

sex scars & a superheroine with scoliosis



the first chapter

PROLOGUE – DELIVERING THE PROVOCATIVE PROMISE IN THE TITLE

“At 13, she was a migrant from the other side of the world. At 15, she faced possible paralysis when a few foot-long metal rods were inserted in her spine. At 17, she graduated as the dux of her secondary college with an ENTER score of 97.85%. At 19, she was doing a double business degree at a prestigious university. At 22, she had established herself as a critically acclaimed commercial sensation with her brilliant best-selling book *Sex, Scars & a Superheroine with Scoliosis*, which, in fiction-memoir format, brims with black humor, honesty and bionic beauty. She is crazy, creative, controversial, charismatic — and a business analyst. She is an unrestrained, raunchy, hilarious contradiction and that is reflected in her work. But she is no lady of literary steel; she is Kremena, Titanium Model, one-name wonder patron saint of intelligent, amusing dysfunction, formidable failure and superb success ...”

Do-it-yourself compliments are the cheapest form of flattery.

That paragraph needs no further explanation. I suppose I like its self-fulfilling prophecy a tad too much — there's a lot to be said about tempting fate in the right way.

Risking the revelation of my self-congratulatory creature nature, this is the description that best captures the essence of me as an aspiring author and creator of the soon-to-be cult genre, firlity — the combination of fictionalized reality and realistic fiction.

Fiction is always so much more realistic than reality.

Sex, Scars & a Superheroine with Scoliosis is a thoroughly self-indulgent, attention-grabbing title designed with the sole purpose of getting me a publishing deal. At least that is what I thought when I proudly came up with it. My stroke of publicity genius must have been nothing short of prodigious if you are reading this now, or at least as you literally allow my monologue to invade your mind.

Looking at the big picture greatly reduces one's attention to detail.

Yet as I started brainstorming ideas and seeking inspiration by casually scratching and ripping open old scars, pulling the stuffing out and examining it strand by strand (as my wounds bled), I exceeded my expectations when I realized I could genuinely deliver quality material on each of the themes in the title.

Keeping a diary and vomiting are remarkably similar activities.

I tried to avoid the traditional, but also the traditionally untraditional, and can personally guarantee that my pseudo-memoir has been declared a 100% sentimentality-free zone. My ridiculous arrogant aspirations are intended to revolutionize the “inspired-by-a-true story” genre by writing about the humor in adversity rather than how to deal with adversity using humor.

It is better to be a professional amateur than an amateurish professional.

My ambition was to create a whole new publishing-industry market segment where adversity and beauty are addressed with so much amusing irreverence and self-deprecating humor that it borders on political incorrectness.

Thus my main motivation was to differentiate the style of my story from its niche genre, which is so full of vomit-inducing drivel about inspiration, heroism and being grateful for facing adversity because it changes you spiritually — even though this is indeed what tends to happen. Another major goal was to steer clear from the typical arts-student-intellectual take on writing fostered by university literature lectures. I also wanted to discard commercial manipulation and replace it with bitter satire about my cynical frustration with society — and yet simultaneously pay tribute to the affection and appreciation I feel for the inspiring and surprising aspects of this exquisite mosaic of contradictions.

Writing to irritate is much more satisfying than writing to entertain.

I have peppered the book with black humor in the hope of encouraging personal ownership of the story, reader self-recognition and most importantly personal interpretation. Because, what use is a book full of clichéd preaching or a collection of facts, if its essence isn't transferable?

Humorous wisdom is a darn sight better than wise humor.

Sex, Scars & a Superheroine with Scoliosis certainly fancies itself as something of an unsolicited, unauthorized, fictionalized quasi-autobiography and what an exuberant wankfest it accidentally evolved into. It certainly gave me an insight into insignificance, the power and implausibility of my own perception, the art of amateur auto-therapy, not to mention the excessive self-conscious overuse of allegories and alliteration. However its motto is simple enough: Normality is indeed overrated.

Pseudo-sophistication is best achieved via verbosity.

So authenticity was the agenda, which meant that creativity struck me at odd times and in odd places. I even engaged in ethically questionable, but colorful, kind of petty criminality — I wrote on the toilet at work while inhaling the guttery smell of public loo perfume.

*To minimize expense
With our cleaners we had to dispense.
Thus use the toilet brush
And don't forget to flush
You know it's up to you,
To clean your own poo off the loo
Remember: Our clients use this toilet too!
OFFICE TOILET SIGN*

I also wrote on the train — while being rocked by the daily monotony right into oblivion.

Finally, I wrote with a ballpoint pen I pinched from the office stationery cupboard and printed my ramblings on “borrowed” office paper. But most importantly, I integrated realistic boredom into the creative process. Instead of taking the well-trodden path of separating and isolating the mundane from the exciting

aspects and pretending that the mundane doesn't exist, I chose to capture it in the name of originality and make it the setting for truly extraordinary and hilarious, yet everyday, developments and struggles.

The only guarantee of hitting the bulls-eye is to draw one on whatever you hit.

Thinking and soul-searching don't stop during ordinary life routines; if anything, the frustration and fascination is amplified and the search for meaning and comedy becomes more urgent, compulsive and successful.

*Written and lived by
Kremena
Melbourne, Australia*

ANALYZING AN AFFLICTION: LOVE FOR LITERATURE LOOPS LINGERS ON

If a genetic predisposition to this kind of condition wasn't enough warning then my stationery obsession should have set off all kinds of alarm bells. It took me some 20 years to put my affliction into perspective, embrace it and accept it as part of my identity, and allow it to become a legitimate component of the phenomenon that is the fascinating history of my consciousness — as pompously sarcastic as this may sound. Even when I was too busy sniffing the mesmerizing chemical smell of correction fluid, I knew from my grandmother's stories that the gene was in the family and that I might be a possible heir.

My mother's side of the family all had it. We have traced it back to my great-grandmother who passed it onto my grandmother, my grandmother's two sisters and brother and their cousin (who is also my godmother). My mother is the only one without it — the family theory is the gene skipped a generation.

Originally it was assumed I had also escaped this affliction because Grandma wrote all my literature essays throughout my early school years, the way she had habitually done for my mother. (Life has come full circle since it is now my turn to write my mother's thank-you letters and evaluative reports. And although I am doing it in an entirely different language, miles and miles from the original place where it all started, my mother still fervently edits out the pure pathos I always seem to over-inject into the writing, just the way Grandma did.)

Witty quotes add no substance.

My literary 'talent' may be biologically inherited, but it was nurtured by acerbic family anecdotes brimming with sardonic wit and accompanied by just the right dose of fiction, which is used to enhance their flavor like MSG in Asian food.

Word-of-mouth stories make for the best memories.

I was brought up on a staple diet of Grandma's spirited childhood recounts

thus I developed something of an appreciation for a cynical brand of humor and offbeat philosophical stories like *Alice in Wonderland*. But most importantly, it was my grandma's Academy-award-winning-actress persona and knack for communication creativity that nudged me over the edge of sanity and right into author territory.

Circular logic is a very frustrating form of psychological paradox.

Growing up in the Balkans of Eastern Europe in a small ex-mining town nestled between barren hills, Grandma's stories became intertwined with my own identity; so much so that I have developed personal ownership of them.

Perched on the balcony with a cigarette, her hoarse smoker's voice didn't carry so she had to whistle a characteristic unmistakable tune whenever she wanted to attract my attention as I played in the common yard below. Like a puppy, I was conditioned to respond to its familiarity and gallop back to my master even though

it spelt the kiss of death for a perfectly fine round of dusk hide and seek.

But let's face it, Grandma's authority left few options apart from obedience.

Being powerful, like being a lady, is an intangible, indefinable quality, but you never doubt its existence or lack thereof.

Bolting out from behind the rose bushes, and thus betraying my hiding spot, I run for grandma's balcony, guided by the red glowing amber of her cigarette. Pesho, the unfortunate boy selected to be 'it' is quick to point out my premature surrender triumphantly. This had apparently sealed my fate as the next reigning 'it'. Instead, I brush him off with a sigh.

"I've gotta go home," I say.

Grandma greets me at the front door and ignores my grumpy face and stompy feet as I move inside the apartment.

"It's getting dark outside," she says in a conciliatory but matter-of-fact tone, adding "the others won't be out for much longer."

I shoot her a look of suspicion and wallow in the self-pity of missing out on a summer night out with all those crazy kids.

“Eeeeeeeeeveryone is still oooooout,” I whine and make a show of glancing longingly out of the window and into the depth of darkness filled with the high-pitched squeals of my free screaming friends.

Surely, I am missing out on the best fear summer session ever! But Grandma remains immune to my martyrdom as the most fun-deprived child on the face of the earth. Seeing my attempt to send her on a guilt trip is entirely futile, I decide I have to just get over it and hope that the others are also called to go home soon. Hearing them all still outside is unbearable torture, so I just sit next to Grandma and try to contain my tantrum with a mere grimace.

“It’s not fair! You and your sisters were out all night in summer!”

I had attempted to pick a fight by using a well-publicized fact from her childhood as

my ammunition. Grandma sees this as an opportunity to encourage a mood of distraction by using my whinging as a launching pad for yet another story from those days.

The good old days are more old than good.

“Those were different times — much safer even though it was during the war,” she muses, her expression showing that she had cast herself at least 50 years back in time.

“You are not gonna talk about THE WAR again!” I protest, still pouting.

“The sirens were the worst, most scary sound ...” Completely unfazed by my complaints, she accompanies the comment with a suitable sound effect. She lives and relives those stories with such relish.

“We’d all leave everything and run for the mine-shaft bomb shelter; everyone from the tenements would go at once. We would hear the planes overhead and we didn’t know what would be left of our homes when we emerged. Mum had to leave my

father back at home as he was too old to run to the shelter.”

She pauses for dramatic effect even though she has told the story a million times. I am entranced for the millionth and first time.

Technology is ever-advancing — in every new war a new method of murder is invented.

“And ...” I interject impatiently because the pause is getting unacceptably long and is starting to test my patience.

“One night we heard a huge bang ...” she continues. “We were convinced that only rubble was left of the tenements, but then we realized the thundering boom was not a bomb, but the bomb shelter gates being banged accidentally!”

She adored telling that twisted turn in the tale. By that point Grandma’s trick of distraction had worked brilliantly.

“And ...” I prod further.

“And then we sat around singing songs and reading poems,” she says as she launches into a particularly ghastly, long and tedious one about a soldier and his sweetheart.

To my disgust as a child, my grandma was really into poetry. She used to listen to poetry readings on old records, which I thought to be quite a travesty considering how much I loathed having to memorize and parrot textbook poems for my school recitals — I’d learn the words by heart and have no actual understanding of the meaning behind them. She would attempt to instruct me to recite the poems with feeling and pathos.

“Will you remember me when you grow up? Will you remember that I always made sure that you slept in bed sheets as white as doves?” she says as she tucks me into bed. I cringe and smirk simultaneously at the corny simile.

It matters not you’ve gone if no one knew you’ve been.

“Snap out of the sappy sentimentalism, Grandma!”

She laughs so I tell her I am not tired and don't want to go to sleep. Then I request another story about her childhood spent in the town's tenements. She says she is sick of repeating herself over and over again. I point out that she always does anyway.

"Let's read some books," she says. "How about a traditional folklore story like *The Three Brothers & the Golden Apple*?"

"That story is boring," I whine. "It could never happen — and what good is an apple made of gold anyway?"

It is a metaphor for the apple being yellow with ripeness as it absorbs the sun's golden rays, Grandma clarifies. I am of course unconvinced about that — in my mind's eye I picture a metal apple that really hurts your teeth when you bite it.

"You have to be familiar with folklore because you will study it at school." she says.

Finally we compromise with an African folk story about the moon and the sun being

husband and wife. I pick it because it's exotic and the book drawings are lifelike. I close my eyes and listen to Grandma acting out the characters as she reads. She puts her best thespian skills forward to get me to sleep. After some time, she repeats the last paragraph she just read. I protest automatically. I know it's a trick she uses to test my concentration and, most importantly, to check if I am asleep.

"I am losing my voice," she complains.

"It's all the smoking." This is my precocious retort, but I am just repeating what her sisters say.

"Your mother would never put up with that kind of crap," Grandma says.

She had a point. And I, for sure, was a little shit.

At least my mother had no poetry inclinations. In fact, she was my ally in literature loathing.

Some books are the building bricks of knowledge, while others merely resemble bricks.

My mother, the notorious former-punk rebel, stays out of sight in the back room as she half-heartedly tries to study in a quarter-hearted attempt to finish a biochemistry degree. Despite the fact that I am repeatedly told not to disturb her, this is not a strong enough deterrent and I persist in bugging her.

I sneak into the back room of the apartment. It is the most northern room, comparatively colder and darker than the rest, its baroque ambience amplified by heavy velvet curtains and mahogany wood-carved decorations combined with plenty of antlers and horns — all trophies from my grandfather's heyday at the Hunting & Fishing Association. There is a carving of a doorway with two mythical guards at the front. I used to try to open it but gave up when the glued-on faux handle broke off.

Making mistakes is the only method of making discoveries.

The other carving is an architecturally correct representation of a winding street. Its three-dimensional quality creates the effect of depth and hence the feeling that you could walk into it and perhaps reach some obscure destination if you followed the stone street.

There is one artwork in that room that I avoid voluntarily because I find it threatening. This is its sure-fire immunity to breakage. The totem mask wears what appears to be a tortured expression; there are cow horns on each side of its head, with a smaller one for a goatee beard. Grandma is adamant that it is traditional art designed to ward off mythical spirits, but to me it is nothing short of a symbol of Satanism.

I cautiously walk past it, trying to avoid making eye contact with its empty black eye sockets, on my way to the corner where Mum looks like she is buried waist-deep in coffee-stained formula sheets.

“Mum, are you done studying? Let’s go out for a walk,” I say with hesitation, but I am

ready to build up to a tantrum if she refuses.

Mum's glazed-over look indicates she is elsewhere. Grandma, who has followed me in to the room, puts in her two cents worth as well: "Come on; go and get some fresh air."

My mother sighs and gets up reluctantly to get ready since she seems to have been successfully nagged and guilt-tripped into going out by Grandma and me respectively. She decides on a dress. The dress is extremely yellow and extremely 80s but that is okay because it is the 80s and admittedly my mother is ultra trendy, which can be a pain because she takes aaaaaages to get ready.

A fashion faux pas today is the trend style of tomorrow and vice versa.

She teases her hair upwards, loading it up with hairspray and shaving cream for volumizing effect, and accessorizes with enormous plastic red clip-on earrings, which match the dress's saucer-sized plastic red buttons. She rims her eyes with

kohl. I stare with fascination and she protests that me watching her makes her lose her make-up concentration control. Grandma dramatically winces in exaggerated pain and proclaims her horror at the possibility that my mother may accidentally poke her eye out.

“Please don’t do that!” Grandma says with fragments of panic in her voice.

Don't torture yourself with fear of what is inevitable.

My mother rolls her eyes and whatever. Grandma stomps off offended that she hasn’t been taken seriously and I start fidgeting with some red nail polish in Mum’s make-up bag.

“Stop specifically seeking out trouble!” warns my mother, using a trademark grandma phrase of extreme exaggeration. “You’ll drop it on the carpet then we will never hear the end of it from your grandma!”

Naturally I don’t listen and proceed to attempt to paint my nails.

“You will look like a gipsy with red painted nails like that,” my mother says as she tries a different threat tactic. Then she attempts to negotiate by offering to paint my nails herself with the pink-pearl. I surrender the bottle of red nail polish and settle for the downgraded standard of pink. It’s better than nothing.

Demand more and complain about what you get, but only after securing ownership of what’s offered.

My mother is usually all ambitious brisk weariness, except when she is temporarily distracted. This is when she lets go, for a snippet of time, and allows a glimpse of the beautiful, witty and trendy young thing that she is.

A proud pessimist, Mum had an edginess to her that I could never quite comprehend. These days I get it because I have the benefit of hindsight combined with the woeful wisdom of adulthood — it was a reflection of her gutsy decisiveness and the endless disappointment on the road to realizing her immigration dream.

Experience life for long enough and the glass that is half full can become half empty.

As a child I struggled to link my mother and grandmother, but nowadays I am frequently amazed by the striking similarities in their manner and personality. Grandma is a fiercely proud woman, obsessively selfless, acutely, aggressively and arrogantly aware of her own intelligence, and capable of extreme panic and hysteria. She is what people euphemistically describe as a “difficult character”, which results in volatile and strained relationships.

Instead of empathy, your troubles usually attract spectators or apathy.

She was always limping because of her cracked heels, washing and cooking with brisk hand movements while giving somebody the silent treatment for one reason or another.

She was also a drag king extraordinaire, masquerading as Santa at Christmas. Her

gender-bending beard-borrowing was the real reason why we only used candles on Christmas Eve. Every year, the imposing Santa mysteriously knocked on the door in the darkness. I always knew it was grandma knocking. She dropped her already husky voice, wore a red dressing gown on her head, sported a white beard made of cotton wool (which served as the soft packaging for our glass Christmas ornaments for the rest of the year) and dragged a pillowcase full of presents. After I opened the door she would ask me seriously in her Santa voice: “Have you been good?”

However, I never ever dared to confront or question my grandmother’s portrayal of the bearded legend, especially when she was in character, because to be honest, I was never quite sure if it were she.

There is a cure for sanity.

Those Christmas decorations were a huge bone of contention in the household because of my frequent demands to take them out and play with them in the middle of summer. Despite my extreme tantrums

on the matter, Grandma would adamantly refuse — the delicate glitter glass was easily breakable, she said, plus she wasn't about to let me get bored of them and thus cease appreciating their traditional annual special-occasion beauty.

“I said no and no means no,” she'd say firmly and unequivocally.

Even though I would continue to whimper and whine, it was crystal clear to me that my own stubbornness was no match for Grandma's. After all, she was the master and I merely the apprentice.

After one whining session, I turn my efforts to political manipulation by begging Grandma's visiting sister Evenya to retrieve them for me. Although she would refuse nothing to no one, she is not about to cross Grandma either. Instead, she comes up with what she hopes will be a middle-ground diplomatic resolution to the conflict.

“Wait here; I have a surprise for you,” she says to me. My excitement that she might actually cave in quickly gives way to

suspicion as she reappears rather too quickly with her hand behind her back.

“Here’s a Christmas decoration for you to play with, but don’t tell your grandma,” she says with her most convincing conciliatory and conspiratorial tone. Then she pulls out what appears to be a glitter glass globe from behind her back.

I catch a quick glimpse of it and am momentarily fooled, but a close up reveals the fraud for what it is — this supposed Christmas tree decoration is nothing but my old dirty rubber ball wrapped up in silver cigarette foil.

The deception pushes me over the diva edge as I grab the “surprise” and throw it in tantrumy terror rage.

“This is NOOOT a REAL glass globe!” I scream so loud that Grandma, as the undisputed disciplinarian, has to come in to subdue me. She also uses this opportunity to demonstrate to my great-aunt that pandering to my demands is always a bad idea.

There is no doubt Grandma has a performing talent, as well as a cheeky and ominous sense of humor akin to Whoopi Goldberg's. There are even physical similarities — the I-am-up-to-something twinkle in the eye, husky voice, ropey black hair and almost black-skin (due to my grandmother's origins).

Beauty is made up of equal parts energy, mystery and humor.

Her hyperactivity was the suspected reason behind her excess stomach acid, which she remedied by gulping down teaspoons of baking soda. She had dentures, despite only being in her mid-50s, and her leathery dark Mediterranean skin was complemented by a very thick black bob, which was secured to the side with a plain metal clip resembling a stork's beak. She dyed her hair black and, in a typically dramatic manner, refused to go out in public without touching up her white roots because she was "too ashamed" to reveal the truth about her advanced age.

Old age brings more audacity than wisdom.

Depending on the dye, she would sometimes end up with a blue tinge in her hair or unintentionally give it a reddish-brown, fox-fur glow, which was especially visible when she went onto the balcony in the sun. She spent a lot of time there, smoking Arda, the cheapest cigarettes, which are ironically named after a super-polluted river. She smoked them down to, and almost including, the filter, stabbing the butts out on the gray concrete and flicking them expertly to the dusty ground.

She frequently took these self-imposed smoking stopovers with her sister Evenya, whom I called En for some unfathomable baby-talk reason. I would hover because I was an attention addict, being an only child and all.

One morning I sneak onto the balcony while they are there. The balcony is bathed in the summer morning sun that will soon turn searing. The common garden below, where I play with all the neighborhood children, is perfectly silent and sparkling with early morning stillness.

“And so his mistress found the money?” Grandma questions as she continues their conversation. She then takes a long drag on her cigarette, squinting as she does because it is almost down to the orange filter with the yellow spots and the smoke stings her eyes.

Don't let life play out without plenty of play.

En refrains from responding immediately. Instead, she throws Grandma a discreetly cautious glance to let her know that I have intruded upon their clandestine exchange. But it is already too late.

“Whose mistress and what money?” I ask insistently as I turn to Grandma. I can feel En's silent sign language behind my back. I absolutely hate it when they do that; almost as much as I hate it when they use exclusive code names to secretly refer to the 'characters' in their gossip sessions. Whispering is also at the top of my pet-hate list.

Grandma makes a show of waving away the smoke from my face.

“Let the old women smoke for a second.” She is trying to appeal to my unselfish common sense.

“We’ll go out shortly. Look I have only this much left of my cigarette,” adds En as she shows me her half-finished cigarette to illustrate her argument.

I look particularly impatient and unconvinced at that point because I know she will take ages. She is not exactly Grandma, who can finish a cig in one go; after all, she’s had 30 years of macho-style practice at it.

“En, could you not flick off the ash? I want to see how long you can hold onto it,” I say as I pull out a cup of diluted detergent water then attempt to blow large bubbles with an empty pen casing. The sun dances on the bubbles’ fragile surfaces.

“Grandma, can you fill my balloon with smoke?” I plead. However, neither of them is in the mood for nonsense and anyway I should know by now that cigarettes are not toys.

Nonsense is the cornerstone of a healthy mentality.

“We’ll go to my place overnight,” En says and gives Grandma a gleeful glance.

That kind of genius bribe should buy them some peaceful gossip time. Grandma, the ultimate authority on the matter, swiftly gives the plan her stamp of approval. She has the chairman’s casting vote when it comes to such decisions. Then she quickly ushers me inside to ensure I fulfill my side of the bargain, which involves waiting quietly until they finish. I retreat as the victor from this particular balcony battle.

Getting something for nothing is merely a delusion.

If ever there was a complete contrast to my grandmother’s abrasive and even abominable character, it was her sister’s personality. I remember En with as much affection as I remember Grandma. She was a much more feminine, spiritual, highly patient and tolerant individual. Although she shared her sister’s selflessness and

generosity, she had a much more fluid approach to human interaction, which was the complete opposite to grandma's autocratic nature. She was a cool yet compassionate counselor to all relatives and the most accomplished source of moral support and spiritual serenity to the family.

A good listener's popularity depends on listening to other people's exciting secrets while resisting the temptation to gossip.

En had the calm nature of a forest nymph and she possessed the ethereal ability to improve with age when everyone else gets crazier, more cantankerous and unbearable. She had the kind of rare genetic combination that gave her the character traits of an expert comforter, and the uncanny ability to convert the toxicity of everyone's woes into environmentally friendly oxygen-like materials.

Truth and tact tend to be mutually exclusive — tactless truth exists, but there is no such thing as truthful tact.

Impeccably groomed and surrounded by fresh vegetarian smells like lemon and dill,

she didn't have a proper garbage bin — food scraps and other compost rubbish were tightly compressed in a tiny yogurt container, which she would secretly chuck out of the window at night. As a child I was thoroughly delighted to be a part of such clandestine secrecy.

The most pleasant people are those that recognize the fact that most things in life are completely uncontrollable.

One following day, with innocent diplomacy and hysterically humorous hypocrisy, she disapprovingly shakes her head when the unsuspecting, energetic and brisk building manager stops her on the common stairs to gossip and complain about all those insolent, inconsiderate residents who throw their garbage out of the window.

If you are going to break the rules, break them with finesse.

En never married but was never short of suitors well into her 70s. She didn't have the reputation of somebody who openly played the field of keen pensioners, but

that didn't stop Grandma from constantly picking on her about it. She would frequently bring up En's longest relationship with a local intellectual who had died shortly after the relationship had ended.

"Evichko, I plead with you! Just admit that it happened. The man died of a broken heart," Grandma says with the sole aim of provocation. To her disappointment, En remains nonchalant.

"Cut the crap, Katusha," she laughs light-heartedly. "It had nothing to do with me or his psychological state. You know very well that it was a stroke."

"Exactly my point! You popped his heart, didn't you?" is Grandma's victorious accusation.

En gracefully ignores the pithy question and questionable pun, because she knows the futility of confrontation, so she endeavors to let this type of conversation die a natural death.

Arguments are undesirable as they might just change your mind.

Instead, she pulls out a bright magenta lipstick and applies it with practiced precision. The high temperature in her faux-leather purse has made the lipstick even more greasy and hard to handle and En ends up with magenta smeared on her teeth. She bares their bony whiteness into her tiny gold-plated oval mirror and does her best to wipe them clean. Then she pulls out an old bus ticket and makes a lip imprint on it to blot the excess lipstick and avoid bleeding.

Grandma looks on with disapproval. She is anti make-up “especially at our age”, plus she is still holding a grudge about being ignored.

“Evichko, your lipstick is almost gone and didn’t you buy it, like yesterday? You eat them up so fast!”

With her inflammatory comment, Grandma is prodding further for a fight, even though she knows very well that most

of the lipstick gets left on coffee cups and cigarette filters.

Nobody is perfect; so when we point out other people's imperfections we are merely saying they are worse than our own.

“You’ll never believe who I met at the market this morning ...” En states sunnily, hoping she can successfully change the subject once and for all. Grandma gets the hint and reluctantly drops the relationship issue, but not before sulking for a split second.

Despite such behavior, En was never bitter about anything, regardless how badly things turned out or what she was blamed for by Grandma.

Laughter is synonymous with life.

En was a true traveler, which in itself invited plenty of surly scornful remarks from Grandma, who never missed the chance to point out that her sister was a woman free of family responsibility. She said that’s why she could trek around the

country with the above-mentioned boyfriend. He was En's most enduring travel-buddy and they'd visit seaside towns, mountains and monasteries.

If you are not on the right track, it's time to get into the map-making business.

He was a quiet and intelligent man with a flair for the arts and a passion for politics — a pretty potent but risky combo considering their travel adventures took place when Communism was at its peak. The most secluded heritage-listed spots were their favorite destinations.

En tells of exhilarating horror when her man — the Dreamy Dissident — got involved in an idealistic one-man crusade against the establishment. Traveling along an empty freeway, he insists they stop. Then he goes on a knife-slashing spree of all the huge crimson Communist propaganda posters adorning the roadside. Then they disappear in a cloud of dust, leaving Lenin's vandalized fabric image to flap in the breeze, and hopefully deliver a democratic message of rebellion to any other motorist that may come by.

It is unwise to trade freedom for fickle safety.

I think it is all pretty classic and cool, but Grandma immediately disapproves of such immature antics, even though she is an anti-communist to the core.

“This is ridiculous and dangerous!” she says. “I don’t want to have to drag you out of jail when you get caught because of your boyfriend’s mid-life crisis! You two should be ashamed of yourselves, acting like silly kids. You are both over 50 for God’s sake! But that’s what happens when neither of you have any responsibility to keep you constructively occupied!”

Those who are young at heart find it progressively difficult to act their age.

“It’s no big deal!” En chuckles defensively. “You’re over-reacting again. Besides, as you remember, you used to be pretty involved in the rebel movement at school.”

The cost of being on the side of the majority is the sacrifice of your own common sense.

“Was that when you sent that threatening collage to the Commie school association and accused them of killing the King? You almost got expelled too, didn’t you?” I inquire, relaying the story I’d heard before.

To think and act alike is a characteristic not restricted to cattle.

Despite En’s exploits as a wannabe rebel she was a bit of a scaredy cat when it came to elevators. That was too bad because she lived alone on the 8th and top floor of a concrete block of flats. The flats were built out of town during the communist regime in an effort to populate a once desolate country area. The building was made out of huge box-like concrete panels held together with hooks, resulting in often-huge draughty gaps between modules. Yet her apartment was a sorceress’ sanctuary for stressed-out souls such as us.

If I collected \$1 from everyone who has come to me for help, I would make a

comfortable living just from the repeat business.

Getting there involved a lengthy bus trip complete with motion sickness, culminating in projectile vomiting and diesel-fumes-induced delirium. Upon our arrival, En's remedy was cucumber salad with a generous splash of vinegar and freshly chopped dill. Unfortunately, this wouldn't happen until we reached her apartment. She was claustrophobic and was thus convinced that the elevator cabin would dismantle and plunge to the bottom of the shaft. So we'd have to climb to the top of the block of flats on foot.

The province of perception is the most important electorate when it comes to voting for the truth.

I'd always grumble, but wouldn't make a big issue out of it because En seemed to be able to appeal to my more malleable side without having to resort to any kind of threats — of which she was quite incapable anyway. This was unlike Grandma and Mum whose main ammunition against my

stubborn pig-headedness was an advanced arsenal of different forms of fear.

Just because nobody is listening doesn't mean you have to stop talking, for the best you can do is hear yourself out.

Thus I'd agree to climb the stairs with En, and since I'd done it many times, I was familiar with every floor and its particular characteristics, like pot plants and door designs. Each time, during our trek to the top of this concrete Mount Everest, we'd encounter the building manager elected by the residential committee.

The only rational reason for the dedicated attendance of committee meetings is the delusion that individual responsibility can be eliminated collectively.

He was one of En's notorious fans and would always stop her for a chat while I'd get the obligatory cheek-pinch. He was an alert, tiny rodent of a man with a mousy brown toupee to match his moustache and I honestly liked his cheerful chirpy friendliness.

“You have to come over and get the keys for your compartment in the common basement,” he reminds En on one stair trip, perhaps hoping to get an extra chance to talk to her.

“Some day ...” En replies as she flashes her flirty smile, magenta with a silver tooth at the corner.

They exchange more pleasantries and some gossip and we continue to climb the stairs, En’s white and black polka-dot sleeveless dress flowing behind her.

The building manager is left with the promise of another accidental meeting and our muddy footprints, which he makes a show of mopping up.

“I’m so sorry for soiling the stairs,” is En’s charming apology. “You know how it is, walking through the mud swamps from the bus station ...”

He seizes this opportunity to chat some more, expressing opinions about the council’s incompetence and their reluctance to fix up the surrounding fields.

Conferences are useless gatherings where important people gather to be useless.

Eventually we move on and, to my relief, we finally reach her apartment on the 8th floor.

Cozy yet spacious, her place was infused with the quiet creativity and optimism of its owner and the magical mysticism of all her exotic pot plants; the aloe-vera, with juices she rubbed on her skin, and climbing species characteristic of graveyards that adorned every cupboard and bookshelf. She also had a huge library of books and a traditional folk theme to her decorations — ceramic hand-painted vases, figurines dressed in traditional attire, candles and hand-made rugs in natural earthy colors.

Each book is a portal to an alternate universe.

A furry piece of brown carpet on one side of her living room was completely surrounded by pot plants. The carpet was soggy from the pot-plant watering overflow. I put a clay fish ornament in the middle of it,

making it swim through this murky river full of currents passing through an overgrown forest.

The blue mountain was visible through her window, an odd contrast to the clouds of black smoke emerging from the chimneys of the nearby processing plant. Like erect penises they ranged from fat cauldron-like cigars to tall skinny cigarettes. “The phallic symbols of Communism” was Grandma’s description of them. Their height was considered an airplane hazard, which resulted in them being half-heartedly painted in red-and-white stripes like the over-stretched sleeves of a dirty jumper.

In the mornings the sounds of the countryside filled the crisp dewy air yet untainted by the charcoal miasma — the bleating of sheep in the uneven sparse muddy meadow below and the cry of a rooster greeting the sunrise.

I adored sleeping over and the first thing I always did was go through her boxes of treasures to fervently seek out the fascination they held.

Mystery has an exquisite magnetism.

She never minded and neither did Mum or Grandma — their only true regret was that the trinkets didn't occupy me for too long, since I was an often-bored whiny, attention-grabbing, constant entertainment-seeking terror.

In her hallway, En had a mirror with a two-storey, hand-crafted, black-iron shelf full of jewelry boxes, little jars of beautifying creams and potions, greasy old unused lipsticks, bottles of dried-out thick nail polish — in the classic colors of white mother-of-pearl, coral pink and blood red — and empty deodorant cans with the odd ether molecule a faint reminder of the presence of a scent. The charismatic chemical fragrance of nail varnish remover hung in the air and even hovered in the bathroom, which was lined with pink tiles and frilly drapes. There was also a clean, smooth ceramic sink, which doubled as a warm foaming bath for both my hands and numerous rubber toys. I would lean over, to get the foam at eye level, attempting to experience this fantasy spa from the lucky toy's perspective.

Her apartment, with its black chiseled-iron candlesticks, vanities and shelves was a work of a professional interior designer. More specifically, it was the labor of love of yet another secret admirer according to Grandma's expert evaluation, even though it was well known that En had engaged him in his renovation capacity only, and had paid for those services.

Secret Admirer also happened to work cleaning the industrial chimneys of the processing plant visible from her window. He'd go over to En's apartment after normal work hours and on weekends to supposedly earn the extra renovation income, but most importantly to enjoy her charming company and conversation over garden salad and vodka.

Grandma complained that she led him on.

"Evichko, you can never say no and you are so indecisive!" she'd say with accusation.

Criticism evokes action and action evokes criticism, but it is better to let someone act first so you can criticize them later.

Even though En had never exhibited textbook assertiveness, she was a smart and skilled diplomat whose immense popularity was gently envied by grandma — sisterly rivalry, no doubt.

Kindness creates a chain reaction of patience and wisdom.

It also meant that En let me manipulate her and get away with murder no matter how transparent my attempts were. I shamelessly took advantage of her generosity. Every time I visited I would beg her for one of her ornaments, which she willingly surrendered, despite Mum and Grandma's disdain. Not surprisingly, once removed from their spiritual environment, the statuettes' mystique immediately disappeared; so I lost interest and abandoned them at the bottom of some toy drawer at home. They would either vanish for good in this chaotic, high-energy-and-hence-exhausting, frequently overcrowded, Bermuda-triangle black hole of a household, or they would be secretly smuggled back to En's place by my disgruntled grandma.

Grandma would whisper to En with hurried urgency as she thrust them back into En's hands when she visited.

To me, she would say: "No more trinkets! You have enough toys as it is! We are already buried in enough rubbish!"

Grandma would rattle off the rules of my visit and would then sternly instruct En not to give me any more of her ornaments. Needless to say, nobody listened and each trinket made the bus trip back and forth on numerous occasions.

En was a thoughtful, emotionally intelligent, funny and eternally optimistic listener. She worked in the office of a hydraulic organization involved in the building of dams. I knew all her colleagues from the enormous box of photos she kept and the story that accompanied each of them.

"Is that the TV repairman that had an affair with Miss Bon Bon?" I pipe up, pointing to a man in tight trousers with sleazy 70s sideburns and porn poo-bah Elvis-style

sunglasses. He was grinning like a Cheshire cat next to her glamorous cousin Christina, code-named Miss Bon Bon.

En quickly puts on her reading glasses and takes the photo. But she is long-sighted so she stretches the hand with the photo away from her so she can stare at the photo from a distance.

“Yes,” she confirms, with a chuckle of reminiscence. “But don’t tell your grandma we talked about it,” she says with a conspiratory wink.

I continue to rifle through the photos in the box, which are not organized in any particular order.

To take life too seriously is to seriously lose sight of what life is all about.

Despite En’s sensitivity and compassion, she was surprisingly unsentimental; always surrounded by a cool sense of secrecy. She was by no means a neat-freak like Grandma, and never cleaned, even though her apartment always had a marvelous fresh ambience about it.

She had curly hair, dyed black like Grandma's. Legend has it that as a child she prayed for curls and her wish was eventually granted. She never used rollers or curlers, but she did enhance nature by spritzing water on her hair and manually squeezing the waves into place in a truly glamorous 40s style. She had tiny feet and wore shiny high-heeled shoes and boots. She also wore elegant cat's-eye spectacle frames set with transition lenses, and religiously applied cucumber peelings to her nose in an attempt to fade her freckles. But what fascinated me most were her fingernails, which were always long, albeit uneven, filed into a pointy diamond shape and painted either a lacquered red or a glistening mother-of-pearl.

Don't be too moderate in your quest to attain moderation.

She was also a literature lover and had an ancient relic of a typewriter. When the keys were pressed, little hammers would jump and hit the worn ink ribbon onto the paper, stamping the relevant symbol. Her extensive book collection took up 90

percent of her apartment and her reading habits were yet another bone of contention between her and Grandma.

Grandma would always say: “How can you read EVERYTHING all the time? I mean, Communist propaganda magazines! How desperate can you get? I’d have a nervous breakdown if I had to read such boring rubbish.”

The fewer your ideas, the more insidious they become.

En was a sought after family therapist. Her skills were often called upon by older sister Tsetska, whose dramatic hysteria was the source of all her woes. Despite it, and her inclination for pseudo-sociopathic phobias, she hadn’t lost her effervescent personality, infectious laugh and arrogant nosiness. Tsetska was a Björk lookalike and just as kooky. She’d twirl in her tornado skirts, greet everyone with wet kisses, and chattily show-off non-stop, while her asymmetrical foam-roller curls bounced up and down competitively.

Sanity is not only overrated but it is also an overstated statistic.

She would come down into the town to visit us; this was because we lived at the very heart of the city center and this meant she could indulge her 25-year-old lottery ticket habit. All that time Tsetska had used the same numbers and was not about to stop anytime soon.

She had kept every ticket she'd ever bought. She asked En to be the trusted custodian of this worthless treasure. En had of course agreed and the tickets seemed safe, until one day En accidentally admitted to Grandma that she had disposed of Tsetska's lottery lifetime.

"How could you do that? How can you be soooooo irresponsible? Those tickets are her life!" yells Grandma in mortification.

"I was cleaning and noticed that they made my cupboard smell like mould," is En's calm explanation.

"You never clean! You chuck everything in that black hole of a closet of yours!"

Grandma's hysterics were reaching a crescendo.

“She'll never need them ever again and she'll never find out about their absence anyway.”

Expect criticism

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