

CHAPTER TWO



The swansong

I WAS NEVER SURE if I was dreaming my life or living in my dreams. I would fall asleep at night as if plunging in deep water, then simply open my eyes in the morning and continue to swim. Far from being vague, I had an exceptionally sharp mind, but I never thought of dreams as something unreal. My imagination was so acutely vivid that fantasy sometimes seemed even more plausible to me than the reality itself.

The night after we found the satans in our forest, I dreamt of dancing in moonlight. Standing on the lakeshore, I saw the cosmic sphere mirrored on the silver surface. A sad, beautiful melody echoed from the sky. Violins and oboes wept as I spread my arms and glided in circles above the still water until the rolling drums announced the handsome prince's arrival.

I prepared to fly into his arms when I heard my mother's voice.

"Wake up, little Trumpet! It's the first day of school!"

It took me a moment to realise that the loud drumming I heard in my head was the mechanical alarm clock in my parents' bedroom.

"We're taking Marta to the bus station." Mum pulled off my blanket. "Get up. We must leave in half an hour."

I rubbed my eyes and jumped out of bed, dancing to the sound of our household cacophony. The door banged in Marta's room and the toilet tank flushed with a rumble. Mum's slippers flip-flapped down the stairs. Water started to run in the bathroom. Dad coughed and tapped the sink with his razor.

I waltzed to my wardrobe to put on my best dress, blue with white dots and frills. Buttoning it up, I dashed to our hallway to check my reflection in the mirror. It was an antique piece carved in wood, which my father rescued from a garbage dump and had restored. Painted in gold, it looked like a majestic gateway. I liked to dance in front of it, imagining that it was the National Theatre stage. After I performed a couple of flawless pirouettes, I concluded my solo by bowing to an invisible audience. Satisfied with the inaudible applause, I parted my chestnut hair in the middle and plaited it in two braids, fastening my hairdo with elastic bands, pins and ribbons.

“What time does Marta’s bus leave from the station?” My dad rushed past me to the garage. Wearing a business suit, he looked fresh and handsome. I caught a whiff of spicy aftershave.

“Eight thirty.” I informed him. “My opening ceremony starts at ten.”

My mother and sister were arguing upstairs.

“I don’t need your advice. I’m twenty years old!” I heard Marta scream.

“Sometimes I forget how old you are.” Mum’s voice sounded shrill. “You act like a teenager!”

Unsurprisingly, my sister left the packing of her bags to the last minute.

Marta departed to Liberec, a town close to the East German border, where she was supposed to study mechanical engineering. The Technical College was an odd choice of specialisation, seeing that my sister was never very good at mathematics or descriptive geometry. She merely wished to get as far away from home as possible. The Technical College in Liberec was the most remote of the available options and it didn’t require the entrance exam.

A moment later, my mother’s reflection appeared in the mirror. She looked good in a scarlet two-piece with a grey, silken blouse. The tight jacket clutched her slender waist. I watched her put on a pair of high heels and a black hat that she adjusted to the most becoming angle with an aristocratic gesture.

“You look like a queen!” I felt proud of her.

“Don’t exaggerate, Trumpet.” She laughed. “I put on a bit of make-up. That’s all.”

Mum didn’t only have the talent to produce delicious meals out of leftovers. She was capable of following the latest fashion by dressing in second hand clothes and hats she bought at clearance sales.

“How do I look?” Marta came into my view with her suitcase.

She wore a black elastic shirt without a bra and a green miniskirt with yellow stripes. Marta's eyes were so heavy with mascara she could barely keep them open.

"What do you want me to say?" Mum resignedly sighed. "You're an adult now."

I led the way to the garage where Dad was busy giving technical instructions to his employee. Peter Hába was a tall nerd with knock-knees, thick glasses and a bald scalp surrounded with a greasy crown of long hair. He serviced the Aparatura while my father drove off to do business.

"Good morning, Marta." Peter almost fell down the ladder when he saw my sister's bulging cleavage. The young man agreed to work for my father's capitalistic wages only because he was desperately in love with Marta. "Can I help you with your suitcase?" He rushed down to her.

"If you insist." My sister haughtily handed him her luggage as if she was doing him a favour. "Put it in the trunk. Will you?"

I followed everyone outside to our rusty yellow Škoda. Our car was typical of the Normalization, looking like a can of sardines on wheels. It featured two pairs of round headlights and an unreliable engine at the back.

"Remember to keep an eye on the distillation column, Peter." Dad exhaled cigarette smoke out of the car window, turning on the ignition. "I should be back early in the afternoon."

The engine feebly coughed and wheezed, refusing to perform.

"Can you give me a push, mate?"

My father's request sounded more like a command.

I pulled up my sleeves to help Peter push our Škoda down the street while Mum and Marta trotted behind on high heels. Seconds later, the motor roared and the exhaust pipe spewed a stinky cloud into our faces. I saw Dad impatiently gesture us to board the car. Running to the door, I hurled myself onto the back seat while the car was still in motion. Mum and Marta accelerated, following my example.

"Bye, bye, Peter." I saw my father's employee disappear behind a curtain of dust and petrol fumes. "Have a nice day."

"Didn't you recently see a mechanic to get the engine fixed, Jirka?" Mum seized her position on the front seat, looking upset. "How much did it cost you?" I watched her straighten her hat and dust off her stylish shoes.

"Don't get me started on this." Dad snorted. "Those thieves at the Mrakotín garage

screwed me over.” He slammed the steering wheel. “It’s cost me a fortune to change the candles, but I bet they’ve put in used parts to increase their profit. I’ll need to have a word with them about it.”

Push-starting cars was an important part of the daily routine in the eighties. The recent models of Škoda especially seemed every bit as moody as the blue-collar workers who cheerfully sabotaged the communist ideology of working towards a better future. The Normalization promoted sloth, theft and professional sloppiness. “A sparrow in hand is better than a pigeon on the roof.” A Czech proverb warns against ambitious aspirations. Back in those days, few mechanics were willing to make an honest effort to repair your vehicle properly. Not even for money. The drivers who drove functional cars were the mechanics themselves. Fine-tuning their engines represented the sole exception to their laziness.

“Slow down, Dad!” Marta yelled in terror while we raced across the fields to Prague. “You’re going to kill us.”

My father overtook cars left and right, doing his best to make the engine repent. As a former cabbie, he trained to bend the traffic rules. Pressing the gas pedal to the floor, he squeezed the maximum horsepower from the howling engine. We nearly flew to the suburban panorama of smoking chimneys and tower blocks. Burning the tires, Dad shot through a busy intersection while the green light turned orange. When we crossed Palacký Bridge on tram tracks, the Prague Castle emerged into my view on the left side, towering above the river like a fairy tale château.

“*Do prdele.*” Dad jammed on brakes, seeing the traffic lights switch to red. “We’re not going to make it.”

After the signal eventually allowed us to take off, I drew a breath and closed my eyes, fighting motion sickness. My father switched his way through the dense traffic, avoiding several collisions. He committed a number of offences, but we managed to get to the Florence Station in time to catch Marta’s bus.

“*Ciao* everyone.” My sister kissed us goodbye like a Hollywood star. “I’ll send you a postcard.” I watched her mount a rickety coach at the platform number 8.

As soon as she handed her ticket to the driver, the rusty bus shuddered. Releasing a cannonade of farting sounds, the vehicle vanished behind a dense cloud of pitch-black smoke.

“So, this is it.” My mother’s eyes filled with tears. “One bird has left its nest.”

“Don’t be sad, Alice.” Dad wrapped his arms around her waist. “She’ll be back before you know it.”

I watched my parents kiss. They were a good-looking couple.

“What are you up to now?” Dad was always quick to snap out of emotional mood to affront practical concerns. “Do you want me to give you a lift to the Conservatory?” He hurried to leave.

“Thanks, but I prefer to walk.” Mum gave him a sad smile. “We have time.”

“*Tfuj. Tfuj. Tfuj.* Little Trumpet.” He spat on the ground, making a show of kicking my bottom, which is a local way to wish someone good luck. “Let the Devil take you.”

Mum and I watched him drive off before we crossed the bus station to visit Grandma Helga at her kiosk.

“Miranda, *me* dear granddaughter!” Grandma cried in her North-Moravian ‘short beak’ accent when she saw us walk over. “I’m so happy you *drop* by! Is this a new outfit you’re wearing, Alice?” She bitingly added. “It must have cost my son a fortune.”

My father’s mother moved to Prague from the coalmining town Ostrava to start a new life after she had divorced my grandfather. Grandad apparently loved her so much, he followed her to the capital, but his broken heart sent him to the grave. Darkly attractive, Helga was a merry widow in her early sixties. She liked to wear crimson lipstick with a matching nail polish. Massive golden rings glittered on her fingers. A pair of big breasts bulged out of her deep cleavage. She made piles of money in her kiosk by wooing her customers with sugary compliments. I watched Grandma bend over the counter to rake generous tips for every little cake and sausage she handed over.

“And how about Marta?” She wanted to know. “Did she leave town without saying goodbye to me? I *go* to miss *me* treasure!” Grandma wiped imaginary tears from her eyes.

My sister used to earn her pocket money working part-time at Helga’s kiosk. She got famously well on with my grandmother, having inherited both her enormous breasts and business skills. It was following Grandma’s example that Marta took to wearing shirts without a bra.

Consequently, she broke the sales records and my mother’s heart.

“I hope you’ll be able to cope with your workload without Marta.” Mum said tartly.

“Don’t worry. I was never *scare* of working overtime.” Helga pursed her crimson lips. “How is *me* son? His business must *do* well if you can afford to buy new clothes?”

There was no love lost between Grandma and her daughter-in-law.

Luckily, a queue of impatient customers saved my mother from having to pursue the conversation. “I’ll be right with you.” Helga smiled at the shoppers, handing me a parcel wrapped in brown paper. “I’ve *make* them for you in my free time.” She beamed with grandmotherly pride. “I *use* the best yarn to keep you warm in the dancing studio.”

“Thanks Grandma.” I pulled out a pair of hand-knitted legwarmers. “This is what I needed.”

Helga was normally too busy to play my grandmother. She dated a different boyfriend every week and her primary preoccupation was to look young. Whenever she tried to do something nice for me, it turned into a major disaster. This time, however, Grandma exceeded all my expectations. She proved unusually thoughtful and I couldn’t thank her enough for her gift.

“Good. I’m happy to see that you’re happy.” Helga posed in the role of a loving grandmother like a sitcom actress. “*Prosím?* How can I help you?” I watched her serve an elderly client at the head of the queue. “Coffee with rum and a Sacher torte? That’s five crowns sixty.”

“*Nashledanou.*” Mum said goodbye and grabbed my hand.

We walked to the quay and followed the river upstream. After we passed the gothic cloister of St. Agnes, I stopped in front of the hospital Na Františku to see if the large windows fronting the operation theatres on the third floor radiated fluorescent light. My mother’s dad used to work in the large edifice as the head surgeon. I imagined that if the lights were on, Granddad might be saving someone’s life.

“He’ll be retired by now.” Mum pointed out.

“What a pity that we can’t say hello to him.” I sighed. “Granddad would have been so proud to see me become a student at the Conservatory of Dance.”

I had met my grandfather only once when I was four years old. Having convinced my mother to visit her estranged father at work, we surprised him in his office. After a brief moment of initial embarrassment, he seemed happy to speak to me and even asked us to come again. When we returned at the occasion of his 70th birthday, however, Granddad refused our presents and slammed the office door in our faces. The Red Countess had presumably made him change his mind, which was a terrible heartbreak. He and I had so many things in common.

“He would love to see you dance in Swan Lake.” Mum’s eyes glazed over. “It’s his favourite ballet too.”

A flock of white birds landed on the river by the Čech Bridge.

“Look, Mum!” I cried. “Four swans. Just like in *Pas de Quatre*.”

“What a coincidence.” She incredulously wiped her tears. “Let’s hope that this is an auspicious omen.”

Housed in a yellow three-storey building with a green copper roof, the Conservatory headquarters stood on the quay behind the Rudolfinum Music Hall, across the street from the Jewish Cemetery. Facing the entrance, I listened to the sound of tortured musical instruments pouring out of the windows. It dawned on me that I was about to cross an invisible line that divided the carefree time of my childhood from the cruel world of professional competition.

My hands began to sweat. “Let’s wait a minute.” I stepped back. “What do you think, Mum? Will everything turn out alright?”

“I hope so, Trumpet.” My mother clutched my shoulder. “If not, you can always quit.” She was never convinced that I should dedicate my life to ballet.

Walking through the revolving door, I feared that it would mince me like a giant meat grinder. The guard in a reception booth at the bottom of the stairway peeked out of the window, reminding me of a butcher.

A group of girls stood in the hallway with their mothers. Dressed up like dolls, they sported elaborate hairdos made of pleated braids, decorated with hair clips and ribbons. Noting my mother’s hat, my classmates grew quiet and curiously stretched their necks to check me out.

“*Ahoj*.” I recognised most of the faces I saw. “Isn’t it exciting to meet here?”

Many of the present girls had frequented the National Theatre Preparatory School of Ballet with me. We used to perform together in children’s roles on the celebrated stage, although I could call none of them my friend. They typically came from well-established Prague families and perceived me as an outsider. Their fathers belonged to the top of the political hierarchy and their mothers bought clothes in TUZEX, a department store for privileged people such as my grandmother, the Red Countess. You had to have access to foreign currency to obtain TUZEX vouchers.

“What are you doing here, Miranda?” A pale girl in Levi’s jeans and a cool T-shirt by Benneton gave me a saccharine smile. “I didn’t think you’d make it through the auditions.”

Ivana Gypsy was traditionally my nemesis. Her dad was a prominent member of the Politburo. The Gypsies lived in a luxurious villa in the best Prague neighbourhood. They

allegedly owned a couple of paintings by Picasso and often travelled to the West. Ivana shunned me, because I didn't wear the right clothes and couldn't boast of any celebrity in my family. Our dead Saint Bernard, who had starred in popular movies during his youth apparently didn't qualify as an enviable acquaintance.

"Really? I can't say I'm surprised to see you here." I was used to the rich girl's snide remarks. "With all your father's connections."

A thick smell of expensive perfumes hang in the air. Ivana was lost for words and nervously giggled. I turned around to greet the less presumptuous girls while my mum politely chatted with their mothers.

"Are these the first year students here?" A fat woman with a face covered in freckles walked over to our group. I watched her count the girls. "Nobody seems to be missing. Follow me to the Assembly Hall." She commanded. "The boys are already waiting there."

The mothers surrounded the freckled teacher with charm. Clicking the heels to the auditorium, they expertly pushed their daughters to the front row. Ballet was similar to politics. Diplomacy and gifts were the best way to the teachers' hearts. I suspected that several of my classmates had passed the three rounds of difficult auditions, because their parents bribed the jury. I didn't remember Ivana Gypsy as a great dancer. My mum and I ended up taking a place in the third row, next to a veteran mother, Mrs Walnut, who accompanied her second daughter to the Conservatory.

"*Čest práci, comrades.* Welcome to the State Conservatory of Dance." An obese man chaired the panel of teachers on a stage. "My name is Comrade Baba and I'm your new headmaster." He cleared his throat into a microphone, reminding me of a sweating hippopotamus with giant nostrils and skin flaps.

"Did you know that Baba directed variety shows before he came here?" Mrs Walnut whispered into my mother's ear. Having two daughters at the Conservatory, there was nothing Mrs Walnut didn't know. She informed us that the former headmistress held her position, because she was the wife of an old guard communist. "Comrade Bílá wasn't an outstanding dancer, but at least she used to dance in small roles during her youth." Mrs Walnut complained. "Baba never had anything to do with ballet, but I don't think he is a Party member."

This was a typical nonsense of the time. Normalization public offices and institutions lived in fear of the changes proposed by Gorbachev. The workplace collectives tried to manoeuvre by changing their leadership. In Prague, the Perestroika was like a game of

musical chairs played to the sound of *Kalinka*, where incompetent turncoats with sharp elbows supplanted the semi-competent hard-line Bolsheviks.

“Comrade Baba surely doesn’t give the impression of being a ballet enthusiast.” Mum frowned.

“Certainly not.” Mrs Walnut keenly agreed. “He’s famous for snoring at the National Theatre production of *Sleeping Beauty*.”

In the meantime, the former variety show director revealed his original strategy for running the ballet school.

“Due to the shortage of space in the main building, we were forced to hire additional studios at the National House of Railways.” He rumbled. “The first year students will frequent classical dance classes in Vinohrady in the mornings. Later, they’ll transfer to Podskalí High by bus to receive standard education in theoretical subjects during the afternoons.”

A wave of quiet discontent passed through the audience.

“Excuse me.” My mother stood up. “Podskalí is miles away from Vinohrady. Does this mean that our children will run around the capital without supervision?”

“A good question.” Comrade Baba clearly didn’t have any answers. “What was your name? Aha. Thank you, Mrs Urban.” Wiping his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief, he turned to consult the freckled teacher next to him.

I watched the red haired woman provide the headmaster with instructions as if she commanded at his place. Directing an unkind look to my mother, she quickly scribbled something into her paperwork.

“Right.” Comrade Baba shuffled his notes. “We’ll do our best to keep an eye on our students.” He said unconvincingly. “Unfortunately, our budget for this year is low. Other questions?” He assumed a threatening pose.

“No. Thanks.” My mother sat down.

None of the murmuring mothers dared to raise a hand to voice their concerns. They clearly feared to offend Comrade Baba by questioning his leadership.

“Great.” The headmaster contentedly handed the microphone to the freckled teacher, introducing her as Comrade Rum.

“Now about the rules.” Comrade Rum begun severely. “As you might know, the Conservatory is a selective school.” She froze the audience with her steel-grey eyes. “We watch our students’ weight and grade their progress on a daily basis. At the end of each

semester, a jury of teachers determine which of the students shall pursue their studies further.” I saw a cruel smile play on the freckled face. “I must warn you that every year, several girls fail to meet our standards.” Comrade Rum added dangerously, eyeing my mother.

There was intense silence in the room as the mothers sneaked looks at each other’s daughters, wondering which one was going to become the sacrificial lamb. Oddly, the teacher’s statement didn’t concern the boys. Mrs Walnut explained to us that due to a permanent shortage of male dancers, even the least competent contenders could always count on passing the exams.

“I probably don’t need to add that discipline and punctuality are our main criteria.” Comrade Rum concluded her speech. “Excellent results in theoretical subjects and good piano skills are a big plus. I hope you understand that our intent is to raise world class ballerinas.”

Comrade Baba nodded approvingly, passing the word to yet another pedagogue who began to read an endless list of things that we were forbidden to do and eat and the equipment the Conservatory staff expected us to bring to school.

“Comrade Rum used to dance in Baba’s shows.” Mrs Walnut hissed.

“What?” Mum gasped. “Is she a vaudeville dancer?”

“What did you expect?” Mrs Walnut sniffed. “The first thing the new headmaster did when he took over his office was to replace the old teachers with his friends.”

I couldn’t believe my ears, listening to Mrs Walnut’s informed gossip. She claimed that she had no respect for Comrade Baba, but at the end of the ceremony, she stood up to applaud him like everyone else.

“I think I need to go to the toilet.” I dragged my mother to the door, feeling queasy in my stomach. Everyone seemed to play a role in the auditorium. I found it difficult to understand my part in the whole production.

Later on, as we walked to the exit, I saw a group of young boys running inside the revolving door. The elderly concierge yelled at them from the reception booth, but they blatantly ignored his complaints. It wasn’t until the boys noticed my mum’s hat that they started to behave with politeness.

“Forgive us, madam.” One of them held the door. He had a tall, sculpted body and blonde hair. We were about the same age. “Now you can go ahead.” He bowed like a handsome prince.

I couldn't tell if he was serious or he merely performed a funny stunt for his friends.

"Thanks." I brushed past him.

"It's my pleasure." The boy flashed me a glowing smile.

I couldn't help blushing. My knees nearly gave in when I revolved through the door. I had to take a breath to prevent my head from spinning.

"What should we do now?" My mother asked, crossing the tram tracks to the Jewish Quarters. "It's a nice day."

"Let's go to Old Town Square." I proposed.

I felt proud walking by Mum's side. She attracted a lot of attention with her stylish appearance while we ambled down Pařížská Street, past the Christian Dior shop on the corner. Most passers-by wore shapeless clothes made of poor quality materials. Faded, gloomy colours prevailed in everyone's attire. My mother looked like a hummingbird amongst the sparrows.

By the time we arrived at the iconic town hall tower, the astrological clock sounded midday. We stopped to watch the twelve apostles stroll through the windows. After the Death clinked her bell and the golden rooster crowed at the end of the performance, we crossed the square to sit on the steps surrounding the sculpture of Master Jan Hus. The imposing monument represented the Czech priest condemned to death as a heretic for criticising the immorality of the Catholic clergy. In 1415, the Constance Council burned Master Jan Hus at the stake, because he refused to take his critical comments back. Immortalized in bronze, the bearded martyr towered above a sculpted group of destitute humans crawling on the grey pedestal. My mother and I made it a habit to repose in the martyr's shade whenever we wandered through Old Town. Placing a plastic bag on the sandstone steps to protect our clothes, we sat down to have a quiet talk.

"How did you like your school, little Trumpet?" Mum asked. "What was your first impression?"

"I think it's okay." I squinted in the sun. "Why?"

I saw a group of Japanese men snapping pictures of the baroque palaces around the square. Apart from the tourists and the occasional passers-by, the historical centre was empty. Pigeons looked for crumbs between the cobblestones and swallows circled the Týnský Cathedral gothic spires.

"I'm not happy about the organization of your classes." My mother's voice sounded serious. "Comrade Baba did little to convince me that the teaching staff will ensure your

safety during the transfers.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m not sure if it was a wise decision for you to become a Conservatory student, Trumpet.” Mum looked worried. “I have a strong feeling that this school won’t give you what you’re looking for.”

“Yes it will!” I cried. “I’ve been working for years to get there. I’ll never give up on dancing.” Tears flooded my eyes. “It may be harder than I imagined, but I still want to go ahead.” I struggled to convince myself. “Didn’t you tell me that to attain one’s goals one must make sacrifices?”

My mother remained silent.

“He did!” I pointed to the statue above me.

“Jan Hus fought for the truth, not his dream.” Mum pointed out. “Your father and I supported you in your decision to study ballet, because we didn’t want to force you to sacrifice your passion. We were secretly hoping that you would change your mind as you grew older.”

I looked up to Jan Hus and clenched my teeth. “I’d rather burn at the stake than stop dancing.” I declared.

The bony martyr with sunken eyes seemed to beckon me.

“How about we take a walk to the Charles Bridge, little Trumpet?” My mother could clearly see my distress and decided to press no further. “We can catch a tram to the train station from Malá Strana.” She stroked my hair.

I loved strolling around Old Town with my mother. She showed me secret shortcuts through forgotten passages and obscure courtyards. We walked beneath the canopies of corroded scaffolding that coated the antique palaces to protect the pedestrians from the peeling facade. Angels with broken noses peeked from dark corners. The clicking of my mother’s heels echoed through the empty streets and the damp scent of lime, urine and pigeons’ droppings was both nauseating and lovely.

After we passed the gothic Bridge Tower, we paused to admire the scenery on the opposite side of the river. Red roofs with slanting chimneys crouched at the foot of the Castle. The clear sky hung above the spires and domes like velvet. St. Vít stained-glass windows reflected sunbeams. The whole panorama shone with gold. Vltava noisily rolled down the weir, swirling beneath the bridge pillars, the sandstone saints mirrored on its surface.

“Aren’t you hungry, little Trumpet?”

A small bakery in Malá Strana displayed fresh bread rolls and delicious pastries in the window. I savoured an irresistible scent of warm dough. This is where my mother and I usually bought our lunch.

“No thanks.” I swallowed the temptation. “I better watch my diet.”

“Do you mind if I buy something for me?” Mum headed inside.

I preferred to wait for her in the street, watching her through the window while she bought a couple of cheese rolls. They were still warm when she carried them out. I nearly fainted with the desire to eat one.

“Are you sure you don’t want any?” She asked me. “You didn’t have anything for breakfast.”

Mum always watched my diet. There was no chance that I would overeat under her supervision. Keeping in mind Comrade Rum’s speech, however, I was scared of putting on weight.

“I don’t feel well in my stomach.” I lied. “Those satans we had last night killed my appetite.”

My stomach rumbled almost as loud as the rails as I watched our tram approach the platform. The carriages screeched to a halt in Malá Strana Square. I climbed inside and slumped down onto a plastic seat opposite my mum. Behind the window, the beautiful panorama receded into a dreamy blur, replaced by the depressing scenery of an industrial neighborhood. I avoided watching Mum eat her crispy roll. The sound of her chewing irritated me. Instead, I gloomily thought about Master Jan Hus and the sacrifices I was required to make in order to follow my dreams.

