

Translated excerpt

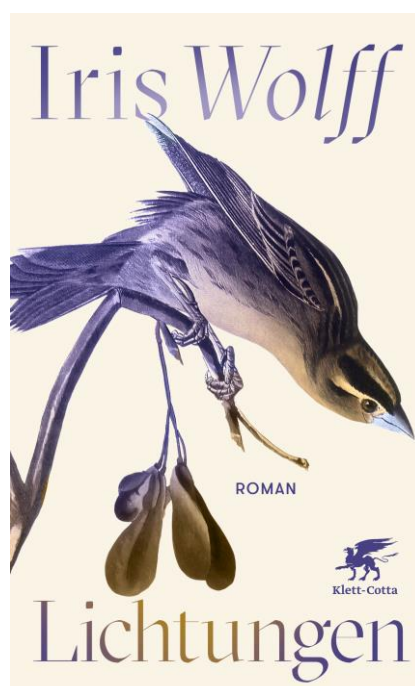
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Iris Wolff
Glimmer of Light

Translated by Alexandra Roesch



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“Sorry.”

Lev stopped.

He had been jostled and scrutinised by the bustling crowd where everyone was maintaining a brisk pace and moving with purpose and urgency. He had been swept along through the carriage and then out onto the platform where the trains were ready to depart, among impatient and unapproachable passengers, who were on edge and stand-offish. Eventually, he had come to a stop in the high-ceilinged hall where announcements across the tannoy, footsteps, voices and the clatter of wheeled suitcases mingled and rose into the vast height of the space.

Then he noticed the large clock and turned right into the passage which led to a fountain. The noise from the street grew louder, with car horns and engine noises; the rolling hum faded, and passengers scattered across the square. Finally he could stand still and survey his surroundings. Before him lay a busy road with several lanes, zebra crossings and rows of five-storey buildings. Blue and white trams approached, and in his hand held the piece of paper with the tram number, directions and the stop.

He compared the tram numbers with his notes, didn't trust his judgement and went through all the timetables once again. There was one additional stop on the way into the town. The fleeting sense of relief was short-lived. The back of his neck felt hot at the sight of the ticket machine. He felt a momentary dizziness when confronted with the machine with its buttons, fare choices, coin slots and correction buttons. Was he supposed to put the money in or press something first? Uncertain, he pressed several buttons, prompting a question from someone nearby. Lev stepped aside and let the man pay, trying to commit his actions to memory. However, by the time it was his turn again, his tram had arrived and people were getting on. He briefly considered boarding, but he was overcome by embarrassment at the thought of being caught without a ticket and by a sense of futility, as though this had been the last train and he had missed his chance.

With a rattling sound preceding its departure, the tram left, leaving Lev at the stop. He put his bag down, turning the piece of paper in his hand as if there was something on it that he had missed. Nearby, a woman with waist-length, pale red hair was plaiting it with three strands, while a man on a bench watched her, his mouth agape. Pigeons took flight, crossing from one side of the street to the other, forming a row on the ledge of a building. Something startled them again. They were dark grey with white bellies.

Lev observed their flight patterns,
as they transitioned from light to dark and dark to light. Something prompted him to turn around. Perhaps she had been watching him for a while, uncertain how to approach him. She might have wanted a moment alone with her recognition – he would have wanted that. To stand still, to not say a word, to look at her: her light-coloured eyes, the line of the three moles on her cheek, her challenging, superior, aloof gaze.

She had always triumphed at this game. She was able to maintain prolonged eye contact, never being the first to disengage from a hug. It was in those subtle moments, those fleeting retreats that led to the separation of two bodies. Lev didn't have much time for the initial, swift exploration; he examined her features, her posture, and noticed what had changed and what had stayed the same; he was surprised by the magnitude of his joy and excitement, and realised with relief that the old bitterness was missing.

She wore jeans, trainers and a green shirt, no coat despite the evening chill. A large bag hung over her shoulder. She seemed thinner yet more muscular, as far as he could tell; her hair was shoulder-length, still undecided whether to be straight or curly. He looked at her hands, the sharp bones of her wrists, the remnants of paint under her fingernails.

Some things were new, some were the same.

“What are you doing here?”

“I had a feeling,” Kato said.

She bought a weekly travel pass for him at the machine. As they travelled a few stops on the tram, Lev felt as if the streets with their high, well-maintained buildings, the shops and cafes, stretched endlessly. At some point, he felt he was going awry, losing himself, his attention solely focused on her, her voice, the sudden closeness, the self-evident way she spoke German, and although he had had the entire train journey to imagine this moment, he had not been able to grasp it – he had not known how it would be to see her again after five years.

Kato accompanied him to a guest house and paid for a week in advance, although Lev resisted (she succeeded because she established a rapport with the woman behind the desk within seconds) and counted out the notes, and Lev resolved not to convert the Francs into Lei, it was too depressing. He ran his hand across the wood of the desk, which he

thought was maple, feeling the rounded edges. The woman informed him of the time breakfast was served, when to vacate the room on the day of departure, and what hours the reception desk was manned, slowly, as if he were dim-witted, and casually crushed a moth that had settled on the desk.

Kato suggested dinner together, but he pleaded tiredness. She said goodbye with a hug from which he was the first to retreat.

His room was on the second floor. He opened the cupboard doors, looked inside the drawers of the table, checked the mattress, switched the light on and off, went out on the balcony. Then he unpacked his bag, had a long shower and got into bed.

Car lights crossed the ceiling. The rattling of the tram penetrated through the open window; a couple on the balcony next door chatted. The city, with its expanse, order, moderation, felt strange to him and he tried to calm himself with the thought that the same laws applied here as well as there. He told himself that there was the time, the language, which is yours too, and no one will throw you out because you don't belong. Especially not if you have a weekly pass - a thought that made him smile.

Kato had sent him a postcard from every country that she had travelled through with Tom. Her slanted handwriting filled the backs of the cards; when she got to the bottom, she would continue writing on the edges, so that he had to turn the cards clockwise, once, twice, until he arrived at her signature. Sometimes he received cards without text: street canyons, fountain statues, flowers, trees, portrait studies over and over again. Then four weeks ago, the card with the words:

“When are you coming?”

Just four words and a question mark.

He had read the question over and over. Had it matured over a period of time, or was it written on a whim? Did she mean the near or the indefinite future? Did the sentence mean that she missed him or needed him? Did ‘coming’ mean visiting or staying? Or did it represent an idea, the way sometimes something is said just for the feeling of comfort it brings?

When they spoke on the phone to discuss the time and the place, it hadn’t been the right time to ask her. Since they never spoke on the phone, the conversation was limited to the exchange of necessary information. On the last occasion, he had waited for her to hang up, but he didn’t hear a click, and he pictured her in the stale, warm air of the phone box, the receiver by her ear, her head leaning against the glass, listening to whether he hung up – which he did, then.

Lev left the city behind and moved off the main road after a few kilometres, crossing fields, vineyards and forest areas. His thoughts grew calm, and soon he thought of nothing, not even the question: where to? He slept on the ground, leaning against the wall of an abandoned hut. In the early morning he heard footsteps, and someone roughly pushed his arm.

Two men stood before him. One of them demanded his backpack.

Lev got up, quickly assessed who he was dealing with, and lowered his head. In the army he had learned not to provoke people. In situations like this, everything happened automatically; you instinctively knew whether talking would help or whether you stood a chance in a fight. He could have tried – physically, he was superior - but he saw the knife and decided against it. There was nothing valuable in the backpack apart from

money. His ID was in his trouser pocket, along with the key to Kato's house.

After the men disappeared into the fields, he stood motionless for a while. Strangely, it seemed fitting to him that everything was gone. He felt liberated; he couldn't say from what. At least they didn't beat you up, he thought, but even in this thought, there was an acceptance.

The men's faces kept appearing before his eyes; he had a clear picture of them, although he had only seen them briefly. Before they left him, the shorter one, who dragged his leg slightly, had nodded to him, almost apologetically. What should he do now?

His Romanian grandmother would have advised him to turn back immediately. She always knew what would happen. Nothing in her life had been unpredictable - not the loss of her son, or the revolution, not even her own death. Bunica saw the trace of a bird in the air even before it flew there.

In her final weeks, she had slept a lot; she had been restless, feverish. Sometimes memories surfaced, sometimes she was responsive and seemed clear-headed. When Lev asked her whether she was afraid of death, she shook her head, as if he had asked a really stupid question. She had a recurring dream. She dreamt of a candle on the windowsill. A breath of wind went through the room; it went dark. But only momentarily, then she saw the candle on the other side of the window, burning.

Only at the funeral did Lev learn her full name: Maria Aurica Costin. To him she had always been Bunica – Grandma. The fact that she mentioned the deceased in almost every conversation (your father would...my husband liked to ...) had seemed like a quirk to him. Now he too had become one of those who asked the dead for advice. But whatever Bunica would say, this could not be the end of his journey.

In the afternoon, he reached a village. At some point, he couldn't say whether he was leaving or entering the village, the road was so winding. The single-storey houses were like a ribbon, wall to wall, gate to gate. He passed the fortress church. An elderly couple sat on a bench. Lev greeted them in German and, without further ado, the man invited him to join them for dinner.

“You look hungry.”

“I am.”

“And he could do with a shower,” his wife added.

“He could,” Lev confirmed.

The woman, who introduced herself as Anna and insisted he call her by her first name, gave him some clean clothes. She would wash his clothes, they would be dry again by tomorrow lunchtime. Wherever he was heading (she paused here, as if to give him the opportunity to explain his peculiar appearance), he couldn't continue in this state. The jeans and T-shirt with 'Levis' printed on it were from her son in Germany.

Aside from one other woman, Anna and Herbert were the only Transylvanian Saxons left in the village. Some had got their houses back or bought new ones, spending their summers here: 'Summer Saxons', Herbert said, and it wasn't clear whether he meant it disparagingly.

Lev would have liked to ask why they had stayed, but he didn't; instead, during dinner, he told them that he was actually travelling by bike. He said 'holiday', even though it sounded strange to him, and he couldn't remember ever having taken a holiday, let alone needed one. He felt ashamed for making up a story to hide his journey, but he had to say something.

There was vegetable soup, fried sausages with mashed potatoes, and pickled peppers. Anna, who had prepared only soup on this working day, had supplemented the dinner, as one did when guests came. Herbert

poured wine, and Lev learned that they had two sons, a younger one whose t-shirt he was wearing, and an older one who already had children of his own. Both lived in Stuttgart.

His bed was prepared in a small room facing the yard. He got undressed and lay under the cool, fresh sheets. When the door opened a crack, and Anna asked if he needed anything else, he could barely murmur a ‘Thank you’.

Sheepishly, he appeared in the yard around midday the next day. Anna brushed aside his embarrassment, saying he was a good guest, having saved them breakfast.

His clothes, as promised, were dry. Herbert was oiling the chain of a bicycle.

“You can have it,” he said.

“Neither of us cycles anymore.” He couldn’t accept that, Lev said.

“Why not? It’s just standing here.”

Anna pushed her hands into her apron pockets and looked at him.

All Lev could do was nod. His throat suddenly felt constricted.

The exodus had been unavoidable. Like a craving. Everyone feared they would be the last. Anna and Herbert had decided to stay. Their children had left and their neighbours, even the vicar, had gone. The others had asked them why they were hanging on. She was not hanging on, she was living, Anna said, and Lev was glad he had not asked.

The lost time, they said. As if there were a time that stayed. From now on, Lev saw the villages he cycled through on his new bike with different eyes. Before, he hadn’t paid much attention; there were abandoned houses and gardens in his village too. Over the last few years, the situation in his village had been similar, with everyone looking at each other and asking: Are you leaving too? Outside the gates, on the benches, there was always someone reporting about someone who was leaving.

And with each person who left, the thought of also leaving grew. And with each person who stayed, the hope of being able to stay grew.

In a community centre, shards of glass lay scattered across the ground like leaves. Cracks had formed above the church windows; ropes lay cut like snakes in the bell tower. In another church, the vault was falling down; someone had piled parts of the ceiling fragments onto the pews. Furniture, boxes, rolled up carpets and a wheelbarrow were in the vestry. It was cool; it smelled of pillows, candle wax and damp. In one village, the Orthodox congregation used the Protestant church; icons stood on the altar. In another church, a man walked through the choir area as if searching for God. Lev sat on a pew, reading the inscriptions on the walls. He read: Have faith, or it will be the end for you.

Anna had packed him sandwiches, cheese and peppers, insisting he keep her son's t-shirt. Perhaps, Lev speculated, it brought her joy to imagine a man cycling around in her son's shirt.

He shared his dinner with a cat. As he leant against a barn wall with his eyes closed, he had felt something warm and soft pressing against his leg. It was delicate, all black; even its paws and whiskers were black.

When you left somewhere, you not only left behind your home and friends but also the animals. Lev remembered a man who couldn't bear to entrust his horse to someone else and instead took it to the knacker's yard. A woman who set her chickens free, knowing they wouldn't survive. Lev thought of Kato's love of animals. Then he remembered Pax's liberation and had to laugh, which frightened the black cat. He had never asked Kato what she had done with the dog. Some things between them were never spoken of. Things that were not spoken about never happened.

He liked their agreement: knowing the essentials and leaving the rest untouched. But wasn't he fooling himself? He had been in the forest and in the army. She had lost Camil. And what did he know about her daily life, living with her father? She didn't allow him to be involved, and he didn't ask – out of respect, or convenience. Over the years, more and more topics emerged that they didn't discuss; they were buried like boundary stones, impossible to overcome.

Lev crumbled cheese and sausage into pieces and fed the cat. After eating, it groomed itself thoroughly and lay down beside him. There was a hint of purple in its fur, like lavender, he thought, like an aubergine. He looked across the fields, a landscape devoid of lights and people. They lived in an exposed world. A world on the brink. Kato had sensed it; he hadn't.

He saw it now after she too had left.

Kato didn't spare him on the way back. As soon as the interior of the car warmed up and they found themselves in familiar areas, she brought it up. Her tongue gently hit against her teeth, as always when she was tired or excited.

“Listen, Lev, I am not angry with you.”

There were turns in the road that required his particular attention.

“It was probably time; I've been thinking about it for a while. Have you?”

A nod might be a good idea; he did it casually, as he concentrated on his driving.

“You know that whatever might replace what we have, it would not be nearly as good.”

What would happen if they didn't find the courage to take the next step?

"You must know what you mean to me?"

"Really?" he asked a little too loudly.

"Tell me, because I don't know. I just know that I think of you, I think of you all the time in this dump where I work."

She gripped his hand that reluctantly let go of the gear stick.

"Why don't you tell me about it?" she asked.

Lev thought of the tunnel, the cold, the barracks. He didn't want to be pitied.

"I can't risk it." There was something in her voice that forced him to look at her. "You are the only friend I have."

"It would work," he said softly.

That fact that she didn't believe in it hurt so much.

"It's bad with my father when he doesn't have any work. He sits at home from morning till evening, then suddenly disappears and doesn't come back for days."

"Is that his bottle?"

"That was his bottle,"

Kato replied, picking up the bottle with a tiny amount left in it that lay in the footwell. They smiled at each other.

"You are gone, and I am here (she gestured in an indefinite direction with the word 'here'), you will meet a woman, probably already have met someone - how else could you be such a good kisser?"

"That's something, anyway," Lev said.

"What?"

"At least you think I am a good kisser."

They laughed. Kato looked at him in relief.

Now they could see the hills and roads of their village taking shape. Kato shoved open the door before the car had come to a stop. A scraping, a

creaking, announced that the front door was opening. Kato's thoughts were already long inside the house, with her father, with her explanation of where she had been. Lev would have liked to say something to lift the sadness he had been noticing in her lately.

But what?

You became adept at averting your gaze, practising the art of ignoring – disregarding, too.

It set you apart from those who thought no further, heard nothing, saw nothing. Because there were some who were very good at seeing and hearing, who didn't miss a thing.

You hardly noticed how everything got more expensive, scarcer. When things happened slowly, there was time to get used to everything. It was almost as if nothing changed, as if nothing got worse or scarcer, colder or darker; you grew into it, grew with it.

Grandfather had been waiting for his exit papers for six years. Once a month he drove to Bucharest and stood in a queue at the passport office and, because he achieved nothing, he had developed new strategies. Most recently he started queuing as early as three or four in the morning, so as to be among the first. He had the theory that about a dozen passports were issued per day, and you had to be one of the select dozen. He stood outside the passport office throughout the night and spent hours in the corridors, alongside other hopefuls, who also had strategies and theories.

Decisive factors could be how many of your relatives lived abroad, whether you had already submitted an application, whether you had been in prison, whether you had a legal case against you, or had debts, or had

attached a good letter – or, better, none. And also whether you had bribed the right people, with German currency, of course.

Ferry was under the impression that when his papers reached the top of the pile, someone pushed them back down to the bottom, so one day he had gone to the German embassy. The official had listened to Ferry's story. Then he had fixed his gaze on him and said with a strange gesture (his hands waved as if they were pushing something under the table), that the Romanian state was such a sovereign state, if he understood, a sovereign state, and unfortunately, he couldn't help him. Ferry had considered taking a holiday by the Black Sea, to escape to Turkey from Bulgaria, where they called the sea 'Tscherno more'. There were rumours that several fences had been put up at the green border to confuse the refugees. No one knew when they had made it and were free. Ferry decided he was too old to chase after such things.

Could you really have everything in the West? Could you really travel anywhere? Was one language enough for a country? For the sayable and unsayable, the obvious and hidden, the true and untrue?

Sometimes Westerners got lost in the area in their Mercedes Benz cars. They looked as if they were wearing their clothes for the first time. They praised the landscape, traded coffee, cigarettes and LUX soap for buffalo cheese, yellow peppers and schnapps, and bought souvenirs, carpets, woven doilies and traditional blouses.

Landscape? What is that supposed to be? the people in the village laughed. How could one talk about it as if it existed outside oneself? For Lev, landscape was something imprinted within, something he always carried with him. Ferry, on the other hand, said he had nothing to do with this land any more. He wanted nothing more than to leave.

"Dear God, please grant us the exit passes"

– was one of the most common prayers among the Germans in the country at the time.

The time has come, Mother said on his penultimate day at home. Lis moved through the room indecisively, picking up one thing, then another, until he understood what she wanted to hear.

“Mother, I’ll be careful.”

“I am sorry to put you through this. But,” she paused, “no one else can be entrusted with this trip.”

“I know,” said Lev.

“There’s a spot available in the truck,” Lis said.

“For you?”

“I am not leaving.”

“Why?”

“This place is connected to your father. I don’t want to lose him again.”

While Lev thought about whether that also applied to him, Khalil slipped into the room. He allowed himself to be stroked but then ducked away again. You always had to look for signs whether an animal loved you or whether you were just imagining this affinity.

“And you?”

“I have something here too,” said Lev.

Ferry didn’t have any luggage.

“You greet the neighbour, lock the workshop, wash the dishes and know that it is all happening for the last time,” he said.

There was a cup that he liked, thin porcelain with a gold rim; it must have come from one of his mother’s tea sets. He had dried it very carefully and placed it in the cupboard. In the cupboard that he would never open again.

“Isn’t it ridiculous?” Ferry forced a smile.

“A cup tells me what I should have understood a long time ago.”

He had started leaving things with his daughter a long time ago, every time he travelled from Schäßburg for a visit - things that he couldn't bear to part with: embroidered doilies and pillowcases that belonged to his wife, a tea set from the Austro-Hungarian era, letters, books.

Lev had looked at the photo albums with his mother: school photographs of Lev, Ferry with his daughter in Păltiniș, Lev with Ferry under the colonnade in Buziaș, photos of his christening, his mother's confirmation, his grandfather in uniform ... Lev held on to the page, asked his mother why part of the collar had been blacked out. Lis told him that as a young girl she had made it unrecognisable; she had been ashamed because her father had been in the Waffen-SS.

They travelled west overnight. Ferry smoked, and the wind messed up his hair. Lev tensed with every glimmer of headlights in the rear view mirror. How would someone with a clear conscience drive? He no longer knew. Each movement was a pretence. Imre had taught him how to drive; they had driven through valleys and mountains for a day. He had to park and reverse on a gravel road; then Imre gave him a canister of petrol, and Lev passed the driving test first time round. Imre had organised the petrol this time too, and Lev suddenly had the distinct feeling that his friend knew something.

At some point, Grandfather demanded that they stop. Lev pulled off on a dirt track and switched off the engine. Ferry disappeared into the darkness, and Lev did not take his eyes off this darkness until he reappeared. The man who got back in the car looked confused, as if he had lost his way.

“Have you really thought it through?” Ferry asked.

Lev nodded and then translated the nod into words, realising that his grandfather couldn't see it.

“How much longer do you need to serve?”

“One year.”

Did he really want to give them a year of his life?

Why give it to them, he would live it anyway, one way or another, said Lev.

There was some freedom here too.

There was either complete freedom or none at all, Ferry said.

They met at the Jewish cemetery. Ever since Kato learned that a quarter of the village had been inhabited by Jewish families, she often came here.

Disappearance was bad enough.

But forgetting, she said, was even worse.

The sun had set, but the sky was still bright, as if it would rise again soon and everything would start anew. Just with the difference that soon he would no longer have to go to school. “Never again!” the words rose in him again.

She appeared beside him so quietly that he was startled. Being startled was never good; it indicated a troubled conscience. He should say it straight away or else he would lose his nerve, but he hesitated, because he wanted to enjoy her carefree nature, her strands of hair in the wind, her innocent, attentive face, her swinging arms in the rust-red jumper that was frayed at the hem.

They took a path between the graves; the ground was damp and their shoes grew heavy with the clinging soil. Kato told him how she had

helped her father shave, and with each of her words, the certainty grew in Lev that he was betraying her. He had thought only of himself in this decision, not once of her. But then again, he had the right to do so; it was a voluntary agreement, not even an agreement - it had just happened when Kato's father decided that eight years of schooling was enough for his daughter. She had been among the top students, but from the age of fourteen, she was expected to manage the household. Kato accepted her father's will without complaint. Only when caravans passed through the village and men and women went from house to house, sharpening knives, selling copperware, repairing kettles, she spent hours on the swing in the pear tree, and Lev guessed what she was thinking.

Today seemed to have been a good day; there were some scattered among the sequence of dark days, then something sprouted between her and her father, a sense of belonging, despite all the confinement and strangeness. Kato's father was a beekeeper. Sometimes he was away for weeks, then there were times when he found no work and drank. Kato feared his anger, which erupted over trivial things sufficed. Whenever she could, she was at Lev's house, and Lis taught her to cook, bake, preserve, everything you needed to learn about housekeeping.

Who would ensure that she continued her education now? Lev went through the schoolwork with her twice a week. He read out his notes and she asked questions. These led to him understanding the material and getting better grades. He felt angry. After all, he couldn't help the fact that her father didn't understand how clever she was. Lev noticed the rough skin of her hands, her fingernails that were cut (or bitten) much too short, and suddenly the playful strands of hair and the light in her eyes were gone. Kato knew what was coming - her body had already internalised this knowledge, so perhaps he didn't need to say anything, perhaps he

could avoid having to explain something. And when he stood still, turned to her, all joy had disappeared from her face.

At the beginning of the summer holidays, he waited at the train station with his brothers Dorin and Valea. A dozen other men were waiting at the tracks with their bags and backpacks. The woman in the station shop was wearing her dressing gown and had curlers in her hair; she sold cigarettes, matches and beer.

They boarded the train, and Lev followed his brothers to a row of four seats. The benches were made of wood, and the windows were open. Bottles of schnapps were handed around; someone was playing on a juice harp. Lev sat up straight and tried to look as if he were a seasoned traveller. The train started moving, the station was left behind, the church tower appeared and then disappeared again. Shortly before the viaduct, Lev heard a whistle, crystal clear, penetrating, and he jumped up and saw her by the tracks. Kato waved at him; he forgot his self-imposed restraint and waved back enthusiastically. The mockery in his brother's eyes did not bother him. The green of the trees blurred into a ribbon, mixed with cornflower stripes. Everything was movement and anticipation.

In early December, his teacher visited him to check how he was keeping up with the schoolwork. When she realised that Lev was being taught with books from the previous century (that is how she expressed it), she decided that someone would come from then on to provide him with assignments.

This someone would be Kato.

Lev assured her that Aunt Anuta also had other books, so it was not necessary to send Kato. And he thought: no, no, please no. Could it be that everything was getting worse and worse? Wasn't it enough that he had to lie here? Now he would be forced to put up with this girl every afternoon. No one bothered with her. Most of the teachers ignored her; they never called on her in class – only his class teacher had developed an inexplicable preference for her. Lev spoke to his mother and asked her to accept the assignments at the door, to spare him.

For the first time since he stopped being able to walk,

Lis flared up.

“You spare me!”

When did he become such a conceited boy, thinking that he was better than this girl?

She came the next day. The gate to the yard opened, the dog barked and calmed down surprisingly quickly, and steps came closer, but nothing happened. Mother went to the door, greeted the girl and accompanied her into the room. Lev tried to look as uninvolved as possible. Kato's eyes wandered over everything, yet remained focused on him. They nodded at each other. Then she sat down on the chair that had been pushed alongside the bed for her. He knew that his face betrayed him, and caught his mother's warning look. Couldn't they have sent a boy? Or if a girl, then one from the front row. Yes, if one of the girls from the front row were sitting here now, he would make an effort to understand the assignments. If one of them would come, then these would be hours that he would eagerly look forward to. Instead, they had sent this girl, the one no one wanted anything to do with. The one who always scribbled something on pieces of paper during break; who seemed so absent that you might think she couldn't speak. But every time she was

asked something in class, she knew the answer. That surprised Lev. He thought she was arrogant. Or dumb.

Perhaps she was both.

The house where she lived with her father lay in a side street on the way out of the village. The fence was low and the planks stuck crookedly in the ground like loose teeth. Behind it was the unpaved yard, then the wooden house, its door open in the warm months. A window was broken, crudely stuffed with cardboard and a picture showing the Eiffel Tower. Wild currants, gooseberries, raspberries; no flowers, no trees, except a pear tree. A swing hung from the thickest branch. Almost every time he passed by, the girl was on the swing. She twisted the ropes in, surrendered to the rotation, eyes closed.

Twisting in, twisting out.

Sometimes he felt sorry for her. It was said that her mother died a few months after her birth. Her father didn't care whether Kato's hair (which couldn't decide if it wanted to be straight or curly) was brushed, whether her face was washed, whether her clothes had holes. She had surprisingly light eyes and a laugh that only played on the edge of cheerfulness.

If he passed by the fence, they nodded at one another. A gaze, a nod, a deliberately detached continued walk, more twists at the tree. He had always continued walking, even when he felt like hiding behind the nearest bush to watch her. Did she hang on these ropes all afternoon?

Lev sat in his bed with the headrest unfolded. He punished Kato with feigned disinterest, as if she were to blame for everything, and yet, when she came into the room, they had nodded at each other, like they nodded at each other over the fence. She remained silent until Lis came

with the tea. His mother touched her shoulder, and Kato's head inclined towards the touch.

“Have you brought something for Lev?”

With a sip of sweetened tea in her mouth, Kato handed Lev several sheets of paper.

“These are the assignments.”

Her tongue struck ever so gently against her teeth. Lev went through the papers.

Kato interpreted his gaze correctly.

She pulled the chair up to his bed and explained the material to him. Lev had assumed she might have a bit of an odour. Yet she smelled of milk and something light and floaty, like on a clear morning.

“He doesn't make an effort. He lies in the room and stares at the wall. For that, he gets food in the morning, noon and evening. How much longer?”

His eldest brother had said that. The sentence struck him in the chest like a knife. He couldn't hear his mother's reply - she spoke too softly. The 'how much longer' echoed in his ears. How much longer until what? Would they take him to the mountains and abandon him or slide him under the ice of the Iza? Would he feel a pillow on his face one night? His brother wasn't as quiet as Bredica, but he was strong. Lev would put up a fight, or maybe he wouldn't, maybe he would lie stretched out and accept the darkness that had been his home for so long. His mother and sister would miss him. The house would miss him because no one listened any more. Kato, on the other hand, would be glad to be relieved of having to spend every afternoon visiting the cripple, whose mind was slow anyhow.

He found it even harder to sleep than before, starting up repeatedly because he thought someone had sneaked into his room, pillow in hand. Lev grew thinner, paler; he saw it in his mother's face, in his mirror. The doctor said he needed fresh air and a change of scenery, but he was not allowed to move because the shock of what happened had not been processed yet, and Lev almost laughed out loud. It was January. Was his bed supposed to be set up in the garden? Who would want to provide him with a change of scenery or have the time? The doctor asked if someone could arrange some petrol, then he would consult a colleague who specialised in nerve-related paralysis.

When his mother came into the room with food, Lev tried to smile. If she shook up his pillows, changed his chamber pot, washed him with quick, matter-of-fact movements, he would place his hand on hers. It was meant as thanks, but his mother cried.

At some point, the days barely differed from the nights, only perceptible from their edges. A glimmer at the window, a breeze, words that he couldn't hear, bread that he couldn't chew, soup that he couldn't swallow. Only water tasted delicious. Mother carried the untouched food back out.

The physical boundaries of his body began to blur - where did his skin end and the bed begin? The room yielded under the weight of his body. He sank. In the dark, everything that gave support, that showed where up and down were, or how his body occupied space, was gone. He lay on a bed; maybe he was floating on a river, or falling through water, deeper and deeper.

Kato came with assignments, but Lev lay there apathetically, understood nothing, said nothing. Kato left and returned the next day. She sat at his bed without going through the assignments, drawing or

reading him something; and even if he could barely follow, he didn't want her to stop.

Lev dreamt a lot, and the dreams gave him his legs back, allowed him to run wherever he wanted. Into the past, into the future, he took every path. He ran through the village, greeted people, walked with them for a while. Did you see him? Who? The man with the round hat. He is walking down the street, knocking on every door. He is carrying a little lamb, his waistcoat turns red. No one opens the door for him. Add a few clouds, close to the hills. The stalks stand high, no one mows them, no one bundles them into heaps. The wind picks up between the stalks. The ice on the Iza cracks, breaks, the water overflows its banks, takes winter away, washes him, Lev, ashore somewhere.

It was my brother, Mother, one night.

The little lamb is dead.

The doctor had come. Lev had missed his trick with the suitcase. Only when he shone a light in his eyes did he notice him. The doctor had an expressionless face; his mouth moved. Lev was supposed to raise his arm upward, but he stretched it to the side. For a while now, he felt he was losing himself in space - he often didn't know what was up or down, whether he was lying or falling. Lev closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, the doctor had gone, a candle was burning in a cup, and his mother was saying the name he was christened with, in three syllables, like a question.

He felt the rustling of the forest, the white of the clouds. He counted silently behind a tree, nine, eight, seven, six ... where was everyone? He saw images of spring days, stork nests, blooming apple trees, doughnuts (filled with jam that ran over your fingers), half-forgotten scenes: a smile, light hands, a grey fur vest, chalk clouds on the blackboard, a face that was turned away, a resigned wait, the slack, peeled

skin of a cow, the smell of the cattle market, the feeling of bare feet sinking into cow dung, crackling hay.

Lev's thoughts were unusually clear that morning. He had slept for several hours at a time and had even eaten some of the semolina porridge his mother had brought him, porridge with cinnamon and honey. He listened into the silence of the house, which turned into the silence of the village. But hadn't there been a noise? The opening of a gate, the front door, footsteps in the hallway – he held his breath, had someone come back early, one of his brothers? The dog hadn't barked. The door to his room was pushed open by a foot, as if someone was holding something in their hands. Lev's heart was thumping; not even a 'who's there?' passed his lips, and the person on the other side of the threshold also said nothing but waited silently until the door swung open.

It was Kato. She held a tabby cat in her arms. They had had visitors, Kato said, a friend of her deceased mother had come by with a car full of animals. He had even had a rattlesnake with him. The tomcat had an impressive pedigree; his name was Khalil, which meant 'good friend' in Arabic.

Lev doubted the story; Khalil looked like a perfectly ordinary cat to him. There were a lot of cats in the village. Some were lucky and someone took care of them, gave them milk, allowed them to sleep by the stove in the winter. Others had to manage on their own, search for food, hunt or live half-wild in the forests. Kato stuck to her story. Khalil was of noble descent and she had known straight away that he was meant for Lev (after all, he could use a friend, couldn't he?). The cat behaved as if he were confirming the whole matter. He had detached himself from Kato's arms and, after looking around thoroughly, jumped onto the bed. He slowly brushed against Lev's legs and up to his chest, sniffed at his neck and stared at him. Never before had Lev looked into a cat's eyes so

closely. Khalil's eyes were black-rimmed, and lines ran over the pattern of his fur down his back. The iris was grey-green with black speckles, his fur tabby-brown, his neck white, his paws too, as if he wore boots. There was no smile in the animal's gaze, but also no fear. Unfathomable seriousness and depth.

Mother was the only one who knew about Khalil. The cat came and went from the house without anyone noticing. He had to wait in the pergola until someone opened the door, then he slipped inside. Lev never knew when Khalil would return; if he was gone for a few hours, he started to wait for him.

Khalil brought him the coolness of the snow, then the sun on his fur when spring began with unusually high temperatures. He brought the excitement of the hunt, exhaustion, hunger, and although Lev started sharing his food with him, he himself started gaining weight. Khalil was not picky. He even liked buttered bread and polenta.

Lev admired the way he could move without making a sound. Lev didn't hear him come into the room, just felt the pressure of his paws, the weight of his body on his own. He was amazed to discover that the animal never smelt, he seemed to have no smell at all. His fur was always clean, even his paws. After his rounds, Khalil came into the room, jumped on the bed, made himself into a perfect circle on Lev's legs or stretched out long, streamlined, and slept.

Lev never tired of watching him in his changing positions. Since he couldn't feel his legs, they couldn't go numb either. So they lay for hours without moving, and Lev watched over Khalil's sleep.
