

A PERFECT FUTURE

(Excerpt of *Un brillant avenir*)

Chapter 1

2003

Just Silence

As Helen unfolds the plastic aerobed, she hears Jacob flush the toilets and open the bathroom door. She looks up and sees her husband in his striped pajamas standing at the entrance of the living room and staring at her. She gets irritated. Not because he is not offering his help—inflating the aerobed isn't hard, and for all practical matters he has become so clumsy that it's easier without him—but because he is not asking the question that is obviously bothering him: why is his wife sleeping in the living room? She decides to remain silent. He can still open his mouth and utter a few words.

She won't check either whether he took the evening tablets she left on the kitchen counter with a glass of water. If he skips a dose, it won't kill him. Sometimes she just can't stand anymore to be the one thinking, speaking, and acting for the two of them. Not only does she take the twenty-four daily tablets out of their silver wrapping, but she also has to remind him to swallow them. Today he forgot again to pick up the mail downstairs. She patiently waited for three days, making many allusions to bills that had to be paid. In vain. The mailbox was full. She ended up telling him. He apologized, but it doesn't change anything. It's not only illness, nor age. Seventy-two is not that old. But he doesn't make any effort anymore. And it will become worse. She doesn't want to think about it. It's too sad.

She presses down the electric button and the bed slowly inflates with a roar. His shoulders bent, his arms hanging along his sides, Jacob is still staring at her like a statue of sadness. Maybe he believes that she is upset because of the mail, or because he got up ten times last night and woke her up each time. Or he wonders what else he forgot. Well, a little bit of worrying will move his brain cells and won't hurt him. In any case, if he wants to

know, he just has to ask: “Lenush, why are you sleeping here tonight?” She will immediately answer with a warm smile, and he will see that it’s not because of him. She is not angry with him. It’s not his fault if he is sick, of course. She just would like him to make a tiny effort. A tiny, tiny effort.

When she looks up, Jacob is no longer there. He didn’t even say goodnight—unless she didn’t hear him. The door to the bathroom closes. The sound of flushing, for the second time in less than ten minutes. She finishes inflating the mattress, makes the bed, and walks out to the terrace.

Through the curtain she sees that he turned off the light inside the bedroom. He is probably asleep already. He has no problem falling asleep. She leans against the railing, lights a cigarette, and looks at the black mirror of the Hudson between the Trump towers. It’s a beautiful mid-September night, full of stars. She inhales and exhales deeply. Manhattan lies at her feet. Her terrace is her realm, where she doesn’t bother anyone, where nobody judges her. It’s for the terrace and its dazzling view of the Hudson, Midtown Manhattan and the New Jersey cliffs that she chose this apartment when they moved here seven years ago. She steps backwards, sits on the plastic white chair, puts out her cigarette and lights another. Tonight on TV she heard that the wind would be strong on Wednesday. She will have to carry the plants inside tomorrow morning. Tomorrow night Camille will stay with them and there will be no time. She drinks some Pepsi, gets up, and throws her cigarette butt into the full ashtray. Just before leaving the terrasse, she walks to the shelf in the corner and picks up the pink and blue plastic Mermaid that blows bubbles automatically. She puts it on the small table, next to the ashtray. Camille loves bubbles.

Her sweet baby. Not a baby anymore. A big four-year old. Over the summer Camille’s baby fat melted and she stopped using a stroller. She was so cute, on Sunday, when she took her grandfather’s hand and told him in French: “Danse, Dada! Danse!” She loves her

grandpa, and she is not afraid of his silence. She is always talking to him. A really special child—a sweet and joyful little elf.

Helen walks back inside, goes straight to the kitchen and turns on the light. Nothing on the white counter. No tablet, no silver wrapping. She checks the garbage can in the cabinet under the sink. The wrappings are there. He didn't forget. She sighs with relief, and a smile brightens her face. There is still some hope, then. She should have been nicer tonight. She will congratulate him tomorrow morning.

She brushes her teeth, unties her hair, and goes to bed. The door to the bathroom opens and closes. It will be one of these nights when he moves around a lot. She can see the room thanks to the TV screen and the lights of the Trump towers outside. Her eyes wide open, she looks at the room and imagines how it will be within six to eight weeks with the new furniture. She is mostly delighted with the recliner. She canvassed the whole neighborhood before she found what she was looking for at a reasonable price. Jacob will finally have a comfortable seat to read, listen to music, and watch TV. And the small sofa has such a light aluminum structure that she can move it without any effort. She won't have to bend anymore to sweep underneath.

Helen opens her eyes. She must have fallen asleep. The TV is still on, with the volume off. A blond woman smiles, revealing two ranks of bright white teeth. The camera focuses on the tiny diamond she wears around her neck. Only \$29.99 for this perfect imitation. She tries to memorize the number starting with 1-800. It would be a good Christmas gift for Marie. She hears the sound of flushing, followed by the switch being pushed on and off, three times in a row. Jacob can't turn off the light. Yet she put these red and green tapes on the switches, so he would know where to push. During the day he has not problem doing it, even with his trembling hands. At night he is more confused.

When she opens her eyes again, it is 3:20 am. The room is silent and dark. Something probably woke her up. Maybe the sound of flushing again. She feels like going to the toilet.

She has a hard time getting up from the low bed. She puts her slippers on. When she walks out of the bathroom, she tiptoes into the bedroom. In the dark she makes out the shape of the white furniture. The temperature is cooler. Sure enough, Jacob pushed away his blanket. As if all his ailments were not enough, he will catch a cold. She walks closer to the bed, pulls the blanket, and covers him. He really can't do anything without her. Not even sleep. As she is stepping away, she has a fleeting impression that his face is strangely white. She abruptly turns around and moves closer to the bed. She gasps.

There is a plastic bag over his head.

She thinks she is hallucinating. But her eyes get used to the dark and she clearly sees the white plastic bag marked AS, from the Associated Supermarket just a block away. It covers Jacob's face down to the neck. She moves one step closer.

"Jacob!"

He doesn't react. She extends her hand, grabs a plastic handle, and pulls. But the bag is stuck under his head. She stops, scared to see what is underneath. And she is leaving her fingerprints all over... Her hand remains suspended. She can't think or act further. It sounds too threatening, too awful.

She runs out of the bedroom to the telephone on the computer table in the living room. In spite of her shaking hands she manages to dial 911. A woman answers after two rings.

"My husband! Oh, oh, oh! He... has a bag on his face, a plastic bag!"

"Is he conscious, ma'am?"

"I don't know, I don't know! He was sleeping, I heard him go to the bathroom, I got up because it was cold and... he had a bag..." She starts sobbing.

"Ma'am, calm down. What's your address? Speak clearly."

She gives her address, the cross street, the apartment number, the phone number.

"Did you take off the bag?" the lady asks.

"No! I didn't dare..."

“Take off the bag now.”

“I have to go to the bedroom; I am in the living room...”

“Go and take off the bag, and then come back to the phone and do exactly as I tell you.”

She places the receiver near the phone and, breathing with difficulty, walks into the bedroom again. When she is near the head of the bed, she puts her hands on the bag and tries to take it off without looking at Jacob. But it doesn't move, blocked by the weight of the head. She has to grab the plastic with both hands and pull very hard. Finally the bag comes off. Jacob doesn't open his eyes. She turns around the bed to pick up the phone on the other bedside table.

“I took off the bag.”

“Is your husband breathing?”

“I don't know, I don't know, ooooh...”

“Ma'am, hold on, I need you there. You have to tip his head backwards. Do you hear me? Put your fingers under his chin and tip his head backward.”

Helen puts the receiver down and goes back to the other side of the bed. What does she have to do? She walks back to the phone.

“I don't know, I don't understand what you are saying, I can't do it, I don't know...”

“Ma'am, please, listen. Don't panic. Have you ever taken a CPR class?”

“What?”

“Resuscitation techniques. You have to put his head backward, so he won't swallow his tongue. Then you pinch his nose and you breathe in his mouth a couple of times. And after that you press on his chest very hard.”

This woman is speaking Chinese to her.

“I am sorry, I don't know, oh please, please, I can't....”

“Ma’am, I can hear the sirens through the phone. The police are arriving. They will be at your door in two minutes. Just open to them. OK?”

Sirens? She doesn’t hear anything. Just silence.