

**Gabriela Babnik**  
**THREE DEATHS**

## **Mama**

(pgs. 7-16)

Mama thought that she would be able to forget her name and all else that came with it. She held onto the sides of the bed and tried to get up but the sharp pain in her stomach was so intense she collapsed. Basically she could not think of a single good reason to get up. The terrace in her older brother Abdulai's house, where she had found refuge since leaving her abusive husband, was clean; last night she had already swept up all the peanut husks that the children had scattered all over the floor and, in the annexe at the back of the house that they used as a kitchen, also scoured the pans blackened with peanut sauce stuck to the bottom. She tried to be useful and do what she thought was expected of her without seeing herself as a maid, like the girl Abdulai had brought from a nearby village to help his ever-absent wife Korotimi, working as a teacher in a faraway village, look after the family. At the same time she was also not a visitor one might place upon on a sofa, who would then stare emptily into the room, trying with a polite, patient and vaguely regretful expression to hide the fact that her life had collapsed and that she has lost almost everything, husband, son, and a roof over her head.

The decision to leave was hers, and although she believed everything would be easier from now on, she had felt a sense of guilt the moment she drove into Abdulai's yard on the old Yamaha. Abdulai had tried to catch her eye as he helped untie her meagre luggage but she evaded him. She dreaded the thought of him asking what had happened between her and Karim, who was probably now, at the moment the pain in her stomach was eating away at her, lying drunk under a table in some bar. Instead of going to Abdulai's house, she could have turned into the dark streets and found Karim, who had knocked out of her all her self-confidence, the raw determination of her youth, turning her into a mere shadow of her former self, dragged him out of the shack, taken him to their rented room, pulled off his shoes, unbuttoned his shirt and watched the yellowish saliva dribble from his mouth. Instead she decided that it was time for a break and that Abdulai, her two-year older brother who, working as a tax inspector in the capital Ouagadougou was relatively well off, could protect her from any hassle by Karim and his possible claims of having right of ownership for her.

Despite Mama's evasive glances, Abdulai must have understood that she had come to him because she could no longer put up with it all. It was he who had, on a number of occasions, admittedly rather shyly, suggested she packed her things and left but she would persistently shake her head. The moment, however, when she offered Abdulai the bag of old clothes bought at the central market in Ouagadougou and some other Chinese goods wrapped in a transparent scarf, he accepted her decision without comment. He did not frown upon her, or demand any gratitude from her, but occasionally, towards the evening, when the family would gather around the plasma TV in the living room draped with heavy curtains, a ceiling fan humming above them, to watch Mexican soaps, when the lips of on-screen lovers would touch, she thought she noticed Abdulai secretly glancing at her. And occasionally, when she was drying the glasses and carefully stacking them back into the cupboard he would pause, pretending to be looking at some papers, but she knew he was looking for clues in her face. Mama believed that the manic fervour with which she looked after the house and in Korotimi's absence also their family, was buying her brother's silence.

On the evenings when Abdulai's wife Korotimi would return after an absence of many weeks, Mama would listen to the creaking wooden bed in the room next door. She would lie in the dark and sometimes had to muffle a sudden outburst of sobbing or crying with her pillow. She did not want Abdulai and Korotimi to think she was jealous – it was more a sense of guilt that she had not organised her own life the way she might have and especially that she did not know how to contain the carnal realities of her own body. It was also not about blaming Karim. She had long realised there was little point in trying to change him and that he nurtured with particular obstinacy his perverse tendencies in the form of drinking and womanising in local bars – he never ventured further afield – and that she had decided to stay silent because she took upon herself some of the responsibility for what had happened in her life.

In the middle of the night when Korotimi would get up after making love to Mama's brother, and in the moonlight use the outside toilet to wash away the traces of sperm, Mama felt like going after her to explain in a friendly whisper how grateful she is to her. The absence of her slender, supple body which she donned with dull colours (even yellow on her was dull) made it easier for Mama to envisage her own future in their family and above all also allow her time to try and remember who she was, what she had been all those years ago before her family forced her into marrying Karim. During this time of emptiness as Mama called it in her own mind, Abdulai never said he missed his wife, nor did it appear that he might be betrayed by lust during Korotimi's absence and become involved with other women, nor did she ever

notice his gaze follow the body of the girl from the village who slowly, and Mama thought sometimes also provocatively, moved around the house. With her inward looking eyes that clearly saw abstention and a desire for self-control, Mama noticed that there was a distance between Abdulai and Korotimi's bodies, which had also to do with the fact that they were all used to living in a space which did not allow outward manifestations of love, always only internal ones. And even so Mama, despite eavesdropping during the nights, which in the Harmattan season acquired a greyish, almost brittle crust along their threshold, did not know where Korotimi and Abdulai stood. Did they still make love, had they managed to overcome loneliness with the duality they had created, despite its fleeting and limited duration? Mama felt that with two children – Mousslim, who at sixteen was dreaming of becoming a pilot even though it was clear from his school results that this was plain utopia, and Amdan, an autistic boy with a whole range of disturbances from hyperactivity to autoaggression – they were simply getting by and improvising on what was supposed to be, in their own understanding, family.

But Mama wanted to leave her thoughts about Abdulai and Korotimi for later, now she had to make herself get up, drink a glass of water and in the tepid morning light make her way to the outside toilet.

How she wished she would have someone beside her to whom she could cry her heart out, and when she had done so, this someone would help her take her clothes off. First take off her skirt, then unbutton her blouse. Bring her warm water and wash her with slow circular movements. She would allow this person to do anything they wanted with her, but as all that was lying in wait at her side was emptiness, she brought her hands closer to her face in a token self-caress; they still stank of onions. The sour stench lingered for days and at moments like this she no longer recognised her own body or her body no longer recognised her, it was combined with an acrid burnt tang. The peanut sauce into which she would put a whole head of cabbage that, despite her having first blanched it in boiling water, softened in layers, just enough for Abdulai to show the tip of his tongue when he carried the spoon towards his mouth, was her speciality. She used to cook it until it became a light brown stew but in recent weeks the sediment always stuck to the bottom of the pot. Abdulai did not say anything but in the afternoon, when he returned from work, he would use a serviette to slowly, almost too fussily wipe the corners of his mouth.

One day after lunch, when Abdulai opened the freestanding fridge and stuck his head inside, Mama thought that he was about to be overcome by some bitter, nasty rage that would eclipse his usual poise. She took a step towards him, the light from the refrigerator illuminating the

onset of baldness on the top of his head. It was the dry season outside, her favourite time of the year, though it was also the time when her body remembered things that seemed long forgotten. The dimmed light caught in the curtains recalled a sensation from childhood. Then she had told stories to her two brothers and sister about how in November, when the dry season is taking hold, it opens up gaps in time. Abdulai, who would listen with his eyes wide open, did not understand what passages Mama was talking about, even though he had heard the story a thousand times. "If you go out in November to get some matches," she would say, "you might never come back." Mama knew that what connected them in their childhood was more than just the joy of socializing and listening to stories, it was even more than the sense of safety they gave to each other. Perhaps they were bound by a sense of fear in the shadow of which they lived all those years, a fear that their mother Nne, never loved by their father Ousmane, might leave and abandon them.

That afternoon Abdulai told her that she could stay in their house for as long as she wanted but that it might be a good idea if she started going to the market in Ouagadougou and at least earn some pocket money. Mama just absently shrugged her shoulders.

She sensed that someone had entered the room and was watching her. Only when Abdulai's youngest boy called out her name, instead of her full name Mama he only uttered the first syllable Ma, and said he would like to eat some chips, did she manage to lift herself up on her elbows. She groaned silently, feeling vomit building up in her throat, but still got herself up. As Amdan gently touched her hand, just a fleeting brush as if to apologise for something, she realised that the boy was the only one to break the silence in this house, a polite, cosseted, placid silence that plugged their ears to all the things that could be uttered and even all those that should be uttered.

The day her son Mousa was driven around in the police car, his hands apparently handcuffed on his back, being paraded as a warning to his companions and all those who set off along the same path as he had, Mama was still working at the bakery in the centre of Ouagadougou, sitting on the tall stool, staring out of the narrow window in front of which people were crowding, their nostrils expanding to take in the smell of bread. The scent had eaten into her skin, settled in her pores, and with the pain in her stomach it sometimes seemed as if she was carrying a loaf of bread inside her. At the time their father Ousmane left the French Legion, apparently leaving all the documents on the table as he put on his coat and stormed out of the door, putting his pride above everything, to go on to open a bakery in his home town, they

only made baguettes. Mama remembered this so vividly as if it was only yesterday – their father, a tall, dark man, standing at the wooden counter in front of a mountain of flour.

Their father's bakery in Bobo Dioulasso was the largest in town, much bigger than the one she had been working in for the past five years and from which she was fired the day her adult son Mousa was picked up by the gendarmes and after a shame-ride around the centre of town incarcerated in a tiny room and interrogated about his criminal buddies.

Allegedly Mousa refused to open his mouth for the first three days in jail. He did not ask after her, or after Uncle Abdulai who was like a father to him, paid his school fees, bought him clothes and even gave him pocket money as Karim was incapable of comprehending that beside fathering him he had any other responsibilities towards his son. Mousa closed himself off and waited for it all to end. It was Mama who had taught him this, she was very good at turning inward like that. It was something she was better at than anything else. When her boss at the bakery, a white man with swollen legs and bitten fingernails, told her that he never wanted to see her again due to her fraternizing with trade unionists, she stood up from the tall stool, made her way to the lockers, slowly, almost with melancholy, took off her overall and then her baker's cap, an ostentatious frill the boss had brought from the south of Italy from where he allegedly originated, placed all the keys she had ever received into the locker and closed the door behind her. She did not say goodbye to her colleagues, or ask for money owed to her, the six, seven pay packets she had no doubt were lost. All she had as she pulled away her hand from the door handle was a feeling that the grease still sticking to her would be hard to wash from her body.

After days of begging when she had almost pulled out all her hair in front of Abdulai and wrung her hands before the uncles who had decided that Mousa should be punished, she was finally allowed to visit her son. In the stuffy jail his skin glowed with metallic lustre. In Mousa's complexion Mama saw a promise of all that she had hoped would happen in her life, and in his silence the chance that all that had sunk deep into their family's river of history might never come out into the open. She was wrong, of course. As she reached with her hand towards Mousa across the narrow wooden table, she knew she was wrong. She was angry with herself for not knowing how to start the conversation with her adult son. "Why did you do it?" she finally managed to say. "Why did you steal from Abdulai? He's like a father to you?"

"Won't you ask me how things are in here, whether they beat me?"

Mama stared at his red eyes and swollen upper lip. She wanted to touch Mousa's bruised face but knowing that this would not happen, without pushing it, she bent down and picked up

from the floor the knitted bag in which she kept her lunch. She slowly placed the thermos on the table, Mousa followed the movements of her hands, but as she was about to unscrew the top he stopped her.

“Give me your phone,” he said whispering so that Mama only understood when he repeated his demand. “I want to show you something.”

Perplexed for a moment, for why would Mousa ask for such a strange thing when he should be eating – prisoners in this jail were fed exclusively by relatives – she eventually leaned across the table and stared at the shots on the screen, looking at the interior of temporary shelters. Mousa said that it was about refugees. “They give the statistics, how many people survived, how many were washed ashore alive. Here they write about two Ghanaians in a rubber boat that were picked up by an Italian cutter.” She observed Mousa’s bitten nails with reddish earth under them. That was when it occurred to her: Mousa smelt of earth but not the dried out earth during the Harmattan when gaps opened up on the roads so large that an adult could climb into them, or the earth of the stories from their childhood that might give you an insight into another, underground world, but of soaked, lumpy soil. “They talk of these people as if they’re animals, carrying illnesses into the European environment. But they have it relatively good, what I want to know is why they don’t write about the nameless dead who drown and sink to the bottom of the Mediterranean. No date, no grave, just approximate numbers.”

“And do you think there are many who die like that?” Mama asked cautiously when she felt she had Mousa’s attention.

Mousa sighed and leaned backwards. Mama was surprised at how talkative he seemed. Usually he would just look at her with empty eyes. If she asked him how he was getting on at school, he would say he was fine. If she asked him how he was getting on with his father with whom he lived after she went to stay with Abdulai, he would shrug his shoulders, and if she asked him what he wanted from his future, he would mutter that that was enough of that. But all of a sudden he was telling her that he did not want to be one of those on the run. Mama did not know what they were running from, or rather what they were running to. Mousa then slid his finger across the screen and showed Mama a different site in a different language with a picture of a man, allegedly from Sudan, behind whom was an unusual dwelling covered in aluminium foil. Mousa explained that the article said the man had swum fifty kilometres in forty-eight hours and before that tried dozens of times to jump over the fence on the border with Morocco.

Mama straightened up. “Do you want to become one of them?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to be a corpse that fishermen pull out of the sea with the fish in their dragnets. I’d rather go underground to look for gold. I’ve found a backer who will get us down to three hundred metres. He contacted me as soon as he found out I was here. He told me I was strong and had talent.”

## **Ida**

(pgs. 129-139)

Ida lightly pushed the key into the slot. She had already entered the house that Father had built for himself to make an invisible break between his previous self and the one before that. Oliver would normally not use words such as – rest, cut, leave – they floated into Ida’s retina as she stepped into the long, westward-looking corridor. She knew that there was a kitchen at the end of the corridor. In her memory it was the brightest and warmest spot, but she turned towards the bedroom instead. Even before she entered, sitting outside on the bench with a stranger with whom she had once interlaced her limbs and who turned out to be a taciturn expert on the town she had temporarily ended up in, she felt the need to lie down in the bed in which Father had spent the last few years thinking about essential matters. “Many will say that I’ve got too much time on my hands, but if I don’t do this now I never will. At the same time it’s not as if I am endangering anyone by thinking things over. I never spread my thoughts,” Father had said one evening as they travelled in Burkina Faso.

Only once Ida woke up from the torpor into which she had been thrown by Father’s act – she did not feel distracted or angry about it, merely numbed – did she begin manically turning around, going over his words, clinging onto tiny fragments, as if any of this could have prevented his suicide.

Standing in the middle of Father’s African sanctuary, wherein she felt that parts of her body were casting off the paralysis and returning to the usual flow of life, she mused about how they would talk a lot with Father when travelling, but tell each other little. He had built a wall around himself that he believed nobody, not even she, Ida, would climb over. She thought this was unfair; he had allowed her to get close and then pushed her aside, as if regretting ever inviting her along on the trip. Perhaps he even sensed that she might take over his imaginary world that could only ever be in Africa, perhaps he predicted her need to transform into a stealthy stalker and begin appropriating parts of his story that would best stay concealed, and



so he stood up one evening, left the hotel terrace, went to his room, placed his watch on the night table and swallowed the poison supplied to him by his African friends.

Ida knew that her thinking was selfish. Mama, Father's friend who with the help of her brother Abdulai arranged for the transportation of Father's corpse to Europe, expressed his evasiveness in a much subtler way. With her deep baritone voice that had settled in Ida's mind and had the same effect upon her as a prayer, she said that Oliver was different and was not like the white creatures who came to Africa with a messianic glow in their eyes. She wished that Ida would remember him as someone who tirelessly pursued the truth.

Ida stared at Mama's chapped lips and felt an infinite gratitude towards her. With Mama she came close to what she in her own mind called friendship, and she was the only other person Ida could ask what she used to ask Father when he stared emptily into space – What are you thinking about?, although she sensed that she would never again be able to go that far with anyone. They sat on the terrace in front of the room Mama rented when she moved away from Abdulai's family, on a plastic carpet, out of the shade, while the pale sun settled on their hands and the upper part of Mama's cleavage. The unclean and cleaned rice were carefully set out in two piles on enamel trays in front of them. Later Mama divided the rice into smaller portions and blew out the chaff. It was Mama who awoke Ida from her indifference. She told her that she would have to learn how to love Oliver also now that he was dead. As Mama stood in the middle of the courtyard, pressing her hands on her hips, and slowly talked about how fate sometimes has its own plans for us, Ida realised that the air in that courtyard was totally still, almost lucid. In the bathroom she washed herself with a bucket of lukewarm water, which smelt of the sky. Watching the shimmering shadows on the bathroom wall she thought about returning to Europe. She felt that the onset of the dry season also brought an increase in her own consciousness.

The bed in Father's room was untidy, the corduroy cover crumpled up, as if the person who used it to cover themselves had fought a battle in the night. At home Mother, obsessed with cleanliness, would make up the bed as soon as they got up, concealing all traces of what had been going on during the night. Not that Ida believed that after all these years her parents were intimate, or that she would not acknowledge that chaos can sometimes offer solace and a smoothed out surface foretells a fight, but the scene before her was so very much her Father, muted along the edges with that determination at the centre, that she wanted to drop to the ground and cry. Instead she just went to the cupboard on the right side of the bed, gaping wide at her. Briefly she glanced at the few English titles of books that were lying around on the floor and the cupboard, and then the books he had brought with him from home – Eric

Hazan's Notes on the Occupation, Ladvine by Marie N'Diaye, The Nineties by Nataša Velikonja, Mahmoud Darwish's Describing Clouds, Joanna Bator's Dark, Almost Night, – next to them some hand cream, empty glasses and sleeping pills.

She took one of the books, only later realising it was a collection of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish, closed the cupboards, stuck her head into Father's clothes and because there was no trace of his smell there, just a mixture of perfume, sandalwood and mothballs, she returned to the bed. She thought about stripping naked but, with that chilling feeling that overcame her upon seeing her dead father in the hotel room still vivid, she kept her T-shirt and trousers on. She thought about the man who had brought her to the house. Before he sat into the elongated car with which during the day in the guise of a taxi driver he drove passengers around Ouagadougou, while at night, with feathers sewn onto a Gucci T-shirt, he touted for possible lovers, male and sometimes female, among which, out of sheer desperation, she also found herself for a brief moment, Ida stared at the exposed part of his body between his trousers and T-shirt. It seemed so beautiful that she wanted to touch it, break a piece off as you might break a piece of warm bread, but she understood that the time had not yet come for her when she could disregard everything else and indulge only in love.

Before that she had to attend to certain formalities. When she had called her sister Nataša from Ouagadougou to give her the tragic news, Ida thought that her sister was a little too formal. In her voice there was merely the very basic twinge of pain appropriate for such cases; "He's gone, Idi, I can't believe it," she had said, at which point Ida began doodling on some paper with a pencil. She and Nataša were never confidantes, there was none of that inherent sibling closeness between them, and in recent years, after Nataša with her husband and her three piglets had moved to Nova Gorica where she dedicated her time to raising her children, looking after the family and her job, they hardly ever saw each other. The last time she went to visit them Nataša had tried to put on a delighted face, the kids had jumped around as if they had been released from their leash and Nataša's husband, headphones over his ears, constantly stared at his phone. Ida found his gazing into the emptiness annoying and she had tried to think of ways of engaging in a conversation this man who had clearly, stealthily, managed to extract himself from the family. It was only when Nataša brought some biscuits to the table that he moved his gaze away from the screen and muttered, "Give me some too." Out of politeness Ida took a heart-shaped one covered in lemon icing and, as she rolled the fluffy sugary sludge around her mouth, Mother commented that she had helped bake them. "They're not easy to make," she babbled away as Ida stood up, looking around the room with confusion, trying to locate the toilet. She wanted to be polite, wanted to placate the thing that

Father often said needed to be placated, but she could not quite get around the image of her sister, getting up in the morning, sending off her kids to school, and then burying her hands in flour and eggs.

As Nataša drivelled nonsense down the phone, Ida, standing in Mama's room whence she had temporarily moved before she found out about Father's house, heard the roar of a car engine. Someone was trying to park. Phone in her hand, she moved in the direction the light was coming from. Half listening to her sister's words and craning her neck towards the outer yard, she remembered another life, when she would eavesdrop on the sounds coming from the upstairs neighbours in her flat in Ljubljana, especially the sounds made by the black man who lived there. He always seemed a little withdrawn, his hands, especially in winter, encased in thick gloves, as if to confirm a stereotype. The last time she could remember seeing him, he was gesticulating at his son. The boy, dragging an old suitcase behind him, hesitated. The black man's insults were uttered in French that Ida could more or less understand.

Ida remembered that at the moment Mama entered the room with a bunch of keys, Nataša began weeping inconsolably, so she quickly hung up and turned her attention to the bearer of hope who had pulled her from the abyss of hopelessness. The keys were to the house in Ouagadougou where Father apparently found refuge when he was not with them. Ida expected to find everything in this house eccentrically messy, but all that was there were some empty bottles of various spirits and even these had been tidily put away into cardboard boxes. Mama had clearly wanted Ida to preserve her Father in the best memories, though she must have known that Ida would try to find out what was going on in Oliver's head, what she had missed on their trip or, what he would not allow her to understand, even though she eavesdropped at the doors of the entire universe trying to understand the true message in Father's words.

In the living room that Father did not use – clearly all his thoughts had become concentrated in the sleeping quarters – and with Darwish's book in her hand, Ida stared for a while at the picture on the wall without realizing what she was looking at. Then she made a greater effort and noticed the wide massive frames accentuating the reddish brownness, although there were also some blue patches in it – it was a couple kissing. The man's lips ready in expectation, the woman turning away. It was obvious that he is holding her in his arms and that she is about to give herself to him but that something is holding her back. On the man's side there was a yellow line that seems to be clinging onto his body, an orange one on the side of the woman. To Ida it looked as if the person who painted the two figures was not really very good at drawing.

She imagined Father, just smiling quietly at her deliberately rough comments, and only after a while responding by admitting only that the painter was afraid to depict the lovers' true profiles because in doing so, in painting every detail, he would have tarnished their love. She found it strange how this picture seemed to be the one that so obviously suggested the moment of reproduction or the time just prior to it. He must have found it in some grubby studio in the market in Ouagadougou. Ida stepped onto the sofa and took the painting off the wall. There was no signature on it, just a sentence in Father's handwriting written on the back, The notion that what we don't see doesn't exist is essential for all that is monstrous in society to exist, remain present and at the same time sunken into non-existence with its concealment. Only once she looked more carefully did she notice that there was a phone number added in the left corner, though there was no indication as to whom it might belong.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath; designing web sites was a compromise, half way towards what she in fact wanted to become – a painter. When she was rejected at the academy, Father, who had just returned from one of his numerous trips, seemed to comprehend her sadness; side by side they dragged themselves along through the misty centre of Ljubljana and ended up in a run-down bar. It had been the first time in her life Ida got drunk, though she did not feel drunk, merely hollowed out. When they were thrown out of the bar they staggered along to the railway station and Father told her not to worry, that things would work out for her. Neither of them ever spoke about that night again; partly out of shame, partly because of the feeling of guilt, added to later by other feelings. What Ida dared admit to herself was that this was her first experience of the city that she later got to know inside out, the city where she found friends and also enemies. This first experience of Ljubljana was almost bitter, as if she had severed something that should not have been severed, and at the same time a new line was drawing itself out on the horizon.

She sat on the bed and pulled her legs up against her chest. Before that she put Darwish's book down on the bedside table and felt a piercing desire for someone to embrace her. In her previous life she would automatically cuddle up to her dog Lizika, her hand finding its way into her smooth fur, but right now Lizika was probably howling in the flat in Ljubljana.

Ida did not know what exactly Mama expected of her when she handed her the keys to the house that had until recently remained beyond her horizon. To empty the drawers? To take the painting off the wall and read the cryptic message? To stay? To start life anew? She knew that Mama occasionally came to the house and had cleaned it before she arrived although the bed where she now lay, covering herself with the blanket and staring into the darkness, still stank of sweat. Ida still did not know why Father had done what he had done in that hotel room and

why he had not told her what she thought he should have told her. Or at least why he had not said goodbye. Mama knew not only that Father was ill and that he intended to commit suicide, but also his African daily routine. When Ida dragged herself into the corner of Mama's room, Mama looked at her not with pity but with surprise. Ida felt guilty that she had not understood the smoke signals Oliver had been sending out.

Only when she had calmed down and the sadness floated to the surface did she remember how she sat with Father at a wooden table in the light of a paraffin lamp eating warm bean soup in the centre of Ouagadougou. Father had absently, almost as if talking to himself, said, "With every step I take into the future Death takes a step towards me. Journalism, to which I have dedicated my life, has already prepared its funeral, here in Ouagadougou." Ida waved her hands to try and repel the mosquitoes buzzing around her ankles and because of the intensity of their bites began tapping her foot against the floor. When Father was in such a mood she did not dare interrupt him. "Being a journalist is like being a drudge, but literature is something quite different, it can save your life," he liked saying when Ida was still at high school, although she never, neither then nor later, took seriously his comments about how we live in a circus tent, the only way out of which is to occasionally take a book and go to the park, sit on a lonely bench and spend some time reading classical literature.

Ida did not think that she should be the one to move anything in this house. She used the toilet. She so wished she had a sweet in her handbag. In recent months her period was particularly intense and the only way to stifle the pain was with a dose of sugar. But after the sugar-coated biscuits she had been offered at her sister's house she thought a number of times about starting to eat meat instead. She remembered how, after that visit, she had bought those very same biscuits at a discount price at the supermarket, instantly recognizing the taste.

Oliver had clearly wanted her to enter this house that he had envisaged as a refuge, though after all his travels he ended up where he began, in a run-down hotel room. Looking into the darkness of the hallway in the house in Ouagadougou that despite Mama's efforts appeared strangely abandoned, Ida understood only that he had planned everything and that he wanted to keep the house without the stain of death. She ascribed him with enough consideration to believe that he did this for her. He knew that he would never return to the house and perhaps even predicted the moment when she, Ida, would stand here, confused and thinking about her next step.

Ida thought about what she would tell her mother and sister. That Father's act had made her feel empty and that staying here could fill this emptiness? That she feels that there is nobody left back there, at home, and that her sister and mother's wilful ignorance also takes away

their human face? That she understands that denial is commonplace and that no one doubts their pursuit is socially beneficial, even if it is just buying biscuits, and that she understands that they too need to find their place in the world? She would not say anything, of course, for there was no point or desire, especially not now, for quips.

She lit the table lamp and a yellow semicircular shadow fell across the ebony wood. Picking up Darwish's poetry collection, she first smelt it like Father used to, insisting that every book had its own smell. She picked up on a mixture of dust and snow, covered herself with the sheet under which Father must have dreamt his dreams, and began reading.

## **Miryam**

(pgs. 238-245)

Whenever she woke up early enough, Miryam would stare at the faces of her sons. Normally they kept close to each other even as they slept, the palms of their hands turned to each other, as if even then they understood what had happened. For a long time she did not explain the story about their father to them. From the first moment when Benjamin was killed and buried in some shallow grave, Nicolas took a protective stance towards her – one he understood as an undeniable right as the eldest son. Though she could not recall exactly what those who took positions of power wanted from her after Benjamin's murder, probably also because of the confusion and opposing reports on public television and radio, she could vividly remember Nicolas's narrow shoulders, tiny hands and pointy knees as he took the luggage from the taxi driver's hands and threw it into the boot, tying the ropes and shouting at Julius to stop crying. It was never a case of her not speaking to the boys because she considered them too young, but that she could not find the words for all that they had left behind.

It was years before she could utter, "Your Father was murdered, even though the coroner's report says he died a natural death."

It took her ten years after her husband's death – life from that Thursday afternoon in 1987 onwards when they had to leave their home and then even the country, was divided into before and after – to find a roof over their head. They even stayed in rooms they had to heat with their breathing. Worst of all were the winter months when in closed rooms they could not avoid facing each other. Nicolas observed her from behind his comics while Julius was a little more adaptable. When she would occasionally take them for a walk into a nearby park or

forest, she had the feeling that Benjamin was walking alongside them. An invisible long, narrow shadow that pauses, sticks his hands into his pockets and begins explaining his political vision. From the fact that the army needed to be reformed, for ignorant soldiers are just inoperative soldiers, to how a constitution in Africa held no weight, at least not while the army was in power.

Sometimes Miryam stopped and tried to listen to him while the children rushed on towards the playground or climbed on trees.

Only as a teenager did Nicolas once ask Miryam why they seemed to be beyond the horizon of anyone's affection and care; whenever the door to their tiny flat closed behind them, her son felt that they were entirely alone, as if the world around them was dead and there was nowhere any love or concern for them.

Miryam looked around as if the walls could help her find an answer. When they had first come from Africa they found themselves in the French Alps, living with an elderly couple in a two storey wooden house. It was as if some giant hand had lifted them up and moved them into the attic flat. Worst of all was that she could not talk to anyone about Benjamin and about what had happened with the revolution in Burkina Faso. Her dead husband was mourned only by his allies in Cuba and radical black activists in New York while the new Burkinabe authorities threw a veil of silence over his body that not even the loudest critics of the regime dared lift, not even those living in the diaspora. Most people at home simply lowered their heads and waited for the worst of the storm to settle. All that the Old Lion, once the commander of Benjamin's guard, told his soldiers when he heard how carefully Benjamin's murder had been planned, with more than a thousand soldiers lead by the notorious Tristan from Liberia waiting in the background, was to put down their weapons and try to save themselves. He himself escaped through the bush to Ginlandia where he kept his head low for a few years, returning only when there was no longer any reason for the authorities to dirty their hands with his blood.

In her dreams Miryam kept seeing the mutilated bodies of people she used to know and when she woke up, gasping for air, there was nobody by her side to console her. She smoothed the empty space next to her, got up, wet her face in the bathroom and stared into the mirror. Here in Europe nobody would or did understand. Even if she tried to explain to people that Benjamin was not murdered only for the words he uttered in July 1987 in Addis Ababa, "Those who lend us money are those who had colonized us before. We had no connections with this debt. Therefore we cannot pay for it," but because he refused to trade in arms, they would now just look away, though in the Ethiopian capital they smirked at Benjamin's

remarks. The Benjamin she saw on TV and read about in the newspapers was a madman, saying things that were not supposed to be expressed in the late 1980s. Things that after his death rolled around under the desks of bureaucrats and were left there.

The only person to offer a hand to them after Benjamin's murder was J J Marlow. He called her the moment the radio had announced the fall of the revolutionary government, the seriousness of the announcement being emphasised by Chopin's Bolero in C-major. He was among the first to know what had happened; news in the streets was based on guesswork, had Benjamin been shot, wounded, had he escaped like the Old Lion? But with Marlow and Benjamin being revolutionary colleagues, Miryam concluded that there must have been some kind of understanding between them. She held the receiver, pressing her other hand onto her chest in fear, checking whether her heart was still beating. Marlow spoke incoherently, out of breath, and years later she could still recall the metallic echo in his voice, something about how Benjamin was also among the dead and that he would remember him every single day as a reminder of what can happen to all of them if they follow his path, uncompromising, as only he could be.

"I am telling you Miryam, leave everything, this is much greater than you, than us, and was also much greater than Benjamin, though he didn't want to admit to it. I'll arrange for you to go to France with the children."

At this point Miryam managed a deep sigh, as if wanting to escape a nightmare she had found herself in by chance, and then fell silent. Whenever she returned to the moment immediately after Benjamin's death she knew that her silence was not a matter of defiance but more about not even knowing how to express the horror. Relatives kept urging her to get her act together, shake off the exhaustion and fear and take care of her sons. She will never forget the face of a female relative from their village who said, "Are not two wonderful children the least of an ordeal among all the possible sources of exhaustion and fear?" Miryam lowered her gaze; she was overcome by a desire to escape, escape to anywhere. She did not want to avoid her responsibilities, shun them, but just vanish. But because she knew that all she would cause her sons in doing so was suffering, she opened her eyes and did what was expected of her.

Marlow arranged fake passports for them. In the French Alps Miryam sat in the yard for days on end, staring at the reflections of clouds in the windows of the house next door and the dark line in between the curtains that sealed them there. It seemed that all her past life could be represented in the composition and scattering of these changing shapes. During that initial period in France she had the feeling that Benjamin had escaped to the other side and that



despite her dedication and enthusiasm, she was unable to keep him. She did not blame Benjamin as much as she blamed herself; she felt useless, despicable.

She only awoke from the numbness once they had moved to Marseille, and she began to comprehend that all three of them, herself, Nicolas and Julius, were just passers by, moving into flats, freshly painted and smelling of lino, where the neighbours, total strangers, politely avoid them in the stairwell. In one of those flats, perhaps on a Saturday afternoon when a laziness descended upon town, Nicolas leaned onto the cold radiator and tried to meet her gaze. For weeks Miryam had been summoning up the courage to get both of them, Julius as well as Nicolas, to sit at the kitchen table, offer them both some ice tea and after the introductory wavering, explain that she was still having difficulty grasping Benjamin's death. In brighter moments she had the feeling that Benjamin has merely been driven out and forgotten, that he was still alive somewhere. She found it impossible to comprehend that on that October afternoon all those years ago when he had intended to just go out for a little recreation, the bullet found its way into the soft tissues of his chest only a short while after he had kissed her on the cheek and left, unaware that it would be forever. One of the military commanders of the revolutionary guard who managed to find his way from the burial pit full of corpses had later, in one of the local papers, commented that Benjamin had fallen as if he had been mowed down and that only a tiny map of blood appeared on his chest. Miryam imagined this undreamed of stain as an ever-changing mass.

Looking at her teenage son who insisted on her revealing the truth concerning his father, she suddenly felt as if something had slipped right through her. That she would have to utter something that had lingered inside her all these years like a thick, slightly flickering mist. Sometimes as she was going about her everyday chores, she paused, stooped over and took a deep breath of air. The thought that Benjamin was responsible for all that was happening after his death was painful and almost unacceptable. It was only Nicolas with his stubbornness who managed to carve out of her the admission that Benjamin had done wrong because he took the revolution personally. He spoke with infatuation of his revolutionary colleague Gombo with whom he has grown up together and in the coup of 1983 also seized power together, as if to say he did not believe Gombo would ever raise his hand against him, and even if he did, it would be better Gombo murdered him than he murder Gombo. Miryam objected that it was never just about Gombo and his wife Zida. The Old Crocodile who ruled Ivory Coast went much further than merely arranging the marriage between his adopted daughter and the young revolutionary who was closest to Benjamin. He contacted Gaddafi and sent Tristan from Liberia to Libya, supposedly to prepare a revenge action against Emmanuel Jode. But

Benjamin objected, saying that igniting a fire in a neighbouring country is like igniting a fire at home. When Tristan returned to Abidjan and, without Benjamin's knowledge, travelled to the Pô military base where the Burkinabe revolution began, Benjamin sat on the kitchen chair, staring at his open palms. "To Hell with it all," she heard him say in a sharp voice. Just that and nothing else.

Miryam saw that after that Benjamin acquired a mildly lost, fading expression which made her understand that calculation was never one of his attributes. When she begged him not to defy such beasts as the Libyan president, not to oppose the system, after all Nicolas had not reached seven at the time and Julius was two years younger, Benjamin responded as if he had already circumvented fear, as if he was already disconnected from the world – he insisted that he wanted to die with dignity and not a murderer.

From then on Benjamin spoke to her directly and harshly, something she was not used to with him and it was probably less than a year later that she stood up from the table, confused and afraid, and went out onto the terrace. It felt as if everything outside had suddenly become still, that an anxious expectation hung in the air. She took a walk across the lawn in the garden, scorched by the Harmattan. In the middle of the lawn a fire was dying down. Miryam called out the gardener's name a number of times. There was no response, instead the sound of classical music could be heard coming from the radio inside. She had known since she was young that classical music was played on the radio whenever there was a coup. She did not know all the names of all the government representatives that had come and gone in various positions since independence, but she knew the names of the composers and the pieces that were transmitted at their departure and at the arrival of new officials, in 1960 it was Schubert's Piano Sonata No. 21, in November 1979 Beethoven's Seventh Symphony.

To Myriam, from that moment, Chopin's Bolero in C-major was not that elevating sensation coming from a different land but the sound of desperation, an echo from the distance, from the future that she later had to live through with her sons.

She told the boys to run into their room, take only the most essential while she went around opening drawers and throwing useless things into the bag – baseball caps, condensed milk from the kitchen, Nicolas' schoolbag. She saw her own hands in a slow-motion shot, her body had become rigid, did not want to respond as it had responded the day before or as it might the following day. Nicolas succeeded in calling a taxi; the quietly droning car was already waiting for them outside until the driver, a potential witness to the horror that followed, was knocked over the head. After Nicolas and Julius were dragged into the bathroom and, with Kalashnikovs pointing straight at her nipples, Miryam had been ordered to strip naked. She

gazed out of the window, as if wanting to find the silhouette of someone who could save them, though all she caught were the outlines of shadows on the net curtains in the living room.

*excerpts from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh*