1.

Stalin

I never asked myself about the meaning of freedom until the day I hugged Stalin. From close up, he was much taller than I expected. Our teacher, Nora, had told us that imperialists and revisionists liked to emphasize how Stalin was a short man. He was, in fact, not as short as Louis XIV, whose height, she said, they – strangely – never brought up. In any case, she added gravely, focusing on appearances rather than what really mattered was a typical imperialist mistake. Stalin was a giant, and his deeds were far more relevant than his physique.

The thing that made Stalin really special, Nora went on to clarify, was that he smiled with his eyes. Can you believe it? Smiling with your eyes? That's because the friendly moustache that adorned his face covered his lips, so that if you focused only on the lips, you would never know if Stalin was really smiling or doing something else. But you just had to take one look at his eyes, piercing, intelligent and brown, and then you knew. Stalin was smiling. Some people were unable to look you in the eye. They clearly had something to hide. Stalin looked straight at you, and if he felt like it, or if you behaved well, his eyes would smile. He always wore an unassuming coat and plain brown shoes, and he liked to put his right hand under the left side of his coat, as

if holding his heart. The left hand, he often kept in his pocket.

'In his pocket?' we asked. 'Isn't it rude to walk with your hand in your pocket? Grown-ups always tell us to take our hands out of our pockets.'

'Well, yes,' said Nora. 'But it is cold in the Soviet Union. And anyway,' she added, 'Napoleon also always had his hand in his pocket. Nobody ever said that was rude.'

'Not in his pocket,' I said timidly. 'In his waistcoat. In his time, that was a sign of good upbringing.'

Teacher Nora ignored me and was about to take another question.

'*And* he was short,' I interrupted.

'How do you know?'

'My grandmother told me.'

'What did she tell you?'

'She told me that Napoleon was short but when Marx's teacher Hangel, or Hegel, I can't remember, saw him, he said one could see the spirit of the world standing on a horse.'

'Hangel,' she corrected. 'Hangel was right. Napoleon changed Europe. He spread the political institutions of the Enlightenment. He was one of the greats. But not as great as Stalin. If Marx's teacher Hangel had seen Stalin standing, obviously not on a horse, but perhaps on a tank, he would have also claimed to have seen the spirit of the world. Stalin was a vital source of inspiration for many more people, for millions of our brothers and sisters in Africa and Asia, not only in Europe.'

'Did Stalin love children?' we asked.

'Of course, he did.'

'Even more than Lenin?'

'About the same, but his enemies always tried to hide that. They made Stalin sound worse than Lenin because Stalin was stronger and far, far more dangerous for them. Lenin changed Russia but Stalin changed the world. This is why the fact that Stalin loved children just as much as Lenin was never properly reported.'

'Did Stalin love children as much as Uncle Enver?'

Teacher Nora hesitated.

'Did he love them more?'

'You know the answer,' she said with a warm smile.

It is possible that Stalin loved children. It is likely that children loved Stalin. What is certain, dead certain, is that I never loved him more than on that wet December afternoon when I scampered from the port to the little garden near the Palace of Culture, sweaty, shaky, and with my heart pounding so hard I thought I would spit it on the ground. I had run as fast as I could for more than a mile when I finally spotted the tiny garden. When Stalin appeared on the horizon, I knew I would be safe. He stood there, solemn as usual, with his unassuming coat, plain bronze shoes and his right hand under his coat. as if supporting his heart. I stopped, looked around to ensure nobody was following me, and went closer. With my right cheek pressed against Stalin's thigh and my arms struggling to circle the back of his knees, I was not visible. I tried to catch my breath, closed my eyes and began to count. One. Two. Three. When I got to thirty-seven, I could no longer hear the dogs barking. The thundering sound of shoes stamping on concrete had become a distant echo. Only the slogans of protesters occasionally reverberated: '*Freedom, democracy, freedom, democracy.*'

When I became certain of my safety, I let go of Stalin. I sat on the ground and took a more careful look. The last drops of rain on his shoes were drying out and the paint on his coat had begun to fade. Stalin was just as teacher Nora had described him: a bronze giant with hands and feet much larger than I'd expected. Tilting my neck backwards, I lifted my head to confirm that his moustache really did cover the upper lip and that he smiled with his eyes. But there was no smile. There were no eyes, lips, nor even a moustache. The hooligans had stolen Stalin's head.

I covered my mouth to suffocate a scream. Stalin, the bronze giant with the friendly moustache who had been standing in the garden of the Palace of Culture since long before I was born, decapitated? Stalin, of whom Hangel would have said that he had seen the spirit of the world on a tank? Why? What did they want? Why did they shout, '*Freedom, democracy, freedom, democracy*'? What did it mean?

I had never given much thought to freedom. There was no need to. We had plenty of freedom. I felt so free that I often perceived my freedom as a burden and, occasionally, like on that day, as a threat.

I had not meant to end up in a protest. I hardly knew what a protest was. Only a few hours before, I had been standing in the rain by the school gate, wondering which way to walk back home, whether to turn left, turn right or walk straight on. I was free to decide. Each path raised different questions, and I had to weigh causes and consequences, reflect on their implications and make a decision I knew I might come to regret.

Certainly, I was regretting it that day. I chose freely which way to walk home, and I made the wrong decision.

I had just finished my cleaning shift in school, after the end of the lessons. We took turns cleaning our classroom in groups of four, but the boys often made excuses and only the girls were left. I shared the shift with my friend Elona. On a normal day, Elona and I would leave the school after cleaning, stop by the old woman who sat on the pavement at the corner of the road selling sunflower seeds, and we would ask her: 'Can we try them? Are they salted or unsalted? Roasted or unroasted?' The woman would open one of the three sacks she carried, the roasted and salted one, the roasted and unsalted, the unroasted and unsalted, and we would try a couple of seeds from each. When we had spare coins, there was plenty of choice.

After, we would turn left to go to Elona's house, munching sunflower seeds and struggling a little to let ourselves in with the rusty keys attached to her mother's necklace which she wore beneath her school uniform. There, we would have to choose which game to play. In December it was easy. At that time of the year preparations for the national song contest started, and we would make up our own songs and pretend we were going to appear on national television. I wrote the lyrics while Elona sang them, and sometimes I offered a drum accompaniment by using a large wooden spoon to beat the pans in the kitchen. Recently, though, Elona had lost interest in the song contest. She was more likely to want to play Brides and Babies. Instead of beating pans in the kitchen, she wanted us to stay in her parents' room, try out her mother's hair clips, change into her old wedding dress or wear her make-up, and pretend to nurse dolls until it was time for lunch. At that point I

would have to decide whether to carry on playing, as Elona wanted, or convince her to fry eggs, or if there were no eggs, whether to eat bread and oil, or perhaps only bread. But these were trivial choices.

The real dilemma emerged after an argument Elona and I had about cleaning the classroom that day. She insisted we ought to both sweep and mop, otherwise we would never get the flag for the best cleaners of the month, which her mother had always been very keen on. I replied that we always swept on odd days of the week, and swept and mopped on even ones, and since it was an odd day, we could go home early and still receive the cleaning flag. She replied that this was not what the teacher expected and reminded me of the time when my parents had been summoned to the school because I had been negligent with my cleaning. I said she was wrong; the real reason had been the Monday-morning control team, who had discovered that my nails were too long. She maintained that it didn't matter, that in any case the right way to clean the classroom was to both sweep and mop, and even if we did receive the flag at the end of the month it would feel as if we had cheated. Moreover, she added, as if no further argument could be had, that is how she cleaned at home because that is how her mother used to do it. I told Elona she could not use her mother like that every time just to get her own way. I left in anger, and while standing in the rain by the school gate I wondered if Elona had a right to expect everyone to be nice to her, even when she was wrong. I wondered if I should have pretended that I loved sweeping and mopping just as I pretended that I loved playing Brides and Babies.

I had never told her, but I hated that game. I hated being in her mother's room and trying on the wedding dress. I found it unnerving to wear a dead person's clothes, or to touch the make-up they had been putting on only a few months before, as if we were them. But it was all recent, and Elona had been looking forward to having a baby sister who was going to play with my little brother. Instead, her mother died, the baby sister was sent to the orphanage, and only the wedding dress was left. I did not want to hurt her by refusing to wear it, or to tell her that I was repelled by the hair clips. Of course, I was free to tell her what I thought about Brides and Babies, just as I had been free to leave her to mop the classroom on her own; nobody stopped me. But I decided it was better to let Elona hear the truth, even if it might hurt her, than to lie indefinitely just to keep her happy.

If I did not turn left to go to Elona's house, I could turn right. That would have been the shortest route home, following two narrow alleyways that joined the main road in front of a biscuit workshop. Here a different dilemma emerged. A sizeable group of children assembled each day after the end of school, at the critical time when the distribution lorry was expected. If I chose that route, I would have to join what we called the 'action for biscuits'. I would form a line with the other children against the outside walls of the workshop, nervously awaiting the arrival of the lorry, monitoring the doors, carefully listening for sounds of potentially disruptive traffic, such as people on bikes or the occasional horse and carriage. At one point, the workshop door would open and two transport workers would appear carrying

biscuit cases, like twin Atlases carrying the Earth. There would be a small commotion, and we would all lurch forward to the chant of 'Oh greedy, oh greedy, biscuits, biscuits, oh greedy man!' The orderly line would then spontaneously divide into a vanguard of children in black uniforms waving their arms to try to grab hold of the transport workers' knees, and a rearguard that swarmed towards the workshop gate to obstruct the exit. The workers would twist the lower half of their bodies to release themselves from the hold, while stiffening the upper half so as to tighten their grip on the biscuit cases. A packet would slip, a fight would break out, and then a manager would emerge from inside the workshop, holding as many biscuits as necessary to satisfy everyone and triggering the dispersal of the assembly.

I was free to turn right or continue to walk straight, and if I turned right, that is what I could expect to happen. It was all perfectly innocent, and it was unreasonable, possibly unfair, to ask an eleven-year-old who was merely walking back home, without having set out to search for treats, to press ahead, ignoring the delicious smell of biscuits drifting from the workshop's open windows. It would be equally unreasonable to expect her to ignore the awkward, inquisitive looks of the other children by walking past, seemingly indifferent to the arrival of the lorry. Yet that was exactly what my parents had come to ask of me the night before that wretched December day in 1990, which is partly why the decision about which way to walk back home was directly relevant to the question of freedom.

It had been my fault, to some extent. I should never have gone home carrying biscuits like a trophy. But it was

also the fault of the new workshop manager. Recently hired, she was unaccustomed to the ways of her new workplace and had mistaken the children's appearance on that day for a one-off event. Instead of offering one biscuit to each child like all the other managers before her, she had handed over whole packets. Alarmed by this change, and by its implications for the 'action for biscuits' in the following days, instead of eating on the spot we had all stored the packets in our school bags and hastily run away.

I confess I did not imagine my parents would kick up such a fuss when I showed them the biscuits and explained where I had found them. I certainly did not expect the first question to be: 'Did anybody see you?' Of course, somebody had seen me, not least the person who had handed over the packets. No, I did not remember her face *exactly*. Yes, she was middle-aged. Not tall, not short, maybe average. Wavy hair, dark. Big, hearty smile. At that point, my father's face turned pale. He stood up from his armchair, holding his head in his hands. My mother left the living room and made a sign for him to follow her into the kitchen. My grandmother started stroking my hair in silence, and my little brother, to whom I had given a spare biscuit, stopped chewing, sat in a corner and started crying from the tension.

I was made to promise that I would never linger in the workshop yard again, or join the line against the wall, and I had to declare that I understood the importance of letting workers carry on with their duties, and that if everyone behaved like me, soon biscuits would disappear from the shops altogether. RE-CI-PRO-CI-TY, my father emphasized. Socialism is built on reciprocity.

I knew when I made the promise that it would be hard to keep. Or perhaps not – who knows? But I had at least to make the effort in good faith. I did not have anyone to blame for walking straight on rather than turning right, or for not going back to collect Elona after the cleaning shift to play Brides and Babies, or for choosing to ignore the biscuits that day. They had all been my decisions. I had done my best and still ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and now the result of all that freedom was the sheer terror that the dogs might return to devour me or that I would be crushed in a stampede.

Not that I could have predicted that I would stumble on a protest, or that Stalin would provide shelter. If I had not recently seen scenes of unrest elsewhere on television, I would not even have known that the strange spectacle of people screaming slogans and the police with their dogs was called a 'protest'. A few months before, in July 1990, dozens of Albanians had climbed the walls of foreign embassies, forcing themselves inside. I was perplexed as to why anyone might want to lock themselves up in a foreign embassy. We talked about it in school, and Elona said there was once a family, an entire family of six people, two brothers and four sisters, who had smuggled themselves into the Italian embassy in Tirana dressed as foreign tourists. They lived there for five years – five whole years – in just two rooms. Then another tourist, a real one this time, called Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, visited our country and talked to the embassy climbers, and then to the Party to communicate their desire to live in Italy.

I was intrigued by Elona's story and asked my father what it meant. 'They are *uligans*,' he replied, 'as they said on TV.' He clarified that *hooligan* was a foreign word

for which we had no Albanian translation. We didn't need it. Hooligans were mostly angry young men, who went to football matches, drank too much and got into trouble, who fought with supporters of the other team and burned flags for no reason. They lived mostly in the West, though there were some in the East too, but since we were neither in the East nor the West, in Albania they hadn't existed until recently.

I thought about hooligans as I tried to make sense of what I had just encountered. Clearly, if one was a hooligan, it would not be beyond the pale to climb up embassy walls, to shout at the police, to disrupt public order or to decapitate statues. Clearly, hooligans did the same in the West; perhaps they had smuggled themselves into our country just to provoke trouble. But the people who had climbed the embassy walls a few months before were definitely not foreigners. What did these different hooligans have in common?

I remembered vaguely something called the Berlin Wall protest the year before. We had talked about it in school, and teacher Nora explained it was related to the fight between imperialism and revisionism, and how they were each holding a mirror to the other, but both mirrors were broken. None of it concerned us. Our enemies regularly tried to topple our government, but they failed just as regularly. In the late forties, we split up with Yugoslavia when the latter broke with Stalin. In the sixties, when Khrushchev dishonoured Stalin's legacy and accused us of 'leftist nationalist deviationism', we interrupted diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. In the late seventies, we abandoned our alliance with China when the latter decided to become rich and betray

the Cultural Revolution. It didn't matter. We were surrounded by powerful foes, but knew ourselves to be on the right side of history. Every time our enemies threatened us, the Party, supported by the people, emerged stronger. Throughout the centuries, we had fought mighty empires and shown the rest of the world how even a small nation on the edge of the Balkans could find the strength to resist. Now we were leading the struggle to achieve the most difficult transition: that from socialist to communist freedom – from a revolutionary state governed by just laws to a classless society, where the state itself would wither away.

Of course, freedom had a cost, teacher Nora said. We had always defended freedom alone. Now *they* were all paying a price. *They* were in disarray. We were standing strong. We would continue to lead by example. We had neither money nor weapons, but we continued to resist the siren call of the revisionist East and the imperialist West, and our existence gave hope to all the other small nations whose dignity continued to be trampled on. The honour of belonging to a just society would be matched only by the gratitude felt for being sheltered from the horrors unfolding elsewhere in the world, places where children starved to death, froze in the cold or were forced to work.

'Have you seen this hand?' teacher Nora had said, lifting up her right hand at the end of the speech with a fierce look on her face. 'This hand will always be strong. This hand will always fight. Do you know why? It has shaken Comrade Enver's hand. I didn't wash it for days, after the Congress. But even after I washed it, the strength was still there. It will never leave me, never until I die.'

I thought about teacher Nora's hand, and the words she had spoken to us only a few months ago. I was still sitting on the ground in front of Stalin's bronze statue, collecting my thoughts, trying to summon the courage to lift myself up and retrace the steps back home. I wanted to remember her every word, to evoke her pride and strength when she told us how she was going to defend freedom because she had shaken Uncle Enver's hand. I wanted to be like her. I must defend my freedom too, I thought. It must be possible to overcome my fear. I had never shaken Uncle Enver's hand. I had never met him. But maybe Stalin's legs would be enough to give me strength.

I stood up. I tried to think like my teacher. We had socialism. Socialism gave us freedom. The protesters were mistaken. Nobody was looking for freedom. Everyone was already free, just like me, simply exercising that freedom, or defending it, or making decisions that they had to own, about which way to go home, whether to turn right or left or to walk straight. Perhaps also, just like me, they had stumbled near the port by mistake, ending up in the wrong place at the wrong time. Perhaps when they saw the police and the dogs, they were simply very afraid, and the same could be said for the police and the dogs, that they were very afraid in turn, especially when they saw people running. Perhaps both sides were simply chasing each other without knowing who was following whom, and that is why people had started to shout, '*Freedom, democracy*,' out of fear, and uncertainty, to explain that this was what they did not want to lose, rather than what they wanted.

And perhaps Stalin's head was entirely unrelated.

Perhaps it had been damaged in the night by the storm and the rain and someone had already collected it so that it could be repaired and would soon bring it back like new to take its old place, with the sharp, smiley eyes, and the thick, friendly moustache covering the upper lip, just as I had been told it looked, just as it had always been.

I hugged Stalin one last time, turned around, stared at the horizon to gauge the distance to my house, took a deep breath and started to run.

2.

The Other Ypi

'*Mais te voilà enfin! On t'attend depuis deux heures! Nous nous sommes inquiétés! Ta mère est déjà de retour! Papa est allé te chercher à l'école! Ton frère pleure*!',* thundered a tall, slim figure all dressed in black. Nini had been waiting at the top of the hill for more than an hour, asking passers-by if they had seen me, nervously wiping her hands on her apron, squinting harder and harder to try and spot my red leather rucksack.

I could tell my grandmother was angry. She had a bizarre way of scolding, making you feel responsible, reminding you of the consequences that your actions had for others, listing all the ways in which the pursuit of other people's goals was disrupted by the selfish prioritizing of yours. As her monologue in French continued unabated, my father, too, appeared at the bottom of the slope. He raced up the hill panting, holding his asthma pump like a miniature Molotov cocktail. He kept looking behind his back as if he suspected that he was being followed. I hid behind my grandmother.

* 'You're here at last! We've been waiting for two hours! We were worried. Your mother is already back! Papa went to look for you at the school! Your brother is crying!'

'She left the school after cleaning,' my father said, hurrying towards Nini. 'I tried to retrace her steps. I couldn't see her anywhere.' Visibly agitated, he paused to inhale from his pump. 'I think there's been a protest,' he whispered, indicating with a gesture that he would continue his explanation inside.

'She's here,' my grandmother replied.

My father breathed a sigh of relief and then, noticing me, turned severe.

'Go to your room,' he ordered.

'It was not a protest. They were *uligans*,' I muttered as I walked through the courtyard, wondering why my father had used that other word: protest.

Inside, I found my mother occupied with a large house-cleaning operation. She was in the process of bringing down from the attic things that had not been seen for years: a sack of wool, a rusty ladder and my grandfather's old books from his university years. I could tell she was agitated. She had a tendency to channel her frustration by finding new domestic chores: the greater the frustration, the more ambitious the scale of her projects. When she was angry with other people, she would say nothing but would bang pots and pans, curse the cutlery that slipped to the floor, fling trays into cupboards. When she was angry with herself, she would rearrange the furniture, drag tables across the room, pile up chairs and roll up the heavy carpet in our living room so she could scrub the floor.

'I saw *uligans*,' I said to her, eager to share my adventure.

'The floor is wet,' she replied in a menacing voice, tapping my ankle twice with the damp end of the mop to indicate that I ought to have left my shoes outside.

'Or maybe they weren't hooligans,' I continued, untying my shoelaces. 'Maybe they were protesters.'

She stopped and gave me a blank stare.

'The only hooligan here is you,' she said, raising the mop from the floor and waving it twice in the direction of my room. 'We don't have any protesters in this country.'

My mother had always been indifferent to political matters. In the past, only my father and my grandmother (his mother) had followed it closely. They spoke often about the Nicaraguan revolution and the Falklands War; they were enthusiastic about the start of negotiations to end apartheid in South Africa. My father said that if he had been American and called up in the Vietnam War, he would have refused the draft. We were lucky that our country supported the Viet Cong, he often emphasized. He had a tendency to make fun of the most tragic things, and his jokes about anti-imperialist politics were legendary among my friends. Whenever I invited them for a sleepover and we laid out mattresses on the bedroom floor, he would poke his head through the door at the end of the evening, and say: 'Sleep well, Palestinian camp!'

With recent developments in the East, or what we called 'the revisionist bloc', something felt different. I could not say what it was. I vaguely remembered hearing about *Solidarność* once on Italian television. It seemed to concern workers' protests and, as we lived in a workers' state, I thought it would be interesting to write about it in the 'political information' newsletter we had to prepare for school. 'I don't think it's that interesting,' my father said when I asked him about it. 'I have something else for your newsletter. The cooperative in the village where

I work surpassed the target for wheat production set in the current five-year plan. They didn't make enough corn, but they made up for it with wheat. They were in the news last night.'

Whenever protests came up, my family became reluctant to answer questions. They looked either tired or irked and they switched off the television or lowered the volume to the point that the news became unintelligible. Nobody seemed to share my curiosity. It was obvious that I couldn't rely on them to explain anything. It was wiser to wait until the class on moral education in school and to ask my teacher Nora. She always gave clear, unambiguous answers. She explained politics with the kind of enthusiasm my parents showed only when commercials featuring soaps and creams appeared on Yugoslav television. Whenever my father caught an advert on TV Skopje, especially if it was an advert for personal hygiene, he would immediately shout: '*Reklama! Reklama!*' My mother and grandmother would drop whatever they were doing in the kitchen and sprint to the living room to catch the last sight of a beautiful woman with a delightful smile on her face who showed you how to wash your hands. If they were held up for a while and arrived when the adverts were over, my father would declare apologetically: 'It's not my fault, I called you, you came late!' and this usually marked the beginning of an argument about how *they* were late because *he* never helped with anything around the house. The argument would soon turn into an exchange of insults, and the insults might deteriorate into a fight, often with Yugoslav basketball players continuing to score points in the background, until the next lot of adverts came