

Another Mother

A Novel

By
Dragica Najcheska

(Translated from Macedonian to English and
edited by Risto Stefov)

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TO KEEP ON STANDING

The story in the novel “Another Mother” by Dragica Najcheska, takes place during the Skopje earthquake in July 1963 when the fate of the people of Skopje was uncertain. The earthquake seemed like it had taken its toll on the city, had definitely mortally wounded it and taken in into the past and into our memories, together with thousands of dead and unfortunate citizens. But the people would not be able to bear and justify the city’s name if they were not capable of starting anew, standing up and offering an alternative.

But it isn’t the earthquake’s material devastation that became Dragica Najcheska’s immediate interest and obsession. This in itself is a significant angle of the project, in which the experiences of the small, ordinary residents of Skopje, the changing of their life relationships, destinies, emotional and mental violations, the creation of new situations and relationships within families, the search for justification and meaning... occupy a dominant place in Najcheska’s story where her characters live on finding the truth that some of the loved ones have disappeared, irretrievably, into the darkness and abysses of the event.

In the centre of her engaging approach to the subject, Dragica Najcheska takes two families and catalogues their emotional tremors from the inside, describing the atmosphere in the city, the objects of where her young heroes see themselves in the past and in the future. Najcheska has good storytelling abilities and consciously avoids outbursts of exaggerated emotion.

The novel “Another Mother” doesn’t put forward sorrow but quiet, elementary accounts of the heroes who speak about themselves and their loved ones; whose life after the earthquake is a struggle to re-establish their relationships, to make sense of things that have disappeared and to find justification for what happened to their relationships, involvement in the family, in school, in the company and in the institutions.

The central hero of the novel “Another Mother” is Hristina, a girl who has barely passed the twelfth year of her life – who is unexpectedly and cruelly hit in the most sensitive way, without

measure or mercy. Her little sister Eli is not aware of the tragedy and the price that has been paid, of the pain that has been inflicted on the survivors through the separation of their dearest ones, without whom life has lost its beauty and charm and, if you like, to a certain extent, time and meaning. It is necessary to stay sober, to get over it. It now represents the meaning of current life and the persistent search for a new formula of existence. In Dragica Najcheska's novel, one feels human primal strength, an aspiration to survive the tragedy, to get over what's been lost, to seek the Archimedean point of existence, regardless of the fact that deep in their intimacy people will bear the wounds of an unexpectedly fierce blow, the repetition of which could not be sustained by a human heart, in this case a child's heart, which after the tragic event forcibly accelerates the intensity of its spiritual meaning.

Dragica Najcheska very subtly reveals the deep emotional and spiritual tremors of her heroes, especially Hristina, because she is the active and only narrator of this quiet, sorrow-free and exaggerated "burning" of feelings - a human, contemporary and eternal drama of people, of families.

It is this component - silence and tragedy - that is the greatest quality in Dragica Najcheska's successful novel. What the subject offers - believing without question the sorrow, awareness of feelings and testimonials - Najcheska consciously reduces, to an extent, and confirms her narrative maturity and the power of selectivity in choosing the most adequate course of action.

The main point in this prose, urban, thematic and expressive, should be sought in the evolution of the emotional and thought world of the heroine Hristina who, after all her internal self-conscious ethical resistance and dilemmas, realizes the inevitability of the elementary act that will take place in the life of her father and the family as a whole.

It took great human and writer's courage for Hristina's intimate dilemma to find its most natural resolution. As a philosophy of life and as a philosophical message to the living and contemporaries, especially to the young generations for whom it is intended and dedicated, - the novel "Another Mother" should be counted among

the most successful written on this topic and for that age in the collection of contemporary Macedonian literature.

Petar Shirilov, October 1978

Another Mother

In the same way as me when I was little, at night before going to sleep, my mother used to tell Eli, my little sister, the long stories about Cinderella, about Ivitsa and Maritsa, about the black cow... Since we slept in the same room I listened to those stories again, which seemed to take me back to the years when I was little. There was something so warm and gentle in my mother's voice and so sweetly lulling that I would forget about all my math assignments, all the homework and drift off into a sweet dream with Eli.

The mornings weren't so great because when I woke up Mom and Dad had already gone to work. I had to take on the role of the big grown-up sister and look after Eli. I also did some other work, in addition to that assigned to me by the school, which my mother had asked me to do the evening before.

First I had to wash, dress and feed Eli, which wasn't an easy task. Her being pampered so much caused me a lot of grief. She used to cry because she didn't want me to wash her, or she would spill her plate of food, for which I would have to slap her hands. But no one seemed to understand my dilemma. Imagine Eli spilling the plate with food on the bright, clean parquet floor, which Mom had made so shiny and lemony smelling with such care! Then Eli and I wouldn't have a good time.

It hadn't been a year since we moved into this beautiful new apartment, which my mom had shined with her caring and hardworking hands. My father also often helped her with the cleaning.

After settling Eli in her crib, enclosed on all sides by tall nets, and piling her in with all the toys, I set about doing my homework. I tried not to pay attention to her so as not to be disturbed by her unintelligible chatter.

I finished the first two years of school with great success and I had to continue that way. When it was time to go to school my Aunt Raina, a distant relative of my father's, would come and stay with

Eli for a few hours until Mom and Dad got home from work. Aunt Raina was always gone before I came home.

I usually played with my friends after I came home from school. That was the best part of the day for me. I would drop off my bag in my room and then run back down the stairs. My friends would meet me and we would play in the street. Today my school was over. Mom and Dad were at home. That chatterbox Eli was with them! Who of my friends was going to catch me or pass me in a race or find me where I was hiding?

It was getting dark and at any moment now I expected my mother to call me: “Hri...s...tina, it’s getting dark outside.” I knew it was time to go but I ignored it so that I could spend a little more time outside. When my mother yelled again, there was no waiting. I would run up the stairs.

“I told you,” she would say scolding me a little, “not to wait for me to call you.” I would then mumble some sort of excuse. It was soon dinnertime. Everything on the table was impeccably clean. The food had an attractive aroma with a well-known scent, ours, in our house, so directly associated with Mom and made with her skillful hands.

Everyone had their own place to sit. Eli was in Mom’s arms sitting on her lap. That’s why it seemed to me that Mom couldn’t eat comfortably. I would have taken Eli in my arms but I knew Mom wouldn’t allow me. And the pampered Eli, under no circumstances, would want to be separated from Mom’s lap, which I knew so well and for which I even envied Eli a little.

My father, being free, would usually finish eating first and then take Eli from Mom’s arms, so that Mom could then finish eating her dinner.

Tomorrow they would go to work early. That’s why Mom did her cleaning in the evening and prepared our lunch for the next day.

Clean, washed and dressed in our pajamas, we lay in our beds covered with ironed sheets that had a wonderful smell and we sank into them like in warm, pleasant water.

Mom's gentle sing-song voice lulled Eli to sleep... "When the children went to bed in the evening their stepmother told their father, 'Tomorrow you will take the children and bring them to the forest where you cut wood. You will leave them there all alone to be eaten by the forest beasts'..." I immediately remembered that story. It was from Ivitsa and Maritsa. I didn't believe Eli understood any of this but, for her, Mom's presence and her soothing voice was enough to help her fall asleep quickly. When Eli fell asleep, Mom would stop telling the story, often in the middle of a word. She would then cover us both, gently touching the blankets, or she would stroke our hair. She would then tiptoe out of the room and leave the door slightly open so as not awaken Eli...

* * *

This one night I was awakened by some terrible banging. I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw were pieces of plaster falling from the ceiling and the walls. I felt like I was being choked. It was simply impossible to breathe from the dust that filled the room. Without realizing if this was real or if I was dreaming of things collapsing around me, I screamed for my mom and dad and then ran out of the apartment and down the stairs. Other people from the building were also running down the stairs. Suddenly I remembered Eli and was horrified. What about Eli? It wasn't safe to go back but even more horrifying was to leave little helpless Eli alone in the collapsing and crashing building. Frantically, not feeling the impact of all the things that were falling on me, I ran back to the apartment. Eli was coughing and choking on plaster dust. I somehow got her out of her crib and, dragging her under my arm, I ran with her back down the stairs. In all this, I remembered that Mom and Dad had gone to work early that day and there was no one to help us. So the most terrible thing that we faced that day was Eli and I getting out of the building. And lucky for us, the very moment that we found ourselves on the other side of the street the building, like it was made of cardboard, collapsed with a terrible crash. I shuddered at the thought of what would have happened to Eli if I hadn't gone back to get her. Dozens of people could be heard on all sides of the street screaming. Everyone was frantic and running like crazy up and down the street.

I'd heard about earthquakes from the old people. I struggled to understand what was happening all around us. A woman took Eli and me to the yard of the neighbour's single-storey house where there was a well and helped me wash Eli, who was crying the whole time, spitting plaster dust from her mouth.

At that moment I heard my father's frantic voice yelling, "Hristina, Eli!"

Immediately after that I yelled out loud, "Father!"

He hugged us both, squeezing us as if he couldn't believe his eyes that we weren't harmed after seeing the hideous ruin that our building had turned into. Several people gathered around us and wondered how we'd done it. How two children had managed to get out of the apartment alone? They hugged and kissed me, as if I'd done something impossible - heroic because I'd taken Eli out of the apartment before the worst happened.

During all that time, the ground shook violently under our feet. At the same time we all looked at each other frantically, grabbed each other's hands, as if that could reduce the danger, and sometimes ran madly down the street, only a short distance, and then turned back.

My father was restless looking down the street where my mother usually came from work. I too, with fear and a tight heart, also kept looking, unable to take my eyes off that street. I wanted to ask my father why my mother wasn't there yet, convinced that she would have come running hundreds of times by now. I was afraid to ask... I knew that he was also tormented by her absence. I wanted to tell him to go and find her, meet her on the way but then I realized that he was afraid to leave us alone again, or of something worse, even more terrible. The earth tremors were still strong. Some people spoke of the horror that the earth might collapse in places and take us all down with it.

We began to cry again when Aunt Raina came running, looking frantic. I immediately saw in her eyes that she was looking for my mother. Then I heard her tell my father to go and find her.

“Don’t worry about the children, I’m here now,” she told my father.

“Your mother and father are lucky, they are lucky they avoided a big tragedy...” said Aunt Raina quietly to herself, pressing us against her lap. She didn’t want to look at the pile of bricks, concrete slabs, broken objects that was left of our house. I myself was stressed when I imagined what really could have happened if I hadn’t woken up at the first moment, and if I hadn’t gone back to get my sister, if I hadn’t dragged her out of the crib and run with her outside to the street.

It seemed like everyone got out of our building alive and unharmed, I guess because it didn’t fall down at the first tremor. I heard some older people say that other buildings in the city fell immediately. We had no idea that even more terrible things were happening elsewhere in the city. Every now and then someone would run up covered in blood, screaming and yelling that there were people buried alive in many buildings. Some of the people around us screamed when they found out their loved ones had been killed. All this exhausted me more and more and I felt that I could no longer stand on my feet. I struggled to hold myself up, still keeping my eyes on the street from where our mother was supposed to come. I noticed that Aunt Raina was also looking, only further.

“Aunt Raina, Mom and Dad still aren’t back...” I said, even though I knew in advance that she couldn’t tell me anything more. It was as if I hoped that her answer would ease the uncertainty that pressed upon me and would dispel my terrible fears.

“They’ll be back, my child, they will come... They were probably held up on the road,” said Aunt Raina with an uncertain trembling tone of voice, which caused me even more anxiety. I thought to myself, “If my father is going to come back, let him come back with my mother. No, not alone, no!” I would have cried at that moment if Eli wasn’t there.

Noon was long gone. I hardly noticed the tremors that shook the earth every ten minutes or so with a dreadful and menacing rumble. It seemed like some huge, invisible monster was attacking us from

underneath, shaking the ground and looking for more victims. Our eyes were still riveted on the end of the street, from where we were waiting for Father and Mother to appear. From time to time Eli, without understanding what was happening, would helplessly cry, Mama! Aunt Raina and I would just hug her and she would stop. Poor Eli, she acted like no great calamity had befallen her. She didn't ask for food, nor did she complain that we were on the street and on our feet all that time.

Dust hovered around like a threatening ghost, even here right next to us. We now had no house, no furniture and nothing to wear or eat. But none of that mattered to me; I just wanted my mom and dad to come back. I didn't care if Mom was wounded and had to go to the hospital. Now, that didn't seem so terrible to me.

When my father appeared alone at the end of the street coming towards us, I wanted to close my eyes; I didn't want to look. I didn't want to believe that he was alone. When he arrived he said nothing, we didn't ask him anything either. At that moment I knew we no longer had a mother. I started crying out loud and so did Eli. Aunt Raina also started crying. Tears flowed from my father's frantic eyes, streaking down his dust-stained face.

Some of our neighbours who lived in the same building and knew my mother came running. "Poor Rada... Her poor children..." I heard some of them say and they cried with us. They hugged us and pressed us up against them. I heard some of them asking, "What happened to her? Did she suffer much? Did she die in the bank where she worked? Did the bank collapse? Not the bank too?!... Oh, this damned misfortune...!"

...One thing was becoming clear and more certain than anything – Mom wouldn't be coming back. The misfortune of the earthquake was a calamity for everyone – for Eli, for me and for Dad. It had taken the most precious thing away from us. And nobody could do anything to change that. I couldn't, I didn't want to believe what had happened! I wanted to grab Dad's hand and ask him to take me to where my mother was, even if she was dead. She couldn't be taken from us so suddenly. Who was it that did this... this sudden and terrible thing... without letting us see her one more time.

How could I ask my father anything about my mother after I looked at his sad face and eyes full of despair? Where did he leave her? Mother, are you going to leave us forever without us seeing you again...?

People came later and took us to the park where there were tents set up. They also gave us some food. Aunt Raina stayed with us. My poor aunt, she didn't have the heart to leave us...

There were moments when I thought all this was a dream, or a horror story that had come to life and I was participating in it. Then suddenly it would all end and everyone would return to their normal life and we would all return to our apartment and Mom and all of us would be together with all our familiar things around us. But immediately after that thought, reality hit and the whole horrible truth hit me again. The presence of the heap of rubble from our destroyed building reminded me of our dear deceased mother.

Something terrible hit me the first moment they said we should go to the park and stay in the tents. I didn't want to separate myself from our building, not even from that great pile of rubble. It seemed to me that we'd lost my mother like we'd lost everything in our home to that rubble.

Only Eli ate the food they gave us. Aunt Raina offered me some several times but I didn't take it. Any pleasure, even eating food, seemed offensive to me. I simply could not swallow it...

The earth rumbled menacingly all night long, heaving beneath us with stronger and weaker shakes. Now that we had lost my mother, it didn't much matter to me what happened to us. Poor Eli, she had no idea what was going on. How would she be with us without Mom? Almost no one slept that night. People mourned; some silently and some loudly and some here close to us in the dark. I cried silently, inconsolably.

The next day my father was gone for a long time, for many hours. When he came back he took us away and soon we boarded a bus; one of those from the city.

The ride was terribly slow. We had to make many detours due to the ruins. Many streets hadn't been cleared. The city looked much scarier than I'd imagined. It was real devastation. We stopped at last. We went to a cemetery. Several fresh graves were dug, all lined up one next to one another. There was a name written on a piece of board for each.

My father pointed with his hand and said, "Your mother is here."

Even though I read her first and last name on the board that my father had pointed to, I couldn't believe that this was my mother, our lively, ever-smiling good mother, under this pile of heaped earth with her name painted in black on this rough board. There were people, strangers all around us throwing themselves on the ground, kissing the boards with the names written on them and crying, yelling and screaming uncontrollably. Some brought framed pictures and left them on the graves. There was an old grandmother looking over one grave. My father was more reserved in expressing his pain, probably because of us. Unshaven, with messy hair, he looked old to me, like he wasn't our father. After we visited the grave for a while we again headed for the bus. I didn't want to leave but evening was approaching and Eli needed to go to sleep. Again crying aloud with tears dripping down my cheeks I followed my father. Eli, of course, understood none of this. I looked back several times at the grave where, as my father said, our mother lay. Now there are only the three of us – my father, Eli and me.

...It's strange how a person can get used to things, even to this most terrible thing that happened to us. There were two mattresses in the tent. Eli and I slept on one and my father on the other.

News of the calamity that befell the city spread throughout the country. Clothes, food and medicine arrived from everywhere.

A few days later, Mom's relatives came. I don't know how I survived that day. I was sad and crying constantly. So much so that I wanted to run away somewhere where there was no one and nothing. My mother's sister, our aunt, stayed with us for a few days but she had to leave because she lived in another city.

We were given dry food in those days so there was nothing to do around mealtime. A water tap was installed in the park for us to use for washing. Kitchens were soon organized where hot food was served.

Eli began to feel the absence of our mother and cried more and more often and for long periods of time. She was just sad.

When I was alone with Eli I often lied to her, telling her, “Mama and Papa will soon come home and bring Eli a new toy...” At night before she went to asleep, because that’s when she cried the most, I told her stories the way Mom used to. She got used to falling asleep to my stories. But now that I remember, I instinctively avoided the stories about bad stepmothers, about the magic mirror, about Ivitsa and Maritsa, about the black cow and about Cinderella... I don’t know why, since I was little, when my mother told me those stories, I didn’t like them. I didn’t want to hear about those bad women... I just wanted to hear stories about godly mothers...

Eli often fell asleep clinging onto me. Even though I wasn’t very big, I was a kind of protection for her now that Mom wasn’t there. Dad often took her in his arms during the day and spent several hours with her.

I almost avoided looking directly into my father’s eyes because I knew what pain I would find there, how many unshed tears. Perhaps it was better that neither the apartment nor anything from it remained. Everything there reminded me of Mom and her magic hands.

When Father and Aunt Raina were talking I overheard them say that some sort of wooden sheds would be built quickly for those whose houses were completely destroyed. And that they would give us one to live in. I didn’t care, I was indifferent to all that.

The painful days passed slowly.

“In which tent did you say Hristina Petrovska lives?” I heard someone say my name one morning near our tent. We had just

woken up. The male voice I heard was unfamiliar. My father immediately got up, dressed quickly and went outside.

“Are you Hristina’s father?”

“If you mean my daughter, yes I have a daughter named Hristina,” my father said, wondering what this man wanted.

“Forgive me Sir, I’m a journalist and I heard from your neighbours about her courage. Is it true that Hristina, as I was told, your little girl was alone in the apartment at the time of the earthquake and, running down the stairs, risking her life, rushed back into the apartment and fearlessly saved her two-year-old sister? I beg you to let me write something about her and photograph her.”

Even though I didn’t see him, I felt that my father was perplexed and that in all our misfortune with my mother, it had never occurred to him that I had rescued Eli from the falling and collapsing building and that other people saw something special and heroic in me. As for me, it was simply the right thing to do. Even now I feel the same but if things went wrong, I now realize that we would both be under the ruins of the building. I think that’s what perplexed my father. Of course I did that unconsciously, by instinct... I would probably do it again if it happened again... who knows how many times.

When I stuck my head out of the tent opening to see the stranger, my father shrugged his shoulders indifferently to his question. I believed that neither he nor I had wanted to be photographed. Most likely the stranger didn’t know about our terrible tragedy with my mother. He took a picture of me the moment I walked out of the tent and wrote down some things about me like how old I was and that I was a good student. I couldn’t stand it anymore so I burst out and told him that we’d lost my mother, but he wasn’t surprised. He obviously knew about it and gave me an encouraging hug.

We had almost forgotten about the stranger when one day the mailman arrived and brought several magazines in Macedonian and foreign languages. Most of those magazines had a photo of me and my name, as well as a few words written about my heroism.

Not a week passed by before I started receiving beautiful dolls, gifts and letters from strangers, mostly from children from all over the country. They wrote expressions of sympathy in the warmest way, as well as invitations for my little sister and me to go and live with their families. They were nice to me and had good and pure, big hearts! I can't tell you how much I cried over those letters and gifts, and how many grateful letters I wrote with Dad's help.

When we moved into the newly built residential shed, I felt like I had suddenly grown up and should assume the role of the lady of the house. But perhaps because we now had rooms and more space in general than in the tent, I felt Mom's absence even more. Sometimes I was afraid of forgetting her... of what she looked like, or the smallest details connected with her. We had no photos of her, not one. I don't know what I would have given for a picture of her to hang on the wall in the room where Eli and I slept. But every time I thought of that it reminded me of the concrete and bricks that had obliterated all traces of our home and her.

One day when I came home from school I was surprised to see a big picture of mother hanging in the room where my father slept. It hung above his bed. Where did he find it? It seemed to me like it was by some miracle that it was hung on the wall. Maybe he went and looked through the ruins of the building and by some chance found the picture intact. Or maybe he had a small picture of her in his wallet, where he kept Eli's and mine. Then I remembered that our relatives could have had a picture of her and they gave it to him. Having the picture there was like somehow having Mom around, present with us. I was a little sorry that the picture wasn't in our room but the important thing was that no one bothered me if I went to see her several times a day. Often I couldn't separate myself from her for a long time. It helped me remember her features and everything about her the way she truly was...

Another day when my father came home for lunch, I saw him carrying an unusual book under his arm. After thinking about where to put it, he opened the closet door and left it there. I realized that he didn't want us to see it and maybe that's why I was even more curious as to what it was about. In front of him, of course, I pretended not to be interested in what he'd brought and where he'd

left it but I couldn't wait for him to go out for his afternoon break, or to buy groceries for tomorrow's lunch.

The moment he stepped out I entered his bedroom like a thief, opened the closet door and took the book. By looking at the cover and title, I understood that it was about documents and photos of the victims of the earthquake. Turning the pages and reading the names of the dead, as well as looking at their photos, I was trembling all over waiting to see my mother and our street like it had been the first time. I felt this way maybe because our tragedy was recorded in a permanent place, like this book with terrible images.

I was crying and kissing my mother's picture and, of course, that's why I didn't hear my father when he came into the room. I just felt his hand hugging me warmly and saw the tears in his eyes. He sat down on the bed. I felt that he wanted to say something comforting to me but that he was so sad, inconsolable, that he couldn't find the right words. I knew that he went to the cemetery every day and on Sundays he took Eli and me.

Before winter came we placed a gravestone on Mom's grave. By setting her apart from all the others it was like we had taken her and reclaimed her. She was now ours. The white marble monument also featured a picture of her. I had long since taken the book from my father and placed it under my pillow, and because of that I was less jealous of my mother's picture hanging in my father's room. I often took Eli to see Mom's picture on the wall and told her things about her. It saddened me to think that Eli wouldn't be able to remember her. She was very young when Mom died. What she would remember, however, was what Dad, Aunt Raina and I told her.

Aunt Raina came over to see us almost every day but she was getting sick more and more often. Her health wasn't the best before, but after the earthquake she was completely weakened. I dreaded the thought that she too might stop coming to see us...

That year winter came earlier than usual, indifferent to the fact that there were still people living in tents and in unprepared, dilapidated houses.

Because it was getting dark earlier, and because of the cold, we rarely left the house. We felt even lonelier during the long winter evenings. My father wasn't a very sociable person to begin with and his friends and acquaintances rarely visited us. And our relatives, those living closest to us, lived in another city so we were usually all alone. Sometimes Aunt Raina would prepare lunch for us. But Dad cooked for us most of the time, the way we knew how.

They also built a prefab school near us because our school, as well as several others in the city, had been completely demolished.

During the first days of school, it seemed to me like everyone knew about what had happened to me and felt sorry for me. It seemed like some of the children whispered about it and looked at me sympathetically. It was nauseating and I felt like crying out loud and running out of class. Our teacher also took a careful attitude towards me, often reminding me of that terrible thing that happened and telling me that it was okay if I couldn't pay attention to what she was teaching because of it. It would appear that only another girl and I in the entire class had lost a mother. Probably from some instinct, I hung out with that girl the most. However, we avoided talking about our mothers because it hurt too much. Marina was even quieter than me and was also a good student. She, on the other hand, had no brother or sister and was alone with her father and grandmother. That damned night her grandmother had taken her to sleep with her because she was living alone in another house at the time. Her father, a doctor, was called to the hospital at night. As a result her mother was alone at home when she died. Marina always wore a black ribbon in her lush blonde hair and I wore a black apron.

I knew that Marina's black ribbon and my black apron were just outside things. The real darkness that we carried in our souls was the regret of losing our mothers. But what could we do? We couldn't show that. I could envy all the other children in the class for being carefree but I knew that I would never have their carefree laughter and cheerfulness again.

It was most difficult for me during the big holidays. On those days I wanted to run away from home and go somewhere, I wanted to

travel somewhere. This first New Year after the earthquake wasn't the same. I knew that almost nowhere in the city would it be welcomed like other years. The terrible thing that had befallen the people of our city was present all around... in the uncleared ruins, in the people who dressed in black, in the expressions on their faces...

I wasn't happy about the gifts we got at school, or the ones that Dad brought home. I couldn't wait for those two or three days to pass so that I could go to school again.

The day I saw my friend Marina in class, from the expression on her face, I knew something unpleasant had happened to her.

During the break after our second class, which was longer than the others, I went to her and wanted to know what had happened. But at the same time, I didn't want to ask her if she didn't want to tell me. I wondered if someone in her home was sick.

Marina quickly returned to class and sat on her part of the bench. She wore a black ribbon and a black apron that day. I wanted to help her, although I didn't know what was wrong or how to approach her. I sat on the same bench and talked to her about things from school but it didn't work. Suddenly she burst into tears and ran outside into the yard. Then she was gone. I put her books in my bag and took them to her home. I rang the bell. When a young woman I didn't know appeared at the door, I was confused. I thought I had rung the wrong doorbell. The young woman smiled kindly at me and reached out for the bag, as if expecting someone would bring it.

"Are these Marina's books?" she asked and took the bag.

"Yes," I said feeling confused. "Is Marina here?" I dared ask.

"She is here," she said. "But she's resting for a while, she doesn't feel well. Thank you for bringing her bag."

"See you later," I said and slowly walked down the stairs. She was a nice and pleasant woman, I thought. I hadn't seen her there before, even though I often went there. I wondered if she was a relative of theirs.

Marina wasn't at school for two more days but I didn't dare to look for her, without even knowing why.

When she came the third day she seemed a little more composed, but not to me. My friendly gaze couldn't escape the truth that she still wasn't over it.

On Sunday, when we were returning from the cemetery, I happened to see Marina's father from the window of the bus. The same young woman was with him, the one whom I'd met at the door several days ago. He was holding her hand. It suddenly became clear to me that she was Marina's new mother. I now understood why Marina had acted like that all these days. I couldn't believe that her father had decided to take this step so quickly. That good, lovable man suddenly became strange to me, even unpleasant. Poor Marina! How would she get used to this strange woman... a stepmother, who would replace her mother... and so quickly? Suddenly I shuddered at the thought. And yet, this was happening to my good friend Marina. If I were her I'd run away from home. Go and live alone somewhere in the world away from here. At that moment on the bus even my father began to look strangely at me. Just thinking about it... that he might be planning to do something like that also.

When I went to school the next day, I tried to pretend that I didn't know about Marina's sad secret. Or maybe it had been just a figment of my imagination.

"My father brought home another mother," she said suddenly when we went out to the schoolyard during the longer break. There was sadness in her voice but also a reconciliation of what had been done... that was inevitable.

"I know," I said and noticed that she wasn't surprised.

After that we were both silent. There was nothing more to say. Neither could she condemn her father for that, nor could I utter such a thing.

For the next few months Marina came to school even more meticulously dressed and combed, but less and less attentive to her lessons and more distracted in class. I often invited her to my house to help her get over it and so that we could study together, but I managed to change nothing.

During the spring, like all the others, I tried to cheer us up but many things got in the way... All the terrible things that had happened the summer before interfered... Nothing could bring us peace: not the blossoms on the trees near the destroyed houses... not the empty places cleared of ruins... and not the birds with their lively songs. It seemed like we wanted all creatures to sing somewhere else this spring... The swallows didn't find their old eaves and old nests. And the park was empty, trampled by the many people who'd found refuge in it during their first unhappy days. Everything looked pitiful.

Walking home from school both Marina and I could still smell the ashes from the ruins despite the fragrances of spring.

“Will you come with me to my house,” Marina asked when we were at the first intersection. “I’m no longer living here, I moved in with my grandmother.”

I was surprised... shocked in fact but I didn't want to ask where or why. I continued to walk with her without saying a word. After we passed a few streets Marina stopped in front of a shed and we went inside. Her grandmother greeted us. She was happy to see me because she knew that I was very friendly with Marina.

She gave us a treat... chocolate candies.

“Let’s celebrate our new house,” said the old woman. I looked at Marina. She was looking out the window.

“You know daughter, they gave me this shed because they demolished my house. It was almost falling down and, besides, I didn't want to live alone. Well that's it, now I'll be living here with Marina. It's nice to be with someone. How are you doing in school?”

“Okay,” I said while thinking about what the old woman had said. Was this true... the old woman didn't want to live alone, or did Marina's father's new wife not want Marina living with them. I knew it would be difficult for anyone to win over Marina so soon after the terrible death of her mother... But I didn't know what kind of woman the new wife was. I just realized that Marina would have to live not only without a mother but more and more without a father.

A few months later it became clear to me that, one day, Marina would have a little brother or sister from the new mother. Marina very rarely went to her father's house after school, feeling more and more like it was an obligation. She became more and more withdrawn and serious. Despite the great tenderness and care she gave Marina, her grandmother's company wasn't joyful company for her.

I never told my father about what was happening in my friend's life. I feared that could happen to me.

“My dear it might be a sin for me to say this, but how long do you think you'll be able to live alone like this? Here, you see, I'm getting weaker day by day. And how much do I help? None! The house needs a permanent housekeeper to do the work all day long.” I overheard this conversation between Aunt Raina and my father one evening. Of course they thought I was asleep.

My father was silent.

Even though I was very attached to Aunt Raina and we owed her a lot, at that very moment I felt like I didn't love her anymore. I felt like standing up and screaming, telling them that I'd overheard them.

It was shortly after the one year anniversary of Mom's death. I don't know how I restrained myself and remained motionless.

“I know it will be difficult,” Aunt Raina continued, “with two children; rarely anyone would want to bother... but we will tell her in advance, we will tell her everything in advance... Perhaps there

will be someone...as long as she doesn't have children of her own... It will be difficult with mixed children. No matter how good she is, she will tend to want her own children more... those she gave birth to."

My father was quiet. I was afraid of what he might say. It seemed to me at that moment that our fate, mine, Eli's and his, depended on what he said. But my father was stubbornly silent. After that I understood the kind of weight this conversation had on him. He couldn't stop Aunt Raina from talking about these things but he did answer her with his silence. This must be very painful for him - I thought to myself. That's what I needed to believe at that moment. But was it really so?

Just when I thought that conversation was over, I heard Aunt Raina's voice again. "Another winter is coming. It will be cold. You'll have to leave your children home alone with a burning fire... in a wooden house. God forbid if something happens. It's well known what a man can and can't do..."

There was silence again.

I wanted to get up and say that I would do everything myself and that there was no need for Aunt Raina to come here if she couldn't. I wanted to tell them that I wouldn't go to school if she had to come here just for us... I wanted to tell both of them things... I was furious laying there in my bed.

I heard Aunt Raina leave and my father pacing nervously in the kitchen for a long time. Eventually I fell asleep in a kind of stupor. That night the stories of Cinderella's bad stepmother, of Ivitsa and Maritza's terrible stepmother and of the little girl who'd suffered from her stepmother in the story of the black cow, all came to life for me in my dreams. I was locked in cages, eaten by beasts, running from witches and when I woke up, I remembered my father's warm gentle hand on my face and his worried voice calling my name.

"Hristina, what's wrong with you," he asked, "are you having a bad dream or something? You were yelling in your sleep."

I grabbed his hand and pressed it to my cheek like I needed saving... Like it was something that could make me feel safe in life.

Oh, how many things I wanted to tell him at that moment. How much I wanted to ask him to promise me that he would never bring another woman to be my mother. How could one be a mother when clearly one was not? I wanted to fall on my knees and beg him. But I couldn't do that. I felt that I was still too young to decide what needed to be done and I trusted my father to make the right decision. That thought and the touch of his hand on my face helped me fall asleep again, this time more peacefully.

In the next few days, I wanted to ask Aunt Raina why she'd said all those things to my father but I didn't know how to start that kind of conversation.

I decided to enroll myself in the sixth grade. I was tall and no one really knew how old I was. Eli was growing up fast and we started having problems with her. It became more and more difficult to lie to her about the tragic truth which each of us tried not to forget, but at least not to think about it all the time and get sick.

Sometimes I envied Eli. If my father decided to do what I considered my worst fear, it would be possible for Eli to believe that this other woman was her real mother, who had gone away for a long time. Anyway Eli was still young and, whatever happened, it wouldn't be so tragic for her. When I thought about all this, I thought how lucky Marina was that she at least had a grandmother to run to and that she didn't have a little sister like Eli to look after.

The time to go to school was soon approaching so I expected Aunt Raina to be here at any moment. When she did arrive she was accompanied by a woman in her thirties whom I didn't know. I quickly said goodbye and ran off to school because it was late; without knowing who the other woman was and what she was doing with Aunt Raina at our house.

When I came back from school my father was sitting alone with Eli. Eli was becoming more and more talkative, if only one had time to listen to her. I looked carefully at my father's face and, I don't know

why, it seemed to me like there was some change in him, that he was hiding something from me. At that moment I thought of Aunt Raina and the woman with whom she'd come before I left for school.

“How was school today?” my father asked like he always did. He knew I was a good student but asked anyway almost out of habit. I thought about what to ask about the woman who'd come with Aunt Raina this morning but nothing came to mind.

Finally, when we sat down to dinner, I quietly said, “Aunt Raina came here this morning with a woman I didn't know. Was she looking for you and did she find you?” I asked but didn't look at him.

“Yes,” he said after a short pause.

My father rarely said much and now words had become a real rarity for him. Usually we saw him only in the evening, when we had a lot of work to do, so his silence didn't bother me.

I didn't understand anything from the answer my father gave me but it was clear to me that I would have to wait for Aunt Raina to return tomorrow to ask her.

“Aunt Raina, who was that woman with you yesterday?” I asked the moment she appeared at the door.

“One of my neighbours... I happened to meet her here on the street. She was coming back from work, so I asked her to have coffee with me. She works as an editor, there where the books are printed; you know what the place is called. Your father knows her from there.

Her answer reassured me a little but at the same time the old woman couldn't always be trusted. She had no problem with making up a story.

A few days later as I was coming back from school I heard someone behind me yell, “Hey, little girl, do I know you from somewhere...?”

I looked back and indeed this woman's face looked familiar. I thought for a moment. It was Aunt Raina's neighbour, the one who'd come to our house. I remembered her even though I'd only seen her for a moment.

"You're that woman who came to our house with Aunt Raina?" I said.

"Yes, that's right..." she said and stroked my hair. Somehow instinctively I didn't want to make friends anymore and hurried away. But she followed me.

"Why don't you and your little sister ever come to your Aunt Raina's place?" she asked.

"We don't have time," I said. "I go to school as well as look after my sister."

"Don't you ever play?"

I just remembered that I hadn't played on the street for a long time but I didn't want to admit that to a stranger.

"Yes I play..." I said with a slightly uncertain tone of voice as I hastened my pace, moving away from her. I wondered why she was asking me all these questions

A few days later we met again at the same time and almost in the same place. I thought she'd been waiting there for me on purpose.

"Oh Hristina," now she knew my name. "Is your bag heavy? Let me carry it for you..."

It was unusual for me and a little inconvenient for her to carry my bag but before I could say thank you and refuse her offer, my bag was already in her hands.

"You're poorly dressed," she said while she hugged me around my shoulders, as if wanting to warm me. "The evenings are cold now and you should wear warmer clothing."

Then, like she'd remembered something she'd forgotten, she took a chocolate bar out of her pocket and handed me half of it. She ate the other half. We parted company in front of our shed. I considered inviting her into our house but then changed my mind.

As I walked towards our front door I thought I saw my father at the window but the next moment he was gone. I wasn't sure if he'd seen me with the woman. If he had I figured he would ask me but he didn't say anything about it during the entire evening. At the same time it seemed to me that he was in a better mood and more talkative. Holding her in his lap, he told Eli a story. He also praised me for the two A's I got in Macedonian and mathematics. He also made some kind of pudding for dinner. In general, all three of us had a good time that entire evening: Dad, Eli and I...

Almost ten days had passed since I'd last met the woman and I was convinced that those two times were completely coincidental. What need would a woman like that have to meet me on purpose? I must have imagined it all.

Marina accompanied me home. I already knew she had a little brother named Liupcho. I don't know why but it seemed to me that Marina still wasn't happy even though she visited her father more often now; to see her little brother of course. I thought that maybe the baby would bring her closer to the other mother. It could have been different for Marina had it not been for the baby. It was now the three of them - the father, the other woman and the brother. This seemed special for Marina, different, which made her feel even lonelier.

Aunt Raina and Eli were waiting for me at the door.

"Your father will be late. He had to attend a meeting at work. He asked me to tell you to come to my place. He 'll come and pick you up there."

Because I had become a real doubter lately, what might otherwise have seemed quite ordinary to me before now seemed a little

strange. We went to Aunt Raina's so rarely that I thought that there must be a good reason for going there.

I left my books at home and we left after we locked the doors.

Aunt Raina's house was a single storey house; small, almost completely dilapidated. It was a real miracle that it hadn't fallen during the earthquake. Even though she was alone she wanted to continue living there. I was pretty sure my father had suggested that she move in with us. She was widowed more than fifteen years ago and had no children. But it seemed she didn't want to leave the house where she'd spent most of her life.

Since I rarely came here, to her place, there were many interesting things for me to look at in the house and the yard, as it is in almost every old house. There was an old wooden loom in a separate room in the yard about which I used to annoy Aunt Raina for hours with questions about the names of each part of the loom and how they worked. I found it interesting to go through every drawer in the credenza looking at various objects that had not been used for a long time.

Aunt Raina often yelled at me, scolded me not to disturb her or ask silly questions but that didn't stop me. In the end, I would go into the chicken coop. There were always a few chickens there and often an egg or two, which was a real joy for me to find and take out of the nest. Also, during all this time Eli would be asking: "What is this, what is that," or demanding: "Give me this, give me that." That kid got really annoying sometimes but I couldn't get mad or yell at her. Every time I lost my patience with her I would immediately be reminded of how lonely she was without Mom and I would forgive her for what she'd done.

Aunt Raina was also very patient with her, as she was with me. Often when I gazed at her almost completely aged wrinkled face and small, blue, but still bright eyes, I was seized with great and unusual tenderness. I wanted to hug her hard, hard... You don't know how much she meant to us during those terrible days... She was irreplaceable... I often wanted to tell her that but didn't know how to express it well. Who knows how painful it was for her not to have

children. I often thought to myself that when I grew up I'd look after her in her old age...

After peering into every nook and cranny and almost getting tired of it, I would sit down with her. She would be knitting some short woolen socks on five needles, with the yarn running over her neck. She often knitted socks like that and probably gave them to someone to sell.

“Aunt Raina, where does that woman who came with you that time live?” I asked and noticed that she was surprised. Then it seemed to me that she was pretending not to know which woman I was asking about.

In the end she said, “Here, down the street.”

It seemed to me that she didn't want me to ask any more questions about that woman and changed the subject.

“Did your father buy you new pants and shoes?” she asked and immediately after that gave me her dilapidated glasses, which who knows when and which doctor had prescribed, and said, “Clean them for me...”

I did that but they were so badly scratched that nothing helped. “Why don't you ask my father to take you to an eye doctor so you can get a new pair of glasses?” I asked and handed them back to her.

“Why? Well your father is busy most of the time. Besides, I don't need them for anything other than knitting or sewing.”

Someone knocked on the door. I thought it was my father and ran to greet him.

“Oh, Hristina,” said the woman, very surprised.

She hugged me.

“Come in Vera,” said Aunt Raina. “Are you coming back from work?”

Aunt Raina left her glasses and knitting behind and came over to the door.

“They let you out very late, how come?” she added looking like she wasn’t expecting her.

“Yes, I work later now. We work two shifts. It was better for me before but not anymore. Maybe I’ll change jobs. I think I’ll apply to the school board. I’m also a qualified teacher. I’m hoping a new teaching position will open in the second semester.”

“For a woman to work as a teacher is the best job one can have,” said Aunt Raina. “Women understand children best...”

Aunt Raina brought out several apples and put them on the table. Vera peeled a couple and handed me one and the other to Eli. Vera picked up Eli and sat her on her lap. Eli was quite friendly and quickly took to becoming friends with almost anyone.

For some reason I wanted Vera to leave. I wanted her gone before my father came by. I didn’t want my father to see this woman. Not here and not again. But of course this could have all been arranged in advance.

In the meantime Eli had freed herself from Vera’s lap and, without meaning to, turned over her purse spilling its contents.

It was very awkward for me but I yelled at Eli rudely. Vera forgave her and pulled her close to her. After collecting her things and shutting her purse, Vera showed us two children’s books that she carried with her. She got them from work, where she worked as an editor. She worked at the place where those books were printed. This made me think. If she worked at the printing house how could she have known Dad from her work when he worked at the cigarette factory? All this was unclear to me and tormented me. Aunt Raina offered no explanation.

Vera started reading to Eli from one of the books. She took her time explaining things to her, which led me to believe that she had no

intention of leaving any time soon. On the other hand, I was interested in how my father and Vera would react when they met again and if this meeting had anything to do with the conversation between Aunt Raina and my father, which I'd overheard during the evening.

"Dad still isn't here," I said while looking at Vera.

I noticed that she wasn't surprised that we expected my father to come here. So there definitely was something cooking I thought. And Vera also seemed to me to be quite dressed up to be really coming from work. She was wearing a very formal green dress, with white cuffs and a white collar, black patent shoes and a black bag. Her hair was especially nicely done, black with a nice shine.

"Hristina, why don't you come to my place sometime, I'll show you all the children's books I have and how beautiful they are. I have many."

I wanted to tell her that I didn't know where she lived but of course it would be very easy to find out. Aunt Raina would have told me or even taken me there. It suddenly occurred to me that she might be married and have children of her own... Then all my stupid assumptions about her would turn out to be false and I would feel ridiculous. I also found it hard to believe that she wasn't already married at her age.

When I heard my father's footsteps I became excited but somehow it was a different kind of excitement.

"Good evening," he said and extended his hand to Vera. I didn't take my eyes off his or her face, not even for a moment.

Vera looked at him very reservedly, almost shyly, but only twice. He immediately took Eli in his arms and she hugged him as usual, like she always did when he came home from work.

No one said anything for a while.

“Dad, shall we go home now?” I asked, unable to hide my impatience. I wanted to go home as soon as possible.

“Why are you in such a hurry?” asked Aunt Raina and motioned with her head for me to sit down.

I sat down obediently and didn't say anything more about going home. Eli had settled in Vera's lap and was trying to turn the pages of the book by herself; attracted by the colorful pictures. Eli getting so close to Vera seemed to bother me. I wished we had gone home. There I would be helping my father prepare lunch for the next day, setting the dinner table, eating dinner, preparing the beds for sleep... Then suddenly, as I was thinking about all that, I realized that my poor father had no time at all to himself, to rest or to go out somewhere.

In the meantime, I began to listen carefully to the conversation my father was having with Vera. I heard him telling her about the meeting he was in earlier that day and what they talked about there. Vera listened carefully, paying attention to every detail. That suited me fine, and why not, my father was an economics graduate and worked at some important job at the factory.

When Vera got up to leave I immediately felt relief but then my father got up and followed her out the door. When they left Eli began to cry. Why? We didn't know but most likely because he'd left without us. From her crying and confusion deep down in my soul, I felt I would soon be crying too.

At that point Aunt Raina took out the zelnik she'd been keeping warm in the oven and gave us each a piece. She had been kneading and working on that zelnik all day. Eli immediately took her piece and started to eat it. She was obviously hungry. As for me, I couldn't even open my mouth. Not now. I had never been as angry as I was at that moment. It seemed like an eternity before my father returned. Why did he have to escort her when supposedly he didn't know her that well? She wasn't even his friend. Even if it was inconvenient for her to leave alone she shouldn't have agreed to him escorting her. On top of that, he was gone for quite a while. Didn't

she live close by? I felt like running out into the street but I knew that wouldn't do anyone any good.

All that time Aunt Raina tried to talk me, to divert my attention to something else, but when she saw that she wasn't succeeding she stopped trying. Once again she tried to get me to take some zelnik but I stubbornly refused.

When my father came back I thought he wouldn't be able to look me in the eye, so I avoided looking at him. Aunt Raina, of course, deliberately went out to the other room and quickly called for him to go there. She probably needed to tell him something in private, so that I wouldn't hear. Wouldn't it be horrible if Eli's and my fate were being decided there and then at that very moment?

When we arrived home I didn't want to help my father like I did other evenings. I didn't have the will, so everything I did I did by force.

"Hristina, you seem to be very tired tonight," my father said in a soft voice after we'd had dinner. "You should go to bed."

"No Dad, I'm not tired," I said even though I really wanted to go away, cover myself with the quilt and hide my face. I couldn't help but wonder what would happen to Eli and me if my father decided to bring another mother home? It would be a great misfortune to bring another woman to replace Mom! It seemed to me that my father was incapable of doing such a thing. I would be losing him too, as I had him in my soul.

As it happened Aunt Raina stayed with us well into the evening, later than usual, in the following days. I was told that my father had to work extra hours in the factory but I didn't believe it. Why was all this happening now? Sometimes I felt like kicking Aunt Raina out of our house. I thought she was to blame for all the things that were happening to my father.

None of the things that were happening to him lately could escape my eyes. He started to wear new clothes. All the time after the earthquake he wore a grey coat and dark trousers, which were worn

out from wearing them for a long time. He bought himself several new shirts and nice shoes. But what confused me more than anything was the change in the expression on his face, which didn't in the least resemble the former one. It was brighter and more open... This made my soul stiffen more and more. Didn't he feel sad about Mom anymore, like he used to? Maybe all this was my imagination and I was accusing him unfairly of things he hadn't done... I didn't know for sure.

At times I blamed myself for meddling in the affairs of adults. I was only a child and, of course, it wasn't right for children to judge their parents. That, unfortunately, didn't lessen my pain. My father must have sensed my negative thoughts and me not being happy with him. But he had only himself to blame for that since he never told me what Aunt Raina and he were talking about secretly and what they were hiding from me. Again I envied Eli. She was too young to understand any of this.

Just as the second school term started and the break was over, I saw Vera in the corridor of our school. She had a school book in her hands exactly the same as all the other teachers. I couldn't believe my eyes. Would she be a teacher in my school? I wanted to avoid running into her but it seemed unavoidable. I went to the other side of the yard pretending to look for someone, but suddenly I heard footsteps behind me and felt a hand on my shoulder. I felt uncomfortable but mostly because of the other children seeing me with her.

"Hristina, as you can see I'll be working here at your school. If you need anything let me know..."

I wanted to tell her I didn't need anything, especially from her, but of course I kept my mouth shut.

"My work as an editor at the old job took a lot of my time but I think I'll have more free time working here. I always really wanted to be a teacher, this was my old profession."

"What does all that have to do with me?" I wondered. The more I wanted to escape from this woman, the closer she got to me.

“Which grade will you be teaching?” I asked, unable to resist asking.

“First grade for the time being,” she said and smiled slightly, looking at me with her big black, kind eyes.

The school bell rang. I broke away from her arm that was hugging me and ran to class. It was awkward for me to look at any of my classmates, who I assumed had seen the new teacher hugging me.

“How do you know the new teacher?” Marina was the first to ask.

How should I answer her? What should I say?

“She lives near one of my relatives...” I said quickly in a rough tone voice, so that she would understand that I wasn’t in the mood to be interrogated by her.

As a result of all this I was distracted and unable to pay attention in class, to the lesson that was being given by our teacher.

I wondered if Vera’s transfer to my school was somehow also contrived. Or maybe it was a complete coincidence because she lived in this area. I was lucky she wasn’t teaching me. And why was I so lucky?

I was hesitant to tell Dad about this right away... if he didn’t already know. Of course he knew, she must have told him, I thought.

“Dad, did you know that Vera, who lives near Aunt Raina, is a teacher at our school?”

As I suspected, he did know so I had nothing more to ask him. From that I understood that he was in a permanent relationship with her, unless Aunt Raina had told him.

In subsequent days at school, I avoided going outside during our breaks to avoid running into Vera. At times I thought that it wasn’t

nice of me to do that and that maybe the woman was decent and didn't deserve to be avoided.

Some days I was curious to know what kind of teacher she was and how she treated her students but I couldn't get much from the first graders; they were too young.

Her presence in the school, however, was felt in other ways. The school began to revitalize extracurricular activities like drama, reading, literature, etc. Also preparations were being made to celebrate the school holiday. Vera, it seems, was involved in almost every extracurricular activity where groups of children gathered around her asking her about various things.

There was a strange defiance in me which wouldn't allow me to get near her and I didn't try, not even once. But she was persistent. No matter how far I was she never missed calling on me and asking me something, anything. I noticed that after each time she was in contact with me, she looked upset, even sad. Or was I imagining things? It was a kind of passive struggle for me not to let her get too close.

I participated in the drama section. I had been doing it since second grade and didn't want to miss rehearsals, despite how I felt about Vera.

I couldn't help but notice that from the moment I entered the room she had a sincere wide smile which attracted all the children, almost without exception. She had a warm calm voice, cordiality, intimacy and bright smiling eyes. The children loved her so much that they wanted to physically touch her. She patiently explained things to us and brought life to the characters we were supposed to portray. She even helped us to properly pronounce words.

After spending many hours with her, despite the conscious resistance that kept me at a distance from her, I began to discover I had new feelings for the woman. I became more and more attached to her, although I made great efforts to hide it both from her and from myself.

One day when I returned from school and found Aunt Raina at home, I felt that I could no longer hide what was bothering me so I asked, “Aunt Raina, is Vera, the teacher married?”

Aunt Raina looked at me. She was bit confused. Then she said, “No, she isn’t married.”

“Does she live with anyone?”

“Yes, with her mother and father...”

I wanted to ask why she still wasn’t married but I realized that wouldn’t be appropriate so I didn’t say anything.

“Do you see her often at school?” she asked immediately afterwards. Without waiting for an answer she said, “How good is she? How good is she as a teacher...?”

I didn’t answer her. I just went into the other room to do my homework.

The day of our performance was getting close and I wanted to practice my role. I thought of Vera again and again, even though I wanted no part of her. My ability to practice, for some reason, wasn’t going well. I put my forehead on the glass window and stared at the street. There were many children coming home from school, as the sixth class was dismissed.

Among the children I saw Vera walking down the street. She was surrounded by them on both sides. I quickly hid behind the curtain so that she couldn’t see me but I could still see her. As she passed right in front of our door she turned towards me, smiled and waved. I was surprised because I was sure that she couldn’t see me behind the curtain. Then she came inside and went into the other room. My father was standing at the open window.

I immediately left the room.

The next morning after my father left for work, I went into his room and quickly focused my eyes on the picture of Mom. I don’t know

why but lately I'd been thinking that one day I wouldn't find that picture there, and I wanted to move it more and more to the room where Eli and I slept. Of course I didn't dare without asking my father but I didn't have the courage to ask.

On the day of the performance we were all happy and wearing new clothes. In the last two days leading up to the performance everyone was talking about getting new clothes: my mother bought me a new dress, my mother sewed one for me, my mother knit one for me, my mother this, my mother that... You don't know how many times I wanted to run out of my class so as not to have to listen to them bragging about their good, loving and kind mothers. There wasn't a moment that those good and sincere friends of mine, carried away by the joys of life, could guess how painful it was for me to listen to them and hide the pain that burned my soul. But I wasn't angry with them for that. How could I be? And of course, I had been like them before the terrible disaster struck my family. Before that I never once thought there could be someone who wasn't as joyful as me and not carefree.

Dad and Aunt Raina prepared everything for me but I never once told anyone in my class that they had done it...

When parents started arriving in the hall, all decorated with flags and flowers, the excitement grew even more. I kept looking, expecting my father to be there anytime now. Each time I saw a new person enter I expected it would be him. Would he come or not? Someone from my family should be there to give me support when I was called to go on stage. I would be happier if more eyes were upon me when I did my recital. At the same time something else was bothering me. Even though I loved to see my father in the hall I was worried about Vera. Since Vera was the one welcoming all the guests at the door she would probably greet my father in a different way... And everyone would see that. Everyone would see that Vera greeted my father differently...

The hall was almost full. We kept peeking through the slightly open door which led to the stage. I still hadn't seen my father. I often looked at Vera and to me she looked like she was in a bad mood... perhaps because my father wasn't there. She was lacking the usual

shine she projected with her face and lit-up eyes. She was dressed in a light blue dress and her hair was shiny like gold in the sun.

The director opened the performance. He was a tall thin man, with little hair on his head. He wore an unusual pair of glasses which often slid down his nose. Otherwise, he spoke beautifully so it was a real pleasure to listen to him.

After that Vera led us to the improvised stage to perform the vocal songs. And because I was in the second row, I had to stand on my tiptoes to see if my father had arrived. Let him come now, I thought. I'm not sure if we were singing well but I saw him quietly enter the hall when we were in the middle of a song. He sat in the front row. Vera seemed to follow my gaze and saw him too. It seemed to me that she now looked more cheerful.

I wanted to do my role from the one-act play and my recital the best I could, better than anyone because my father was there. As I was doing my recital our eyes met several times. I found moral support, joy and pride in his look. Almost half of the people present in the audience were mothers. I looked for my mother. Oh, you don't know how much I missed her... My eyes were so full of tears I could hardly last until the end. As soon as the applause started, I ran off the stage. Vera was there to welcome me into her arms. At that moment I felt that Vera knew everything... both about tears and emptiness... and for the first time I let her hug me freely. I felt that hug, really heartily, sincerely, but quickly after that I got out of her arms and ran out to the street, and in my ears I could here my voice, like it was someone else's, yelling - Mom, Mom...

When I came back inside the performance had ended and everyone was being congratulated, especially Vera. On top of being congratulated Vera was also given flowers. No one could dispute that she was the main organizer of this entire program. Many of the young students also congratulated her, giving her big smiles and sincere warm looks.

"Teacher, wasn't the performance great? Let's do it exactly like that the next time," yelled one child from the group of children that had

gathered all around her. Some still hung onto her hands and didn't want to let go.

"Of course children, of course students," she kept saying with her energetic voice from time to time. You could feel the smile on her face even without looking at her.

As I thought, my father also came over to congratulate Vera. I didn't want to look because I didn't want to see how he looked at her. When he shook her hand, which was okay by me, unlike the others I quickly walked towards the exit door, being certain that my father would wait for her and that they would go home together. The other children had already joined their mothers and fathers and were leaving and having cheerful conversations and getting praise.

"Hristina," I heard my father say, which surprised me. He called me at that very moment when it seemed to me like he was the least preoccupied with me. He immediately caught up with me and threw his arm over my shoulder. He gave me a warm hug and we headed home. I don't know why but it seemed to me that Vera had told him to do that. But despite wanting to hug him here in front of everyone and cry on his shoulder, I proudly walked next to him and had the feeling that my father was the best and most handsome man of all.

Aunt Raina greeted us at the door. She had set the table for lunch. Today our lunch had to be more festive and richer also.

While my father was washing his hands, he was praising me and the entire event in front of Aunt Raina and Eli.

Eli blabbered that when she grew up she would also speak in a show.

"I'll say things better, won't I Aunt Raina?"

"Much better dear and how..." said Aunt Raina with a mechanical tone of voice and stroked her hair.

I heard footsteps on the sidewalk and looked out the window. It was Vera carrying a huge bouquet of flowers. She was coming to our

house. My father immediately found himself at the door and opened it. It was obvious, from his confusion, that he wasn't expecting her.

All red in the face, Vera handed the bouquet to my father and said, "I got so many flowers that I can't take them all home and Hristina really deserved them. She recited and acted very well."

I looked down at the ground shyly. My father and Aunt Raina almost took her inside by her arms. A plate was immediately set for her at the table. Even though she refused and really felt that she wasn't comfortable, she sat down to eat lunch with us.

I knew that it would be a great joy for any of the students to have Vera as their guest today... Why couldn't I feel that way?

"Next year, we'll enroll Eli in a nursery school," said Vera after we finished lunch, then stroked her hair. I thought that was an odd thing to say.

Eli was beaming with joy. She was always impatient and constantly asking, "When will I go to school?"

As soon as they finished their coffee, Vera got up and shook hands with everyone in turn. My father again went to send her off. Just like the day when we were at Aunt Raina's. It seemed to me that Vera was talking to my father only when they were away from me and I couldn't stop them.

"If the children are lucky..." I heard Aunt Raina whisper, without thinking that I might hear her. She was probably wishing that my father and Vera would get married. What I didn't understand was why we were "lucky"? Didn't Aunt Raina understand how I felt?

I went to my room and found the book with my mother's picture in it, along with pictures of the others who had died in the earthquake. I cried for a long time, holding it to my chest... my mother, my poor mother; no one could replace her...

When my father came back, I was lying on my bed but I wanted him to think I was asleep. He turned on the light and asked me if Eli and I had had dinner.

“Yes, we had dinner,” I said even though I only fed Eli. I didn’t eat a morsel.

When he sat on my bed, I knew he wanted to tell me something.

He sat there and said nothing. He was silent for a long time.

I had an idea of what he wanted to tell me and that’s why it was difficult for him. I wished we didn’t have to have this painful conversation tonight but I realized that in the end it wouldn’t matter.

“Hristina, you aren’t so young anymore,” he said, “you are even more mature for your age than most. I know how hard it is for you without your mother. It’s even harder for you than for Eli, precisely because you are older. You also know that it has been terribly hard for me too. But there is nothing we can do about that... We can’t exist for too long alone and without another mother.

The very words “another mother” were unacceptable to me. How could there be “another mother” other than the one who’d given birth...?

Stepmother, I would have accepted the word stepmother. I wanted to tell him, ‘Father you want to bring home a stepmother’. I wanted to tell him that rudely but at that moment Vera’s face appeared before my eyes and, I don’t know why, I couldn’t see her as a “stepmother”. A stepmother, I thought would be some other woman, completely different in looks and character. On the other hand, I thought that Vera herself would never agree to be just a stepmother. Fear began to fill my heart. I was afraid of the kind of stepmother Eli and I would have to take into our home. We would have to take her the moment my father decided. We would have no choice and nowhere to escape.

“You Hristina, you see,” my father continued, “I’ve been at work all day every day and Aunt Raina has been looking after you. But she is

getting old and sick. Soon she won't be able to come here and look after you. And you Hristina, you need to study, you should study a lot. You can attend higher education, even university..."

I kept quiet. I wasn't convinced that these were good enough reasons to make my father think about marrying someone. Like everyone else, he probably didn't want to be alone, with just me and Eli.

I remained stubbornly silent.

"You Hristina, you shouldn't be afraid. Everything I do I will do to make things easier and better for all of us. That's the way it will be. I promise you that. You trust your father, right?"

How could I not trust my father? I only had him. Only him. It would be terrible if I lost trust in him... But this, which he talked about with me tonight, was very difficult for me. I knew that there was nothing I could do to stop him if this was what he intended to do. I felt helpless.

"Oh Father, Father," I cried and threw myself on him. I hugged him while crying and all the time thought that this might be the last time he was free like this and only mine...

"Tina, Tinche (short for Hristina) calm down," said my father. He was also crying. At that point I realized how difficult it was for him too. Everything was difficult for him... this conversation we'd had... what happened to our family... These were painful things for everyone...

"Tina, everything will be fine, trust me, I'm your father," he said quietly through his tears, so as not to wake Eli up and scare her. Then he put me back on the bed, gently covered me, stroked my hair and, after turning off the light, went to his room. He didn't eat dinner that evening.

Sometime later I wanted to ask Marina why she didn't stay with her father and stepmother but I was afraid of making her sad. Almost every time she wanted to see her little brother, she asked me to go

with her. I felt that she didn't want to go alone. Her little brother's mother greeted us with the usual restrained expression on her face. I wasn't sure whether she wanted us to come and stay or come and leave right away. Marina didn't know what to say to her, nor she to Marina.

She would usually ask, "How is your grandmother, Marina? Or "How is school, Marina?" Those were the most common questions her stepmother would ask, to which Marina would usually reply with one short word: "Okay."

She rarely ever served us anything.

After visits like that Marina became even more withdrawn. I wondered if her stepmother had told Marina and her grandmother to move into the other apartment, or maybe Marina's grandmother couldn't stand to live with the woman her son-in-law had married after losing her daughter. How had Marina's father agreed to all this, I wondered. How could he give up on his own child? Then I remembered the first time I saw Marina's father with this new woman and how I was then convinced that my father would never be like that... do something like that.

Now everything was different. Now that my father had openly declared to me that he had such intentions, I wondered if the woman he would marry was Vera. Or was I making it all up in my head? Maybe he'd already chosen someone completely different?

That frightened me. If it had to be that father married someone, then Vera seemed to me to be the best candidate. And if Vera was pretending to be a goody-goody just to win over my father, then what would she be like after she had?

I should have asked my father or Aunt Raina a long time ago which woman my father was thinking of marrying. Why I hadn't I don't know.

Vera used to come to visit us almost every day. She didn't hesitate to help me with lunch and feed Eli, dress her and check my homework. I began to resist her less and less.

I noticed my friends looking at us with interest every time we left school together and watched to see if Vera came to my house. They were also curious when they saw us coming to school together.

In the evenings, when Vera stayed late with us, my father would escort her and spend time with her. Sometimes a long time... This became routine for them. Did they walk the streets, or did they go to her house? That I don't know. I sometimes wanted to follow them but that seemed so low and inappropriate. So I didn't.

One day when Aunt Raina came earlier than usual and Eli was playing in the yard, I asked, "Aunt Raina isn't it scary to have a stepmother?" I then began to cry and buried my head in her lap.

"Tinche, you're not a little girl anymore, what's wrong with you? Sit here with me for a while," she said and pulled me onto the couch next to her. I wiped my tears and sat down.

"Your father and mother loved each other very much. That's why they decided to have a family. You were born and then Eli. Even though you are young, you remember very well what a beautiful life you had, how good it was and how happy your mother and father were. But unfortunately misfortune struck and took your mother from us. The other mother, if your father decides to marry again, won't be able to be like the one who gave birth to you. But she can still be very good and you will love her because she will look after you and raise you to be a good person. You know that your father is a firm and serious man and he won't rush to marry just anyone."

I was just about to ask her if my father had decided to marry Vera, when Aunt Raina said, "Why can't you love her, or at least get used to a woman like Vera?"

Still no clear answer... Again I felt the same as when I'd talked with my father – in all these struggles of mine – if it had to be someone then let it be Vera. Even the very fact that I had reconciled with her as a second mother seemed to me like a kind of betrayal towards my late mother... I didn't know what to think about the fact that Eli was happy... She was so young and all this didn't torment her.

Aunt Raina looked at me with interest, waiting for an answer.

“She is a very good person,” I said and at the same time tried to imagine her as my other mother. Again I didn’t know how and why but in my mind it seemed impossible. If the character of Vera, the teacher, for whom I had warm feelings in my heart, didn’t mix with the character of Vera being my stepmother, it would be something completely different...

“Aunt Raina are you just saying that about Vera, or is it true?”

Aunt Raina fell silent and I felt like she wasn’t sure how to answer me.

“It could be,” she said quite vaguely and went to the washroom, as if wanting to end the conversation there.

So it must be right, I thought. I’m not dreaming up things. I tried to imagine her as a housewife in our house. I just couldn’t. I’d just have to get used to it, to call her Mom... No! I wouldn’t be able to! Eli hardly remembers Mother, if at all, and it would be easier for her, if only Vera was as good a person as she appeared to be.

Many things hinted to me that Vera might soon move in with us. I became more and more restless and more impatient. I became aware that life in our house would completely change. Aunt Raina would certainly come less often. My father and I would have less common things to do around the house and we would be less involved in household chores. And who knew how it would actually be?

I was constantly haunted by my desire to take my mother’s picture from my father’s bedroom and put it in our room. But I was afraid to do it without asking Dad. What if I just took it? So what? So what if he scolded me? How much could it hurt? But I knew it would hurt him. He might think that I no longer respected him, that I considered him unworthy of having Mom’s picture above his bed. And really, how would that look? Surely she, the new mother, wouldn’t be comfortable with Mom’s presence, even in a picture. Is that what

would happen, or was all this just a figment of my imagination? Maybe my thinking was completely wrong.

Anyway, I moved the picture. I could barely reach it because my legs were sinking into the quilts and pillows of the bed. I'd made my decision to take it the evening before and couldn't wait for my father to go to work. I didn't want to tell Aunt Raina because I knew she wouldn't let me. I managed to take down the picture and press it against my chest, like a thief stealing something precious which they had long dreamed of appropriating. After I went to my room, I hesitated for a long time as to whether I should hide the picture for now or hang it on the wall. I decided on my second choice. My sweet mother, I don't know how many times I kissed her picture before I decided to hang it up on the wall. I was so happy I cried. Now she would be closer to me and I would be able to look at her all the time, especially in the evening before falling asleep. She seemed more secure to me here and no one would dare remove her from this place.

"Mama," yelled Eli when she came into our room. She was happy to see Mom's picture above our beds. That made me cry. When she saw me crying she squealed loudly, probably because I was crying. She didn't understand why. I hugged her and lifted her into my arms, like I had when she was very little. I knew that I would always be closest to her like a sister and a mother all at the same time. She quickly calmed down when I smiled and managed to compose myself.

After I fed her and changed her into clean clothes, I let Eli play in the yard. Then I immediately went into my father's room again. The place where Mom's picture hung until recently was now empty but everyone knew there had been a picture there. I took one of the other pictures in the apartment and hung it in its place.

All the time I was at school, I was subconsciously thinking about how my father would react when he saw that the picture had been moved. Would he get angry? Would he take it from our room and put it back in its original place? What would I tell him when I saw him when I came home? How would he look at me? What answer would I give him when he asked why I'd done it?

My teachers kept looking at me and felt that I wasn't paying attention in class, not as well as I had other times. I seemed distracted but none of them asked me why.

Father, this way I might save you a lot of trouble. Imagine how hard it would be for you and the new woman if she asked you to take Mom's picture down. She might feel it was something unnecessary, something that got in the way, etc. What if she asked you to destroy that picture... and I heard her say it...? No Father, the best solution for the picture is to stay here with me. It's simple – I love that picture very much, I've wanted it for a long time, since you put it up. I wanted it to be in our room, mine and Eli's.

Confused, I went into the kitchen with my school bag in my hand while feeling my heart beating fast and hard. Dad was reading Eli a story from a children's book.

“Hi Hristina...” they both said and my father continued reading. I didn't get anything from the expression on my father's face. It was like nothing had happened. Maybe he hadn't seen or noticed the change, or maybe he was just pretending. It wasn't possible that he hadn't gone into either room during the entire afternoon. He was cunning that way. He didn't want to give away what he knew, neither suddenly nor rudely. Or maybe he had just moved the picture back.

“Hristina, go change your clothes,” said my father. At that moment I became aware that I was still wearing my school clothes, had my school bag in my hand and was standing in the middle of the kitchen.

That gave me a good reason to immediately leave and go to my room where my street clothes were and change. I felt excited before I turned on the light. I stood there for a moment wondering what I would see. There was no surprise. Everything was as I'd left it. “Daddy, Daddy thank you for understanding, you're a good father.” I said excitedly.

After we had dinner and put Eli to bed my father and I cleared the kitchen table and washed the dishes. All that time I got the impression that he wanted to say something to me but I was afraid of what it might be.

“Hristina, you wanted your mother’s picture in your room, right? If you had told me that, we would have hung her there earlier.” said my father, almost avoiding my gaze. It seemed to me like something was choking in his throat. And again I felt sorry for him.

“It’s better if it’s in my room father, isn’t it?” I said in a completely quiet tone of voice, but also with some defiance.

He looked at me and tried to understand what was hidden behind those words of mine, and to read from the tone with which I’d said them.

From the expression on my father’s face I realized that I’d hurt him and it made me sick to my stomach. My hope now was that he would only think that this was a simple wish on my part to have mother’s picture in my room and nothing more. It was too soon to determine if there was anything else, like why I was in such a hurry to take the picture without asking. Then an evil thought surfaced in my mind. Maybe by moving the picture I was helping him, if he had such an intention... to move it. However, I pushed that thought back down and said, “Dad, when you brought the picture home for the first time I wanted to ask you to put it in my room but I didn’t have the courage to tell you to do that then. So now, after it hung there for a long time, I figured I could have it for a while,” I said trying to justify myself.

“Okay, Tinche, I’m not angry at you,” he said, “but you should have made your intentions clear beforehand.”

The conversation ended there. And he knew or I believed he knew, the real reason why I moved Mom’s picture. And it was best to keep it that way.

I was happy that Vera didn't come to our house after school that evening, as she often did lately. I wanted us to be all alone: my father, Eli and I – and my mother in the picture.

“Marina, it looks like my father may be marrying Vera, the teacher,” I said to Marina one day during our long break at school. I felt like I had to confide in someone. I told her because I felt she would understand.

“I know,” she said. “That didn't surprise me at all because it seemed like almost everyone in the school knew. And all the neighbours too...”

“I just don't know what to do,” I said, pretending I wasn't that outraged. Marina was silent for some time like she didn't know what to say, but looking at the spark in her green eyes it was clear that we were going to continue this conversation.

“You should be very happy,” she said. “Vera is a very good person, at least that's how it seems to me.”

After that Marina immediately changed the subject. I knew that it was very difficult for her to talk about. Soon after that she left me and went with some other girls.

Perhaps Marina was right, as far as Vera was concerned. But I didn't want to accept what she said and feel relieved about the whole situation.

Marina still lived with her grandmother. Her father was so busy with work that she hardly saw him once a week and that was if she went to his house. Maybe that's why Marina was defiant, stubborn and sometimes wicked. It was like she wanted to take revenge on others for his misfortune. She also defied the teachers – she didn't want to answer questions and behaved like she was undisciplined. During our conversations, I warned her that what she was doing wasn't good, but I couldn't influence her. I didn't know what else to do for her. Who could do anything to fill that void in her life? I sometimes thought it would be easier for her if her father wasn't there... gone... given that he was present so little in her life.

When I wanted to talk about it she would try to avoid the subject and, if I persisted, she would alienate herself from me. So our intimate conversations became quite rare.

I didn't know how to help her. That would be even less possible in the future because I would probably end up in her situation and I too would be distancing myself from people.

Vera and my father had no wedding ceremony. Even their marriage registration went almost unnoticed. I saw Vera's mother and father, brother, sister-in-law and their two sons for the first time at lunch the day of the marriage registration. They were now, as my father explained, our very close relatives.

I avoided sitting down, for a long time, at the table where lunch was served on the occasion of the celebration, even after Aunt Raina had scolded me several times in the kitchen. This was probably because she wanted me to be as happy as her. She couldn't hide her joy that this marriage was finally taking place, which was obviously important to her. That day I didn't love her as much as I had before.

I wanted to leave this house. It was no longer our house... Dad's, Eli's and mine, and of course Mom's from the picture... Where could I go? I had the feeling that all these people who were having lunch at our table were somehow taking our house away from us in some hidden and insidious way. And I was helpless to stop them because my father, my father had allowed them to walk in here. He'd opened the door for them.

I finally sat at the table and looked down at the food feeling like I was sitting at someone else's table with other people; with strangers. My plate stayed full until the end but my father was too busy looking after our guests so he hardly noticed me, whether I was eating or not, and how I was feeling. You wouldn't believe the effort it took me to hold back the tears, ready to burst from my eyes several times.

"To your health... To your happiness..." our new relatives often toasted, raising their glasses of wine up high. The loudest were the

godfathers and their wives, whose shrill voices pierced my ears and my heart. The more they drank, the more cheerful they became. I watched our guests with dread expecting that any moment now they'd start singing.

The older woman, the one with the white hair and dark-rimmed glasses, wearing a dark blue suit, looked at me and Eli from time to time with sort of an unhappy look. She was Vera's mother. It seemed to me that she wasn't happy at all, as if she didn't approve of all that was happening here today. Vera's father was a decrepit but calm man, a real old man, in formal black clothes who was completely bald. He was already drunk and, perhaps because of that, tears constantly flowed out of his small, bloodshot eyes and rolled down his wrinkled cheeks.

The elder godfather sang somewhat softly, timidly, as if he was doing something illegal. The others looked at each other with uncertainty. Some looked at my father to see if he was open to the idea of singing. Vera's brother also began to sing. But the singing quickly died out. It was evident that there wasn't enough desire for the singing to continue.

I decided not to run away but I tried to make myself invisible.

No one had sung in our house in all these years. When I found myself in the hallway my tears began to flow on their own.

I hadn't noticed but Vera's brother's two boys came out right behind me. When I turned around they were surprised to see me crying. They kept staring at me not sure what was happening. I quickly wiped my tears. I didn't want them to see me crying. At that moment I became very angry and ran out into the street leaving them stunned in the hallway. Where did I go? To Marina's place...

"I was waiting for you," said Marina before I had a chance to speak.

I didn't say anything. I wondered how I would hide my red eyes, from all the crying.

"Are your guests still at your place?" Marina asked.

“Yes!” I said, not being able to hide my hostile feelings. “I think I’ll never be able to love my father the way I used to. It seems to me he now belongs to them.”

Marina tried to change the subject of our conversation but it didn’t work. She was always sincere and trying artificially, like she did today, didn’t work. Her grandmother treated us to some sweets, which she regularly made. I sat with them for a while but realizing that no one could ease my pain, not even Marina, I went home.

When I saw my father retire with Vera to his bedroom in the evening I again felt like I’d lost my mother all over again. I wept miserably while straining my eyes in the dark to look at her picture. Mother, why did all this happen to you, to us and now to Dad? Why does it have to be like this? It was nice when we were all in our old apartment with you and everything you did for us. How much do we have to be punished... and for what...? I don’t know... Maybe it’s this woman’s fault, the one who came here to live with us... Maybe she is to blame for at least some of our misfortune. Will she make our life easier or will she add weight to our problems? I wanted to take the picture off the wall, kiss it and beg for forgiveness for everything which would happen, starting tomorrow.

The next day when I was expected to face Vera as my father’s wife, I didn’t know what to call her so I tried to avoid her. I had never been as clumsy as I was in those first few days. I was breaking things... I wasn’t doing things right... and because of that I got even more nervous and things became worse.

Soon Vera started to bring some of her own items here and gradually began to rearrange our house according to her taste. All those changes and new things she brought worried me; they were foreign to me... Even the fact that I thought it was better this way and the house was more beautiful, I didn’t want to accept them.

A few days later when we sat down to breakfast, Eli asked, “Will Aunt Vera be ours forever, always?”

“Yes forever,” said Vera without waiting for somebody else to give her an answer. She then hugged Eli. Eli was very happy. Poor Eli, she needed a mother and would approach any woman who was willing to be her mother. She had no mother and I, of course, could hardly stand another woman in Mom’s place. Let Eli be happy and let Vera be with her.

Being freed from many of my chores, which at first was very difficult for me to let go, I gradually began to feel pleasantly relieved. I had more time to study, read books and even play, which I had almost forgotten how to do. Again I began to get used to sitting at a set table, with lunch prepared by someone else, eating with dishes washed by someone else, clothes washed and ironed...

If I did any household chores I would immediately hear from Vera, “Tina, go do your homework... Tina, have you read the book I brought you yesterday?... Tina, if you’re done studying go out and play... Tina, go for a walk...”

At first I felt uncomfortable that she, a teacher, the woman who had just arrived in our home was doing things for me that I’d been doing for a long time. At first I was defiant and didn’t like to be told what I couldn’t do. But she persistently tried every day to relieve me of all my obligations and she succeeded. She probably thought I was too young to take on such obligations. And even though she worked at school regularly and taught her class successfully, she did everything on time and properly at home. My father too, rarely had to help with the housework.

Bent over her work from school sometimes at night, I would stare at her nimble hands moving unnoticeably, checking and grading papers... Those hands became dear to me because everything beautiful in the house came from them.

Of all of us Eli seemed to be the happiest. No one could say when and who taught her but every third or fourth word coming out of Eli’s mouth was “Mama Vera”. It bothered me at first but I realized that it wasn’t only inevitable but also completely understandable given what Vera did for Eli and for all of us, from the first day she came here. She was nothing but a mother. She brought back the

warmth and comfort of our home and helped us feel safer under our roof.

For Eli the day began with a song, which seemed to spring out of Vera's mouth. That was followed by a warm breakfast, then looking at picture books and booklets. Vera's classes were mostly in the afternoon so Eli was never without Dad or Vera. For me, the responsibilities of looking after Eli were quite few and voluntary. I could take her for a walk if I wanted... and only if I had no homework. I could tell her a story if I wanted, or read a book to her.

After some time I noticed that my father too was reading in the evening.

"What are you reading, Dad?" I asked him one day.

"I also enrolled in school," he said and smiled. "I'm a student now too..."

"Really...? What kind of school?" I asked with interest.

"At university," he said, seeming like he was bragging.

That made me very happy. I was excited that entire evening. It was very important for children to brag to their friends about what kind of jobs their fathers and mothers had and from what kind of school they'd graduated.

I felt very uncomfortable at school the first days after Vera married my father. It seemed to me that the girls, if they were whispering something to each other individually or in groups, were talking about me. During our breaks I avoided going out into the yard. I didn't want to run into Vera. It was even more difficult for me now.

"Is Vera really your mother?" one of the girls asked me one day as she passed by me in the yard.

"Stepmother, not mother," I heard Lidia whisper. She was a girl with curly red hair from the other class. She constantly hid behind

the girls and pounced on them unexpectedly, making all sorts of unwanted comments.

“You’re really boring,” Marina told her, jumping to my defense wherever I needed it. She then took me to the other end of yard.

“She’s stupid,” she said mockingly and we immediately started a new conversation.

Stepmother... Once again that word. You don’t know how rude that word sounded to me, even though it was said in a whisper. It was so insulting... At that very moment I couldn’t connect this word with Vera, our new mother. I felt she didn’t deserve to be called stepmother, at least not now. If Marina hadn’t pulled me, I don’t know what I would have said to my friends. I don’t know what kind of answer I would have given them but I felt the need to protect Vera. I thought she’d been wrongly accused.

When we were alone again Marina said, “Sometimes I feel sorry that you don’t have a grandmother like me.”

I knew what she meant by that. I had Aunt Raina and every time she didn’t come to our house I went to hers... but that wasn’t the point. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, our house was becoming more and more comfortable. Every word Vera said to me, or Eli, or to Dad was warm and kind. She never expressed any concerns about us. She was always happy to be with us, help us and do good. So I had less and less reason to oppose her and was getting more and more attached to her.

Of course I didn’t want Marina to know all that, because if I compared Vera to her second mother she might feel worse and even more bitter, which was already overwhelming her. Most of the time I ignored her direct questions or twisted things.

At the same time, with regard to how I felt about Vera, I began to develop different thoughts and feelings that opposed me deep down in my soul. They were eating away at me like a worm, not leaving me in peace. By loving Vera and getting closer and closer to her I felt like I was becoming a traitor, like I was betraying my love for

my dear dead mother. Wasn't I gradually allowing another woman to take her place in my life and in my soul? That thought gnawed at me terribly and there was no one to help me get rid of it; least of all my silent conversations with my mother's motionless picture on the wall. Maybe I should have remained persistent in my resistance to Vera. I shouldn't have let her take my mother's place in mine and Eli's life. My father could have done whatever he wanted. But I realized that this struggle would lead nowhere. Vera wasn't an opponent but a staunch and tireless ally.

My father seemed quite pleased with our connection and relationship with Vera. His biggest concern was that he might have to intervene once in a while so things would go smoothly between us, but he found that there wasn't much need for that.

One morning, when Vera and Eli had gone out to buy something from the store, I saw my aunt, my mother's younger sister, enter our yard. I wondered where she'd been all this time. I hadn't seen her in months. She was wearing a dark grey coat and carrying a small travel bag. She lived in another city and because of her job she rarely visited us even when Mom was alive. Suddenly I felt uncomfortable. I wasn't ready to talk to her, to tell her what had happened since we saw each other last.

The moment she walked in the door she began to cry out loud, like someone had died.

“Poor Nada, for whom did you struggle, to whom did you leave your children? It would have been better if you'd taken them with you, sister. Wake up sister, your husband has brought home another bride, wake up and look. Who cares about you rotting in the black ground, dear sister? Your husband didn't wait... not even three years to mourn you. Leaving your dear children in someone else's hands... to a stepmother? May fire burn her soul...”

I stood there petrified, shaken and horrified. I looked down the street, hoping Eli and Vera weren't coming.

My aunt wiped her tears with her handkerchief. I wasn't able to cry, probably because of the way she acted and everything she'd said.

“You regret your mother dying, don’t you?” she said with a scolding tone of voice like she knew this was the most painful thing she could say to me. I was silent with my head bowed. How could I convince her that none of what she said was true? At the same time I had no desire to do that.

“Where is Eli?” she asked abruptly.

“At the store with Vera. They went to buy shoes.” I said.

“With her, ha?” she said sarcastically and immediately stopped crying, “So this is how she has deceived you? By buying you clothes and things? Don’t you have a father to buy things for you? She buys things for you, ha!”

All the words she uttered were full of hatred, like she was talking about an enemy.

“It’s not your fault! What do you know? You’re children and can easily be fooled. It’s his fault... your father’s. But he will regret it you’ll see.”

I felt completely helpless. I was glad my father wasn’t here? It was a good thing that Aunt Raina wasn’t here either. I’m sure they would have had a big fight.

“Are you a good student?” she asked. The expression on her face changed slightly like she had something good to tell me.

“I can’t take you with me but I can take Eli. She’s coming with me right now. I’m not leaving without her. This is what your father has done to you, my child. Put you through hell and made you live with a stepmother. Where even the crust of bread you bite tastes bitter. This isn’t something you can learn in school...” she said talking non-stop and waving her hands in all directions. “Don’t fool yourself because she is nice in the beginning that she’ll always be nice. Everyone is like that. Then they take over... After she takes over your father it will be curtains for you... She’ll do as she pleases. And wait until she has a child of her own... It will be hard and bitter

for you. You poor children...” she said and wiped her eyes again, even though they were already completely dry a long time ago. She then stroked my hair whispering, “My sweet child. That is your destiny. Like it was your mother’s...”

She then walked around the rooms, looking at things she hadn’t seen before, which she was sure were Vera’s and hatefully pushing them around.

This woman was my mother’s only close relative but still I didn’t feel comfortable being close to her, nor could I confide in her about things that tormented me. I didn’t know why this was... perhaps it was because she lived far away from us and we rarely saw her? Or was it because she was so negative towards us, especially towards Vera even before she’d had a chance to meet her? I tried to justify her behaviour because of the great sadness she felt as a sister towards Mom, but still...

After a little silence she abruptly asked, “Does she beat you?”

This question was very strange to me in general because Vera was nothing but a gentle person. I couldn’t relate such a thing to Vera. I’m sure my aunt wouldn’t have asked a question like that if she knew Vera even a little bit. Vera would never do such a thing even if we were her own children.

My aunt continued persistently, “You’re hiding something... Are you hiding something from your aunt? Is this woman closer to you than me?! Or are you afraid to tell me... because you think I’ll tell your father. I won’t say anything to him, I promise you. I want you to tell me what his intentions are. Don’t hide things from me...”

All this time I kept quiet because I knew that whatever good I said about Vera would make my aunt even angrier and she wouldn’t believe me anyway.

“If she hits you or if she doesn’t give you food, don’t tell your father he’s already married to her, but write me a letter so when I come back I’ll show her a thing or two. I’ll let her know that even though you are without a mother, there is someone to defend you. Then I’ll

take care of your father too. Now I'm going to town to do a few things and I'll come back to pick up Eli," she said. "Also I want to ask your father a few things but not much. At least Eli will have some peace with me for a while."

"Aunt, don't be angry with Dad about Eli, he won't let her go. And I don't agree either, I can't do without Eli. She is fine here."

"Well I can see that you too are against me; you're all giving up on us. Now you have another mother," she said sarcastically, "so why would you need your deceased mother's relatives?"

She stopped talking for a moment and started up again:

"I'm your mother's sister and what is there dearer and closer than a sister?"

"No Aunt, no one said we don't need you," I tried to explain to her. "Why are you talking like that, it's not true. Why shouldn't we love you? But the truth is Eli is fine here and so am I. Dad and Aunt Vera take good care of us."

"I know, I know how good they take care of you," she said sarcastically and didn't want to hear any more.

She finally said, "I know," one more time before she left.

It felt like a heavy burden had been lifted off my shoulders when she was gone. I figured when my father came home he could argue and negotiate with her. What nonsense! She wanted to take Eli now that my father was married. Where had she been until now? When father heard what she had to say he would probably kick her out. I'm sure Eli wouldn't want to hear about going with her either. She barely knew our aunt. Vera and Eli got along better than most people. It was never difficult for Vera to please her and follow her wishes.

I rushed to do my homework because I didn't have much time. I wondered if I should tell Vera that my aunt had been here and that she would come back. But I decided to tell Aunt Raina instead, the

moment she arrived. I probably wouldn't see Vera until later in the day because Vera and I would both be at school at the same time.

But, as it happened, Vera and Eli came back first followed by Aunt Raina. Vera immediately noticed something in my facial expression and my behaviour. She looked at me carefully several times. Nothing could be hidden from her eyes. However, I still didn't tell about my aunt's visit. At one point, when Aunt Raina was alone in the kitchen I told her. She, probably knowing my aunt better than I did, wasn't at all surprised.

When I told her that she wanted to take Eli with her, she shouted, "Is she out of her mind? It's a good thing your father wasn't here. She wouldn't have had a good time with him, that's for sure."

"Aunt Raina, could she take Eli by force?" I asked with fear in my voice.

"No, she's not capable of doing such a thing," she said, thought about it, and continued. "Even if we gave Eli to her, she wouldn't take her. If your aunt wanted to help us she would have done so when you were much younger and alone. She just wants to show that she is concerned and cares about you. Go to school and don't worry. I'll take care of her."

It was difficult for me to pay attention in school with all the things that had happened that day at home. I was tempted to run over to the house during our long break and see what had happened. I didn't want them to break relations with my mother's sister, no matter what kind of person she was. No one could convince me that she didn't love us and wasn't concerned about how we lived. She lived far away and had many worries and responsibilities of her own; and she expressed her feelings for us as best as she could.

Vera came over to see me.

"Tinche, is something bothering you? Do you feel well?" she asked looking at my face with concern.

That concern of hers bothered me at that moment. It seemed exaggerated and therefore perhaps not so sincere. But when I met her gaze I immediately realized that I was wrong. I wanted to confide in her but I thought that if I did tell her what had happened that morning, she wouldn't like it at all. At the same time Vera wasn't a relative and we weren't that close.

Vera kept looking at me like she needed to know something from me. Suddenly she hugged me, pulled me into her arms as if she wanted to say, whatever it is don't worry, your father and I are here for you. My eyes pooled with tears. Fortunately the bell rang and I got out of her arms and ran back to my class.

Why couldn't I trust her? When school was over, I didn't want to wait for her, so I ran home by myself.

I saw Eli from the distance playing in the yard with her neighbour friend, Mariche. I don't know why I thought she was in some sort of danger and needed me to save her? I wanted to give her a big kiss and forget all the nonsense.

Then I saw my aunt, my mother's sister, run angrily out of the house with a travel bag in her hand and, without saying goodbye to me or Eli, left through the front door. I looked at her. She almost collided with Vera, who at the time was going inside the house. I too rushed inside and headed for my room, fearing that Vera might ask me who that woman was wearing the black handkerchief on her head. I didn't know if my father would want me to tell her about my aunt being here this morning.

Even before I closed the door to my room, I heard Vera ask Dad, "The woman I almost ran into at the door, who left our house in a hurry a little while ago, was she a relative of yours? I don't know her. She looked kind of strange and was terribly angry."

My father was silent for a while, looking like he was thinking what to say.

"She is Nada's sister," he said, and when he mentioned my mother's name in front of Vera, I felt a strange discomfort.

Vera didn't say anything. I don't know why. Was she waiting for my father to tell her more about this visit, or was it simply awkward for her to ask more questions. But the fact that none of Mom's relatives had set foot in this house since Vera came here was a clear indication that they didn't like her or my father marrying her.

After some time I heard my father's voice again, "Of course, you're interested in knowing more but I don't know how to explain it to you, that she's just a simple woman. She feels sorry for her sister and wants to help somehow, but doesn't know how." My father sighed.

I was glad that my father came to the same conclusion about my aunt as I had. At that moment I felt it was a mature decision, at least it seemed that way to me. I also felt sorry for my aunt and decided, when all this was forgotten, to write her a beautiful, long letter and tell her about some of the things she didn't know about us since we rarely saw each other.

Tension between us seemed to be rising in the house as a result of my aunt's visit, which tugged at us in the most painful places, taking us back several years.

Living in her own world, Eli ran into the house from the yard with all her cheerfulness and carelessness, carrying a whole bunch of toys in her hands and yelling, "I'm hungry, I'm hungry."

That helped us all snap out of our preoccupation and get back to our daily lives so that we could bring order to the house. I was also very hungry because I'd eaten very little lunch at school, so I joined Eli and yelled, "I'm hungry too". Vera ran out of her room to prepare something for us to eat.

"I would like a fried egg," said Eli in a serious tone of voice.

"And you, Tina, what would you like to eat?" Vera asked setting aside her personal feelings.

"Are there any leftovers from lunch?"

There was plenty left; almost all of the food was left. Apparently nobody felt like eating lunch that day. From that Vera figured that Dad was hungry too and gathered us all for dinner.

In the following two years, my aunt tried several more times to prevent us from having good relations with Vera, as if wanting to disrupt the harmony that we had created in the house. I believe she did it out of fear that we might forget our mother, her dead sister. Neither my letters nor the conversations between her and my father helped... Vera stayed out of all our discussions with her. That, of course, made my aunt even angrier. She felt no opposition from Vera, which is why my father had the worst time. But he still didn't hold a grudge against my aunt. He was trying to understand her motives.

How could we forget our own mother? She was part of us. It was most unfortunate that her life had ended so tragically. We remembered everything about her, the smallest detail of her qualities, even completely unimportant things.

I was rarely surprised and excited at the same time, but when Vera suggested that we go to the cemetery together, I was both. My father had been on the road for almost two weeks and wasn't home, so Vera decided to take us. I don't know why but it seemed to me that going to the cemetery should have been uncomfortable for Vera. I even expected her to try to trick Eli into thinking she was her mother, and not the one buried there somewhere, because Eli could barely remember mother. But the opposite happened. Not even a week passed without Vera saying something good about our mother, reminding us of her qualities that my father had told her about.

When we went to the cemetery alone that day, without Dad, I saw that Vera knew where my mother's grave was and led us directly to it. We carefully cleaned the stone and poured water on the flowers which almost covered it. I couldn't hold back my tears when I saw Vera arrange the flowers we'd picked up from our yard. We brought flowers and placed them in the vase sitting on top of Mom's grave. We cleaned and washed the marble stone, whitened by the sun, so that my mom's image could be clearly seen. It was very painful for

me to look at her, here on this cold stone. Vera was looking serious with some reverence for the dead expressed on her face. Eli was looking at me and at Vera, and pulling at our hands wanting to go home.

People in several places around us mourned aloud over the graves of their loved ones. It was Sunday. There were people visiting almost every grave. It was very difficult for me.

Before we were ready to leave we stood by Vera, Eli on one side and I on the other, and said goodbye to Mom.

“There’s nothing dearer than a mother,” said Vera, more so for herself than for us. I wanted to hug her, to cry on her shoulder. I felt that she would understand why. She was very understanding. I was sure now that if someone was to replace Mom, I would want it to be Vera and only Vera, and that nothing bad could happen to us with her around.

Time seemed to fly. Eli also started going to school. She was taught by a colleague of Vera’s. Vera wanted Eli to be taught by her because she was very good, a good teacher.

One day while I was doing my homework in the hallway Eli was playing in the yard with two kids from her class.

“My mother’s a teacher also,” I heard Eli say to her friends convincingly. I felt unusual. Those words coming out of Eli’s mouth sounded convincing even to me and completely normal. It might seem unfair but at that moment bitterness filled my soul. Over time Eli seemed to remember our real mother less and less. I never did call Vera, Mom, right from the start and it stayed that way. I know that most children who have stepmothers were forced to call them Mom. Even though I think Vera really deserved it, I didn’t call her Mom, ever. Vera, of course, didn’t expect me to and wouldn’t in the future.

I continued to listen to Eli’s conversation with her friends. I was afraid that in response to her boasting that her mother was a teacher,

they would tell her that Vera wasn't her real mother. But her friends seemed to pay no attention and started talking about something else.

They were so young.

Over time my father continued to go on the road. Sometimes he was away for more than ten days. His absence, however, wasn't so difficult for us. Life continued normally. We were happy living with Vera. Her being there for us became a good part of our lives.

"Your father went on the road again," Vera said one evening after I returned from Marina's. "It's better for us when he's here but what can we do, that is his job."

"Will he be away long?" I asked.

"A week, maybe more... Did you do your homework with Marina?"

"Yes I did but I think it would be better for me if I do it alone. She likes to talk a lot and waste time."

"I think it's better to work alone too, you can concentrate more. I know you feel sorry for her because she's alone with her grandmother, so you should go and see her after you do your homework."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

When we got home the next day Eli was complaining about her head. Later she complained about her stomach. After that, just before going to bed, she started vomiting. Vera looked at me with fear in her eyes. What to do? She couldn't leave me alone with Eli in this condition and run to get the doctor, nor could she send me alone to get him.

Vera took Eli's temperature. I didn't see the reading but from the expression on Vera's face I knew it was bad. Vera became even more concerned. Eli kept throwing up. There were changes in her face. Vera stayed with her, holding her hand, stroking her hair and cooling her forehead with a wet towel. Eli was breathing hard. From

time to time she would open her eyes as if asking for help from Vera.

Several times she yelled, “Dad, Dad...” Vera could barely hold back her tears.

I went to the window and looked outside. We need to call a doctor, I thought. Vera had her face pressed against Eli’s.

“Mama, Mama,” whispered Eli.

Was Eli calling Vera in her helpless condition her real mother, who had been gone a long time. At that moment I didn’t know.

Realizing Eli’s condition was getting more serious and nothing could be done there and then, Vera quickly wrapped her up in a thin blanket, lifted her into her arms and together we all ran to the hospital. It wasn’t very far but still I wondered how Vera could carry Eli, who was quite chubby.

After the doctor examined her he said it was some kind of severe poisoning and placed Eli in a bed. We spent the whole night with Vera by her side. She had to be given medicine periodically, which the doctor on duty had left with us. I dozed off and on at Eli’s feet until morning. Vera didn’t close an eye all night.

After the crisis was over, like Eli, I too considered calling Vera, Mother. In any case it really didn’t matter because, like Eli, I also felt we already had a mother.

When my father came back from his trip he was horrified about what had happened. I told him everything in detail. He was happy that all went so well and that we’d become even closer to Vera.

Like other times when we were finished school, Vera and I came home together.

“After you finish this year,” said Vera. “You’ll be going to high school and we won’t be walking home together. You’ll be a big grown-up high school girl. But I will still be at this school with Eli.”

“I know all the teachers in this school and I’ve become used to them,” I said. “Who knows how it will be for me there.”

“You have good work habits, there’s no reason for you to worry,” answered Vera.

In fact, since I started going to school I’d never had a single four (less than 80%) in any subject.

When we came close to our house Eli came to meet us. At the same time I saw a man with two small children coming towards us. He smiled at Vera kindly and looked at her carefully. I noticed from the expression on her face that Vera felt uncomfortable seeing this man and wanted to avoid him. She was trying hard not to look in his direction. When I saw that I rushed over to her and so did Eli. I must admit that I was very curious about this man and what he wanted with Vera.

“Vera,” I heard the man with the two children say.

She tried to pretend as if she didn’t hear him but then he yelled again.

Vera paused hesitantly. Eli and I continued walking, leaving her behind. I purposely hung onto Eli and told her not to look back at Vera.

Who could this man be and why didn’t Vera want to talk to him? I wondered.

When he got close to her they shook hands. Vera then patted the two children on their heads. They spoke quietly.

At one point Eli looked back at Vera and, as if wanting her to come with us, she called out, “Mama.”

I also turned around and looked. He gave Vera a surprised look.

Vera stood there seemingly confused for a moment and immediately after that she hugged Eli, who had just run to her.

“Hristina,” Vera called me and, while pointing at me, said, “This is my other daughter,” with a kind of hidden defiance.

Eli kept touching the children on their heads and hands. I really didn’t know how to behave or what to do. That whole situation, although I didn’t know why, bothered me. After saying goodbye to the man and the children, I took a closer look at him. It seemed to me that he was looking at Vera with too much tenderness.

Vera suddenly became impatient. She patted the children one more time and we parted ways. We went home. She didn’t tell us anything about the man on the way home, and instinctively we felt that we shouldn’t ask. Eli and I agreed not to tell father either and we didn’t. If it was important we were sure Vera would tell him herself.

That evening, as well as several other times, I wondered about why Vera didn’t have children with my father. She didn’t look that old to me and I didn’t think age was a problem. Maybe my father didn’t want any more children, thinking it would be better for our sake. Sometimes I thought that if a sibling had been born, it wouldn’t have been awkward. At least that’s what I thought now that we had become close to Vera.

In the days that followed I got the feeling that Vera wanted to tell me something but couldn’t find a suitable moment to do it. I thought it had something to do with the man we’d met but I wasn’t sure.

A week had passed and I had almost forgotten about it when, one evening, Vera covering us in bed as usual before going to sleep, said, “I want to tell you a true story tonight.”

Eli and I perked up our ears curiously and listened carefully.

“There was a time when a brother and a sister were born to a family,” began Vera. We could sense great excitement in her voice, so great that she whispered some words.

The little sister was older. They lived very happily in their home. The children were loved very much. The girl loved her friends, both older and younger, and all the children in the world. The girl and her little brother grew older and older. The girl had almost grown into a woman and thought that when she got married she would have many, many children and that she would love and care for them. This was probably why the girl decided to be a teacher, to work with children. At first that wish came true. She became a teacher and the students loved her and she loved them all. She wanted to live with their sorrows and joys and help them in their first steps in life.”

Vera paused at this point, seemingly finding it difficult to continue. It seemed to me that she hesitated wondering if she should continue to tell the story.

“When that girl finished her teacher’s training and became a teacher, she fell in love with a young man who she’d known for a long time. He was an architect. The girl loved the young man very much... When she married him they lived a very happy life. But unfortunately it didn’t last long. A bad thing happened; it was worse than the girl could imagine. Several years passed and no children were born. The doctors determined that the young woman would never be able to give birth to a child. She couldn’t imagine a more terrible punishment than that, especially since she loved children more than anything in the world. Gradually she became aware that she and her husband would never be happy because of that terrible truth, no matter how much they loved each other. They didn’t spare spending money looking for a cure. Her husband took her to see many doctors and got her all kinds of medicine from all over the world. But all this was in vain. Nothing helped.

Finally the truth came out. It was the hardest thing she’d ever heard. A well-known doctor told her that treatment was unnecessary because her deficiency, for which she couldn’t have children, had been there since she was born and couldn’t be removed with any medicine.

Then came her biggest disappointment. She didn’t tell her husband but, deep down in her soul, she began to think about leaving him. She wanted to leave her husband precisely because she loved him

very much and because he was a good man and deserved better. If I was punished by my fate not to have children of my own, the woman thought, at least let him have his. Why should he be a victim of my tragedy?"

It became clear to me that with every word Vera uttered, this was her story and at times I wanted to stop her from telling it. It was all so painful, and her face was so sad, her lips quivered and it seemed to me like she would burst into tears at any moment. Eli, I believed, didn't fully understand all these things, but since she was also sad I realized that she felt how we felt.

"The poor young woman fought with herself for a long time wondering whether to tell her husband openly that she wanted to separate from him or just tell him she no longer loved him," continued Vera, pausing a little, as if to gather her strength. "If she'd told him that she wanted to separate from him she knew that her husband wouldn't let her. So she began to pretend that she'd stopped loving him; that she couldn't live with him. She even went to stay with her parents for ten days several times but then returned to him again.

At first her husband was surprised by her actions. Then he seemed to come to terms with them and told her that he didn't want to force her to live with him if she didn't love him anymore. He suffered greatly because of all that. Of course, all of this was painful for her too but she didn't want to give up her idea and was determined to have him leave her and establish his own home in which he could have children.

When she decided to leave him permanently and stay with her parents she fell physically ill and it took a long time to recover. At that point she realized that she was left not only without children but also without her loved one. She fought with herself for a long time, wondering if she'd done the right thing.

Her husband was deeply affected by all this. He might have even have guessed the real reason why she'd left him but he never questioned it. It is certain that somewhere deep in his soul a doubt was born and eventually he figured out the truth, but it was too late.

Even though they were separated for almost an entire year he still tried to convince her to come back to him but it was in vain. She didn't tell anyone the whole truth about what made her act this way, not even her mother.

Before telling her he was getting married he spoke to her one more time, begging her to reconsider. Then, when she rejected him that time she realized that she would be alone forever, without her loved one and without children.

As hard as it was for her to see him married and living with another woman, she expressed joy and sadness at the same time. Then she found out that the following year that he'd had a son. This was made possible only because she loved him and the son he had, in her mind, was somehow also her son, to whom she should have some right. Many times she wanted to go to their house, take the child in her arms and hug him. But that would be unfair to his real mother and she would probably not understand her motives. So she didn't do it. She accepted the fact that the child belonged to his father and mother and not to her. As a result she suffered even more," Vera's face was now full of despair, visible even in the semi-dark room lit by a dim night lamp.

"It was during that time that the terrible earthquake took place. The moment the woman freed herself from her own house, she ran as fast as she could to the house where her ex-husband lived with his wife and child. She was overjoyed when she found them alive and well. Then she immediately left, not wanting to be seen.

Then, in all those terrible days that followed when the radio began to broadcast the names of those who had died in the earthquake, she was horrified to hear the name of one of her classmates from the time before she enrolled in the teacher's school. She knew that she, her friend, had graduated from the school of economics and worked in the bank. Indeed, they hadn't seen each other for a very long time, but she knew that she was married and had two children. Her heart sank when she read the tragic news about the death of her friend in the newspaper. When she read the names of her children who were now without a mother her heart was deeply carved. She felt very

sorry for them being left without their mother, just when they needed her the most. Those days were sad for all the people and terrible for the children.

The woman became very restless. Shouldn't she find her classmate's children and help them? That thought haunted her constantly. She had no peace.

One day she decided to go to the cemetery where the victims of the earthquake were buried. But that was the time when many of the families had taken their dead and buried them in their own cemeteries. She found her classmate was no longer there, in the common cemetery. The woman walked around the cemetery looking for a long time but it was all in vain.

She thought of writing in the newspaper that she was looking for the children of her classmate who had died but that would have been awkward.

Her loneliness and desire to have children by her side, to take care of once again, made her walk through the cemetery, hoping to find some kind of clue. Then something happened that only happened in stories. She ran into a man who was carrying a bucket of water from the tap to a grave, probably to wash it, or to water the flowers. She stopped him and asked, "Excuse me Sir, there was a woman buried near here who died in the earthquake. She worked in the bank. Do you by any chance know what happened to her?" She then told him her first and last name. The man looked at her with a surprised look and said: "How do you know that woman? She was my friend and also my wife."

Then the woman who'd asked the question and was also surprised, followed the man to his wife's grave. Although she hadn't seen her in a long time, the woman recognized her friend from the picture on the white marble monument. She began to cry hard. In those terrible days of the earthquake, people even cried for complete strangers, neither seen nor heard, it was a terrible time. Her dead friend's husband also began to cry."

Listening to Vera's story I felt myself crying silently with bitter tears.

"Then," continued Vera, "she told him about being friends with his friend and how difficult it was for them to separate when they decided to go to different schools. After that the two women saw each other less and less and that's how life separated them."

After some time the woman visited her friend's grave several times but she didn't see her husband there. When she did see him it was inappropriate for her to ask him who took care of his children, or to find a way to suggest that she should help them. She figured that they had close relatives who were there for them during those difficult times.

Then there was another coincidence. Her friend's husband came to the printing house, where she was a proofreader, to do business. She worked there temporarily after the earthquake because most schools were destroyed. There he gave her the address of his house and invited her to his home to meet his children. This was difficult for her so she put off going. But the more she put off going the more difficult it was for her to go.

When she saw those children for the first time, about whom she'd thought for so long, she realized that she could fall in love with them. But she didn't know if they would love her back. She wanted to be there in place of their mother because she knew that no one could completely take the place of their real mother. She wanted the children to love her for who she was and not necessarily as their mother. This way they would feel less than being completely without a mother and her less without children.

The children's father seemed to think that this particular woman would be able to love them and take care of them. So the man and the woman decided to start a new life together. One day they got together and began to grow their relationship.

Then one day when the woman ran into her ex-husband with his son and daughter, she proudly showed him her two already grown up daughters. They really were her daughters. Weren't they? At least

that's how the woman felt about them with all her heart. And they too, the woman thought, also loved her as a mother, as another mother?"

Eli and I, as if by agreement, burst out and hugged our mother Vera tightly, crying together with her.

I knew that our three hearts were beating together, loudly at that moment; something which I would never forget. There and then I knew that my feeling for that other mother would in no way ever hurt the feeling of the mother who gave us birth, who we'd lost in such a tragic way. Both Eli and I now carry two mothers in our hearts, the one who gave birth to us and the other who helped us grow into real people. I think that would be fair to both.