



**THE
EIGHTH
LIFE**

(FOR BRILKA)



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BOOK I



STASIA

No, not under the vault of alien skies
And not under the shelter of alien wings —
I was with my people then,
There, where my people, unfortunately, were.

ANNA AKHMATOVA

The doorbell was ringing and none of her sisters were answering. Someone kept yanking at the bell-pull and she continued to sit, motionless, looking out at the garden. It had been raining all morning; her mood rendered visible. The rain, the grey sky, the damp earth: they exposed her, giving the whole world an insight into her wounds.

Her father was not yet home, and her stepmother had taken the little one out to buy fabric in Papa's magnificent new carriage. She called her sisters. No one answered, so she slowly stood up and forced herself to go downstairs and open the door.

A young man in a white uniform was standing outside. She had never seen him before, and she stepped back from the heavy oak door, slightly confused.

'Good morning. You must be Anastasia? Allow me to introduce myself: Simon Jashi, lieutenant of the White Guard and a friend of your father's. We have an appointment. May I come in?'

No ordinary soldier, then; a lieutenant, an officer. She merely nodded silently and proffered her hand. He was well built, tall and broad-shouldered, with slender limbs and bony hands: the latter were rather hairy, which seemed incongruous in such a dapper gentleman; it was as if Nature were forcing its way through the uniform.

He removed his perfectly angled headgear, which she found ever so slightly ridiculous, and stepped inside. She wondered where all the others were; it was only now that she noticed that the whole house was silent as the grave.

The smell of coffee and cake wafted from the kitchen, but no one was there. She took the guest through to the reception room, where the door to

the garden stood open. Rain was blowing into the room, the white curtains flapping in the damp wind. She quickly ran to the door and closed it. The rain was a threat to her: seeing it, she felt the urge to cry again, which in the presence of this strange man was inconceivable.

It occurred to her that he had recognised her and addressed her by name, although they were four sisters. Yet he had never been to their house before; she could tell that from the way his eyes kept darting curiously about. It was a trap. Yes, that was what it was. Now she understood the sudden emptiness of the house. So it was him. He was the one. He was the wrathful God who was to mete out her punishment. He was the guarantor of her future. He was the slaughterer, the executioner. She turned pale and stumbled out of the room.

‘Is everything all right?’ he called after her.

‘Oh yes, yes. I’ll just fetch us some coffee and cake. You do like coffee?’ she called from the kitchen, leaning against the wall and wiping away her tears with her sleeves.

Nothing would ever again be as it was. Suddenly, she had understood this; she had received confirmation that her childhood was over. That her life would, at a stroke, become another; that everything — all her dreams, desires, visions — would be reduced to this one man in the white Russian uniform, probably a subordinate of the fat, uneducated governor of Kutaisi — how frightful!

She felt like throwing up, but the coffee was steaming in its pot and the chocolate gateau from Papa’s patisserie, symmetrically cut, was waiting to be offered to the guest.

And so the chocolate gateau was her first offering to her executioner. Just as she would have to offer up to him all the promises of a future that Life itself had whispered into her ear night after night: offer them up for him to kill, in that she would start to live his life, where she would not find her place, where she would be an outsider, where she would never be at home. She bit her lip and stifled the pain.

She carried out the silver tray with the steaming coffee and the porcelain cups and saucers. The man was sitting in Papa’s armchair, legs crossed, staring at the green lawn that was being drowned and buried by the heavy rain, along with the little spring flowers that had forced their way up through the earth, greedy for life and warmth.

‘Oh, that’s delicious. Your father is a true genius. And such a good man. So modest: a man of humility. One seldom finds such men nowadays. Someone plants a tree and the whole parish has to hear about it. Nobody does good

deeds any more nowadays, at least, not without shouting them from the rooftops. Your father's not like that. I'm very proud to be able to count myself one of his circle. And your *maman*. She is enchanting.'

'She's my stepmother.'

'Oh.'

'Do take a slice. We have plenty more cake. There's never a shortage of sweets in this house.'

'Yes, I'm familiar with your father's creations. Those delicious little almond tarts — and his plum mousse is magnificent! An absolute dream.'

'And how do you know Papa, may I ask?'

'I ... I did him a favour once, if I might put it that way.'

'You said just now that, when one has done something good, one should not speak of it. That, if I understood you correctly, is true greatness.'

'You're very precise.'

'I am indeed.'

'The cake is divine. Why don't you try some?'

'I eat enough of it every day. Thank you.'

'I did him a favour, that's all. I didn't say it was a good deed that I did.'

'It's in the nature of a favour that it should be good.'

'That depends entirely on how you look at it, wouldn't you agree? Everyone sees things from their own perspective, which is not necessarily shared by others.'

'That's not what I meant. There are some things about which all people should feel the same. And see in the same way.'

'And what would those things be?'

'For example, that the sun is wonderful, and that spring can work miracles; that the sea is deep, and water soft. That music is magical when it is well played. That toothache is a dreadful business, and ballet the most beautiful thing in the world.'

'I understand. You love to dance, don't you?'

'Yes, I do.'

'And you don't like me because you think I don't share this view?'

'How should I know?'

'It's what you think. It's what you suppose.'

'I don't suppose anything at all.'

'That I don't believe.'

'All right, I admit it: no, I don't believe you share many of my opinions, not least because you're serving in the army and I am not fond of the army.'

Why are you laughing?’

‘I’m sorry. You amuse me.’

‘Oh, splendid. At least one of us is in a good mood.’

‘Do you ride?’

‘What?’

‘I said: do you ride?’

‘Yes, of course I ride.’

‘Side-saddle, I presume?’

‘I prefer astride.’

‘Excellent! Would you venture on a ride across the steppe with me tomorrow?’

‘I have a ballet lesson tomorrow.’

‘I can wait for you.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Or are you afraid?’

‘What would I be afraid of? Certainly not of you.’

‘It’s agreed, then?’

‘Listen: I don’t know what my father has told you about me. But it’s bound to be untrue. I don’t know what he’s promised you, but I’m certain I am unable to give you that, either. I will happily risk your anger, and my father’s, but I have no intention of deceiving you. I will not love you. Why are you laughing again?’

‘You’re even better than your father’s description of you.’

‘What has he promised you?’

‘Nothing. He just said that I might visit you from time to time.’

‘So that later on I’ll marry you and won’t be permitted to dance any more?’

‘So that we can get to know each other.’

‘You’re much older. It’s inappropriate.’

‘I’m twenty-nine.’

‘You’re still much older. Twelve years is a big age gap.’

‘I look very young.’

‘You know nothing whatsoever about ballet.’

‘I saw you dance at the private performance at Mikeladze’s.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘And?’

‘You were quite good.’

‘Quite good? I was *very* good.’

‘Perhaps. After all, you just said I know nothing about it.’

‘Well, every layman has the right to an opinion.’

‘Oh, how generous of you.’

‘You don’t have a moustache.’

‘And what does that mean?’

‘It’s not the done thing.’

‘According to the latest fashion, it is.’

‘I’m very conservative.’

‘That’s not my impression.’

‘You don’t know me.’

‘I saw you when you were fourteen, listening to the Maxim brothers’ violin concert. We sat side by side, and you were so moved that you wept, and you wiped away your tears with the sleeves of your dress. You didn’t use a silk handkerchief. I liked that. And then you stormed out of the concert hall. And, months later, I saw you at the circus that pitched its big top up there in the hills. And you were eating a baked apple and licking your fingers. You didn’t use a silk handkerchief. *Which is the done thing.* And later I saw you at the New Year’s ball, your first ball, given by the mayor. You were enchanting, dancing your first dance, but your partner was an idiot, incapable of leading you. He kept treading on your feet, and every time he did you pulled a face. You came out and wiped the little pearls of sweat from your brow with the edge of your dress. No silk handkerchief. Then you sat down on the stone steps and looked up at the sky. And I decided it was time I got to know you.’

‘Why should I want to get to know *you*?’

‘Because I’m another one who never uses a handkerchief.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Someone who needs a veil, an object, even one made of silk, between themselves and the world is afraid of life. They’re afraid to experience things, to really feel them. And I think life is far too short and far too wonderful not to really look at it, not to really grab it, not to really live it.’

‘By which you’re trying to say that we are similar?’

‘No, I just think that we have a similar attitude to life.’

‘Nonetheless, I am not going to marry you and move with you to Moscow.’

‘I’m not in Moscow. I’m here.’

‘You serve the Russians, and I don’t like Russians. They say that soon there will be uprisings. That things are unsettled in Russia. There are rumours. Anyway, Papa went to Russia, too, and brought his wife back here with him when he married the second time. I know how things work in this world.’

‘And how do they work?’

‘Not exactly to the advantage of us women, shall we say?’

‘A real bluestocking, then.’

‘Now what are you talking about?’

‘In Europe, there are women who believe they are equal to men. And who fight for these rights. Bluestockings, they’re called.’

‘And they’re right to fight. But it’s a very stupid name, in my opinion.’

‘In that case, we can go on a proper ride across the steppe. Then we can see just how equal men and women are.’

‘I don’t believe they are equal. I believe women are better.’

‘Better still. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.’

‘Wait ... You don’t even know where I take my ballet classes.’

‘I’ll find you. And send my best wishes to your father. No need to see me out. A truly emancipated lady should always remain seated.’

‘A what lady?’

‘One who fights for her rights.’

He left the room, with quick, light steps and a mischievous grin. Stasia remained seated, as if turned to stone, unable to believe what had just occurred. It wasn’t permitted to like your executioner; it wasn’t permitted to flirt with him. It wasn’t permitted to offer him more sacrifices than were necessary. It wasn’t permitted to go riding with him. And then she laughed aloud. The rain had stopped and the flowers were springing up out of the earth. Life was everywhere again, with its sweet multitude of promises. Stasia opened the door to the garden and ran out. The earth was damp and her feet got stuck in the mud, but that didn’t stop her from dancing a *pas de deux* in the sodden garden.

★

They met and rode across the steppe, both of them astride. I’m sure she looked incredibly graceful and self-assured. She had started learning to ride when she was a little girl, and she loved to take the thoroughbred Kabardins out and ride them bareback. She liked to linger in the barren landscape of the steppe. The old cave city was a place she knew like the back of her hand. People were always going missing in this mysterious labyrinth of stone steps, interconnected rooms, and crannies, but Stasia always found her way back: the way out of the cave city, which had been cut into the huge mountain centuries ago at the command of the country’s powerful queen, and had now become a desolate landscape where the ghosts sang. Yes, you could hear them, if you closed your

eyes tightly enough and silenced the thoughts in your own head. And I'm sure the lieutenant was even more impressed by her skill. They are sure to have talked about all kinds of things, and Stasia often challenged him to race her.

They started making plans to go riding together every day. Soon, Stasia was so enthralled by the hours they spent together on the steppe that some days she even forgot about dancing.

Of course, our seventeen-year-old Stasia had to fall in love. The White Lieutenant was delighted by Stasia's trust, which grew day by day, ride by ride. And it was his firm belief that they would be good for each other; that he needed just such a headstrong wife — and this firm belief inevitably impressed Stasia.

Simon Jashi also admired the chocolate-maker's family, and his affection was returned by his beloved's father. Anastasia was to experience no resistance to her choice of husband — unlike her second-eldest sister, who, whenever she fell for a man, could always count on her father's disapproval. The White Lieutenant, by contrast, seemed to be Papa's first choice.

And since these were troubled times, and one never knew which way the wind would blow, one had to act quickly. Even in matters of the heart.



The White Lieutenant had attended a cadet school in St Petersburg, when the St Petersburg of delightful balls and sweet French accents still existed. He had fought only briefly in Russia's war with Japan, where he was wounded, promoted to lieutenant, and sent back to his homeland. This wound saved him from being sent to fight in the First World War. After his recovery, he was assigned to administrative duties in his sleepy little hometown, where he analysed war correspondence.

Simon did not rush to request a transfer. The political situation was unfathomable, and he was insufficiently resolute; never in his life had he been able to feel at home with an ideology that would determine his onward path.

At that time, innumerable ideologies and political groups were springing up out of the ground every day like mushrooms, in little attic rooms, canteen cellars, and flats overlooking dingy courtyards, and all of them believed they had discovered the solution to every problem, or knew precisely how to guarantee a rosy future for the downtrodden Russian people.

Simon came from a good middle-class family: his father, a respected doctor, had made sure his son received a good education. Influenced at an early

age by liberal, democratic ideas, as a young man he had made contact with the liberals in the military circles of his cadet school, and had even been to a few meetings. But at the same time he had realised that, if it were to come to the crunch, the liberals seemed too weak and not nearly purposeful enough to withstand a serious threat, such as that represented by socialism. And Simon could also see that the socialists were always louder, always more demanding and fearless. All kinds of conspiracy theories and legends circulated about the party's ringleaders, the majority of whom had already been imprisoned or had moved abroad.

Simon had little sympathy with the socialists; they were too primitive, too unrefined, too loud for his middle-class ears, but at the same time he didn't want to end up on the wrong side. He had to act. He had to decide, but he was still too hesitant: events were not transparent enough, there were still too many possibilities.

He had already come into contact with a few ideas at the front, and, having been wounded and ordered back to his hometown, he started a circle for 'the study of the philosophical writings of the Ancient Greeks' in the hope that, together with others who were confused and searching for answers, he would find some knowledge that would take him further. Simon Jashi felt himself to be neither a reformer nor a revolutionary. As a soldier loyal to the authorities, he served the military unquestioningly, along with its clear hierarchies, discipline, and division of duties. He loved clear structures and regulated relationships, in which everyone knew exactly where they stood. Simon was a rational man. He was gallant, tractable, rather morose, and thoughtful by nature, not a man of burning ideas and deeds. He also had nothing against the tsars, though he might have had a little sympathy for the peasants, as was proper for the authorities at that time.

But one notable characteristic may have recommended him to the chocolate-maker as a good match for his daughter: Simon was a sentimental man, and a great devotee of the past. He loved Pushkin's Russia; he dreamed of the great Napoleonic balls, grew downright maudlin at *Swan Lake*. In my great-great-grandfather's eyes, his heart was warmed by everything connected to the divinely appointed king, the tsar, and thus to a clearly structured world.

This must have been a very idiosyncratic and peculiar attitude for such a young man at the time, but it chimed perfectly with my great-great-grandfather's worldview. Simon's heart belonged to Old Russia, to the European elite, and the lovely, glittering life of the *good old days* — or rather, what he imagined these to be.



To my great-great-grandfather, being conscious of tradition meant living according to the values of the elite: displaying modesty and excellent manners, and being neither too hedonistic nor too puritanical. And knowing exactly which layer of society was created for which purpose, and which people in society had to occupy which places. Great-Great-Grandfather stemmed from the impoverished minor Georgian nobility. He had completed a confectionary apprenticeship at a high-class spa hotel in the Crimea, rising quickly from apprentice to head of the *chocolaterie*. His skill had enabled him to attract the regular custom of a lot of rich aristocrats, whose patronage he enjoyed, and, thanks to their support, he was eventually able to spend two years in Budapest with a master *chocolatier*, who had previously worked for the royal household in Vienna.

My great-great-grandfather gathered experiences from all over Europe. He toured some excellent patisseries in western Europe, and yet, contrary to his employers' expectations, he decided to return to his homeland and start a business of his own.

He had — and unfortunately I am not in possession of any verifiable information about where exactly he developed his incomparable chocolate — discovered a magical secret formula, and had a recipe in his pocket that would revolutionise the taste of hot chocolate.



At this point, the recipe — or rather, the hot chocolate resulting from it — should be introduced as one of the principal characters in our story, Brilka.

As, unfortunately, I may not reveal the ingredients of the drink (under no circumstances, no way, never, never, never), I have to find words to describe the indescribable. And, unfortunately, I also don't know whether my great-great-grandfather derived this recipe from somebody else or developed it himself. He guarded it like a secret of war. But one thing is certain: on his return home, he already had the guarantee for his future success in his pocket (at that point, nothing was known of the side-effects of his magic chocolate).

For now, it was a recipe for a simple Viennese-style hot chocolate. This meant that the base was chocolate, not cocoa. First the chocolate was manufactured, then it was melted and mixed with other ingredients.

But something in the mixture and the preparation made this chocolate special, unique, irresistible, startling. The very scent of it was so enticing and so intense that one couldn't help hurrying towards its source.

The chocolate was thick, syrupy, and black as the night before a heavy storm. It was consumed in small portions, hot, but not too hot, in small cups, and — ideally — with silver spoons.

The taste was incomparable: savouring it was like a spiritual ecstasy, a supernatural experience. You melted into the sweet mass, you became one with this delicious discovery, you forgot the world around you, and felt a unique sense of bliss. As soon as you tasted this chocolate, everything was exactly as it should be.

My great-great-grandfather returned home from Budapest with this secret recipe in his pocket. He was proud of what he had achieved, and he believed it was possible to bring the gallantry and exquisite tastes of Paris or Vienna to the Georgian provinces, and change the tastes of the people there.

Following his return, he married a pupil from the Holy Mother of God convent school, a pious and taciturn woman named Ketevan, who had what one might call melancholic tendencies. She didn't care two figs for the Russian Empire, thought Russia's annexation of Georgia the most disastrous mistake in the whole of Georgian history, and all her life refused to speak Russian. He had fallen in love with her; it was not an arranged marriage, but unfortunately it was not a happy one, either. She espoused different values; she saw Russia as the origin of all evil, while my great-great-grandfather viewed Russia as an opportunity for Georgia, and believed it was the Russians who had first given the Caucasus access to world culture, combating the illiteracy among Georgia's population and the greed of its minor aristocracy. He was pro-tsarist, and enjoyed all the privileges that his *collaborateur* lifestyle afforded. His wife, however, never tired of claiming that Georgia was nothing more than a colony, and that the Slavic culture was the downfall of the Caucasian.

'We ourselves called on our great neighbour — we invited him here,' my great-great-grandfather told his wife in the first months of their marriage, in an attempt to change her mind.

'We invited them as helpers, not occupiers,' Ketevan retorted. 'Our king was exhausted by all the occupations and raids by our Muslim neighbours. He couldn't see any other way out, and when he asked the tsar to sign a protection treaty he was choosing what, in his view, was the lesser of two evils. A protection treaty, with the emphasis on protection. If I might remind you.'

'Yes, but, my love, in practice it still meant that, from then on, we were

subject to the great Russian Empire, and our king knew that when he brought the Russians into the country.'

'Certainly, my dear, but he probably didn't know that our northern neighbour would accept this invitation not for a few years, but for a few centuries.'

Ketevan refused to be beaten.

'I think it is wrong, my love, always to take the image of David and Goliath and use it as a parable for our country. I think that, in so doing, we make it very easy for ourselves. Too many Georgians have benefited from it, Ketevan; you surely must agree with that!'

'In this country, assimilation is always feigned, and at the core of this assimilation you always find a longing for what belongs to us alone. I speak of true Georgians and not of traitors,' replied Ketevan, casting a scornful glance at her husband.

Ketevan barely involved herself in my great-great-grandfather's business. She was good at managing the household and knew how to present herself in society, and she bore him two daughters. But the couple's love and affection for each other was extinguished, at the latest, after the birth of their second daughter. Ketevan dedicated herself to piety, praying, and maintaining good relationships with the Church and the priests, while her husband opened his shop, The Chocolaterie, which everyone always called 'the chocolate factory', with my great-great-grandfather known only as the 'chocolate-maker'. The business flourished, sales rose from one year to the next, and the chocolate-maker's reputation was established.

He was disappointed that his wife didn't value his success and seemed to make no use at all of the family's social and financial privileges, or to enjoy their increasing prosperity. He had looked for the same support and encouragement from her that he got from others. Five years after his return, he was running a patisserie that was famed throughout the town, and planning branches all over the country; later, he hoped, at the pinnacle of his success, he would be able to supply the whole of the tsar's empire with the very best chocolate products.

He produced divine gâteaux and cakes of every description. Truffles, bitter chocolate, milk chocolate with apricot jelly, with walnuts, or raisins, and more exotic items like chocolate tarts with black pepper, cherry liqueur centres coated with mint chocolate, chocolate biscuits filled with fig cream, or chocolate nougat with watermelon jelly. The Chocolaterie managed to unite the French art of patisserie and traditional Austrian baking with Eastern European opulence.

At six o'clock every morning he went to the shop and added his own

ingredients to the huge mixtures of chocolate prepared by his employees for each product in his range, giving them their special flavour. Nobody could work out the formula, and it was this that made his chocolate so irresistible.

So far, he had added only a very small amount of the special mixture to all his chocolate products — a finishing touch to the flavour, as it were — but it was in the hot chocolate that its magic was at its most potent.

Encouraged by the tremendous success of his magic formula, which made him flirt with ambitious plans for expansion, he planned to unveil the *crème de la crème* of his creation — the hot chocolate — only at the very pinnacle of his fame and success, in Tbilisi, Moscow, or St Petersburg. It would make everybody swoon. In spite, or perhaps because of his success, the chocolate-maker, who was hoping for an heir, had sworn to keep his recipe in the family, and to keep it secret for the time being.

According to Stasia, this decision saved our family, if not our whole country, from total ruin.

Alongside his work, my great-great-grandfather was a freeman of the town, and took part in its social and cultural life, moving in elevated circles in local politics, founding the town's only gentlemen's club (in the European style), and becoming the patron of several literature, theatre, and philosophy circles. He sat on the committee of the 'Society for Tradition and Honour' and was also, incidentally, one of the richest inhabitants of the little town, which he wanted to transform into the 'Nice of the Caucasus', since Tbilisi already enjoyed a reputation as the Caucasian Paris.

His wife cared little for these outward appearances, preferring to occupy her time with Bible study and the strict upbringing of their two daughters. She had to be persuaded to take part in any kind of social event, and was not particularly keen on travelling, either, which didn't please the chocolate-maker at all. Her exaggerated piety also vexed him. He sensed that, because of it, he had lost all connection with his children, who were also, under the strict eye of their mother and a religious governess, growing into pious, timid, un-European girls.

The battle on the female front in his own house seemed to be one he was losing, with grave consequences.

He had to have a son! The female majority in his house had simply become too threatening. He needed an heir, a man to fight by his side in the battle against the opposite sex. It was a long time since the couple had shared a marital bed, and he knew it would require a lot of time and all his powers of persuasion. The two births had been very difficult for Ketevan, and she wasn't

in the best of health. It wouldn't be easy to convince her to go through another pregnancy.

Several times he explained to his wife that it was purely a matter of inheritance because, after all, the chocolate factory needed a male heir — but she remained unimpressed, and consoled him with the thought that his two daughters would marry, and a shrewd son-in-law was a good alternative solution to the problem.

He therefore had to employ other means to convince his wife to bear him a successor. And so he decided to make his finest creation for her — the hot chocolate — because the more concentrated the ingredients, the greater the effect of the recipe.

He arranged for a little string quartet to play, just for her, in the chocolate factory, which was already closed to visitors; and, by candlelight, enveloped in the intoxicating aroma of his own concoction, he set in front of her the most beautiful porcelain cup he had been able to find in his shop. As she spooned up the chocolate, he spoke honeyed words to her, convincing her of how essential it was for him to have a male heir.

Like so many people after her, Ketevan was overcome by an unbridled craving for more, and, in the days that followed, she begged her husband to make the hot chocolate for her again. And so my great-great-grandfather was finally able to give her an ultimatum: if she would undergo another pregnancy, he would prepare the hot chocolate for her every day for the following nine months. Her resistance was broken, and her longing for the most delicious taste in the world gave her no choice but reluctantly to give in and agree to his offer.

And so it was that, nine months later, she found herself in labour in her bedroom once again, attended by a country doctor and two midwives. It was several hours before they got a healthy, well-formed girl out of her (the mother just gave a disappointed sigh). She thought she had come through it all successfully, until the worried doctor called out that the labour was still progressing. A second one was on the way. After more pushing and screaming, another girl finally saw the light of day.

But the second child refused to cry. Something wasn't right with her lungs, the doctor declared; the child was turning blue, she wasn't getting any air, and he slapped her hard on the back. A few minutes after the birth, the second baby had to be pronounced dead (they had been identical twins).

But the first, who was baptised Anastasia, seemed healthy and cheerful and screamed lustily for her mother's milk.

A short while later, Ketevan died of pneumonia contracted during her confinement. She went quickly, without any great torment, after giving Anastasia the breast for the last time.

These two tragedies were the first in my great-great-grandfather's life: they came in such quick succession, and were so definitive, so immense, that for months afterwards he handed the whole of the business over to his chief secretary, as he was in no condition to leave the house. Only in the mornings did he walk to the shop, with sluggish, shuffling steps, to prepare the mixture that went into every batch of chocolate.

His love for his wife may not have been as fresh and radiant over the preceding years as at the start of their marriage, but she had remained an important part of his life. The loss of the mother of his children weighed heavily upon him, and, left alone, he had no idea what to do with the three girls.

During this time, he began to be haunted by peculiar thoughts. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had been responsible for his wife's death. If he hadn't coerced her into another pregnancy, she might have been alive, and he would also have been spared the tragedy of the baby's death.

Could it be that there was a fatal aspect to his bewitching creation? Had the chocolate he had so enthusiastically prepared for her through all those months set the catastrophe in motion? Was it simply too delicious to be consumed without paying a high price? Did it make those who tasted it so happy and carefree that reality then had to avenge itself upon them all the more mercilessly? Could it even be cursed? Could he have discovered something that was too *good* for mankind? Was his plan to offer the hot chocolate for sale only at the pinnacle of his success not, in fact, a calculated strategy, as he had first thought, but a premonition that had made him mix the recipe into his products only in small amounts?

At the same time, there was a nagging doubt in his mind: he thought it childish to believe something so irrational. He wasn't a God-fearing man: he even had his doubts about the Church, let alone superstitions, which he held to be a religion for the poor.

In an attempt to bring himself to his senses, he decided to bequeath the most valuable thing he possessed to Anastasia. Anastasia should inherit the recipe for his hot chocolate. And he swore to himself that he would pass on the recipe to her when she married, as the most precious dowry he was able to bestow.

Little by little, the chocolate-maker awoke from his stupor and employed a peasant woman, herself newly delivered of a baby, to nurse Anastasia. He

finally dismissed the strict, religious governess and found a young nanny, who cared for the girls with patience and a warm heart.

The oldest of the three girls, Lida, was already six, and was probably the one most affected by her mother's death. She had been her mother's favourite, and had always tried to please her. She was therefore excessively shy, taciturn, and God-fearing, more like a grown woman than a child. Her father was even a little afraid of her, with her stern gaze, her highly developed sense of morality, and her gloomy disposition.

The second child, five-year-old Meri, did not yet display any revealing characteristics, but she was often sickly, and had an innate dissatisfaction for which her father could find no remedy.

Both of them missed their mother, and their father was a stranger to them. Before their mother's death he had always been at work, or fulfilling social duties. He smoked a pipe, talked loudly, liked to drink cognac with friends in his study, and spoke about things that didn't interest little girls.

But the youngest, Anastasia, who quickly became known to everyone as Stasia, was influenced by none of this. She was much too young to be conscious of losing her mother; she had no memory of her. Despite the difficult circumstances of her birth, she was a cheerful child, with an impressive head of hair. Even when she was a baby, you could have plaited it — as I've said already — and she revealed a dominant disposition early on.

The chocolate-maker decided to do everything right with her. He wouldn't allow her to become estranged from him like her sisters, and grow up far removed from his philosophy of life.

After the first and most oppressive year of mourning had elapsed, the chocolate-maker summoned his courage and decided to give his family a new start.

Over the following four years, my great-great-grandfather made a real effort to win his girls' affection. He spoiled them, introducing them to the good things in life that their mother had denied them: they were permitted to stuff themselves with food and stay up late; they were permitted to go to the bazaar and the travelling circus; they were permitted to skip church on Sundays; they were permitted to get dirty and charge wildly around the house; they were permitted to go to The Chocolaterie and eat as much chocolate as they were able; they were permitted to do their homework *after* they had played games, and to ask him to bring them back pretty clothes and toys as souvenirs from his business trips.

It was a light-hearted, free atmosphere that reigned in the chocolate-maker's

home during those years, and the many little signs of neglect that began to appear in the once-immaculate house didn't seem to bother anyone, either; on the contrary, they added to its cosiness.

Stasia always remembered her early childhood, and the period of 'girl rule' in the house, with great fondness. But when her father came back from a business trip to Kiev one day in the company of a tall woman with a somewhat cool, but very impressive, Slavic appearance, who understood not a word of Georgian, and introduced her as his new wife, everything changed in an instant. A house without a wife was no house at all, their father said, and he was sad to be going through life alone. He had no intention of replacing their mother, he told them, but he implored them to accept Larissa (or Lara) Mikhailovna as a new member of the family with respect and open hearts.

But Lara Mikhailovna, who was a member of the Moscow aristocracy and had previously been married to a (now deceased) Ukrainian merchant with alcoholic tendencies, proved not so easy to accept. She was an imperious woman, used to people flattering and paying court to her. She liked luxury, and regarded her move to the Georgian provinces as unworthy of her. Unlike the girls, their father seemed untroubled by Lara's difficult character. Either she was delighting her new husband at night with her incredible talents, which made it worth his while to forget the hardship of spending the day at her side, or she possessed other intellectual qualities that were revealed only to the chocolate-maker. There was no other explanation for why he heaped expensive gifts on his new wife, subordinated everything else to her wishes and wants, and allowed her to treat him like a serf.

The cheerful, relaxed atmosphere of the preceding years gave way to an oppressive, hierarchical order, in which Lara set the tone.

She found the girls too wayward, and began to re-educate them at once. First, the two older children, Lida and Meri, were sent to a strict girls' school for children of the elite. Then she engaged a piano teacher, who practised tirelessly with them every two days, followed by a private tutor to work on their Russian — their accent was abominable, or so Lara said.

She herself, however, enjoyed the advantages that her spouse and his status brought her. Spa trips were undertaken, celebratory dinners given, balls attended, materials ordered from France, hats sewn, two new housemaids employed, and jewellery purchased, along with several Chinese porcelain vases that Lara particularly liked.

My great-great-grandfather also blossomed; Lara seemed to be the wife he had always wanted at his side. The fact that his children laughed less and

less, became ever quieter, and were always sticking out their tongues at Lara as soon as she turned her back were things he was happy to overlook. Lara was more than fit for good society, adept at using the advantages of money; she loved the attention, the travel, the jewels, the gossip, went to church only at Easter and Christmas, and knew how to impress people, above all the male sex.

Two years after the wedding, Christine, the late arrival, came into the world. Seven years after Stasia.

The chocolate-maker still wanted a son, and didn't give up hope of an heir. But neither he nor Lara was as young as they once were, and there were no further pregnancies. And so — after several visits to health spas and a great deal of effort — Christine remained my great-great-grandfather's final attempt to produce a male successor.

Christine was to become the classic baby of the family: pampered, spoilt, and arrogant. She was declared by her mother — as if it were the most obvious thing in the world — to be the only princess in the house, and was idolised by her father. Admittedly, Christine was an almost supernaturally beautiful child. Nobody who visited the family could stop talking about the little girl's beauty, to the great pride of her parents. What a Madonna-like face, what grace, what perfect features, what fine limbs!

In fact, the girl embodied the ideal of Slavic-Caucasian collaboration. Particularly as, from a young age, Christine knew how to use her advantages, and was very good at getting what she wanted. For the older girls, life didn't exactly get easier.

Perhaps it was this change in the household that made Stasia develop a kind of spirit of protest. Unlike the quiet Lida, who was flirting with the idea of entering a convent, and the rather superficial and exuberant Meri, Stasia had realised very early on that she had to assert herself in this family. Otherwise, she would probably remain unnoticed, in the shadow of a toddler with whom she just happened to share a father.

She quickly learned to voice her own opinion, to concentrate on her dreams and desires, to do things that Lara, and therefore also Christine, would never do, like, for example, riding astride on Kabardin horses, taking an interest in women's rights, wearing no jewellery, caring little for luxury — and, above all, taking ballet lessons, dreaming of a ballet career, and planning her departure for Paris.

Time hurried by, and the political mood throughout the Russian Empire grew tenser by the day. The chocolate-maker had already started to worry about his own future and that of his children; the communists, who seemed to have been swarming all over the place for the past eight years, did not bode well for them. Like all members of the Georgian elite, my great-great-grandfather was afraid of the proletariat. He was happy to make charitable donations to them, but he still liked to keep them at arm's length whenever possible.

My great-great-grandfather didn't believe in socialism; he didn't believe in the revolution, or radical reforms; and, although he followed the news from Russia with some concern, he apparently always said that, in his country, the Bolsheviks would never prevail (the embryonic 'Third Group' was already hard at work in the Georgian capital and would declare Georgian independence barely a year after the October Revolution).

My great-great-grandfather viewed Simon Jashi's well-balanced mixture of *good old-fashioned values*, a longing for stability, and a commitment to moderate liberalism as a kind of guarantee for the future of his business. Simon was also a military man: should the going get tough, he could be useful to the Reds as well, and would thus be able to assure the family's future. With no male heir, the chocolate-maker wanted a man at his side: the future was already knocking at the door, and nobody knew what it would look like.

His first-born would never find a husband, monosyllabic, pious churchgoer that she was. And he started to come to terms with the idea of giving Lida over to God, whom she seemed to love above all other male beings — *Does God actually have a sex?* the chocolate-maker wondered on some evenings, as he sat in his study with a good glass of cognac, mulling over his thoughts.

The second eldest, who was by then already twenty-one — a good, marriageable age — proved to be no easier. At nineteen, she had become engaged to a hard-working banker's son, and nothing seemed to stand in the way of this promising new family alliance, until one day she announced that she didn't want to marry him after all: he was chasing after every skirt in the city, and that was hardly likely to change after the wedding.

'But darling, Meriko, my sunshine, you have to allow the poor boy a little pleasure in life. We men are weak creatures; we need more affection than you women. Let him look to the left and right a little — who's it going to hurt? There are many temptations along a man's path, and resisting them is difficult. He loves and respects you, and after all, that's the most important thing for a woman.'

This was how the chocolate-maker had reasoned with his second eldest daughter. But she had just snorted scornfully and said she wasn't that stupid.

She wasn't about to throw her life out of the window just so that he would finally have her out of the house. Of course, the banker's son was famed throughout the town as a Don Juan, and Meri was not domineering enough to take him in hand and turn his head firmly in her direction. And yes, my great-great-grandfather would have liked to marry her off: he was, after all, seeking allies for the chaotic times that lay ahead — was that so reprehensible? But at the same time he admired Meri's self-determination, and he let the matter lie.

Three years had passed since then, and nobody seemed good enough for Meri. One was too dull, another too old, a third had an awful mother, and so on.

Stasia, though, was the one who actually caused him the most trouble. Yet my great-great-grandfather couldn't help loving his second youngest with the most sincere, respectful love he was capable of giving his daughters. Stasia was the most quick-witted and nimble, the most contrary of his daughters, the one who vexed him most and most frequently provoked his rage. But he loved her mischievous ways, and he even loved her peculiar dreams and her addiction to dance. She knew what she wanted, and, unlike little Christine, things didn't just fall into her lap. She only did what seemed important to her. Perhaps her father recognised himself most in her; perhaps he had never overcome the guilt he felt about his late wife and Stasia's dead twin sister; or perhaps Stasia was simply more accessible, less outlandish and alien to him than his two elder daughters.

His deep love for her had a firm hold on his heart — so firm that it hurt at times — even though he and Stasia argued most often and loudest, and Stasia sometimes seemed impudent and lacking in respect. But he was adamant that she should be happy, and should lead a life that never completely excluded her dreams — although never for a second did he seriously consider sending his child to the Sodom and Gomorrah of the West, to Paris, to become a frivolous dancer.

And so the chocolate-maker was all the more pleased when Stasia responded to Simon Jashi's advances, and seemed to be far from averse to the young man.

Up to this point, Stasia had wanted nothing to do with men. She had refused to wear a Sunday dress to church, or to go out with her stepmother and sisters on a Friday and promenade along the main street — a kind of marriage market. She had also given the cold shoulder to the men who had flirted with her at several school and town balls.

It seemed that Simon could indeed become an anchor in the unfathomable waters of Stasia's nature.

But that was where my great-great-grandfather was wrong.