

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

GABRIELA BABNIK
ADVICE FOR LOVE
(EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL)

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TRANSLATED BY: URŠKA CHARNEY

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Gabriela Babnik

from Chapter 1

Advice for Love

With my first paycheck, I wanted to buy, in addition to rugs and a mattress and bedding, a service of plates and twelve white cups. I went to the department store to look at them. I held the handle up close so my long face shone out at me. They were completely different from ours, in cardboard boxes, folded bathing suits. With strings all around, triangles above and below. In the early seventies, we called them bikinis.

“The Germans have ordered three tons of bathing suits,” called out the manager from the window-lined space, and we looked at each other, shyly tucking our hands into the pockets of our smocks.

We lost our shape in those blue down-to-the-knees smocks. Though my hips were still visible, straining beneath the buttons. The manager always brought me a roll and a slice of cheese, or juice with no cream. We sat on the floor under the windows when he wasn't looking. We each took a tiny sip or a bite, and giggled.

“His nose is too big and his hands too are small.”

Sometimes they talked in their own language, which I didn't understand, but I giggled with them all the same. If only the crooked nose of the manager would pay me enough to buy the service painted with coaches and coachmen. Though I knew that would come too. I only needed to stare long enough at the patterns that the needle of the black Singer sewing machine made all by itself. The machine was so black that I sometimes fell asleep in front of it and was poked awake by the elbow of the Macedonian girl sitting next to me. It would all be over if the manager saw me. A bikini worn secretly beneath my smock, plucked eyebrows, a nibbled roll. Sometimes we looked like a herd of grasshoppers and a dragonfly. He hovered above us because he was a man. And we hummed behind our sewing machines because we were women. We even lost our names in his eyes. The woman next to me – tiny, pale, hunched over – was a Macedonian. Sometimes, while sewing, she told me how her father herded sheep in the mountains. I was a Slovenian with big hips who told no one about her family, least of all about her father. Nobody knew how I ended up here and nobody bothered to ask. I was the best model for bikinis. When no one was looking, they crowded around me and pushed bikinis fresh from under the sewing machine needles into my hands. Before the manager noticed, I opened my smock. The triangles left shadows in the most delicate places. I walked up and down, the sewing machines humming, and the Macedonian exclaimed that she would pluck my eyebrows and draw them in the air. The others laughed and applauded, a little too loud I thought.

It was around that time that the German heads entered the window-lined studio. All bright, blond, wavy, staring at my dark triangles. I stared back in surprise and thought about the service of plates and cups that I would never be able to buy now. I would never touch the handle and bring it up to my lips and gaze at the reflection of my own long face in it.

The female grasshoppers moved around me, slowly, in a circle, as if I were a sacrificial calf the bones of which they would feast on later, but for now which they simply needed to display me to the crowds. The bright

heads acted as if nothing were happening. They just turned and stared at the mountains of cardboard boxes, and asked the manager to open them so they could verify the quality of the bikinis. They pulled on the strings, giving me time to close the buttons of my smock. Their hands slid over the viscose. They held it up to the light as we sat down behind our sewing machines again. When they turned toward us, we were ordinary grasshoppers again, guiding the needle with our fingertips. The Macedonian woman beside me was silent. Maybe she was thinking that her father would never get a pair of pants. She told me that he had never worn pants in his life, that he wore burlap tied around his waist. That made me wonder whether she'd be able to draw symmetrical eyebrows or not. One might be bigger than the other one.

"You," the bright, slicked-back head pointed a finger at me. "You, in the bikini, come over here."

There was a murmuring in the place. Even the light coming through the window became more silvery. It broke through the taut blueness and fell on all the women's craning necks. Now it struck me that I could be in the department store with the service, ride in the coaches, in real coaches, with real coachmen dressed in white. The bikini I had on was black. Black strings, black triangles. Black was supposed to makes you look thinner. Supposed to because, even in the early seventies, Germans knew it was good and beautiful to be thin. No more rolls, no more juice. Not in secret, not in public. I watched as one of the German's hands came toward my breasts. I felt as if I had translucent wings that were trembling very precisely, very carefully before the sting. My shoulders shuddered and I closed my eyes. What if he takes off my smock and sends me half naked into the street? What if he fires us all? How will we then pluck our eyebrows and buy pants for our fathers? The veins on the translucent wings shone through my closed eyelids and mingled with the blueness. Those whose eyes were opened later said that the bright head merely buttoned up my smock. The top button, the one we forgot about in the rush. Then he went back to his pile of cardboard boxes and yelled impatiently at the manager. That's what they said, the ones who saw. We, with our eyes closed, saw only the reflection of our flattened faces in the handles of the cups.

When the manager returned, he yelled through the space that the Germans had ordered three tons of bikinis.

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There is a photograph in which I am wearing a dress to my knees and leaning on the pedal of a bicycle. A landscape opens behind me, the field into which my father once stared, the forest where Bernard hid. Only I don't know anymore if you can see all the way into the forest. It is certain that I am standing beside an empty house. The adults and the children have all left it. That house has always stayed with me. When I shook the sheets over the balcony rail, there was no one on the other side. Sometimes at night I dreamed of dark automobiles driving through foreign towns, no longer knowing that somewhere a woman was standing beside an empty house with her dress billowing around her wide waist. Then I went to work, for an afternoon shift, which meant I wouldn't be home in the evening, not before ten at night. Maybe that's why he took the camera and photographed me. He took the picture from a distance, from his workshop; that's why my eyes and mouth cannot be seen clearly. In those days, we had almost everything we needed: windows and doors that I bought from the factory on credit. He made room for a workshop in the lower part of the house. He needed to have enough light. And so I took a big loan and bought lots of windows. In the end, because of inflation, the amount I paid back would have bought only a cup of coffee.

I don't know if he and Laura missed me when I left. Laura knew how to go to the store alone when she was only four years old. She went on foot, not on a bike, with change in her fist, and she would buy a fruit sherbet or a princess donut with a candied cherry in the middle. She always gave the sweets she bought to him. She stretched out her hand through the bicycles, the skis, the corpses of sailboats, the pictures of naked women, and brought it to his mouth. She said: lift the anchor. He got up and they laughed. She could sit for hours and hours with him when I wasn't there. Sometimes she went in front of the empty house and pretended that people lived inside. She stood before the window, made up the names of children that might have lived in the rooms, and called to them. When she grew tired of that, she took a chalk and drew hopscotch boxes in the courtyard, and hopped through them, counting as she did. Every so often, he popped his out of the workshop to make sure she was still there. He asked her if she needed anything, if she was sad. She shook her head and looked back at the calendars through the spokes of the bicycles.

The people who came to him stroked Laura's hair and said: oh, poor thing, or, oh, you have no mother. When I left, with my dress down to my knees, with my wide waist, I could have left her with my mother. At the time, she was better. So much so that she pulled Laura's hair when she ate too many slices of bread with Rama margarine. Bernard would bring us Rama margarine from Austria and mother kept the yellow containers in the cupboard where they looked like little rows of kittens. But we always had to "save, save" for hard times. "A child shouldn't be greedy. You must not teach them to be so," she said.

Then Laura would explain with mournful gestures that she didn't eat more than two thin slices, and when her pretty, heart-shaped mouth trembled, I thought that, after all, we were quite similar in some ways. I also ate margarine with a spoon. When Bernard first brought Rama margarine, I ate the whole container in one afternoon. But Laura didn't need that much. She didn't need to do that for her face to be dried with tears, to become lighter and lighter like laundry in the sun.

But I needed my job. Not only because of the windows and doors and the loan, not because of my wide waist which could easily expand with the aid of my paycheck, but because I felt that eventually a distance would come between the two of us. Even when he was taking my picture from the workshop I felt he was too far away. What was he really photographing? The landscape or me or some other person? At two in the afternoon, Laura stood somewhere at the back and imitated the gestures of a grown woman. She put crumpled newspapers under her shirt to make breasts. The breasts of all women, not just mine. She offered milk to drink to the plastic doll she held in her arms. I don't know if she understood where the plastic doll came from, but when she mixed powder in the pan, there at her play stove, in the darkness, somewhere out back, it was enough for at least three people. For her, for the child, and probably for my husband. She never lifted a candied cherry to my lips. She never said to me, lift the anchor, and let out that most innocent of laughs. It's also true that I wasn't the one who had bought the toy stove when my mother pulled her hair. It was always him. And that's why I knew I must go to work. One day they would both turn against me and drive me out of the courtyard.

I don't know if that's why I went to the other side, to the dead house. And stood somewhat far away, with one foot on the pedal and one on the ground. My crinoline dress got caught on the back of the bicycle. I ended up looking beautiful in that photograph. The background of the dead house made me look beautiful. Only now do I realize that I went so far away so that the shadow of the balcony railing couldn't catch me. Maybe he was waving toward me to come closer, but I waited a minute more, then I turned the

bicycle toward the fields, toward the forest. And my four-year old girl inside, in the darkness, nursing her plastic doll with newspaper breasts.

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If I depart for a moment from this description of the idyllic love between my husband's parents, I should perhaps speak about how Ivan and I went from the village to the city. In a Peugeot with the music turned on low. Only much later did I learn that what was flowing from the cassette player was called ambient music. I was confused, almost afraid, a man of his kind should be listening to country music. Or maybe I came to the wrong conclusion because of the checkered shirt he was wearing, or because of the strawberries and traces of other fruit on his hands. He held the wheel as if it were extremely important, or as if he were thinking about something that had nothing to do with the road. Supposedly he had wanted to be a mathematician once. A long time ago, before he had met his wife, before he had decided to tie himself to the soil. But during the nights, rather than mathematics, he developed photographs. I never saw him, not even his camera, I didn't even dare to imagine that they had dreams, Ivan and his wife, leaning above the seedless fruit, above a cup of steaming tea. The most my imagination allowed was a bruise on her neck, or around her wrist, which I attribute to lovemaking. She had such translucent skin it would have shown. But nights were not reserved for that. That's what he told me in the car when he laid his hand on my knee.

"Maybe you'd like to know what I did in Auschwitz?" he said, looking at me sideways.

His music lifted me from the seat. If the window had been open more than a crack, I might have tried to squeeze through it. I didn't have enough air and, in a panic, I grabbed his hand and returned it to him.

"I don't care about Auschwitz. I come from a very religious family and that won't change."

He was silent for a while, perhaps because he was surprised, perhaps because he was thinking that it would have been better to have become a mathematician after all, than to be driving some girl from one periphery to another. And the rocky walls on either side of the road didn't even have protective netting.

"What does a German concentration camp have to do with the church?"

I rolled down the window halfway and took a deep breath of air. What should I have said to him? That's what I heard, that's what I felt. My mother had a cousin who fled to Argentina. Five years and he had to flee because he was a believer. The ship took him away and ever since then we have been receiving parchment letters covered in tiny writing. My sister had the privilege of sitting next to my mother, next to the stove, in the darkened kitchen and reading the letters to her. I stood nearby and guessed at the words that shone through the other side of the paper. Maybe that's why I never understood. If I saw the words from the right side, I might have understood that the cousin of my mother had gone into exile after the war and the would-be mathematician had been to Auschwitz during the war. I would have understood that some people were red and others were white, and that none of it had much to do with faith but more with the current situation.

"I asked you something."

Ivan's hands were now on the steering wheel. What was that before with his hand on my knee, with the music, and his question? I shrugged. What did I know what religion had to do with Germans and Jews and Slavs? The fact that I knew anything at all about the geography was thanks to my sister. She was better

at school than me and, if she let me, I sat by her side and copied, copied. Only now and then did the name of a place or a person remain in my mind like a laser in a darkened discothèque.

“There’s something I’m going to tell you and you’ll remember it always,” he said, looking deep into my eyes. “There weren’t only Jews in that concentration camp when all the ashes went up. Were there really six million? What about all the Gypsies and the Poles and we from these parts?”

I didn’t say anything, although I’d read something similar in the words of the parchment paper turned the wrong way around. Parchment as thin as the skin of Ivan’s wife that showed every bite or heavy touch. Those marks around the wrist were quite unusual, maybe she’d been bound by something, maybe they still did that after thirty years of marriage. I opened the window all the way and leaned my head out. I lifted myself from the seat. He didn’t stop me and I almost flew out the window, but at the last moment his hands pulled me back and I sat down again. I wanted to say something like, it’s still a long way to the city, but words came out of my mouth that were not mine. I asked about his nights, about intimate matters. It is true that he had a camera, but can a camera replace mathematics?

There was a sign up ahead. Warning, falling rocks. Maybe we were both thinking the same thing at that moment. Why don’t that put up protective netting. If they did, we both knew where it would belong. Between the white and the red, between those of us who believe in God and those who had starved and written him off after their losses. And Ivan’s hand wouldn’t have gone any father than my knee since he was only trying to protect me. And the music shouldn’t be playing as if we were driving through some other time. And I shouldn’t think that this was the end. This was the last time I would ride with him. Mathematician or not, I would get my driver’s license and get out of here myself.

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from Chapter 2
Blue House

I wore pearls to my sister's wedding. A bracelet and earrings. When I looked for the hole in my ear, my head tilted down toward my shoulder, my husband caressed me from behind. It was the first time he did that. Maybe because I looked beautiful. Sophia Loren asked me to be her maid of honor. She gave me very precise instructions about what color I should wear. She said that I mustn't wear my lily colored suit, because it wouldn't do to wear the same thing to her and to my wedding. But that's exactly what I did. At the last minute. I felt safe and elegant in violet and, besides, it's my husband's favorite color. I don't know if he knows that it's the color of jealousy. And yet there was no fear. The white pearls lent the suit some intensity and I wore a pair of suitable gloves. So when she saw me, she wasn't too disappointed. She stepped toward me with her hair down and her low heels, and she hugged me.

"You look beautiful."

"You too, you too," I breathed into her neck.

Her future husband stood next to her. Not too tall, not too handsome, just right. She had found a policeman in the end. I asked her why him exactly, and she answered because he would pamper her. One night he stopped his little Fiat, kissed and caressed her, and then gave her a ring of white gold. "Would you be my wife?" he said, just like he was supposed to, and she considered a while and then nodded her head yes. There were trees around, maybe even a deer, and she rested her silvery face in his palm. They came to the wedding in the same Fiat. When my lips were not far from her neck, he laughed as if it were all their museum of love. He had white teeth, almost as white as the collar on his bleached shirt. And I could tell from his bearing that he was proud, that he really would pamper her. He was like a pearl. If you lose it, it will be noticed right away, just like when you put it on.

From behind, Bernard squeezed me around the waist and, though it startled me, I liked it. When I saw her looking so beautiful that I could hardly find words to describe her, I would have wanted another sister. Maybe an older one who would wear a high hairdo and gloves and a lily suit instead of me. She would smile at me protectively, always discreetly telling when my lipstick is smeared, when my face is sad, or my shoulders slouched. When everyone else ran out of rice, she would still have some and threw it carefully, gently, right under the face of the newlyweds. But when I turned, there was only Bernard standing with one foot in the shadow. He had grown a beard recently because his little girl died. Mother actually claimed that she died because that woman left the girl alone too long. "How can you make a child with such a woman?" she had yelled at him. And now the woman was no more. At least not in our courtyard. He stood alone, next to the peonies, and laughed quietly. He'd never looked so handsome before.

"Where did you find those gloves?" he whispered into my ear, his beard tickling the pearls that hung there.

"In the closet."

Before he went to my sister and her policeman, he shook his head: "You don't how to take a joke, do you?"

I adjusted my suit around the waist and my eyes sought out first my mother, then my father. For them, this was just a day like any other. At the moment, they were both frowning. All these people and these flowers and even a violin. Sophia Loren didn't want an accordion but something more special. And so she said she'd have her wedding with a Fiat and a violin. But standing there, beside a house from the previous century, in a cracked courtyard, next to peonies that drank in the sound of the violin, aroused a certain discomfort in my parents. My mother shoved her hands into the pockets of her apron, as far as they would go, and my father stood beside her. Someone brought him a glass of wine. First he looked at her and then he took it. He drank it in one gulp. If he opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue, there would have probably been a dark violet stain on it.

Mother nodded at me as if to say it was a good thing that Bernard hadn't bring Maja. That impossible woman would have ruined everything. She would have come in a miniskirt even though her legs were too fat and she recently had a baby. Bernard kept her from us. Only when I saw a photograph in the newspaper of the baby with its eyes closed, dressed in white, with a mountain of flowers next to the crib, did I call him on the telephone. I heard only the hum of receiver until he started to cry into the silence. "She was asleep and I thought that she was sleeping or something, so I let her keep sleeping. Even at other times she didn't cry very much. Maja left me a bottle of milk. She had gone somewhere and I was working on the car outside. But when I heard the church bells in the distance, I knew something was wrong. I shook her, hard, maybe too hard. She felt as heavy as a rock in my hands. Then I took her and walked along the streets with her. Her little head kept falling to the side. You can't see anything in the newspaper..."

If Bernard were with me now, I would hold his hand. I would hold it so long, until it was noon and the peonies in their cement vase in the cracked courtyard began to turn in the other direction. Toward the street where my husband was standing. He was speaking to a policeman. One was tall, the other tiny, one with hands that would sooth a doe, the other with hair that reached toward the clouds. I couldn't do anything but look up. The sound of the violin created a weightless feeling. If I weren't wearing these pearls and this jealous color, my hands would rise up to the old pear tree in front of the house, and toward the window from which the neighbors were looking. Sophia's conditions for her wedding were – besides the Fiat, the tousled hair and the violin – that it take place in late spring. No dead baby could prevent that.

"Bernard will survive and I don't care about that fat pig," she said as I closed the buttons on the back of her wedding dress.

She was holding her stomach in so tightly that the second part of the sentence barely came out.

"All the same..."

"I'm not going to talk about it anymore. Plus it's none of your business."

In her opinion, my business should just be her wedding dress. Creamy yellow with covered buttons down the back. It took me about a month and a half to sew it because she changed my mind so many times. The lower part like a bell, then straight to the floor, or in the end only to the ankles. My husband scolded me, saying I wouldn't have time for my own dress and I'd have to wear the violet suit from my own wedding, which brings bad luck. A matron of honor in an old suit. But he didn't know that my older sister would buy me suitable gloves. And the pearls, which would make the violet shine with a new intensity. Right at the end, when everyone would leave the courtyard, and the violin would grow quiet, and the neighbors would stop looking and my mother would pull her hands from her apron pocket, she will press a box of rice into my hands. And I will carefully, gently throw it in front of the faces of the newlyweds.

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I wanted to tell her how Ivan threw his old body at me. How he stopped the car, talked some more, and then spread my legs. Slowly, carefully, as if he were waiting for my permission. The cassette player played and I closed my eyes. I wanted to tell her how I thought that if I don't see anything then nobody else does either. But for a while there was nobody anywhere. I was wearing a skirt, a bra, a blouse, all almost untouched, and Ivan exhaled, spurring out water like a whale. Maybe I thought he couldn't do it and that's why I put my legs in the shape of a triangle. Maybe I thought it wasn't even possible on the seat of a car. A young woman and an old man on her. And maybe I thought that I would belong more if I did it, that I would have more rights to that field of strawberries and other fruit. Ever since I got my menstruation, there's been no room for me in the family. Though in the beginning, they didn't even know that I got it. I washed the pads I put between my thighs secretly, in the cold air. So there wouldn't be a smell, but still I didn't walk fast enough. My father discovered me under the old pear tree when was bleeding and I couldn't get away from him. Afterwards, when he told my mother, I felt like an infected creature.

I would have told my mother everything if she wanted to listen. Instead of sitting at the table and looking at me with an open face and asking me whether he really did it, she stood at the counter and beat egg yolks. In one hand she held a bag of sugar and in the other a big silver fork. Now when I was pregnant, I got only the best. Before I was the kind of girl you asked for a coffee, or to go to the seaside, and then you left her. There are many like that. But it was different with me now. I was carrying the child of her only son. One or the other, or it didn't matter.

Now I think that I wasn't able to find enough rage. Rage would have saved me from those yolks, and from Ivan's half soft meat inside of me, and from the silence. After she didn't react, after she claimed that it couldn't be true, after she said that he had suffered so much in Auschwitz, I decided to be quiet. What should I say to my parents? Or my sister? That the father of my fiancée raped me in an old Peugeot? That the window on my side was open and I could have gotten out if I wanted to? But because of my menstruation, even though it was the last day, I couldn't run, at least not very far? And even if I could have slipped out the car window, where would I have gone? Bernard would certainly have shot him. He would have borrowed a shotgun from someone and gone after him, but then everything would have come out, and I wouldn't be anyone's wife after that. I'd be on the street, like a stray dog that had sniffed its way to a destination and could no longer get back.

I sipped the tea in front of me. Everything was good for her and she could still have all the rituals. I looked through the window hung with lace curtains. The stairs outside looked like a broken white mesh, and I remembered that Bernard, after all of those girls who had sat on the back of his motorcycle with their skirts flying open like umbrellas, finally took Maja with her fat legs and her short skirt. Those legs ended up being good for nothing but still what would Ivan have do to her? Later, when he caught his breath again and her whale smoothness grew pale in the sun, I was told that it that I had provoked him the first day, when I came home in my blouse with three buttons open. That was the day that he thought he got up from the table, sat me in the car, turned on the music that you can get on any car radio, and drove me to the city. From the near periphery to the far periphery. In between, somewhere at the edge of the forest, he stopped and spread my legs. The only thing he worried about was whether he could get it up. He hadn't done that for a long time. At least not with his own wife. Because, really, coupling is a dirty thing. If you respect a

woman, it's better not to shove yourself inside of her. "What am I then?" I asked, my eyes still closed so that no one could see me. "With you, it's different. You're like my wife. But I had to check myself before I hand you over to my son."

Disgust erupted from the world all around. And what if I didn't have my menstruation and I could have run? Into the forest, anywhere? And what if my own family didn't ostracize me and instead taught me to believe in myself? What if I knew, for example, the difference between red and white, that two thousand three hundred forty-six prisoners from Slovenia were deported to the largest German concentration camp in the south of Poland and more than half of them died there? If I knew that the largest transport from Slovenia to Auschwitz took place in early August 1942, carrying three hundred thirty-three women and one hundred eighteen men? Would I have ruined a wedding with my lily-colored suit? Would I have stayed alone?

"Lidija, now you really need to care of yourself. A child is extremely precious, but you know that already, don't you?" the pale white hair said, frying old bread dipped in egg yolks and milk.

But why do you need a glass bowl and a silver fork for that?

"Hmm." Although I should have said that I don't whether he came or not. Did that old meat really manage to get inside of me and can a woman conceive during her menstruation, even at the end of it? She could have explained it all to me. She was the only person in the world who might have known. Why did Ivan do such a thing in the first place? What should I have done? Were the three open buttons on my blouse really responsible for everything? But she was silent as if her mouth had been stitched shut and her tongue couldn't see out.

"Have you thought about a name?"

I shook my head.

"If it's a boy, you could name him after my husband."

A dog appeared on the other side of the lacy curtains. Small, reddish, with its tail in the air like an antenna. It stood there for a while, looking toward the window. It looked as if it might start barking but then it suddenly turned and ran away. I pushed the cup of tea away from me. I want nothing more from this family. I will never again go to the strawberry fields. And I certainly won't name my child after my rapist. I will belong to myself only. I don't need to be like that tail on that little dog outside. I can be the whole dog. I'm only guilty for not pushing him away from me with my feet. I could have resisted beside that open window. The music would murmur, and he would have fallen toward the steering wheel and never woken up again. And I'd tell everyone how limp he was, how shriveled. But because the rage came too late, because inside of me a heart shone the color of pigeon's blood, I looked away from the window and toward the table and took the fried pastry sprinkled with powdered sugar. My mouth lunged into it like never before. Like an old freckled hand on my buttons, opening three of them, and summer falling into his lap.