-140

**Nataly Elisabeth Savina**  
***My Best Bitch***

Translated by Zaia Alexander



## Berlin

Pari's apartment measured thirty square meters and was located on the ground floor of a narrow, dilapidated little house. Only the façade facing the street had been renovated, in the back courtyard cracks ran through the hoary plaster. It smelled of mold and stir fry. Other than the mattress on the white lacquered floorboards and a clothes rail, the living room was empty. Pari had placed his books on the windowsills. Hanging on a wall were Polaroid photos that Achim had shot. Of the small town, of nature, and there was even one of me from behind with my hair down. In the kitchen stood the only table. A stove with drip marks, a dusty stereo system, a tower of empty pizza boxes crowned an empty, filthy fridge, and a vacuum cleaner bursting at the seams completed the decor. Below the kitchen window was a roof overhang that stretched over the back entrance of a cellar bar like a small, mossy terrace. My first official act was to take out the garbage that Pari apparently had forgotten about before he took off. Boys stink, I had to think of Nike's words. The bar's windows in the back courtyard were covered with black foil, some had bars over them. Tons of cigarette butts and bottle caps meant the back court was open to the bar patrons at night. Somebody had glued the word LOVE in pink paper letters onto the rough brick wall next to the garbage cans. When I got back inside, I lay down on the mattress and waited for the first dream that I'd dream in a bed, I'd never slept in before. These dreams have the power to predict the future.

On my first night in Berlin I dreamt about Julian. We were driving a jeep through the city, behind us in the back seat were three empty, baby seats full of crumbs. A police transporter was bearing down on us. It swayed back and forth, accelerated hectically, shoved, rammed, and finally passed us by. Men and women dressed in black were sitting in the car with rigid faces, swallowing pills in rhythmic movements. We followed them until the car stopped. The men and women slipped on police uniforms and ran down the subway entrance carrying heavy black rifles. "That's no way to hold a rifle," I shouted. "Call the police, they're not policemen!" Julian dialed a number and spoke into the receiver. Shots were fired. Julian took me in his arms, held me tight and said: "It's good that the children are with their grandparents."

I opened the window when I woke in the morning. A faint stench of exhaust fumes and rotting garbage drifted into my nose. I switched on the stereo, Giant Drag blasted from the speakers, until the phone in my hand rang. "My God, turn the music down, I've had a headache all day," my mother said. "Hi mom," I said and turned the music down. The speakers crackled and hissed. "Can't you turn them off completely? That primitive pop music, two chords and a beat machine, it's dumbing down the masses." "I thought football dumbed down the masses," I said. My mother hated football as much as my father loved it. "Have you eaten yet?" Her prying annoyed me, but I decided to keep cool. "I haven't been outside yet." "Please don't buy cheap food. Find a health food store. Please, don't try and save on food, I'll send some money if you need it. I didn't breast-feed you forever to have you go and ruin your health, all because you just had to

go and move out. And please don't smoke. It's not cool, it's just the tobacco industry." "I'm fine." "And your skin? "No panic, no fear, nothing's made me itchy, since I got here." "I always knew you'd find your fortune in Berlin," my mother lied valiantly. "But I expect you to make some effort to get into a university. You could enroll as a guest student at first. The professors remember pretty, hard-working girls, believe me, it doesn't hurt. And dress properly. Not like some unkempt hippie. You know what I mean." "I just got here." "Time and love are a liberated woman's greatest enemies. Call me as soon as you've eaten something."

I threw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and skipped down the steps in a pair of summery sandals. The unbuckled straps dangled between my feet. I had no plans. I had nowhere I needed to go. Nike once mentioned a feminist movement, the goal was do nothing: anti-consumption, refusal of performance, with a socio-political objective. Just get the hell out, I thought, and two steps down I got stuck on a metal fitting that fastened the linoleum to the old steps. I stumbled, nearly broke my ankle, but then landed with both feet on the ground. The shock gave way to euphoria, because even now nothing was tingling or itching. Was this city my salvation? It would be way too kitschy if it were that simple, I thought, and - can I fly? I walked past the Turkish kiosk on the corner, glanced at the wooden toy shop and at the bored girls in the nail studio across the street.

Birds were pecking at the garbage on the street. I stopped in front of a Focacceria. The people were sitting at round tables with warm, fragrant raspberry cheese pancakes in front of them. Some of them were reading, others were sunbathing contentedly, the corners of their mouth curved upwards, like a sea lion mutant yet to be discovered. The scent of coffee was in the air. I'd never part with this city. I bought a piece of raspberry pie to go and sat in the park to eat my breakfast. I dialed Nike's number. "Hello?" Her voice sounded distant and sleepy. "Faina?" I had to chew faster. "Where are you, I've been trying to reach you for days!" "Come on, you know me, it doesn't mean anything," Nike said. "Don't worry. I'm just lying in bed with my lover." She giggled. "So much has been going on, when you don't answer the phone, it drives me crazy," I said. "I'm in Berlin." "By the way, I was serious about what I just said, it wasn't a joke," said Nike. I heard bed sheets rustling and remembered Nike's snugly smell when she slept. "We're having champagne and strawberries and the reception is pretty bad. I'm in Sweden. Send me your address, okay? I have a semester break in a few weeks, I'll come and visit you."

The warm feeling I always got from Nike lasted long after she hung up. I imagined how she loved someone, how she'd be loved back, and that everything went smoothly, passionately and inspiring. Nothing could stop us from savoring our bursting energy that felt like chili peppers in the mouth, and like a leopard in the legs. Encouraged, I wrote Julian a message, said I was there and that we could meet. He messaged back, "Where?" I punched Achim's address into the phone, matching his brevity, "Friday, Bar." It was only Tuesday, I had enough time to prepare for our reunion.

Achim's brother's apartment was like a cave that I made all my own. My underwear, my sandals and my hair clips. My food and my cosmetics. My order, my scents. I checked out the immediate surroundings. I applied for library cards, signed up for the Ramones Museum, the comic book library and for the Arthaus Filmverleih. In my neighborhood there was a park, a big touristy street, lots of colorful side streets with lots of hidden cafés, a pottery studio for children and a slightly dubious massage parlor. I went hunting for food in the evening and decided on a small pizzeria. It belonged to a young, pretty Italian with bright blue eyes, shaggy blond hair and strong arms. "I saw you walking into the door next to the cellar bar with a package of toilet paper," he said smiling. "We're neighbors." He told me his name was Maurizio and that he owned a sailboat in Sardinia. "You wouldn't believe how hard it is to work eight hours," he said. "I can hardly take it! The only thing that helps is masturbating in the bathroom several times a day. Don't look at me like that. I'm very careful about hygiene. And hey, for neighbors the pizza's free."

I put a tall pot on the stove on Friday and filled it with a handful of bergamot black tea. The crumbled leaves danced a polka in the boiling water. Then I took the pot off the stove and put it on the floor and took Nike's yellow book out of my pocket. On the cover was the girl with the dress in front of a young, naked man crouching - thoughtfully - or just exhausted? On the first pages, I read a story about two rats stuck in an empty bucket. The stronger of the two rats ate the other one's belly and then starved to death anyway, only later. I put the book away because I almost threw up. As soon as the tea in the pot had turned lukewarm, I knelt on the floor and dunked my head in the fragrant broth. The hair floated, heavy and warm, like seaweed in water. I let it drift for a few minutes, until the infusion had conjured up a golden shine and then wrapped a towel around my head. Like a Sikh.

The kinda sorta-bar in my house was having a crazy party this Friday, and I took the invitation in the mailbox seriously. I made a fish scale dress from aluminum foil that I'd bought especially for the occasion and wrapped the rest of the foil around my calves and ankles to make them look as if I had on superhero boots. The layers of wrapping crackled when I moved. Instead of a purse, I took an old enamel teapot from Pari's kitchen. I was ready for the crazies, just my mother's worried voice was still echoing through my mind. Her bossy advice, disguised insults and well-intentioned lies. She only wanted my best, I thought, but that didn't make it any better. I unrolled the aluminum foil, shaped it into a spiked helmet and put it on my head. I was the silver Barbarella, a worthy Magneto daughter. My aluminum helmet shielded me from my mother's grasp.

As soon as it grew dark, I walked down the crumbling steps and onto the street. The peeling plaster had the color of a boiled egg. Above the entrance to the bar there was a faded inscription in Yiddish. I could only decipher the word cobbler. I walked down the stairs to the basement and stepped through a beaded curtain. A fireplace was blazing on an old LCD screen,

next to it stood a sofa with torn floral upholstery. I couldn't find Julian anywhere, and it wasn't exactly easy to look confident with a teapot in my hand - the other guests weren't in costume. My polished nails looked like glittering chitin exoskeletons in the neon light. I ordered the first beer as though I were completely self-assured and it tasted like bitter peas. The second beer gave me a buzz and eased the nerves. I toasted a group of Swiss-Turks who were flirting with me in Italian. I answered them in Persian, Arabic and Zulu, but they didn't understand me. Julian wasn't there. Before I drank the third beer, I ceremoniously held it high in front of me: To the big city of my dreams, may my liver forgive me!

In the bar's cramped bathroom, I photographed my shiny silver mirror image with my cell phone, squatting on the toilet bowl, next to a bathtub full of beer bottles, and putting on Friday Red lipstick. My teapot stood on the edge of the bathtub. I pressed send, Nike had to see me. Then I opened the small window to get some fresh air and stared across the back courtyard that I'd seen from my bedroom window. I was finally on my own, curious and ready for mischief. The city whispered promises to me and blew its dirty air into my face. I drank the fourth beer right there. It plastered a quirky grin on my mouth that wouldn't quit. Later, I blissfully watched the dancers in the middle of the bar. When I had nearly emptied my fifth beer, Julian stumbled over my feet, trying to push past me onto the dance floor. He had on a dress and was wearing heavy make-up. Around his neck, he'd hung an authentic looking penis made from a stocking stuffed with cotton. His mouth was also outlined in a scarlet red smear. "I am the whorehouse madam," he said. I looked at Julian. Everything about him that had seemed strange in the small town where we grew up fit in perfectly here. His glasses, his unnaturally long fingers, the colorful brows and the desperate look. Even his corny sayings. "If this bar were a human, it would be a limping drag queen in a pair of its grandmother's antique earrings," he said. I smelled the tobacco and also the hash. Julian let a strand of my hair glide through his fingers, then dipped it gallantly into his red wine glass and took a deliberately big gulp. I put my hand on his upper arm which felt firm and hot. "Been here long?" he asked over the music. I smiled inscrutably and began to dance.

When my father disappeared from our lives and my mother was left behind with a disappointed look on her face, I often sat alone in bed and imagined getting kidnapped by a vampire. The perfect escape, straight through the window in the middle of the room. Only secretly, was I able to admit to myself that I didn't miss my father. Maybe that's why I wasn't able to comfort my mother, that was the hardest part. She didn't know about my fantasies and was always concerned about my health, insisted that garlic was like a vitamin pill and pleaded with me to eat it. I thought of the vampire and refused. So my mother hid the little garlic clove in my bread. She pressed it into the soft, moist center of the dough and smeared sour cream over it to conceal the spot. I still wouldn't eat the bread and insisted on sleeping with the window open. Back then I even was determined to remain a virgin. So that my blood would not lose any of its taste. Julian could be that vampire, I thought now. He was pale and slim and wore this dress.

Julian and I were among the last to leave in the early morning, we walked through the neighborhood intuitively, like alley cats. We walked through the courtyards nestled within each other like a Russian wooden doll, across the chaotic mosaic of broken beer bottles, past the city's poplars, the blossoms flying on the paths like in a Western. Julian was serious and silent. His Madam's dress had ripped across his chest while dancing, the wig dangled from his smock like a scalp. A tourist had convinced him to give him the penis pendant as a souvenir to take back to Barcelona. I stopped in front of an old house façade, the scaffolding was already up, it was about to be renovated. I rubbed my hand over the crumbling plaster, touched the grey stones and stuck my finger in a bullet hole that looked dusty and as authentic as a theatre prop.

Here I stand, I thought, Faina of the present day, alive and kicking, while the Faina of the past had died in the same war where this bullet hole had originated. Hopefully she's triumphing somewhere in the afterlife. "Tell me about your childhood," Julian said. My childhood memories consisted of a bunch of disconnected tidbits, unwieldy, like jagged shards of porcelain from a broken cup. Most of them suddenly seemed insignificant to me, the ones worth telling would never cross my lips. "You don't tell childhood memories just like that." I said, "You have to make an effort to discover intimate things about somebody." Julian looked down at himself, straightened his dress and blinked into the sky. I looked at his night-black hair, his light poppy colored eyelashes. Sometimes people manage to draw you in, like a black hole. Julian turned to me again. His eyes shone comet-like rays through me, and I noticed the ground slipping from under my feet, as if I were floating. I snatched at him, the way a cat grabs a mouse, and pressed my lips to his mouth.

Dragging Julian into Achim's brother's bed seemed irreverent to me. I pulled him inside the apartment and before I could find a neutral spot, Julian pressed me between Achim's pinned up Polaroids with the strength of his entire body. I grabbed at the tear in his dress and pulled, until the fabric ripped apart. Julian peeled off my crackling foil boots. I put my bare feet, one after the other, on the wooden floor and got down on my knees. My face directly in front of his face, my back stretched like a dancer. His shoulders were a freckle planetarium, his arms surprisingly muscular. His skin tasted of nicotine and a little salty, under his armpits he had soft reddish fuzz. Whoever kisses with their eyes open doesn't love, whoever laughs during sex doesn't mean it seriously ... Wasn't that written on my school desk? Or on the door of a toilet? I saw the crumpled black cotton underpants somewhere behind Julian on the floor, kissed him again and lost my bearings. Each of Julian's caresses released a trickle of warmth within me. It spread from his hands over my skin, slipped from his lips into my mouth and poured itself unstopably like a roaring river in my belly. I smelled the wood oil from the specialty store that Pari had painted on the floor. It rose to my head like a new, big city drug. Julian had awakened a small foaming sea between my Legs. The spaces between the missing planks etched cracked landscapes onto my sweaty skin. Julian buried his fingers in my hair. They smelled of bergamot. "He said, "hello, mermaid," breathing warmly into my ear. I stretched like an animal warming itself in the sun.

Something inside me melted. Something that had been frozen solid beneath the pragmatic layers of my mother's expert advice.