

**Antje Rávik Strubel**

**Blue Woman**

**Fischer Verlag, 2021**

(Excerpt: pages 78 - 105)

The warmth from the vodka had worn off. “A few tears, Sala, won’t make anybody lose their nerve right away.”

But there isn’t anybody in the kitchen except for her.

Leonides. Who acted as if she had miraculously fallen from heaven. At his feet, of all people, Leonides Siilmann, severely nearsighted, pushing forty, and hailing from a battered emerging country.

Now he’ll have to act as if she had miraculously dropped off the face of the earth. And since it is in the nature of miracles to be capricious, he won’t look for her. It will prevent him from making inquiries.

*What do you want with me*, he asked sometimes, *what do you want with an old man like me?* he asked, when he was in a pensive mood, and about to confess those things to her that only teenagers confessed in the movies they had seen together. Only his dread of pathos held him back. Instead, he talked about being kindred spirits. He said, he felt as if they had known each other from a past life.

She liked going to the movies with him. His laughter in the dark, his reliable body in the seat next to her, the sour drop candies in his mouth that he bought at the box office. Later on, as they drove back in the Volvo, he turned on the heat and they talked about the movie, if there was anything left to talk about, then she fished the last drops out of the bag and popped them into his mouth. The green wooden house appeared in the arc of the headlights. Peaceful and foreign, it looked just like the home of the people in the movie.

When she entered the hallway the light turned on automatically, and she stowed her shoes inside a cupboard built into the wall. She now knew where the shoes belonged. The curtains in the rooms were shut. A timer took care of that, too, as soon as the sun went down. She lay down on the sofa and listened to Leonides pattering around, taking off his coat, picking up the newspapers that he had carelessly left lying around in the afternoon, walking into the bathroom and the kitchen. After a while, it smelled of black tea.

He brought a blanket and carefully wrapped the end around her feet. And our little life is rounded with a sleep, he whispered. It was one of his favorite lines from Shakespeare and he repeated it often.

He didn't push her, not in any way. Only once did he come up with the idea of traveling to Estonia together. His mother was no longer alive. His father and a younger brother resided in the area around Tallinn. He wanted to show her Tallinn; apart from Tartu, it was the only city worth mentioning that Estonia had to offer. And he wanted to take her to the coast, to the small town where he had spent many summers as a child. In autumn, the myriad rowan trees bathed the coast in the splendid red of their berries. Giant boulders lay on the shore that he had climbed on as a child. He read yellowed library books that the pioneer camp librarian had given him in boats that rocked in the water, until he had read through the entire collection. He discovered from the books that if he threw a stone over his shoulder into the sea, he could make a wish. After he had made friends with a boy from town, he threw lots of stones, wishing each time that when summer was over and the camp was closed, he could go and visit him there. But the town was in the restricted zone, and even the magical power of stones bounced off the Soviet border guards.

Adina had just moved in. She had stored her belongings, placed her toothbrush in a glass on the shelf in the bathroom just as her mother used to do, put her brush and nail file in a drawer, but she didn't have it down that the light switch was to the left, not to the right of the bathroom door. She had to adjust to this life, to being a twosome.

At night, she couldn't sleep and got up to lay on the sofa. When he woke her in the morning, she'd wake with a start. But on the days they ate breakfast together, she

managed to open the refrigerator door to remove the milk and eggs which he liked fried to a crisp.

She didn't want to go anywhere. Getting used to him demanded all her energy. He hadn't considered that. He didn't have to either, Leo, my Le, who could pursue any impulse, any bright idea. He pursued his desires lavishly, and if he felt like traveling to Estonia with her, he would make it happen. But then they would also have to go to *Harrachov* and *Tanvald* and *Jablonec* to keep things in balance. Otherwise, the pendulum would always swing in favor of one person. Which wasn't on his radar. Which never would have occurred to him. It would never have crossed his mind that one did not simply go to visit one's mother, even though she was still alive.

That was unfair. Leonides would not have protested. He would have thought it logical. Had she said just a single word about *Harrachov*, about the secret paths along the river, the trail along the ridge in the snow, and the *Labská bouda*, he would have insisted on visiting her mother.

"I don't want to go anywhere."

"No?" He knelt in front of her by the sofa. "Don't women place a high value on such things?" His eyes looked like juniper berries behind the thick lenses. "On family and stuff like that?"

"You're asking the wrong person."

"It's only a stone's throw across the Baltic."

She gently put a hand to his cheek.

"You think I'm old-fashioned," protested Leonides, who believed childhood was a better word for homeland, even if that childhood had taken place in an occupied country.

"Don't be angry with me, Leo."

"My father can't speak English," he said. "And he refuses to speak Russian. You'd get along great because you'd just smile at each other all the time."

She shook her head, and he made a last attempt.

"Wouldn't you worry less about losing me? Getting to know my father would give you a sense of security."

"Because you would owe it to your father to stay with me?"

"Sometimes you are relentless."

She had to smile and took off his glasses. Without the glasses, his eyes were much larger.

"You are all I need," she said softly, "to stay with you."

Leonides took the glasses from her hand and stood up.

"If I can't see you," he said irritably, putting his glasses back on, "I'll forget who's speaking."

Her denial hurt him. And yet he seemed relieved, as she noted afterwards in the days that followed the conversation. It was as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Perhaps he thought it would be courteous to introduce his family to her. And yet it embarrassed him. He was embarrassed in front of his father. A foreign temp worker, who barely knew where Estonia was had to be below the standards of his successful son, the professor of political science, envoy to a young republic. Leonides. She could find no other explanation for his contradictory reaction. And because she was too exhausted to bring up the subject again, she was content to have touched on something, something deep, for which, as he said, he could find no words, despite his worldliness. His mechanisms did not work on her. Which only proved to her that in their unequal relationship, he was not the foreigner, she was.

She no longer worked night shifts. She went to the hotel during the day. When she left the house, she pretended to go to the university, but instead continued to work illegally. Sometimes she drove to the area around the university. She got a library card. In the

stacks for world maps and atlases, she found a map of Estonia. Estonia was small, barely half the size of the Czech Republic. That surprised her. She lingered awhile around the shelf with the topographical maps. Even as a child, she had spent hours immersing herself in a terrain, in layer lines and shading that made it possible for her to imagine the differences in elevation between mountains and valleys. Now she was engrossed in the courses of Estonian waters, in elevations and coastlines, and followed with her finger the railroad lines between Lahemaa and Soomaa National Parks, between Lake Peipus and Haanja Park. She felt as if she were on an expedition. She had trouble reading. The letters began to flicker in the light that flooded the rooms from the skylight. She couldn't concentrate there, so she borrowed the books. In the small section for Czech literature, she discovered a novel she had read in high school. Later, among the English-language titles, she came across a book she wanted to keep. She renewed it several times. It was about a twelve-year-old named Frankie, who roamed the dusty streets of a small American town one hot summer. Frankie's summer was empty and lonely, relieved only by playing cards with a black maid. But it was also full of promise, a promise Adina knew well, and she feared for Frankie, and on sleepless nights she lay on the sofa with the novel and read.

When Leonides wasn't traveling, he cooked, made exotic salads, or put a fish in the oven. Sometimes she would see him standing at the kitchen window waiting. He took her backpack, looked inside it, but never commented on what she was reading. Since their first conversation in the kitchen, he never mentioned another word about the university.

She quickly knew the way by heart. She knew the changing colors of the houses, the potholes, the neighbors, the cats, she knew it all so well that she didn't need to pay attention anymore. Lost in thought, she walked towards her permanent address, for now she had an address, even if he wasn't there, but in Brussels, at conferences or meetings with MPs, Russian human rights activists or NGOs.

She never settled into that feeling. She took nothing for granted. Not because Leonides was temporarily living in Helsinki, in a university apartment, or because he owned his own apartment in Tartu.

Deep down, she suspected that Leonides wasn't forever.

The weeks and months with him were just a breather. Taking a breath is a vital necessity and stopping is nearly impossible.

So for the time being, she didn't stop.

\*

When the blue woman appears, we are alone. On the bench at the shore, in the shade of the trees, it's just her and me.

I walk through the underpass every day now. I haven't been to the Collegium in a long time.

Sometimes tools are lying scattered in front of the boat sheds. Varnish is on the ground. Between the buckets, the grass is rooting in a fresh coat of anticorrosive paint.

A portable radio is playing. Somebody had forgotten to turn it off. Finnish pop is blaring from the speakers. Beer cans lying crushed in the gravel; a sign that the slipway can be very busy.

\*

The liquor bottle is a quarter empty. *Viru Valge* is written in white letters on a blue background. The woman blowing the bugle under it raises the horn upwards, towards the neck of the bottle.

That is the sky.

The liquor in the bottle is colorless, pure Estonian vodka, *cleansing*, Leonides had said, *if you take it like medicine*. Now it is as dark as the kitchen, nearly black. She takes another gulp. It can do her no harm. Outside it is night, and *Viru* is untranslatable, a proper name of the same transparency as the liquid, and when she drinks this liquid and the vodka runs through her veins, she will be transparent too. She will be see-through.

Being see-through is a form of being invisible.

There is a gate called *Viru* within the city walls of Tallinn, Leonides had said. The gate has two round towers connected by an arch, and *valge* means white. In the past, anybody who wanted to enter or leave the city had to go through this white gate. The woman on the label gives the signal to leave and the gate opens.

She drinks.

That is the food.

When she screws the cap back onto the bottle, the thread doesn't grip. The cap pops out of her hand. Rain is drumming onto the flat rooftop across the way. Black, soundless rivulets flush light from the street lamps down the wallpaper. She can't remember when it started.

Maybe it has been raining for a long time. It has been raining since she went to the door. The doorbell ringing must have drowned out the sound of the rain starting to fall.

The man standing at the stairwell was a foreigner. He was a neighbor, who guarded the entrance to the apartment house so that nobody would feel inconvenienced; no one disturbed in this prefab building that people returned to after office hours to spend a quiet evening at home in the few square meters they could afford. The voice on the stairs was a stranger's. It was not the voice of the man who had spoken to Leonides at the reception in the palace. It was not the person who had said to Leonides, "My friend, you've got all of Russia against you."

The reception took place in a magnificent hall with chandeliers and oil paintings and long sumptuously set tables. Early September. When bouquets of fresh flowers stood everywhere. On an evening barely a week ago.

Not even a week, since she had left Leonides.

"Don't say that, Sala. How can you say such a thing?"

"Why don't you ask how I can do such a thing?"

She picks the cap off the floor and forces it back onto the bottle. She twists it in the right direction, but it slips away. She stands prone. No sound breaks the silence of the kitchen. The people in the apartment house have gone to sleep.

Nobody looks back from the window. Rivulets stream down the pane, pouring rain. The branches of the trees shimmer in the dark, the plumage of the maple, the bedraggled linden and the diaphanous spider web of the birches. *Viru Valge*, come to rest.

A black limousine had picked them up. It had stopped in front of the house and a neighbor came running out into the street, shaving cream still on his chin, to get a closer look at the ostentatious car. The chauffeur, who exited it, wore an elegant uniform, the sun shone on his black polished shoes. Had shone, past perfect. Perfect time. Perfect, but not flawless. Time has merely passed. It is done, gone forever. Yet, it was not long ago. A few days. September was just beginning. It still had the full force of summer, the September of this year, not the last one, a beginning of September that has now turned into a desolate middle of the month, with just her and the spiders in the empty flower pots on the balcony.

Leonides would never have allowed that. He would not have permitted it. Were it up to him, she would still be there, in the apartment paid for by the university. She would sit by the fireplace, or at the marble kitchen island, where she especially liked to sit in the morning, in the first light of day.

But he has no say in the matter anymore.

The limousine had brought them to the city hall in that fading summer. The leather on the seats was cool, the motor barely audible. During the drive, Leonides had taken a few bills from his wallet and placed them inside an envelope. At the reception, they were collecting for charity. He had also asked her for five euros, because he believed generosity should be more than what you are able to afford. "A donation doesn't benefit only the needy," he had said, "but also the donor. Giving should be a human right. If we are deprived of the opportunity to give, we lose our sense of self-worth, the recognition of equals among equals, and everything reverts back to denial and hatred."



The city hall was located near the train station. Two stone colossi guarded the massive palace. The wind had an icy core, but on the grand staircase the sun was warm, the dresses shone, languages were buzzing around her, and in honor of Leonides, she also wore a dress, the only one she owned, it was from a secondhand shop, made by a famous designer.

The participants of the conference had traveled there from all over Europe. Leonides was scheduled to give the keynote speech in his section but not until the next day. The reception was an opportunity for them to go out together. Maybe there would even be dancing after dinner, he had said to her, fearing all the while that she might back out in the end.

"National romanticism," Leonides whispered to her on the staircase. "This architectural aberration of taste is commonly called the palace."

Leo, my Le. With his charisma and a confidence that came from having had a seamless career. He was the envoy of a young republic, which gave him an added boost and she climbed the stairs in high spirits too.

An activist showed up in the queue outside the coat check, one of the many people with whom Leonides was in constant contact by phone or e-mail. She was vivacious, spoke quickly and emphatically, threw her head back when she laughed and seemed to be the only person not sticking to the dress code. Instead of evening clothes, she wore jeans and a tight-fitting white shirt that revealed her tanned skin.

"There they are again, all the saviors of the world, each one of them with that uplifting feeling of being the most important person in the world. What a vanity fair."

"I'm glad to see you too, Kristina!"

Adina had taken a step back from the jostling crowd and he turned around to her. "I used to get lots of things going with Kristina."

"We made an effort," said Kristina. "We slapped a lot of stamps on a lot of documents. We stamped loads of things."

"True. Only Russia and the EU still trust a stamp, probably the most forgery-prone means of authentication. I still think it's a rather telling common denominator."

"And what was the outcome?" asked Kristina, dodging a few pushy people who were in a particular hurry. "Evenings like this. A public display that everybody gets dressed to kill for."

"It's not as if you'd avoided a glance in the mirror, either."

"Typical. Gives the worst compliments and still gets the most beautiful women."

Leonides laughed. "Since your interests have shifted, Kristina, there's nobody around to point out my flaws anymore."

Kristina seemed to be one of the women he liked. Which wasn't a bad thing, Adina thought. She liked her, too.

"I don't think so," Kristina said, giving her an attentive, intense look.

"Sorry. This is Sala."

She felt light. The reception resembled the receptions at the hotel, except there were a lot more people, and this time she wasn't the one pouring the wine. The laughter, the flirtations, the conversations, the lapsing of laughter into silence, the slipping of smiles, the forlornness mid-sentence when somebody had been left standing alone, because somebody more important had shown up, the weariness that instantly flashed across the faces, all of that would be the same. Leonides sometimes held it against her that she was wary of people. But this time she would not be wary. This time there would be an island, an island of Leonides, this Kristina and her.

"If I know you, you've got to go and meet a bunch of people."

"Of course," Leonides said. "And you've profited from it!"

"If I thought it would be of use, I'd still be wallowing around in documents with you," Kristina replied. „Unfortunately, that doesn't lead to a happy ending. We need to send a clear message, when those who lose their centuries-old sovereignty of opinion declare this loss as the end of freedom of expression.”

"How is it that the past often seems better to us?"

"The past is better," Kristina said, "because it's over."

Somebody squeezed between them. She had wanted to say that the statement was true, yet it was also false because it didn't apply to a good present, but she didn't get the chance.

"She brought me back to politics," Leonides said, after Kristina had disappeared into the crowd. "She's a relentless activist. Somebody who goes to the barricades. Which you wouldn't know by looking at her. But you can bet she'll be where the earth is burning." He laughed. "Rock 'n' roll Kristina we used to call her."

(...)

In the foyer of the palace with high ceilings and wood-paneled walls, there were long tables with silver trays and bowls full of fruit and tiramisu. Her glass was being filled by one of the many waiters and Leonides murmured to her, "Excuse me a minute, will you? I have to say hello to somebody."

"Excuse me a minute," she says in the silence of the kitchen. She raises the bottle of vodka in a toast. "I have to say hello to somebody."

She yanks open the refrigerator door. Glaring light and the stench of onions greet her from the cold.

"Nice to see you," she says, as though somebody were walking towards her from the refrigerator, as though the man was approaching her from behind to shake Leonides' hand. "You found your way alright?"

"Siilmann, old chap!" the man shouts from behind her back. "I thought you'd grace us with a visit at the center in Berlin sometime?"

"As you can see, I'm struggling with the hurdles of the Finnish language instead."

"For you, as an Estonian, it ought to be a cinch! Doesn't it have a close kinship with your mother tongue?"

"I manage to understand a bit. But mastering it is out of the question," she hears Leonides say. "Care for a drink?"

"So nice, so nice."

"At first, I could barely remember the Finnish street names. Our memory doesn't kick in, until we know how to pronounce the words."

She puts the bottle back into the refrigerator. The cold blasts the back of her hand, strikes the pain in her joint, crashes over her. She knows she must stay still now, stand firm, that she must not turn around, not under any circumstances.

"Usually we remember what's useful for us," Leonides says. "We avoid pain. Pain wallows in the darkness, turns into the dark spots of history. Or as Lennart Meri, our first president so aptly put it after the Soviets withdrew: everybody talks about the death of communism, but nobody has seen its corpse."

"You haven't changed a bit," says the man at her back. "Still the same brilliant mind. Your endorsement, my dear Siilmann, is indispensable for our exile program."

"Oh, come now." says Leonides. "But there is one thing you have overlooked."

"Your courage. Of course, my friend, you have become more courageous. All of Russia is against you."

The man at her back clears his throat. And there it is, the sound of him clearing his throat makes her recognize him. She would always recognize that sound. The earth is on fire.

But the woman who is where the earth is burning doesn't sound the bugle; she is nowhere to be seen.

"Your demand to extend the Council of Europe's fourteen-eight-one resolution does not meet with universal approval. A European day of remembrance for the victims of Stalinism and fascism? You'll never box that one through, Siilmann."

Leonides laughs. It's his easy, familiar laugh. "There's no shame in having Russia against you in a case like this."

"Quite right, quite right. But the headwinds from Moscow and from our ultra-leftists are icy. You are the man who sullies the glorious role of the Communists in the fight against fascism. Not to mention relativizing the Holocaust."

"My dear fellow," Leonides says. "How much longer are we going to uphold such double standards? Weren't Nazi criminals tried at the Nuremberg trials? Explain to the Central and Eastern Europeans why there is no such thing as a Nuremberg for the Soviets in human rights-conscious Europe! Why are the crimes of the communist dictatorships not documented in a trial, why are the perpetrators not named? The millions of people who were deported, tortured and murdered in our country, while the raisin bombers landed in your country; I can tell you, in the entire Baltic region, you will not find anybody whose family had been spared. The international community must demand a similar coming to terms with the past. From Putin as well."

She holds the refrigerator door tightly. She clutches the door, which is the edge of the table, which is the table with the spotless white tablecloth, and the plates, and the end of the table that her hands use to propel her into the hall, where she staggers in the direction of voices getting quieter.

"You are an idealist, my dear Siilmann. I like that." A direction that was good, that she could head towards, that she had to continue on, because it led away from this German.

"Let's drop the politics," she heard Leonides say in the distance. "Come with me. I'd like you to meet somebody."

She kept walking, staggering all the way, the beating in her throat closing her windpipe, she didn't stop walking, her shoulders braced in the expectation that this man would step in front of her at any moment, politely feigning interest, but then recognition flashing across his face, a disparaging smile, an ironic glance at Leonides, whose expression hadn't changed. His face had that glow that appeared when he felt good, when everything was going well, a glow that now had intensified, because he had made a confession, had committed himself to her, confessed it to this German, to him, of all people.

Leonides was far away. But then his hand was at her waist. He was standing behind her. She had reached one of the large windows as the guests were still arriving outside the portal below. They were crowding into the palace.

She felt his hand, its faint pressure, and did not manage to lift her head.

"Sala," Leonides said quietly. "Not now. He's an important multiplier."

That is the last word she hears him say: multiplier.

\*

When the blue woman appears, there is always time. Time to look at the dry reeds, the rustling stalks, the wisps set like pennants in the wind, and the weed drifting in the waves. The wind blows the seaweed towards the beach.

She is not in a hurry.

As the sun breaks through the clouds, the rays flat, she places a hand protectively over her eyes.

It's as if she's been there for a long time. As if she had been there before the boats and the harbor ever existed.

I tell her how unusual our encounters are for me.

The blue woman takes away her hand. On her fingers she wears no jewelry.

She wants to know what usual means to me.

\*

The apartment is lacking light. It has been pitch dark since she slammed the refrigerator door.

It's as dark, as if her eyes had been bound by a black scarf. The cupboards must be to the back, the window, the postcards. But in this darkness, she doesn't know which direction the window is located, or the light switch. She has only lived there for a few days. She doesn't know the apartment by heart yet. She had found a platform on the Internet, clicked a link with the cheapest deals. She didn't look at the floor plan, or the layout of the rooms, she didn't check how large the spaces were, or if the balcony faced west, but she was lucky that it was a furnished apartment.

The clock on the wall makes no sound. Her eyes are wide open. She grabs her head with her hands to tear off the scarf, but the hands are not her own. They are other hands, and they are groping her somewhere else, exactly where, can't be said in this darkness. Only the dizziness is clear. It must be the dizziness that makes everything go black. She falls to her knees.

Those are the seizures.

While she is close to the floor, people are rushing up the flight of steps to the palace.

Rushed, she thinks. Past tense.

People were rushing up the grand staircase, flocking to the ceremonious reception, to the opening of a conference that was about Europe, about the proper remembrance of a past in which she had no part. She had to leave the party ahead of time.

"I'll be right back, Leo. I'm just going to disappear for a minute." And so she did. She disappeared.

She ran through the door of the main hall, into the stream of people rushing toward her. She fought her way into the vestibule, where the mayor was still shaking hands and the noise fell like rain from the vault.

Kristina was standing next to the coat check. She was the woman who sounded the bugle when the earth burned. Kristina was casually leaning against the wall. A huge farmer was throwing a bundle of hay down at her. It was the same painting as on the poster in Leonides' apartment.

Kristina had everything in view, the men surrounding her, the farmer in the hay, and then Kristina noticed her, too, hoping to sneak by unseen.

"Are you going out for a smoke? Wait, I'll come with you! I'm just going to get my cigarettes."

She was faster than Kristina. She left her jacket at the coat check. She didn't have the ticket, Leonides did. Leonides had everything, even her lipstick. He kept it in his jacket when they went out, because she never took a purse, because she didn't like carrying purses, and he knew that, Leo, the envoy of a young republic, who was meeting with an important multiplier.

It was good to leave her jacket in the coat check, she thought, outside at the cab stand. If Leonides went looking for her, he would find the jacket. He would see the jacket on the hook and assume she was still at the reception. He would not miss her.

The cab pulled up and she saw Kristina through the rear window, standing at the foot of the stairs, an unlit cigarette in her mouth.

Her heart hammers fast in sync with her escape. She squats in the kitchen. Her palms on the linoleum are the only link between her and the world fallen into darkness.

\*

The blue woman appeared late. Not until afternoon does she stand by the boulders, beyond the birch trees, at the end of the bay. Blueberry bushes are growing on the rock. The roots have burrowed into cracks and crevices.

I say that on the other side of the underpass lots of things are usual. The expectations we have of each other, and how quickly we are disappointed by one another. The habit of



judging each other on a scale of arbitrariness and prejudice. How we believe the far-fetched logic, not the one close at hand, when it is to our advantage.

The blue woman nods. She does not linger beyond the prefab buildings without reason. She avoids the other side.

She can no longer look into faces that are locked under the skin behind steel doors.

\*

The kitchen floor is cold. The walls slowly shift back into place. Above the sink, cabs are driving through New York. The yellow of the cars shimmers.

"Go to sleep, Sala!"

That is Leonides. His voice sounds tender. Because it's logical. Because he wants her to sleep now. It's her right to go to sleep at this hour.

She turns on the faucet and holds her hands under the stream. The water splashes against the tiles. As she drinks, she hears Leonides. "Not to worry, Sala. It was just a neighbor. The kind who guard their house as though it were their precinct. Nobody knows where you are."

She gropes her way into the hallway.

She walks into the bedroom without turning on the light, she finds her way to the bed. She sits on the edge of the bed and pulls off her pants. She slips under the covers, she lies on her side and pulls her knees towards her. She lies like this without taking off her sweater.

She lies that way until she falls asleep.

\*

When the blue woman first appeared beyond the birches, she abruptly looked at me.

She beckoned me to come.

She wanted me to sit next to her on the rocks. It was as if she had been expecting me.

It could have been a coincidence.

The blue woman knows that her silence gives rise to speculation.

\*

She is asleep. Only once is she wakened by car headlights sweeping across the ceiling. And once by the sound of the clock faintly striking the hour.

She sleeps curled up in a knotty blanket. The cover is rough. When she is thirsty, she gets up and gets a glass of water. Each time, she hears Leonides. He speaks to her from an ever-growing distance; he does not talk to her. He speaks in a tone which clearly shows that what he is formulating is indisputable for him.

*The atrocities of all totalitarian regimes of the 20th century must be recognized as an integral part of our common European history, and I don't care if that irritates Russia, China or the Western left.*

When he has an idea, he jots it down in the margins of a newspaper, sometimes on the blank flyleaf of a book.

*I don't care. Mne ne interessujet. Man nelabai rūpi. I don't give a flying fuck. Mam to w dupie. Ma ei ole midagi volesti teinud.*

He says it in every language he knows. And she doesn't contradict him. Leon, my Le. She smiles in her sleep. It's as if that's all she can do: sleep.

\*

Whether the blue woman comes for me remains uncertain. We move in the same blurriness of the early light that bathes the rocks on the shore.

I ask her if we might have met before, on the streets in the city center, at the University Collegium. Whether that was why she had waved to me.

I ask her whether recognition is conceivable.

She abhors this sort of disclosure.

It only serves to neatly sort out the swirling chaos of emotions that send us adrift.

\*

*We need an expansion of the European concept of crimes against humanity.*

One of Leonides' irrefutable sentences.

*You cannot deny that the West had been an ally of the Soviet Union. The West had collaborated with the dictatorship next door, which lasted not twelve, but seventy years. In 1968, demonstrators in Frankfurt and Paris proudly carried banners through the street of the heads who were responsible for shooting demonstrators in Prague.*

(...)

When he speaks, she does not interrupt him. She does not inform him that she isn't there anymore, that she is no longer listening to him, because in her dream she knows that she would wake up as soon as she called out to him, awakened by her own voice.

Leon?

*Only when a French person, when a German is ready to say that the Gulag is our very own problem, just as Auschwitz is our very own problem, will we no longer be heading towards*

*a Western, an Eastern, a Central Europe, that is, heading towards the disintegration of Europe.*

Leo!

**Translated by Zaia Alexander**