

## **The Final Incarnation: Chapter 1**

Karolina stared absentmindedly at the baggage reclaim information screen. Pain throbbed inside her skull, as if someone stuck a rusty nail into her brain. Her mind was a fog, her neural synapsis still intoxicated by the sleeping pill she had taken somewhere over the Atlantic. Everything around seemed slowed down and fluttering as if in an aquarium. Her knees were unsteady, and in her mouth, she felt the nauseating taste of unwashed teeth. Her stomach growled and contracted as she plodded towards the conveyor belt. She hadn't eaten since San Francisco. She slumped onto an empty bench.

“Why on Earth do you need that jumper right now?” a hoarse female voice pierced Karolina's mental vacuum. “Hanka is already waiting, we need to go!” At the adjacent belt, an older woman with tanned dry skin and wispy hair was glaring at her husband, who was rummaging through a suitcase, and despite it being mid-November was wearing just shorts and sandals.

It was in that moment that Karolina that the flood of the Czech language coming at her from all sides struck her: The airport signs, people chatting, talking into their phones, the advertisements ...

Although she had grown up in this language sanctuary, where one would hear English only in songs on the radio, the sudden influx of her native language was grating on her nerves. She had managed to break free from that sanctuary years ago and eagerly explored the great big world of English. For her, her home country was a claustrophobic island separated from the rest of the world by the poorly permeable language barrier. It was a world unto itself, existing in a bubble. One of many such worlds.

Since she'd left the country, Karolina would barely ever speak Czech. She knew a handful of Czechs in San Francisco but never felt too drawn to them. She was at home with the international crowd, and when she had time, which with Susan around wasn't too often,

preferred to hang out with other psychotherapists. She would sometimes read Czech news online but was losing interest. She was tired of the never-ending litany of political scandals, fraud cases and what she perceived as an utterly embarrassing behaviour of the country's so-called political elites. She found refuge in English. It was a world where she could easily protect herself against the force of other people's emotions. It was a world where even insults didn't feel so harsh.

Two young girls sat next to Karolina, immersed in a discussion about someone called Jana. "Do you know what happened?" one asked, her voice oozing arrogant stupidity. "I met her the other day, and she didn't even say hi. Who does she think she is? A Miss Universe, or what?"

The other girl nodded in agreement: "Yeah, she's a cow. Have you noticed that she keeps using English words all the time? She wants everyone to know that she's been to 'Ameeerica'," the girl overemphasised the word America to show her disgust.

"She thinks she's interesting," sneered the first girl.

Karolina desperately wanted to turn the surrounding scene into a silent film. But the sound of her mother tongue was mercilessly drilling into her brain and down to the core of her being. She felt as if those random bystanders were baring their souls to her in an annoying psychological striptease. She was shocked to remember how intense language could be, how much the connotations and nuances in tone could reveal about the speakers. But she wasn't interested in any of that. All she wanted was to cover her ears and make them go away.

Three years ago, when Susan was born, Karolina decided not to teach her Czech. It seemed logical to talk to her daughter in English and let Erik teach her Spanish. She didn't want to confuse the child with an obscure language spoken only by ten million people somewhere in the middle of Europe. She knew she would make it impossible for Susan to have any real relationships with her relatives in the Czech Republic, but she didn't care. She

thought Susan could always decide to learn Czech when she'd get older. The only thing her daughter knew these days were a few invectives that occasionally slipped from Karolina's mouth in challenging situations behind the wheel.

The conveyor belt finally moved. Karolina's suitcase arrived among the first. She set out towards the exit, tapping a quick text to her sister as she walked. Mariana was already waiting at a nearby petrol station, finishing a cup of coffee. She didn't want to pay for the overpriced parking at the airport and was, in fact, not too eager to pick up Karolina at all. In a message, which Karolina received after landing, Mariana complained that she had to take a day off work to take Karolina to their mother's house. Karolina didn't expect anything else from her sister.

Mariana, two years younger than Karolina, was a successful lawyer, and as it transpired a couple of years ago, a lesbian. For many years, her sister's personal life had been a mystery for Karolina. Until the age of 31, Mariana hadn't had a stable relationship and had been perfectly content with a succession of flings and friendships with benefits. Two years ago, after she'd finally ended an on-again off-again affair with a colleague from work, she'd announced she preferred women.

This final twist destroyed Karolina's theory that Mariana was psychologically and emotionally blocked because of the toxic relationship of their parents. In the past, she had tried to explain this theory to Mariana, but her sister had had no time for her preaching.

Their parents had gotten married after barely four months of dating when mother had fallen pregnant with Karolina. Looking back at her childhood, Karolina couldn't recall a single moment of love and affection between her parents. Neither could she remember either of her parents showing much love and affection for either of the sisters. She had since become convinced that both suffered from undiagnosed personality disorders, of which they were completely oblivious.

Mother had been the dominant force of little Karolina's world. She had her ideas about how things should be done, what her children should like, want and do, and how they should talk to her. To any sign of dissent, she usually responded with an immediate counterattack.

"Why do you hate me so much?" she would yell at Karolina in a drunken fit of self-pity after Karolina had asked her to leave her room.

"You are drunk, I don't want to talk to you." Karolina would strive to stay calm.

"You fucking brat! Just wait! Life will teach you a lesson! If I ever dared to talk to my parents the way you talk to me, I would get smacked so hard I'd hit the wall."

Sometimes, mother's rage was so loud that Karolina worried the neighbours would come to complain.

But mother's venom wasn't spilling only when she was drunk. She would trample all over Karolina's confidence even when perfectly sober.

"And who do you think would be interested in you?" she sneered when Karolina said she wanted to become a ballerina. "Just look at you! You're nothing special."

She had more down-to-Earth plans for Karolina. Perhaps, she should work in a lab, or become a bank clerk, just like her.

Mother spent her entire life working for the same company in the exact same role she had taken up after high school. She believed that without her, everything in the office would grind to a halt. Despite that, promotion evaded her, for which, she used to claim, she was actually grateful.

"I have so much work already that I can't manage everything without overtime," she'd wave her hand after a younger colleague got the coveted team leader post. "If I were supposed to run the department, I would have to sleep there. Besides, next time they decide to bring new people in, I won't get an axe."

She would often come home irritated and start yelling as the door closed behind her that the girls hadn't washed the dishes or taken out rubbish.

Karolina soon began feeling that she was somehow responsible for mother's unhappiness.

"Leave me alone! You don't respect me! I'm done with you." Mother would slam the bedroom door in her face when she tried to apologize for a perceived transgression. Then she would sulk for hours, only to come out and pretend nothing had happened.

It was only years later that Karolina realised that despite the intimidating façade, mother wasn't really in charge of her life. She was clinging to things that didn't work and staying in situations, which every sane person would have left. That included her marriage to Karolina's father.

He too, Karolina believed, should have been in psychiatric care. Karolina remembered too many occasions when his heavy hand would leave a mark on her cheek following something as minor as a five-year-old's joke.

"If *that thing* hadn't happened, I would never have married you," he sneered at his wife during one altercation. "You tricked me to get you pregnant because of this flat."

Noisy fights were part of the daily routine. Some nights, Karolina would lie in bed, listening to the two raging voices in the living room. Sometimes, a slap on the face or a slam of the door would end the argument. Sometimes, noisy drunken sex would follow accompanied by mother's theatrical moaning. Mariana, who might have been sleeping, would eventually wake up too, and climb to Karolina's bed. To distract both of them from the embarrassing show, Karolina would switch on the bedside lamp and read her sister a book.

At about the time when Karolina reached puberty, the marriage of her parents reached the rock bottom. The rows became even more frequent and no longer followed by drunken

sex. After one such row father moved out of the parents' bedroom and turned the living room into his protected territory.

From then on, the parents lived their separate lives. Each was doing his or her own shopping, cooked his or her own meals and tried hard to poison the sisters against the other one. The conflicts hadn't stopped completely since the kitchen remained a common area and thus an occasional battlefield.

One day, before Christmas, father moved out altogether. It took about six months for him to contact the girls again.

Karolina walked through the automatic terminal door into the chilly Prague morning. The daylight, although subdued by a thick layer of low November clouds, made her squint. She headed to the short-term car park where Mariana's bright green Volkswagen Polo waited.

"How was the flight?" Mariana, lean, dressed in skinny jeans and a trendy winter jacket, emerged from the car, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"It was OK." Karolina lifted her suitcase into the boot and slammed the lid shut.

"How's Susan?" Mariana asked as the sisters got into the car.

"She's doing really well." Karolina fastened her seatbelt. "She started pre-school in September."

"Does she speak Czech at all?" Mariana turned the key and the engine began to murmur.

"Not really."

"That's great," Mariana smirked as she put her hand on the gear stick. "You don't even teach your child your mother tongue. Do you really not care at all that she won't be able to talk to us?" The car rolled forward towards the exit.

It was the familiar pattern all over again, but Karolina was too tired to quarrel.

"What's the weather going to be like?"

“November, what do you expect?” Mariana stopped at the barrier and stretched her hand with a parking ticket out of the window. The machine devoured the ticket, the window closed. And then they were speeding up the slip road and onto the highway. Karolina watched the familiar yet alien landscape outside. There were new residential complexes she didn’t remember, billboards with faces she hadn’t known. She wondered how much had changed since she had been home, and it suddenly dawned on her that the world in which she had just landed was no longer the place she called home.