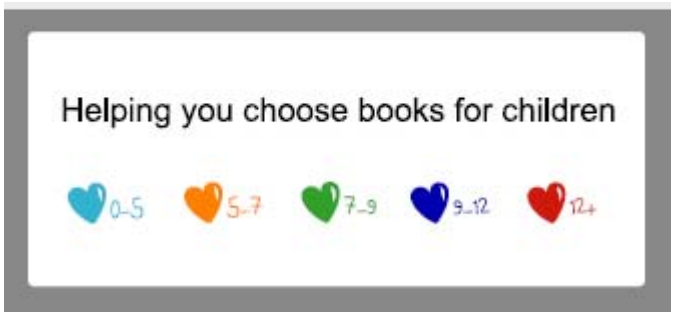
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opening extract from

# Tina's Web

written by

## Alki Zei

published by

## Aurora Metro Publications

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## CHAPTER ONE

They say it's not possible to remember the moment you were born. That the first images of your life come into your mind much later, and even those are fragmented and cloudy. Well, that's what they say.

Soon I'll be thirteen. But I can still see the moment I was born, very clearly, right in front of me. They think because I've heard them talking about it, I've started to imagine . . . But it's not imagining at all. I can actually see it, like the slides from our holiday in Denmark that dad brings out to show his friends. How could I have just dreamt it up? I can't imagine anything. At school, even the Greek language teacher – Greek Geek, the kids call her – she's always telling me: 'You have no imagination.'

Stuff that happens I can describe – very well, actually. That's why I'm inconsistent. Sometimes I get nineteen out of twenty for an essay, sometimes only eleven. I mean, everything about me's uneven. I'm either up, or down. I can love, I can hate. But however hard they try to convince me I can't remember the moment I came out of mum's tummy, I absolutely know I can.

I didn't yell, unlike that baby I saw being born in a TV documentary. I was wrapped in cobwebs. I was fighting with my hands and feet to free myself. Someone said – it can't have been dad, he couldn't even face going into the birth unit – perhaps it was the doctor, because it was a man's voice: 'I've never seen a new-born child covered in cobwebs before.' And then they say I can't possibly remember it!

Whenever I gave a push to get out, I got even more tangled up. Finally the doctor cut the threads with a pair of scissors, set me free, caught me by the feet and lifted me high up. But I'd got so exhausted, I couldn't manage a peep. Of course, I can't recall every detail, like how I got into my cradle with my gran bending over me. But I heard very clearly what gran said to the nurse: 'It's yellow, just like a little corpse.' 'Don't say that, madam, that's a terrible thing to say.'

Truth is, my gran never stops telling people how I came into the world shrouded in cobwebs, how I never made a sound, and how I looked like a little corpse. But it's not just that I've heard it from her. I can actually remember it. Even now when I'm asleep I often see myself entangled in a net, and I have to kick out to free myself. I only weighed five pounds five ounces. Of course, I can't remember that. My mum wrote it down in a book called *Our Child's First Years*. It's full of questions, and mum answered them all. Where I was born, the date, day of the week, time of day, how much I weighed . . . There's nothing about the webs though, because there's no question that goes: 'Was your child born

wrapped in a spider's web?' But there ought to be.

Well, according to the book, I was slow at doing everything. Slow at turning my head, at sitting up, standing up, crawling around, walking, even slow at starting to speak. But it's not true that I didn't say my first words until I was two. I'm sure I was speaking a lot earlier than that, but saying the words inside myself. When gran asked me why I wasn't eating my cream pudding, I used to reply silently: 'Just because!'

I used to talk to the cats in the yard, to the fish in the bowl, most of all to the ladybirds that flew onto my fingers. They weren't afraid of me, and I wasn't afraid of them.

When they left me at gran's house, I'd sit down on a little stool, and I wouldn't budge until they came to fetch me. 'You should take her to the doctor,' gran would tell Mum. 'That child doesn't speak, not a squeak out of her. She just sits there like a flowerpot.' And maybe she was thinking to herself: 'Like a little corpse.' Mum insisted, that at home, I was always jumping around on the sofas and doing the voices of dogs, cats, even donkeys – though I'd never actually seen one. Gran would shake her head in disbelief.

My gran's called Ismeni, and dad wanted to name me after her. But she wouldn't hear of it. She was convinced I was going to die, and she didn't want to waste her name on me. They christened me Konstantina, and I survived. I never knew my grandad, but he was called Konstantinos.

Gran didn't like me, and I didn't like her. There was only one child she really loved; my cousin

Venetia. She was the daughter of Auntie Maria, my dad's sister. I say 'she was', because Venetia's not alive any more. She died two years before I was born. Or rather, she burnt to death. They'd bought her a little nylon skirt for Easter. She put it on and ran to show it off to her godmother, who lived a couple of houses away. The godmother went into the kitchen to get her some orange juice and Venetia found a box of matches and went out to the balcony to light the candles they'd stuck on the parapet railing for the Good Friday procession that was passing by in the street below.

She was ten years old, was Venetia, and she was utterly charming and totally pretty, blah blah blah. Just like the famous city of Venice, according to gran, though she's never been there in her life. In gran's house, in the lounge, in her bedroom – everywhere in fact – there are photos of Venetia as a baby, Venetia as a little girl, Venetia as a ballerina, Venetia dressed as Marie Antoinette, as Snow White, as a water-sprite, and as a Venetian lady – in a carnival costume her godmother had brought her back from Venice. She had blonde hair, waves and waves of it falling down to her waist, and chubby rosy cheeks. But her eyes were dull, a sort of watery blue-grey, even if gran says they're 'expressive'. In all the photos, they gaze out into the distance, looking nowhere in particular.

Perhaps that's why I never liked going to gran's. She really got on my nerves with dear little Venetia. Good thing she died. Since I hated her dead, just imagine how much I'd hate her if she was still alive.

Gran didn't come to see us much. 'Well, since you've gone to live at the end of the earth . . . ' she used to say to dad, every time they grumbled about it.

She lives in the Kypseli area, not that far from the centre of Athens, while ever since I was born we'd rented a place out in Argiroupolis, down towards the airport. But I don't think it was the distance that stopped her. It was because I was living there, the little corpse, scarcely five and a half measly pounds, who only opened her mouth once in a blue moon – since I was saying everything silently to myself – and Venetia was gone. Venetia who could talk, sing, recite poems, and who didn't slouch like me, but stood up straight, as straight as a wax taper at a christening.

Whenever they asked gran to come and stay with me, because I was sick a lot of the time, sometimes with tonsilitis, sometimes diarrhoea, but mostly with bronchitis – as soon as she came into the house I'd hear her saying: 'So that child is ill again!' Before going to work, mum would show her the medicines I had to take, and leave books and board games on a little bookshelf close to my bed.

But gran wouldn't read to me, or play with me. She sat in a chair next to me and read her newspaper just like a kid swotting for exams. If I was burning with a fever or choked with coughing, she'd stop reading for a bit to give me a spoonful of syrup, then she'd immerse herself again in her paper. Each time she turned a page it gave me a shock, like hearing a gust

of wind catching an open window and slamming it to. 'Gran, stop turning the pages,' I said in my drowsy stupor, and I could hear the pages of the newspaper going 'dung-phwum!', banging to and fro as if on some deserted house covered with cobwebs.

When mum and dad told her we were going to Germany, because they'd been appointed to teach in the Greek sections they have in some German schools – mum and dad are both teachers – I think gran was glad to get rid of me, not to have to keep on putting up with me being ill, having to ask me something three times before getting an answer, or wondering why I had hair as straight as a ruler, when all my family on both sides have curly hair, or wondering why I was so thin, why I had a slouch, why I was so pale – 'like a little corpse' – and why my eyes had such a searching look. I've no idea what kind of look I had, but I know I certainly wasn't gazing out into the distance with dreamy blue eyes – mine are a dark chestnut, almost black, and they took up a lot of room on my tiny blob of a face.

So gran was really pleased, I'm sure of that, but she still argued with dad about our going to live in Germany. 'You've forgotten all about your father, apparently.' She hated the Germans, because during the Second World War, 'when they invaded Greece and enslaved our poor country', they caught Grandad and put him in prison – though he managed to escape. But she couldn't stand the British either, because something else happened in Greece after the War had ended, and this time it was the British who

arrested grandad and interned him somewhere in Africa. As for the Americans, she didn't like them one bit, because she said all the evils of our country and the whole world were caused by them, and she got really mad when I put my rock music on full blast. The only ones she liked were the Russians, not the ones they have now, but the previous ones, the Soviets, as she called them. 'Going to live with the Germans? The very idea!' She just couldn't stomach it at all. Dad laughed and teased her, telling her that it was time to take the needle off the record. I didn't understand what he meant, but I didn't care anyway, and I was pleased we were leaving.

I'd never travelled before, except on the bus, on summer trips with gran to Karpenissi, up in the Roumeli mountains. But now I'd be boarding a plane, and we'd be going to 'a really lovely city called Aachen'. You have to pronounce the 'a' twice, it's like taking a deep breath. Dad had already been there, and he'd rented a flat for us. I'd be taking German language lessons in Athens in the summer, and when we went to live in Aachen they'd send me to the German school, to the proper first year class, except that for some of the lessons, while the other children had painting or craftwork or something similar, I'd be doing German on my own. In the afternoon I'd be attending the Greek school, an independent department of the German school. Dad explained all the details to me, and he said it was better not to mention it to gran, because 'she'll

just get angry and make a lot of fuss'.

I think they'd concealed something else from her: the whole of last year, he and mum had been going to a German language institute in Athens and they'd been studying until late at night, when I was asleep.

When the time came for us to say goodbye, gran gave me a yellow woollen bonnet that she'd knitted herself, 'because it's very cold where you're going'. She'd never knitted me anything, apart from a little jacket when I was a baby. I'd never have thought she could knit, if I hadn't seen Venetia wearing knitwear of all different colours and patterns in the photos. There was one thing of hers I was actually very envious of. It was a red pullover, with a row of blue deer on the front.

A yellow bonnet! I never wore it.

Mum couldn't keep it to herself, she said: 'Anything but yellow, please. It doesn't suit her at all.' Gran replied that she couldn't knit with a colour she hadn't already used, and the yellow was all she had left. 'A little corpse with a yellow bonnet', I said to myself. I don't know what she said to herself, she just came and kissed me on the top of my head. I tried to hug her, but my hands stayed woodenly at my side, and I just said: 'Bye, gran'.

At that moment, none of us could imagine that a day would come when she and I would live together in her house in Kypseli, and that this was the last time I'd call her 'gran'. Later, I'd give her another name that would stick forever.

I'm caught up in the cobwebs and struggling to free myself. Slowly, I open my eyes. I've got mixed up with the bedclothes. I never used to get tangled up with my feather duvet. I sit up in bed, with the sheet twisted round my neck. The heavy grey blankets are prickling my legs.

– Your milk.

An unfamiliar voice. Not mum's, not dad's.

Opposite I can see the narrow window. Horrible blue curtains with red roses, ughhh.

I'm at my gran's house. Waking up is always the same, even after six months. I think, it must be a nightmare, and when I wake up, I'll be underneath my good old feather duvet.

– Your milk.

It's the third time she's called out. So I have to reply:

– OK, Farmor.

That's what Sigrid called her grandmother. Sigrid was my schoolmate and bestest friend in Aachen. She's Swedish, and the Swedish word for gran is 'Farmor'. That's the gran on the father's side, on the mother's she's called 'Mormor'. 'Farmor' really suited my gran: Mormor sounds far too sweet.

It's Sunday, I'm sure of that. So why am I being woken up at the crack of dawn? I look at my watch. OK then, nine o'clock. At this time, in Aachen, my dad would go out and get us warm bread rolls. I could smell them while I was still half asleep. Now Brigitte will be eating them . . . How suddenly everything can

fall apart. 'But didn't you notice anything?' gran keeps on at me. But even if I wanted to answer her the first time, I couldn't manage it. 'No, Farmor, not a thing.'

## CHAPTER TWO

They say when you're drowning at sea, before you go under for the last time, you see your whole life pass before you, like a film in the cinema. Well, now that I'm drowning on dry land, I can see my whole life in Aachen flashing past.

Our house, on a wide road lined with trees, and with flowerbeds in the middle.

We used to live on the third floor, and on the ground floor was the bakery that sold the bread rolls. My room was large, with a big bed, almost a double, made of brass, like in the olden days. Above it was a hoop, and a canopy like a mosquito net covering it over completely, perfect for snuggling down and daydreaming. I'd seen it in a shop window, when I went with mum and dad to buy furniture. 'That's the one I want.' They laughed. 'Let's treat her,' said Dad, and they bought it for me. After they delivered it, I used to lie on it for hours. Sometimes I'd just hide away under the netting, sometimes I'd open it and look through the big window that took up the whole of one wall, and opposite I'd see the lights of the Annastrasse – a

quiet street with lovely old houses, decked out with antique street lamps.

That's where I'd go with my dad for a walk after my lessons, even when it had started to get dark. When it snowed, the snowflakes sparkled in the lamplight. On Fridays, when neither of us had school the following day, dad and I would stroll all around the pedestrian zone. We'd do some window shopping – or rather, I would – and we'd end up in a large café, the *King's College*, where they had chairs made of yellow cane, and wooden tables. I'd have a hot chocolate and dad would drink a beer. If we were late getting back, mum would laugh and say 'Have you two been throwing our money around again?'

It was on that street with the lamps that I used to tell dad all my secrets. 'So, Tina, my teeny', dad would say, 'what news today?' And I'd start talking and never stop, mostly about school, which I adored.

I loved my school the moment I saw it. Although before we went in on the first day, my heart was pounding like mad, and my hands, held by mum on one side and dad on the other, were sweating buckets.

We came into a large courtyard paved with green-grey stone slabs and a big over-hanging roof all around the sides.

'Herr Heiner, the headmaster, is expecting us in his office,' says mum. We passed along a corridor with beige and cherry-red floor tiles. The corridor seemed endless, but along its whole length there were windows, and on the ledges there were flower pots, each one with different flowers and plants.

There were paintings all along the wall on the other side. My heart seemed to stop beating altogether – I was lost in a daze.

We climbed a staircase; instead of banisters, it had a white metallic mesh with a red rail on top. We reached the first floor and stood in front of a door that dad said was the head teacher's office. I probably went pale. I expect I looked like a little corpse. Mum knocked on the door and dad turned round and smiled at me. 'Be a brave girl, Tina – as we said, he's the best.'

The door opened automatically, and dad practically dragged me through the doorway, but before we'd got properly inside, a man came up and stood there before us. He wasn't very tall, and he had reddish hair and blue eyes; he was smiling, revealing a set of snow-white teeth.

My heart stopped beating like a drum. He made a bow, gave me a kiss on the cheek and said in Greek: 'Welcome, my dear child.' Dad had told me that Herr Heiner was passionate about Greece and was learning Greek. He went to his desk, a large one, piled high with papers, in the middle of which you could just see a blue vase of yellow roses.

He told us to sit down, and I sat right on the edge of a chair. If I'd moved at all, I'd have fallen off.

Farmor, if only you could have heard what he said to me. How he could see from my face that I would get on just fine, and that I looked 'intelligent and determined'. Then he got up and held my hand to take me to my class.