

Being
by Kate Ivanova

1998

In a neighbourhood where the Khrushchyovkas grew like fungi out of concrete, promising prosperity and never-ending development, six year old Yana was gently closing the door of her flat, making sure her fingers wouldn't get crushed by it this time. That six year old Yana could be me and will be me for the time being.

“No farther than the playground! No more adventures! Can you hear me!? Or are you going to keep running away looking for trouble?” The grandmother yelled after me and I ignored her. The heavy wind did all the talking; whining loudly, its cry aggressively shutting the door, echoing.

I remembered how the wind almost taught me and the mother how to fly. I thrust the swinging, peeling ground floor entrance door open. The grey sky revealed itself. The playground that the grandmother tried to confine her granddaughter to was again invaded by sweaty teenage boys. They would come daily, at the same hour, from a different neighbourhood, to kick the ball around the sandy, pebbled patch of land and drink beer. With discipline and consistency the boys were adding swear words into anything they discussed amongst each other. Spitting in sandboxes made of worn out concrete, they would try to engage in their secret “adult” life, surrounded by peeping windows of Khrushchyovkas that they were strangers to.

They were the invaders. Their pubescent bodies moved menacingly and carelessly, because the buildings that actively preyed on their defiance didn't have their parents' faces peeping from their cavities.

My chin and knees were covered in scabs. Every week a new one would appear and itch like hell.

“They are healing”, the grandmother said that morning, “Do not pick at them!” and so I picked at them. I let it my chin bleed freely. Galina came out of the mouth of the faceless building as well. She was a girl of the same age, wearing a top that she had outgrown a long time ago and shorts that revealed her soft curves. As I was using the opportunity to escape the absorbing gaze of the apartment block, Galina paced behind me and shouted:

“Hey! Where you going?”

“To *the house*.” *The house* had once been the offspring of the living and recently became a deserted hope, a construction site that now served as a refuge for the dying.

Galina frowned.

“Why are you going there? Didn't you hear about this girl? Your grandma doesn't allow you to go there. I will tell!” I ignored her and walked on. “You're a complete loser!” Galina shouted after me.

Grandmother usually sat by the iron grilled window of our flat, conducting an observational study of my every move. At times, she would get lost in her daily chores of making pumpkin porridge or searching for her glasses that she left “the devil knows where” the night before. At these moments, I was convinced that she deliberately gifted me the opportunity to explore places that stretched beyond the sandboxes.

The house, the abandoned project, stood naked at the back of my apartment. Its carved, black eyes and gaping mouth were staring at and almost consuming the misty mountain Ai-Petri. The naked brick walls were covered in scrappy graffiti saying “xyŭ”¹ and “СССР”².

I used to love caressing the dried grass that sprouted from the wrinkled concrete with my palms. As usual, I climbed up, my knee brushing against the dirty walls and the

1 A Russian curse word meaning “penis” or rather “dick”.

2 Cyrillic writing saying “USSR”.

3 “Sharik”, meaning “little ball, is a common dog name in Soviet/Post-Soviet countries. Here I reference Mikhail Bulgakov's short novel *Heart of A Dog*. The story deals with the concept of the New Soviet Man who is supposed to be a new saying of USSR. The stray dog Sharik is a satirical figure of the New Soviet Man. The dog is being

sand filling my opened wounds. That day I heard voices from afar. My secret, deserted place that used to be my silent haven was now filled with rustling noises. I navigated through the junk that was left behind by the angels of the night. With anticipation, I tiptoed through the sea of plastic and glass bottles, beer cans, split leather shoes, rags and blocks of concrete with rusty iron tubes sticking out. All the way to the very last of the doorless rooms. Sitting on a used up, yellow mattress was a shape of peculiar appearance. Its swollen features made it look ageless and sexless. It was holding a syringe filled with yellowish, bloody substance.

A grey-toothed smile stretched out the dry skin on the figure's face and its thick fingers gently pressed down on the syringe, squirting the filthy liquid in front of me. The smiling face transformed into a beaten up corpse and with a rough, diabolical voice, it uttered its first words:

“What are you staring at? Get the fuck out of here!”

At first I walked steadily away and then started running, jumping off the building, I landed on my knees, again. The pain was too familiar to notice. An ongoing agony. I saw Galina again. Dusty, with shaking knees and bulging eyes I shyly approached her. My friend's meat-fed cheeks were shaking in spasms:

“I really wish you'd get hit by a car!”

The darkness had already engulfed the rotten buildings and eventually us two. The six year old girls parted in the front yard.

1994

The husband forcefully swings into the apartment block. He is carrying a colour television and a VCR. The steps are slippery and a patch of mould is growing on the ceiling above flat N° 5. The husband carefully balances the colour TV on his thigh and presses the blackening lift button with his knee. Nothing happens. Nothing ever will. The apartment blocks are meant to expire, they are there to remind the husband and the alcoholic from

the 9th floor that they are a bunch of miserable Shariks³ or their progeny. The husband is my father.

He stoically takes the stairs. The drunkard from the 9th floor left a smell of hydrogen peroxide and fresh vomit lingering on the second floor. Every single morning, after drinking by the corner grocery shop with his pals, the drunkard crawls up to his floor, drooling on the concrete and dozing off on each floor's banister. It's 9 a.m. and he is probably sleeping through his hangover before starting the marathon again.

“Fucking pig”, the husband whispers.

The husband's sweat is dripping as he passes the fourth floor and sees Olga's door. She could be watching through the peephole, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. My father tiptoes on the staircase now, his muscles swelling, aching with the load that he is carrying. He imagines what Olga would say to him.

“You never came back! You *сукин сын*⁴!” She would fake a pregnancy and put up a show for the entire building to watch and possibly take part in. His wife will find out, if she doesn't know already, and he will have to find a new place to stay. He doesn't want to stay with Olga, Olga is mental and she talks in her sleep.

Seventh floor, flat number 35. The husband rings the bell and remembers that he forgot to buy flowers for my mother. It's her birthday so he carves a smile on his face and convinces himself that the colour TV and the VCR are his presents for her.

“I will try and get access to this antenna! We could have 20 channels; one of them shows music videos the entire day! Can you imagine all the international films and music videos!” he says to his wife while placing the electronics on the dresser. Inga, my mother, is clasping her bony elbows and grinds her teeth: “That's ... that's great.”

Today I know that she was miserable when she married my father although I

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4 Russian: “son of a bitch”.

realised that already by the time I turned four and wanted to change my surname “Shylo” to my mother's “Ivanova”. Shylo which means screwdriver in Russian. I suppose only Russians will understand the humiliation that comes with sharing that surname on the playground. My mother consented with a vengeful smile: “Your father is a complete loser of course we are going to change your surname sweetie.”

My father brings that television in 1994. It reminds Inga that before becoming my mother she would have been excited about westernising her home. Television sets taking the place of the ancient Soviet radio. There is no need to go all the way to Czechoslovakia in 1994 to buy fashionable clothes. Just five years ago, before the burden, before the collapse, my mother and her girlfriends were cliff diving the rocks of Crimea. Like nymphs they were penetrating the black sea. The house parties were wild, promising an emergence of the new, restructured woman. My mother danced to the leaked tapes of Madonna and drank spirits shamelessly. Invincible and beautiful.

In 1994, she wants to tell him that she doesn't even care about the television. She can watch it with my godmother Anastasia when the two are breastfeeding their babies.

“Don't look at me like that”, the husband says guiltily. “Don't. Please.”

“What?”

“I know what you're thinking. But we have to ... Inga, I really wanted that TV. It will keep us entertained. We might have English channels, the kid could learn English. I promise I'll bring that watermelon next time.” That is all she asked for her birthday, a watermelon. My father always tries to justify that filthy business of his. These days things have become easily justifiable.

Anastasia's flat is just around the corner. Inga's exhausted feet carry her there while my grandmother watches my one year old self. Anastasia brews some tea for them and throws a couple of slices of cheese on some black bread.

“Twenty-three huh? Happy birthday you hag!” Anastasia chuckles. “I asked the cashier to give me the freshest cake they had. She just laughed at me and gave me this.

It's a few days old, didn't look too bad, let's taste it."

They sit down at the dinner table while my godmother is slicing the cake, wet laundry caresses their heads. Inga starts talking and sighing endlessly, tracing bread crumbs with her fingers on the table. She is telling Anastasia how he turned up with a stolen television this time.

"One day it will all be over, he'll get shot. I know it! He keeps getting himself into deeper and deeper shit with the KGBs assholes. One day he won't be able to get out of it and it will all be over. I'll take her away from this shithole and we will move somewhere new." Anastasia nods at my mother. Her son's father is in the same racket gang and he keeps telling Anastasia that he is doing it for the family, for prosperity and yet nothing ever reaches their doorstep.

That night my mother prays. She replays the scenario of the rival catching my father and his rabble in her mind, over and over again. But he makes it home that night. He comes in late, she pretends he is dead. That night he promises her a million dollars and a car, wishes her a happy birthday again, kisses me who is sleeping in their bed. She sees that his eyes are filled with blood and asks:

"Cut the bullshit out. What happened?"

"Someone ratted us out. We got shot at by the motherfuckers at the gas station. I promise I will get out of this as soon as possible now." His eyes grow bigger and darker. He keeps promising and promising.

"They shot Vlad five times in a row. We were all going ape shit so I cannot tell you how it ACTUALLY happened. All I know is that he died, Inga. I'm so sorry. I know I got him into this but it's not my fault. Will you tell Anastasia? Please?" He doesn't wait for a reply, he leaves the room and smokes a cigarette on the balcony. For a few minutes, my mother watches me doused in peaceful sleep. I wonder if that day somehow managed to inscribe itself somewhere deep in my subconscious mind. A memory I will perhaps dig out once I'm doused in the peaceful process of dying.

Fireworks lighten up the sky of our neighbourhood. It's the 12th April, we are celebrating Cosmonautics Day, our never-ending obsession with escaping Earth. The husband curves his shoulders forward, warm tears run down his face into the corners of his mouth as he bites his lower lip. He longingly stares at the sky contemplating how Vlad had to leave behind a pregnant wife and a son. He says to his trembling self: "It's all right. It is what it is. Get your shit together now. These are hard times we live in, some people are luckier than others." Inga didn't say anything, couldn't say anything. Her green eyes study the carpet on the wall, her cheeks are fiery and she now drifts around the room like a ghost and wakes me. We leave the flat quietly. I am cradled in her warmth and we abandon our building, leaving Shylo behind peering into the green sky.

1998

"You devil's creature! Why are you so obsessed with the Georgian, huh?" the grandmother asked me in an breathless voice. This was after yet another adventure that led me and the Georgian Lesia to a different part of the neighbourhood. We loitered and shared our dreams with each other while flying on the squeaking, rusty swings. This obviously didn't make the old crow grandmother happy.

The entire building knew whenever I went missing because of her violent scream that resonated through the entire neighbourhood.

The next door neighbour Lyudmila had become immune to the yell but at times would still choke on bits of her biscuit when she heard my name echoing and she would tell her friend over tea:

"No wonder this child is so uneducated and undisciplined. The mother left the homeland behind and abandoned the girl to become a prostitute in Europe. It's not a surprise that she is prone to committing of sin and to spreading of disease." Later she met my grandmother Tonia and in a tone of concern she said to her:

"Tonia, you have to be careful. I think your little one is possessed by the devil. The

child was left behind by her own mother! Think! You are growing old and she is clearly not listening to you. The Devil might not yet RESIDE inside of her but your granddaughter has surely opened the doors to it. I saw her with the poor Georgian the other day. Be careful Tonia. Read her passages from the Bible and you might want to bring her to aunt Nelya who can cure these things with her hands. Think of it. God bless you!” She wouldn't let Tonia speak and would disappear in her flat within seconds. People from the apartment block were saying that Lyudmila went mad after her husband had drunken himself to death. But either way, everyone went mad at that time. We were all mad in that apartment block. My uncle, the schizophrenic was shaving his head one day, he pretended that the razor slipped and slit his artery open. Barefooted he then ran away to the woods. I personally think he had always been the sanest one amongst us post-Soviet beings.

After grandmother's ferocious spanking, my tears dried out and I sat on the windowsill, playing with satellite wires that hung purposelessly on the surface of our decaying Khrushchyovkas. I fixed my gaze with anticipation on the opposite apartment block hoping to see Lesia' dark head lean out of the window.

Lesia meanwhile opened the door of her own flat. Quietly she first leaned in to listen whether her father had left. She didn't hear a single voice but that of the television that her mother watched compulsively every day, every hour. She dozed off in front of it after sucking her bottles dry. Lesia took off her oversized coat and walked through the hallway into the living room. The girl's father threw her out of the house that morning “to get some fresh air”. Lesia never understood there was always fresh air in the flat, the heating never worked and hot water only came on once a week these days. The girl figured that there was some adult business she wasn't supposed to be part of and yet, as they say: one day she will know, because one day she will be an adult herself. His father liked Lesia to breathe fresh air basically and surprisingly never seemed to care if the mother got enough of it. The girl would often come home and find his mother unconscious.

“My mother is always tired”, she once told me while we were daydreaming on the

swings. "She would never go abroad like yours did. She is too tired. She prefers sleeping and watching television. I like doing that too. I wish I could do it every day. I never want to go to school."

On the living room couch, Lesia's mother was looking into the television screen, hypnotically watching advertisements of Snickers, Tide and Schwarzkopf with her watery eyes. Lesia bent down and kissed her mother's bruised, puffy, pink face. Stepping back to have a better look at the state of the living room, the girl brushed past the coffee table and the shaking bottles woke her mother up from her hypnosis. She directed her gaze on her daughter:

"Honey, be careful please. The carpet!" She stood in the same spot watching her mother's misery and she noticed, so her mother smirked. "These crazy adverts. You spend more time watching advertisements than the actual programmes these days." She then sunk even deeper into the couch.

This is why I never saw his friend looking out of the window and so I went to the kitchen to eat insipid lunch. My grandmother was rushing about, cleaning and complaining:

"No bread on the shelves and yet they advertise American food. Hamburgers, fried potatoes?! What is going on with this world! Who eats this?" I knew I wanted to go to Moscow that day. I knew I wanted to move to a big city where McDonald's opened its doors to the post-Soviet disillusion. "I will move to Leningrad" I often said.

"There is no Leningrad you little devil!" My uncle Sasha appeared in the kitchen as if out of thin air and laughed. I was often confused. How could a city that was so much spoken of in movies disappear?

"Where did it go? What happened to it?" I asked.

Perhaps it was left by all its inhabitants. Perhaps all the people, just like my mother packed their bags and left the city, making Leningrad an empty space that vanished into a black hole.

“Believe me, I do too! Always did!” said his grandmother sarcastically.

“At least I want to move to the times of Leningrad”, she added swiftly.

The uncle sneered.

“Well I personally don't want to go back to *совок*⁵.”

“Little one!” My uncle looked at me “Leningrad disappeared! Go to the land of freedom! To America! Where The Beatles jammed and where people have a goddamn life!”

“America, America, America! Everyone keeps moaning about this European way of life. We had whole, nutritious food on our tables every day, people prospered in the old times! Look at us now! To hell with that Gorbachev and that drunkard Yeltsin! And they call them politicians”, the grandmother protested while not knowing the difference between American life and the European.

“Oh so under Stalin and Khrushchev we were all free, is that what you're trying to say? Don't you remember the misery we lived in? The *kommunalka*⁶, four of us cramped in one tiny room and you working like a horse! Everyday you'd come home from work and silently cook for us and clean our shit while mumbling to yourself. I remember every word, *working in a palace and living in a doghouse.*”

Grandmother's eyes watered.

“Stalin held the nation like that”, she clutched her fat, overworked hand into a fist and weaved it in Sasha's face.

“The entire world grieved his death! I am sure that even the Europeans did! We all lived together! We were all good to each other.”

5 “Sovok”: slang for the Soviet regime.

6 “Kommunalka” was a typical Soviet form of accommodation; it could be translated as “the communal space”. Similar to university halls, kommunalkas were composed of up to 16 families all living together and sharing a kitchen, the bathroom and the toilet. The 'private' rooms were small and at times cramped with up to five family members all sharing one tiny space.

At that time I had already heard of Stalin. Specifically that he was a friend of Lenin. I knew who Lenin was or at least I would have recognised him walking in the streets if I saw him, his monuments decorated the big cities and his iron head could be seen in the smaller ones too.

The clatter of the house phone interrupted the debate.

“Mother!” left my lunch to dry and ran to pick up the phone.

“Mummy, mummy how are you? Where are you now? When are you coming back?”

“Hi baby, I need to be fast, the connection is pretty bad and I have to be at work in a bit. Are you all right? I bought you so many presents here abroad!”

“Is there anything we can do so you can come back mummy? Grandmother is not fun to live with. I miss you.”

My mother's voice became shaky and distant. “I will be home soon. I cannot leave work for now. I miss you. Remember that if you are nice to grandmother and do your homework you will come travelling with me and we will be doing fun things together in Europe.”

“Is it true that you are a *prostitutka* now mum? Lyudmila the neighbour says you are. What does it mean mum? She also asked us kindly if you could send her some money over since you are abroad and there's loads of it. She is building a church!”

The line cut before I could get a response from her. She came back months later. Her slim, long legs were bruised but she was wearing fashionable clothes and her lipstick was bright. The apartment organised a banquet. Every flat teamed up and made food because “the woman from third floor is arriving today from abroad.”

“Is it America that she went to?” some of the old women would wonder.

“Mmmhm... no, Europe”, their girlfriends would say.

“Well I've heard she was in Japan and married rich”, Anna from the first floor would say proudly as if she had access to some secret information. Each one of them was

planning something to ask my mother. A story? Perhaps they could ask her new husband's name so they can laugh, showing their silver teeth, pat her shoulder and say how lucky she is to not have to work anymore with a man like Franco or Michel in her life.

“No, too nosy”, they'd decide and would casually ask my mother for money, to help Lyudmila build the church.

1999

I stuffed my empty objects into my miniature bag; rubber dwarves, imaginary friends and perhaps the devil himself. For the first time in my life I had the freedom to decide what to pack, what to wear and I was five and a half. I probably picked the most ridiculous outfit, just because I could and because my father? Well, he didn't care!

He burst through the entrance door and told me to silently pack. My grandmother's wrinkled face merged into a landscape of capitulation. With the guilt of a traitor, I obeyed. I know I could have stubbornly refused but of course, it never happened.

Today, whenever I watch daughters and their fathers, I keep asking myself why I didn't cry nor beg to go back home when we took the first taxi, the first train and when the journey just became a continuous roll of concrete. I was watching the grey, uniform buildings and electricity wires flashing over sunflower fields. A tiny flame was flickering within me. The flame that finally burned a hole in the monotonous life of a 5-year old.

The journey took us places that today are buried in the depths of my mind, waiting to be dusted. It threw different characters at us. In a small village we met a muddy gypsy woman with a drunk goat. The villagers were circling around her and she gave out pocket pies while laughing ecstatically. Women kissed the goat, leaving lipstick marks on its bony face. The gypsy kissed the women's lips, sucking their souls out. The women yelled and giggled “Ah! You silly girl!” She dragged her long, dirty garments across the streets and continued her way through the filthy alleys, tracing her way with feathers that flew out of

her hair. I can recall her circling around with the basket of pies and it was swinging joyfully on her forearm. The goat always followed, he was her festive companion. Away, away into a new dimension. "Follow me my child!" she said to me. I never saw her again.

We took a break on the road and he took me to a playground. A girl my age approached me. I forgot her name within seconds but she reminded me of myself so I welcomed her. On the swings she would yell eagerly: "Let's try to make a sun! A S-U-N! If you push hard enough, the swing traces a sun!" Her words got lost in the winter breeze and I laughed until all of a sudden, I couldn't find him anymore. He had disappeared among the crowds and their blank faces. This was my opportunity to run but I decided not to. Maybe because there wasn't much to run for? My heart was racing, my mad eyes obsessively rummaged in the crowds and for a minute I thought that perhaps this time it was his turn to get kidnapped and stabbed in a corner. Of course he came back.

People keep asking me how I remember him and whether I remember him at all and I nod mutely. What do I remember? What *can* I remember? I remember his silence. His own personal space, piercing me through. The silence surrounding us became so embedded in me, that I often came to admire it in other men. His silence was the kind of ego-crushing silence that as a teenager, I was sharing with a married man. The silence of a gaze from a distant land that saw straight through me and did all the talking but then gradually loosened its grip, finger by finger and evaporated completely. All of them had that one particular silence in common with my father.

I sometimes hoped that he had actually planned everything. That step by step, he put some intense, analytical thought into the procedure of taking me away. I once told this story to a lover, all he did was smile and say: "He was right to kidnap you, I would have done the same!" At that point I felt special.

On the road, he might have nervously condemned my mother and might have said something like: "She's the one who abandoned you! She exchanged you for a different world, for a life in Syria." or Lebanon, or wherever the fuck she was at that time anyway.

He might have said that. I cannot tell. All I remember is his persistent silence, like an awaiting for something that was yet to come. We made another stop at some strangers' house whose faces lit up when they met me and who later pushed me down to my knees and made me recite the Bible. I was paying for my sins or perhaps my mother's sins. I remember watching my father standing in his own corner of the same

room, praying, seeking redemption from the darkness of his own past.

From the strangers' house we went to another place where I was given all the toys of the world. One morning without really knowing where I was, I watched my father sleep next to me. I observed his features. I asked myself what was next and whether he could be any better than my mother. That same morning the door creaked and she appeared seemingly out of thin air. She was wearing a pink-flowered blouse and it all came back to me: my whereabouts. This was the place that was once full of shadows creeping inside of each one of us, feeding on every part of us. The place where my mother's bad habit was to accidentally cut her fingers with the kitchen knife and my father tried to smoke himself to death. This was where we celebrated my fourth birthday, what seemed like centuries ago. This used to be our home.

At that moment the adventure trip with him had ended. I took my new toys and left with her and her lingering tiredness. Back to the rail tracks, back to the ghostly corners. A couple of months later, my mother invited him for dinner out of pity. He came in and said that he had an epiphany, an important message from God. He said his prayers at the table, said that he had finally found salvation and that the letting go of me was the source of it. I watched my mother and she started weeping, weeping at the dinner table, weeping out of a long awaited, pure bliss.

