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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lea Ypi is a professor of Political Theory at the London School of Economics. Her first trade book, *Free* was shortlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize and the Costa Biography Award and won the Slightly Foxed Best First Biography Prize. It is being translated into nineteen languages.

Free

Coming of Age at the End of History

LEA YPI



PENGUIN BOOKS

13.

Everyone Wants to Leave

On my last evening in Athens, I prepared a plastic bag with half a Milka chocolate wrapped in tinfoil, a chewing-gum that looked like a fake cigarette and a loofah sponge in the shape of a strawberry from Yiorgos's factory. I had promised Elona I would bring her a present from my first trip abroad and was proud to have kept my word.

She was not there when I returned to class. I was told she had fallen ill and had to miss school for a few days. A whole week passed, but she did not come back. Then another week. Then it was spring break.

When classes started again at the end of April, Elona had still not returned. I decided to visit her, to check on her health. I had eaten the Milka chocolate but saved the cigarette-shaped chewing-gum and the sponge that looked like a strawberry. I knocked on her door. Her father opened it. 'I'm looking for Elona,' I said. 'I'm told she's ill. Can I see her?'

'Elona?' he asked, as if he did not recognize his daughter's name. 'Elona is a bad girl. A very bad girl.' He slammed the door in my face. I stood there for a few minutes, wondering what to do. He must have seen me from the window, or noticed I was still on the doorstep. He opened the door again. 'Can you give her this?' I said

in a shaken voice, passing him the plastic bag, which trembled beneath my hand. He grabbed it, and flung it a few metres away, into the middle of the road, shouting: 'She's not here. Do you understand? She's not here.'

Not long after this conversation, Elona's name was taken off the school register. The teachers denied she had ever been ill; she had changed school, they said. In class, we speculated about her whereabouts. Some children said she had gone to live with her grandparents in a different part of town. Others that, like her sister, she had been sent to an orphanage, only one for older children. Others that she had left the country. When we ran out of guesses, she stopped being a topic of conversation. I asked my parents. They shrugged. 'Poor girl,' my grandmother commented. 'Her mother was such a good woman. Who knows where that poor girl has ended up?'

We learned the truth one day in late October of the same year, when Nini and I were returning from a walk. I recognized Elona's grandfather on the street. He had been to our class on 5 May the year before, to tell us about his heroic fighting as a partisan in the mountains near Greece. I could not remember his name. Elona had always called him 'Grandpa', so I shouted across the boulevard: 'Comrade! Comrade!' He did not turn. 'Sir! Sir!' my grandmother shouted, more loudly than I had. He stopped, and recognized me. I told him I missed Elona and wanted to know where she was. He took a deep breath, then sighed. 'Elona,' he said. 'That wretched child. We recently received a letter from her. Which way are you going?' He started to explain, walking by our side.

On the morning of 6 March 1991, Elona left her house

to go to school, wearing her uniform, carrying her bag, heavy with the textbooks and exercise books she needed for that day's lessons. During those weeks, she would take off earlier than usual, to meet with a boy she had got to know, a young fellow of about eighteen called Arian, he said.

I knew about Arian. He lived on my road. We hardly talked to him; even Flamur was afraid to go near him. Elona had mentioned once that she knew him, when we had gone to visit her sister at the orphanage. But I did not think they saw each other regularly. It turned out they met every morning in one of the secluded little alleyways off the main road that connected her house to the school. I knew the place; there was a sheltered area at the rear entrance to a small block of flats where couples could meet without being seen. Only 'bad girls' went there. It was odd to imagine Elona and Arian together. I wondered why she had never told me. She had recently turned thirteen, but I had always assumed she shared my complete indifference, even contempt, for older boys. Perhaps she had started seeing Arian while we were travelling to Greece.

On the morning of 6 March, her grandfather explained, the roads were teeming with people. Even the sheltered area where Elona and Arian met was crammed with families who spoke with strange accents and seemed to have spent the night there, in preparation for another trip. Locals also hurried on to the street, swarming in the direction of the port: youngsters, workers in factory uniforms, men and women carrying children wrapped in blankets.

Elona waited for Arian until she could hear the school

bell. She was about to leave when he finally showed up. 'The port is no longer guarded,' he said. 'All the container ships are full of people. Everyone's trying to leave. The soldiers don't shoot. They have joined the crowds on the boats. I'm going. You coming?'

'Coming where?' Elona asked.

'To Italy,' Arian replied. 'Or somewhere abroad - I don't know. Wherever the boat takes us. If we don't like it, we can come back.'

By then, it was too late to go to school. Elona followed Arian to the port, at first only to take a look. The closer they got to the area where the container ships were berthed, the denser the crowd on the street became. They wrestled their way to the mooring, close to one of the largest boats, a cargo ship called *Partizani*. A man shouted that *Partizani* was about to depart. Arian jumped inside, pulling Elona behind him. The boat's ladder went up.

The journey lasted seven hours, Elona wrote in her letter, but they had to wait for official authorization to disembark. The order came after twenty-four hours. At first, the new arrivals were accommodated in a local school turned refugee camp. A few days later, they were distributed around the country. Elona and Arian settled in the north of Italy. They lived in a tiny flat shared with some people they had met on the boat. She was too young to work, but Arian had found a job delivering refrigerators for a local shop. He did not make much money, she said, but they survived. As proof, she had put a few banknotes, worth 20,000 Italian lire, in the envelope. She had also written down her postal address but asked for letters to be directed to Arian, since she was pretending to be his sister.

It was hard to believe that my friend, who only a few

months before bought sunflower seeds and played dolls with me, and who had hardly ever travelled outside our town, could have found the courage to leave the country. How could she leave behind her home, the school, her family, even her sister?

'I tried to go myself,' Elona's grandfather said to my grandmother. 'I wanted to find her. To bring her back. I left in August. I was on the *Vlora*. We were treated like dogs.'

I remembered the day the *Vlora* departed. That morning, Flamur's mother had knocked desperately on every door of the street to ask if we had seen her son. He'd embarked on the boat without telling her. My friend Marsida and her parents left too. Her father was mending a pair of broken shoes when the customer stormed into the shop, asking for them to be returned immediately. She would wear them broken, she said. The port was open, there was no time to waste. Marsida's father left his sewing machine and ran to collect his daughter from school and to find his wife in the factory where she worked. They jumped on the *Vlora* too.

Tens of thousands of people were crowded into the port. The *Vlora* had just returned from a trip to Cuba, carrying a load of sugar. It was commandeered while sitting in the dock waiting for repairs to its primary motor. The crowds broke into it and forced the captain to sail to Italy. Fearing for his life, he decided to start the boat on a supplementary motor, but without radar. Although it had a capacity of only three thousand people, the *Vlora* carried nearly twenty thousand that day. It seemed an eternity until the boat reached the port of Brindisi, the same port where thousands of people had

disembarked successfully in March. This time, though, the authorities instructed the captain to turn away, and set course instead for the port of Bari, some 110 kilometres from Brindisi. It took the boat another seven hours to complete the journey.

The images of the *Vlora*'s arrival in Bari are still fresh in my mind. On the screen of the small colour television that we had recently bought, I saw the dozens of men who had managed to climb to the top of the masts, half naked, with sweat dripping down their necks, their faces dirty and badly shaven, their hair grown long at the back, in mullet fashion. Standing there precariously, struggling to hold on to the mast, they looked like the self-proclaimed generals of an army that had lost its morale before the battle had even started. They waved their arms senselessly at the television cameras, shouting, 'Amico, let us exit!', 'Let us disembark!', 'We are hungry, amico!', 'We need water!' Above them hovered two or three helicopters. Under them, on the deck, there was a sea of people: thousands of men, women and children, scorched from the heat, injured from waiting in close quarters, pushing each other, wailing, desperately attempting to leave the boat. Squeezed inside the cabins, other passengers perched on the windows, gestured or shouted instructions to those on the deck, encouraging them to dive into the water. Some followed the advice and were arrested. Others managed to escape. The rest continued to scream: that they had consumed the last lumps of sugar from the cargo hold several hours before, that many people were severely dehydrated and were drinking sea water, that there were pregnant women on board.

The events that followed were first recounted by those

who lived them, to warn others against repeating their mistakes. A journey of about seven hours lasted thirty-six. When disembarkation orders finally arrived, the crowds were forced into buses and locked in a disused stadium, guarded by police. Those who tried to leave were arrested and beaten. Packaged food and bottles of water were dropped by helicopter. Inside, men, women and children fought to reach the supplies. Some people had brought knives with them and started to use them to butcher other people.

In the stadium, rumours spread that, since our country was technically no longer a communist state, requests for political asylum were likely to be rejected. Instead, the new arrivals would be considered economic migrants. This was a new, unfamiliar category. It applied to the same people, but with different, if slightly obscure, implications which became clear only some days later. After almost two weeks in the stadium, the crowds were shovelled into buses. They were told they would be sent to Rome, to sort out the paperwork. Soon they realized the buses were directed to the port. They were embarked on return ferries. Those who protested were beaten up.

'I didn't want to stay in Italy,' Elona's grandfather explained to Nini. 'I just wanted to find Elona and bring her back. But they didn't let anyone explain. I wanted to tell them that I did not need any papers to stay, that I was just trying to find my granddaughter. They didn't listen. They gave us 20,000 lire each and forced us back on to a boat. They would not listen to me,' he repeated.

'Perhaps you can try again with the embassy?' my grandmother said. 'Maybe you can apply for a visa?'

'A visa?' he snorted. 'Have you seen what it's like at

the embassy? You can't even get close to the door. It's a military zone. There are guards everywhere. There are five layers of protection. Inside. Outside. Everywhere.'

'Have you tried calling to make an appointment?' I asked. I remembered how we had made an appointment at the Greek embassy to receive our visa.

'Call?' he laughed. 'Call?' He laughed again, louder. 'You'd be better off waiting for death to call.'

'We went to Greece,' I said. 'We got a visa. We had made an appointment at the embassy.'

'When did you go?'

'Earlier this year,' my grandmother answered.

'Just before Elona left,' I added. 'I didn't see her when I came back.'

'That's it,' he replied. 'Now, they've closed the roads. All blocked. Can't go anywhere, unless it's for work.'

'Our government—' my grandmother began.

'No, not the government,' he said, interrupting her. 'Our government would be happy if everyone left. Perhaps they've even organized the boats themselves, just so they could get rid of people. Then they won't have to feed them, or find them jobs, now that all the factories are closing. I mean the embassies, the foreign states. They can't take any more immigrants, they say. But I'll try again. I'll find a way. I've thought about the south,' he explained. 'The land border. I'll try the land border with Greece. It's dangerous. You might be shot. I know the area. I fought there in the war. But I'm not as agile as I used to be. I'm not a partisan any more.'

He gave a faint smile.

'Some people managed to leave,' I said. 'Like Elona and Arian — they managed to get away.'

He shook his head, absorbed in thought. 'In March, they said we were all victims. They accepted us. In August, they looked at us as if we were some kind of menace; like we were about to eat their children.'

My grandmother nodded. I was thinking about how my parents had never considered leaving. When Marsida and her parents had stopped by our house to bid us farewell, before they sailed to Italy on that cargo boat, Nini had tried to persuade them not to take that risk. 'It's dangerous,' she warned. 'It's dangerous even if it works. I was born an immigrant. I know what life as an immigrant is like.'

'It was hard enough for her in the Ottoman empire, when the pashas and the beys of her family were running it,' my father teased. 'It can't be as bad as here,' said my mother, who would have liked to try. Nini kept shaking her head.

I did not want to leave either. I had enjoyed being in Athens at first, before it became difficult with my grandmother, but eventually, I started to miss home. I was frustrated by not being able to understand the language. I grew angry when people stared at me, pointing their fingers, and I couldn't understand their words. At least when tourists visited our country, it was reciprocal. They stared at us; we stared at them. Our worlds were divided. Now we were no longer divided. But we weren't equal.

'Maybe they'll open the roads again,' I said.

'I don't think so,' Elona's grandfather replied. He turned to my grandmother. 'They're trying to make it harder to cross. They've increased marine patrolling. They don't wait for you to be there. At first, they were unprepared. Now, they know what's coming. I tell you,

they're not about to dismantle any controls, they're making them more efficient.'

He spoke like someone who understood the technicalities of border control, who could decipher them in the same way he had deciphered guerrilla strategies in his youth. 'If they discover you trying to cross the border, they put you in a camp. You can get stuck for ever.'

'You need money too,' my grandmother commented.

'When we went to Athens, everything was so expensive,' I said. 'We had no money. It was horrible. There was so much in the shops. There were no queues. But we couldn't buy anything.'

'Money,' he said, his mind more on his plan than our remarks. 'Yes, money is another way. Of course, if you have money, the roads are not closed. If you put it in a bank, and you make the bank issue some kind of statement that you have a deposit, then it's a lot easier.'

'I'm sure Elona is fine,' my grandmother said. 'If she has written to say she's well, she probably likes being in Italy. Teenagers. It helps one grow up to make big decisions like that. Back in my day, girls that age were sent to boarding school.'

'Or work,' said Elona's grandfather.

My grandmother nodded. 'She will come back to visit before long,' she tried to reassure him. 'She probably needs to sort out the paperwork. As long as she stays in touch . . .'

To me, it all sounded absurd. How, I thought, could someone be happier abroad than at home? I could not imagine how living with Arian might make you better off, even in Italy. The more I reflected on it, the more it seemed implausible.

'Everyone wants to leave,' I wrote in my diary, commenting on the events of March and August 1991. 'Everyone except us.' Most of our friends and relatives spent days, weeks, even months, planning how they would leave. There was a wide range of possibilities: falsifying documents, hijacking boats, crossing the land border, applying for a visa, finding a Westerner who could invite them and guarantee their stay, borrowing money. People hardly gave thought to the purpose. Knowing *how* you would get somewhere was more important than knowing *why*.

For some, leaving was a necessity that went under the official name of 'transition'. We were a society in transition, it was said, moving from socialism to liberalism, from one-party rule to pluralism, from one place to the other. Opportunities would never come to you, unless you went looking for them, like the half-cockerel in the old Albanian folk tale who travels far away, looking for his kismet, and in the end returns full of gold. For others, leaving the country was an adventure, a childhood dream come true or a way to please their parents. There were those who left and never returned. Those who went and came back soon after. Those who turned the organization of movement into a profession, who opened travel agencies or smuggled people on boats. Those who survived, and became rich. Those who survived, and continued to struggle. And those who died trying to cross the border.

In the past, one would have been arrested for wanting to leave. Now that nobody was stopping us from emigrating, we were no longer welcome on the other side. The only thing that had changed was the colour

of the police uniforms. We risked being arrested not in the name of our own government but in the name of other states, those same governments who used to urge us to break free in the past. The West had spent decades criticizing the East for its closed borders, funding campaigns to demand freedom of movement, condemning the immorality of states committed to restricting the right to exit. Our exiles used to be received as heroes. Now they were treated like criminals.

Perhaps freedom of movement had never really mattered. It was easy to defend it when someone else was doing the dirty work of imprisonment. But what value does the right to exit have if there is no right to enter? Were borders and walls reprehensible only when they served to keep people in, as opposed to keeping them out? The border guards, the patrol boats, the detention and repression of immigrants that were pioneered in southern Europe for the first time in those years would become standard practice over the coming decades. The West, initially unprepared for the arrival of thousands of people wanting a different future, would soon perfect a system for excluding the most vulnerable and attracting the more skilled, all the while defending borders to 'protect our way of life'. And yet, those who sought to emigrate did so because they were attracted to that way of life. Far from posing a threat to the system, they were its most ardent supporters.

From our state's point of view, emigration was a short-term blessing and a long-term curse. It acted as an immediate safety valve to relieve the pressure of unemployment. But it also deprived the state of its youngest, most able and often more educated citizens,

and tore families apart. In normal circumstances, it would have been more desirable for freedom of movement to include the freedom to stay in one's place. But these weren't normal circumstances. With thousands of factories, workshops and state enterprises facing closure and cuts, leaving was like taking voluntary redundancy when faced with the sack.

Yet not everyone tried. And not all who tried made it out. Of the people remaining, many had to ask themselves what a life without work was. My parents would soon be among those.

14.

Competitive Games

My father lost his job shortly after the first multi-party elections. He returned home one afternoon and announced that his office would close for good in a few weeks. Trained as a forest engineer, he had devoted the first half of his life to designing, planting and looking after new trees, especially laurels. Now the state had other priorities. Not only were new trees no longer planted; the existing ones were being chopped down. Power cuts and heating demands on the one hand and the brand-new cultivation of free individual initiative on the other meant that every night more trees disappeared from the forests. One might also have called it theft, except that an individual appropriating common resources constitutes the very foundation of private property. Bottom-up privatization would be a better description.

My father announced his office's closure in the same tone with which he had in the past announced other administrative changes to his work life, for example that he would be transferred from one village to another, or that a new director would replace the current one. He said that he would no longer need to provide his biography, the one where he explained the family's history. Nobody cared about that history now. All that one

18.

Structural Reforms

'Do you know what the hardest thing I've done in my life is?' my father asked one gusty November morning before going to work. He stood in front of the closed curtains in our living room, listening to the sound of the window frame rattling from the draught, stirring his coffee.

'Was it when you had to lie to me about our relation to Ypi the prime minister?' I asked. 'That must have been hard.'

He shook his head.

'Wait, I know,' I said. 'Remember when I was desperate to have a photo of Enver Hoxha on the bookshelf? You told me we needed a nice frame for it, and we had to wait until it would be ready. I almost believed that.' I chuckled.

Five years after the fall of socialism, episodes of our life back then had become part of the repertoire of amusing family anecdotes. It didn't matter if the memories were absurd, hilarious or painful, or all of these at once. We would joke about them over meals, like drunken sailors who had survived a shipwreck and relished showing one another the scars. My father joked more than anyone else. He joked all the time, so much so that it was often difficult to infer from the tone of his questions if they

were intended seriously or if he wanted to make us laugh. At one point in his life, he had figured out that irony was more than a rhetorical device, it was a mode of survival. He made ample use of it and was usually pleased when my brother and I tried to mimic him.

'Or was it when I—'

'The world doesn't always revolve around you, Leushka,' he curtly interrupted me. He was not in his usual playful mood.

He had recently been promoted to general director of the port, the biggest port in the country and one of the largest in the Adriatic Sea. We'd had a telephone line installed in our house, and the first thing he did each morning was call the Harbour Office. He worried about storms preventing ferries from docking, cranes threatened by the wind, queues forming in the customs office. After he'd spent two years running Plantex, amassing a proven record of cutting costs and reducing debt, someone high-up must have thought he was ready for even greater responsibilities. He received a higher salary, was assigned a personal driver who picked him up in a Mercedes Benz each morning to go to work, and doubled the dose of Valium he normally swallowed to go to sleep.

I made other guesses, correcting the tone of my replies. Was it the time when as a little boy of six or seven he tried to protect his mother from being kicked by a police officer? Or when he had to give away his pet dog because the family was being deported? Or when he first met his father, after he was released from prison, and wondered about the stranger who'd come to live with them? Was it suspecting that his best friend was a spy?

He shook his head and kept staring at the bottom of

his small coffee cup, as if he expected the concentrated dark liquid to wash away his even darker thoughts.

'It is this,' he said, slowly moving the curtain to reveal a group of twenty or thirty Roma gathered in the garden. Some of the women had toddlers tied to their backs; others nursed babies while sitting on the ground. More were crowded outside the gate, their faces pressed against the metal rails, like frozen prisoners behind bars. When they noticed my father behind the open curtain, a sudden movement spread in the courtyard; everyone pointed their finger towards our window and started to shout: 'There he is! He's there! He's up! He's going to come out!'

My father closed the curtain. He sat on the sofa and reached out for his pump, taking a few deep breaths to inhale the medicine. His hands always trembled; the result of years of anti-histaminic medicines for the asthma he had contracted as a child. This time, they trembled more.

'They work in the port,' he said after a pause. 'Do you know what we call them? Structural reforms.'

His face was twisted by an expression of pain that he tried to contain, like someone due to appear on stage who has just got their fingers trapped in the dressing-room doors. From the start of his contract at the harbour, he had been in negotiations with foreign experts like Van de Berg to discuss what the World Bank called 'structural reforms'. Like every other state enterprise, the port was in deficit and had been urged to cut costs. This time, nobody promised there would be no redundancies. The experts charted what they called a 'road map', the first step of which involved a series of lay-offs, mostly of

low-skilled workers. Hundreds of Roma worked at the port: cargo loaders, cleaners, freight transporters, warehouse operatives. My father was responsible for firing them all.

When those working in the port heard they were about to lose their jobs, they began to visit our house in the early hours of the morning, waiting patiently outside until my father left. At first, there were only four or five, but as news of the structural reforms spread, the crowds grew bigger. They stood in the courtyard until my father appeared at the door, then shouted at him, begging him to think twice. 'Good morning, boss. You're a good man, boss, don't do it, don't listen to them thieves.' 'Is it about drinking, boss? Is it that? I can quit drinking tomorrow, if that's the problem. Tomorrow I can quit drinking, and I can quit smoking too, if you want. Who has money for raki these days? I've cut so much, boss, really cut down, you know.' 'I only have a couple of years until retirement, boss. Just two more years. I have worked in the port since I was thirteen.' 'Boss, I never stole anything. You know, they say gypsies steal everything. Maybe someone told you I stole from the warehouse. I've never stolen a penny, boss. I swear on my children's heads, I've never stolen anything.' 'Let me do my job. I like my job. It's a hard job, but I like it. I know everyone in the port. The port is like my house. I sleep there, I eat there, I do everything at the port. When I go home, my children are sleeping.'

'I don't know how to go out there,' my father said that morning. 'Every day, there are more people. Yesterday, I had another meeting with them in the office. I have meetings all the time. First with the World Bank, then

with them, then again with the World Bank. Take a look at these people, standing there. They think it depends on me. They think I can do something. I don't know what to say to them. There are new rules now. Things work differently, companies are run differently. Parts of the port will need to be privatized. Someone has to do it. It just happens to be me, but if it wasn't me, it would have to be someone else, whoever, doesn't matter who, someone has to do it.'

'Why do you have to do it?' I asked.

'We can't keep them all on the payroll,' he said. 'Van de Berg says we need to modernize, save money, buy new equipment. He talks about replacing them, as if they were machines. Like you get rid of some old machine and buy a faster one. Bang, just like that. I don't know how to do it. I'm not a machine. I wish I were a machine, so someone could program me to just do it. Van de Berg says they've done it in Bolivia. I've never been to Bolivia. These people don't even know where Bolivia is. What does that even mean, they've done it in Bolivia – so what? Look at them. They're not machines. They're people. They have tears in their eyes, and sweat on their brows. They would have hope too, if there was any left. Go to the window. Stand there and take a look. Structural reforms, they are called. Structural reforms.'

My father nervously pulled his raincoat from the hanger and left the house, slamming the door. I did as I was told. I returned to the window and opened it to listen. When he showed up in the courtyard, the crowd remained silent. The gate opened and a man appeared; a man the same height as a five-year old, who used his hands to hop along the ground and dangled his

amputated thighs left and right like a fish tail. From the window, I recognized Ziku, the Roma cripple I used to see as a child, who begged for money at the cemetery entrance.

Ziku smiled and waved like someone seeing an old friend. I had never noticed his front teeth were missing, just like his legs. I had never seen him smile before. It was a contorted smile, almost like a grimace.

'You remember me, boss!' Ziku exclaimed. 'I told them you wouldn't have the heart to do it. You never walked past this cripple without giving him a little something. Sometimes more, sometimes less, but a little something each time. I told them you're a man of the people. I know you won't let them down. There aren't many people who love gypsies, and who love cripples, but you do. I know you do. You never let me go without bread. You won't let these children go hungry. I told them you won't. You're a good man. I told them.'

My father searched for my eyes on the other side of the window. *It's not Ziku's fault for being a cripple*, he would say to me when I was little. *It's not my fault*, his face was saying now. He inserted his hand in the right pocket of his trousers, as if looking for spare change. This time, he found no coins, only a handkerchief, with which he wiped his face. Ziku spotted him, and dragged himself closer to my father's feet. 'He's crying.' He turned to the others. 'You see, he's crying,' he repeated pointing his finger at my father. 'I told them, boss, I told them you would do anything you could.' 'We know you're a good man, boss,' the other men joined in. 'Don't do it, don't listen. They only want to make money for themselves. You don't want to make money, you want to give

it to the poor, you don't want to keep it.' Two women nursing their toddlers threw themselves at his feet, sobbing, begging him to save their husbands' jobs. When the toddlers saw their mothers crying, they cried too. It was not a protest; it looked more like bereavement. There was no anger, only despair.

'Not here, not here, please,' my father said to Ziku with a dying voice. 'This is my house. We can discuss it in the office. If I . . . if I . . . the money is not mine. I would keep everyone at work, it's not about me, I'm not the one who makes the decision. I mean . . . yes, I make the decision, but the decision is . . . well, it's not mine.' He noticed he was rambling, and tried to organize his thoughts. 'You see' – he turned to the crowd – 'this is not like giving money to Ziku, it's not the same thing. We're given a *ratmat*, you see. You must understand, there are rules. We need to get the market economy going. There's a path that must be followed. If we do it properly, it will be better for everyone, for all of us. These are structural reforms. Everything needs to change, and we need to change how we do things – we can't keep everyone at work, it's not possible. Soon, there will be jobs for everyone, it will be better. But now we have no choice, we all have to make sacrifices, we just have to do it. It must be done.'

He promised his bosses he would do it, but never did. He never signed off on the redundancies. He kept repeating that structural reforms were inevitable, but he avoided them for as long as he could. 'It's about politics,' he would say. 'These are political decisions, I'm just an administrator, a bureaucrat. I can only delay things. I can't stop them.' He spent long evenings staring at

numbers, charts and graphs, trying to work out how to cut costs without firing people. He was not proud of the results. A part of him felt embarrassed, ashamed even, that he couldn't find the courage to fulfil the duties he had been given. He had worked conscientiously all his life. My grandmother had taught all of us to put our best effort even into the most meaningless tasks, to always try to own the consequences even if we couldn't own the causes. He could not admit to failure in his role. 'Soon, very soon,' he would say.

He had meetings with the deputy minister, then the minister, then the prime minister. They all repeated Van de Berg's warning. 'Structural reform is like going to the dentist: you can postpone it, but the more you postpone it, the more painful it will get.' But my father had never wanted to be a dentist; he'd wanted to be something other than what he was, although he had never had a chance to discover what. He remained a dissident at heart. He was critical of capitalism. He had never believed in the rules he was now asked to enact. He did not have much faith in socialism either. He hated authority in all its forms. Now that he represented that authority, he resented the role. He would neither endorse structural reforms nor obstruct them. He hated wrecking people's lives, and he hated leaving the dirty work to others.

My father had been proud of his promotions at first. After years of depending on the goodwill of his superiors, and a lifetime of relying on the mercy of Party officials, he cherished the independence he presumed the new role would give him. Soon he came to realize that independence had its limits; that he was not as free as he had imagined. He wanted to change things but

discovered there was little left for him to do. The world had acquired a definitive shape before anyone could understand what that shape was. Moral imperatives and personal convictions mattered very little. He discovered that, although nobody ordered him what to say and where to go, he needed to say something and be somewhere before he had time to reflect on it, to consider the benefits and weigh up the costs. In the past, when dilemmas arose and he failed to live up to his commitments, he could blame the system. Now it was different. The system had changed. He had not tried to stop the changes; he had welcomed them, encouraged them.

Or perhaps not. My father assumed, like many in his generation, that freedom was lost when other people tell us how to think, what to do, where to go. He soon realized that coercion need not always take such a direct form. Socialism had denied him the possibility to be who he wanted, to make mistakes and learn from them, and to explore the world on his own terms. Capitalism was denying it to others, the people who depended on his decisions, who worked in the port. Class struggle was not over. He could understand as much. He did not want the world to remain a place where solidarity is destroyed, where only the fittest survive, and where the price of achievement for some is the destruction of hope in others. Unlike my mother, who thought that human beings were naturally inclined to harm one another, he believed there was a kernel of goodness in everyone, and that the only reason it failed to emerge was that we lived in the wrong societies.

But he could not name the right societies: he could bring up no examples of any existing place where

things worked out. He distrusted big theories. 'Stop philosophizing!' he would often admonish me. He had grown up with socialist realist novels, and Soviet films that explained what was right and wrong, how justice comes about, how freedom is realized. He admired the intentions, but hesitated to endorse their prescriptions. The world he wanted to see was always different from the one he lived in. When he noticed the beginnings of a movement that resisted the way things were, he thought there was promise. But as soon as that movement became concrete, as soon as it had its own leaders, its own set of constraints and conventions, as soon as it became something as opposed to the rejection of something else, he lost faith. He knew there was a cost to everything, but he was not prepared to accept that cost. The people he admired were nihilists and rebels, men and women who spent their lives merely condemning the world they inhabited, but without committing to any alternatives.

When confronted with the same decisions about structural reforms, his colleagues became cynical. 'Oh, well,' they would say. 'We survived the Turks. We survived the fascists and the Nazis. We survived the Soviets and the Chinese. We'll survive the World Bank.' He was terrified of forgetting what that survival had cost. Now that he was safe, now that our family was no longer at risk of being killed, imprisoned or deported, he was anxious that he might soon no longer remember what it was like to wake up in the morning and worry about what the day would bring. He tried to recall the names of all the people who worked in the port, even though there were hundreds of them. 'If I forget their names, I will

forget about their lives,' he said. 'They will no longer be people; they'll become numbers. Their aspirations, their fears, will no longer matter. We will only remember the rules, not those to whom they apply. Only think about orders, not about the purpose they serve. That's probably what the Mule thought as she informed on her pupils' families. What Haki repeated to himself when reaching out for his torture instruments.'

The sole thought of being like them, of complying with rules in the same abstract and heartless way, was enough to leave my father sleepless at night. He didn't share Van de Berg's ideas of how everything would work out once the transition was complete. He knew something like a market economy would be needed, but had never given much thought to the form it would take. Like many in his generation, he was more preoccupied by freedom of thought, the right to protest, the possibility of living in accordance with one's moral conscience.

Even if he had shared the theory, even if he was convinced of the truths everyone now accepted, he would have worried about believing too much. He had met too many people for whom theories came first; he knew that one can injure others by acting in good faith. Ideals now looked different; perhaps even calling them ideals would be an exaggeration, perhaps they were simply prudential prescriptions. They still required human intervention to be turned into practice. He had been innocent in the past. He had been a victim. How could he suddenly become the offender?

19. Don't Cry

In the mid-nineties, I had my own share of torment to contend with. My teenage years were mostly ones of misery, a predicament which intensified the more my family denied that it had cause to exist. They seemed to assume that one was entitled to feel wretched only when there were objective grounds: if you were at risk of starving or freezing or had no place to sleep, or lived under the threat of violence. These were absolute thresholds. If something could be done to raise yourself above the threshold, you forfeited your right to protest; otherwise, it would be an insult to those less fortunate. It was a bit like with food vouchers under socialism. Since everyone had a share of something, hunger couldn't possibly exist. If you said you were hungry, you became an enemy of the people.

I was urged to feel grateful, to show my appreciation for the bliss of freedom, which had arrived too late for my parents to enjoy and therefore required me to exercise it all the more responsibly. When I failed to sympathize with their predicament, I was scolded for my selfishness, for being insensitive to the suffering of my ancestors, for erasing the memory of their plight with the lightness of my behaviour. I did not feel free at all. I felt especially constrained in the winter. It got dark early, and I was not

it was time for me to leave, he would cling on to my leg, throw himself to the floor and kick his carers, insisting that I should either stay with him or take him with me. 'Bring Ilir home,' he would cry. 'Mama take Ilir.' He became increasingly difficult to handle in my presence: he refused to come out of the water at the beach, eat his food or go down for his naps. When I tried to leave, I noticed that my bag was missing, or my sandals had disappeared. It could have been normal toddler behaviour, except that babies at the orphanage never cried, and toddlers never threw tantrums. The problem, the carers explained, consisted in my presence, in his attachment to me. Ilir didn't have to be miserable like that; he would be fine if I just kept out of sight. I was asked to reduce my visits to the toddler room and moved to a different area of the building, one with younger babies, who forgot people more easily.

Then the summer came to an end. The weather changed, the project ran out of funding, and I stopped my visits. I don't know what happened to Ilir, nor did I ever hear anything else about Elona or her sister. I sometimes wondered if Elona was still on the streets, and if Mimi had found Canadian parents. I returned to my bedroom, where my grandmother walked in without knocking, at regular intervals of ninety minutes, carrying a glass of milk or a piece of fruit. 'We're so lucky,' she would say to herself each time as she left the room.

Like the Rest of Europe

At first, it was going to be my mother who would run to become an MP in 1996. She had been a member of the party since the day it was founded. She knew everyone in party circles, she'd even read the manifesto. We called it the party, even though it wasn't the Party: it was the Democratic Party of Albania, the former communists' main opponent in elections. Still, everyone understood what we meant. There was no danger of my family supporting the former communists. There was only one party for us, just as there was only one party for them.

At that point, my mother had been politically active for five years. She endorsed the party's main slogan, whose disarming simplicity concealed decades of frustrated aspiration: 'We want Albania to be like the rest of Europe.' When my mother was asked what 'the rest of Europe' stood for, she summarized it in a few words: fighting corruption, promoting free enterprise, respecting private property, encouraging individual initiative. In short: freedom.

Yet, as my mother soon realized, explaining the slogan was not enough to make her a successful parliamentary candidate. Other virtues were needed. She had charisma on stage, but lost her patience in meetings. She was possessed with the zeal of the prophet, and although her

speeches enthused in the short term, in the long run they frightened people. The seriousness with which she took her commitments made her reluctant to compromise. Her manners remained those of the strict maths teacher.

She volunteered my father to take her place. 'He is a man. That helps,' she explained while pitching him. 'And he is loved as if he were a woman. That helps too.' In general, my father was much more popular than my mother. Not many candidates could appeal both to the Roma workers fighting to keep their jobs at the port and to former dissident families fighting to reclaim the properties of their grandfathers. He had a good reputation even among his socialist opponents because he did not interrupt them in debates and he tried to put his views forward without personalizing the critique. 'He can fight too, if he needs to,' my mother hastened to add, as if it had just occurred to her that my father's affable manners might end up compromising his chances. 'He can fight corruption. There is so much corruption out there. We need honest politicians.'

'Corruption' was a new buzzword. It was a generic explanation for all sorts of evils, both present and past, personal and political, a problem of humans and a deficiency of institutions. It was where economic liberalization and political reform met and, instead of integrating harmoniously, as promised, started to rot. Described sometimes as a dereliction of moral duty, sometimes as an abuse of office, more often it was seen as a failure of human nature, after its attempted socialist transformation. It was, moreover, extremely difficult to fight. Like the Hydra, for every head you chopped, two more would grow. Corruption had its own logic,

but nobody tried to decipher it, much less challenge the premise. The word itself was enough to account for the problem.

Initially, my father was reluctant to run for office. He had never been a member of the party. He worried his views were too obscure, even controversial. He wasn't sure about privatization and free markets. He wasn't sure that the country should join NATO. He wasn't even sure our biggest problem was corruption. He did not know where his opinions placed him, on the left or on the right. He felt 'left' on justice but 'right' on freedom.

My mother corrected him. In a former communist country, she said, there was no left or right, only 'communist nostalgics' and 'liberal hopefuls'. He did not necessarily fit the category of hopefuls either. But he had grown frustrated with his life as a bureaucrat. Every day, he came home from the port increasingly anxious and resentful, with tales of efforts that had gone awry, with papers that shouldn't have been signed. It was easy to persuade him, as my mother did, that if he cared, if he wanted to do some good, or limit the bad, he shouldn't stay idle. That he should take action, and that to be active meant to be involved in politics. Politics matters, she said, because you don't just implement other people's decisions, you get to make them. That's what democracy is about.

Yet no party would have been able to prevent structural reforms. They were intrinsically bound up with what was now called, in candid tones of self-congratulation: 'the process of integration into the European family'. There may have been times and places in the history of my country where politics made a difference, where

being an activist rather than a bureaucrat meant that you could try to change the rules by intervening at the level at which laws were made rather than applied. This was not one of them. Structural reforms were as inevitable as the weather. They were adopted everywhere in the same form, because the past had failed, and we had never learned how to shape the future. There was no politics left, only policy. And the purpose of policy was to prepare the state for the new era of freedom, and to make people feel as if they belonged to 'the rest of Europe'.

During those years, 'the rest of Europe' was more than a campaign slogan. It stood for a specific way of life, one which was imitated more often than understood, and absorbed more often than justified. Europe was like a long tunnel with an entrance illuminated by bright lights and flashing signs, and with a dark interior, invisible at first. When the journey started, it didn't occur to anyone to ask where the tunnel ended, whether the light would fail, and what there was on the other side. It didn't occur to anyone to bring torches, or to draw maps, or to ask whether anyone ever makes it out of the tunnel, or if there is only one exit or several, and if everybody goes out the same way. Instead, we just marched on, and hoped the tunnel would remain bright, assuming we worked hard enough, and waited long enough, just as we used to wait in socialist queues – without minding the time that passed, without losing hope.

'Like the rest of Europe,' the local imam, Murat, repeated one balmy May afternoon, when we visited him to ask whether my father could count on his support for the upcoming election. 'Of course, of course we will support

you, Zafo,' Murat said. 'You need money, though. Can't do these things without money.'

After selling the house to Arian's parents, Murat's family had moved out of our neighbourhood and rented a small flat near the cemetery. The flat was cramped, with furniture piled up like a barricade. I recognized the same green polyester curtains with printed flowers and butterflies. The bookshelf had been removed to make space for a colour television. On the floor there were scattered copies of the Koran in different languages, and several pairs of shoes wrapped in newspaper, because Murat still did repairs in his spare time.

'I watched an interview with Berlusconi the other day,' he continued. 'You know Berlusconi. What a man. He looks so fit. Like a twenty-something. Always smiling. I watched an interview where Berlusconi told his life story. He started with construction. Then he played music on a boat. Then he bought a private television channel. One has to try different things; you never know what works. He said this himself. He's a businessman. Now other people take care of his business; he is in politics. If he knows how to make money, he knows how to win elections. Of course, he has many enemies, people are envious, they always are. But he can just ignore them; he's got his own television stations, his own newspapers. If you want to win, you need money. One always needs money. If you don't have money for yourself, you can't give it to others. Where's your money?'

'In my father's coat pocket,' my father joked.

Murat giggled.

'You will need a lot of money, Zafo, a lot of money,' he continued. 'I know how these things work. I've seen

it with the Arabs who make donations to the mosque.' He paused to light a cigarette. 'When Flutura's factory closed down' – he looked in the direction of his wife – 'I thought, what are we going to do? We're all going to starve. I thought: Allah Qerim.* But Allah helps those who help themselves. Then, fortunately, things took a turn for the better. The firms started. You know what I mean. The firms—'

'Xhaxhi Murat, I have a question,' I interrupted. 'Do you actually sing "Allahu-akbar" from the minaret every morning and afternoon, or is it a recording? We have a bet going on at school. Some people say you do it every day. I said it's a recording.'

'It's a recording, Leushka,' he answered. 'It's a recording. Now you owe me 10,000 leks.' He winked. Then he turned to my father again with a serious look on his face. 'Sude, Populli, Kamberi, Vefa. The firms. You have to put some money in, so you can get more money out. We didn't have any money to put in. What could we do? We tried to leave the country. We were on the *Vlora*, remember. All we got from our trip to Italy was a few bruises. That's when we decided to sell the house. The kids were sad to leave our street. We were sad too, we had good neighbours. I built that house with my own hands. The same hands that have made all your shoes.' He paused briefly, and raised his hands, as if holding all the shoes that he had made.

'One has to make sacrifices. The Bakis, our neighbours, they bought the house and paid us in cash. We could do anything we liked with it. We could spend it,

* Allah is the most generous.

or we could . . .' He thought for a moment. 'What's the word? Invest it. We invested it. We didn't keep anything. What do you think the rest of Europe does with money? They invest it. They invest it so it can grow.'

My father was thinking. He had a vaguely guilty expression on his face. We had recently talked about the new firms at home. Sude, Kamberi, Populli, Vefa were the names of companies that had begun to appear, promising high rates of interest in return for savings. At the height of their activity, more than two thirds of the population was involved in investments that amounted to half of the country's GDP. Some of the companies also built hotels, restaurants, clubs and shopping centres. But my family was reluctant to deposit the cash we kept at home.

Murat blew out the smoke, stubbed out the cigarette he held between his fingers and lit another one.

'Zafo, listen to me,' he said with a serious air. 'You can't keep all your savings in a coat pocket. Times have changed. You need to invest it. Like the rest of Europe. What are you waiting for? We had all our savings in Kamberi, but they only gave ten per cent each month, so we switched the money to Populli, where you get thirty per cent. Then we discovered Sude, and they've been doubling our savings each month. Even more. Of course, we don't take it all out, we leave it there so it can grow. Like the rest of Europe. You have to save and invest. Save, and invest, so the money can grow.'

My father smiled, and nodded. Whenever we discussed the firms at home, my parents argued. My mother said we should forget about the coat pocket and put our savings in the firms. The rest of the family was reluctant.

'I don't understand how you can just deposit 100,000 leks in a firm,' my father said, 'and receive double that amount after a couple of months. It sounds like gambling.'

'We could try it with a small sum,' my mother replied, 'and see how it goes. We can take it slowly. I'm not saying we should sell our house or anything.'

'But where does all the money come from?' my father insisted. 'There are no factories here, there's no production.'

'Just because you're not used to it, it doesn't mean it's something dirty,' my mother argued. 'The firms make investments too. They have restaurants, clubs, hotels. The money circulates. People send money back from Italy, from Greece, a lot of immigrants help their parents. Most of it is from honest work. That's where the money comes from. They send it to their parents, their parents save it in the firms, and the firms keep it all safe together, invest it and pay people interest. Then, if you need it, if you need to make a purchase, they can give it to you or lend you money. It's not nuclear science. You have a university diploma. What's there not to understand?'

'What I don't understand,' Nini joined in, 'is what happens if everyone demands their money back at the same time? How can the firms pay everyone?' This last remark proved especially irritating to my mother. 'Why should people all ask for money at the same time?' she replied. 'Why should they want it all back? It's not like you can spend it all at once. Why would you prefer to keep your money under your mattress rather than in a firm?'

'Why would you keep your money in your father's pocket?' Murat also repeated to my father. 'My family, we're doing okay now. One day we may be able to buy our house back. *Positive thinking*,' he said in English. 'Like the rest of Europe. We were never taught *positive thinking*. I tell you, that's our problem.'

In the end, *positive thinking* won. We did not sell our house, but we did 'invest' most of our savings in one of the firms, Populli, whose full name was Demokracia Popullore (Popular Democracy). My grandmother never got used to it; she kept confusing the firm with Fronti Demokratik (Democratic Front), the local council unit from which we'd received our food vouchers before 1990. 'Did you get our interest from the Democratic Front?' she asked my father at the end of the first trimester, when he returned from Populli's offices with the interest on the savings he had deposited. 'I did,' he replied. 'It's all in the pocket.'

Positive thinking also won with regard to my father's election as an MP. He obtained more than sixty per cent of the vote. This was the only success he recorded in his short career as an MP. The rest of the months spent in parliament were an unmitigated failure. He soon discovered he had neither the fearless instinct of a leader nor the calculated patience of an adviser. He lacked party discipline. He hesitated to make decisions but was unwilling to endorse those of others. He had neither the ambition to guide, nor the inclination to follow.

It was a cursed time to become an MP. The elections that year ended up being some of the most contested in the history of the country. The socialist opposition accused the sitting government of fraud. They did not

recognize the result, and never took up their seats in parliament. The country was flooded with international observers, diplomatic mediators and political advisers.

It was also flooded with financial experts who specialized in popularizing technical names in English for problems they considered in need of urgent solutions: *emerging markets, investor confidence, governance structures, transparency to fight corruption, transitional reforms*. The only technical term they failed to popularize was the one for the 'firms' to which the overwhelming majority of my fellow-countrymen had entrusted their savings: *pyramid schemes*. These had started to emerge in the early nineties, to compensate for the country's underdeveloped financial sector, and in the context of an informal credit market based on family ties and supported by emigrant remittances. After the United Nations suspended sanctions to the former Yugoslavia in 1995, there were fewer opportunities for smuggling and more people sitting on cash, which meant that the pyramid companies could promise increasingly high interest rates in return for deposits. The 1996 elections compounded the problem: several of the firms donated to the campaign of the governing Democratic Party, raising their profile and contributing to the general hype about investing in order to profit *like the rest of Europe*.

A few months later, it emerged that these pyramid schemes were unable to keep up with their promised high-interest payments. They all became insolvent. More than half of the population, including my family, lost their savings. People accused the government of colluding with the owners of the companies and took to the streets to demand their money back. The protests, which

started in the south, with its strong traditional base of Socialist Party support, soon extended to the rest of the country. Looting, civilian assaults on military garrisons and an unprecedented wave of emigration followed. More than two thousand people lost their lives. These events are recorded in the history books as the Albanian Civil War. For us, it is enough to mention the year: 1997.

an illness rather than discussing options for the future. I decided to remain silent.

'I don't understand,' my father said nervously. 'They never studied any philosophy at school. Not even Marx. How am I going to ask people to lend me money for her to study? To study what? PHI-LO-SO-PHY. People will think we have lost our minds. What does she know about philosophy?' There was anger in his voice.

That night, we made a pact. They promised to let me study philosophy, and I promised to stay away from Marx. My father let me go. I left Albania and crossed the Adriatic. I waved goodbye to my father and my grandmother on the shore and travelled to Italy on a boat that sailed over thousands of drowned bodies, bodies that had once carried souls more hopeful than mine, but who met fates less fortunate. I never returned.

Epilogue

Each year, I begin my Marx courses at the London School of Economics by telling students that many people think of socialism as a theory of material relations, class struggle or economic justice but that, in reality, something more fundamental animates it. Socialism, I tell them, is above all a theory of human freedom, of how to think about progress in history, of how we adapt to circumstances, but also try to rise above them. Freedom is not sacrificed only when others tell us what to say, where to go, how to behave. A society that claims to enable people to realize their potential, but fails to change the structures that prevent everyone from flourishing, is also oppressive. And yet, despite all the constraints, we never lose our inner freedom: the freedom to do what is right.

My father and my grandmother did not live to see what became of my studies. After quitting his career as an MP, my father was thrust from one private employer to another, each time blaming the dismissal on his poor English and, increasingly, his rudimentary computer skills. To facilitate his job searches, the family moved to a flat in the capital, close to the old Botanical Gardens, now one of the most polluted areas in the country. His asthma deteriorated. One summer evening, shortly after his sixtieth birthday, he had a violent asthma attack. He rushed to the window and opened it to breathe but was

wrapped in a cloud of carbon monoxide and dust. The ambulance found him dead.

My mother was in Italy when it happened. My parents had reconciled, but she worked there seasonally as a carer or cleaner to help offset some of our new debts, while her siblings in Albania chased their old confiscated properties. Those efforts, which Nini had always deemed a 'waste of time', came to fruition a few months after her death, following that of my father. A large chunk of coastal land was sold to an Arab property developer, and our fortunes changed overnight.

I no longer needed to count my last pennies until the next scholarship instalment. I could enjoy meals out and drink late in bars discussing politics with my new university friends. Many of those friends were self-declared socialists – Western socialists, that is. They spoke about Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, Salvador Allende or Ernesto 'Che' Guevara as secular saints. It occurred to me that they were like my father in this respect: the only revolutionaries they considered worthy of admiration had been murdered. These icons showed up on posters, T-shirts and coffee cups, much like the way photos of Enver Hoxha would show up in people's living rooms when I was growing up. When I pointed this out, my friends wanted to know more about my country. But they did not think that my stories from the eighties were in any way significant to their political beliefs. Sometimes, my appropriating the label of socialist to describe both my experiences and their commitments was considered a dangerous provocation. We used to go to a large open-air concert in Rome for 1 May, and I could not help but reminisce about the parades of my childhood on

Workers' Day. 'What you had was not *really* socialism,' they would say, barely concealing their irritation.

My stories about socialism in Albania and references to all the other socialist countries against which our socialism had measured itself were, at best, tolerated as the embarrassing remarks of a foreigner still learning to integrate. The Soviet Union, China, the German Democratic Republic, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Cuba; there was nothing socialist about them either. They were seen as the deserving losers of a historical battle that the real, authentic bearers of that title had yet to join. My friends' socialism was clear, bright and in the future. Mine was messy, bloody and of the past.

And yet, the future that they sought, and that which socialist states had once embodied, found inspiration in the same books, the same critiques of society, the same historical characters. But, to my surprise, they treated this as an unfortunate coincidence. Everything that went wrong on my side of the world could be explained by the cruelty of our leaders, or the uniquely backward nature of our institutions. They believed there was little for them to learn. There was no risk of repeating the same mistakes, no reason to ponder what had been achieved, and why it had been destroyed. Their socialism was characterized by the triumph of freedom and justice; mine by their failure. Their socialism would be brought about by the right people, with the right motives, under the right circumstances, with the right combination of theory and practice. There was only one thing to do about mine: forget it.

But I was reluctant to forget. It is not that I felt nostalgic. It is not that I romanticized my childhood. It is not

that the concepts I had grown up with were so deeply rooted in me that it was impossible to disentangle myself. But if there was one lesson to take away from the history of my family, and of my country, it was that people never make history under circumstances they choose. It is easy to say, 'What you had was not the real thing', applying that to socialism or liberalism, to any complex hybrid of ideas and reality. It releases us from the burden of responsibility. We are no longer complicit in moral tragedies created in the name of great ideas, and we don't have to reflect, apologize and learn.

'We are doing a reading group on *Das Kapital*,' a friend told me one day. 'If you join it, you will learn about real socialism.' And so I did. When I read the opening pages of the preface, it felt a bit like hearing French: a foreign language I had been taught as a child but rarely practised. I remembered many of the keywords – capitalists, workers, landlords, value, profit – and they echoed inside my head in the voice and simplified formulations of my teacher Nora, adapted for schoolchildren. Individuals, Marx wrote in the opening pages, 'are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests'. But, for me, behind every personification of an economic category, there was the flesh and blood of a real person. Behind the capitalist and the landlord there were my great-grandfathers; behind the workers there were the Roma who worked at the port; behind the peasants, the people with whom my grandmother was sent to work in the fields when my grandfather went to prison, and about whom she spoke condescendingly. It was impossible to finish reading and just move on.

My mother finds it difficult to understand why I teach and research Marx, why I write about the dictatorship of the proletariat. She sometimes reads my articles and finds them baffling. She has learned to weather awkward questions from relatives. Do I really believe these ideas are convincing? Or feasible? How is it possible? Mostly, she keeps her criticisms to herself. Only once did she draw attention to a cousin's remarks that my grandfather did not spend fifteen years locked up in prison so that I would leave Albania to defend socialism. We both laughed awkwardly, then paused and changed the topic. It left me feeling like someone who is involved in murder, as if the mere association with the ideas of a system that destroyed so many lives in my family were enough to make me the person responsible for pulling the trigger. Deep down, I knew this was what she thought. I always wanted to clarify, but didn't know where to start. I thought that it would take a book to answer.

This is that book. At first, it was going to be a philosophical book about the overlapping ideas of freedom in the liberal and socialist traditions. But when I started writing, just like when I started reading *Das Kapital*, ideas turned into people; the people who made me who I am. They loved and fought each other, they had different conceptions of themselves, and of their obligations to other people. They were, as Marx writes, the product of social relations for which they were not responsible, but they still tried to rise above them. They thought they'd succeeded. But when their aspirations became reality, their dreams turned into my disillusionment. We lived in the same place, but in different worlds. These worlds overlapped only briefly; when they did, we saw things

through different eyes. My family equated socialism with denial: the denial of who they wanted to be, of the right to make mistakes and learn from them, to explore the world on one's own terms. I equated liberalism with broken promises, the destruction of solidarity, the right to inherit privilege, turning a blind eye to injustice.

In some ways, I have gone full circle. When you see a system change once, it's not that difficult to believe that it can change again. Fighting cynicism and political apathy turns into what some might call a moral duty; to me, it is more of a debt that I feel I owe to all the people of the past who sacrificed everything because *they* were not apathetic, *they* were not cynical, *they* did not believe that things fall into place if you just let them take their course. If I do nothing, their efforts will have been wasted, their lives will have been meaningless.

My world is as far from freedom as the one my parents tried to escape. Both fall short of that ideal. But their failures took distinctive forms, and without being able to understand them, we will remain for ever divided. I wrote my story to explain, to reconcile, and to continue the struggle.

Acknowledgements

This book was written mostly from a cupboard in Berlin during the Covid-19 pandemic. It turned out to be the perfect location to hide from the children I was supposed to home-school (my own) and to muse about my grandmother's words: 'When it's difficult to see clearly into the future, you have to think about what you can learn from the past.' Thank you to my mother, Doli, and my brother, Lani, for being willing to revisit that past with me, for letting me share *their* stories in *my* words, and for always telling the truth.

Thank you to my editor, Casiana Ionita, for being the first person to ask if I had ever thought about bringing my academic writing to a wide audience, and to my agent, Sarah Chalfant, for giving me the confidence to pursue a project which ended up being very different from how it was initially envisaged. Without their intelligence, questions, comments, patience and good humour at various stages, the book would not exist.

Thank you to Alane Mason at Norton and to Edward Kirke at Penguin for excellent editorial suggestions on the manuscript as a whole, and to the incredibly talented and passionate teams that turned the book into material reality: Sarah Chalfant, Emma Smith and Rebecca Nagel at the Wylie Agency; Casiana Ionita, Edward Kirke, Sarah Day, Richard Duguid, Thi Dinh, Ania Gordon, Olga Kominek, Ingrid Matts and Corina Romonti at