

## ROSES FROM STALIN

A fragment from the novel by Monika Zgustova

*Stalin's daughter, Svetlana, the symbol of Soviet power in the middle of the cold war, arrives at JFK where she is greeted by hundreds of media people from all over the world. At a press conference in New York City a few days later she recalls her life with her father.*

1

On the drive to the airport in Zurich, Svetlana admired the way the tender pink blossoms of the flowering apple and almond trees, the rosy-red cherry trees and pear trees robed in white, stood out against the dark backdrop of the sky. The springtime beauty struck her as a good omen for her travels. As they reached Zurich, the heavy black clouds let loose a downpour, but once the plane had climbed above them, the sky lit up with bright sunshine. The clouds broke as they crossed the Atlantic, and gazing down, Svetlana had the impression that even from that height she could see whitecaps on the surface. The dazzling blue ocean divided the life she had lived up to now from the one she was yet to begin, not only in space but in time. She felt nothing troubling her, no trace of the anxiety that so often plagued her. As if she had left it behind in Moscow, in a dark corner of her flat. Sitting there in the plane she felt light and safely out of reach: no telegram repealing the decision to let her leave, no complaining letter from her children or nasty phone call; nothing but the blinding sunshine, reminding her of the sharp light in India and Brajesh's luminous inner peace, which kept him from

paying undue attention to life's minor annoyances. She was flying from old into new, reveling in the timelessness.

The flight attendant brought a menu. Alan Schwartz, her young lawyer with the long face and striking features, ordered a martini as an aperitif, wine with his lunch, and a cognac for afterward. Actually, Svetlana realized, looking at him again, the only thing young about him was his childlike face. He was thirty-four years old and his hair was going gray. She could tell he was agitated about what awaited them at the airport and using the food and drink to try to calm his nerves. She washed down an aspirin with two cups of black tea. After the weeks of uncertainty, she suddenly felt a powerful headache coming on, like the one she'd had at the U.S. embassy in New Delhi. She decided to eat something she had never tried before: crab. They didn't sell it in Russia; all of their crab was for export. After the aspirin and the delicious meal, her migraine eased a little. Svetlana smiled.

"How many other things today will be for the first time in my life?"

Alan counted them off in between sips of cognac. He attempted a cheery tone, but his forehead was nervously wrinkled and his hands were trembling.

"Landing in a new city. Holding a press conference at an airport with hundreds of journalists from all over the world. Driving down a highway wider than any in Switzerland, never mind Russia."

"Let me read you a few lines from Kennan's letter," Svetlana said. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind. 'You face a difficult test: meeting the press at the airport in New York. I wish I could spare you the ordeal, but unfortunately I can't. You're going to have to adapt to a new country and it won't be easy. The shadow of your father will

follow you wherever you go. Overcoming these obstacles will take more courage, patience, and trust than most human beings have.' Is it really going to be that awful?"

Alan thought it over a moment, then said something too quietly for Svetlana to hear. She too pondered the meaning of Kennan's words, but she was in too lighthearted a mood to take them seriously. "The shadow of your father . . ." She imagined the shadow of Hamlet's father haunting Shakespeare's hero, thinking back to the first time she had seen the play, with Kapler, then later again, with Brajesh, both times in Moscow. At the time she still had no idea she was going to spend her whole life uneasy and anxious, fleeing her father's shadow from one continent to another like Oedipus fleeing his guilt.

For the moment, however, it felt as if she had totally cut herself off from her past, flying into the unknown, where she would be just another anonymous foreigner, the way she had wanted her whole life. The sparkling ocean and sunshine only confirmed her in this belief.

"Look, Alan, islands! Which ones are those?"

Alan leaned to look out the window.

"I'm not sure about those over there, but that below us is Nantucket. My family has a summer house there. Will you come to visit in August? It's that little island there, see it?" He pointed to a small brown spot surrounded by ocean. Even he had begun to succumb to Svetlana's charm.

Her second invitation of the summer already! The first one had been from the Kennans, to visit their farm in Pennsylvania and spend the summer with their children, although George and his wife wouldn't be there.

Alan showed Svetlana a picture of his wife and children.

“I was a redhead when I was little, just like your son,” she said. “You know, I think I’d like to get to know America first by meeting the people. I can see the sights later on.”

The plane slowly circled over the city—more a string of islands and peninsulas woven through with rivers, channels, and inlets. Svetlana yelped as the Statue of Liberty came into view. “It’s so little. Look at that!” The skyscrapers of Manhattan, the green rectangle of Central Park . . .

Alan explained with mounting impatience that the journalists at the airport would receive her speech in writing. She only needed to read a few words of it aloud.

“Watch what you say,” he said. “The press can twist anything!”

His frown grew even deeper.

“What are you so worried about, Alan? What’s there to twist? I’m going to the land of freedom, aren’t I? Everything will be fine, you’ll see!”

Alan went on disjointedly, repeating the same thing again and again. He was angry. Svetlana may have been charming, but she was intolerably childish and naïve. He warned her she could be used as a weapon in the Cold War, repeating the words *caution* and *problems* over and over.

“Kennedy airport!” she sighed admiringly.

She remembered how upset Brajesh Singh and his Indian comrade in Sochi had been when they heard the news of the president’s death. As far as she was concerned, the name Kennedy was the best welcome to America she could have had. She didn’t see how such a trivial thing as a press conference could make Americans so upset. Maybe it was because they didn’t know what it

was like to struggle with bureaucracy day in and day out like the Soviet people are used to, she thought. She smiled to herself at the phrase “the Soviet people.” She wasn’t one of them anymore. She breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Alan knew that with Stalin’s daughter arriving, the airport would be closed to normal traffic and swarming with police, both in uniform and in plainclothes. But he didn’t say so to Svetlana and it never even occurred to her. Rarely had she felt as happy and free as she did right now.

She was the last passenger to exit the plane once they had landed, and as she stood looking down from the top of the steps, she was stunned at the throngs of journalists with their microphones, tripods, and TV cameras. She bounded down the stairs as if she were floating on air.

“Hello! I’m happy to be here!” she said cheerfully into the microphone. Like a little girl who’d won a game with other children, Alan thought, frowning at her side. He was worried the newspapermen would describe her as childish and naïve. “We’ll see each other again soon,” she went on in a stronger Russian accent than usual, which led Alan to believe she was more nervous than she had been letting on. “I’ll tell you more about myself next time. But I’d like to relax for now, if you don’t mind. I’m dead tired!” she smiled.

Alan could tell she was putting great effort into her words, but she didn’t look tired at all. In fact, even after the eight-hour flight she looked young, energetic, and pretty. Her red hair fluttered in the breeze, sparkling like the sun that had slipped behind the clouds. The journalists were dazzled, and it showed in what they wrote.

"You see, I passed the test!" She turned to Alan Schwartz as they got into the car to go from JFK airport to the highway. He turned and looked her in the eye, but only for a fraction of a second; then, he went back to concentrating on driving; that afternoon there was fairly heavy traffic on the highway to Long Island.

"Alan, did you notice that billboard with the big letters which read: 'BEFORE-AFTER'? Under the word 'Before' there was a photo of a fat deformed woman and under the 'After' there was the same woman transformed into a sylph, with a waist as thin as a wasp's. It was an ad for a beauty treatment. You know, I have the feeling that I too have been advertised on a billboard with the word 'After': the Svetlana of before, a ponderous, Soviet woman, has long since gone, and the new one has just been born. We still don't know what she'll be like."

Alan saw that Svetlana was radiant, happy within herself, and with her talk to the American and international media. He knew what it felt like when your adrenaline surged, he'd had that experience often when defending clients before a judge.

"Don't you feel as if you were on the Moon or on Mars?" he asked, making a sweeping gesture with his hand: everywhere were huge multi-lane highways, a whole network of highways with upper and lower levels.

"This reminds me of Russia," Svetlana said, looking around her.

"Russia? Really? That's not possible," said the lawyer, surprised.

"Not the highways, of course," she said quickly, to clear up this little misunderstanding, "The plain which stretches to the horizon, is similar to the ones on Russia. And the low, greyish-blue sky. What's more, at the airport I had the impression that the people there had round Slavic faces. Didn't you notice?"

"I only saw Americans, apart from Mexicans and Asians, of course."

Alan didn't know what she was going on about.

"Probably because I'm only on the lookout for things which are similar to those in Russia."

"Look for what feels close and familiar. That'll help you. You won't feel so lost when faced with things which for you are new and strange."

Svetlana began to laugh:

"So I fled Russia only to look for Russia all over the world?"

The lawyer noticed a certain tension in Svetlana's voice, and something tragic in her question. To brighten up the increasingly solemn atmosphere, he laughed too.

3

Later, Svetlana saw only differences. So many women driving their cars on the highway! Young, pretty women, chatting with women friends at the wheel, attractive middle-aged women in male apparel and pearl necklaces, hat-wearing elderly ladies who smoked: they were all driving jauntily along, as naturally as they breathed. Young girls, almost children, white, black and Asian, young mothers and elderly women in hats, but also little old ladies, for whom in the USSR there would only have been one means of

transport: a wheelchair. Many of the women were accompanied by men and women who were sipping lemonade or Coca-Cola through a straw, some of them smoking; others drove nonchalantly, with their left hand. Svetlana's curious eyes also noticed several women who wore their hair short, fashionably trimmed à la Twiggy, and others had long tresses that flowed out of the car windows, and wore earrings, bangles, and colourful necklaces. Whereas in Russia you were advised not to stand out from the crowd, here each woman had her own style, and knew what was required for her to be herself. Each and every one of these American women wanted to be unique.

Svetlana thought of Russian women: they were more numerous than the men, many of whom had died during the Revolution or during the Second World War. Which was why in the Soviet Union, most of the teachers, dentists, salespeople and doctors were women. Women also had some of the most burdensome jobs; in her mind's eye Svetlana saw a parade of tractor drivers, street sweepers and dustbin women, who after work, back at home, still had to feed their children and do the housework. And when she looked around her, she saw smiles, happy expressions, although there were also quite a lot of people with long, worried, depressed or concerned faces; but she didn't want to focus on them. In passing convertibles, long tresses waved in the wind, revealing smooth, tanned napes; sunglasses of all shapes and sizes gave some women an air of elegance, and to others, an eccentric originality, and they always highlighted the idiosyncrasy and personality of the wearers.

A woman at the wheel: for Svetlana that had always implied that the driver was free of men. With few exceptions, in post-war

Russia women didn't drive private cars, only women truck drivers drove their lorries or tractors. Svetlana was very young when she learnt to drive. And her father was the first person she took for a spin in her new car. He looked at her incredulously; how she appreciated the admiration of that man back then, he who demanded that everyone admired himself! He didn't know how to drive and depended on chauffeurs all his life. Mentally, she compared the old, worn-out, muddy cars of Moscow with the comfortable, brightly coloured automobiles that she could see on this sunny day in the United States, her very first. Sunny day?, she corrected herself: no, it was a mainly cloudy day and yet the day still seemed full of light. And around her there were only women. For Svetlana this meant that American women were emancipated, they knew what they wanted, they made an effort to get it and nobody tried to change their minds. She, too, wanted to be like that! One of the first things she would do in the United States would be to take driving lessons, because a Russian driving licence wasn't valid here. Soon she would be able to say hello to her new friends, waving a brand new driving licence in her hand.

"What's on your mind?" asked Alan after a long silence.

"I'm thinking about all the women around us, driving their own cars."

Her answer unsettled the lawyer. What was Svetlana talking about?

"Yeah...Yeah, sure. Most of them, I guess. Though some of the cars might be rented."

"In Russia, no women have cars. Maybe if you're a famous actress, but even then it's strange..."

"Well... that's...uh...kind of different."

"The health of women is the health of the nation," she said, thoughtfully.

Alan wasn't sure how to react. Finally, something occurred to him, and he was glad that it was a positive thing about Russia:

"In your country, medical attention is free, right? It isn't here."

But Svetlana shook her head:

"I was referring to another kind of healthiness. And the expression wasn't mine, it comes from a sociologist from the last century."

By now, they were approaching a white wooden house with red shutters, which is where Svetlana would have to spend the first few weeks. The house belonged to Priscilla Johnson MacMillan, whose job was to translate Svetlana's book, *Twenty Letters To A Friend*, into English. In front of the house a man was waiting for them. He had grey hair, an athletic build, pink cheeks and blue eyes. He was smiling broadly.

"Stewart Johnson," he said, by way of introduction, "Priscilla's father. Welcome. Make yourself at home."

4

A few hours later, the fact that she was lying on a bed made of wood which creaked with every movement she made, gave her a sense of security, as if everything was as it should be and nothing could happen to her. Curious, how the objects in a house and its old furniture can induce a feeling of tranquillity in people, she thought. Like most Russians, until then she had thought that in the United States she would find only cement and plastic. Now she was resting in a bed in a house made of wood in which the floor and stairs

creaked with every step she took; in which people sat on upholstered chairs around a mahogany table with a hand-crocheted tablecloth; in the glass cabinets, porcelain figurines and antique tea sets were on display; red and white rugs lay on the parquet floor. At night, the lamps lit up the rooms with a fragile light filtered through red and yellow shades, and a real fire was lit. "And this is America?" She opened her eyes in the darkness. "This atmosphere is far more welcoming than I had imagined," she thought, stretching her arms out with pleasure and closing her eyes. She didn't so much as think for a second about the important international press conference that was waiting for her in the spacious chambers of New York's Plaza Hotel.

Yes, old interiors have a calming effect, she repeated to herself with her eyes shut. Why had her father never decorated any of his numerous residences in a way that was welcoming? After the death of Svetlana's mother, Stalin had ordered the Kuntsevo dacha to be rebuilt from scratch at least once a year. The result was always the same: cold-blooded, chilly and tasteless interiors. By contrast, in the house where she was now, Svetlana felt like she was in a Henry James novel...

Svetlana smiled and, quite at ease, dozed off, but suddenly something woke her up again. It was a thought she'd had about her father. It was to be supposed that at an important press conference she should condemn all the evil he committed: millions of deaths, tens of millions of lives ruined. "Why did he do it? For what reason?" she asked herself for the umpteenth time. When they found her mother's body, something changed within her father. To be certain, he continued to be as irascible as ever, brutally violent, but then, on top of all this, he started getting spiteful, he started to develop gut

hatreds. He sent close family members to the prison or to the gulag; some died there, others were shot on his personal orders. And as for her? She had to condemn all that, so that people would know about it. This decision calmed her down, and, slowly, she fell asleep.

5

"My father was not the only guilty one. In fact, all those millions of dead, all those executions, all that bloodletting was not so much the fault of my father as of the Communist Party, of the Communist regime, all the mechanisms according to which the country was governed." So Svetlana declared, vehemently, to the journalists at the press conference at the Plaza Hotel.

"But what am I saying?" she thought, horrified, yet she couldn't stop. When, only a moment ago, the journalists had asked her about her father, she had suddenly remembered his letters and that sort of game they had played: she ordered, he obeyed.

"My beloved little Svetlana,

Thank you for your gifts. And thank you also for your message. I see that you haven't forgotten your father. Wait for me in Sochi, all right?

Kisses from  
your daddy

But she also remembered that once, when she was little, Svetlana had asked the nanny, when her mother was still alive: "Why do I love my mom more than I do my dad?" The nanny had been horrified and told her that she had to love both parents equally.

Then she told the crowd of journalists about how grey and dull life was in the Soviet Union; and also told them that the Communist Party had forbidden her from marrying an Indian citizen, a translator, so that she was obliged to live with him even though they weren't married, something that was not tolerated in the USSR. She explained to everyone assembled that the Soviet government had persecuted Brajesh Singh until the day he died. She remembered that the people in Kalakankar had told her that Brajesh had been physically fit when he went to Moscow and that his death had come as a shock. "What happened to him? What did they do to him?" The journalists looked at this expressive, attractive and vigorous woman, with her greenish-blue eyes, her short, striking hair, her carefully painted nails and plucked eyebrows; her behaviour was as spontaneous as if she'd been sitting with a woman friend in a café instead of being faced with hundreds of journalists during a press conference, at which every word she said could be misinterpreted with serious, unforeseeable consequences. "Was this the daughter of one of the greatest tyrants of the 20th century?" they asked themselves and racked their brains for juicy headlines for the articles they had to submit for the next day's editions.

The master of ceremonies, a well-known TV personality, with a casual but perfect haircut and a suit which had an easy-going air to it, gave the floor to a healthy-looking, tanned journalist who had an intelligent face:

"What was your childhood like? How did your father and mother treat you and what was your relationship with them like?"

Svetlana talked about her mother, saying that she was young and frail, and then about her melancholy, her husband's rudeness, which her mother found unbearable; and about how, in the 1920s,

her mother had gone to take the waters at the Mariánské Lázně spa: an episode which had tragic consequences.

"A person who I knew I could trust told me that just after my mother went to the spa, her doctor, who was also a friend, was murdered in his car."

A long silence fell over the room. Immediately afterwards, the same journalist asked, in a weaker voice:

"I'm sorry? Were the secret police behind it?"

Svetlana couldn't help smiling, so innocent did the question strike her, in its ignorance of totalitarian regimes.

"My mother, who was still a student, as followed constantly by the secret police, both in Moscow and abroad, as was I."

"Can you give us an example?" eagerly asked an dark-haired shortish young woman with an aquiline, somewhat Picassoish nose.

"An example? Well, here's one... Ever since I became a teenager there were always three people in my romantic trysts. A boyfriend, myself, and at least one member of the KGB."

She fell silent. She wasn't sure if she should go on. Afterwards, she said firmly:

"And then something happened for which I have never forgiven my father, and for which I never will forgive him."

Again, she stopped. Did she have to explain this to these people she was seeing for the first time?

The young journalist with eager eyes and the Picassoish face, entreated her:

"You're not obliged to talk about it, it's a private matter for you. But if you do decide to share your life with us, we would greatly appreciate it."

After these friendly words, Svetlana felt like telling her story to these smiling, polite people from a country which, so far, had treated her so well, and each and every one of whose citizens, she ingenuously believed, were new friends of hers. She took a deep breath:

"I met Aleksei Kapler, a famous Russian film director, during the war, when I was almost seventeen years old, and he was forty. We went to the cinema and the theatre a couple of times. During the Russian Revolution celebrations, on November 7th, he invited me to dance a foxtrot with him. I felt comfortable dancing with him. He asked me why I was sad and I said that ten years ago, my mother had died. I told him about our family dramas. Later on, Kapler would bring me books: I remember one by Hemingway and a huge anthology of Russian poetry. Even today I can still recite from memory verses by Anna Akhmatova, Pasternak and Khodasevich, that I learned by heart. Aleksei Kapler and I would take long walks through Moscow, through the snow, and we loved being together. As I mentioned, I had a spy following me, Mikhail Klimov. Kapler always greeted him politely and would occasionally offer him a cigarette; that infuriated Klimov. Nobody treated spies like that, you see. I'm telling you all this so as to answer your question."

"And couldn't you tell us what happened between you and your friend Aleksei Kapler during the war?" asked a small woman with long chestnut hair and fine features. Many people in the room agreed, making it understood that they too were interested in the answer to this question.

"What I've just been telling you about took place before the battle of Stalingrad, you see," Svetlana said, and suddenly felt happy, as if she were chatting with some friends in a restaurant after

lunch and a good bottle of wine. "During the battle, Kapler had to go to Stalingrad as a war correspondent. Then one day I was leafing through the paper when I found an article called 'Lieutenant L.'s letters from Stalingrad: Letter One, signed by Kapler. In it, my friend described what was happening at the front, using the format of a love letter. I was afraid, and with good reason, that my father would find out something. Through my spy Klimov, he obviously knew about every step I took, as well as about my daily telephone conversations with Kapler, which used to last over an hour each time. On more than one occasion, my father had shown how much he disliked my behaviour."

"Did Kapler make it out of Stalingrad? So many people were killed there!" asked a young man with glasses.

"Yes, he did indeed make it out of Stalingrad," Svetlana replied.

"And can't you please tell us what happened next?" asked the Picassoish journalist, like a little girl, without even asking for the floor.

"Next?" Svetlana thought for a while, without saying anything. She didn't want to reveal too much of her private life to strangers, but on the other hand she felt close to these journalists and their interest spurred her on:

"Despite the dangers threatening us, Kapler and I went back to our old habits and every day we went to the cinema, to the Tretyakov Gallery, for walks... On the 28th of February, my birthday, we arranged to meet to say goodbye to each other: Kapler had to go off to Tashkent to make a film. On the 2nd of March of 1943, when Kapler was about to leave, two men arrested him and took him to the Lubyanka prison. After a brief trial, which reached the verdict

that he was a 'spy in the pay of a foreign power' he was condemned to forced labour at Vorkuta, beyond the Arctic Circle. I didn't know this."

"And what happened to you?" asked the young man in glasses in a loud, serious voice, to indicate that he wasn't asking the question out of mere curiosity, but was searching for hard facts.

"On the 3rd of March, in the morning, when I was about to go to school, my father suddenly appeared, walking into my room without knocking. As soon as my tutor saw the mood he was in, she left the room in a hurry and hid herself away in a corner somewhere, the whole time his scolding lasted. My father was usually a man of few words, but this time he was choking with rage, his face purple. "Where are they? Where are all the letters from that... writer?" He spat out this last word in disgust. "I know everything! I have the transcriptions of your phone calls, right here." He slammed a hand over his pocket. "Give me the letters! Your Kapler is a British spy. But he hasn't got away with it, he's in jail now!" There was nothing else for it; I had to open the drawer where I kept Kapler's letters, to give them to my father. Apart from the letters, there were signed photographs of him, notebooks, the script of a film about Shostakovich and, above all, the long farewell letter which he gave me on my birthday, so I would remember him."

"And how did you react?" asked the dark-haired woman with smooth features who was sitting in the front row, once Svetlana had gone silent.

"When I felt able to speak again, I said 'I love him, Father.' And my father: 'You love him! Oof! Look how low she has fallen, tutor: we're at war and she is having it off...' And he used words that are too vulgar to repeat here. 'No, no, no!' my tutor, my nanny, kept on

saying, frightened, her hands on her head. 'What do you mean, no? Why do you say no, if I know everything?' Then he looked at me in disgust: 'Have you seen what she looks like? Do you think someone could love her? A girl as ugly as this? You must be mad, and what about him? Men like him have women throwing themselves at them!' The sentence 'Do you think someone could love her?' hurt me more than the two furious slaps he gave me afterwards.

"When I got back from school – I was still beside myself – they told me to go and see my father: 'He's in the living room.' Seated at his desk, he was ripping up Kapler's letters, the photographs, the notebooks, and was throwing it all in the wastebasket. 'Writer,' he spat out the word again, 'He doesn't even know Russian! At least you could have met a Russian!' I understood then that what most bothered my father was that Kapler was Jewish."

"Then what happened?" the dark-haired woman wanted to know. " Before you said that there was one thing that you could never forgive your father for."

Again, she had the feeling that she was with friends who were interested in her because they wanted to help her. She went on, in a low voice:

"I couldn't forgive my father for sending my beloved into forced labour, beyond the Arctic Circle. I will never forgive him for that. You asked me what happened afterwards? I didn't say a single word to him. Without saying goodbye, I went to my room. From that moment on, there was a distance between us. We didn't talk to each other for months. Only in the summer did we address a few words to each other. But our relationship did not go back to what it had been before. I never went back to being his loving daughter."

"And what happened to Mister Kapler?" asked somebody in a loud voice, who was pointing a camera at her and so wasn't fully visible. He had a foreign accent. "A Russian accent," it occurred briefly to Svetlana.

"Well," Svetlana said in a low voice, "Kapler spent five years in Vorkuta. It's true that there he worked in the theatre, but he was still a prisoner. Then they made him move to Kiev, to stay with his parents, because he was forbidden to go to Moscow. Despite the ban, and the risk it implied, he appeared in Moscow. That was in 1948. They arrested him and tried him. This time, they sent him back into forced labour in the Arctic Circle, but in a concentration camp where he worked as a miner for five years. They didn't release him until after Stalin's death."

"Did you eventually forgive your father? Were you able to do that?" asked the dark-haired woman in the front row, once again. She was completely absorbed by Svetlana's story.

"But just a moment ago she said she hadn't forgiven him". "Listen properly!" "You'd be better off asking something else!" came the protesting voices of the other journalists addressed to the dark-haired woman, all over the room, to the extent that the master of ceremonies, despite himself, had to call them to order. Afterwards, he spent a little while adjusting the collar of his orange shirt.

"Did I forgive him?" said Svetlana thoughtfully, ignoring the protests. "Look, on the 3rd of March of 1953, I was sitting on the edge of my father's bed, watching him breathe with difficulty; he was dying. I remembered Kapler. Ten years had gone by since he'd been imprisoned. And it was ten years to the day that my father had slapped me, before ridiculing and humiliating me."

"What about Kapler? Did you see him again? Did you met up after so many years had gone by?" said the dark-haired woman with a sigh, completely carried away by the story, as if she was living it out herself.

"A year after my father's death, at a writers' convention in Moscow, we met at the reception desk. We hadn't seen each other for eleven years. And it felt as if we'd met just yesterday. Spiritually, we were as close as we'd ever been. That was clear to both of us, from the very first moment. But our lives had changed in the meantime."

The room fell completely silent. After a moment, a timid, fair-haired young man, who was wearing overly thick-framed glasses, dared to asked in a low voice what had happened to Svetlana's mother.

At first, Svetlana didn't say anything. She asked herself once more: should she share private information with strangers who might misunderstand what she was saying and write nonsense in the papers? But in the end she decided she wouldn't stop half way. She told about how her mother, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, first wanted a divorce, but Stalin wouldn't allow that; then she tried to distance herself from her husband and lived in Leningrad with her children at the home of some relatives. Svetlana's father, however, was about to go and fetch her back home, but she anticipated him and went back herself."

"Why did your father behave so badly towards his family?" the woman with Picassoish features wanted to know.

"My father enjoyed humiliating everybody: his colleagues, his family. My brother Yakov, the son from his first marriage, never loved him much, and Stalin demeaned him so much he tried to kill

himself. After that, my father laid into him even more. 'You don't know anything, you can't even fire off a shot, you useless idiot,' he told him. And then came that night, when –" She stopped in mid-sentence.

In the room, you could have heard a pin drop. All those present were hanging on her next words. Svetlana thought about how she had found out that time... She was sixteen. She was at home reading English and American newspapers, to which she had access, being a girl from a privileged family. She was reading *Life*, *Fortune* and the *Illustrated London News*, to get political and cultural news and to practice her English. She found an article about her father and her surprise turned into horror: they reported as a known fact that on the night of the 7th to the 8th of November of 1932, Stalin's wife, Nadezhda, had committed suicide. Svetlana was stunned. She ran to her tutor, who explained what had happened back then, when Svetlana was six: during a gala dinner, Stalin had turned to his wife and said "Hey, listen, you!", and she had protested. None of the people present knew how to react. According to Krushev's memoirs Stalin took his wife over to the ballroom, dragging her by the hair. But neither the tutor nor Svetlana believed Krushev's version, as the man tended to exaggerate. The continual brutality of her father, day after day, year after year, is what had brought her mother...to what eventually happened. She looked out at the room and said:

"Then came the night on which my mother died," and Svetlana felt that everyone, all those hundreds of people, knew that her mother had been found with a revolver in her hand and a bullet in her head. "When I found out what had happened, I started to have doubts about my father's good faith and his concern for justice. You

have to understand that for me, such doubts amounted to blasphemy. On the one hand, he was my father, who, what was more, was the head of state, there was a war on and he was playing a leading role in it. But I couldn't go back. I realised then for the first time that Stalin was a cruel, pitiless ruler, and that family life was..."

Now Svetlana could clearly see compassion on some faces. But only a few. At that very moment, she realised she wasn't in a café with some old friends and that she shouldn't let herself be taken away by the wish to make new friends in order to fight her loneliness in this new country. She made an effort to be as objective as possible and began to weigh her words more carefully:

"My mother used to protest about my father's policies. She made it absolutely clear that she disagreed with his methods. When Beria appeared on the scene (he would later prove to be the most bloodthirsty animal who's ever lived) my mother let her husband know how much she loathed this man. 'Show me proof,' he would tell her. But all that my mother knew was that Beria was utterly inhuman, capable of anything, she'd seen that in his face, but she didn't have any evidence yet, it was too early on: they had this conversation towards the end of the 1920s. And so Beria went on living, and my mother didn't."

She stopped speaking. The journalists respected her silence. After a moment, she added:

"After my mother's death, it was as if my father had gone mad. I never saw him happy again, in the way he sometimes was before. And maybe that's why he turned into a bloodthirsty dictator: he became harsh towards other people, who he hated because they were alive and his wife, whom he loved, despite everything, was dead. A few years after my mother's death, he had all her relatives

jailed and sent them to concentration camps; most of them died there; some were executed."

A sprightly journalist with thick white hair asked what Stalin was like as a father: did he bring up his daughter properly and prepare her to cope with life?

"After my mother's death, my father needed me," Svetlana explained, "We often wrote brief messages and short letters to each other; my father invented a game in which I was the princess regent and he was my secretary. I would give him orders and he would have to obey them. But everything began to change as I got older, although I was still a child. 'What do you think you're doing, walking about naked?' he scolded me when, one Spring, he saw me wearing white socks and a skirt that came to just above my knees, of the kind most girls used to wear at my age."

"Here, we probably couldn't even imagine anyone doing that," said a journalist with a grey bob cut and a golden snake on the lapel of his black jacket.

"Maybe in New York we couldn't imagine that, sure. But in some other parts of the United States there are plenty of hypocrites!" several people said.

"How did you react? I don't know what I'd have done," asked the journalist with the grey bob cut.

"I'm glad you said that, because I didn't know what to say, either. My father ordered my tutor to use one of his old vests to make a pair of pants so long that they would go below my knees and would cover up the bottom half of my legs. In vain, I protested that all the girls wore skirts as long as mine. My father flew into a rage that got worse and worse. 'Father, I'll look like a clown! everyone'll laugh at me! I can't go out wearing those pants!' I said,

crying, even though I was tall and mature for my age. 'My daughter will not go out into the street naked!' he yelled, and left, slamming the door. From then on, he took control of my wardrobe: if a dress was fastened at the waist, he would rip off the belt; if my knees were just a little bit visible, I had to put on a long dress like the kind old ladies wore. Once, he tore a beret off my head. 'What's this crap? You will wear a hat, not this rubbish!' Even though all the young women in the city were wearing berets."

Svetlana smiled a little, to make her story seem less tragic.

"Later on, I found out through a Georgian woman that old Georgian men will not tolerate skirts that are above the knees, or short sleeves, nor socks or stockings, and least of all sleeveless vests."

"Was your father more careful when in front of other people?" asked the bright-eyed Picassoish girl.

Again, Svetlana had the impression that she was talking to a friend on a park bench, and went on to explain:

"At the formal dinners, at which I had to wear evening dress, my father would often say to me, in front of everybody: 'You can't imagine how awful you look' or 'you look disgusting' or 'what a scarecrow'. For a teenager like me, that was very hard, and I had less and less self-esteem. I realised that my father didn't like the way I looked: he wanted me to stop being a gauche teenager, and to look more like his deceased wife, who was a delicate, pretty, attractive woman. Ever since I left home, I've taken to wearing short skirts, by way of rebelling against my father. Not long afterwards, he also started to dislike my opinions. Whenever he could, he made it quite clear that he thought I was not only unattractive, but stupid. Basically, I studied languages, just as my mother had wanted me to:

I learnt to speak fluent English, German and French, but I didn't get many chances to practice these languages."

"But you had plenty of visitors from abroad!" came the voice of the man hidden behind the camera, who had a noticeably foreign accent.

"Sure. But I hardly ever came into contact with those visitors. Once my father asked to be present when Winston Churchill was visiting. So I put on evening dress and made an effort to look smart. But my audience with Churchill only lasted a few seconds and I wasn't even encouraged to speak; my father invited me to be present to show Churchill that he was a human being, with a family."

The friendly, white-haired journalist raised his hand once more:

"I can confirm that your father made a good impression on the British Prime Minister. It's a well-known fact that Churchill held him in high regard, and wrote about him in his diary and his correspondence, with affection and admiration. Please tell us, if you would, what happened to your brother Yakov, a POW in Germany, and whom the Germans could have freed along with other Soviet prisoners? They offered Joseph Stalin an exchange for German POWs who had been taken prisoner at the battle of Stalingrad. Why didn't your father accept the proposal, instead allowing his son to die with the other Soviet prisoners?"

Svetlana thought for a moment. Then, very seriously, she said:

"I've thought a lot about that. The way I see it is as follows: my father was aware that his son was a POW, but he pretended not to know. He felt that if he pretended not to know anything, the problem would cease to exist. He had a habit of putting his head in the sand, like an ostrich. He never wanted to know anything about his family,

as if it didn't exist. He washed his hands of it, and effaced us all from his memory. You're right, by rejecting the Germans' offer of an exchange, he condemned Yakov to death. And not only Yakov: he also betrayed many other Soviet prisoners in the same way."

"Did he ever mention it to you?"

"Only once. In the summer of 1945, when the war was over, he told me in a tired, indignant tone 'The Germans shot Yacha (that's what we called Yakov at home). I have received condolences from a Belgian officer, who was an eyewitness. The Americans freed all the Soviet prisoners not long after.' He never spoke about the matter again. He never loved Yakov's daughter, because the girl's mother was Jewish."

The journalists fell silent, barely breathing.

The master of ceremonies put a hand to his chin and announced that the time limit was up; he tried to make a joke at the end:

"It's so late, it's going to be difficult to find a place that'll serve lunch. But we've got to give it a try, all these horrors we've been listening to have killed our appetite!"

Everybody laughed in relief, Svetlana too. Dozens of clicks could be heard as tape recorders and TV cameras were switched off; chairs scraped on the floor.

Then, for quite a while, the journalists gave Svetlana an enthusiastic standing ovation.