

1994—126 cm

1995—132 cm

Kostya ran first his eyes along the lines, then his fingers. He scraped them with his fingernail; he spat on them and tried to wipe them off with his thumb; he rubbed and rubbed with the flat of his hand, but the biro had gnawed its way into the white paint, so he yanked at the doorframe, took the door off its hinges, prised the growth chart off the wall, carried it into the bedroom, put it on the two mattresses and lay down beside it.

For three days he lay in his childhood flat and cried. He puked in the bathtub, smeared the windows with shit, pissed on the Turkish carpet, aiming for the burn holes, smashed all the light bulbs and made sure he left the place as he wished it to be found.

He didn't say goodbye to anyone. Misha drove him to the airport; they hardly spoke. Kostya boarded the plane with the taste of salty dill gherkins on his tongue. On the flight, he looked at brochures of Germany and leafed through glossy catalogues, and when he got back to Vika with her long raspberry-coloured nails and her long-fingered hands, he saw that those long fingers of hers were stained yellow from nicotine. He hadn't noticed before.

## VALYA

I met Kostya the day he brought home his engineering degree, and that's how he was presented to me: a qualified man with a certified degree—job guaranteed. All that was wanting was a wife, and not just any wife, but a proper Jewish one—and there I was at the door. You can imagine, can't you? They'd got their teeth in me; I still have the marks. On the fourth day, Kostya said: "You're my wife." Just like that. Didn't ask. Nobody asked. Nobody waited for an answer either. And all this time he was in love with another woman, a regular goy. The love of his life, she was. Shame he didn't have the balls to marry her.

That was the moment I realised I had been deluding myself into thinking I'd want to hear what Valya had to tell me, no matter what it was.

Today she was wearing a discreetly checked green blouse that hugged her shoulders and flowed over her body—a body that looked

imposing when she held herself straight. She wasn't looking at me, but right through me, reading a script off my face, like a newsreader following a teleprompter—except that in her case it was yesterday's news and had already left lines at the corners of her mouth. A slight protuberance pulled her upper lip down; I don't think she ever smiled much, but not because she wasn't a cheerful person—on the contrary, my mother was more given to laughing than anyone else in the family; it was just that there was no place for laughter in the time that had spawned her—no place for laughter in that land called Socialism; it wasn't part of normal social behaviour over there. Deep down inside, though, she laughed a lot; I could see it in her eyes.

She was speaking several languages at once, putting them together in different combinations to fit the colour and flavour of her memories, making sentences that told a story different from the sum of their words. When she spoke, it sounded like an amorphous medley of all the things she was—things that could never have been reduced to one version of a story, or told in only one language.

She said: 'I wouldn't have married him if I hadn't got pregnant. I'd have left after the first argument, the first wallop, the first time I saw his face all red and puffy. Don't get me wrong, I don't regret it—I don't regret having you, I mean. But you have to have children quickly before you've had time to get to know each other and be disappointed. No one would ever have children otherwise; the human race would die out—would've done in the Soviet Union, anyway.

'We had no word for love, no notion of what it meant, no mental picture of it. We had nothing to...what's the word...to *compare* it to. And we didn't have time for broken hearts. We were too busy building up socialism.

'Of course, you did see girls with tear-stained faces in the university toilets. It was always a mystery to me—that they could go around like that with their make-up all smudged and feel no shame. I'd have

given myself a good slap in the face. Then again, I suppose I'd have cried and beaten my breast if I'd had anything to cry for. *Anyone?*

I could feel soundwaves flinging my brain from one side of my head to the other and wasn't sure whether it was because Valya's voice had suddenly shot up, or whether I was just being sensitive. Something furry was creeping up my throat, my temples felt as if they might burst and, as my mother pieced herself together, a little bit of story at a time, she became more and more of a blur to me. This wasn't a good time for a migraine. We always put off breakdowns in our family—postpone them to the solitude of empty rooms. I knew, too, that Valya was only just getting going.

I'd come without expecting anything in particular, stepping into a flat I had more memories of than I'd thought. Only the dimensions were different from what I remembered—the height of the ceilings, the size of the rooms and furniture. And Valya wasn't sitting at the kitchen table, where I always imagined her, but at the desk in her bedroom, her back pressed against the glass tabletop behind her, her hands resting on the plastic arms of the swivel chair, and Shura above her, looking down at us from one of his oil paintings. I suddenly loved her so much that I felt an urge to slide off the edge of the bed and rest my head on her lap—but I stayed put because I didn't want to interrupt her.

'Really, I should have stayed firm and refused to leave Volgograd. I didn't want to go to Moscow. Everyone thought you had to marry your way to Moscow—not me. I was the only one, but I knew it was a stupid idea. Moscow's evil; it stinks. Did then and it does now, maybe worse than ever now—a snakepit of a city. You can't even buy milk there without the shop woman spitting in your face. I didn't want to move; I wanted to stay in Volgograd, but they talked me into it. My girlfriends all screamed at me: "What? Are you crazy? It'll mean you'll be registered in Moscow. I'd marry an unemployed alcoholic for that,

if I had the chance, and yours actually has a job." One of them, Dasha, had gone there to be mistress to a man thirty years older than her—he was married, with children and all—and do you know, she was happy—she was just happy to be in Moscow. So I thought the place must have something going for it.

I tried to imagine the picture those eighties women must have had of Moscow, but saw only swings buried deep in snow, their rusty frame sticking up into a sky criss-crossed with white streaks. What a shame, I thought, that I can't imagine more. I was having trouble thinking straight.

It was the light that alerted me to the onset of the migraine. It sliced through my eyeballs, although the room was relatively dark—Valya liked it dim and the curtains were drawn. Then everything seemed too loud. I tried to ignore it; I didn't want to have to leave Valya, but already the smells in the room were keener too; Valya's perfume stung my nose.

"When I got to Moscow, they put on this act for me—I still can't believe the trouble they went to. Or that I fell for it. Actually I thought Kostya was ugly—he was covered in freckles and had a big belly, even in those days, and skinny little arms and red hair—but then he sat down at the piano and began to play, looking into my eyes and pressing his lips together and flaring his nostrils, and his parents sang his praises and told me about the hidden qualities of this sensitive young man—how well read he was, how considerate towards his parents and neighbours, how much he liked the theatre and the opera.

"To begin with, Kostya took me out—museums during the day and the theatre in the evening. Can you imagine—Kostya in a museum? And do you know something funny? He was a big eater, even in those days, and every time we went to the theatre he'd stuff himself first, shovelling it all in, any old how, sour cream and beef with onions and whatever, and then he'd have wind all through the play—and I don't

just mean on one occasion; this was every time he took me out. The orchestra in his belly would start up just as the lights went down, and either he'd belch or he'd fart, and it pained me—I felt for him; I was sorry for him, you know? I thought how awkward it must be for him; the poor thing's trying to make advances to me and ends up making a public spectacle of himself. But looking back on it, I don't think he gave a damn. In fact, I'm *sure* he didn't.

Hearing people talk of the world as if they could rely on it always makes me feel lonely and helpless. They speak of being sure about things; they tell you how something was or even how it's going to be, and it always makes me acutely aware of how little I know about what might happen next. I don't even know what I'll be addressed as when I go to buy cigarettes—a he or a she? Each morning I'm surprised by my own face in the mirror, and I'm sceptical about any attempts to predict the future. My temples ache a lot; it lays me low for days. But I didn't want to burden Valya with the ins and outs of my emotions, which were on a rollercoaster ride from the testosterone, like a permanent adolescence. I was here to listen.

I remember my mother ringing while I was there—she was off somewhere again, Hungary or Czechoslovakia, and wanted to know whether Kostya had proposed yet. And I said: "Mum, I don't even know him. We've only just met." And she said: "Feelings come with time, daughter."

I was afraid of suddenly turning deaf again, like the time I realised that Anton was gone. Something inside me had started to run—it was charging against the inner walls of my body, desperate to get out.

Valya said: 'I got pregnant quickly. Russian men don't do contraception. Abortion was the standard contraceptive, but after two abortions during my marriage to Ivan, I'd had enough and had a one-hundred-and-fifty-per-cent reliable Soviet-tested coil put in. I got pregnant with you almost immediately.'

Since seeing me with designer stubble, Valya had stopped asking when I was going to give her grandchildren, and for that I was grateful. Grandchildren had been topic number two, second only to my bad eating habits. My uninterested uterus. The western way of living only for yourself rather than bringing something into the world that had even worse chances than you. But now that my shoulders had grown broader and the muscles in my arms more prominent—now that I could pick my mother up and lift her in the air—she'd given up asking.

'I wasn't prepared for that. I couldn't cope; it was all too fast for me. I didn't know where I was or who these people were, and of course we had to get married even more quickly than planned. The idea had been to do everything on the Volga in the summer, but because I was already pregnant, the wedding had to be in the winter. In the filthy, slushy Moscow winter. My white tights were a complete mess by the time we got to the registry office. Do you know how hard it was to get white tights in those days? They were my first nylons. I went to the ladies and tried to scratch off the muck with my fingernails, speck by speck, splash by splash, without ripping them. Didn't do much good; I look like a Dalmatian on the wedding photos. Mother-in-law teased me about it for years. And then things went even faster—too fast. The next thing I knew, along came you two. You were early.'

I hadn't expected her to talk about that. And she didn't really—only in her own way, leaving out all the things I'd never have dared ask about. All she said was: 'It was Kostya's birthday. I'd wanted to go to Erinka's in Volgograd and give birth there, but it wasn't to be. Kostya had this party and—'

Valya was a blur—I sensed her rather than seeing her—and the air was dry; it was only now that I realised she must have the heating turned right up. Valya was always cold. Like me. And before anything could burst in my ears again, I did a bunk. I went out of my body. It stayed there, sitting stiffly in front of Valya, and I leapt out of myself. I

was on the outside; I could listen with impunity now.

'He had this birthday party and...anyway...premature labour...no petrol in the car...Kostya still completely pissed...the ambulance took two hours to come—or was it three or four?...Then it was off to the maternity ward, where fifteen other cows were already lying moaning with their legs spread. And in I march, with bruises all over my body and it felt as if the head was already sticking out—yours, it was your head, I know that now.'

Valya looked at the wall behind me. She didn't notice that I'd dodged her again, absconded; she was talking through my body, on and on.

'There was no bed for me at first and I wanted someone to pick me up and carry me, because I was scared that if I kept walking, I'd crush the head that was coming out of me—and then I split open completely; you ripped me open. I thought either I'd crush you to a pulp or you'd rip me to shreds. Push, crush, rip. But here we are today. We made it. I wasn't so sure at the time.'

I wouldn't be so sure now, I thought, looking on from outside. I left my stiff body sitting there and rose in the air, not breathing out until I was floating above the glass desktop. My empty shell was careful to keep blinking at regular intervals, so as not to arouse suspicion.

'So there we were: Mr and Mrs Chepanov. Kostya was fed up with being called Berman; he said it had given him nothing but hassle at work, and I had no trouble believing him; I'd grown up a Pinkenzon, after all. Don't ask me where the name came from—bought or invented, I suppose; someone had married someone at some point; it was floating around somewhere in the family. Kostya's parents approved. The only one who didn't was his granddad; he kicked up a row and said we were selling our souls to the Christians. He'd lived under the Germans, you see, and nothing had been quite right with him ever since; giving your own name away was like being sent to

the gas chambers, as far as he was concerned.

'He came to see us once a month from Podmoskovye, the part of the country they all came from. Kostya's mother gave him food to take home so he wouldn't go hungry, but she had a good look at the best-before dates first and only ever gave him things that had long outlived their shelf life.'

The self beneath me laughed mechanically. Valya looked at it, not yet used to the tinny sound of my breaking voice—and who could blame her? *She* didn't laugh.

'Chertanovo was the outer crust of the city; you only had to walk through one wood and you were in Podmoskovye. But try walking that as an old man. He'd arrive all out of puff, sit straight down at table and fall on the food.'

'We lived in this filthy part of town—an out-of-bounds zone—even the taxi drivers only went there if they had to. I didn't know that when I first came to Moscow, of course—that there was a death or a rape in the block every other day. You think I'm exaggerating—it's a blessing you *can* think that. That's why I brought you here—so you wouldn't believe all these awful stories. So you think I'm exaggerating when I tell you that the sixteen-year-old girl next door was found raped and murdered on the stairs. Or that the cobbler who lived opposite, a vast man, two metres by two metres, got a bottle smashed over his head by muggers, just outside our block, and bled to death on the spot. He'd no money on him, of course. And there was a child who fell out of the seventh floor—if he wasn't thrown. There were so many stories like that.'

I hung cross-legged over our heads, enjoying the new perspective; I'd never been up here before, never seen the room like this. The surface of Valya's face was constantly changing: one moment it looked like a ball of cottonwool, the next like the face of a Pioneer girl flying into space. Seen from above, her haircut was a strange mushroom

shape, and I asked myself when she'd started to dye her hair. I should have asked *her*—and I should have asked too how she'd lost so much weight so quickly and what she liked to eat—I could cook for us.

She said: 'I never understood my in-laws. I don't know what they made of themselves. He was short and puny, a bristly worm—and that impossible cloth cap, like a street urchin; he even kept it on for his afternoon nap. When he wasn't working, he'd lie on the bed for days on end, just staring at the ceiling. He might have a drink of water every now and then, but that was it. Didn't move, didn't speak; all he did was breathe. Mother-in-law was a doer, though—always knew exactly what she wanted. If I hadn't got pregnant, she'd have carried on working. She liked working; I don't think she wanted to be a housewife, but you didn't have a choice in those days; somebody had to stay at home with the children. You couldn't send them to kindergarden—might as well poison them yourself and get it over with; if they didn't come home sick, they came home dead. So Mother-in-law stayed with you and I went to work. She cleaned and cooked and looked after you and washed all your nappies by hand. A maid of all work.'

I looked at the corners of the walls and the stucco on the ceiling—or the marks where it had once been.

'I think I felt sorry for her.'

From somewhere down below, I heard Valya say: 'My in-laws only had one friend—a man who'd moved to Moscow from their village. He was the only visitor we ever had; he came round a lot, and if I hadn't known they had no truck with beggars, I'd have thought that's what he was. It's what he looked like, and it's what he smelt like too. A quiet man he was, almost gentle to the pair of them—I never heard anyone else speak to them like that, least of all their own son—and they were almost human towards him, this one friend of theirs. I've forgotten his name. It's possible, though, that he only came so often because his wife was always drinking urine.'

The self below laughed again. Valya ignored the strange, tinny noise.

'She did this urine therapy, for years, and he was always telling us about the smell and how unbearable it was, having to live with it. It wasn't that you peed and then drank the urine; it had to stand around a bit. Fresh urine's no good, apparently. The poor thing was always desperate to get away from home. You can imagine.

'Their only real friend. I liked him.'

She went on talking about her in-laws and their friends and their friends' friends, and I understood. If I was asked about myself, I always talked about other people too, pretending that the stories I told revealed something about me, and knowing at the same time how hopeless it is to try to cover your tracks.

I only caught snatches now of what Valya was saying. 'This friend moved to America. When he came and told them he was emigrating, the friendship was over. They started some argument—said he'd stolen from them, taken something from the flat...he kissed their feet, ate out of their hands...apparently he'd nicked a radio of theirs—as you do, when you're emigrating to the States—just what you need in America, a Soviet radio...at some point they said he'd made it over there and now he was dead...'

I glanced to the side. Shura looked me straight in the eye. That painting had always unnerved me because the oil made it look as if his pupils were throbbing. I looked back questioningly.

Valya said: 'We always had a lot to eat—so much that I put on thirty kilos in my first year in Moscow. They fed me up as if it was an embarrassment to them that the professor's granddaughter was so skinny. They were war children; they had to have heaps of fat and potatoes with everything.'

'Mother-in-law rubbed butter on her hands to stop them getting chapped; I'll never forget the smell of Soviet butter on her skin. I once

bought her some hand cream from my savings, rose-scented, but she never opened it—just hid it away at the back of the cupboard. I bet she waited till it was past its use-by date, then gave it to someone as a present.'

I tore my eyes away from Shura's face and looked down at Valya's hands, thinking how I'd love to rub cream on them—feel her fingers, and the skin between them, and her nails. Then I thought of the hands of my other self down there, growing gradually rougher. I was sometimes startled by my own calluses, usually when I was in bed, half asleep, and laid one curled hand in the other beside my head. But perhaps it was only the strange feeling of holding my own hand. Valya, I thought, would never notice how rough my skin was growing, because we never shook hands and only touched each other through our clothes when we hugged.

She said: 'Mother-in-law wouldn't let me take photos of you; she said the devil would take your souls. That's why there are so few baby photos of the two of you...only the ones I developed myself...I'd cover up the kitchen window and close the door to make it dark enough. Then Mother-in-law would come in and rummage around in the fridge, saying she really felt like a bit of ham...by the time she'd found what she wanted, the negatives were overexposed.'

On the first photo of me, you see my bare baby's body—almond-shaped eyes wide open, pointry chin—lying on a white sheet, arms and legs thrust out as I try to push myself from my tummy onto my back. It looks as if I'm flying.

On another photo that for a long time was on the chest of drawers at my grandparents' in Moscow, you see my almost fully grown, flat body in a floral waistcoat that hangs undone from my bare shoulders. I'm holding an apple in one hand; the other hand is empty and clenched to a fist. On my head is a white cap that comes down over my ears, and I'm looking into the camera as if I'd lost something. And

I don't know—maybe I'm imagining things, but I seem to recall a colour photo of my brother and me: me in leggings and a vest, my arms folded, and Anton next to me in a golden dress, dancing.

I forced myself to listen to Valya again. I felt I owed it to her and began to stitch the half-sentences back together. It didn't hurt to listen, up here.

Valya said: 'Did you know that the Russians say if you can't prevent a rape, you must learn to relax? That's something I never learnt. I practically lived in the hospital, hardly ever left if I could help it, did overtime, organised conferences, talked to patients into the small hours—anything I could think of to avoid having to go *back there*. Kostya always waited for me—parked outside the clinic and left the engine running. Sometimes I didn't even bother going out, and sometimes I'd go out and say I was busy and then go straight back in again.'

She said: 'I remember the first Edam cheese Kostya brought home for me, with its thick red wax rind. I remember the taste. I only knew two kinds of cheese until I was twenty-five—kolbasnyi and rossiy-skiy—and this was something exotic. I was so delighted, I threw my arms round Kostya's neck. He called me his little monkey and often brought me cheese after that—though God knows where he got it.'

'I think he was the first to come up with the idea of emigrating. He was the first to talk about it, anyway. There were tanks on Red Square; we were expecting civil war any day, or a coup or whatever—and we knew who'd be the first to take a battering. A whole wave of people left for Israel; there were countless invitations along the lines of: where you are, things are troubled and dangerous; where we are, there are mangoes on the trees. They took all comers, whether genuine Jews or Russians who'd bought themselves names ending in -berg or -man or -stein—whatever sounded Jewish and dreamed of the desert. I remember Mother-in-law saying: "It's all a trick! The Russians want to find out where the Jews are living! They'll take your details and haul

you away! You don't really think they'll take them to Israel, do you? How stupid can you be? The gulags—that's where they'll send them."

Valya laughed suddenly, surprising herself. She clapped her hand to her mouth, feeling for something on her desk with the other hand. The gurgling sound came from deep in her throat and mingled with something shriller.

'At the embassy we were told we needed our parents' signatures if we wanted to leave the country. They had to give their consent. Children were people's retirement provision—why else do you think they had so many? The state pension was only enough to keep you in bread and milk till the end of your life, so the old folks had to sign to say they were prepared to do without their children. Mine were willing, but Kostya's said: "No way."

'We could, of course, have faked the signatures. You only had to slip someone something and they'd issue you with whatever you wanted. But Kostya's parents knew that and threatened to report us—and that would have been it for us; the door to the west would have been shut forever.

'Kostya made several attempts to talk his father round, but the old man just came up with all these stories about his life in the village—what an awful time they'd had of it, how much they'd sacrificed for us, and that we must be off our heads to want to go to Germany where our blood—Soviet blood—was barely dry on the pavements. I tried too. I talked calmly to him and said if it didn't work out, we'd come back—we could always come back; it wasn't far; you could fly or take the train and we'd be there right away if anything happened. He interrupted me—I can see his face now. "I'm the one who decides things round here," he said. Then he picked up the knife.

'There was more to my father-in-law than you might think. He may have been so short and puny, you had the impression you could crush him in your armpit, but apparently he did stuff in the army—tortured

the other soldiers, poured hot oil in their eyes. I couldn't help thinking of that when I saw him standing there with that knife. Kostya, of course, immediately picked up the table and...

'I screamed. Mother-in-law screamed. You and Anton were standing in the door; I remember, I saw your faces and stopped screaming straight away. Then Mother-in-law saw you, then Kostya, then his father: we all turned to look at you, standing there looking at us.'

A knife floated before my eyes. I saw my dad hurl a table across the kitchen; I saw the frozen faces I knew from photographs; I called up images that seemed to fit.

Valya said: 'I knew nothing about Germany, nothing about anything—I had no picture of the place, no idea what I wanted from it. You say you want your children to have a golden future—yes, all right, that's what you say, but it isn't what you think. You don't think anything at all. You feel like a rolling stone.'

I was floating above us, watching that other self of mine listen to my mother talking about the move. My other self was sitting up very straight and so was she. I couldn't quite catch what we were saying; our words were strangely staggered. I saw Shura's purple eyes again, level with my forehead. *Are you talking to me, old man? Talk to me. Say something. I miss you. I miss talking to you.* But Shura said nothing and his eyes weren't purple in the painting. I looked down once more at mother and child, sitting, mirroring one another, and again I saw clearly how similar we were, especially in the way we let our arms dangle at our sides, slightly bent at the elbows.

I saw Ali and, suddenly, sitting there opposite his mother, it could have been Alissa. It was the familiar surroundings that did it; he was hovering between times and bodies; he was empty. I heard Valya say that the walls were damp in the first flat in Germany; I heard her tell Ali about the time her mother-in-law came to visit from Moscow and

she, Valya, had a stroke. Her father, Daniil, had pushed her around the little West German town we lived in at that time in a wheelchair, because she couldn't walk for weeks. The patches of sunlight in the small park he sometimes took her to were full of old people asleep in wheelchairs. Valya wasn't yet forty then. I heard her say that the right-hand corner of her mouth never quite recovered from the stroke, and saw Ali lean forwards slightly, discreetly examining the corner of his mother's mouth to see if he could see anything. But all he could make out were the hundreds of little wrinkles on her upper lip, like shredded paper.

Valya said she'd had to move to her parents' and that her husband had come and taken the children away. He didn't bring them back until she threatened to divorce him. From diagonally above, I looked down into Ali's motionless face with his big nose and pointy chin; between his chin and lower lip, a deep dimple sprouted black hairs. He looked at Valya in silence as she told him about her daughter, who'd been so disturbed after seeing her father drag her red-eyed mother out of the flat that she hadn't spoken for weeks. Ali blinked without understanding.

I hung in the air. Time slowed, then tumbled past my nose in a rush. Floating up there next to Shura's picture, I stretched out an arm, ran a hand over the frame around his face and peered at my fingertips. I saw fine grey streaks of dust and rubbed my fingers together; the dust formed tiny globules that I flicked away over the heads below me. Nothing made any sense. I heard Valya reproach Ali for coming to ask questions—but in her own way. She didn't say it was presumptuous of him, or that he'd never understand the world she came from; she didn't even say that it was more than she could manage to explain everything. She said something very Russian like: 'Memory's a parasite. It's best to leave well alone if you don't want to end up like me, unable to stop. I—'

'I' in Russian is 'Я', the last of thirty-three letters. People say: 'Я'



is the last letter of the alphabet, so put yourself last, forget you exist, don't rate yourself too highly, melt into the background. It seemed to me that Valya had taken this adage to heart; it made sense to her that she should be last; it was logical. Valya believed that there was a logic to things; she believed in a chain of events, each following the other, ineluctably. When she told me her life—or the part of it that she wanted to pass on to me—she described a chain of causal relations that seemed to her entirely natural, but that somehow, in spite of the firmness of her voice, failed to convince me. My thoughts were playing hopscotch, trying not to land on the lines. I couldn't think a 'Я', I realised, as my mother drew her picture for me. I didn't know how to place it.

My name begins with the first letter of the alphabet and it's a scream, a faltering, a falling, a promise of a B and a C that can't exist in the absence of historical causality. It's a mistake to think that people who go through the same things will come out together on the other side. I know a lot of people whose lives have followed the same path as mine, but their faces are differently hewn; they wear different clothes, play musical instruments, eat pickled herrings at their parents' every Sunday and manage to sleep through the night afterwards; they have jobs, buy flats, holiday in the south and return at the end of the summer to a place they call home. I'm not like that; I feel unable to state anything with certainty, to adopt a point of view, develop a voice of my own, a voice that would speak for me. A clear-cut 'Я'.

For me, time is a turntable. Images blur before my eyes, and over and over I guess how things might have looked, guess the names of streets I've never set foot in, of city stairways and empty boats. I try not to mix up the people whose names repeat themselves down the centuries.

I make up new characters in the same way that I piece together old ones. I imagine my brother's life, imagine him doing all the things I

can't do, see him setting off into the world because he has the courage I've always lacked. I miss him.

And what did I do when I thought he was calling me, when I got this sign? I misread all the signals. I hung back, pussy-footed around, did all I could to numb my tension and bury it inside me. I lay down on a sofa, willing it to eat me up. I hardly moved; I waited—for what is waiting if not hope?