



S. FISCHER VERLAGE

Golden Sands

Katerina Poladjan

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A playful novel about family, Europe and the absurdity of life's paths.

In the 1950s, a holiday resort is built on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast: Golden Sands, planned as a shining vision, a place in the sun for everyone. Eli is conceived on the construction site. Sixty years later, he has long since celebrated his greatest successes as a film director and is lying on his analyst's couch in Rome. He speculates and fabricates his family history, which begins in Odessa in the early 1920s, leads from there via Constantinople and Varna in Bulgaria to Rome, and then on to Oranienburg near Berlin.

What to do with the unfulfilled promises of the past?

Katerina Poladjan was born in Moscow, grew up in Rome and Vienna and now lives in Germany. A playwright and essayist, her prose debut *One Night, Elsewhere* was followed by *Maybe Marseille*, and she also co-wrote the literary travelogue *Beyond Siberia* with Henning Fritsch. She has been nominated for both the Alfred Döblin Prize and the European Prize for Literature and participated in the 2015 Festival of German-Language Literature in Klagenfurt. For *Here be Lions* she received grants from the German Literature Fund, the Berlin Senate and the Tarabya Cultural Academy in Istanbul. *Upheaval* was shortlisted for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize 2022.

Sample Translation: Katy Derbyshire

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I

Well. It starts in Odesa on the early morning of an autumn day in 1922. A young woman, a man and a small boy come down the Potemkin Stairs. The boy is holding the woman's hand; he takes every stair with a jump. Cut. We're on the deck of a passenger steamer. The young woman lets go of the child's hand, signals to the man and pushes through the crowd to the ship's rail. Silvery and calm, the sea. Gulls circling. Lights blinking in the morning mist. Serious steamers are at anchor, communicating via navigation lights. The camera follows the young woman around the ship for eighty minutes. The day passes and evening comes. In their cabin, the young woman exchanges a few words with the man, wishes the boy a good night, then goes to the salon. There is arguing, drinking, crying, laughing. The young woman leaves again. On the quarterdeck, she is alone; she gazes at the white foam of the ship's wake, then into the darkness where the lights of Odesa have long since vanished. She places her hands on the rail and swings one leg over; her foot finds a hold. Then the other leg. She hesitates. She jumps. The steam engine stomps on, its sound duller than moments before. She surfaces. The engine is quieter now, then fades entirely. What remains is gentle splashing.

That's the film.

That's the entire film?

I won prizes for it.

Do you have an explanation for why the young woman jumped into the water?

Escapism, I'd say. But that's just my assumption.

And she was your aunt?

Vera, yes.

Her little brother Felix woke the next morning and didn't understand what was going on. Passengers and crew were at sixes and sevens, and when Felix asked his father Lev about his sister, he left him standing to continue the search for Vera, from the engine room to the mess. He had a mental image of the last time he'd seen his daughter, touching his shoulder with a smile and saying she was going up on deck; it was too stuffy in the cabin, she needed fresh air.

Arrived in Constantinople, father and son booked into a shabby boarding house. Hour after hour, Lev brooded over nautical charts. He drew a straight line across the Black Sea from Odesa to Constantinople and marked the coastal area closest to the line. He calculated that must be the most likely place for Vera to have reached after jumping into the water. She was last seen shortly before eleven at night. In the salon.

How do you know that?

That's how I imagine it. Based on my research. A German Baedeker guide from 1905 gives a time of around thirty hours for the 844 nautical-mile passage from Odesa to Constantinople. Departure from Odesa in the morning. Vera was seen again after fifteen hours at sea, at eleven at night. And the mid-point of the route is approximately at the marked area, around the town of Varna in Bulgaria. That's where Lev wanted to look for his daughter. He would find his daughter, and if she was dead he would bury her and weep for her at the grave. That plan helped him to go on breathing as he lay sleepless night after night, his son Felix curled up to his side amid the moans and whimpers of the other exiles in their communal accommodation. Many hoped to return soon; the madness must come to an end at some point. Yet the more time passed, the darker the news reaching them from home became, and the more hope waned.

Whenever Lev leaned over his maps, Felix would sit at his feet playing with stones. The night before their departure, he'd been given a thick slice of sweet bread, intended to help console him over saying goodbye to the house and his friends. Will you share it with me, Vera had asked him. But Felix had shook his head, stuffed the entire slice in his mouth at once and then choked on it. Serves you right, Vera had laughed, at which Felix wished she'd go to hell. He stamped his foot and screeched: Piff! Paff! Off with you for ever more! Foolish as children are, he now blamed himself for Vera's disappearance; but he could not vent his tortured soul to his father, too afraid that he'd be sent to hell himself for it.

Yet even if Felix had tried to speak to his father, he would hardly have got through to him; the search for his daughter occupied Lev's mind to such an extent that they soon boarded another ship, from Constantinople to Varna. Lev had sold their luggage and the meagre remnants of his library to fellow countrymen, using the funds to bribe an officer who had procured a place on the steamer for him and Felix even without valid passports. From Varna, they continued on foot – Lev striding ahead, Felix scrambling bravely behind on his short legs – northwards along the coast. Lev had shouldered a kit bag containing the bare essentials, Felix carried a bundle of the few books Lev would never part with and had donned Vera's summer hat with its blue ribbon. Lev found it difficult to look at, but when he tried to take the hat away from him, Felix cried and wailed, so Lev let him go on wearing it.

They slept on the beach. When it grew cold Lev would light a fire. They would find a place to stay before the winter. There was an eternity to go before the winter. When Felix complained about the cold on dank autumn evenings, Lev asked: How many centuries has man been living in nature and with nature? How many centuries did we cover our bodies with pelts and skins? Felix had no answer to that. He was afraid of his father, who had become a different man. Lev raised his arms to the sky and called out: Who am I? What has become of me? Felix watched him, silent.

Eventually, they built a simple hut in a wood, on the edge of an isolated beach. The work sparked unknown strength in Felix; he helped saw and pile with zeal, collected reeds for the roof, and more than once, his vigilant eye prevented his distracted father from making grave mistakes.

When they lay on their mats inside the hut in the evening, they'd hear the sea. When they woke up in the morning, they'd see the sea. They underwent expeditions along the coast every day, sometimes northwards, sometimes to the south. Using a stick he always carried with him, Lev would lift stranded fishing nets, roll stones aside, stab at hollows in the jagged rock where water had pooled. They found all sorts of useless and useful items: bleached bones from seabirds, a board studded with good iron nails. Whoever they asked, however many rocks Lev turned over, they found no trace of Vera.

Lev began catching fish and weaving baskets. They sold the baskets at the nearby town's market. In the forest, they found an owl fallen out of its nest; they took it home and reared it. Once the owl was strong enough it flew away, but it came back night after night to perch on the tree outside their hut. Felix talked a great deal to the owl; he imagined it was his vanished sister returned in a different form.

Felix had to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. Lev taught him until noon, every day. At the age of seven, Felix had a command of basic algebra, wrote Cyrillic and Latin letters and played passable chess. They talked about the planets, the universe and the philosophy of despair, which Lev had at first ridiculed; in the light of the experiences, the fateful twist in their lives over the past few months, he rediscovered it. Man could not stop torturing himself with useless metaphysics and other ghastly questions, he claimed; for instance, that of why God tormented his most loyal servants, as Job demonstrated. Man would never solve this paradox, however, and would ultimately remain behind, astonished that existence could only be explained by means of absurdity.

When Lev was teaching Felix, he felt like a professor in his auditorium again, annoyed by inadequate performance, pleased by the students' witticisms and progress. All youth had vanished from Lev's face and his beard had grown to an impressive length; he looked like a hermit. If I grow too queer you must shake me, he urged his son, time and again.

For more than two years, they led this austere and lonely life. The struggle for existence inevitably forced them to neglect their search for Vera, their expeditions growing shorter with every week.

The beach was located around halfway between two cities the ancient Greeks had named Odessos and Dionysopolis. In those days, Odessos was called Varna – as it is again today, after several years when it seemed opportune to name the place Stalin. In Varna, Lev met a man on market day who showed interest in his baskets. In strange, guttural and melodious Russian, the man informed Lev he needed not one or two baskets, but thirty, and he asked how quickly Lev could deliver them. Lev was startled, for that amount was far beyond his capacities, yet he left Felix in charge of their stall and went to a café with the gentleman to discuss the matter. The man introduced himself there as Jules; he was Swiss, he said, a former landscape architect to the Russian tsar, and had now been commissioned by the Romanian king to build a garden for a new summer palace in nearby Balchik, the city of the Greek wine god. The queen had extravagant taste, he explained; the palace would have Oriental and Balkan features and her aspirations for the garden were equally exclusive. Seeing the beautiful baskets Lev was offering had inspired the man to grow the capricious seedlings of exotic plants in them, so as to move them to safety in the event of excessive sunshine or heavy rain.

By this point, Lev was convinced he was dealing with a braggart or a madman, and he raised his hands to ward him off; it was sadly impossible, he explained, for him to produce so many baskets in an adequate time. The Swiss man leaned back, fiddled

with his watch chain and took a good look at Lev. Because you're not a basket-weaver, he said with a faint smile.

I used to teach philosophy.

And where do you live now?

We live in a hut on the beach.

And the boy?

My son.

Does he go to school?

I teach him.

Is he clever?

The cleverest.

The man leaned in. Come with me. I have a large house at my disposal in Balchik; you'll assist me and the boy will go to school.

To take up his new post as basket-weaver and assistant gardener to the Romanian queen in Balchik, Lev and Felix had to cross another border, for the area north of Varna, southern Dobruja, was part of Romania at the time.

Without passports?

The Swiss landscape architect will have taken care of passports.

And Lev simply accepted this next turning point in his life, which meant abandoning the search for his daughter entirely?

He did it for his son's future. And he may have hoped to find a trace of her on the Dobruja coast.

Alright, go on.

The room Lev and Felix occupied in the architect's house was small, but it had French windows, there was a bathroom, and the kitchen was open to them. After their life of privation on the beach, they wallowed in such luxury. Felix went to school, helping his father in the garden in the afternoon, when Lev didn't impose extra lessons on him,

considering the school's teaching insufficient. Then, father and son would prune trees and shrubs, weed beds, loosen the ground, sow seeds, water plants, lay out spring and winter beds or assist with planting new trees, such as a *buxus colchica* transported from the Caucasus to Balchik at great effort and expense. In the evenings, Lev would introduce Felix to the basics of Latin and ancient Greek. During the few idle hours remaining to him, the boy would pick up pencil and paper and draw: plants, trees, the coastline, the palace from all sides and all perspectives. At times Felix would draw the construction diagonally from above, sitting on a hillside, and then from below, the palace towering above his perch on the promenade. On another occasion, he drew it semi-concealed as he hid behind bushes and framed the building's geometric contours with the trembling tangle of leaves.

When Felix turned fourteen, changes manifested in his character. He grew reluctant to spend evenings with his father, became ill-tempered when Lev lectured on the sophists. There were certain habits of his father's that he could barely tolerate, for example when he twisted his forefinger into his ear as if to screw something in. Even the furrows on Lev's brow triggered feelings in Felix that disturbed him. Where did this shame come from so suddenly, who had planted it in him? There were times when Felix would walk along the promenade filled with shame – simply because he existed. The Black Sea endured patiently when he threw stones in the water, angry and confused.

One day, he climbed a holly oak in the wide-ranging palace garden and hid in its dense foliage. He decided never to come back down to earth.

The queen called the garden her peaceful retreat, and in the evening hours she would often stroll alone among the exotic plants and labyrinthine hedges. Her husband, King Ferdinand I of Romania, had died four years previously, and since then she had spent much of her time at the summer palace with her lover.

Felix spied her, and the queen spied him between the branches, but showed no sign of her discovery. She wore one of the dresses she designed herself, a plain white robe with

a turban in Bedouin style. As if to herself, she spoke: Trees are so firm, so calm, so confident.

I'm never coming down, the words escaped Felix.

And what if I send a montgolfière?

What is a montgolfière?

It's a hot-air balloon, but montgolfière sounds much better, I find. You could grab a dangling rope, young sir, and drift away. Would you want that, to leave forever?

I don't know. How would you do it, Madam, send a montgolfière?

I am the queen, said the queen.

It all sounds a little fairytale, don't you think?

Does that bother you?

Not really.

But our time is up. I'll see you next Thursday.



After the session, Eli goes to a bar only a few steps away from the practice, and drinks coffee. He tries to remember what he said, what he thought as he lay on the couch. He has a very clear image of the little hook in the white ceiling, presumably for a lamp that might hang there but doesn't.

A man walks into the bar, stands at the counter next to Eli and hums a tune to himself, as if he were skipping towards a rainbow. What is it exactly, Eli asks, that's putting you in such a good mood?

Aren't you that famous director? I know you, I've watched one of your films on TV, on the culture channel. They showed an interview with you afterwards.

And?

And what?

Did you like the film?

What kind of question is that? I can't possibly judge.

Of course you can judge. Someone gives you a sweater and you can say whether you like the sweater or not. You watch a film and you can say whether you like the film or not.

Alright then. I didn't like it.

Eli steps outside, not in any hurry. No one could say he was strolling, either. He's seeking his rhythm, a speed to express that he has a destination. So the gentleman in the bar didn't like the film, but what arrogance to judge so curtly. And why the devil doesn't the dottoressa hang a lamp from the little hook on the ceiling?

Eli's walk home takes him past the presidential palace. He ventures into Sant'Andrea al Quirinale. The light is dim inside, a few rows of chairs in a semi-circle, following the church's outline around a precious floor mosaic. He sits down, stretches his legs, tips his head back and looks up at the dome. When he first met Jenny, he was constantly in and out of these churches; she wrote her dissertation on Roman Baroque. Now look, Eli, how Bernini painted his figures, frozen in motion in the moment of greatest fervour. Back then he'd only had eyes for Jenny; now, he has to admit the apostle Andrew really is almost toppling off his cloud in his heavenly ecstasy, the cherubs in the cupola must be struggling with their gilded garlands and the laws of gravity. Despite the dramatic situation, they seem to be having fun, though perhaps relying too much on their wings, which are far too short to keep their rotund bodies in the air if they fall.

Jenny never grew tired of her enthusiasm for Rome's beauty. She couldn't understand that anyone could be unhappy in this city. She accused Eli of only seeing the ugly, the miserable, the abyss. He retorted that she was closing her eyes to the city's reality, immersing herself only in Bernini and Borromini's art, but he was telling her,

the works of the Baroque were then and now gilded smoke and mirrors to distract from the ever-present misery and decline.

Once, she showed him Pietro da Cortona's ceiling fresco in the grand hall of the Palazzo Barberini, where three fat bees flew in like a formation of the Frecce Tricolori aerobatic team, while the personifications of faith – all in white – hope clad in green and red-dressed charity floated in the sky, holding a giant laurel wreath precisely so that it formed the Barberini coat of arms in conjunction with the heraldic bumblebees. It's like a movie, Jenny said, it's the staging of the moment, *la messa in scena del momento*. Then she cursed the Italian language, it was imprecise, didn't get to the root of the matter because it wasn't possible to meld various terms into a single word – *Inszenierung!* – a word that then had its own meaning without losing the semantic echo of its constituent parts. Needing three words for *Inszenierung* was so annoying – *messa in scena*. The German word *Augenblick* was the same, untranslatable into Italian: eye and gaze, together meaning an instant. On another occasion, Jenny showed him the astounding detail on a marble bust of Cardinal Agostino Valier, one button of his clothing not quite fastened, another not at all, as if the cardinal had dressed hastily before being carved in stone. Bernini preserved that *Augenblick* for eternity. And he makes us believe that he as a sculptor succeeded, two hundred years before the invention of photography, in capturing that blink of an eye in the blink of an eye. And yet he probably spent hours or days working on that open button.

Eli remembers Jenny's exuberance, her face, her pale eyelashes, the slightly raised mole on the right wing of her nose; he remembers her mouth, usually in motion. When she thought deeply, her mouth would hang open, lending her an expression of perplexity, which could transform unexpectedly into great satisfaction. He remembers her fleeting glances, her laugh, or the way she crawled under his cover at night, and he felt her against his back. And sometimes Jenny would whisper something in his ear in German; he didn't understand it but her warm breath was so pleasant that he never asked.

Perhaps we are only ever in love with the idea of the other, perhaps he only loved his idea of Jenny, and she only her idea of him. Did they only love fragments of one another? Eli wonders whether their connection might have lasted if they'd ever met as their whole selves; might they then have made their way forever, dangling along the golden garland of their love like the cherubs up there in the cupola? A crash rents the silence in the church. Eli has leaned too far back on his chair and fallen over along with it, lying like a beetle on its back. A young Jesuit emerges from the vestry and watches from an appropriate distance to see whether Eli can right himself. He can. The clergyman has disappeared.

Back home, Eli sits out on his terrace despite the cool February afternoon, testing out the new garden chair bought on special offer. Sometimes there's nothing better than feeling the wind caressing his cheeks. A breeze like that can move him to tears. Eli jiggles a little and drums his fists on the armrest. The salesclerk said the chair would stand up to all adversities. Eli adjusts the back lower. It's very easy. An excellent chair. From this position, he has a view of the underside of the balcony. Large patches of plaster have fallen off. The sprawling laurel hedge also makes him feel slightly discontent. He's not been taking enough care. For some reason, he thinks plants don't need looking after, they're self-sufficient. Fresh green is sprouting between the travertine flagstones. The villa too, built by his maternal great-grandfather in the 1920s, ought in his view to ward off decay of its own accord, simply stop crumbling away.

A caterpillar crawls across the terrace at his feet. He puts on his glasses and leans forward. The caterpillar is squirming, seems agitated and strained, its abdomen moving up and down impressively. Eli is briefly distracted by an ambulance passing with its loud siren on. When he lowers his eyes back to the caterpillar, it is no longer moving.

He goes inside, turns on the computer in the library. His feet are cold. He goes upstairs to put on warm socks. On the way back, he stops on the step before last and

sits down, socks in one hand, slippers in the other, looks up at the ceiling, looks right, looks left. The house would make a wonderful film set. The movie would start with a child playing. No, that's twee. The movie would start with his grandmother Giulia. A movie about the Italian side of the family. Audiences want authenticity and genuine emotion. It will start like a documentary, an interview – Giulia sitting in the kitchen, asked: If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently? Giulia thinks for a long time, the camera very close, then she answers: I would not marry Omero. Cut to Eli's grandfather Omero, obviously played by Toni. The first question for Omero: Who have you loved in your life? Eli will ask Toni to insert a slight cough, or to clear his throat. No, he'll leave out the documentary part. It will start with a party, with a lavish fascist celebration, at which Omero inappropriately harasses the fifteen-year-old daughter of a friend. That will be the first image. Omero and the girl in the garden. No. What on earth is the matter with him? Why has he run out of ideas? It will start with a war. No. It will start with a toad. A toad squatting on the path, not moving. Like the warty common toads in his garden, which freeze when he touches them with his toes, and don't move a muscle.

II

After his morning coffee on Thursday, Eli sets off for the dottoressa. He watched the film *Uno strano tipo* the night before. In one scene, Donatella Turri shoots a rifle on Amalfi beach at the titular strange type, played by Adriano Celentano. That's where Eli fell asleep. Now he's on the couch, feeling refreshed and rested, and hasn't understood the dottoressa's question. Excuse me, what did you say, Dottoressa?

How are you today?

Eli looks up at the ceiling. There's the hook. Then he turns his head slightly; the dottoressa's stockings are the colour of mallow blossoms. She has her legs crossed, is balancing a grey velour leather pump on her toes.

After our last session, I rented your film. One character seems particularly interesting to me, actually a minor character, a rather uncanny figure dressed in dark clothing, visible in the background of almost every scene –

You noticed him.

Of course I noticed him, a man in a long coat with black bags around his eyes, dark lips like Nosferatu. You don't know what his intention is. He looks like he'd eat children.

Yes, a terrible get-up. The man turned up on set one day and claimed his name was Ivan Mosyukin and he had to be in my film. I had him thrown out, but he was back the next day – I don't know how he got past security – and repeated his demand. I lost my temper, the filming schedule was already out of order, we were working with analogue 35-mm film and the producer was breathing down my neck about finances. I yelled at the man to get out of there and stop stealing my time. It made no difference; he kept coming back.

And then you gave him the part in the background?

No! It was only once the negatives were developed and I was viewing the material that I realised he'd made it into the film – I couldn't find an explanation, it was a disaster! The film was in the can, the set had been dismantled and scrapped, the ensemble was long gone – impossible to repeat the scenes.

To your advantage, Eli! The man's difficult expressions in the background lend emotional depth.

Ha! The critics wrote the same thing, when all along that Mosyukin's only glaring like he's turned to stone. In my desperation, I started looking into his name. Ivan Ilyich Mosyukin was a Russian actor who had emigrated via Constantinople after the revolution – just like my paternal ancestors – with his wife, another actor – what was

her name? – Nastasya or Natalya Lissenko. He left her in Paris, later on. She started sewing ugly dresses, then she was Mussolini's lover, but I wouldn't stake my life on that, it might just be a rumour. Mosyukin was a star of the silent movie era. The director Kuleshov made his name with a film in which Mosyukin stares at a bowl of soup. But at the time I was filming, Mosyukin had been dead for over seventy years, died destitute after his strong accent meant he was cast less and less as the talkies arrived. And the man in my film – I never found out who played that trick on me.

A long pause. Then the dottoressa asks: Do you have any new ideas for films?

I finished making my last film ten years ago, but that doesn't mean I've been doing nothing. I open my eyes every morning and ask the new day what it has to tell me. But the present day doesn't answer. So I turn away from the present and focus on the past.