

Prologue

The Curtain Falls

Live from Berlin, December 1990

“The walls are crumbling all over Europe. A year ago, this city was still divided by one. Many of those who wanted to escape life in the East, by climbing over or tunnelling under it, lost their lives. Concrete fragments of that wall are now sold as souvenirs, pathetic remnants of a former threat.

‘From Tallinn to Tirana, from Belfast to Bucharest, people are on the move, free at last. We don’t need visas any more and soon we will need no passports. We are witnessing the end of history. And this glorious city, where I am now standing, is both the heart and the fountainhead of this new world.

‘In the past two years, small countries lying on what some wrongly see as the edge of Europe, but which are just as much part of the continent’s glory as any lands to the west, have suffered agonies of social turmoil. Some have ended decades of repression with bloody revolutions. These countries are now queuing up to join us in the European Union. As an Irishman and, above all, a European, I feel their pain and share their hopes. We must

offer them a hand of friendship, show that our world is better, that it was worth their sacrifice.

‘I am honoured to receive this great poetry prize in the newly reunited Germany, a harbinger and, I hope, a leader of further unifications. Allow me to dedicate the honour to my sons, Nicholas and Philip.

‘Their generation will grow up without the Iron Curtain, without the suffering it brought to millions, and in a new Europe without borders. I am speaking for them, and to them, this evening.

‘Dear boys, your father promises you an open, unfettered Europe. I look forward to seeing you in Britain very soon.’

He stared into the TV camera as though straight into my eyes. His hair was tamed in a smart cut and his Nehru jacket was too obviously bespoke to be borrowed, but he seemed unchanged otherwise, every centimetre his dishonest self, spooling out clichés unworthy of the award he was about to receive.

I used to love this man.

I could not bear to witness the eagerness with which he glided in the slipstream of political power, a cultural opportunist performing like a circus dolphin. How well he did it, and how uncritically and enthusiastically his audience accepted him for what he wasn’t. His skill was in striking the precise chord they wanted, to stroke their desire to feel simultaneously cultured and virtuous. I knew his power to seduce. I had been just as gullible once.

A crystal orb and fifty thousand Deutschmarks: that was the prize, they said. The performance was worth every pfennig. It was a betrayal of everything poetry should stand for.

I could not bear the sounds of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' rising under his words, deployed in that sentimental way that only the Germans seem capable of when they want to mask their own might. And I definitely could not bear to hear Europe mentioned once more.

I used to love Europe too.

I switched the television off.

Part One

East of the Iron Curtain

In a Far-Away Country of Which We Know Nothing

Membership in the Communist Party before the Revolution meant sacrifice. Being a professional revolutionary was one of the highest honours. Now that the Party has consolidated its power, Party membership means that one belongs to a privileged class. And at the core of the Party are the all-powerful exploiters and masters.

Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the
Communist System*

Chapter One

Victory Day

1981

It was a mediocre essay: threadbare insights into the details of the life of the poor in *Oliver Twist*, the kind you had to spew out in order to pass an exam, interleaved with a few adolescent aperçus of my own. I was passable, good even, as a student of the English language. Home tutoring and access to imported music and films helped, and of course I had attended our capital's sought-after English-language high school, one of the unisex 'Etons of the East', as it was waggishly nicknamed.

Literature was a different matter. I found analysing books, particularly the sort of English novels that graced the Communist curricula, too tedious. Teaching assistants treated me timidly, as though it was an honour to have me in their seminars, but my attendance record remained dismal.

I went to the end-of-year awards ceremony only because I knew that my absence would speak more loudly than my presence. I did not want to fight every battle against the system just to show my father that I was my own person. How do you rebel when even your rebellion is anticipated?

The Dean called my name. His articulation of my arguments was sharper than anything in my essay. The gold medal. Imagine my fury when I was summoned to the podium. Both the silver and the bronze winners looked stunned as the three of us were lined up for a photo.

‘Great work, Comrades,’ the Dean told the other two. ‘Not quite matching the finesse of Comrade Urbanska’s understanding, but well done nonetheless.’ He managed to sound lovelorn as he pronounced my name.

I shut my eyes when the camera clicked.

I opened them to spot Misha and Lana, my boyfriend and his brat sister, smirking in the third row. They were there purely to embarrass me. Someone must have told them – but not me – about the prize. I dreamed of pushing Father from the top of the stairs back home, of breaking his bovine neck.

‘Happy Victory Day,’ Misha said in Russian when we met later that evening. His intonation was soft: Leningrad rather than Moscow.

‘You speak too soon,’ I said as he stepped towards me. I gave a snort, like a prize pony, then shoved him away. I was still fuming about the medal, not in the mood for fondling. Had I only guessed that Misha would be taken from me so soon – Russian-style, albeit not by the Russians – I’d have pulled him closer, held him better.

I was in my regulation black-widow student outfit – black shirt, black trousers, black plimsolls, kohl-rimmed eyes to match raven-black hair.

‘The Juliette Gréco of the steppes,’ Misha said.

He was dressed as faultlessly as ever: navy Converse, red-label 501s with button flies, a racing-green Lacoste

polo, Ray-Ban aviators tucked into its neck opening, a wine-coloured cashmere cardigan draped over his shoulders. His Jim Morrison curls stood out in a city in which the police scooped boys up off the streets for savage shearing if their hair so much as touched their shirt collars.

My relationship with Misha achieved the rare feat of dividing my parents. My father, predictably, hated the little sissy. Mother's concept of manhood was broader, accustomed as she had been to tenors in powdered wigs and lipstick in her days on the operatic stage. My own take on Misha was, to begin with, very simple. I wanted a boyfriend, he was good-looking and good in bed. The local choice was limited. We weren't – certainly I wasn't, or not yet – in love.

He offered me a cigarette from a shiny black-and-gold John Player Special packet and, when I took one, he held up his cloisonné Dupont lighter. Click. He was a vacuous prat, I thought, and I was worse than him for being able to read his get-up, item by item.

Nothing on him – not the socks, not the boxer shorts, not the watch, not the braided leather bracelet on his wrist or the musky aftershave – was purchased locally. Even the bitter lemon he drank arrived in cans from Italy. Only the rare few around here had passports; fewer still could afford to travel in order to shop for fripperies; and a handful had foreign fripperies delivered to them.

I used to think Misha an immature snob for needing his Western façade to be so immaculate that even the briefest of walks required an hour's notice and a full-length mirror. I had misread its significance. It was an exoskeleton, a scaffold that held him together. It was not so much about worshipping the West – Misha knew

the West too well for that – as about a refusal to belong to the East.

All Communist countries were supposed to be alike. Socialism was scientific after all, a repeatable experiment. But each one, including our own, bore the imprints of its past. Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Islamic; Byzantine, Ottoman, Habsburg, Tsarist Russian, Königliche Prussian, regicidal Serbian or even theocratic and tribal Montenegrin – centuries of tradition lingered into the Marxist dawn.

Kafkaesque, bureaucratic Prague or the *déclassé* but still bleakly Germanic East Berlin was very different from the quasi-oriental satrapies of Bulgaria or Romania, with the latter's sinister tales of secret executions, not to mention the terra incognita of closeted, deviationist Albania. The worlds that came before eventually seeped through the layers of fresh paint like bloodstains on the wall of an ancient torture chamber.

I preferred history to literature. However, there was little point in studying history here. We lived it every day but could only discuss it freely but furtively by night. Our own land melded both Latin and Phanariot ingredients in a soup of Slav blood. It had been ruled for centuries by despots and *sebastokrators*, men dressed in velvet and pearls and unused to opposition. Their fathers died in their own beds only when given a nightcap of poison. Their melancholy mothers – princesses imported at six or seven, from palaces as far afield as Sicily or Seville, to shore up an alliance or buttress a peace deal – spoke Latin and Greek and knew little of our barbarian tongue. They brought up their sons to expect the finest of everything, because an all-too-fleeting luxury was the only succour they could guarantee.

In addition to all that, we were a satellite orbiting the great mother planet of the revolution, the Soviet Union itself. Misha was the latest member of one of our illustrious, indigenous revolutionary lines. Of course, he was against entitlement and privilege. We all were; it was a matter of principle. But I am not speaking about principles here, I am speaking about DNA.

‘We are the most talked-about couple in town,’ Misha said. ‘Comecon’s Charles and Diana.’

That spring, it was our running gag. Both our mothers were mesmerised by the fairy tale that was the British royal engagement. While their husbands were nominally committed to executing monarchs wherever they might reign, the two wives followed royal families avidly in glossy foreign magazines, savouring palace intrigues from Monaco to Stockholm. Neither of them had anything better to do.

‘My lady Di,’ Misha appraised me in sing-song, pronouncing the name the way my francophone mother would: *maladeedee*.

‘I can’t wait to see you in uniform in a couple of months’ time, dearest Charles,’ I shot back, just to be mean.

In army matters, boys like Misha got off lightly, spending their two years of military service in the cushiest corners of our lovely land. Yet even so they sometimes suffered mental breakdowns, because their privileged locks were finally shaven to match other heads, or because coordination of every last detail of their outfit was no longer up to them.

Two years were still two years; no one could give that time back. And occasionally someone shouted, even at them. The fathers might well have encouraged the barking of orders. Rather like that notorious tradition of English

fathers paying good money to send their sons to bleak and spartan public schools, it was good for character-building.

‘It’s four months away still, darling, not until September,’ Misha said. ‘Don’t cry for me, Argentina.’

The tosser had the only LP of *Evita* this side of the Iron Curtain. We held *Evita* parties in his villa.

‘Have you heard what’s happening at the Youth Palace this evening?’ he asked. ‘Lana is already there, guarding two seats for us.’ He took the jumper off his shoulders and threw it over mine, perhaps to break my coiffed and sartorial monotony of black.

The pavements under our feet were covered in acacia petals. Their scent was stronger than the ubiquitous diesel fumes, so strong that it reached through fastened windows and balcony doors at night. People went about their business in this confettied whiteness like swarms of bees.

It was the eve of Victory Day and a rehearsal was going on along the main drag as we emerged. The street echoed with the sound of boots falling on tarmac, kicking petals into the air.

‘Present arms,’ the drill sergeant shouted. Several hundred young heads turned right just as Misha and I were passing, their dark eyes glinting, bayonets sparkling. Wafts of boys’ sweat and the felted wool of their overcoats cut through the perfume of the acacias. Their winter uniforms were too heavy for the weather. There was the inhuman, grinding sound of tanks on the move somewhere further up the road.

Misha grabbed my hand and pulled me back under the trees and into the park.

‘Present arms,’ he imitated the sergeant in a stage whisper. I froze to attention and he lifted me up. I propped my chin against the top of his head. His curls tickled, so I tilted my head back. The sky was lit by a million stars. It seemed just possible, in that moment, to love both him and this place. He was mine and it was ours.

We skipped over rows of municipal flower beds and across freshly watered lawns, ignoring the warnings not to walk on the grass. The row of flagpoles in front of the Praesidium came into view, pale like giant birch trunks in the evening light. The flags fluttered redly some fifteen metres above our heads. I always hated the building; in its rejection of bourgeois taste, it seemed to me instead a celebration of ugliness and, in its massing of reinforced concrete, well beyond any scale that could be described as human. Even the paws of the stone lions at the entrance were as tall as we were. It was an expression of power, as brutal as the boot forever stamping on a human face that I had read about in the Orwell novel my father kept under lock and key.

That evening, unexpectedly, there was something magical about the animals; the granite they were carved from sparkled in the moonlight.

‘Let’s climb the lions,’ Misha said. ‘Let’s sit up there. The guards have gone to bed.’

He gestured towards the massive bronze doors. Their patinated squares, produced by some Communist Pisano, illustrated the story of the revolution. The doors were wide open in daytime, with guardsmen in ceremonial uniform standing on either side, guns at the ready. One side was now closed, the squares shining faintly in those low spots where a human hand had touched them. Where

the other side was open, you could see another door further in, made of thick glass, and, through it, the lobby. There, in the half-light, stood a soldier in battle fatigues with a machine gun. Unlike his chocolate-box colleagues in daytime, this one wasn't for show, but a reminder of the less-than-distant memory of the revolution that had eaten so many of its children. He looked in our direction but it was unclear whether he could actually see anything.

'The revolution never sleeps,' Misha said, undeterred. 'Let's climb up there anyway, please, Mimi. Let's be like those hippies who ride the lions in Trafalgar Square.'

'You are out of your mind,' I said and pulled him away. We ran towards the residential quarter.

That too was shockingly empty. I wondered if we had missed some edict. As we walked past shops and that socialist speciality of alcohol-free milk restaurants, all closed for the day, there was a sound of motorcycles. Eight outriders on heavy Ural motorbikes turned in from Odessa Square, followed by a line of black limousines – a couple of ZiLs, a couple of Mercedes and an old Chaika – then four strange white vans with security grilles over their windows. The flotilla trailed off towards the Praesidium followed by another cluster of Urals.

'Did you see that? Mercedes!' I asked, disbelieving.

'It must be my dad in that Chaika. That man is incorrigible,' Misha laughed, ignoring my question.

The comrades were fond of West German technology at home – sound equipment, kitchen gadgets, fridge freezers and even washing machines – but cars were different, a step too far, too public a gesture. I wondered which ministers were inside those two German vehicles. Were their

capitalist conveyances a reward or a punishment? Were they being set up for a fall?

As the sound of motorcycles trailed off, I saw plain-clothes policemen, always so obvious with their ferrety features and their smart-casual mufti, stepping out of doorways and side passages here and there. Then people, ordinary citizens, began to emerge, slowly filling the street, going about their business again.

‘Where were you two shaggers?’ Lana hissed when we finally reached the Youth Palace. The auditorium was full, boys and girls squashed against each other and spilling out into the lobby at the back, yet she had somehow managed to keep two front-row seats for us. This was not Party privilege, this hogging of premium spots, this was Lana’s genes at work – pure Darwinism – seizing, then defending, her territory. I could see as I squeezed into my seat that her win had not come without a fight.

There was a young woman onstage, seated at a low table that could have come from a primary-school dining hall. She was dark-haired and lean, and naked above the waist, with only a grey pleated skirt below. From where we sat, you could occasionally observe that she wore no knickers, but she wasn’t showing off the fact. She stared ahead with kohl-rimmed racoon eyes, her left hand splayed flat on the table, a knife in her right, stabbing blindly between the fingers as fast as she could. Her nipples bobbed furiously to the rhythm of her hand movement, like two blackberries on a flat chest. All the while she sang an anthem of our wartime resistance movement in a hoarse, passionless voice. A couple of young men walked up to the front and unfurled a banner with the words ‘Arise, Ye

Wretched of the Earth' inscribed in thick red paint, then just stood there, holding it at the girl's feet. The room hummed along, waiting for blood.

'That's us through and through,' Misha said. 'This bloody country. Always derivative, even in subversion. Marina Abramović did this same thing in Belgrade eight years ago.'

'Fuck Marina Abramović,' Lana said. 'It's easy to pull off this kind of stunt in Yugoslavia. That's a capitalist country with a little Communist make-up. Here it takes bloody balls. Shut up, Misha. Watch.'

Lana's eyes were wide open and welling with tears as she stared at the performer. I winked in Misha's direction. He flicked his tongue in mock cunnilingus. I am afraid I sniggered. We used to call girls like Lana sapphic and think of their sexuality as unnatural. They were treated in psychiatric hospitals. For all its revolutionary heritage, ours was a conformist culture. I thought myself advanced but I was as blinkered as everyone else.

'You watch yourself, Psycho,' I said to Lana.

I was bored. I got up, fought my way through the crowd, went downstairs to a smoke-filled lavatory and then sat in the cubicle, adding to the smoke. The walls and door were covered with obscene limericks and drawings: plenty to read, and more to enjoy than on the stage upstairs. Lavatory walls were, we sometimes joked, our free press. I peed, eventually. There was no paper. There never was. I had to waste another handkerchief. I liked the touch of silk, but it was a pity always to have to throw these things away.

When I stepped out of the cubicle and moved over to the row of dirty sinks, I noticed a man just standing there, next to a pillar, his head shaved, the back of it pressed flat

against a mirror. He seemed to be waiting for me, unbothered by the fact that he was inside a women's lavatory. I started towards the exit as fast as I could, but he was faster. He grabbed my wrist and blocked the door with his foot. There was no one else around.

'Comrade Milena,' he said, 'I have been searching for you.'

Although he looked like a bald gorilla, his voice was educated, and unthreatening, but that did not mean he was not about to rape me. Socialism had done little to suppress our much older macho traditions, and a woman alone in a space such as the one I found myself in was all too easily seen as fair game. I tugged away, opened my mouth to scream. He let go, but his foot was still blocking the door.

'How do you know my name?' I hissed. Despite my father's fame – or notoriety – my face was not public property.

'I am here to tell you that you must leave this building, you and your two friends, by ten-thirty at the latest,' he said.

'Or?' I asked.

'There is no "or". I am to tell you that you must leave this building, you and your two friends, by ten-thirty,' he repeated.

'Goon,' I said.

'I am sorry to hear you say that,' he said and withdrew his foot. Someone had been trying to open the door from the other side. A girl I vaguely knew burst in and had difficulty hiding a smirk when the goon planted a light peck on my cheek before leaving. It was, like his use of my first name, an annoying attempt to pretend that we were acquainted. His cologne was sharper than car deodorant, but it did nothing to mask the smell of cheap tobacco.

‘Fuck you,’ I said. ‘Fuck both of you!’

Misha and Lana waited in the lobby. Misha looked fed up. He must have dragged his sister away from the performance, for she kept glancing back. The young crowd inside was now humming the Internationale: you wouldn’t think it possible to infuse humming with irony, but they achieved it. I could hear the shouts of ‘Happy Victory Day’ amid the reverberating noise. I had a vague feeling I should warn someone about something but I didn’t know where to begin. I did not want to tell even these two about the goon. We left.

‘Children! It’s just normal rebellion.’ I heard Mother’s voice the following morning as I was approaching the breakfast room.

‘Nothing wrong with a spot of—’ Father stopped when I walked in.

They were already eating. My breakfast sat under a silver cloche. A napkin was wrapped around the handle, although everything underneath must have gone cold long ago. There was no reason to have our breakfasts served at the same time, other than as a punishment for what they thought of as my lie-ins.

‘How was your evening, Mimi?’ Father asked.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘We went to some boring arts event, then to Misha’s.’

That was as much as I was going to say. Father knew what I was doing as well as or, given my hangover, even better than I did. I couldn’t be bothered to try finding out what he and Mother were talking about, or what, if anything, had happened at the Youth Palace after I left. I guessed members of the audience were probably searched and warned not to attend similar gatherings again. I was

sure their IDs were recorded; two strikes like that and you became a registered hooligan. That meant no place at the university and the catch-22 of unemployment. No one dared give you a job, yet social parasitism was itself an offence.

The fate of the artist was a different matter. There was no second strike for her, unless, like Marina Abramović, she was someone's daughter. Possibly not even then. Ridiculing the revolution, public nudity, banned songs: that performance went too far on several levels. Still, there are worse fates than whatever might have befallen her last night. This wasn't Stalin's Russia, and these weren't the 1930s. Those in power recognised that the problem with apocalyptic, irreversible punishments was that they could be inflicted on them and their own families as the wheel turned. My best guess for that girl was a psychiatric hospital, some drugs, maybe a little electricity, then silence. And you couldn't call that a pity, I thought. She was risibly derivative.

I remembered her blackberry nipples and felt a faint tremor between my legs. I hope I am not going psycho in Lana's way, I thought, and let out a small involuntary giggle. My father looked at me with a mixture of exasperation and concern, then recalled something and smiled at me.

'I heard about your essay, Mimi,' he said.

'Before I even started writing it?'

'Ha-ha,' he countered, his voice flat. 'Don't you get tired of always making the same jokes? You'll thank me when you get an academic post. Not that I had anything to do with your bloody medal yesterday morning.'

'Surely not,' I said. 'Our name bloody well helps, though.'

'Talking about names: that boyfriend of yours, young Kovalsky ...' He went on regardless. 'His father's a veteran

of the Spanish Civil War, a National Hero, mother's a close friend of Margot Honecker, maternal grandmother a pal of Clara Zetkin.'

There was no need to recite common knowledge from the Communist *Almanach de Gotha* to Mother and me, but Father liked the sound of his own voice. His pronunciation of Honecker and Zetkin was baroque.

'Fine pedigree, but a bit of a ninny,' he went on. 'What's he studying?'

'Architecture,' I said. That was, nominally, true. I wasn't sure Misha was taking any actual exams, but his studio was a black-and-white temple to Mies van der Rohe. I could confirm that Mies had never tested his Barcelona couch for sexual comfort after designing it, but that was probably the last thing Father wanted to know.

'Architecture,' he echoed with an unexpected touch of distaste. I could have said ikebana.

'I don't need to ask if he is a Party member – not with that hair. Still, the army will sort the boy out soon enough, I expect, even where old Kovalsky has allowed the reins to slip. But I'd rather not have my only daughter wait to find out if that young *Beetus* comes good at the end. I have other options in mind for you, Mimi.'

Father was not above matchmaking. I shuddered at the thought of the kind of boyfriend he might consider suitable for me. Mother tee-heed. She knew how to pronounce Beatles, but wasn't going to correct him. Father took pride in not understanding a word of English, believed that its time as a lingua franca had passed.

'Good, good family. Excellent family,' Mother echoed with a delay. 'Lovely sister. Talented too. Music academy, I hear. And architecture is a useful subject. Our country needs its architects.'

That was as far as she dared go by way of contradicting him.

'Anyway, enough of that,' Father stood up and lowered the napkin on the table just as Dara walked in bearing a tray surmounted by a fresh soft-boiled egg ensconced in its cup, a thimble vase with a cornflower alongside it.

Dara's role in our household was not easy to define. She had always been with us: her presence so taken for granted that I never wondered about its rationale. She was educated far too well to be one of our domestic staff, but she wasn't obviously involved in any of Father's official business, notwithstanding the fact that Communism ran in her bones like the names of English seaside towns in sticks of rock. I took her for Comrade Danvers to my Father's proletarian Maxim de Winter and, by extension, us: too taciturn to be one of the family, yet too obviously devoted to be an outsider.

We were not supposed to call Dara a housekeeper, let alone a maid, and she certainly wasn't supposed to cook my eggs to order. Another egg would have been sitting under the cloche, hard-boiled and stone cold, since six-thirty. That was the precise time when Svyatoslav, our cook, served breakfast every morning, New Year's Day and May Day included. Mother's alarm went at six; Father woke up under his own steam, God knows when. I knew that he considered every minute spent abed after five-thirty a sign of decadence. I often came down in my dressing gown at seven or seven-thirty, intending to go back to bed and have another three hours after he'd gone. I felt a touch of self-pity. My friends were allowed to sleep off their hangovers.

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Dara liked to spoil me, but she also liked an excuse to see Father and Mother.

‘Comrade Dara, a very good morning to you,’ Father said.

‘Good morning, Darina,’ I added.

‘Good morning, Mimi. Good morning, Comrade Stanislav. Good morning, Comrade Gertruda,’ Dara said. She lifted a jug of juice from the table and topped up my mother’s glass.

‘Moroccan oranges are sweeter this year, Dara,’ Mother said. ‘So these must be Algerian, I assume? A touch bitter. Or did Cook neglect to peel them properly before juicing?’

‘I’ll speak to Comrade Svyatoslav, Comrade Gertruda,’ Dara said.

‘You better get ready, young woman,’ Father said. He hated this kind of conversation. He would be happy subsisting on gruel, he always claimed, and I knew that to be true. Even the two years he spent in prison before the war seemed idyllic when he talked about them. Simple diet, cold showers, German-translation workshops with other political prisoners. Marx all the way.

‘Why, it’s Victory Day,’ I said. ‘No lectures.’

‘Precisely,’ he confirmed. ‘You are coming with me. Go and get dressed while Dara and I speak to the staff. White shirt, blue skirt, black shoes, ponytail. None of that rub-bish around the eyes, please.’

Mother tee-heed again as Father and Dara left the room.

‘Last night,’ I said, ‘what happened?’

‘I know nothing about last night. I watched *Borsalino*,’ she said.

I took a sip of her orange juice. It was heavily laced with vodka.