

SCRIBE

NINO HARATISCHILI

TRANSLATED BY CHARLOTTE COLLINS

MY

SOUL

TWIN

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF THE EIGHTH LIFE

I look at your face, so pale, so peaceful, and still feel the old, familiar feeling, and mistrust it even as I feel it. I wonder how it can be that I still feel this closeness. Even now ...

I will never be able to explain this feeling to anyone. I am not supposed to feel it, given what happened. But this is how it is, and I am slowly accepting it, this emotion that seems to outlast everything else.

For the first time I stand alone, in every way: mentally, physically, emotionally. But even now it seems that my feeling, your feeling, what I am feeling here, now, looking at your face — it overcomes all fear, blocks it out. All that remains is this tremendous closeness, this gentleness.

I don't know how it can be that you were able to give me this gentle closeness, because no feeling can be gentle, because it is in the very nature of gentleness that it doesn't last — it is a phenomenon that appears like a pinprick and vanishes into nothingness. Yet my gentleness endures. It is of a different order; it is more enduring than anything else in my life. And I have long since ceased to question it.

So here I sit, a few days before my departure, on the beach, our beach, from which we would always swim out into the cold water; on the sand, which is cool and damp, because it's been raining for two days. In a moment I will cut off my hair and meet the new thoughts and the cool wind with a shorn head. Strand for strand, I will grow lighter, more weightless, perhaps freer, too. I'm sitting in our bay, where no one but us ever came, because this place seems so cold and bleak; here, where I first tried to offer you my love and you could not yet accept it, where we spent so many mornings and evenings after you learned to speak again, where so often we whispered our secrets, promises, desires, and plans to the sea.

I sit here. I look at you, and I feel the exhilaration of closeness: I

dance this exhilaration on the grave of loneliness, because for me it is a denial of loneliness, a victory of elemental, Dionysian greed.

I am gentle; I am soft as wool, and my inside is silky smooth, as if I were a baby, a foetus, secure, wanted, untouched by the world.

You told me so often that I had forgotten who I was, and perhaps it is actually true. And perhaps, with you, I never knew it. Perhaps I only realised it when I stopped fighting this gentleness in me. But I know that I am not you, not anymore.

And just as I am not afraid of the solitude, the silence, the questions that will come after all of this, that perhaps are encapsulated in the word *future*, I am not afraid of this realisation. I will have to weep. All that I cannot process I must push out of me, and there will be no one to hold my brow — I am aware of that as well. But what does it matter?

I look at your face. You are beautiful. You are as beautiful as ever, and I find myself smiling. I look at your face and think that I am grateful to you, for this gentle closeness and this terrible alienation. That even though this closeness is a feeling I can never share with anyone again — I let it go.

I look at you.

1

It all really started with the end.

That morning, Tulia called and told me he was here. She woke me. Mark had taken Theo to school and I had stayed in bed, feeling bad because I hadn't got up, hadn't made breakfast, hadn't played a part in my family's morning. Overcoming my guilty conscience proved easier than I feared, though, and my lie-in was worth every missed second of the grey Hamburg morning.

The door barely seemed to have closed behind them when the phone started ringing. When it didn't stop, I forced myself out of bed and, cursing the squandering of those precious minutes of sleep, crawled over to my mobile, which was on top of the chest of drawers. Apparently, it was a law of nature for it always to be left in the most inconvenient places.

'Wake up; I know you're there. He's back.'

'Tulia, my God, do you know what you're doing to me right now? I've just managed to get a bit of sleep for the first time in a hundred years, and now you come along and wake me up. Please, can't you call later ...'

'No, I can't. Didn't you hear me? He's back! I can't believe it. He walked in just like that, our young Adonis; you can't imagine how well he looks. Seven in the morning he calls me, says he's here, he wants to stay here for a while, he wants —'

'Tulia, who? Who are you talking about? Who do you mean, for heaven's sake?'

'Ivo, Ivo, our Ivo!'

I almost dropped the phone. Maybe I did actually drop it and I don't remember. I was so shaken that I staggered backwards and sat down on the edge of the bed. Or rather, I fell.

I couldn't consciously recall a single day when I hadn't thought of him, hadn't wondered what he might be doing, where he was, how he was. Over the last eight years, though, these thoughts had become routine, quiet, calm, self-evident — so much so that I was quite convinced they had nothing to do with reality. I had my Ivo, who lived inside my head, and whom I worried about, but the actual, real Ivo, of flesh and blood — this Ivo I hadn't seen for eight years. He had vanished from my life and followed his own path, which was so removed from mine that every step he took distanced him still further from me.

'What's he doing here?' was the best I could manage.

'How should I know! He's only been at my place an hour; he's just gone out to buy cigarettes. So I had to call you ...'

'But he must have said something, surely?'

'Who cares! He's back, that's the main thing. He's said he wants to stay here for a while, and I'm not going to try and talk him out of it.'

'Did he ask after me?'

'I was smothering him with kisses for the first hour; he could hardly speak, poor boy. I think I practically strangled him.'

I could hear an excitement in Tulia's voice that I had almost forgotten, which always gripped her whenever he was talked about. A mixture of maternal pride in a child who had drawn the short straw in life and so had to be loved all the more conspicuously and explicitly, and a certain pride in herself, because Ivo embodied all the things she felt were worth striving for, and she presumably saw the influence of her child-rearing most strongly reflected in him.

‘What am I supposed to do? Jump for joy? And why are you calling *me*, particularly? I mean, what do you want from me?’ I said helplessly — and was immediately annoyed at myself for asking this silly question, because within seconds I had manoeuvred myself back into the role of the little girl, Tulia’s ward.

There was a brief silence on the line. I knew perfectly well that Tulia was inconsistent, governed entirely by her emotions, that she didn’t always think before she said or did something. Perhaps she had rung me without considering the implications. But when it came to Ivo, I didn’t trust her, because in all those years I had never quite figured out what she really thought about it, about Ivo and me.

‘Oh, there’s the doorbell — he’s back. I have to go — I’ll call again in a few hours. Or he’ll call you himself. I’ll expect you here soon, anyway.’

★

I wanted to reply, but Tulia had already hung up. My need for sleep had suddenly evaporated. I was wide awake. I tried to put my thoughts in order, went into the kitchen, made coffee, and sat at the breakfast bar for which Mark had fought for so long, which I had never liked. I was shaking from head to toe, and my eyes were burning. Clutching the coffee cup, I stared out of the window at the grey drizzle. A customary picture to which I would never grow accustomed. My eyes fell on my wedding ring — narrow, understated, it had taken me such a long time to decide whether it really was the one I wanted to accompany me for the rest of my life.

I knew that everything was going to change. I knew it would be best to defend myself against this — to call Mark and ask him to take me with him on his next business trip, to drop our little boy at his grandparents’ and disappear somewhere until the clouds had passed.

Ivo had been bound to come back some day. I had expected it; had often pictured this moment, run through every conceivable scenario

in my head. I had armed myself, lulled myself into a sense of security. But until today it had only played out in my head. Until now, I had been the puppeteer. Had held the strings in my hand.

Despite all that had happened between us, I had never tried to erase Ivo from my life. Ignoring everyone's advice, I had put our childhood photos up in our apartment, told Mark a modified version of our story, sent parcels on Ivo's birthday with no message — for as long as I still had his address — and proposed toasts to him at parties, which not infrequently led to heated arguments and even shouting at the table.

But I had embalmed him in a sealed past, deprived him of space in which to grow — I was well aware of this, too. I had preserved him in my head as the child, the boy, the man who had shared his life with me, who existed in me, in my universe. But he was absent — absent from my life, and absent from his true life, which for so long I had also considered mine.

I wrenched myself out of my reverie, went to the bathroom, took a shower, drank another coffee, and put on some black trousers. I stood in front of the wardrobe trying to decide on a top, went blank, and just stared at the shelves stuffed with jerseys, T-shirts, and blouses. I stared and stared, as if hidden in there was the solution, the clarification, the quiet I so desperately needed. In my mind's eye I saw his face, the last time I'd seen him, and I instinctively covered my mouth to stop myself from screaming.

Yes, it all really started with the end. But my life had always been that way: the family structure I grew up in, we grew up in, was always upside down. Eventually, I no longer trusted myself to use possessive pronouns when talking about my relatives. Because if I said *my* father or *my* mother, *my* brother or *my* grandmother, I always had to add a *kind of*.

'Your father? And why don't you live with him?'

'Because my parents are divorced.'

'And why don't you live with your mother?'

'Because she lives in America.'

‘But why didn’t she take you with her?’

‘Because that’s what we decided.’

‘And does she sometimes come over?’

‘No, we always go to her.’

‘And why do you live with Tulia?’

‘She’s my father’s aunt; she’s like my grandmother.’

‘And why don’t you live with your real grandmother?’

‘She is my real grandmother; we don’t have another grandmother.’

‘And why does your sister have the same name as you, and your brother doesn’t?’

‘Because my brother’s adopted, and he kept his parents’ name.’

Later, to avoid all this, I said: This is Leni. This is Tulia. This is Ivo. This is ...

★

I awoke from my comatose state holding a dark-blue T-shirt, and put it on. It reminded me of my husband, my child; that I was in the here, the now, and that everything my brain was clutching at was in the past. I took a deep breath and forced myself to smile: I needed to feel the ground beneath my feet again.

I looked for the phone, which had ducked under the duvet this time, and called my editor.

‘Hey, Leo. I’d like to take a few days out of the office; I have to do some research for the biennale and won’t be back in till Wednesday. Is that okay with you?’

‘Oh ... sure. What about tomorrow, though? Nadia’s surprise party, remember?’

I’d completely forgotten. ‘Remind me again tomorrow; I’ll try and show up for a little while at least, okay?’

‘Is everything all right?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘You sound tense.’

‘Just the usual family stress. You know how it is.’

‘Fine, I’ll give you a ring tomorrow. Try to come. It would mean a lot to her. Yeah?’

‘I’ll do my best. Take care.’

I hung up, ashamed that I had accused my little family of stressing me out. This old pattern was also familiar: me lying, me lying for Ivo. I hadn’t had to do it for so long, and although this lie was really quite harmless, I was ashamed, and wished I hadn’t answered the phone earlier, wished Tulia had never called me, the old bat. But again I was resisting facts — I couldn’t control Tulia, and I had to accept that Ivo had been leading his own life beyond the bounds of my imagination.

I went into my office and turned on the laptop. An hour later, I gave up. I sat at my desk, sobbing, clutching a photo of my son — a last anchor, a last point of reference. Eyes screwed shut, I pressed my face into the desk, and only just managed to stop myself from screaming as loud as I could for help.

