

People Who Are Always With Me

The Little Girl (excerpt from first chapter)

Morning

Mama comes down the steps, brushing the heavy metal railing with the tips of her fingers, her slides knocking cheerfully against her heels. Mama's wearing my headscarf, she's folded it several times lengthwise into a long, wide ribbon and tied it in a funny knot across her forehead. I follow her and grumble. It's not that I don't like her wearing a child's scarf with bluebells on a blue background, I'm just dully annoyed, I don't even know why. I want to grab Mama by the hem of her dress and not let go. So I frown, but I don't say anything, I just walk after her and sigh to myself.

"Stop sighing as if your heart's breaking," says Mama, "You'd better take the milk can for me."

The milk can is white, enameled, with a bouquet of yellow flowers on its fat, protruding side. I lift the lid and glance inside. It's empty. It should be empty—the last of the milk was used today for cream of wheat. I honestly tried to eat it. But it's unbelievably icky! Although to look at it, you wouldn't say so: a smooth, thick, white mass, and in the center, the small, melting island of butter. It's really fun to pretend the spoon is a skate blade and use it to draw complicated patterns across the white skating rink. Then thin yellow streams of melting butter run along the grooves of the patterns. Beautiful to look at, but impossible to eat.

Sometimes things are like that. One way on the outside, but the opposite inside. And you don't understand why they're like that.

Mama gets upset when I don't eat. She says I'll drive her into the grave with my stubbornness. And she also says I'll be dying of hunger and the school won't take me. Like I need that. They probably feed you cream of wheat at school, too. What kind of inhuman human invented this cream of wheat, anyway? Why couldn't they think up something better for breakfast? Ice cream, or candy? Or cookies?

"Don't rattle the milk can so much," says Mama, "and watch your feet."

We're going to buy milk from our neighbor, Vardik, who has a cow named Marishka. Marishka is already long gone to graze in the pasture, Aunt Vardik milked her in the morning and let her out of the gate to join the herd. And she sells milk on the side to feed her family. Because Aunt Vardik's husband, Levan, doesn't work at all. His legs don't behave the right way. He walks with great difficulty, and I'm afraid to get close to him. When he walks, he teeters so much that it's like a strong wind is blowing him from side to side. He can fall at any moment. So, I'm afraid to even go near him, what if he suddenly sways and falls down on me? Uncle Levan is covered in a beard, and he has the kind of face... A wrinkled face, ugly. But his eyes are super-kind. He used the soft part of a loaf of bread to make me a figure with six edges that stick out, it's a little awkward, but it's a lot of fun and looks like a spinning top. And the most fun thing about that figure is that no matter how hard you try, no matter how hard you throw it on the floor or against the wall, the edges that stick out don't break and don't even crumple. I don't understand where grownups come up with these ideas.

They're pretty smart after all, these grownups, if only they hadn't thought up cream of wheat! For goodness' sake, as if they'd never been children! They grow up and forget all the yuckiness of their childhood.

I love Uncle Levan and always say hello to him over the fence. But I really don't like Aunt Vardik. She has a loud, sharp voice and clear blue eyes. She looks at you as if she's looking through you, and her glance is as cold as ice. And the little black circles of her pupils stick out from the center of her eyes. You get the feeling that some evil person sits in her head and tracks you through her pupils. It's an unpleasant feeling, very unpleasant. For some reason, it seems to me that Mama also dislikes Aunt Vardik and goes to her very unwillingly. Only if there's no milk at home, and the store is sold out. That happens a lot, the store's small, and there are always long lines there. If you don't get there on time, you can't buy milk or anything else. Cheese, for example.

At first we walk through our yard, then through Nani Tamar's garden: past a stubby apple tree, then past the sunflowers wound around with newspaper.¹ They look very funny, those sunflowers—a tall, green stem with big leaves sticking out and a crumpled knot of newspaper instead of a circle of seeds. The sunflowers are wrapped so birds won't peck at the seeds. Nani

¹ "Nani" means "Great-Grandmother."

Tamar collects old newspapers called *Pravda* from our grandfather and wraps the large heads of the sunflowers with them, and she tightens the edges of the newspapers with coarse thread. And the sunflowers stand as if they've got tonsillitis, heads and throats wrapped up. Only sometimes the birds turn out to be so clever that they peck holes in the newspaper, and if you don't catch them in time, you're out of luck, you haven't got any seeds, as if they'd never been. And do you know what I think about that? That everyone in this world wants to eat, and you can't do anything about it.

In all we walk past the sunflowers; past the rose bushes; past the sour cherry tree; past the black mulberries, the last berries large, heavy, begging to be eaten, but who can stand to eat them, everybody's already sick of mulberries. As we walk on I rattle the milk can, and Mama sings something to herself under her breath, Mama has a pretty voice; when she sings, everyone falls quiet and listens with pleasure. It's too bad that she sings so rarely.

Then we turn towards the old stone oven—it's big and cosy, with a crooked roof and a heavy metal door. That door closes the curved, horseshoe mouth of the oven like a gag. When Grandma Tata bakes bread, first she heats the oven up hot then, as soon as the wood burns out, she rakes the coals to the side and lays the large rounds of bread inside. The oven gives off so much heat that Tata turns away and breathes quickly-quickly. And then the main thing is to stay out from underfoot so that she's able first to spread out the rising circles of dough with the long wooden paddle and then to pull out the crusty, delicious-smelling loaves.

Right behind the oven, a narrow path that turns sharply to the right comes up against the warped wooden fence. You have to stand near that fence and call Aunt Vardik. Then she'll come out of her house, take our milk can, and return it after a few minutes filled to the brim with milk. Aunt Vardik's house is made of stone, two stories, with a large, glassed-in veranda and a wooden balcony. The yard's empty, and that's a good thing. It means they've finally tied up their Hektor. Hektor's a large watchdog, for some reason he's quite evil, he attacks everyone, but especially children. The day before yesterday he chased after me, I was scared and ran away, then I tripped and sprawled out in the dust. Hektor came running up and barked horribly at me, right at the back of my head. If Vitka hadn't come around the corner from somewhere and attracted Hektor's attention, the dog probably would have bitten me then.

Now I'm afraid of Hektor, and I rarely go beyond the wicket gate by myself.

"Vardik, Auntie Vardik?!" Mama calls.

“Coming!” Aunt Vardik crosses the threshold, her hands large and wet. With her usual motion, she catches up the edge of her apron, wipes her palms, collects the milk can, and minces into the house.

“Mam?” I tug at the hem of Mama’s dress.

“Yes.” Mama looks down on me from above, a thick fringe of bangs creeping into her eyes, my blue headscarf sticking out in the funny knot over the bangs. Once Mama had long, long hair, but now it’s very short.

“Why’d you wear a headscarf, anyway?”

She straightens her bangs and laughs.

“You don’t like it? It’s fashionable now to wear such knots on your head, see, I’m in step with the new fashion. What do you think?”

When people say “what do you think” to me, I’m immediately as proud as a peacock. I like it when people ask my opinion. As if I’m entirely grown up and know many clever things. And now, swelling up importantly, I answer Mama:

“Well, if you like it, then wear that knot on your head.” And, thinking a little, I add: “I like it, too!”

“Well, thank you.” Mama stoops and presses her cheek to mine. “That’s my little girl!”

I hug her tight and, although I understand it’s not right to talk about it, all the same I whisper:

“Mam, why were you crying last night?”

Mama frees herself quickly, stands up, and laughs again. Only now her laughter isn’t radiant at all but, what do you know, a kind of sad, forced laughter.

“I wasn’t crying, daughter, I just had a bad dream, so I woke up from fright.” And she puts on a carefree face.

“What did you dream?”

“Can you believe it, I’ve already forgotten.”

“You really, really don’t remember?” I walk barefoot on the grass. “Have you really forgotten it all?”

“I’ve forgotten it all, all of it! That’s probably a good thing, right? What do you think?”

And then I swell up with pride once more, and instantly the next question flies right out of my head, the question I wanted to ask: *And why did Papa scold you and whisper “Why do you blame yourself for something that isn’t your fault?”*

But here Aunt Vardik comes up and holds out our milk can.

“Thank you,” says Mama, pays for the milk, takes me by the hand, and we go back through Nani Tamar’s garden.

Aunt Vardik doesn’t answer, but even through the back of my head I feel how she follows us with her long, sharp gaze, leaning her round head to one side like a chicken. At home, Mama lifts the lid of the milk can and makes a helpless face:

“She’s watered down the milk again, look how blue it is.”

“Don’t be angry with her, daughter.” Tata takes the red enamel saucepan with white polka dots out of the cabinet and puts it on the stove. “She has to feed her children somehow.”

“Then she should charge more for milk. Why cheat people?”

“I don’t know.” Tata pours milk in the pan and puts it on a low flame, at the same time explaining to me: “To be sure the milk doesn’t burn, always heat it on low, remember?” Then she turns to Mama, Mama stands by the window looking thoughtfully into the yard, the funny knot of the headscarf sticks out of her head, and Tata looks at that knot for some time, then sighs and says: “You search for truth in everything, daughter. Let it go. There are things that must be accepted the way they are. It’s simpler to resign yourself to that.”

“I can’t,” says Mama and continues to look into the yard.

Afternoon

I’m hiding from everyone behind the house and crying. Well, not exactly crying, of course, you could even say I’m not crying at all, just whimpering miserably.

Today the speckled hens pecked my favorite hen. Pecked her to death. And no one, not one of the grownups stood up for her! They stood and watched as the hens finished her off. And then Nani took her by the feet, carried her off somewhere, and blood dripped from her crest, and her head dangled helplessly back and forth. I don’t even want to know where Nani took her!

Probably we'll have chicken soup for dinner. Oh, oh, how awful! I start walking in circles and whimpering miserably again because I'm so upset.

Our house stands on the steep slope of the hill. So as to keep the fertile soil from slipping down into the ravine, people hacked a sort of set of large steps into the slope. Our house and the big yard and the old mulberry tree fit on one step, and Nani Tamar's house is nestled to the left of ours. On the "step" below, a large fruit garden spreads out, apple trees grow there, and pears, and greengage plums, and quince, and nut trees, and even blue spruces. In the far corner of the garden, Tata cultivates a kitchen garden with beds of cilantro, basil, parsley, and dill, with the absolutely necessary *kotem*.² Because if cress isn't added to the midday meal during the garden season, then Grandfather leaves the table in protest. I really don't know what he finds to like about it! I tried it several times—a strong-smelling green, spicy to the taste, nothing special but, who would have thought, Grandfather loves it very much, with cheese or without, and he gets very upset if it isn't on the table.

Behind the kitchen garden, right behind the beds of herbs, is the henhouse. During the day the speckled hens walk around, clucking in a self-satisfied way, digging in the ground, and as dark approaches they sleep on wooden perches. In the corner of the henhouse stand two boxes filled with hay. The hens lay eggs in these boxes. It's my responsibility to go to the henhouse every day with the small enamel bowl—the bowl's no longer suitable for anything else because the enamel along the bottom is chipped, and so it's my responsibility to go to the henhouse and check whether they've laid any eggs. Sometimes the speckled hens refuse to lay eggs in the boxes, they get up to mischief, hide the eggs among the various bushes, and then I have to walk along the perimeter of the garden and look for them.

Our rooster is horribly quarrelsome and raises a racket, but he's incredibly handsome, too. He's a delicate gold, with a large tail of many colors and a crest hanging proudly over his left eye. That overhanging crest gives the rooster a devil-may-care, piratical look. Every so often he flies up on the wooden fence and from there cries his triumphant "cock-a-doodle-doo," but the hens run around in agitated flocks. Sometimes I pick up green and dark blue rooster feathers in the yard, wash them well, dry them, and store them in the drawer of the desk. When I get sick or the weather's bad and they don't let me out into the yard, I pull out one of the feathers, sit at the

² Garden cress.

desk, take out a sheet of paper, and move the feather around it, pretending I'm writing. Like in the films they show on TV, where marquises or other nobles write letters or dictate commands about "off with his head."

Nani Tamar bought the hen at the market several days ago. She came home and called me, saying, come, see how beautiful. I rushed out of the house, putting on my sandals as I went, and flew down the steep steps of the veranda.

"Careful!" Nani was frightened. "Don't trip!"

"I won't trip," I soothed her and ran to her as fast as I could. "What have you got in the bag?"

"This." Nani Tamar opened her string bag and from inside pulled out a little snow-white hen, an absolute princess—she had a neat crest, beige beak, and short, thin feet.

Our speckled hens are brown-orange, with darker feathers on their flanks and in their tails, quite lean, and quick-footed—they can run quickly and even fly a little, in short bursts. But this hen was very plump and walked slowly, with dignity, and her tail was much grander than those of our speckled hens.

I fell in love with her immediately.

"Can she be my hen?"

"Yes, of course," nodded Nani and released the hen into the garden. "What will you call her?"

"I'll think of something," I promised.

On seeing the new hen, the rooster spread all his feathers festively, flew to the fence, and crowed triumphantly. He'd always been very amorous and was almost incessantly climbing on some gaping, speckled hen. The speckled hens, clucking heartily, then sprang out from under him and ran away into another corner of the garden—to smooth their ruffled feathers and come to themselves after such shameless treatment.

With the appearance of the white hen, the rooster stopped paying attention to the speckled hens and threw himself into making love only with her. In the beginning, the speckled hens met the white hen in a friendly way. But later, understanding that the rooster had suddenly become attracted solely to the white hen and didn't notice anyone else around him, they raised a terrible ruckus and began chasing their rival around the yard. Tata kept them off her as well as she could, she shut the speckled hens in the henhouse with the rooster and left the white hen

alone to run around the kitchen garden. The rooster crowed irritably and jealously followed the new hen with his besotted yellow eye, and the speckled hens screeched angrily.

Today Tata opened the henhouse and let the hens out. Grumbling discontentedly, they spread out around the yard, and the yearning rooster again chased after the new hen. The speckled hens observed this picture with ill will, but didn't do anything, thus quieting Tata's watchfulness. However, at the midday meal, when everyone was sitting at the big kitchen table, an unbelievable noise arose in the yard, we rushed to the veranda and found a terrible sight: the speckled hens, having cunningly surrounded my hen from all sides, pecked at her crest and tore her sides with their claws.

I threw myself into the yard to save her, but Tata didn't let me do that, she caught me in her arms and pressed me to her:

“You can't do anything about it, they'll kill her in any case.”

And everyone watched silently as the speckled hens finished off my hen. Then they parted triumphantly, leaving their bloodied victim on the field of battle. I sought out Mama with my eyes. She stood in the far corner of the veranda and, hugging her arms across her chest, looked at the yard.

“Did you see what the rooster did?” With heavy steps, Nani climbed the stairs—on her apron, right under the pocket, a small, wet speck was turning dark. “He didn't do anything to protect the hen, he flew up on the fence and watched from the sidelines as they finished her off.” Nani stood up, rested her hands on her hips, shook her head. “And now he walks around the yard as if nothing had happened.”

“Just like with people,” sighed Tata, and she took me by the hand. “Just like with people. Let's go. Lunch is getting cold.”

Evening

Vitka and I are fooling around in his yard. We're chasing away the bugs called *turki zatik*, “Turkish lady bugs.” The bugs have crawled out onto the concrete slab bathed in the evening sun. On this slab, Vitka's grandmother dries the sharp-smelling wool, heavy from being washed, or large trays of fruit and berries. Vitka's grandmother has best-tasting dried fruit in the

neighborhood. Her cornelian cherries, for example, retain their softness and juiciness even after long drying under the scorching sun.

Now the concrete slab is empty, and the *turki zatik* are running briskly over it. They're small, oblong, with a dark pattern on their red, armored backs and, unlike ordinary lady bugs, they don't fly. We squeamishly drive them to the edge of the slab with a large burdock leaf and push them off.

Vitka lives two streets from our house, in the crook of the street that skirts the ravine on the north side. Turning sharply, that street comes up against the slope at an acute angle and then slithers down for a long time towards the ruins of the old chapel.

The old women often go to the chapel. They light thin, yellow candles at the ruins of the *khachkars* covered in lichen and then stand there a long time, screening the weak flame from the wind with their palms.³ Because if you ask God for something and the flame goes out before the candle burns down, He won't hear your prayer.

All our old women look the same: small, wrinkled, stooping women, but lively and very quick in their movements. Their heads are covered with light summer headscarves, their narrow sweaters with bunched-up sleeves are tucked into long, heavy linen skirts. An apron with three pockets around the edge absolutely must be tied above the skirt. Under the heavy upper skirt, they wear two or three underskirts, and on their feet are simple stockings or hand-knitted socks, most often in stripes of many colors, and black shoes—mercilessly ground down by the stone roads—on an uncomfortable, flat sole. On rainy days when the narrow roads become impassible from oily, sticky slush, they put on large galoshes over the worn-down shoes.

I love to watch the old women, especially when they go to the chapel. They stand a long time over the candles twinkling in the approaching twilight, a sunken mouth says some quiet words, wind flutters the dark clothing and dislodges grey hairs, pinned up in thinning braids with a simple wooden comb, from under a light scarf. Mama says each of these old women is a sacred temple.

Vitka's grandmother thinks that because of youth and stupidity no one believes in God, and only towards old age do people understand that for their whole lives, even without knowing it, they've been carrying on an internal dialogue with Him. Sometimes I stop short in the middle

³ *Khachkars* are memorial cross-stones.

of a word and check myself—am I talking with people or, maybe, also with God? It turns out that it's only with people, because God doesn't hear me. I think that's my own fault. If I were able to speak to Him the right way, he'd hear me and make it so that Mama wouldn't suffer and cry at night.

Vitka's grandmother is good and caring, I love her very much. She's bringing up Vitka by herself, that is, they're all alone in the whole world, they've got no one else. Because Vitka's papa died in the war with the *mujahideen*.

In the biggest room, which is on the second floor of their house, hangs his portrait, edged with a black silk ribbon. Vitka's grandmother walks up to the portrait, strokes it with her palm, and says:

*"Tsavd tanem."*⁴

She speaks quietly, in a whisper. If I'm standing next to her, then I always go up to her and take her by the hand. So we both stand there, she saying quietly, over and over again: *Tsavd tanem* and stroking the portrait with her wrinkled palm, across the curly hair combed back on one side, across the large, bright eyes that protrude slightly like Vitka's, across the high cheekbones, across the chin. Then she stands up on tiptoe and kisses it. And I hold her hand. So that she doesn't cry too much.

Where Vitka's mama is, no one knows. Nani Tamar calls her a cuckoo and makes a face every time someone talks about her. I don't fully understand what's bad about cuckoos. Sometimes they show cartoons on television that leave a lingering, bitter taste in your mouth because they're sad. Not long ago, they showed a cartoon where one mama got sick and asked her children for water, but they started playing and didn't bring her water. And then the mama turned into a cuckoo and flew far away, and the children collected themselves, ran after her, and called her back, but she didn't return.

After that cartoon, I cried for a while, then I put on Mama's jacket and wore it around the house. And when Mama came home from work, the first thing I did was bring her some water and say: "Mam, if you suddenly get sick, then I'll always bring you water, you can count on me."

And Mama hugged me and said: "What a smart little girl I have."

⁴ "I take your pain on myself" (Armenian).

It's not that I'm smart, it's just that I don't want Mama to turn into a cuckoo and fly away from me.

And so when Nani called Vitka's mama a cuckoo, I walked around thinking for some time, then I went up to Vitka. He was fussing busily in the yard with a tarpaulin he'd dragged from the scrap heap. I watched him silently for several minutes, and then I said: Vitka, I said, did you bring your mother water?

And he shrugged his shoulders and didn't answer. He generally doesn't say anything when people ask about his mother. He's silent, as if he's gone mute. But I rarely ask about her, you can even say almost never, I understand that he's suffering.

So I stood next to him for a little while, and then I went to Vitka's grandmother and said: "Grandma Lusine, was Vitka's mother ever sick?"

Vitka's grandmother isn't able to answer questions right away. First of all, she takes you to wash up, pouring water from the large iron pitcher and making sure you wash off all the soap thoroughly. While you dry your hands on the towel, she's in the kitchen putting simple bread, cheese, greens on the table. She pulls out a jar of milk from the refrigerator, pours it into a glass, seats you on a tall wooden chair and says:

"Eat."

And you begin to eat. What else is there for you to do? And when you're sitting with your mouth full and a splendid milk moustache is blooming on your face, she asks:

"What did you want to ask me?"

"Did Vitka's mama get sick?" I repeat, sinking my teeth into the crisp bread crust.

"She got sick, of course. Why do you want to know?" She's surprised.

"And did Vitka bring her water when she got sick?"

"No. He was very little when his mama left us." Grandma Lusine gets up heavily, goes over to the window and deliberately, angrily, scolds her grandson: "Viktor, put down that piece of tarp, how much time can you waste!"

"Tati, I want to build a kennel.⁵ If I build one, can we get Dzhulbars?"

⁵ "Tati" means "grandma."

Vitka has dreamed his whole life about having a *gampr* and naming him Dzhulbars, and only Dzhulbars.⁶ But a *gampr* eats a great deal, and I can't even imagine how they'll feed him if they get him. They barely make ends meet themselves.

Vitka's grandmother doesn't say anything, she watches her grandson for some time, then bangs the window shut and turns to me:

"His mama left when he was eight months old. He wasn't even able to walk, he just crawled on all fours. Why are you asking?"

"Just because." I pinch off a small piece of cheese, chewing thoughtfully. "I'm full, may I go play with Vitka?"

"You may."

That's how I found out that mamas leave not just because children fail to bring them water. Sometimes mamas have other reasons, apparently, such important reasons that they abandon their own children, like cuckoos. Look at that, I called Vitka's mama a cuckoo. Just in my thoughts, but I did it. The most important thing is not to say it to him, or he'll be offended, and I don't want to offend him.

Early evening has fallen, and although the shadow from the house stretches across the whole yard, it seems entirely transparent, not so thick as it is when night's all around and the few streetlights shine. And while it's light and the concrete slab holds the warmth of the sun's rays in itself, the *turki zatik* are running across it. We push them off the slab and mercilessly squash them with our shoes. Because people claim they're poisonous. Vitka says they certainly aren't poisonous—look, he'd poked a finger in an armored back and nothing had happened, he'd survived.

"And why, then, do they call them Turks, if they aren't poisonous?" Vitka shrugs his shoulders.

"Does 'Turk' mean 'poisonous'?" I ask. Vitka is older and smarter, he's already eight years old, and he knows a lot of things.

"'Turk' means 'forbidden,'" sniffs Vitka. "That's what Grandma told me."

"And why are we squashing them?" I raise my foot over another bug.

"Because we have to."

⁶ A *gampr* is an Armenian wolf hound. It's a breed of dog originating in the Armenian highlands.

And for some time we squash bugs, there's an unbelievable number of them, they're everywhere, and they crawl out from every crack. We squash and squash them, and I think that we call everything bad "Turk." If you want to insult someone, you say he's like a Turk, if someone does something bad, you say he lacks a conscience, like a Turk. Not long ago, Papa yelled at me because I'm stubborn:

"Why are you so naughty, I'm talking to you in human language, not Turkish!" Papa was outraged.

See, he says the same thing!

"Vitka, why do we hate Turks so much?" I raise my foot over a new bug, but at the last minute I pull back—I reconsider squashing it.

Vitka tosses the burdock leaf aside and looks at me with his clear eyes.

"Tati says they did very bad things to us. They wanted to kill us all—but they weren't able to. They took our homes, our land. They took everything. That's why we hate them."

Night

In the dark, I become completely defenseless. That's why, when I lie down in bed, I barricade myself with toys on all sides. There's the bunny with wide-set, button eyes: one of the eyes is deep blue, the other's green. Earlier, it just had green eyes, but then one button got torn off and lost, and Mama sewed on another button. There was no green button to be found, so she sewed on a blue one. And then the bunny had eyes of different colors, but I like it even better that way. There's also the doll, the big one, with a bow in her fluffy hair, I painted her cheeks with Mama's red nail polish, and she became an all-around beauty. It's true that Mama scolded me afterwards for spoiling my toy and wasting nail polish, but there's nothing I wouldn't give for beauty, not my own things, not Mama's. There's also the little book with fairy tales—about Cinderella, about Little Red Riding Hood—I really love reading that book, it's true that I still don't know all the letters, so I say a few of the words from memory.

It's scary in the dark, so I hold the bunny's paw in one hand and the doll in the other, and the book lies on my chest. Now no one can touch me, because I'm protected on all sides.

“Tomorrow Nani will take me to get rid of the fear,” I say to the toys in a purposefully loud whisper, such a loud whisper that the person who hides behind the wardrobe and sends me terrible dreams will hear. “She was with an old wise woman who told her to bring me tomorrow. She told her to bring a small piece of meat and a pin. The wise woman will stick that pin into the meat and say a prayer. Nani warned me that as soon as she starts to stick the pin into the meat, I’ll start to yawn, and I shouldn’t be afraid, because that’s the way the fear will leave me.”

And then, when the wise woman has said enough prayers, Nani and I will go to where three roads meet and bury the charmed piece of meat there. She and I considered for a long time where we might find such a place, and then we remembered that three roads happen to cross opposite the militia building. It’s true that there are stoplights and lots of cars there, but Nani never gives up that easily. She shrugged her shoulders and said: “You’ll stand on the sidewalk, and I’ll bury the meat very quickly. It’s a good thing,” she said, “that our roads aren’t paved, how could I dig around in asphalt?”

Nani ordered me not to say anything to Grandpa. And I wouldn’t have said anything, either. My grandfather is oh-ho-ho so stern and gets so angry when Nani says anything about God or about ghosts.

“That’s all ridiculous,” Grandpa rustles his newspaper angrily. “There aren’t any ghosts, don’t stuff the child’s head full of who-knows-what nonsense!”

And Nani stubbornly purses her lips and doesn’t answer him. But she does it her way. We’re terribly stubborn in our family. And then they’re surprised that I take after them.

And I talk that way with the bunny, the doll, the little book, I talk and look out the window at the yellow circle of the moon rolling out from behind the tall hills, at the stars—enormous, twinkling, distant—and I listen to the gentle singing of the crickets, and my eyes close all by themselves.

If you pull yourself up a little, very slightly, with your hands to lie on your stomach on the windowsill, you can see how she hangs out laundry in the yard. She stands in profile, her short hair pushed back behind her ears, her unruly bangs falling in her eyes. Botsman gets underfoot, runs in circles, and barks angrily at every drop of water.

And she smooths the laundry on the line and, smiling, says something sweet to him.

I know she’s the most beautiful woman in the world.

I can't hear what she's saying, I crawl along the windowsill on my stomach to get closer. I very much want to be out there in the yard, but they didn't give me any chocolate, and I'm acting like an angry little girl. I was even able to cry a little. It's true that I quickly got bored and started to play with my dolls. But every time I heard someone's step, I started to howl loudly and didn't stop until the steps died away. I'm a little ashamed that I'm behaving so stupidly.

Sometimes I'm stubborn and can't do anything with myself.

"Daughter, will you come outside with me?"

I'm offended, silent.

She left. Now she's hanging up the wash out there, and I'm looking at her from the window. I want to run down the steps and dive into the laundry that smells of detergent and starch, I even feel its wetness touching my face. The heat's all around, but in the shadow of the wet laundry it's cool, it hangs, hangs, and then the wind blows, the duvet covers fill up with its breath, wings spreading and flying off somewhere in the heavens. And I'll fly off, clinging to the edges, quick as a flash.

They didn't give me candy, can you believe it?

I climb down from the windowsill, peek outside the door. No one's there. I tiptoe into her room, pause uncertainly in the doorway. There on the dresser is a large wooden jewelry box. I know what's in that jewelry box, but I don't go right up to it, I'm afraid. At first, I shift from one foot to the other in the doorway for a while, trying to be calm. Then I run to it, lift the lid with a jerk, and take out the large, fluffy braid. Light brown hair, curling in a big ringlet. The braid's heavy and a bit dead. I hold it out in front of me for some time, then I spread it out on the bed and lie next to it.

Why I do this—I don't know. I just lie quietly next to it and think.

She cut it off at the root and walks around with short hair. And I know why. But I pretend I don't. Because once I asked her if there were any photos of the little girl, and she turned to stone, and all at once her lips turned white-white. And I understood that I shouldn't talk about it. And I don't talk about it, I'm already big, although I act like I'm little, I'm naughty, for example, or I don't eat anything, well, maybe I eat strawberries or apples. I also love jam. If I don't eat, she says, "Then you won't get any candy." And I get mad and go to my room. I'm stubborn.

Something's wrong in this world, I know.

And she also has amber beads, and in one large bead you can see the transparent little wing of some kind of insect. She says a drop of resin tore off the wing, and it hardened into stone. And I look at that little wing and think that the insect probably grieved the rest of its life. Of course, it flew and flew and now, bad luck, you haven't got a wing and can't fly.

Sad things also happen to insects.

And then I suddenly understand that it hurts most not when your wing is torn off, but when you tear it off yourself. Like when she cut off her own braid. The grief was so enormous that she lost her head, ran around the rooms, saw her reflection in the mirror—heavy, light brown hair falling over her shoulders, and is it really right, when there's such terrible grief, for hair to fall over your shoulders—so she plaited it into a braid and cut it off at the root.

And now she keeps it in the jewelry box. I don't know why she keeps it.

And I lie there like that, thinking, and then suddenly I climb down from the bed and tuck the braid under my shirt.

And I go down silently into the yard and walk, first slowly, not turning my head, then faster, and finally I break into a run and tear along past the wooden fence, past the tall cypresses, past the branches of the blossoming mallow, past the lilac flowers of the *lalazar* that stain your hands when you touch them,

down along the gentle slope, across two roads, through Grandma Lusine's garden, she knows how to bake real Karabakh gata, which they make with cream and bake in the ashes and call *krkeni*, but that's not important right now, the important thing now is not to stop, because if you stop, it's possible to be frightened by what you're planning to do,

so I keep tearing along, across the ravine, past the crooked wicket gate, past the ruins of the old chapel, along the small grove and further, further, there, where the stream awakened by last night's downpour sounds, past the junk dealer's house, past the wheat field, past the vineyard, and there it is, the old stone bridge, the stream echoes noisily down below, and I'm as scared as if everyone had died and I were left alone,

and so I screw up my eyes, pull the braid out of from under my shirt and throw it down below into the white water, into the deepest depths, and I keep saying—take that! take that!—and then I see how it floats, coiling in long snakes around the stones, but now I'm not scared at all, and I stand on that bridge—the clear sky above me, the river racing beneath me—and I tell

myself super quietly, but as if I'm addressing everyone, because it's very painful for me to live with this all by myself, you know, I say in a whisper, I had an older sister, and now she's gone.