

Manunia and Me

By Narine Abgaryan

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In lieu of a prologue

How many country towns do you know split down the middle by a noisy, boisterous river, with a crumbling medieval fortress looming over it from the very top of a cliff on its right shore? With an old stone bridge, sturdy and stout, stretching across the river, breaking its banks at high tide, brimming and bubbling, trying to devour the bridge whole.

How many country towns do you know that rest in the cupped hands of sloping hills? As if the hills had stood up in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, reaching forward and joining their hands to form a shallow valley—this was where the first of the squat little huts had sprung up. And smoke from the stone stoves had stretched upwards like fine lace towards the heavens, as the ploughman tilled the soil, his booming voice swelling with the *horovel*—a song to rally the peasants and beasts. “Aniii-ko,” he crooned to the woman from that age-old tale, wiping his eyes with a wrinkled palm. “Aniii-ko! Where’ve you run off to, you wretched thing? Who will bake the sweet *gata* bread now?”

How many country towns do you know where you can climb the tall outer walls of a ruined castle, clinging to your friend’s shoulders with frozen fingers, and look down at the nameless white river, foaming and frothing in the depths of a gorge? And then, ignoring the sternly-worded sign —‘Protected by the State’—you climb the fortress itself in search of secret passages and infinite treasures...

This fortress has an extraordinary and tragic history. In the 10th century, it belonged to an Armenian prince, Tslik Amram: along with his troops, he went to confront his tsar, Ashot II, king of all Armenia, who had seduced his wife. So began a brutal civil war, which crippled the country for years after it had already been bled dry by Arab invaders. Meanwhile, the beautiful and faithless princess, tormented by the gnawing of conscience, hanged herself in the castle tower.

For many centuries, the fortress had stood on the cliff—impregnable from all sides. But in the 18th century a terrible earthquake split the cliff in two. One side held the ruins of the eastern wall and the inner structures of the fortress, and along the gorge that formed below, the swift river ran. The town elders used to say there had been an underground tunnel beneath the fortress leading all the way to Lake Sevan, and weapons were smuggled through it when the fortress was under siege. That was how the fortress had weathered all the raids by nomadic tribes and, but for the earthquake, it would still be standing tall, intact and unharmed.

A little town flourished around the ruins. It was called Berd, meaning ‘fortress’.

The people in this town are really quite peculiar. You’ll never meet a people more headstrong, more maddeningly obstinate, than this lot. They are notoriously difficult and often referred to, rather fittingly, as the ‘stubborn mules’. And if you think this bothers them in the least, you’re sorely mistaken. If you’re ever in Berd, you might well overhear something like the following:

“You’re wasting your breath—you know I’m a Berdian Mule. No use trying to persuade me.”

“So what? I’m a Berdian Mule, too! Born and bred. Question is—who’s going to give in first, eh?”

And if you still want proof, here's a prime example of the famous Berdian mulishness:

In summer, we Armenians celebrate Vardavar—a bright and cheerful festival, rooted in pagan prehistory. On this day everyone, young or old, douses each other with water. This goes on from morning till late evening, and the water can come at you from anything that will hold it. All you need to do is lather yourself up with soap, open your front door, and stand there. Beyond the threshold, you're sure to find crowds of people soaked to the skin, gleefully shrieking with laughter as they chuck a tonne of water over you. Pretty nifty way to have a wash, if you ask me. Just kidding.

And even if a complete stranger douses you with water when you're outside, you must never ever take offence: they say that on this day water has healing powers.

Well. The Armenian Apostolic Church was keen to 'systematise' traditional celebrations, and therefore went to great pains to impose a strictly fixed day for Vardavar. They didn't reckon on our stubborn little town though, did they?

Big mistake. Because these days everywhere in Armenia celebrates Vardavar according to the Church's decree. Everywhere that is, except Berd, where they celebrate it on the last Sunday in July, in the old way. And I assure you, if the Catholicos himself issued a special decree specifically for our little town, nothing would come of it. May His Holiness never even try—you can tell him that from me. Because you won't get anywhere with this lot unless they're good and ready.

In other words, never.

Now though, here's a little more about the main heroes of our tale.

Once upon a time in the little town of Berd there lived two families—the Abgaryan family and the Schatz family.

The Abgaryans boasted Yura, a wonderful father, solid as a rock, and Nadia, a beautiful and devoted mother, and their four daughters, all of various ages and different characters: Narine, Karine, Gayane, and Sona. A long-awaited son, Ayk, was eventually born into this happy family, but that was a few years after the events described, so only the four girls feature in this tale. Yura, the father, was a doctor, and the mother taught Russian language and literature at school.

For their part, the Schatz family boasted a splendid grandma—Ba. Short for *babushka*.

Of course, apart from Ba, the Schatz family consisted of two more people: Ba's son, Uncle Misha, and Manunia, his daughter, who was therefore Ba's granddaughter. But the real pride of the family, first and foremost, was Ba. And even so, the other family members were no less splendid. Uncle Misha was an engineer, and Ba was a mother, a granny, and a housewife.

For a long time, our heroes barely had anything to do with each other, as they didn't even know the others existed. Then one day, a strange occurrence brought them together forever.

The year was 1979. The 34th Victory Day celebrations were just around the corner. The usual events were due to take place at the local culture centre, including a celebration of the war veterans. The Berd music school was entrusted with an important mission: to perform 'Buchenwald Alarm Bells' by Aleksandr Sobolev and Vano Muradeli.

The choir was rehearsing so desperately, they were practically hoarse. Their brilliant choir master, Sergo Mikhailovich, struggled endlessly, haranguing the basses, who irritatingly insisted on coming in half a bar late. He wrung his hands, lamenting this rendition of 'Buchenwald Alarm Bells' would make them the laughing stock of the town, and as punishment the choir was sure to be "bloody well disbanded" once and for all. For some reason, the choir found this upsetting.

And then it was D-Day.

Do you know what? Everything would have been just fine, had it not been for the long, two-level bench the second and third rows of singers were frantically hoisted onto during the brief intermission. It was all going swimmingly: the song was flowing out evenly and with feeling—even the basses came in unexpectedly on time. Sergo Mikhailovich was zigzagging around the stage, like he was being chased by an angry wasp. The solemnity of the moment gave the singers goosebumps all over. The audience, at first intrigued by the choirmaster's frenzied movements, was soon imbued with the emotion of the 'alarm bells' and fell quiet.

There wasn't the slightest inkling of trouble ahead.

And then suddenly, at the words: "The international columns are talking to us", they heard it. Nearby. Behind them. A strange crack. The first row of choir singers didn't dare turn around, but judging by the choirmaster's grimace, something terrible had happened behind them.

The first row faltered but stoically went on singing. Then at the line: "Do you hear the roar of thunder? This is no storm or hurricane," the bench beneath the second and third rows gave way; with another, ear-splitting crack, it broke apart and all the children came crashing down.

The veterans surprised themselves: despite being of a certain age, in one swift move they leapt up onto the high stage, their medals and decorations clinking as they began scooping up the pile of kids.

The singers were devastated—the performance was clearly a disaster. Wretched and upset, the children dusted themselves off and limped off the stage in silence. One of the girls was tall and skinny Narine; with gritted teeth, she tried in vain to crawl out from under the plump and inexplicably wet Manunia, who was lying on top of her like a quiet little mouse.

"Get off me!" hissed Narine.

“I can’t,” sobbed Manunia. “I’ve peed myself!”

Let us take a deep breath and ponder on that for a moment: in order for two little girls to form a fierce friendship that would last the rest of their lives, sometimes all it takes is for one of them to pee on the other.

It was in this thoroughly original way that Narine and Manunia became friends. And then their families became friends.

‘Manunia’ is a story about a remote, rural little Soviet town and its inhabitants. About how, despite monstrous shortages and numerous restrictions, people managed to live and enjoy life.

‘Manunia’ is a book for grown-up children; for people who at 13 and at 60 believe in the good in life, and look to the future with a smile.

‘Manunia’ is my declaration of infinite love for my family, for my nearest and dearest, and for the town where I was lucky enough to be born and raised.

Happy reading, my friends.

And no, in case anyone is wondering, our choir wasn’t disbanded. We were awarded a certificate for our professional performance of ‘Buchenwald Alarm Bells’, and even rewarded with a trip to a dairy plant.

They probably should have disbanded us, to be honest.

Chapter 1

Manunia introduces me to Ba, or The tricky task of making it onto Rosa Iosifovna’s guest-list

Over the course of the narrative, you might get the impression that Ba was grouchy and stubborn. Perhaps even a bit of a tyrant. This is absolutely not true. Or rather, not absolutely true. Ba was kind and sensitive, loving and devoted. And if you didn’t get on the wrong side of her, you might have even

taken her for a perfect angel. The fact that she could fly off the handle over anything, sometimes even the most seemingly insignificant things, was another matter entirely. On those fateful occasions, even a military operation like “Desert Storm” would feel like a childish game compared to what Ba was capable of! Trying to sweep the wreckage from a tornado under a rug would have been easier than weathering the catastrophic storm that was Baba Rosa’s wrath.

I guess I’m pretty lucky, my friends. I came face to face with this force of nature many a time and lived to tell the tale. Kids can survive just about anything—a bit like cockroaches.

Manunia and I were eight when we first met. By that time, we were both having lessons at a music school: Manunia was learning the violin and I was learning the piano. We might have said hello when we had the odd class together, but it wasn’t until that rather eventful choir recital that we became the kind of friends who were ‘thick as thieves’, as they say. We switched seats in class to sit next to each other and started walking home together—we were going the same way anyway. Whenever Manunia had violin practice, we took it in turns to carry her case—it wasn’t particularly heavy or anything, just a bit bulky for two little girls.

A couple of weeks into our fierce friendship, I decided to invite Manunia home to meet my family.

Manunia stopped in her tracks.

“The thing is,” she said looking down, sheepishly, “I live with Ba.”

“Who?” I asked, totally confused.

“Well, Ba... My granny, Rosa.”

“So?” I couldn’t understand what she was getting at. “I have grannies too!” I said, “Grandma Tata and Grandma Nastia.”

“Look. You might have ‘grannies’ but I have Ba.” Manunia eyed me reproachfully. “You don’t want to get on the wrong side of Ba! She doesn’t let me go to strangers’ houses.”

“But I’m not a stranger!” I said, throwing my arms up huffily. “We’ve been friends for ages now...” I said, counting in my head, “a whole eighteen days!”

Manunia readjusted the shoulder strap of her school pinafore. She straightened out her wayward skirt, nudging at the violin case with her knee.

“Okay, how’s this?” she started, “I’ll ask Ba about it and let you know what she says when I see you in class.”

“Just call me at home. Shall I give you my number?”

“The thing is,” Manunia gave me another guilty look, “Ba doesn’t let me go round ringing strangers. So look, when you and I are OFFICIALLY introduced, then I’ll call you.”

I thought it best not to remind her that we were already pretty much introduced. Instead, I realised this was simply how it needed to be. A grownup’s word was law: if Ba didn’t let Manunia phone other people, then, inexplicable as it might have seemed to me, she must have had a perfectly good, albeit cryptic, reason for it.

Next music lesson, Manunia handed me a piece of paper folded into four. I unfolded it, carefully.

This most charming little note from my friend began with the following mysterious inscription:

“Narine, yore invited to my home this Saterdag, 1979, at 3 o’clock. Bring your famly photo album with you if posibble.”

My name was written in thick, red marker. Underneath, Manunia had drawn a little house in brightly coloured pencil. On the roof stood a single chimney

belching out thick smoke. Rays of light from an oil lamp shone out of a solitary little window, and a long, winding path snaked its way up to the front door. In the sky—which was green for some reason—the sun peeked out from behind fluffy clouds. Nestled in the right-hand corner, there beamed a wide-eyed moon with a little star for company. A note at the bottom read: “I lost my blue pensill so the sky’s greane but nevermind. The End.”

It was all very touching!

The way Mama got me ready for my visit, you’d think it was Judgement Day. In the morning, she washed me herself, scrubbing me with such ferocity it was a wonder my flesh didn’t come off. Then she plaited my hair so tightly I could barely blink, let alone breathe. At times like these my granny used to say “mind you don’t bend or straighten, draw breath or break wind.” And she wasn’t wrong! But apparently, unearthly beauty demands sacrifice, so I did my best to get through the ordeal. I was then presented with a new summer dress to wear: it was a soft, creamy colour, with puffy sleeves and a lace hem.

“Get it dirty and I’ll thrash you,” said Mama, a pleasant smile playing across her lips. “Your sisters will need to get some wear out of it after you.”

She solemnly handed me a carrier bag containing our family album and a box of chocolates for Ba. The bag was bright blue and incredibly beautiful, with a picture of a lone, handsome cowboy and the inscription ‘Marlboro’. Mama had a few bags like that, which she guarded carefully for only the most special of occasions. Anyone who suffered hardships during Soviet times will remember how much effort and incredible nous it took to procure those polythene bags.

“Keep your elbows off the table and mind your p’s and q’s! Behave yourself, and don’t gawk at the house like a ninny!” Mama went on yelling instructions

on how to behave, as I ran down the stairs of our building. “And look after your dress!” Her voice caught up with me at the doorway, prodding me in the ribs.

“Oka-a-a-ay!”

Manunia was hovering impatiently near the gate outside her house. Spotting me in the distance, she ran up to meet me.

“You look so pretty today!” she said.

“Made an effort for your gran, didn’t I?” I grumbled. But all my fighting talk soon disappeared. My vision became blurry, my knees started knocking, and my sweaty palms really gave the game away.

Manunia noticed the state I was in.

“Oh, don't worry — Ba’s lovely, really,” she said, putting her hand on my shoulder. “Just agree with everything she says and try not to pick your nose.”

“Okay,” I croaked. To add insult to injury, I’d even managed to lose my voice.

Manunia lived in a large, two-storey house made of stone, with an enclosed veranda supported by several columns. “Why do they have so many columns?” I thought as I wandered feverishly through the courtyard, though I didn’t dare to ask about them. My attention was instead drawn to the enormous mulberry tree that sprawled daringly close to the house. Underneath it was a long, wooden bench.

“That’s where Pápa and I play draughts in the evenings,” explained Manunia, “Ba sits next to us and insists on giving each of us pointers. Such a pain!” she said, rolling her eyes. I was even more scared than before.

She pushed the front door tentatively and whispered: “Ba must already be taking the shortbread out of the oven.”

I sniffed the air—something smelled unbearably delicious. From the outside the house seemed large, yet inside it felt much smaller. We made our way down a long, narrow corridor and into a hallway. On the left was a wooden staircase leading up to the first floor. Opposite stood a large ebony chest of drawers adorned with two brass menorahs, and on the floor lay a carpet with an intricate Eastern pattern. The entire wall behind the chest of drawers was plastered with framed photographs. I stepped closer to get a better look but Manunia took me by the hand, as if to say ‘not now’. She indicated the door on the right, which I hadn’t noticed until that point.

“Let’s go inside!”

And that’s when I felt the last of my strength drain away. I realised I couldn’t take another step.

“I’m not going in,” I whispered hotly. “Here. Take the bag. It’s got chocolates for your granny and some photos of my family.”

“What’s the matter?” Manunia grabbed my hand. “Have you gone completely mad? Come on, there’s still some ice-cream left!”

“No,” I stepped back towards the front door, grabbing onto the handle. “I don’t eat ice-cream. Or cakes. And anyway, it’s time I was on my way. My máma will be wondering where I am!”

“Oh, Nari! Why are you making such a fuss?” Manunia was clutching my arm, trying to pull me away from the door handle. “Where are you going? What’ll I tell Ba?”

“I dunno. Tell her whatever you like.” I was stronger than Manunia—just a few more seconds and I’d have bolted.

“What on Earth are you two up to out here?” A voice thundered suddenly from behind us, rooting us to the spot.

“Ba, she’s gone mad. Says she wants to go home.” Manunia had somehow managed to pull me away from the door handle and into the corridor. “She’s scared of you. She’s being so... weird!”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! Come on both of you. Into the kitchen!” boomed the voice.

Without looking up, I shuffled silently after Manunia. Stealing a sideways glance, I caught a glimpse of a foot in a warm slipper and a snatch of a flowery dress.

I fell in love with the kitchen instantly. It was spacious, with lots of cupboards, a low-hanging lampshade, and plain little calico-print blinds on the windows.

“Now, let’s introduce ourselves properly, shall we?” the voice resounded behind me.

I felt extremely nervous, as though I were in a doctor’s waiting room.

But there was no escape. I turned around. Ba peered at me over her large glasses. Her eyes seemed lightish brown in colour, and her greying, curly hair had been gathered into a bun at the back of her head. She was quite heavysset, but—as I would soon discover—surprisingly light on her feet, carrying herself with great poise and dignity. She also had a rather large birthmark on her cheek that was kind of round and funny. I let out a sigh of relief. Ba was just a normal granny and not, as it turned out, some sort of fire-breathing monster.

Manunia went up to Ba and hugged her waist, pressing her cheek into her belly.

“Isn’t Nari GORGEOUS?” she asked.

“You’re both gorgeous,” retorted Ba, “at least, you are when you’re asleep,” she added, before turning to face me. “Now then, young lady, are you going to introduce yourself properly, or what?”

“Hullo,” I squeaked, feebly.

“Hello indeed!” Ba snorted and then chuckled to herself.

Ba’s laugh took me by surprise—she laughed as though some unlucky little creature was being murdered inside her belly.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“But Ba, I already told you—” interrupted Manunia.

“Quiet, Manunia! I’m not talking to you,” barked Ba. Manunia sulked but kept quiet.

“Narine,” I managed, before summoning whatever courage I had left and adding: “Pleased to meet you!”

The tortured creature inside Ba’s stomach was surely close to death by now, as the loud guffaw she let out sounded like an agonised roar.

“Been practising that for long, have you?” she asked me through her unsettling laughter.

“Yes,” I admitted, guiltily.

“And what’s that you’ve got there?”

“A bag—it’s a present for you!”

“You’ve brought me a bag as a present?” Ba’s eyes narrowed. “Times must be hard indeed if people are giving carrier bags as gifts.”

“There’s also a box of chocolates and our family album,” I said, stepping forward hesitantly and holding out the bag.

“Thank you.” Ba glanced in the bag, “Ooooooh, truffles! My favourite!”

The knot in my stomach seemed to loosen a little. I sighed with relief and puffed out my chest.

“You’re a skinny little thing, aren’t you?” She eyed me appraisingly from head to toe and made a circle in the air with her finger. “Now then, turn around, there’s a good girl.”

I turned around.

“Máma makes me wear two pairs of tights ‘cause my legs are so skinny. She’s worried people will think I’m being starved at home,” I grumbled.

Ba burst out laughing so hard, it was clear the executioner in her belly had chosen another victim. She stopped laughing and eyed me closely again. I desperately wanted to make a good impression. Remembering how Máma had taught me to keep my back straight, I raised my shoulders up to my ears before pushing them backwards and then lowering them—now my posture was surely perfect.

Evidently, Ba appreciated my effort. She stared at me for another minute and then observed with some surprise: “Hmm. Chest like a sailor and bum like a turkey.”

I decided to take this as a compliment. I breathed a sigh of relief and raised my eyes bravely.

At that point, Ba fetched a large, pink apron from the cupboard and handed it to me.

“Here’s my apron—put it on. Never mind if it’s too big. You don’t want to dirty that dress of yours. Your máma wouldn’t be best pleased, now would she?”

I nodded timidly and put on the apron. Manunia helped me tie it at the back. As I wandered around the kitchen the apron flapped about loosely, like a flag on the mast of a ship in a strong wind.

“It’ll do,” said Ba, with an approving nod. She sat us at the table and for the very first time, I tasted Ba’s baking.

You can’t possibly imagine how exquisitely delicious her pastries were! I have never tasted anything quite like her shortbread, anywhere or at any time since. It was fine and crisp in texture, almost translucent in appearance. This powdery pastry had to be handled most delicately between two fingers, tentatively holding your breath as you did so; exhale a little too fiercely, and the whole thing might just crumble into dust. Nibble by nibble, you’d savour each and every morsel as it melted away instantly, coating your tongue in a warm, tingling sensation. And with each little mouthful, a sweet, blissful feeling would make its way into your soul.

Ba sat opposite me, casually leafing through the album, asking me who this was and who that was.

Upon discovering Mama’s relatives lived in Kirovabad, she threw her hands up and said: “Ah! So she’s from my neck of the woods, is she? I hail from Baku, you know.”

She asked for my number so she could give my mother a call.

“What’s her patronymic?” she asked. Ba needed to know this, because she wanted to be polite when she addressed Mama in Russian.

But out of panic, I somehow forgot what ‘patronymic’ meant. My eyes searched her face frantically and I felt myself blush in embarrassment.

“I don’t know,” I squeaked.

“You don’t know her middle name?!” Ba peered at me over her glasses.

I thought for a moment.

“Ooohhhh!” I exclaimed, suddenly remembering what that cursed term meant. “Andreyevna! Her name is Nadezhda Andreyevna!”

“Well, praise the Lord!” She grunted irreverently and dialled the number.

At first, she and Mama talked in Russian, then Ba eyed us suspiciously and switched to French. Manunia and I craned our necks and stared intently, unable to understand a single word. As the conversation progressed, a wide smile spread across Ba’s face. The smile continued to grow until finally she exploded in a monumental fit of laughter—I pictured Mama dropping the receiver at the other end in shock.

“Well, bye then, Nadia,” said Ba, as the telephone call came to an end, “Of course we’ll come for a visit. And you must come over, too. I’ll bake you my famous apple pie.”

She replaced the receiver and gave me a long, pensive look.

“It seems,” she said, “you’re a good girl, Narine.”

To this day, it still surprises me how I managed to contain myself at that moment without simply bursting into a thousand little pieces out of pride.

We had second helpings of shortbread. Then ice cream. And then coffee with milk, which made us feel just like grown-ups. Ba stroked my hair with her hand.

“Poor old thing,” she said. I noticed her palm felt warm and comforting. Then Manunia gave me a kiss, her sticky lips and cold little nose pressing against my cheek.

Chapter 2

Manunia, or Baba Rosa’s knickers

“I think I might have lice...” drawled Manunia, lost in thought. We were in her bedroom and I was leaning over the arm of the chair, reaching for the draughts box on the shelf.

“What gives you that idea?” I asked, backing away from Manunia. Just in case.

“I can feel a RUSTLING in my hair,” said Manunia, raising her finger meaningfully, “a very MYSTERIOUS kind of rustling, if you know what I mean.”

Just then I felt a mysterious hair-rustle of my own. I raised my hand towards my head and then quickly whipped it back.

“What are we going to do?” Manunia was beside herself. “If anyone finds out about this, we’ll never live it down!”

“I say we fill up the bath tub, dunk our heads in, and just wait for the lice to drown,” I suggested.

“How long do lice take to drown?” asked Manunia.

“I dunno. Probably an hour.”

There was a glint in Manunia’s eye—I could see my idea had tickled her.

“All right,” she said, “only promise you won’t breathe a word to Ba, or she won’t let us anywhere near the bath.”

“Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye!” At that ripe young age, it was the fiercest vow I knew!

“Really?” asked Manunia, incredulously. “But what if you don’t keep your word? Is someone really going to stick a needle in your eye?”

I paused for thought: what actually happened to people who broke their word? Suddenly, I had visions of a dungeon, with slimy worm-covered walls, and scenes of an agonising, yet well-deserved, death by torture. We sat for a moment in bewildered silence. Manunia replaced the draughts box on the shelf.

“Let’s not swear on anything,” she said resolutely, “instead, whoever blabs to Ba is a rotten egg.”

“Deal.” I was relieved. The prospect of being a rotten egg was far less terrifying than death by torture.

Quietly, we slinked out of my friend’s bedroom. Manunia’s house had a very peculiar layout: to get to the bathroom, you had to go down to the ground floor, across the large hall, and down a long corridor with creaky wooden floorboards that ran past the kitchen and the living room, till you reached the bathroom.

Manunia’s granny was cooking in the kitchen. We crept past, inching silently along the wall. The aroma of meat, vegetables, and roasted walnuts filled the air.

“She’s whipping something up!” Manunia whispered.

“Whipping what?” I asked, confused.

“Well, Pápa asked her earlier: ‘Ma, whip something up for us today, would you? Pavel’s coming over tonight.’ So there she is, whipping away.”

Manunia’s unruly fringe was sticking up like a lopsided Mohawk. “She’s even promised to whip out a whole baklava in time for tea—can you smell the walnuts?”

I sniffed the delicious aroma in the air, which made my mouth water. My belly gave a mighty rumble but I managed to nip it in the bud with sheer willpower before the noise gave us away.

We skulked along the corridor to the bathroom and carefully bolted the door.

“We’re like the two piglets from ‘Three Little Pigs!’” giggled Manunia.

Upon entering the bathroom, we were immediately struck by the whopping size and lengthy waistband of a pair of pantaloons—or ‘knickers’, to you and

me. They were hanging opposite the gas water-heater and looked utterly terrifying.

“Are they your granny’s?” I asked.

“Well, they’re not mine, are they?” snorted Manunia.

Now, in order to fill the tub with hot water, we had to fire up the gas heater. This put something of a spanner in the works: going anywhere near matches was ‘strictly forbidden’. Fully aware of the criminal element to our plan, we knew we had to act quickly and quietly.

“Right. I’ll light the match and bring it up to the gas heater—then you open the valve,” I said.

“Right!” said Manunia, who immediately opened the valve.

“I said wait till I light the match and bring it over!” I huffed.

“Just light the match and stop faffing!” said Manunia, snatching the matchbox out of my hands. “Oh, let me do it—you’re doing it all wrong, as usual.”

She snapped about five matches before finally lighting one and bringing it over to the heater. At that moment, there was a short, sharp ‘bang’—a long flame shot out of the heater and darted towards the opposite wall, skimming along the ceiling, before finally, having found nothing more worthy of its attention, seizing hold of Baba Rosa’s knickers. The knickers must have been nice and dry, or perhaps 100% synthetic, because they instantly caught fire.

“Aaaarghhh!” we shrieked and started pounding on the bathroom door.

“Baaaaaa!” shouted Manunia. “It wasn’t us! It exploded by itself!”

“Baba Rosaaa!” I bawled. “Your knickers are on fi-i-i-ire!”

Ba materialised on the other side of the door.

“Will you open the door, Manunia, or shall I call your father?” she yelled, barely able to conceal the worry in her voice.

The magic phrase ‘call-your-father’ had an instantly sobering effect—we suddenly remembered how to unbolt the door. Ba burst into the bathroom like a hurricane. Despite the thick smoke, she quickly found her bearings—she twisted the valve, flung the smouldering knickers into the sink, and turned on the tap.

In the commotion, we seized our chance to escape.

“Where do you think YOU’RE going?” shouted Ba, grabbing us by the collar. “Think you can just disappear after causing all this mayhem? What did I say about matches? WELL?” Her gaze shifted from me to Manunia and back again—we’d really done it this time. Manunia and I made a final break for it—kicking and screaming—but to no avail. Ba held us so tightly you’d think our collars were nailed to her palms.

“Ba,” Manunia began whining, “we were only trying to get rid of our lice!”

“Lice?!” Ba grabbed hold of both collars in one hand and reached behind her with the other. “Oh, I’ll show you how to get rid of lice!” She gave us a whack with something wet and smelly. “Just you wait—I’ll get rid of YOU in a minute.”

I realised the wet and smelly thing was the remains of Baba Rosa’s knickers. Sodden and heavy, they were pretty painful on our necks—we tried to dodge them, shrieking as we ducked and dived. Ba threw us out into the corridor.

“Wait here. Move a muscle, and you’ve had it,” she hissed, as she set about tidying the bathroom. “I’d only just *cleaned* the bathroom,” she wailed, “and what do you know? Turn my back for a second and they’ve already gone and wrecked the place. Are you human beings or savages?” she asked, turning back to face us, “I’ll ask you again, are you human beings or savages?!”

Ba's grey hair had escaped from her bun and was sticking out in every direction: her unruly fringe—just like Manunia's—stuck up like a Mohawk. She narrowed her eyes and glowered at us, her face seething with anger.

"I'll ask you one more time—are you human beings or savages?" she repeated, still waiting for an answer.

We just whined pathetically.

"Oh Ba-a-a, why are you asking us that?" Manunia moaned. "You know we're only little girls?"

"Well then, little gi-i-i-rls," said Ba in a mocking tone, "get yourselves over here. You need a wash!"

She dragged us up to the sink, turned on the freezing water and splashed it in our faces.

"Aaargh," Manunia protested, "you could at least use hot water!"

"I'll give you hot water in a minute!" said Baba Rosa, diligently lathering up both our faces with smelly household soap. "That's what you get for playing with matches!" She rinsed it all off with a gallon of icy water, so cold it made our eyes sting and our hearts quiver. "And that's for disobeying your elders!" She grabbed a starched waffle cloth and rubbed our faces raw. I glanced in the mirror: two traumatised little girls stared back at us, red-faced and dishevelled.

Ba bristled with justified indignation.

"And what on Earth makes you think you have lice?" she began interrogating us.

"We can feel a mysterious rustling in our hair!" we both cried, giving away our terrible secret. "We thought we'd fill the tub with warm water, dunk our heads in, and wait for an hour till they drown."

Ba's expression changed.

“Give me strength,” she said with a pained look on her face, “so you thought the lice would drown but you wouldn’t?!”

Manunia and I exchanged stunned glances. The idea that we, too, might have drowned hadn’t even entered our heads.

Baba Rosa hauled us into the kitchen.

“Now sit down and eat your stewed vegetables,” she commanded imperiously, “and no turning your noses up. You’re not leaving the table till it’s all gone. Got it? And later on, when your hair’s dry, I’ll have a look at what’s rustling around those empty heads of yours!”

Looming over us like a thundercloud, she dished out two large helpings of stewed veggies.

“Isn’t there any meat?” asked Manunia.

“Only good little girls get meat for supper!” snapped Ba.

We chewed listlessly on the dreaded veggies. They wouldn’t go down though. Making faces, we quietly spat them back onto our plates. Manunia sighed theatrically and tinkered loudly with her fork. Ba pretended not to hear.

“Ba?” Manunia twisted a lock of brown hair around her finger and rolled her eyes upwards. “What happens if you swear on something and then you don’t keep your word?”

“Your guts would fall out of your bottom!” Ba retorted over her shoulder. She was standing with her back to us, kneading dough, her shoulder blades shifting furiously under her colourful dress. “They’d fall out and dangle there, right between your legs, for the rest of your life!”

We went quiet.

“Good thing we’re just rotten eggs,” I whispered to Manunia in relief.

“Yup,” she sighed, “better than having our guts dangling between our legs.”

Chapter 3

Manunia, or Everything's fine... Nothing to see here!

“We'll shave it off. All of it,” said Baba Rosa, doing her best impression of one of those stone statues from Easter Island.

It was hard to argue with Ba, who was about as flexible as a chunk of granite. Having discovered that Manunia and I were well and truly louse-infested, Ba had valiantly offered to keep me at her place so as not to pass on the little ‘visitors’ to my sisters.

“Oh, don't you worry,” she had said reassuringly to my parents, who were upset after hearing the news, “I'll soon get rid of the beggars.”

“They say kerosene's quite effective...” said Mama timidly. “You put it on dry hair and leave it on for a bit.”

Baba Rosa gestured imperiously with her fingers, as if to zip my mother's lips shut.

“Don't worry, Nadia. Leave it to me.”

We slept in Manunia's room, side by side in her bed.

“I know! Let's get my lice to visit your lice!” said Manunia, gathering her curly, brown hair into a pony-tail and laying it above my head. “There we go,” she said happily. “Now they're one big family.”

And so I fell asleep underneath her mass of hair. I dreamt a throng of Manunia's lice was crossing over to my head, like Noah's family in that painting by Ivan Aivazovsky. In the dream, Noah himself, who had the same face as Ba, was waving his staff threateningly and saying: *“You naughty girl! You wouldn't let us cross over to your sisters' hair!”*

Next morning, Ba gave us breakfast and then shooed us out into the courtyard.

“Go outside and play. I’ll do the washing up, then I’ll see to your hair,” she said.

Manunia and I trudged around the courtyard, taking it in turns to sigh mournfully. Almost ten years old—and very grown up—we certainly didn’t want to be deprived of our long hair.

“And didn’t your pápa just give you that new hairband?” I asked Manunia. “With a golden ladybird?”

Manunia angrily kicked a little stone lying in the grass. It flew off and hit the tall wooden fence. “Surely she’ll leave us with a bit of hair, at least... won’t she?” asked Manunia hopefully.

“Nope! I’m chopping off the lot!” Ba’s voice boomed behind us. “Okay, so maybe you’ll be bald for a while, but then your hair will grow back all fluffy and curly—just like Uncle Moishe’s!”

Manunia and I were horrified. We’d only ever seen faded old photos of Uncle Moishe in Ba’s family album. He was incredibly skinny, with sharp cheekbones, a prominent nose, and a magnificent bush of unruly curls.

“But we don’t want hair like Uncle Moishe’s!” we wailed in unison.

“Okay, fine,” said Ba, softening a little, “maybe not Uncle Moishe. You’ll have a mane like Janis Joplin, then!”

“Who?”

“A drug-addict and hell-raiser,” said Ba flippantly.

That shut us up.

Ba led us to the long, wooden bench underneath the old mulberry tree. She brushed away the fallen berries and motioned to me to sit down. I did as I

was told. Ba stood behind me and began sheering off my long hair at the roots.

Manunia was hovering around us, oh-ing and ah-ing with every falling lock. She picked one up and held it to her head.

“Ba, what would you say if I had blond hair like this?” she asked.

“I’d say you weren’t my granddaughter,” drawled Ba, deep in thought. Then suddenly: “What a silly question,” she snapped, “what difference does it make what colour your hair is? And get that lock of hair away from your head. As if you’ve not got enough lice of your own!”

Manunia put the lock of hair on her shoulder.

“What if I were this hairy? Look Ba—I’ve got hair growing out of my shoulders!” Manunia kept chatting to distract herself, knowing with every *snip* of the scissors, soon it would be her turn for the chop.

“Keep on at me like this,” said Ba, “and I’ll have Nari’s ear off in a minute.”

“Don’t!” I squealed.

“Quiet, you,” said Ba. “Louse-infested. The pair of you! I just can’t, for the life of me, understand where you caught them.”

Manunia and I exchanged furtive glances. Let’s just say, we had an inkling where we might have caught them.

In the backwoods behind Manunia’s block, in an old stone house, lived Uncle Slavik, the rag-and-bone man, with his wife and all their brood. Uncle Slavik was a skinny old thing—sinewy and not much to look at. He couldn’t have weighed more than 40kg, and he looked rather like a green grasshopper with a big head. Whenever Uncle Slavik talked to you, his wide-set, unblinking eyes made you feel somewhat awkward. You’d feel your own eyes start to bulge as you struggled to maintain eye contact.

Twice a week, Uncle Slavik did the rounds, visiting all the courtyards in our little town. The wheels creaked loudly under his heavy junk cart so you could always hear when he was on his way. By the time he turned up with his three grubby little kids, all the housewives would be downstairs waiting for him. Uncle Slavik did odd jobs, like sharpening knives and scissors, and he would also buy up any unwanted household junk. Whenever he managed to actually sell something, he seemed absolutely delighted. He would then sell on any odds and ends to the gypsies who often set up camp on the outskirts of town.

Despite our parents' strictest orders, Manunia and I used to run away to Uncle Slavik's house and spend time with his children. We liked to play 'school' and pretended to be strict teachers bossing these poor little kids about. Uncle Slavik's wife never interfered with our games; in fact, she gave us her blessing.

"They're a law unto themselves," she'd say, "at least you can keep them quiet."

Telling Ba we had picked up lice from the rag-and-bone man's children would have been the end of us. And so we kept shtum.

When Ba finished with me, Manunia gasped: "Eek! Will I look that awful, too?"

"What do you mean, awful?" Ba scooped up Manunia and pinned her deftly to the wooden bench. "You'd think all your beauty was in your hair the way you're carrying on," she said, shearing a long ringlet off Manunia's crown.

I ran inside to see in the mirror—I looked absolutely horrendous! My hair had been cropped closely but unevenly, and my ears were sticking out in protest, like angry little thistles. I burst into loud sobs—never had my ears looked so hideous!

“Nari-i-i-ine!” I heard Ba’s voice from outside. “Stop admiring your ugly mug in the mirror. Come and have a look at our Manunia!”

I dragged myself out to the courtyard. From behind Baba Rosa’s mighty back, I could see Manunia’s tear-stained little face. I gulped. Manunia looked astonishing—even more ‘breath-taking’ than I did. My ears at least stuck out symmetrically, whereas Manunia’s were all over the place: one pressed neatly against her head, while the other stuck out belligerently to the side.

“There we are!” said Ba, admiring her work. “Just like Cheburashka and Crocodile Gena off the telly.”

Afterwards, to the accompaniment of our loud howls, she whipped up a bowlful of shaving foam and applied it to our heads. Ten minutes later, a pair of matching billiard balls beamed brightly in the hot summer sun. Ba then marched us into the bathroom to wash away the last bits of foam.

“Whoa...” said Manunia, as we looked in the mirror. “Good thing it’s the summer holidays. Imagine being on stage with the choir looking like this!”

We burst out laughing. Now that would have been a show, all right.

“Or... or... or...” said Manunia through uncontrollable giggles, “Imagine us performing some E minor Sonata for violin and piano!!!”

We literally fell about laughing, ending up on the floor.

All we could do was shriek and howl—every time we glimpsed our close shaven heads, we were seized by yet another fit of hysteria. Tears streaming down our cheeks, we grabbed our bellies and shook with laughter.

“Having fun?” said Ba, her voice resonating behind us. “Out you come. I’m not done with you yet!”

We rubbed our eyes and looked up. Ba was towering over us, like the Motherland Monument at Stalingrad, only instead of a sword she was holding out a bowl.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a hair-mask,” said Ba, with an air of importance, “a special hair-mask that’ll make your hair grow thick and curly.”

“What’s in it?” we asked. Picking ourselves up off the floor, we tried to stick our noses into the bowl, prompting Ba to lift it even higher out of reach.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out!” she snapped. “Listen carefully: I’ll put the mask on your heads, and then you’ll sit quietly in the sun for an hour till it’s all dry. Got it?”

“Got it!” we answered in unison. We didn’t know what Ba had in store for us, nor did we care. I can tell you now, though, we were naive. And like Ba always said, “You *never* know—not till you go through the change of life!” When we first heard that expression of hers, we somehow got it into our heads that ‘the change’ must have been a kind of weather condition. So every time Ba used this expression, Manunia and I looked out of the window, expecting to see some natural weather disaster.

Ba sat us down on the little bench and started applying the mask to our bald heads with a shaving brush.

“Stop fidgeting!” she shouted as Manunia tried to look at me. “Sit quietly and don’t touch or you’ll dirty your dress.”

We waited an agonising five minutes.

“There we are,” said Ba, with a look of satisfaction, “now you can go and relax.”

We gasped at the sight of each other: our heads were covered in a thick, dark blue paste. I wanted to touch it but Ba smacked my hand away.

“What did I say about touching it? Leave it alone for at least an hour!” bellowed Ba before disappearing into the house.

It was one of the rare occasions when we didn't dare disobey Ba. Although we desperately wanted to scratch our heads, we both sat without moving a muscle. After about twenty minutes, when the mask was dry, it started to crack and crumble off. Keeping an eye out for Ba, we picked at the flaky bits, rubbing them between our fingers. They were thick, with tiny specks that instantly dyed our hands blue.

Our investigations were interrupted by the sound of the gate. We ducked behind the mulberry tree.

"Máma?" called out Uncle Misha, Manunia's father. With a sigh of relief, we crept out from our hiding place.

Uncle Misha, who was shortsighted, stopped in his tracks. First he screwed up his eyes, then, in disbelief, he opened his eyes wider, drawing the eyelids back with his thumb, first one then the other. As we came closer, he remained transfixed, quite unable to take in the apparition before him. Seeing the look on his face, we began to whimper weakly.

"Hi Uncle Misha," I whispered through tears.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Uncle Misha, finally regaining the ability to speak, "Girls, who did this to you?"

"It was Ba!" sobbed Manunia, so upset she could barely get her words out: "Sh-she... s-said... w-we'd... look..."

"Like Janie Jimp-Jorp!" I chimed in, also in floods of tears.

"Like who?!" said Uncle Misha, his eyes nearly popping out of his head.

"Janie what-now?"

"A drug-addict and hell-raiser!" wailed Manunia and I, both now bawling uncontrollably. The full horror of what we looked like had suddenly hit us. We were bald! And we would be bald for the whole summer! No going out! No

visits to the bakery to buy pastries! No swimming in the river! And worst of all—our schoolmates would laugh at us!

Uncle Misha backed away towards the house.

“Ma..?” he called out, “what have you done to them? I thought the deal was to put kerosene on their hair and keep them away from fire for a bit!”

Ba swept out onto the veranda.

“Shows how much you know!” she huffed. “You’ll be thanking me later when their hair’s nice and curly!”

“But... Manunia already had curly hair!”

Uncle Misha bent down to sniff our heads. “And what on earth have you smeared them with?”

“It’s a hair-mask! Fay’s recipe. You know, Fay Zhmaylik. It’s equal parts blue powdered dye and sheep droppings—then you mix it all up with egg yolk,” said Ba.

“Sheep’s what?” Manunia and I interrupted.

“Droppings! Sheep droppings!” said Uncle Misha, breaking into laughter. “In other words, sheep POO!”

Manunia and I were dumbstruck.

“Ba! How could you?” we finally wailed, legging it to the bathroom to wash the hair-mask off our heads. The poo was easy enough to wash off but our heads now had a blue tinge to them.

When we slinked back out onto the veranda, Uncle Misha let out a long whistle.

“But Máma, who said you could do this to them? Never mind Manunia—what’ll we tell Nari’s parents?”

“No need to say anything,” said Ba, cutting him off, “they’re intelligent people and unlike you, they’ll appreciate my efforts. Why don’t you call Nadia now—tell her Nari is ready to be collected.”

“I’ll do no such thing!” Uncle Misha drew us to him and gave us each a kiss on our blueish heads. “This is your mess, Ma. You clean it up.”

“Fine by me!” snorted Ba. “I’ll do it myself!”

Holding our breath, we listened tensely as Ba talked on the phone:

“Hello? Oh, hi Nadia! How are you, dear? Yes, all good, all good. You can come and pick up Nari if you like. Why can’t she walk home? Well, of *course* she can walk home... Absolutely! Only, she’ll need a sun-hat. A sun hat, I said! Yes, that’s right. What do you mean, ‘why’? So she doesn’t get sunburnt, that’s why. What *about* her hair? Well, with hair it’s all a matter of time, isn’t it? Hair today, gone tomorrow—that’s what I say! Haha! What are you gasping for now? Yes, well, I shaved it off, didn’t I. Kerosene? I’m not wasting good kerosene on them. Don’t worry—I’ve handled everything. I even put a hair-mask on them. One of Fay’s recipes. You know, Fay Zhmaylik? I tried to tell her: *No, Fay, we don’t need any hair-masks!* But would she drop it? Would she heck. Kept going on and on at me. Practically forced me, she did! So what if she’s all the way in Novorossisk? You can force people over the phone, you know! Anyway. Don’t you worry. It was just a simple homemade mask—some egg yolk, a bit of dye, and other bits and bobs. Just bits and bobs, I said. Never you mind. Well okay, sheep droppings—nothing serious. Oy! Again, with the gasping! You’d think I’d put rat poison on them... Yes, yes, everything’s fine, my dear. Only her head is a little blue. A little *blue*, I said. You know, like a drowned person. What are you getting upset for, now? Yes, of course she’s alive! It’s just blue from the dye I mixed in. It’ll be gone in a day or two, you’ll see! And the hair will grow back in no time—it’s not like teeth, you know! Mmm, yes, okay! See you in a bit, then. Bye, dear!”

“Ma?” shouted Uncle Misha when Ba put the phone down. “Sure you didn’t hear the sound of a body dropping to the floor at the other end?”

“Darling!” said Ba, her voice full of foreboding, “Keep going like that and I’ll give *you* a dose of Auntie Fay’s mask, n’ all!”

Uncle Misha grunted.

“Look, you’d better give us something to eat, as I’ve got to be back at work in half an hour.” He winked at us. “Now then, my little dung casualties, let’s have some lunch, shall we? No sheep droppings in the food, I trust?”

Chapter 4

Manunia, or Baba Rosa’s unusual act of kindness

For lunch, we had fried chicken with rice and green salad, and refreshingly sour cherry-plum squash.

Manunia and I practically devoured the bird, trying in vain to maintain a solemn expression on our faces. We wished we could have made an elaborate display of dying dramatically, so Ba would have had to mourn us, ideally clutching at our lice-ridden hair. But no force in the world was strong enough to keep us away from the crispy, aromatic chicken, which Ba had cooked to perfection.

Uncle Misha glanced at us sideways and chuckled quietly.

“Look at them, Máma,” he said, no longer able to contain himself, “they’re like a pair of mutant tadpoles!”

Our ears pricked up. Ba pushed aside her plate.

“Everyone finished? Good. Now, off you go. Out from under my feet. Our GUESTS arrive at 6 o’clock to pick up Nari, and I’ve still got the apple pie to bake.”

“Do you honestly think your apple pie is going to make up for the damage you’ve done to Nari?” Uncle Misha teased. “You’d be better off giving them a bottle of plum brandy for every pellet of sheep droppings you put in that god-awful hair-mask of yours!”

Manunia and I exchanged looks anxiously—Uncle Misha was clearly playing with fire. The long hard stare Ba gave him soon took the wind out of his sails.

“Fine. I’ll be quiet,” Uncle Misha added hastily. Then he turned to us and said, “Right, I’m off to work. You two had better behave yourselves—messing around with head-lice has already landed you in enough trouble!

“Will you be off then?” asked Ba, almost sweetly, “Or do I have to come over there and put one foot in front of the other for you?”

“Okay, okay!” Uncle Misha gave her a peck on the cheek and slipped out of the kitchen.

Ba placed a hand over her cheek, where Uncle Misha had just kissed her. She sat pensively for a few moments, a tender smile playing across her lips. Manunia and I knew instinctively not to bother her. We sat at the table, perfectly still, watching her intently.

Ba snapped out of her daydream—she stared at us thoughtfully then burst out laughing: “You know, you really do look like a couple of mutant tadpoles!”

We took her laughter to mean we were excused from the table.

“Ba, what’s a mutant?” asked Manunia.

“I’ll tell you when you’re older,” answered Ba, “but if you start on at me now there’ll be no dessert.” And with that, she handed us two little chocolates. Each!

We couldn't believe our eyes. Chocolates from Ba were clear proof the universe was finally starting to smile on us, instead of baring its backside as it had done all day. Ba, you see, was categorically against chocolate and considered it to be the cause of all human ills, from bed-wetting to genetic disorders. So when she voluntarily handed us two—two!—little chocolates each, we didn't hang around waiting for her to come to her senses. We snatched them from her outstretched palm and legged it out of the kitchen.

“Aren't we forgetting something?” Ba's voice caught up with us at the doorway, prodding us smartly in the ribs.

“Tha-a-anks, Ba-a-a!”

On the veranda, Manunia unwrapped both sweets and shoved them into her mouth.

“She's feeling guilty for what she did to us,” she spluttered. “Better eat yours quickly before she changes her mind.”

Picture the scene: under a tall, sprawling mulberry tree, on a wooden bench sit two little girls with shiny blue shaven heads and lopsided ears. With a sweet piece of heaven nestled in each cheek, the girls blissfully roll their eyes and smack their lips, a hint of saliva glistening at the corners of their mouths... A heartrending sight indeed!

We finished our chocolates and went for a walk around the back yard, wandering aimlessly among the fruit trees. We stood by the neat little rows of coriander, picking at the leaves and chewing them absentmindedly.

Suddenly, our attention was drawn to a faint shuffling movement under the pear tree. When we realised what it was our hearts sank. In the grass, alone and helpless, lay a baby bird—a poor, naked, crooked little thing.

“Oh!” we cried, “it must have fallen out of its nest.”

We looked up but couldn't see anything through the thick leaves. Gingerly, Manunia picked up the bird. It squeaked and floundered around in her hands, totally helpless.

We ran into the house to show our discovery to Ba. She was busying herself with the pastry for the pie in the kitchen, which smelled of cinnamon and roasted almonds.

"Ba!" we shouted. At the sound of our voices she turned and jumped in surprise.

"You made me jump!"

"Aha! So you admit it, then! Thanks to you, we're now scarier than death itself! The truth hurts, doesn't it?"

"I'll show YOU how the truth hurts!" she said, bristling. "What's that you've got in your hands?"

"Look what we found," said Manunia, shoving the bird under Ba's nose.

Ba eyed our discovery shrewdly.

"You needn't have brought it in. It's practically dead," she muttered.

"But Ba!" cried Manunia indignantly, "it's not dead at all—look!" She prodded the bird, which recoiled at her touch, flailing its wings. "See?" said Manunia, triumphantly, "we saved it and now we're going to feed it and nurse it back to health. Ba, what should we give it?"

Ba didn't miss a beat.

"Well, why don't you dig up some earthworms, chew them up nicely, and feed them to this half-dead little bird," she said sarcastically.

“Ewwww! Ba!” Manunia wrinkled her nose. “Disgusting! Can’t you just help us?”

“Are you suggesting I chew up the worms for you?” Ba said, momentarily turning away from the dough.

“Oh, could you?!” said Manunia, excitedly hopping onto one leg. The poor little creature quivered in her hands.

“Manunia,” said Ba, peering over her glasses, “just think about what you’re saying.”

Manunia’s eyes widened. She puffed out her cheeks.

“What if we gave it milk?” I chimed in.

Ba raised her eyebrows in amazement.

“Who ever heard of a bird drinking milk! Perhaps you’ve seen a bird with breasts, have you?”

“I have actually!” I decided to go all in with this one. “Harpies, for example, are birds with the large breasts of a woman. I’ve seen them myself. In a book... on ancient gods.”

Beads of sweat broke out on Ba’s face.

“Okay, so why don’t you go and find this harpy bird of yours, and ask it to feed this dead thing here with its ‘large breasts of a woman’ then?” she barked.

We exchanged silent glances. Manunia prodded the bird again. It stirred weakly. She laid it at the end of the table and stroked its naked little back.

“Poor thing,” she whispered tenderly. “Ba! We can give it bread crumbs!” she suddenly thought, “And use the pipette to give it water! You just give us

some crumbs, Ba! And show us where the pipette is—the one you used to put that horrible black liquid in my ears, remember? Oh, we could even give it a bath! We'll put some warm water in a basin and plop it in. Then we'll tuck it into bed with a little blanket.”

Ba groaned but Manunia was far too carried away to notice.

“And if it has a tummy-ache, we'll just flush its bum out with the pipette,” Manunia continued eagerly, “you'll help us, won't you Ba? Actually you don't have to—we can work it out ourselves.”

Ba's posture shifted ominously and I was filled with a sudden sense of foreboding, not that Manunia paid any attention. She was still chattering away, lost in thought.

“Now, if only there was some way you could catch a fly...” she continued, “Even just a midge. What do you think, Ba?”

“Oh, for goodness' sake!” Ba suddenly spun round and with a light *crack*, snapped the little bird's neck.

“Right. Now you can give it a hero's funeral,” she sighed, paying no attention to our crestfallen faces. “I'll even let you have the tin box from the Indian tea for the ceremony! It was kinder for me to kill it now before you torture it to death with your experiments.”

Still reeling from the shock, we took the bird's body in complete silence and made our way to the back yard to bury it. We dug a hole under the pear tree, placed its body inside and covered it with earth. We stood there for some time, staring solemnly at the little grave.

“We should dig it up tomorrow and see whether its soul has flown away, or if it's still *flickering in its chest*,” said Manunia, thoughtfully.

“What are you talking about?” I cried. “What do you mean, ‘flickering’? You do know it’s dead, right?”

“Don’t you remember that weird, old goy story Ba was telling us about Jesus’ resurrection?” Manunia tore off a leaf from the branch and wound it round her finger. “Well, maybe this is ‘Bird-Jesus’.”

We stared thoughtfully at the tiny grave. Then, as if on command, we tied two twigs together with a blade of grass to make a cross and stuck it into the little mound of earth.

The author would like to apologise to her wonderful readers for any blasphemy here. The author herself is a Christian, not a devout one, but a Christian nonetheless. In Ba’s defence, the author of the text would like to explain that Ba had a very complicated relationship with God, resulting from a difficult childhood and youth. Ba belonged to one of the founding Abrahamic faiths and therefore considered herself entitled to criticise the holy figures of every religion, in equal measure. Please address any complaints to the author alone, as she will not have a single bad word said against Ba.

When my parents arrived that evening, the tremendous aroma of apple pie was wafting out of the kitchen. Ba poured warm honey over the top and sprinkled it with cinnamon and chopped almonds. In a large cast-iron pan, she roasted coffee beans till they had an oily sheen, then she fetched a brown misty bottle of her famous plum brandy from the cellar. Manunia and I diligently ground up the coffee beans with a grinder.

Ba got up to greet my parents on the veranda.

“Stay in the kitchen,” she hissed, widening her eyes at us warningly.

“Oh, Nadia! Yuri! (*Kiss kiss*) How was your journey? So what if it’s just a five-minute drive? You never know—anything could happen. You could get a flat tyre, or the petrol tank could leak, or the oil could spill, or any other kind of

tsuris for that matter. Our neighbour Gora's son nearly set his own car on fire — something to do with the ignition, apparently... (*sympathetic ah's and oh's from my parents*). I've baked us an apple pie (*loud enthusiastic murmurs*) and Misha should be home any minute... The girls behaved beautifully today — they buried a little bird (*alarmed mutterings*). Oh now, no need to worry! They found it and brought it in, and they were getting ready to give it a little enema... so sadly, I had to break its neck. You know, to stop them torturing it to death (*uncomfortable coughing*). Oh, by the way, don't mind their blue scalps (*more anxious coughing*). They're still a bit stained, you see. It'll be gone in a couple of days and then everything will be back to normal (*bewildered murmurs*). Anyway, why are we standing out in the hallway? Let's go into the kitchen!"

I won't go into detail here about the hysterical guffaw my parents let out at the sight of our blue heads. Pápa gave us a closer inspection, turning our heads round in his hands to check we were okay. As he lovingly examined every lump and bump, he let out scary words like 'brachycephaly', 'dolichocephaly' and 'craniology', until we were well and truly stunned into silence.

When Mάma started sobbing into Ba's shoulder, Ba tried to console her, saying that losing our hair was bad but it wasn't as though we had lost our teeth. "You do see that, don't you, Nadia?" With some semblance of relief, Mάma wiped her face on Ba's dress.

"Oh, Ms Rosa, I realise that, of course. Still, I can't help feeling sorry for the poor girls!"

As Pάpa and Uncle Misha stood out on the veranda, steaming cups of coffee in their hands, they smoked cigarette after cigarette and talked endlessly about how, "it really is time we quit smoking, Misha," and "yes, of course it is, Yura, but we can only do our best!"

All things considered, the day ended pretty well. After a savage mocking from my sisters, I soon fell asleep in my own bed, happy with the heart-warming thought that somewhere, just five minutes away, in a two-storey house made of stone, Manunia was sleeping soundly—her shaven head, just like mine, glowing blue in the dark.