

**Kateryna BABKINA**

**Two stories**

### **KOSTIA**

As it turned out, it was my grandpa who made dresses for me when I was a kid. Before the war, he used to carve things on lathes, some really precise parts — he had sensitive and gentle fingers – but then, during the war, he lost his eyes. Eyes, not his legs—my grandma welcomed him back. They weren't much of a couple before the war, just dance partners, but after the war, grandpa, real, robust, warm, and unharmed but for his eyes, was considered an incredible stroke of luck.

Grandpa could not only dance well, he could also make deals, so he always found some odd job here or there. Usually, the veterans' association organized his lectures at technical schools. He lectured on scientific communism, but who cares. He even managed to get a degree in history somehow, juggling night school with all his lectures. He walked everywhere with his thin, clacking cane, sporting his stylish glasses. Everyone helped him get around.

Grandpa badly missed his lathes. Grandma's Podolsk sewing machine reminded him of a lathe, with its metallic clatter and its easy-to-reach, greased mechanical parts. Grandma used it to make sheets out of torn blanket covers, pillow-cases out of worn-out sheets, and grain sacks out of worn-out pillow-cases. She never made anything more sophisticated than a cotton buckwheat sack, didn't even try. After all, grandma was an accountant at the army exchange, which meant both money and connections, so she had whatever clothes she wanted made by whoever she wanted.

Grandpa loved to touch the sewing machine, to pat it, to caress it. To turn its hand wheel slowly, to listen to the needle moving, or to put a sheet of paper under the needle and touch the holes it made. He learned how to thread and feel the length of a stitch and the speed of the needle by sound and touch. He spent hours and hours trying to understand how the thread weaved so simply, turning round and round and making this or that stitch. I don't actually know this for sure; I'm just making it up, since my blind grandpa was already pretty good at sewing by the time I was born.

I'm not sure how other people got by, but my grandpa came in handy when the Soviet Union collapsed and we had nothing, not even food. Grandma and grandpa had already retired, and my mother was working at a school, teaching hopeless literature, a subject for which no one ever bothered to hire a tutor. So, no extra cash for our family. The students loved my mother. On holidays, they'd bring her flowers many, many years after they graduated, but you can't live on flowers alone.

Sewing used to be grandpa's thing and nobody else's; it was a type of entertainment only he was into. He'd give me a green or black shirt as a gift, a neatly-stitched one, always a perfect fit, with immaculate buttonholes. Or sometimes he'd make a hand puppet—you slide your fingers into it and put on a show, pretending you're a bear or maybe an elephant. The puppets' mouth and eyes were always stitched with a strong, steady thread of one particular color, dark brown.

Then I decided to put grandpa to work and we struck a secret deal, also steady and strong, that brought us closer together and helped us stay sane, helped both of us—me, almost nine at the time, and my grandpa, almost seventy.

“Where does grandma keep the cuts?” I asked grandpa one day.

I knew that ever since her army exchange times, we'd had plenty of “cuts” at home, those rolled-up remnants of good, nice fabric. Grandpa was not interested in grandma's cuts; he preferred simple, honest fabric, heavy cotton, most of all. But he, surely, knew where those cuts were kept; if

you lost something, all you had to do was ask grandpa, who knew all the goings-on in the house better than anyone, and he would tell you where it was right away, nearly without fail.

I went for a maroon velvet or plush, as they called it. It looked luxurious to me, like those fashion magazines my mom would unearth and bring home for a day or two, just to leaf through. But at that point, grandma couldn't be bothered with the cuts. She now sold sugar and grains at the market, pouring them into the very bags she had sewn before, all so that we wouldn't go to the dogs. My mom would come home from school and study English. She thought all of her problems would go away if she passed some exams at the postgraduate institute and switched professions. Everyone wanted to learn English back then; she grappled with the words 'wardrobe', 'obsolete', and 'education' for a while and even passed her exams, but she never did master the language.

Long story short, no one bothered me and grandpa. He listened, attentive and patient, while I described what my dress should look like: straight, yes, but slim-waisted (a bit), with folds in the front ("Why, Nastia?" grandpa would say with a laugh), so you could insert shoulder pads (ripped out from one of grandma's jackets) and three buttons (I'll do that myself!), and a round neck, and a three-quarter sleeve, and with the hem above the knee, but not too high.

Grandpa carefully followed the shape of my body with his fingers, felt my shoulders and hips, arms and collarbone. When no one else was home, we rolled up the carpet, and he spread the maroon plush out on the floor and crawled on it, cutting out the pieces only he knew to cut out, with a special knife, sharp on both ends, which he'd made a while ago. Marks and scratches were scored into the hardwood floor and many more appeared after that, hidden beneath the carpet. Grandpa sewed very slowly, but it was always worth the wait.

I had the best dress at my first school dance. At that time, knee-high socks were in fashion; I cut off some old, thick, black stockings and grandpa whipstitched them on the top for me. Those socks kept slipping down all the time, but when you're wearing a dress like that, no one pays attention to that sort of thing.

Grandpa never asked me how I felt in that dress. He couldn't wait to hear what the next one should be like.

That's how we spent the next three years. I flipped through the magazines my mom brought home and described everything I saw to grandpa—textiles and patterns, styles and folds, lapels, lengths, and shapes. We stroked and felt grandma's cuts together, selecting carefully. Then we waited until everyone else left, rolled up the carpet, spread out the fabrics, and grandpa cut them, guided by touch and leaving those special scars on the hardwood floor. I still haven't lacquered it, the hardwood floor, and the carpets are surely long gone, but the dressmaker's marks, rubbed out by footsteps over the years, still show through here and there. Grandpa was my best friend; he knew all my thoughts and secrets and even forgave me when I sold one of the dresses to my classmate Mariana. I was proud of my first sale, but grandpa didn't appreciate it for some reason; his Soviet-style mindset couldn't accept any under-the-table dealings. I kept at it, of course, only secretly, and grandpa never asked me where this or that dress went or how often I wore them. I slipped the money I earned into my mom's purse, in small bills, making it seem as if they'd always been there. Or I said I'd found them on the street or I'd just buy myself some cakes, coke, lipstick or posters.

Over time, I needed fewer and fewer dresses, I got bell-bottom jeans and opted for dress shirts, t-shirts, and sweaters instead. I spent less and less time with grandpa; he didn't like the music I listened to on my feeble radio. Also, there weren't that many thoughts I dared to share with him. I'd heard all of his stories. Grandma had become weak, so she no longer went to the market. She often sat by his side; he turned the hand wheel, and she stared at him as if she hadn't looked at him enough up until then and was now trying to make up for it.

Grandpa kept sewing dresses for me, more and more slowly, and all of them, down to the very last one – a dress I wore to the music school recital – were gorgeous. He passed away quietly, at his sewing machine. He must have been awfully lonely; we later found out that, for whatever reason, he'd made stitches in some books and on many old photographs.

I haven't thrown away any of those dresses. They're overflowing with blind love and irredeemable memories; if I could, I would've probably even bought back the dresses I'd sold to my classmates after wearing them once or twice.

Almost twenty years later, Kostia, who'd gone blind after the Battle of Shchastya, somehow wound up at my apartment, and it was very uncomfortable.

I picked him up on Friday afternoon at five; he was still at the outpatient clinic, though he'd already learned braille, started looking for work and doing some volunteering. Our plan was simple: take a walk by the river. Breathe in the blooming trees and young leaves, listen to birds chirping and kids laughing. I could have talked him into going to the mall to get him some clothes—some nice everyday outfits; later on, I realized I couldn't have gotten him to go, definitely not. That said, I had to take him to his parents' place in the evening, to the other side of the river, where Kostia planned to spend the weekend.

I wound up paying for Kostia's treatment; this was the easiest way to help soldiers coming back from this bizarre war—a war in our own country—to help with your wallet. He also asked to meet me, to see me, as one of the volunteers said; but how could we really be seeing each other if one of us had no eyes?

Rain began pounding down as we approached the riverfront. I did my best to stay cheerful, smiling all the time, as if Kostia could see me—smiling like an idiot. I felt so uncomfortable, so I just kept blabbing on and on. Kostia, meanwhile, seemed confident and reserved; he didn't seem to like me all that much.

When the rain started, I could tell neither of us felt like going for a walk anymore. We made our way toward the bridge, toward Kostia's place, but I guess the entire city had just decided to cross the river, and it looked as if we'd be stuck in traffic till the next morning. I had to think of some way to keep us entertained for a couple of hours, keep blind Kostia, who wasn't too fond of me, entertained.

"Wanna see a movie?" I suggested. It took me a bit to realize something was wrong.

A long pause followed. Kostia is much younger than me, I thought, ten years younger, maybe more, and then he burst out laughing. Unfeigned, sincere, real laughter. I started cracking up, too. And suddenly, I felt that he didn't not like me.

"No movies," Kostia said. "Where do you want to go?"

"Huh?"

"Um...where do you want to go?" Kostia repeated his question.

We were waiting at a red light, the rain drumming against the windshield and the wipers flapping at top speed.

"I'd like to go home," I admitted. "It's been a long day. I worked a lot, I'm hungry, and I want to go home. Go home, yes."

I don't usually invite men over, but Kostia didn't seem like a real man to me. He sat at the kitchen table; there was something simple and noble about him. I tossed two steaks into the frying pan and turned on the stove fan. He reached out and started to feel the wall around him, then ran his hand down to the shelf and began to feel the things on it: a candle holder and my notebooks, spare car keys, trinkets from all over the world, frameless photos – mom, grandma, grandpa in his uniform right after the war, a few pictures of my friends. The stove fan was humming and the meat was frying. I opened the window and lit a cigarette, the rain rustling outside. We would have dinner, and I would drive him home; it felt good that no hostility had arisen between the two of us. I was afraid he would start saying he'd earn the money and pay me back for his treatment, or something like that. Nothing like that happened, though, and the pressure was off.

I didn't realize at first that Kostia was saying something.

"Huh?" I asked, flicking a half-finished cigarette somewhere onto the ground and coming back out of the rain.

"I love you, Nastia," he repeated. "And I still remember you by touch. Even now."

At first, I wanted to be brusque with him and call a taxi. "Get out of here—no eyes? So what? Who does he think he is saying stuff like that? What's his angle?" I thought. But then I quickly realized it wasn't him talking to me, it was someone else. Someone else had said that, and he merely repeated those words, passed them along.

Kostia was holding a photograph of my grandpa, several rows of stitches on it—what I used to think of as something the old man did during a bout of melancholic insanity.

Kostia ran his fingers along the rubbed-out holes and said once again, slowly: "I love you, Nastia."

How many books—with his notes and advice—had he left for me by touch? I thought. With his special interpretations he wanted to share with me? How many photos with his comments, funny and not?

"And I still remember you by touch."

Old postcards from people I didn't know; he made holes in them to tell me what they'd meant to him, and, in a sense, what they meant to me, as well. Just how much love had he left for me that I wouldn't find until later? Until such a long, long, infinitely long time later? I might have never discovered this treasure. I might have never understood those letters, but he knew for sure that I would find them and would understand.

And then Kostia finished: "Even now."

## A BOX WITH BUTTONS

When I was six, she and I stole the buttons and then lost them under the tanks.

The buttons were kept in a dressing table drawer at my place. I knew there were diamonds mixed in and I told Anka about that.

The box was big, carved, ivory; its lid rattled. You'd want to keep gem jewelry or a garnet bracelet in it, but nothing of the kind was in our box, probably because a black-and-white, grained picture of the Kremlin was drawn on the lid. Only buttons were in the box – a smattering of treasures, real treasures, after all, not some knock-off junk.

Clearly, I was supposed to keep away from the drawer with Grandpa's compasses, razors, commemorative medals, scissors, and old army watches – and from the button box, too.

The button box contained the entire history of Grandma's life after she'd gotten married, that is the history of the family I belonged to, which was probably the only thing I really knew. They moved from Korosten to the Russian Far East, then to Uzhhorod, then to a town along the Soviet-Chinese border, then to several more places until they finally settled down in this military garrison. Grandma parted ways with her five younger sisters after they got married, one by one, and then she no longer had to take care of them. She scrupulously discarded the clothes they didn't want to take along, cutting off the buttons first. Then her own kids came along; onesies, little shirts and dresses, unpretentious changes of homely Soviet women's garments into women's clothing; new military uniform and Grandpa's promotion to captain and then higher up, new overcoats and shirts, shoulder board; relatives visiting from Moscow and Voronezh; trips to the beach together with Grandma's sisters' families; their trips abroad and suitcases of gifts sent home; the oldest daughter's wedding, a new man in the house, the first grandchild; her daughters' first pairs of hard-to-come-by American jeans, the second grandchild, me, that is – all that was experienced and faded out, all that was new and became a part of our everyday lives, and lost, lost, lost buttons which my Grandma meticulously collected and put into the box.

Anka and I saw something like that on TV the other day – it was probably "Dona Beija" series; TV was always on at Anka's place but no one was ever home. A key on a red string always dangled around her neck. The phrase "I'm not allowed to" wasn't a part of Anka's vocabulary – you aren't allowed to do this or that, go here or there, swim in the deep end, make bonfires, steal pastries at a grocery store – Anka simply couldn't get what "you're not allowed" meant and why you shouldn't do certain things. Her mother had only one definite no-no – don't let anyone get into your pants. And Anka obeyed her earnestly without giving it much thought.

A slutty heroine found a huge diamond, as transparent as a tear and as big as a fist, in the murky water of a secret bath. It happened not in our military garrison, even though we felt no lack of such heroines, but in Venezuela or in Brazil, that is, on TV.

"We have a diamond like that at home," I said. I knew for a fact there was one like that in the button box, heavy and cold. I realize now it must have been a spare glass bead of a tacky chandelier.

Anka started nagging me about stealing the diamond and taking it to the swamp. Anka knew there was a swamp on the grounds of the military base, across the street from our house – a real one, overgrown with grass, with ever-present puddles than never dry up and could very well serve as baths.

I wasn't allowed to bring outsiders into our home, but that was a lame excuse for Anka – when I was called home for lunch, she just followed me. Grandma shook her head, smacked her lips disapprovingly, noticing Anka's heels, black with dirt, mumbled something about a poor little shiksa, and set the table for both of us. Then came time for my post-lunch nap. Anka said a polite good-bye, went from the kitchen into the hallway, opened and shut the front door. It never

occurred to me that it was so simple to pull one over on Grandma. She was right there, in the next room; she thought that Anka had left but she'd didn't. I was scared.

"Where is it?" She didn't even bother whispering.

Frightened, I brought her to the room and pointed to the drawer wordlessly. She squatted, pulled out the drawer without thinking twice, shoved aside all of Grandpa's boxes and bags, showing no interest in them, and then opened the box with buttons. She sifted through them, and we both saw it was there, in the scattering of small black, white, colorful, pearly, and metal buttons. A diamond, as transparent as a tear and as big as a fist.

Anka closed the lid, grabbed the box and ran outside, and I ran after her, like I were her slave. It was the first time I ever went outside without permission.

Anka, small and light-footed, dashed down from the third floor and darted around the house, to the street, toward the fence of the military unit. I was scared out of my wits, and then the ground started to shake all of a sudden. I recalled everything I'd seen about the earthquakes in Japan and Armenia on the news, everything Grandpa had told us, after the war had ended, about bombings and air-raid warnings. A mighty roar was rolling towards us in the middle of a clear summer day; to make things worse, I wasn't taking my usual nap, Anka had stole the buttons, and we were running across the street, without any adults.

"Stop!" I yelled, in tears. Anka froze right in the middle of the street and looked at me quizzically. The roar was deafening; I couldn't understand what it was and where it was coming from.

Instead of voicing all of my doubts and fears, I shouted, choking back tears, "Give it back!" Then I snatched the button box away with both hands.

At that moment, tanks started to move towards us. It was too much even for Anka – she, too, had grown up on movies and books about the war, just like everyone else.

Anka grasped my arm and started dragging me along. The box clanged on the ground, buttons splashing out in all directions like colorful droplets. As soon as we crossed the street, Anka pushed me down into the grass by the military base fence, hopped on top of me, covered my head with her hands, and lay like that until the tanks rode over all of Grandma's buttons and the diamond – as transparent as a tear and as big as a fist – and disappeared somewhere at the end of the street, the roar fading out.

When we rose to our feet, my Grandma was standing across the street, just outside our yard, in a robe, her hands on her hips. Anka dove into a dog hole under the fence right away and disappeared on the military base, while I – dirty, teary-eyed, with a crushed button box – was left to face Grandma.

It was all Anka's fault anyway. I don't remember saying just that, but it somehow turned out that way, even though I was also punished because you're supposed to take responsibility for your actions and think for yourself. That night Grandma went to Anka's and got into a big argument with her mother, but all I heard about the outcome of that undertaking was that Anka's mother was a slutty shiksa and that my Grandma was told to fuck off. I was not allowed to play with Anka anymore, which seemed quite fair to me. The next time I went outside, Anka was sitting on a swing in the yard. I walked over to her with my head high and said, "I'm not allowed to play with you!"

"I don't even want to play with you," Anka answered casually. "You betrayed me. Go away."

I went away obediently, for some reason; well, not really away, but home, and I stayed inside for quite a while.

The tanks no longer passed by my house – sent away from the military base, they must have grown over with moss and grass. Soon afterwards, we moved from the military garrison to a place downtown; our family dispersed into three apartments – my aunt with my uncle and my elder cousin, Grandpa with Grandma, and my mother and I, all separate. A year or two later, Grandpa said

something about Anka's mother dying, but I'm not sure it was really her. The only time I thought of Anka was when my friends and I would go to the amusement park near the military garrison. By that point, we had enough money to pay for admission ourselves. Two boys, two girls—it almost felt like a double-date. Lonia, Anka's father, would start the rides for us. He looked very old for some reason. Back then, in the military garrison, he was so young and strong. When he wasn't in prison, he would walk around shirtless, his hairy torso showing. Here, at the amusement park, he looked almost like my grandpa – toothless, smelly, his brown, once shiny hair turned gray and thin. But I knew for a fact he was Anka's dad.

"Hello, Natasha, dear," he said just as he did back then, and I turned away from him. My friends asked me who he was but I said I had no idea and pretended as if nothing had happened.

Then she and I were eating oysters together at the Grand Central Oyster Bar; I looked at the hundred-year-old floor tiles and watched men in white shirts, aprons, and chef's hats shucking oysters, dumping out ice, cutting lemons, and handing sauce, napkins, and soup to those sitting at the bar. Anka came to the bookstore in the East Village for my reading. She listened absent-mindedly – texting the whole time – waited patiently until I signed a few books, and then came up to me and got down to business right away. "Hi. I'm Yasmin Greenstein. Didn't you recognize me?"

I didn't. I'd never known any Yasmin Greenstein with short hair and a pierced eyebrow who wore an expensive leather coat and a fanny pack and had incredibly bright eyes. I had absolutely no doubt about that. My experience at these kinds of events taught me to smile politely and keep my mouth shut.

"Thanks," said Yasmin Greenstein. "Buttons."

I was the only one she could play with in the military garrison. Anka's father was in jail most of the time, her mother was quite hard-working and level-headed, but she died, that was true. Anka was taken in by Vadik, Denys, and Isfar. I barely could remember those guys; they were slightly older than us. They were petty thieves who would steal car radios, wallets, and old women's jewelry. They planned to break into a kiosk but it wasn't easy, since kiosks were grated and padlocked. Also, sometimes vendors would hunker down in there and only open the tiny window to sell things. Those guys belonged to some bigger organization; they called it the mafia – at least that's what they told Anka. Anka would tag along, like a younger friend or sister; she learned how to break into cars and she sold everything her father hadn't gotten rid of yet. She didn't skip school, because that would've raised questions. But nothing raised questions back then. One country had just collapsed and another one had yet to be born. Everyone was just trying to get ahead, the military base was plundered, those who could left the garrison, and those who couldn't stayed.

We'd finished the oysters and bottle of wine by that point, so we went up to Grand Central. There was a big, excellent bar on the second floor, soft music playing in the background, and a glass chandelier hanging somewhere over our heads – I tried my best not to think about its beads. The hostess showed us to our seats. Someone sent Anka an Old Fashioned right away; she nodded, said "Hi" into the gloom, and ordered two more for us. And another two. And then two more.

Anka had to figure out her future when she fourteen. She couldn't just tag along with Vadik, Denys, and Isfar any more, so she had a serious talk with them. They totally agreed with her, so they talked to someone from the mafia about her future. After all, she had a knack for breaking into cars and men's apartments: she'd get them drunk, flirt with them, steal their keys, and then worm their addresses out of them. They returned to Anka and said she had to be initiated. They offered her a choice: either they rape her, all three of them, or she fights them. Like a man. Gloves off. Anka was given some time to mull it over.

Then we got into Anka's shiny BMW. Her maneuvering was a bit tentative by this point, but she did manage to parallel park somewhere in the East Village about ten minutes later. Anka stopped by a Chinese joint and came out with a bottle of good whiskey and two tumblers; as I sat there waiting for Anka, I thought she'd never come back and that she'd never even been here, actually. We wound up losing those tumblers somehow. We walked by the church Andy Warhol

went to, sat on the grass near the church where Patti Smith read her poems, drank straight from the bottle, hugging each other on the tall steps across from the building where Auden lived.

Anka took that choice very seriously. It just so happened that she barely knew her father, but, at that time, he was bumming around the house. Anka told him briefly what was going on and asked him point-blank, "What should I do?"

And he said, "Fight."

He probably should have told her to run away and hide, forget all about those people, go to school, find a job so she could get out of there one day, volunteer somewhere, move abroad, find a good guy and have kids, save herself, forget about life there and try to never come back again – or something like that. But all he said was "Fight."

So Anka fought. Like a man. Gloves off. But there were three of them.

"And you know what?" she said, pulling at her eyebrow piercing and passing me the bottle somewhere by the corner of Second Avenue and 11th Street, near the river that smelled of rotten watermelons. "When I couldn't fight any longer, when I was down and out and almost unconscious, they went ahead and raped me anyway."

The lack or the illusion of choice sobered Anka up. After she started to look more or less like herself again, she decided to try a good old scheme – it didn't really matter that it hadn't worked last time. Anka took a shower, went to school, and then stopped by the principal's office.

It just so happened that she barely knew the principal at all. She brought her up to speed quickly, though. She told her about her mother, her father, and the fact that she'd been living on her own for a while now. She skipped over the most recent events, to be sure, or maybe not, and asked her point-blank: "What should I do?"

The principal was confused, but not for long. She did some digging and found out that Anka's mother had been Jewish and back in those days – and those days were lucky – it was pretty easy for her emigrate. Anka was enrolled in an exchange program; they called it that for some reason, although no one exchanged anything with anyone. It's just that Jewish kids were adopted by Israeli families. Their parents wanted it that way or just let it happen.

Anka took Hebrew classes and then graduated from high school in Israel. She had to apply for an ID when she turned 17. Having nothing but her birth certificate and another unreadable paper for identification purposes, she decided to take a proper first and last name while she was at it and came up with them on the spot, right at the registrar's desk, exchanging her birth certificate and the other paper for the promise of a soon-to-be-ready Israeli passport.

"But why Yasmin Greenstein?" I asked, trying to find some analogies or signs. The sunrise colored the river in front of us gray and pink, the lights of Williamsburg glimmering across the water.

"I don't know. Why not?" Anka said. She never looked for any analogies or signs where there were none, and she was quick, too, and always got right to the point. Yasmin Greenstein served in the army, graduated from college, started a business, sold it, and now headed a branch of her own company in New York. A lone bird chirped up in the trees behind us, welcoming a new day. Anka put her head on my shoulder, her lips tickling my neck.

"Where's my Dad, do you know?" she asked.

"I don't," I lied. Anka giggled. I still haven't learned how to lie.

"Tell him thank-you, okay? For all this. Tell him thank-you for what he said back then. When he sent me over to those guys. Go tell him that when you get back. Thank you. And there's something else. Tell him whatever you want, but don't forget to say thank-you."

I did as Anka told me. I always did what she told me to do.



Leaves whirled softly around the empty park. They were probably shed in despair by abandoned merry-go-rounds, as no trees grew on the playground. Swings swayed ominously on their long, rusty chains. I don't know if anyone comes to this park anymore.

Anka's dad sat on the rickety chair by the control panel and slept. Or perhaps he was just sitting there with his eyes closed and breathing hard.

"Hello," I said.

He opened his eyes.

"Can you start the swings for me, please?"

"Out of order," he said.

"What about the wave swing?"

"Out of order."

"Can you start anything at all?" I asked.

"Twenty hryvnias," Anka's dad stuttered. I handed him a bill without saying anything. He grabbed it, put it in his pocket, and switched something on the control panel – and the largest, the most childish ride slowly came to life. Horses and deer, elephants and chariots, fishes and planes and a giraffe, all rusty and shabby, slowly squeaked round and round. Anka's dad and I couldn't take our eyes off it, and I thought he probably saw little, curly-haired Anka, her heels black with dirt, sitting proudly right there, on a white horse, looking straight ahead – Anka who always knew what to do and wouldn't be told what she could or couldn't do. Or maybe he didn't.

I went up to Anka's dad when the ride stopped, and before leaving the park by the military garrison I'd never go back to again - this time for sure - I said, just as Yasmin Greenstein had told me to: "Thank you."

*Translated from Ukrainian by Hanna Leliv*