Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2022

NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE
CONGRESS CENTRE SOFIA

NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE

National
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Bulgaria

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Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2022

Ten Books from Bulgaria

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NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE

The National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia (known in short as the "National Palace of Culture") is one of the largest multi-purpose venues in Southeastern Europe. Opened in 1981, the National Palace of Culture is designed to host a wide range of events, such as international congresses, official meetings, conferences, international conventions, summits, exhibitions, festivals, concerts and other cultural events. The National Palace of Culture houses a rich variety of the most distinguished Bulgarian collections of visual art designed by some of the country's most prominent artists. These monumental works are integrated into the conceptual architecture and design of the building.

Currently, the National Palace of Culture seeks to give new dynamics to its environment by establishing diverse contemporary art spaces that are meant to shape Sofia's cultural life. In 2018, the National Palace of Culture hosted the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE

The National Book Centre was founded at the National Palace of Culture – Congress Centre Sofia in February, 2015. Currently, the National Book Centre, along with Peroto (*The Quill*) Literary Club, forms the palace's Contemporary Literature Division – a unit under the direction of Svetlozar Zhelev – which is housed within the Strategic Development, Marketing and Production Department of the National Palace of Culture.

The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture assists in the publication, distribution, translation and promotion of Bulgarian literature – at home and abroad. The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture works to support Bulgarian literature nationally and internationally, to create conditions conducive to its participation and visibility in the global literary field, and to affirm the National Palace of Culture's image as an active contemporary culture centre – a venue initiating, fostering and producing cultural activity in the field of literature.

The main programs of the National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture include two sponsorship programs: the Translation Programme, designed for foreign publishers, as well as the Bulgarian Book Programme, open to Bulgarian publishers. The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture has also established the annual Peroto (*The Quill*) Literary Awards, named after the palace's literary space, where the award ceremony is hosted. The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture also annually compiles and prints the *Contemporary Bulgarian Prose* and the *Children's Books from Bulgaria* hybrid catalogue-anthology series.

The National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture works in a close cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria, the National Culture Fund, the Bulgarian Book Association, VIVACOM, as well as other governmental, non-governmental and private bodies.

Complete information is available at http://ndk.bg or upon request at nbc@ndk.bg.

Ten Books from Bulgaria

Yordanka *B*ELEVA

_Porcupines Come Out at Night

Yordanka Beleva was born in 1977. She is a multiple award-winning Bulgarian short story writer and poet. *Words Without Borders* hailed her as one of the most interesting contemporary voices of Bulgarian literature, and *Electric Literature* called her book *Keder* "some of the most beautiful, heartbreaking and almost magical writing to come out of Bulgaria in the last few years." Her hugely popular stories and poems have been translated into French, German, Turkish, Arabic, Croatian, and Macedonian, and anthologized in multiple collections. She is the author of *Peignoirs and Boats* (2002), *The Sea Level of Love* (2011), *Her* (2012), *Keys* (2015), *Missed Moment* (2017), *Keder* (2018), and *Porcupines Come Out at Night* (2022).

Annotation

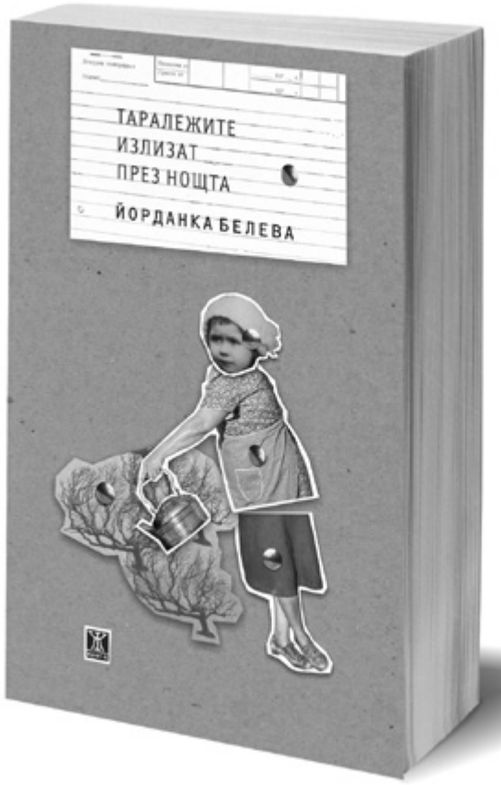
"Yordanka Beleva's writing places scars at its core—the scars of the past, which make us remember it; the scars of the present, which help us get through it, and the scars of the future, which we know are coming. As an author, she impacts us, her readers, threefold: by making us remember, endure, understand."

Mitko Novkov, Bulgarian literary critic

"I love Yordanka Beleva's prose because she perfects the intricacy of simplicity, I love the language of her stories, the way she plays with it, the same way the vigorous and ever-changing waves play with the tireless, unchanging strand."

Vladimir Zarev, writer

Short story collection,
92 pages
ISBN: 9786191867196
Janet-45 Publishing House,
2022



EXCERPT
Translated by Izidora Angel

Somewhere a Candle

My grandmother Zoitsa was a sexton in the village church. She loved to say that she was God's servant. On occasion the priest paid her for her work, but she was adamant — I am on God's payroll — so she took the money and tucked it away for something extraordinary. Once, she even gave me some money to buy a pair of jeans. The word itself — jeans — must have been new to her and she probably thought jeans were something godly. Over the years, with all that lighting of candles and cleaning out of candelabras, grandma had formulated her own theory of light.

She'd often tell me that the darkness thinned out each time we entered the temple. It thinned out with every candle we lit and with every prayer we prayed, when we made peace with ourselves, but most of all when we forgave others. Showing mercy was how darkness turned into light.

One day I objected. It was precisely them, the church sextons, I said, who worked for darkness. I am one of those people who become outraged on the big holidays when just-lit candles are put out and thrown away to make room for the new ones. One day, she revealed to me her theory of light. Her theory of shared light. Told in her words, it sounded like this — *soul into wax*.

All used church candles go into candleworks where they're melted down and poured into new ones. All new candles are well-married old ones. It's how a permanent, inextinguishable synopsis of light exists, passed on from one church to another. A light equally shared between people. She requested that next time I hold a church handle in my hand, to imagine the following: how it was poured out of someone else's hope, from the prayer for someone else, how it is composed of tiny particles of faith, all brought together precisely for me. To be cognizant of what of myself I left in the candle — *the soul poured into the wax*. To look at the light, not the sexton's sleight of hand.

Ever since, the second I glimpse the dome of a church, I become lighter.

It's because I know that right at that moment someone, somewhere is lighting a candle from my pain.

Japonais

In memory of my grandfather, Georgi

There was nothing Japanese about my grandfather, except his nickname: Japonais. Dyslexic as a child, he often switched the order and meaning of words. His nickname came courtesy of the village priest, who had overheard him heatedly explain to another kid that he must fight a samurai if he wanted to get over his cold. What grandpa actually meant was that the other kid should drink *salamura*, pickle brine, but what was said was said and it was too late for clarifications. The priest proclaimed — we have a little japonais in our village.

As much as he wanted to outrun this nickname, the irony of life wouldn't let him. Here's how grandpa didn't get to be a samurai.

Before his mandatory military service, there had been a physical examination and an assessment of military qualities. They probably hadn't found in grandpa anything worthwhile in building up the Bulgarian military spirit or perhaps they found the opposite, but either way, his army ID book stated that he had been the army bread baker. I don't know of anyone at home who's tasted this grandpa-baked bread, and grandma too had her doubts whether he'd baked even a single loaf in his life. Out of all his military service habits, there was one that stayed until the end — maniacal cleanliness. He always carried, without fail, a white handkerchief in his pocket.

Grandma told me that if it weren't for that handkerchief, they'd never have gotten married. At the pre-arranged meeting of the prospective bride and groom, the two young lovebirds-to-be made awkward small talk, avoiding even eye contact, when my grandfather suddenly pulled out his handkerchief and wiped grandma's face and neck with it. He then unfolded it and when he didn't see a single speck of dirt, he told her he was sending to make things official. His penchant for cleanliness is what likely stood in the way of him becoming a communist — in his drawer, next to his army book is his agrarian ID book. There's nothing purer than the earth, that's what he said to us every time we played in the dirt and then beat the dust off our clothes.

I know he had a hard time giving up the acres of family land to the government for the creation of a state-run co-op. Maybe he got locked up because of his open

dissent. I find it very interesting that I don't remember grandpa ever being absent but I very much remember my parents getting ready to attend his wake.

Before he became a widower, he was always angry at grandma for being sick and bedridden. He accused her of pretending, of ducking out of her garden work. He called her *kitsune*. At the time I didn't pay much attention to the word, I must have assumed it was just another Romanian one, you find plenty of them in Dobrudja.

Just recently I happened to have a conversation about grandpa with a friend who's a folklorist. It turns out that *kitsune* has nothing to do with Romania. The word is Japanese and it means "fox." Did grandpa have any idea what he was calling grandma and what *kitsune* must have even meant to him, it's too late to ask him. I can only wonder.

I read that according to Japanese mythology, the *kitsune* transforms into a beautiful woman, a young girl or an old man. I doubt that my dying grandmother looked beautiful to my grandfather. It's his memory that was rather like a fox in the last years of his life: it savvily covered its tracks and avoided the traps of pharmaceuticals.

When my mother found grandpa dead, he was clutching a white handkerchief. There was a single spot of red blood on it. Maybe it had to do with his last breath. Or blood from a last wound. I don't know. A small blood stain against a white backdrop. Almost like a Japanese flag.

Sometimes a man's nickname outruns him even in death.

Radoslav *B*IMBALOV

_Hush

Radoslav Bimbalov is many things— father, husband, brother, son, friend, artist, entrepreneur, Plovdiv native, dog companion, talker, biter, man of few words, activist. He was born in 1973 in Plovdiv—the city where all roads come together. He's the father of Diana and the husband of Ana. He's the co-founder of one of the most creative advertising agencies, The Smarts. The short story collection *Hush* is his second book, following the novel *I, the Maniac*, which was published by Hermes Press in 1999.

Summary

Hush is an exquisite collection of 21 short stories that refract the dark arabesques of reality, but also reflect the strange and fragile curves of the human soul.

In a world of paradoxes, warmth, and fear, in the absurd and surprising universe of these unexpected stories, anything is possible: you can encounter a pink flamingo on the bus, you can turn back time, you can straddle Wind or go hunting for worms, you can run out of words. And it would all be completely normal because you're human.

These concentrated, emotionally dense, real or almost real stories engage some of the most burning issues of contemporary society: domestic violence, racism, our attitudes toward death and love. And thus, they become a flawless mirror of human searching and longing.

With his full-flowing language and unconventional plot twists, Radoslav Bimbalov puts together an impressive book that sifts through the words and brings them back to life.

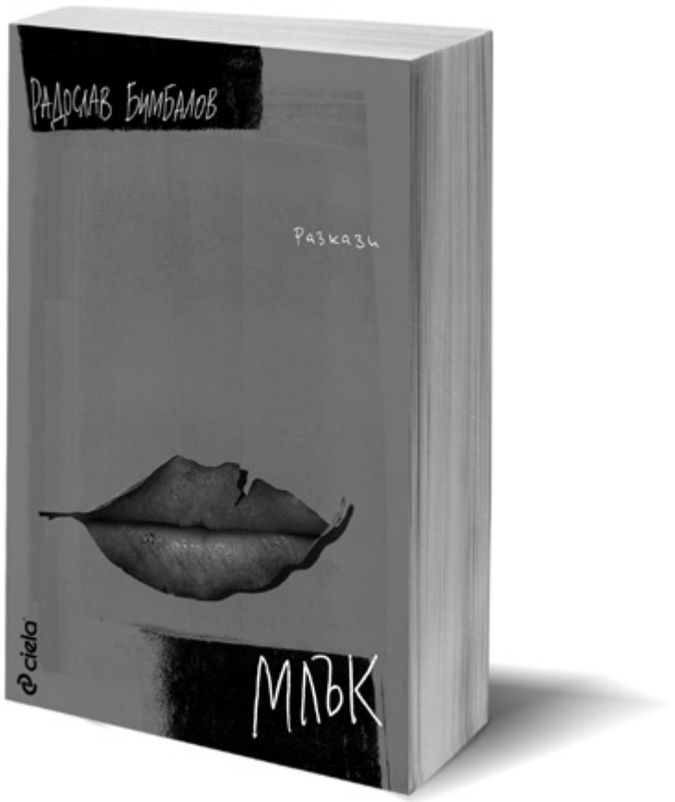
Devoid of any pretense or revanchism, the short story collection *Hush* is a masterful reminder that, in the century of loud messages and deafening promises, the most important stories recount themselves. That they're born in silence.

"Bimbalov's stories are like the opening of a window that's been firmly shut after a long winter—they feel surprisingly fresh and at the same time as though you remember them from somewhere. This is the effect of good storytelling—it simultaneously surprises you and brings you comfort."

—Zachary Karabashliev

"Wonderful short stories! Powerful prose that flows towards the readers' hearts with the strength of a long-awaited spring, causing the human spirit to search and create paths toward the truth. We're in need of such masterfully told stories—original, deeply human, courageous."

—Zdravka Evtimova



Short stories,
184 pages
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Ciela Norma Publishing, 2022

Wind

Translated by Ekaterina Petrova

It was morning, summery and quiet. The rooster was taking a breath, just about to make his call, when such a noise rose from the garage that all the creatures in the yard scattered with a chaotic flutter, turning tail and hiding under anything they could find. Amidst a cloud of dust and hay, emitting the ripping roar of a newly awakened mythical monster, out the garage came crawling an old-timey gray motorcycle with a sturdy sidecar attached to its right side. Mounting the worn seat, his grease-covered hands tightly gripping the handlebars, Grandpa Damyan smiled the satisfied smile of someone who has just revived an engine that has been dead for several decades. The motorcycle was an Ural, produced in

1963, four-stroke engine, two cylinders. Back in the day, its sidecar had carried the most important passenger who used to accompany Grandpa Damyan on his rugged drives down the dusty dirt roads.

And now here she was, out in the yard, her apron wet and her hands stained from peeling onions. Incredulous, she watched the old man happily circling around with the hard-to-maneuver motorcycle, miraculously risen from its almost eternal slumber in the garage. Grandpa Damyan stopped right in front of his wife, enveloping her startled face in a smoky cloud of oil and gasoline. An aroma that turned back time.

They'd nicknamed it Wind, although it always needed a while to gain speed. The sidecar bestowed it with a false sense of stability, but in fact it caused the motorcycle to experience a vicious attraction to the ditch on the side of every winding dirt road. The rough rides always went hand in hand with the unbearably inspiring noise of the rough Soviet engine and transformed every trip into an adventure whose ending was unknown.

Grandpa Damyan didn't dare turn off the engine, unsure he'd be able to persuade it to turn back on. Still astride and still wearing his old dirty trousers and his faded quilted jacket, he took the old leather helmet off his bald head. He'd found the helmet in the basement and now held it toward his wife. His eyes shone enticingly, like naïve suns drawn with chalk into the wrinkles of the asphalt. She instinctively shrank away and pressed her bony hands to her apron, ready to shout at him to stop acting crazy, go back into the house, and not make a fool of himself in front of the neighbors. But she didn't do any of that. Instead, she took off the apron and let it fall at her feet, then—like a girl—gathered her skirt, stepped over the edge of the sidecar, and settled into it. As though she'd done it just yesterday, and not several decades ago. She pulled the leather helmet over her gray hair and grabbed the front handle. Grandpa Damyan turned the throttle, and Wind growled excitedly, while the exhaust pipe marked their exit from the yard with excited fireworks. Seconds later, the old man and his eternal girl were already riding down the village street, sending clouds of dust toward the sky. The motorcycle took a heavy turn to the right, and Grandpa Damyan smiled, pleased that he still had the strength to command it; the sidecar jumped into the air, then thumped back to the ground, but the grandmother seemed unfazed. The road stretched before them—a rough black tongue, sticking out between the yellow summer fields. Wind galloped like cattle on the loose, the grandmother's hair was blowing in the wind underneath the helmet, and Grandpa Damyan's smile set his eyes ablaze. A flock of geese was crossing the road when the motorcycle hungrily plowed into them. Shrieking in terror, the geese scattered in all directions while shedding some of their feathers and all of their dignity. Grandpa Damyan accelerated, and Wind pressed its rusty forehead into the air before it. They caught up with a truck, from which live music blared—a gypsy brass band was riding in the open back. The musicians puffed their cheeks in an effort to outplay the truck's engine, but when Wind joined it in a duet, the virtuosos started sweating even more. The motorbike and the truck drove side by side. A smiling, dusky young man sat in the driver's seat and shouted something, of which only " . . . you hear me?" was heard, then gestured to Grandpa Damyan to overtake him. Wind passed the truck, which strained to keep up behind it, while the brass band musicians puffed their cheeks in an even wilder rhythm. The geese from earlier now reappeared, flying over the motorcycle with the sidecar and the platform of musicians that escorted it—they were flapping their wings with the ease of pigeons addicted to speed. Grandpa Damyan grasped the handlebars even tighter, while his wife in the sidecar lifted her gaze, mesmerized by the white bellies of the low-flying birds. Next to the road, a bunch of kids pressed on their pedals in a dusty attempt to catch up to Wind. Suddenly, two neat rows of people appeared on both sides of the road, smiling and waving. Grandpa Damyan momentarily lifted his hand from the handlebars and greeted the masses like the winner at the finish line of a racetrack. The geese over his head pressed on with their wings and overtook the motorcycle, then slowly ascended toward the blue nothingness filled with white fluffs. Grandpa Damyan's gaze followed the birds, then slowly moved to his wife in the sidecar. She gave a slight nod. Her eyes were filled with a strange tranquility that matched neither the speed nor the hubbub. Grandpa Damyan's bony fingers tightened around the handlebars, he turned the throttle, and the engine gave out a mighty roar, then the front wheel came off the pavement and started lifting higher and higher. Wind was now riding on its back wheel, and the sidecar was also looking up. The motorcycle roared and gently rose. It lifted off the road and its wheels kept pointlessly turning in the air, while Wind was flying upward, among the geese. It rose over the truck, and the musicians put down their instruments and stared at the sky with sagging cheeks. Grandpa Damyan was holding on to the handlebars tightly, the motorcycle was rising higher and higher, and everything down below was becoming small and bygone. Wind rumbled one last time, then sighed and fell quiet, suspended in celestial weightlessness. Silence enveloped the motorcycle and the two seniors, then drove them into the white down of a cloud. Grandpa Damyan felt Wind softening in his hands, as it melted and merged together with the cloud. The old

man relaxed into the lightness of the nothingness and no longer felt anything, not even himself. The perfectly white, wonderfully empty lightness filled what used to be his body.

The weight of time disappeared, and the last bodily thing he felt was the touch of his beloved wife's hand, as she drifted beside him in the cloud. She started to tell him something, but then just smiled and shook her head, before she rested it on his shoulder, and the two of them, along with Wind, melted into the white nothingness.

Chavdar CENOV

_The Old Man Must Die

Chavdar Cenov is author of the book *The Drowned Fish*; the short story collections *Dirt under the Nails*, *The Strausses of Waltz* and *The Other Door*; the novels *Dogs under Carbon Paper* and *Where the River Flows*; as well as the collection of novellas *Deviations in Autumn* and the novella *The Old Man Must Die*.

His books have been nominated for many prizes, including: the Elias Canetti Novel of the Year Award, the Peroto (Quill) Award, the Helikon Award, and others. He has twice received the Hristo G. Danov Award, as well as the annual award from the Kultura Portal, the Literary Forum Prize. In May 2019, Professor Svetozar Igov awarded him the Pencho's Oak prize for his prose.

Summary of *The Old Man Must Die*

Every late afternoon, after working the whole day on a team translation, two men set out to stroll around the city. One of them, Vergil Stoilov, is a writer, and he tells his friend why and how he wrote a novella based on the fragments of a long-abandoned screenplay. Back in his younger days, he and Kalina, a student about to graduate in film directing, had wanted to make a short film. The action took place in a rented Sofia attic—first Margi the Good lived there, then the Scribe, then Curly-Haired Kosyo, and then a fourth tenant. The students were forced to pass the key on to one another due to various circumstances that revealed their personalities as well as life under late socialism. The landlord would appear in the interludes—an old man who silently observed the unending party in the attic. One day, all of the former tenants went to visit the attic. This was the finale—the young people found the landlord in the attic. "The old man must die!"—declared Professor Lyubomirov, a famous film director and Kalina's teacher, when he read the screenplay. "What do you mean he must die?" Vergil and Kalina were surprised. "Just like that, they need to find him dead in a rocking chair. His death will bring into focus reflections on how the young people carelessly frittered life away." Vergil refused "to kill" the old man and had a fight with Kalina, as he was jealous of the professor…

As he speaks, Vergil jumps from topic to topic. Sometimes he talks about his novella, other times about the so-called writerly lifestyle. He lives like a bohemian, has no money worries, and doesn't want to bother putting effort into anything. Witty and extroverted, Vergil is at the same time very moderate—he wouldn't want to do anything today that might deprive him of life's joys tomorrow.

During one of their walks, Vergil's story comes back to Kalina—they had slept together a few times, there was definitely a spark between them, but despite this, their fight snowballed into a huge falling-out when Vergil accidentally ran into Professor Lyubomirov, who told him that Kalina had quickly gotten married to a fellow student of theirs from Macedonia and had gone to live there with him.

The idea of the novella is to interweave the two narratives—one follows the plot of the erstwhile screenplay, while the other tells how the author had been afraid to kill off the old man because he hadn't known death and it seemed banal to him. The novella includes reflections about why he hadn't been able to kill the old man off; in the ending planned now, the old man definitely has to die. But as often happens in writing, here, too, the old man in the novella survives…

A year after the novella is published, Vergil comes across it on the Internet in Macedonian. He had not agreed to the translation and chews out his publisher. When he finally gets ahold of the Macedonian edition, he is stunned. The ending has been changed, and there, the old man dies. The name of the translator is Kalina Grozdanovska…

The two translation partners finish up their joint project at the beginning of the summer. As they part, Vergil gives a copy of his novella to Emil. While Emil reads it and familiarizes us with several of its chapters, he receives a letter from Vergil, then a second, and then a third.

Realizing that his past actions might have been mistakes and deciding that Kalina's daughter must be his child, Vergil plans to travel to Skopje, but learns of Kalina's death. He then goes to Venice to see her daughter, who works at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum.

At the same time, Emil gets a call from Vergil's wife. She is very worried about her husband and is looking for help. After his conversations with her and with their publisher, and with Vergil's letters, Emil is completely confused. Is Vergil Stoikov a liar? An egocentric who loves to scandalize people, or a charming dreamer? Are crazy hypotheses eating away at him on the cusp of old age, or has he had a sudden revelation and is now abandoning his serious self-delusions one by one?

While Emil asks these and other questions, many months pass. Vergil's wife again calls. Vergil is in the hospital with cancer, it has spread everywhere. Emil goes to visit him, and shortly thereafter, Vergil dies. They bury him one autumn day. Emil cannot forget how Vergil had whispered to him in the hospital: "You did know the whole time which old man must die, didn't you?" Emil takes his friend's death hard and wants to tell the whole story.

Novel, 160 pages
ISBN: 9789543207954
Riva Publishing, 2022

EXCERPT
Translated by Angela Rodel

I had known Vergil Stoilov in passing. We were on *hi-how-are-you* terms, we'd run into each other at various Sofia publishing houses. Both of us translated, edited and copy-edited. Usually the pay for such jobs was humble, so I tried to make up the difference with more work. Vergil wasn't quite in the same boat. I had heard he'd inherited some rather nice property restituted after the fall of socialism, and he was also into writing, which might not bring in much money but at least took up time.

This is likely why we rarely crossed paths, I was short of breath, sprinting from job to job, while he was laid-back, well-intentioned, he'd look you almost emphatically in the eye when he said *hello* or *see you later*. He gave off the vibe of someone whose heart quailed with the desire to talk to you. Except instead of a heart, I carried around in my chest a strictly scheduled list of urgent tasks.

Until the day when Apollo Publishing House offered to hire us for a team translation of a thick book with equally heavy content. I won't dwell on it here, I won't even mention the title, so you don't think I'm trying to slip in an illegal advert, but if you come across our names next to each other on some book jacket or on a title page, rest assured that's the book. Because it was our first and last time working together. That's just how things panned out, it was a rare chance to translate a volume that was well, even very-well subsidized by a European project and for which we would be decently paid.

That was the main reason that Zhoro Doychinov, the owner of Apollo Publishing, offered the job to us. Killing two rabbits with one bullet (and a blank, at that), as the Bulgarian saying goes. As far as Vergil saw it, we were the two rabbits, never mind Zhoro's lofty blather about how wonderfully we'd work together, with Vergil's sensitivity to language and my experience, and especially my unfailing workaholism.

Zhoro was the king of pretty speeches, of bald-faced flattery, but he was notorious in our circles as a terminal tightwad, he could barely hide the real reason he offered this job to us—at least this once he would pay us (with someone else's money) what we were worth, so that afterwards he could wring us dry again and again to his heart's content.

A friend of mine had worked for this same Zhoro; whenever she got paid for a project, she would go straight home. The moment she told her husband how much she had made, he wouldn't even bother to make a scornful face, that's how used he was to the pathetic size of her honorariums. But later, when it came up that Zhoro had just bought himself a brand-new Audi with a leather interior, the husband couldn't help but comment: "Those leather seats must be made from the skin of translators, I imagine…"

Thanks to our joint translation, Vergil and I started seeing each other regularly, most often at his place. His wife worked in Strasbourg, they didn't have children, he lived like a typical bon vivant. We gradually got comfortable around each other, Vergil started sharing more personal things with me, at one point he started telling me the story that was insistently on his mind at the time. At first, he only mentioned it in the most general of terms, I acted intrigued, he'd tell a bit more of the story, the next time he would add more details.

And so, day after day, he returned time and again to the same past experiences, watering them with contemplation, spraying them with scents, while they somehow branched out of their own accord, sprouting into side anecdotes…

We would work for a few hours, then go out to stroll around. Vergil lived in the neighborhood between the Military Academy and Tsar Ivan Assen II Street. After work, our heads would be buzzing from untangling syntactic loops and digging around in synonyms, we'd circle around the neighborhood's side streets, as if trying to unscrew and set our spinning heads straight in some reverse yet correct direction. Down one street, then another, then a third, hey, let's cut through this little park…

In this way March melted, April bloomed, and finally May grew dark and lightning flashed.

The day was growing longer, stretching out, the grass (where you could find it) was going crazy, branches jutted out from courtyards covered with the first blossoms, later delicate green leaves, and finally cherries and morellos hanging heavily on them. One afternoon there was a hailstorm, and the sidewalk was bloody for a long time afterwards.

Sometimes we breathed in the aroma of lilac, sometimes of linden. Evening after evening we got swept away in conversation, we circled "backwards" through the side streets; when we wore ourselves out or if the sky leaked before that—we would decide to go inside somewhere for a drink (or sometimes two or three).

Go inside is only a manner of speech. In fact, we would go inside somewhere, but we would immediately come back out into the courtyard of the pub, or if it was rainy, we'd huddle under overhangs fashioned for the purpose. The smoking ban was already in effect, and from April to October diehard smokers like Vergil would only ever go to open-air spots. There were quite a few of them in the vicinity, but for the sake of variety—and, often swept up in our conversations—we would find ourselves in a nearby neighborhood where there were also pleasant pubs to be found.

While we strolled, I would think to myself what a nice area Vergil lived in—it was downtown, yet relatively quiet, clean, calm. If I had had money, I would've bought a house right here, and not at the foot of Vitosha Mountain, where turds, begging your pardon, often demonstratively float down the gutters, while the wannabe nouveau-riche hop over them, hoisting their pantlegs and cursing the exotic adventure that is walking to the store…

"I was too young, I still had ambitions," Vergil started in on his story again as we went into yet another pub. "Kalina, a student in film directing, asked me to write a screenplay with her for her thesis project. A short film, live action. Before we knew it, we had written it. Or rather, I had written it. Kalina's contribution consisted of reading what I had written and commenting on it—OK, so maybe *yes* to this scene, but I'm thinking *no* to the next two lines." Yet this was no small thing. The young writer feels a constant need to share his work and to receive encouragement. And after all, Kalina would direct the film, right? The most important thing was that she was happy with it. So she decided, albeit with lots of dithering, what would stay and what would get cut. Where we would ratchet up the emotional tension, where we'd add more real-life logic…

Kalina was an interesting girl. An anxious face, deep dark eyes, and a very nice figure, albeit hidden beneath overly baggy and dumpy clothes. Here we were together every day, and I only noticed her curves later, in the summertime on Vitosha…

Vergil began his story somewhat unexpectedly, in the middle he would start describing Kalina, then stop just as unexpectedly—so we could find a suitable place, say a bistro or a backyard, or to give our orders—and I'd have to wait for the next part of the story.

Before then I had read several of his short stories. They weren't bad, but they weren't masterpieces, either. Plus, he structured them in a rather complicated, somewhat pretentious way. This isn't my favorite type of writing, so I didn't follow his publications too closely, besides I don't think they were too numerous. His last book, a novella, was called *The Old Man Must Die*. Later Vergil would tell me what it was about, and even later still I would read it, because it was precisely this book that stood at the core of the story that obsessed him. In the beginning, however, he just mentioned that two years after it had been published, he had come across it while surfing the Internet.

In the first moment, he didn't understand that it was his book, he caught a glimpse of the title in Macedonian, which is close enough to Bulgarian, so it seemed at the time familiar, yet he didn't understand it right away—he had never seen it before, so he was about to pass it by without a second thought when he saw the author's name in the upper righthand corner: *Vergil Stoilov*.

With a start, he went back to the title, and indeed, this time he translated it immediately: *no way, you've got to be kidding me*! He clicked twice on the cover. The little hourglass came up, its grains running from full to empty, i.e., it was thinking, i.e., it seemed to be freezing up. After a fruitless minute or two, things sudden sped up, he was sucked into virtual space and boom: the cover, the hourglass and Vergil ended up on the Macedonian site "Cheap Deals."

This of all places was where Vergil's book had found a safe harbor—and he became convinced that it was his book over the next few minutes. The edition must have been pirated, since the author Vergil Stoilov, holder of the copyrights,

knew nothing about it, but perhaps Zhoro Doychinov might know something, so he hurried to call Zhoro.

"Are you sure it's your book?" the publisher asked, no less puzzled than Vergil.

"The title is mine, the name is mine, what else do I need to be sure?" Vergil asked, indignant.

"So what? It could be some Macedonian Vergil Stoilov, their names are close enough to ours."

"Yeah, right! Some Macedonian Vergil Stoilov happened to write a Macedonian novella *The Old Man Must Die*. True, their Gotse Delchev* is just like our Gotse Delchev, but still…"

Vergil's outrage increased in decibels, so Zhoro wisely accepted that this was Vergil's book. Over the course of the conversation certain other things also became clear. It turns out that Zhoro himself had given the book to some friends of his, Macedonian publishers. He would call them that very day and check whether they had published it.

"Fine, I'll wait for you to call me." Appeased, Vergil hung up the phone.

He could easily imagine Zhoro Doychinov telling them something of the sort—here are a few books, take them, they're on me, read them, translate them to your heart's content. But we don't have, you know, the copyright—Zhoro had surely magnanimously waved this concern of theirs aside, convinced that every author would jump for joy to be translated, whether into English or Macedonian, so they needn't trouble themselves over impractical things: rights, money, book tours and other such extravagances…

Vergil told the story in a rather scattered way. He was constantly going on tangents, adding this or that, getting stuck in memories or suddenly skipping far ahead, only to suddenly jump back again. Thank God he was telling me his story verbally, so I could interrupt him at any moment to ask something, to clarify. But I knew that's how he wrote as well, and that his readers were hard put to orient themselves in the action.

Then again… a listener had to demonstrate minimal courtesy and at least pretend to be listening, while a reader was free, they could toss the book down on the bed, or put it back on the shelf, or even chuck it out the window.

In any case, I couldn't totally follow the meanderings of Vergil Stoilov's thoughts, nor can I recreate for you the chaos of details in which he habitually

* *Gotse Delchev was a famous, turn-of-the-century rebel leader against the Ottoman Empire, whom both Bulgaria and North Macedonia claim as a national hero.*

dwelled, but I will nevertheless try to preserve some of his confusion, because it says a lot about his life and his character, as well as about the story itself that he was trying to tell me—from here and there, pit by pit, cherry by cherry, morellos by the handful, however it happened.

"Just so it's clear to you why I'm paying so much attention to this story, I've got to fill you in a bit on the backstory"—that's how Vergil began yet another one of his tangents, and it was then that regaled me with his writerly past.

In short, he had grown old in his desire to write. I don't mean that his desire had aged him, but rather that he had been inhabiting it as long as he could remember, without it producing much in terms of results.

He felt like writing, but the feeling was like this: a very general urge, a sense that it would be nice to do something in particular. Look, you'll sit down, you'll strain your brain, you'll write a few pages that you later won't like and you'll rip them up (delete them), only to write them over again in a different way, running the very real risk of a third rewrite and a fourth, a fifth and a sixth; in short, you'll keep working—doggedly, painfully, with all the requisite agonizing and with absolutely no guarantee of success. This decidedly did not square with Vergil Stoilov's understanding of the good life.

He felt like writing, but it was better to put it off till later. He would write tomorrow, he'd start on Monday, from the first of the month, he kept making himself such promises, just enough to reassure himself that all was not lost, that there was time—once he sat down and got started, that was it, he would do nothing but that. Everything he had hidden away and put off would come pouring out of him day after day.

Things ended up as in that fable of La Fontaine's about the race between the tortoise and the hare (rabbits appeared in yet another of Vergil's examples; he noticed with a start that if a writer mentioned some word once, say "rabbit," then two or three pages later it would inevitably come up again, even if there was no clear connection).

Ah, how well did Vergil understand that rabbit and its attitude towards time. While the tortoise crawled along the track of writing, the rabbit told himself: "Good God, there's time, of course, I'll write, how could I not, but just look what's come up on the detour-from-writing route—my favorite Sofia track: hundreds and thousands of lazy mornings with coffee and cigarettes, talking on the phone, paging through ever more enticing reading matter, chowing down and getting fatter (damn, but the language just pulls me along, how could I pass up a rhyme!), drawn-out, drowsy dreams; hundreds and thousands of even more pleasant

evenings—with nearly obligatory drinking at restaurants or parties, with love affairs (some more loving, others more purely sexual), with friendly debates and sharing the most inspiring things in life."

How many tales did Vergil and the other rabbits tell on their evenings, how imperceptibly time passed, yet the desire for having fun did not fade. Come on, let's get together again tonight, let's go somewhere to hang out, come on tonight, and tonight again come on. There were no signs whatsoever that the evenings of his life were nevertheless numbered…

Once, many years ago, Vergil had been out strolling with his friend R., a popular composer of pop music: *estrada*, as we called it then, as well as film music, as we called it then and still do now. They met an infamous Sofia wiseass, a fine judge and connoisseur of almost everything to do with the delicate sphere that was art.

"Ooh, R.!" The wiseass said happily. "Just the other day I heard your music from that film… you know, your most recent one…"

"Woodland Light."

"Exactly! I listened to it on my tape deck, and maybe because the film wasn't there to distract me, I thought to myself: 'Damn, R's music is really amazing! But his job is like delivering coal with a Boeing 747. I ought to call him and tell him to write symphonic music.'"

R. laughed and immediately replied, as if he had been expecting this: "Look, I've thought the same thing myself. But if something requires effort, then I'm not the man for it. To me, art is an impulse, a gesture, sudden goosebumps. That's art, the rest is Tolstoy and Dostoevsky…"

Vergil mentioned this conversation with respect to his attitude towards time—like a bottomless barrel that you want to keep pouring fun and pleasant experiences into from morning till night; he also mentioned it with respect to his attitude towards his own thoughts and feelings. Towards those rare, yet spontaneous fits of conscience, to which he would answer simply: "Hell no, neither suffering nor backbreaking labor over the blank page is to my taste."

So he, like R. the composer, with whom he turned out to have a very similar worldview, did not like to exert himself much, he always tried to have something pleasant to look forward to, something to tickle the senses, even if it were something completely petty and insignificant. To some extent, this joyful anticipation doubled as enjoyment of life, he would not trade it for anything. How he hated those greetings that had cropped up lately: have a safe night, take care, and so on. What proletarian drivel!

Vergil Stoilov didn't need a safe night, he needed good nights. Like glowing, spitting sparklers. Just like human eyes shoot their charm in all directions, you just need to light them and keep the flame alive…

Here, however, arose the insurmountable contradiction. Vergil wanted the satisfaction of stretching his time to the limit, so that the hands of the clock were barely trudging along… Only the world is constructed to the contrary—sweet moments fly past quickly in principle, only the painful hours are capable of dragging on, their end invisible on the horizon. In the world we know, there is no way to both experience pleasure and for that time to pass slowly.

In this respect Vergil, like all wannabes before and after him, was a complete failure. He still hadn't gotten his fill of anything, and yet what do you know—the greater part of his life was already lost in the past.

He recognized this very well, yet despite this he continued to chase away daily unpleasantries with dreams about the city, with thoughts about the city, with strolls around the city.

What was the connection between the city and having a good time, I asked him? Well, it was perfectly direct! Years ago, he would once in a while find himself in some village or in the mountains when night fell. The quiet unnerved him, the crickets' song was like the grinding sound of a blow-torch—sawing away in his brain…

In fact, Vergil's encounter with so-called nature turned out to be a mandatory interaction with various uncontrollable flies, mosquitos, ants, beetles, spiders, mother and countless other vermin. He could never sleep while breathing in so-called fresh air. On the contrary, fresh air made his lungs ache, the nocturnal howls of the village dogs drove him to despair… Until he finally realized once and for all that if he truly wanted to enjoy life, he must not leave the city, the big city, more precisely.

And so, by studying himself, he learned how to ward off unpleasant moments. If some minor regret cropped up in his consciousness, he would immediately recall some pleasant experience and would add a promise to most definitely repeat it, and the minor regret would shrink clean away, disappearing like a sigh in an uproar.

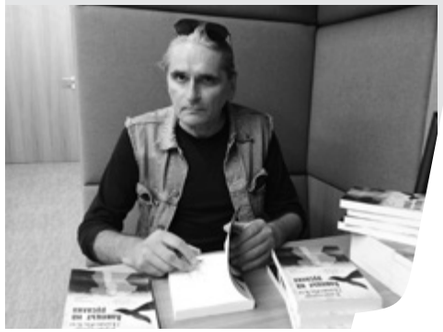
He developed this habit: whenever something bad happened to him, before thinking about it, he would pick up the phone and arrange to meet somebody that night for a drink at the Chess Board, for example. At that cozy bar, the cult of the good mood reigned supreme. The waitresses glowed with happiness, as if they had been dreaming their whole lives of taking an order from you of all people.

The interior, decorated in black and white, had pairs of strongly contrasting photographs on the wall.

One showed a wild dance from the inimitable belle epoque, while the other was of the aftermath of a destructive earthquake God knows where. One: a happy London crowd celebrating the end of the war; the other: a shocking shot of the war itself. One: a coral reef in the northern Red Sea with hundreds of colorful fish; the other, a bay decimated by an oil spill. It was as if these contrasts had been hung there so as to confirm: better to be healthy and young than old and sick, and in short—*summer on the seaside is fine*…

This is more or less how Vergil imagined happiness—a few friends headed out on the town in the evening, and all around them: a crowd, the chattering of voices and laughter, the ringing and creaking of the streetcars, horns honking. You might just glimpse an exquisite female ankle, you might just hear a gleeful young woman's high heels tap like drums from a warm-up band, you might just feel a fat wad of cash in your pocket, meant to be thrown around that very night.

Treating nice people to a round, leaving a hefty tip—could there be any greater pleasure for big-hearted people? Which is what Vergil was, at least in his own eyes. "I could have become an excellent writer of light reads. But I'm a headcase just like most people. On the one hand, deep down I want to live for satisfaction, on the other hand I don't have the courage to admit what would bring me the most satisfaction and to turn it into a career…" An author of erotic novels or detective stories, it doesn't matter. But something light, pleasant, ephemeral. Some new chick-lit, but this time for men. Chick-lit, but not as romantic, more lusty and revealing. Accompanied by your average, ordinary ruminations about history and modern life. About love and rivalry. Slightly bohemian, but on very slightly, more about family and extended family. National, but also with a sense of responsibility towards our neighbors. Bulgarian, but without getting carried away. Liberal, but without going to extremes. Conservative, but with good-natured condescension towards trendy digressions. In short, the quintessence of the essence…



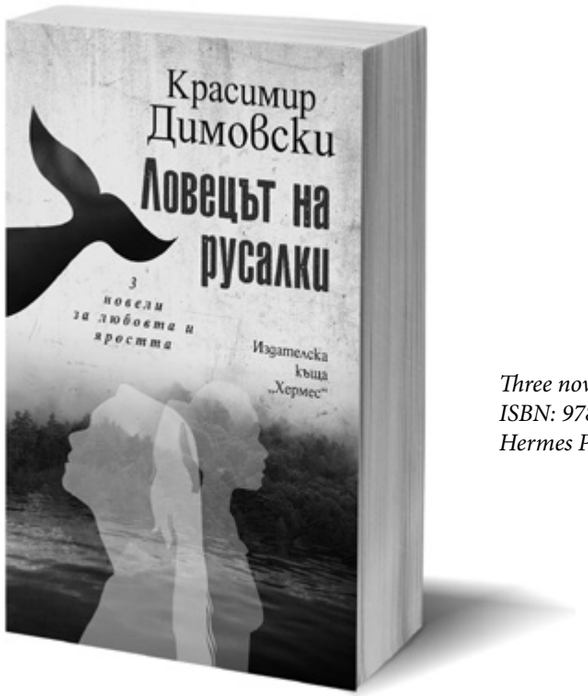
Krassimir *D*IMOVSKY

_The Mermaid Hunter

Krassimir Dimovsky was born in Asenovgrad and grew up in Yavrovo. He graduated in Czech philology and currently lives and works in Plovdiv. Dimovsky has published poems, short stories and novellas in literary publications and periodicals. He is the author of the collections *We, the Cavaliers* and *The Garden of Eden*. His latest book, *The Girl Who Foretold the Past*, was awarded the Bulgaria Writers Union Prize (2021) and the Plovdiv Prize (2021).

Summary

The Mermaid Hunter: three novellas about love and rage. Love of creation - the final key that opens the door between woman and man. Love of power - the final key that opens the door between men and hell. Three stories imbued with mysticism, magical eroticism and drama, lightened by the humorous situations the characters fall into, driven by their passions and aspirations. One man's deadly quest to rule the world, one woman's love of ruling over a man, and one man's quest for freedom make up the horizon of the „little human race" doomed to live between Mogila and Mogilchitsa... A small world populated by big ideas, already familiar from Dimovsky's previous book, *The Girl Who Foretold the Past*. A world discovered and recreated in Dimovsky's inimitable style.



Three novellas, 200 pages
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EXCERPT
Translated by Gergana Galabova

Part One

1.

The sky, with all its clouds, began descending until it touched the fields and became an ocean. The waves flowed towards the rocks at Stakivkamik, turning them into a shore. The peaks curled into the vacated expanse of sky where the sun immediately settled, took to picking at it and grew bored.

Bayana threw down her staff, looked around to make sure she was alone, and slipped off her shoes, then looked around again and took off her skirt, she didn't look around a third time because one of the lights, yellow and timid, passed over her bare thighs and sputtered before her eyes, then came back and started up her ankles: groped them, crawled up the smoothness and stopped where the afterlife began. A baby could come out of the afterlife, or a man might come in, but neither of them could explain what it was like on the other side, because the baby couldn't speak, and the man was left speechless.

Bayana sat on the rock, dipped her feet in the descended clouds, a thrill came over her, she sighed and said, "Damn, this fog!"

Her eyes went out over the ocean, passed over a few waves with downy crests, and went all the way to the seemingly aggravated horizon, separating the grey from the bright vastness. She stared at it, but she couldn't tell if it was truly angry. A moment ago, the whole field had been visible from here, with the cart, carriage, or car, crawling out of the city's little cubes, out of the breathing of the city's little people, covering the field with blueness. Now it was submerged in the misty ocean, and Bayana imagined the little people stamping on the bottom and letting out bubbles and stopped.

Her visions were fleeting, but they sometimes made her swell up, as if her drunken little husband was stringing her on his big sobriety, and if her vision was persistent, it floated out of her widened eyes, wet her lips, and flowed down her neck to the entrance to the afterlife. Just like that, all wet, she shivered.

She was now shivering as well, for it seemed to her that someday the ocean might indeed drown out humanity, while she breathed on this rocky shore. Such a sense of freedom took over her at this thought that she pulled up her blouse, fastened it in a knot, and dipped in up to the waist. The celestial thickness brushed right up against her heavy breasts and stiffened them.

Bayana had never seen an ocean, nor a sea, nor a wide river; she had only heard men tell of them, for they walked the roughness of the world and gathered knowledge. From their tales she pictured that great water, but briefly, for she had not the strength to imagine the entire vastness. She could read, but the letters tripped her up; if she had finished fourth division, she would have read a whole book, and then her visions would have been more powerful. That's what Sianitsa told her. But she didn't tell her they would have been more sorrowful.

Bayana felt the thick heavenliness pass between her thighs and hurried to enjoy it before the fog lifted, and she was stuck half-naked on the rock. Amidst the mountains who guarded memories of the true ocean that had been here millions of years ago, as Sianitsa had said.

Bayana splashed the mist, and her yellowish shriek drifted over the suspended clouds, then suddenly it stopped, and her gaze stopped, and her breath, and all the mysteries it propelled in her.

A figure emerged from the misty ocean, powerful as the shadow of Garibaldo the bull, but then it shrank and cleared up.

It was no bull.

It was a man.

The figure crawled to the rocks, stood up, staggered to the shore, and saluted. He was wearing a stained T-shirt with white and blue stripes. The man fell to his knees and sprawled on his back, as if crucified.

Bayana felt terror rising from her core and managed to stop it moments before it erupted from her mouth. Then she took to doing many things at once: she rolled over to the man, leaned over him, ran away, came back, spat into her bosom to ward off evil, and crossed herself because she thought he looked like a fallen Christ, and in the church everywhere they painted him upright. She feared for the goats she had brought to graze, gathered them with the help of the staff, then ran to the stranger again, and he opened his eyes, and she shrieked and covered her breasts, though they were tucked into her blouse, while down below she was as naked as light, and the shivers went up her thighs as far as where the afterlife began. As soon as she realized she was covering herself in reverse, she ran to the discarded skirt, put it on, slipped on her shoes, and led the goats to the village.

It stood between Mogila and Mogilchitsa, looking down on the imaginary ocean formed by the low clouds every winter and summer and spring and autumn, changing only their oceanic colours.

When she reached the foot of the village, Bayana stopped, crossed herself again, let go of the goats, and returned to the man. Kneeling, she tucked her arms under his armpits, rolled him onto his back, and letting out the roar of a wounded bear, slowly stood up. She staggered, but held the heavy burden and said: "May the plague take him! Shipwrecked!"

She had heard that word from Sianitsa. And she walked up to the goats that waited for her below the village, where something bloody was raging...


© Boryana Pandova

Joanna *E*LMY

_Born of Guilt

Joanna Elmy is a writer and a journalist. Born in 1995 in Sofia, Bulgaria, Joanna has lived in France, the Netherlands, and currently resides in the United States. She holds a BA in English and a BA in International Relations from the New Sorbonne University in Paris, as well as a MSc in Communication Science from the University of Amsterdam. She is a part of the Bulgarian independent weekly *Toest*, where she is responsible for the disinformation and international politics beats and writes investigative and analysis/opinion pieces. Her work has appeared in *Deutsche Welle-Bulgaria*, *Capital Daily*, the *Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria*, *Bulgarian National Radio*, *The Literary Journal*, *VIJ Magazine,* and others. In 2019 she was a fellow in the Sozopol Fiction Seminars organized by the Elizabeth Kostova foundation, with focus on writing in immigration. In 2019, as the winner of the *Per Aspera ad Astra* grant in literature, she wrote the play *Narcissus and Echo,* which premiered in Plovdiv and Sofia. Her debut novel (working title *Born of Guilt)* won the prestigious Southern Spring Award in 2022 and was longlisted for the Portal Kultura annual literary prize. The book has been a success in Bulgaria and lauded as "one of the most promising debuts in the past few years" by a "very promising name in Bulgarian literature" (*The Literary Journal, Stranica Journal for Literary Criticism*). The novel's editor Georgi Gospodinov calls it "one of the most powerful debuts I have encountered in recent years. Impossible to miss." Apart from her native Bulgarian, Joanna is fluent in English, French, and conversational in Russian.

Summary

Yana/Jane is a young Bulgarian woman who arrives in the United States to work on a J1 visa. Like many Eastern European students, she is attracted to the promise of "fulfilling the American Dream." Instead, the protagonist witnesses a fatal car accident that kills another student like herself. Yana, or Jane (as her American friends and colleagues call her), becomes increasingly disillusioned with her Work & Travel experience as she deals with harsh work conditions and becomes closer acquainted with the immigrant community's schemes and hardships, all concocted in search of a better life. As she navigates her new reality, Yana is forced to reckon with her past through a young American who becomes an unlikely confidant. A fragmentary narrative shifts between her point of view and that of her mother (late 1960s to present day) and her grandmother (1940s to present day), weaving together several timelines with their distinct experiences. Yana's mother, Lilly, marries her father despite his drinking problem and the two have Yana amid the '90s, during the so-called Transition from authoritarian communism to democracy. The shortages and political turmoil test the aspirations of the two young medical students who cannot even afford diapers due to rampant inflation and widespread shortages. The marriage suffers not only historical but also inner pressures, as Dimitar's alcoholism clashes with Lilly's pursuit of a normal family life, which she sees as the sole source of possible happiness. In turn, Lilly's mother, Eva hopes that a family of her own may heal the wounds of the past. Shortly after the end of WWII, Eva's father is taken to a labor camp set up by the totalitarian pro-Soviet government, with the family forced out of their rural home during the rapid industrialization of the country. After rejecting the love of her life, Eva marries a more suitable match – a marriage that quickly turns into a nightmare. Bit by bit, Yana paints a picture of what she has left behind: domestic violence, controlling parents, the Eastern European destitution of the early aughts filled with broken promises of Western-like prosperity and freedom, which have nominally replaced the promises of the Soviet Bright Future. These broken promises have created generations of broken people, who have urged their own children to run away. Now on the run herself, Yana cannot help but turn back and ask: is there a better life elsewhere, or does she belong to a generation that has missed the greatest time to be alive and is forced to reckon with the harsh reality of "the mirage our parents saw from behind their iron curtains."

EXCERPT

Translated by Joanna Elmy

night

We meet amidst the chaos of the world. We share nothing, no friends nor continents. We don't know it yet, but this first night is our best together. We sit next to each other on the lifeguard chair that towers above the empty beach. There's no moon, it's so dark that if someone comes from the resort behind us, they'll hear only two voices narrating life. Here and now we're the youngest we'll ever be for each other, at our most unexplored and thus most thrilling. One will dissolve into the other slowly, allowing for the decantation of accrued time. Each of us is an alien in the other's universe. All we share is a language and a night's worth of time.

He holds two cigarettes in his lips, lights them and hands me one. The smoke draws question marks over the indigo of the night.

Who are you?
Where do you come from?
How did you end up here?

Birth

I am to be blamed for this day, forever. Here's my mother. The florescent lights flicker above our heads. We're still one and the acid of her thoughts penetrates all the way to my fragile bones. She'll never suspect I'll remember everything: the nasty brown of the hallways, the echo of each glassy crackle of the lights. The wall peels in patches, hand-written schedules taped to the doors. We've been here for hours. We're alone.

My mother owns me for the last time.

Where's my dad?

She doesn't know.

I want to wait for him.

The child will be born with all signs of post-term birth, they've informed her.

Fuck, it's cold. Her naked body shivers.

Where is everyone?

I am born into a world of deficits. Her belly hides the ward door and she can't see a thing. The lights continue their crystalline count: ding, ding, ding...

I tear her from within. She curses me.

Do I even want to come into this world? Doubt courses through my body, the same doubt I must have been conceived in. Maternal exhaustion crawls down the spine, into the blood vessels, reaching the placenta. The vague feeling that something is wrong builds up in my system along with all the vitamins and antibodies.

Won't you please come out already, she begs.

The yellowish sheet on the stretcher is soaked with blood. She's in horrendous pain. My pain.

Our pain.

My mother hears steps and lifts her head, a sweaty lock of hair slipping from her right ear. A man in a white coat approaches. She tries to cover herself up, to close her legs. He stops next to us. He looks at us.

"The hell you doin' here?" he asks.

My mother whimpers. He looks around the hall, takes a few steps towards the delivery room, turns the lights on and off again. He comes back, sticks his hand in the pocket of his coat, pulls out some crumpled cash.

He carefully places the bill on her overripe belly. He sneers.

"Go to the canteen, grab a bottle of water till everyone comes back. Later."

And he disappears.

I hear her sharp breathing, the song of the glass, blood dripping on the linoleum. The bill flies down towards the puddle.

No one knows where we are. She hasn't called anyone. My father hasn't been home in days. She fears he's started again...

If he truly loves us, he'll get better. The child will make him better.

And if not, at least she won't be alone anymore. I'll deliver her from desolation. Two gentle hands throw a sheet over the wet body ready to burst.

"Did I die?" she asks.

"Hush, be quiet now."

The smell of bleach pierces our lungs. The cleaning lady rushes inside the room, probably trying to press the button to call the head nurse. My mom tells her that those buttons don't work in most hospitals.

How do you know, asks the other woman.

Because I'm a doctor, she responds.

She swallows, nothing to swallow. She knows she's dehydrated.

I just want to make sure you have ten fingers on your hands and feet, she tells me. She's not afraid of dying. Even relieved. She only wonders *who will look after the baby*.

Some time ago the head doctor had told her that *the worst is whining women, they make me sick*. She tries to escape the pain and think of something else, she dives into the shadows of definitions and terms, deeper and deeper into a thick forest of memories. She clenches her eyes, the words engraved on her eyelids one after another in red ink. She has always been a straight-A student.

Good job, Doctor, good job...

Herds of As start running before her eyes. So many of them... and all fat and pregnant, a, a, a, their bellies bursting with smaller a-letters coming out.

... She'll go from A to F, from one to six, and all will end.

One.

Where is he?

Two.

Where?

Three.

Somewhere something is ringing.

Four.

Five.

She's hearing voices.

Hypovolemic shock. Sudden drop in the circulating blood volume.

Shock, means to knock out. What was it? When left untreated, the patient goes through several stages...

Initial Stage.

They meet at a party in '92: music, shit liquor, and cigarettes are the meal of the poor. Tall, a hiker, works out, has a long scar on the left of his chin, slightly darker than his skin, he burned himself with a cigarette during military service. His movements are premeditated, like a cat ready to rip prey apart. She loves him, that's what she thinks. She can't breathe when they are apart. Sometimes he disappears and doesn't call and then she doesn't know what to do with herself. But then he comes back, and all is well. And she's too afraid to ask where he's been.

Second stage of shock, compensatory.

He makes her feel graceless. Like a child who wants to be praised but is unable to speak. His mother and father have travelled the world. They show souvenirs: precious gems from Brazil and empty bottles of *Chanel N5* perfume.

Her and her brother have never been to the seaside and her mother's hands are so rough... She doesn't remember her mother ever wearing perfume. She's consumed by hatred for herself... She will carve out the past. She will be someone else.

Followed by the Progressive, third Stage.

It's the little things that drive her mad. Why is she like this? He always eats standing up, never sitting on the table, crumbs falling everywhere. He doesn't know how to run the washer. He hasn't helped her once around the house.

Her mother asks on the phone why they haven't bought new furniture, aren't they newlyweds, how can they live in such abjection.

His mother constantly criticizes her: she doesn't do her nails, her hair, her legs are too thick, she doesn't take care of herself enough for him to like her, and this is the most important thing for a man.

She thinks that he never wanted to be a doctor. He's erratic, lacks determination. He reminds her of a fly trapped in life's webs. She observes his chaotic collisions with hardship, him wasting energy repeating the same mistakes. A fruit fly drowning in colorful poisons: amber, crimson and a bit of ice.

Lilly, Lilly, where is Dimitar?

Why have you let him make rounds of the bars yet again?

Refractory Stage.

Hush, be quiet,

don't talk,

you're not well, not well,

not well...

I don't want to have a child, he tells her, touching her growing belly. I can't be a good father. He moans.

He tells her about his great-grandfather, the Party Secretary, and the two sixteen-year-old boys he used to live with. About his great-grandmother who slept in the other room.

He talks about the military.

There were three of them,

sobs,

thirteen months of service, no women, nothing, cast out at the border, the most horrific border, not a living soul, no one allowed without a special pass. There were three of them and they laughed and laughed and laughed...

It hurt so much.

My great-grandfather hung himself in this very kitchen, right here. My great-grandmother didn't cry.

Why don't you take him to acupuncture, asks her mother-in-law, for his nerves.

He'll need drug treatment, my mother answers. He's an alcoholic.

How can he be an alcoholic, don't be stupid, Lillia. I've given life to this boy…

I know him better than you could ever imagine. You can't understand until you're a mother yourself.

Only breaking the vicious cycle, the repetition of the phases, can save the patient.

Initial, compensatory, progressive, refractive. He loves her, she promises to do better, he disappears, he's sick and she can't help him.

Initial... he loves her, she believes in him, she can help him,

compensatory, she'll find better doctors, support him more, he just needs to be loved, someone to understand him, what will happen if she also leaves him, as if he hadn't suffered enough already,

progressive, where is he, why does he abandon them, if he loves them why does he need to drink,

refractive, he comes home, vomit everywhere, pisses in the sink and the urine reeks of alcohol, the child is heavy inside her and she wakes up at night because she dreamt the baby is dead. His side of the bed is empty.

They don't let her hold me after, they carry me away. She is in pain, she feels her body melting on the table, she's cold, she just wants to be left to die in peace. At least that.

Novel, 328 pages
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Zdravka *E*VTIMOVA

_A Safe Place for Men and Wolves

Zdravka Evtimova is a Bulgarian writer born in 1959. Her short stories have been published in 32 counties around the world. Her short-story collections have been published in the US (*Carts, Time to Mow, Parable of Stones; Impossibly Blue*), as well as in Italy, France, China, Greece, the UK, Israel, and Canada. Her novel *Sinfonia Bulgarica* was published in the US, UK, Serbia and China, and was selected as one of the Forum of Slavic Cultures' 100 best novels written by a Slavic author after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Her novel *In the Town of Joy and Peace* was published in the US, Italy, and North Macedonia. Her novel *You Can Smile on Wednesdays* was published in the US and in Italy.

In Bulgaria, Zdravka Evtimova has won a number of literary awards, including the 2021 H. G. Danov Award for her overall contribution to Bulgarian culture. Her short story "Blood" is included in an anthology of recommended readings for teaching literature in junior high schools in the US and in the high school curriculum for teaching English in Denmark.

Summary of *A Safe Place for Men and Wolves*

Radomir is a small town in Bulgaria with high levels of crime. Unemployment, fear of burglaries, and of losing one's job are pivotal points in everybody's life. Ginger Dimitar, a thug who has become rich quickly by terrorizing Radomir, takes everything he likes and browbeats the town's inhabitants into being obedient and too frightened to protest. All the young people in Radomir are scared to death of Dimitar. If he sits next to a girl or a boy in a restaurant, the girl or the boy knows what will follow: sex with Dimitar the way he wants it.

Elena, a woman in her late fifties, lives in Staro, a suburb of Radomir. She collects herbs and makes poultices and infusions known far and wide. Elena uses herbs to cure the sick who cannot afford to pay for expensive medicines and doctors' fees. Elena has a six-year-old granddaughter Damiana who has learned from her grandma how to prepare herbal medicines. The herb-gatherer Elena is the only one who opposes Dimitar. The thug cuts down all the trees in her orchard, which she has been taking care of all her life. Elena tells him he will be punished for this crime and shoots a rifle above his head. One day, Ginger Dimitar is found prostrate on the sidewalk. His eyes look yellow and badly swollen. Elena uses one of her infusions and Dimitar soon gets well.

Christo, Elena's son, is married to Siana, a beautiful young woman who in the past was a good mathematician, but in the small town of Radomir, her talent for mathematics is doomed. Christo finds a job in Spain as a day laborer to make enough money to provide for his family. Siana quarrels with Elena, the herb gatherer, abandons her daughter, and moves into Dimitar's grand house. It turns out that the little girl Damiana poured some poison into Ginger Dimitar's cup of coffee, making his eyelids turn yellow and swollen.

Damiana has a friend, the Roma boy Vasko. All the other children refuse to play with Damiana because her grandmother Elena shot at Dimitar. Christo, having learned that his wife Siana has abandoned him for Dimitar, comes back to Radomir. Siana refuses to see her husband, and Christo falls ill. Elena cannot cure her son. She feels that only Siana's presence will help Christo recuperate. Elena implores her daughter-in-law to visit Christo who is very ill; Siana agrees on the condition that Elena, the herb-gatherer, carries her in her arms to Christo's room and pays Siana a huge sum of money. Elena agrees. Soon after that, another thug, one of Dimitar's henchmen, is found lying on the sidewalk with his eyelids swollen and yellow.

Ginger Dimitar feels that no one can stop him from doing whatever he pleases in Radomir. He is stronger than the police. Dimitar captures Elena and her granddaughter Damiana, and breaks the little girl's hand. He and his underlings, however, are afraid and do not dare to put a dog collar on Elena's neck. The Roma lad Vasko is beaten black and blue by Dimitar as punishment for being Damiana's friend. After a slow recuperation, Vasko learns to play the trumpet and plays it beautifully for Damiana.

The whole town is outraged by what Ginger Dimitar has done to the little girl. People are still scared by his cruelty, but they find a way to fight him. They record on their cell phones wailing wolves that have sneaked into the outskirts of town in the dead of winter. Everywhere Dimitar goes, the sound of wolves wailing and howling follows him. He is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Elena tells him she can help him get rid of the crushing stress under one condition: he must break his own right hand the way he has broken Damiana's. Dimitar agrees.

Siana becomes a very rich woman; however, she knows that she has ruined her talent for mathematics. She goes back to her husband Christo, the only man she has loved and tried to give him a thick wad of cash, but Christo refuses it. He says Siana is not the beautiful, pure girl he had fallen in love with. At the end of the novel, Christo receives a letter. He recognizes the sender's handwriting—it is Siana's. There is only one sentence in her letter, "You. The rest is loneliness."

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EXCERPT

Translated by Zdravka Evtimova

"Go away," Grandmother Elena said to my mother.

"'I'll go, but your son will buy cockroach poison. He'll drink it."

"It's none of my business," Grandmother said.

Grandma Elena's son is my father.

My grandmother Elena is like that, she doesn't like fairy tales.

She grabbed the pair of fire tongs—she sometimes disciplined Gasho, our dog, my best friend, with it, but more often this pair went with her at night around our cherry orchard to scare away thieves. Would she scare Mom away now?

"Who is this venomous woman who's hiding frost under her skirts that poisons the orchards?" they asked around the village of Staro about my grandmother Elena, as if they didn't know. They had long ago decided to crucify her, but one day at noon shouts from the cherry orchard exploded, and you'd think the village of Staro was going to breathe its last. It wasn't the whole village, four guys were in for it, huge as barns all of them, their legs tied with rope (I recognized the rope, my father kept it in his tool cupboard before he went to earn heaps of money in Spain), their hands bound with long pieces of packthread.

"Who beat the pants off you, thieves?" the mayor asked them.

Two of them were Roma chaps. Although they were well-known pickpockets, their hearts seemed to be in the right place, and they did not betray anyone, but the Bulgarian bandits Pavko and Ginger Dimitar, spilled the beans simultaneously, "Elena did."

"Elena?"

The woman had not only tied them up, but she had also used her red-hot fire tongs to leave purple scars that glistened like the moon on their backs. Well, their foreheads had been tattooed as well—I don't know what else Granma had wielded to carve those frightening scars with.

At dusk that day, Ginger Dimitar came running to our house, kicked the kitchen door, his head bandaged, all covered with gauze from the neck up. You'd think that only his nose had remained in place in his head, so he'd know which direction to go. Grandma Elena and I were alone at home. She was washing the dishes.

"Hey, crone!' the redhead croaked and pushed Grandma's arm. "I'll gut you like a fish tomorrow."

"You can try," Grandma Elena invited him politely and continued fumbling with the saucepans.

The ginger-headed individual turned round, his nose as big as a roof beam, and unexpectedly beat it. Unfortunately, he was back after a minute, must have remembered something, for he stopped in his tracks at the door and yelled, "'I'm going to buy a rope for your neck, you old bat!"

=========

Every night, Grandma Elena makes me read a page from *Pippi Longstocking* to her. I don't go to school yet and I don't have to read anything, but if I don't open the book she doesn't give me any food for dinner.

"Start!" she orders me.

The letters pop and shake their naughty heads. They slip out of my mind, these difficult Bulgarian letters, and I can't get them to stick together. I am so hungry that my stomach will positively run away on its own to the kitchen in search of food. To stop it, I take to making things up—Pippi was absolutely ravenous. She went to pick tomatoes from the garden with her dog Gasho—the beast would keep her company, so that Ginger Dimitar wouldn't give the girl the fright of her life.

"The book doesn't say anything about Ginger Dimitar," Grandma Elena snatches Pippi out of my hands and pushes me into the bedroom where I have to spend the night.

"Give me some bread, Grandma, please," I beg, but she doesn't open the door. "I can't sleep."

She doesn't open the door.

I know. Even if I keep on whimpering till kingdom come, no bean soup would come my way, so I say very quietly and calmly as if I'm not starving to death, "Grandma, please let me read *Pippi Longstocking*."

She opens the book to page eleven, I sit down in the chair next to her and begin to slowly, like a caterpillar with its head ripped off, spell out the words. They are long, those convoluted phrases, each one weighs a hundred tons, but until I've read the chapter all the way through, there's no bread or cheese. One night, much to my surprise, Grandma gave me a piece of chocolate.

"You read very well and didn't stammer," she said.

It was then that I learned a substantial lesson. If you don't want to starve in a dark room and to get nothing but a chunk of bread, you have to speak clearly. That's why I asked Mom the other day—I spoke very clearly and didn't stutter at all, "Are you going away for good, Mom?"

I know that "for good" begins behind the bakery of the beautiful twins Dida and Donna, and *for good* never ends. Your mother puts her socks, T-shirts, and pants in a suitcase; you remain in that endless "for good" and get nothing for lunch. Your stomach hurts. Grandma Elena can chase you away to sleep in Gasho the dog's kennel because you forgot all about the working hours of Dida and Donna's shop and failed to buy bread. So you will have to learn how to eat sand.

"I'm going away for good," said Mom. "Stay with your grandmother. You'll make a good bean-picker. That's all that you can be."

At that moment I saw Grandmother Elena pick up the fire tongs she had used to draw scars and tattoos with on the backs of Ginger Dimitar and the other thieves.

"If you say one more time that nothing will come of this child, I'll cut out your tongue," Grandma Elena said calmly, and even more calmly did she pull a knife from a sideboard drawer. Mom failed to stand up and walk on air the way she did in the town square. She said quite unperturbed, though, "I say nothing bad to the girl. It's not a bad thing to pick beans," and then she kept mum. I'd have kept mum, too, if I were in her socks.

Grandma left the knife on the table.

Mom turned her back on us. Suddenly I felt sorry for her. She'd given me her make-up and lipsticks, and she'd told me, "What a pretty girl you are. Too bad you're growing up in this wild place."

"Mom, I love you," I said quite honestly. "I want you to stay with me."

I'd be picking beans all my life anyway, at least she'd be nearby and I'd have someone to talk to. She was very beautiful.

"Your mother is very pretty," said Grandmother Elena.

Whatever Grandma Elena says is true. It's even more than true, her words are made of steel, and everyone in the town of Radomir knows it. It was a pity that Grandma added, "But she is not a good woman."

I looked up to check what the matter with Mom was. We believed that if a mother walked out on her daughter, she'd turn into a weird creature. Had she become a sparrow or a minx? I ran out to the sidewalk and what should I see? Nothing at all. Mom was still a woman. Tall, her face blushing, she walked, head held high—as high as the flag of the European Union in front of the town hall. Our neighbors, quite smart housewives all, came out of their back gardens to look at Mom, their faces silent, frozen as if someone had tied their lips with a piece of rope.

* * *

Ginger Dimitar burst in upon us, and I thought to myself, "Now I don't know where Grandma Elena's fire tongs are. This will be the end of the story. Mom had clutched her big suitcase with her skirts and shirts stuffed in it. They said her pants were her battle flag, which she had waved cheerfully as she went away. Dad was making heaps of money across the sea, even across the ocean. It would be okay as long as Grandma Elena woke up on the right side of the grass. If they did her in, where would I go? I had two levs and thirty-two pennies, a slice-and-a-half of bread. Gaping and wicked, the wound Granny's iron tongs carved into Ginger Dimitar's forehead looked like a pit to me.

I was carefully observing the red-haired guy—Grandma Elena had no fire tongs or a knife in her hands. She was about to drown in her brown dress. Surely this was how she was going to die—in this ugly garment. What T-shirt would I die in? Since the day she beat the hell out of the four thieves, no child would play with me. It felt like I myself had clouted and kicked the burglars. In these parts, it was very bad to beat any hoodlums; after two days they beat you black and blue. They broke your elbows.

I cast a cowardly eye on the situation. What should I see—Grandmother Elena neither cringed nor cared a pin about the fire tongs.

Ginger Dimitar took out a knife, snapped something in its handle, and the blade popped out like a lizard on a boulder.

Grandmother Elena ignored it altogether. She went on peeling potatoes as if the sky would collapse if she didn't finish off this little spud.

"Where did Siana go?" asked Ginger Dimitar.

Siana is my mother.

But how could I know if he was looking for my Mom or for our neighbor Siana the cook at the Young Bulgaria kindergarten? Old Siana the Quarreler lived nearby our house as well. Which of these Sianas was Ginger Dimitar in search of? His knife, hungry for blood, touched Grandma Elena's cheek and I said to myself, "He's going to do her in," but she went on peeling that potato as if the peel was made of granite and she couldn't slash it.

"Where is your daughter-in-law?"

"Ask me again where she is and I'll cut off your ear," said my grandmother. Her voice, like that potato, was stone—you couldn't eat it.

"You old bucket of swill! She chose me. She dumped your stupid son," yelled Ginger Dimitar. "Your son is a lump of tallow, and a pretty woman doesn't eat tallow. Where did Siana go?"

"If she's not with you, then she must have taken up with another rag,"

explained Grandmother Elena. "Write it down somewhere and read it twice a day."

Then I quietly (for I am a small nothing, I have neither jewels nor gold) took a step towards the window and saw them all—Pavko and Vovo, the hoodlums jutting out by our gate. If these two were hanging out in front of a house or a shack, the building would be ablaze on four sides even before the evening news started on TV.

"If my house catches fire," Grandma Elena began more calmly than the correspondent who spoke for the evening news, "I'll cook a potion that opens big wounds. Wounds I inflict do not heal. Yours and your buddies' will not close easily. You will curse every day of your adult life if you set my house on fire." I was scared every time my grandmother's voice sounded like that. Every word was a volcano. I lay down on the ground lest it set me on fire, too.

Ginger Dimitar dropped the knife. It was no longer a knife, it was a worm.

"Where is Siana?" he rasped as much as to say something.

Grandmother Elena went on with her work, and I was sure I was the only one who saw Ginger Dimitar wave his hand.

The two huge guys who had been standing at our gate in the street rushed into the courtyard.

"Cut!" ordered Ginger Dimitar.

They clutched big axes and ran like mad to the cherry tree that produced cherries as big as eggs.

"No!" I screamed.

I loved that cherry tree. I had no brother and no sister, the other children didn't play with me since Grandma had a blazing row with the hoodlums, and when I sat under the cherry tree it seemed to me that stars perched on its branches willing to talk to me. I brought buckets and buckets of water from the river to the tree.

"Don't cut it down!" I pleaded.

"'Don't whine!" Grandma Elena yelled at me.

Even before the words dried out on her lips, she pulled out the pistol. It was my father's, the poor fellow, he'd bought it on the black market for a truckload of money. He must have been planning to scare Mom into staying with him and not running away to love a punk like Ginger Dimitar.

Mom wasn't a coward, though.

The pistol was as empty as my purse. However, I walked down the street wearing the purse, hanging around my neck on a gold chain. Everybody envied me and no one knew that neither the chain was gold nor the purse was a rich girl's pouch. The thing was as lonely as me. My dad had boarded a bus to Spain in order to get filthy rich; that was how Mum explained it to me. It all boiled down to one thing—Dad had sent her on a wild-goose chase, which meant that the poor man didn't know money killed you more quickly than a gun.

Grandmother Elena calmly held the gun to Ginger Dimitar's head and said, "If an axe touches my cherry, you are dead meat, Ginger Dimitar."

"Hey, old bag, your gun ain't loaded."

I also knew there were no bullets nor gunpowder in the tiny weapon.

My math teacher had told me that half the truth was often a whole lie. It turned out Ginger knew half the truth.

Grandma pointed the gun—I couldn't tell at who exactly—then the gunfire rumbled worse than a thunderstorm. Ginger Dimitar dropped dead by the kitchen cupboard.

"I didn't shoot at you, squirt," said Grandma Elena. "I will shoot you if you touch my cherry tree. I think you get my meaning."

Ginger Dimitar opened his mouth, but no sound came out of it. Granma poured a jug of water over his head, then I couldn't be sure where she got her fire tongs from—she kept all her things hidden by the full buckets of water we stored in case we had nothing to drink and wash the dishes with. She bashed Ginger Dimitar on his buttocks.

"Get out," said Granma. "I haven't requested the pleasure of your company. Oh, before I forget, you're going to crawl out of here. Or you will breathe your last."

Then I saw it indeed. A huge man who had a pail of carrots instead of hair crawled on all fours along the path to the gate. He was squirming, writhing, and sweating profusely as his large haunches tried hard to zigzag forward, a real grass snake the poor bugger was. Grandma Elena hit his heels with the fire tongs. If you ask me, I wouldn't torture a hulk of a red-haired man like that, making him move on hands and knees to worm his way like a sniveling sprog in front of me. Well, I was not Grandma Elena. I felt sorry for the poor fellow.

"Don't put him on the rack, Grandma," I begged. I didn't know exactly how it happened. I just felt the back of her hand clouting me one. Without meaning to, I rolled into the open not far from the man who was going on all fours toward the gate.

Kostadin *K*OSTADINOV

_The Butterfly Hunter

Kostadin Kostadinov was born on November 14, 1960, in Radomir. He graduated in Bulgarian philology from Sofia University, then worked as a journalist for several years. In 1990, he became the founder and co-owner of the PAN Publishing House. Kostadinov made his writing debut in 1991 with the book *Rosy Pelican Reserve*. His second collection of short stories and novels, *The Bay of Iphigenia*, was published a quarter of a century later. He also wrote the scripts for the feature films *Rosy Pelican Reserve* (2003) and *Legend of the White Boar* (2004).

Summary

The novel *The Butterfly Hunter* brings back the myth of Ada Kaleh, the Ottoman Atlantis on the Danube, and its inhabitants. The plot is based on the popular belief that when someone dies, a butterfly comes the next day, lands on the grave, and carries away that person's soul. Each of the butterflies in the novel is a mirror image of the deceased, a true kaleidoscope of human souls from all over the planet. At the boundary between life and death, each of them finds their way to immortality. The most valuable one, the 88th butterfly, comes for the novel's protagonist, Lazar Karaivanov (Kosturo).

"I haven't read such a well-written Bulgarian novel in a long time. A story of the now-gone Danubian island of Ada Kaleh, and the fate and adventures of curious artist and murderer Lazar Karaivanov, who gathered his collection of butterflies with much love and death. His whirlwind travels across the land are both heart-wrenching as personal and historical events, and deeply mythological and meaningful without being overly pretentious. Fascinating book!"

Emil Andreev, writer

"A remarkable Bulgarian novel, no doubt about it. Brimming, mellifluous, enchanting. As light-hearted as an adventure story, as wise as a philosophical parable."

Alexander Sekulov, writer

EXCERPT
Translated by Desislava Toncheva

CHAPTER NINE: Blue Underwing (Catocala fraxini)

As soon as I arrived in Sofia, I contacted the Organization. I appeared before one of its leaders, a gentleman with the initials G.C., former officer in the Bulgarian army. I am deliberately not sharing his name, because I didn't like that man at all, even though many have said that later, during the Balkan War, he'd fought bravely and basked in glory.

My meeting with G.C. took place in the office of a wealthy residence. I was introduced to him by a villager from near Skopje, who apparently served as his guard. The gentleman was wearing a formal black suit.

His bald head was shiny, freshly shaven. I sat myself down on a leather sofa, and he offered me a glass of cognac and struck up a conversation: "So you're the Gray Shadow?"

"I am."

"Word of you has already reached Sofia, and the Organization highly values your skills."

I hastily told him about my troubles with the detachment and of my stay at the old jail. G. C. patiently heard me out, then asked: "Are you ready to run a new errand?"

"If I go back to Macedonia," I said, "I'd probably be hanged."

"For now, you don't have to go back to Macedonia," said G. C. "What you have to do is kill a traitor who's currently in Chepelare."

"What did he do?"

"He was tasked with transferring weapons to Turkey across the border, but he abused the Organization's trust. He'd accepted the guns, then deliberately gave them to the wrong people. His death sentence was issued unanimously."

"Someone has to point him out to me," I said.

"You know him well," G.C. calmly sipped from his glass. "It's Kolyo Kaisha."

I must've gaped in astonishment.

"Kolyo Kaisha has been convicted and you must execute him," said G. C.

I jumped up, yelling: "Kaisha's not a traitor. I've known him since I was a child. In Setoma, I shot an innocent woman on the Organization's orders, now you're making me kill that old rebel? If you ever seized power, would you still pass judgments so easily?"

The top of G.C.'s head beamed in red.

"There's no room for sentimentality in the revolutionary fight," he hissed. "You took an oath, and you know where disobedience will lead you."

"I know," I replied. "But I refuse to carry out such a ridiculous order."

Angry at my words, G.C. pulled a revolver out of nowhere and pointed it right at me. "Consider yourself sentenced as well."

"Be careful who you're threatening!" I said, and then, without looking at the gaping gun barrel, I strode out of the room.

Downstairs, on the way out of the house, I caught a glimpse of the villager from near Skopje, still hanging out there on his post. I politely nodded goodbye and slowly walked off down the street, but as soon as I turned the first corner, I ran for it with all my might. I put in the effort because I was afraid that G.C. would send his guard after me.

This was the inglorious end to my revolutionary career.

I went home to Ada Kaleh. There was enough work in the inn, and when needed, I helped out in the forge.

Once, Siklavari hinted that it was time for me to settle down, so I started keeping an eye on the girls on the island.

I was sure that my dealings with the Organization were settled, but shortly before Christmas I received a letter from Sofia. A letter three lines long, written in distorted, crooked handwriting:

"Lazar,

The Organization has sentenced you to death for insubordination.

Hide somewhere for your life!

From a well-wisher"

It seems Mr. G.C. had managed to get me sentenced. What else could you expect from a vengeful man, whose honor had been insulted? However, someone from the leadership of the Organization had doubts about the evidence of my

guilt and, to clear his conscience, warned me to hide in an anonymous letter. I never did get the name of my well-wisher.

I went from executioner to target. The letter with my name on it had easily reached me in Ada Kaleh.

So any of the Organization's assassins could find me without much of a hassle.

The looming threat almost drove me insane. I'd bar the door in the evening. I'd lose sleep, springing up at the slightest noise. I eyed all the strange men arriving on the island with suspicion. I wouldn't be caught dead at the pub of the inn. I'd imagine the sniper spots I'd position myself in if I had to pick off someone in Ada Kaleh, and I avoided going near them. I armed myself with a revolver, carried it around everywhere, even to the outhouse.

I had to get off the island to live in peace. For a long time I pondered where to go. Unfortunately, I had no way of knowing the whereabouts of the Ciniselli Circus. I knew from experience that in the countries up along the Danube, if you run out of money and work, no one will look at you twice.

In January 1903, right after Christmas, I left for Thessaloniki. I spent ten days there at my brother's place. I slept on the floor.

Mihail and I had so much to talk about. He confided in me that along with several classmates, he was a member of an anarchist circle founded by his teacher Slavi Merdzhanov. With a fanatic spark in his eye, he shared with me some theories about the just future of humanity. He'd already managed to swear an oath to the Organization and was eager to sacrifice himself for the cause. I tried to cool his enthusiasm, giving examples of my misadventures and my ridiculous death sentence, but Mihail kept saying that every revolution has its victims, and that "when fire rages, it can burn the innocent along with the guilty."

I never got to meet my brother's classmates. The news of my sentence had already reached Thessaloniki. There was a chance that one of those young anarchists would hand me over to the Organization, so I didn't dare stay any longer in Mihail's warm quarters. I had to hide from both the Turks and the Bulgarians. I pondered for a long time where to go. I was already well versed in the blacksmith's trade, but I'd never been able to earn a master craftsman's papers.

There was one place in the world where a man could get bread and shelter without paying money. That place was the Holy Mountain.

I decided to go to the domain of the Virgin.

I traveled to Mount Athos by a steamer, which left the port of Thessaloniki late one evening. The sea was rough, and the ship rocked the whole way there,

for about ten hours. Women are not allowed on the peninsula, so only men had boarded, most of whom, including the returning monks, were dressed in black, as if at a funeral.

At dawn we came up at the cape of Sithonia, the middle of the Chalkidiki peninsula. The fog lifted and revealed a lovely view of Mount Athos, which rises almost vertically 2000 meters above the sea. A white cloud was perched on the very top, much like a cap.

The ship docked in Dafni, the main port of Mount Athos. Fifty horses and mules were waiting for us there, saddled and ready to go. They were rented by the wealthier pilgrims, while I, along with the rest of the crowd, set off on foot to Karies, where I arrived after nearly three hours.

The settlement of Karies was the capital of Mount Athos. The handful of small shops and three inns at the market were full of customers, as this was the only place on the peninsula where money could buy anything. All kinds of goods were sold, except for meat. I wandered the streets all day, explored the nearby Koutloumousiou Monastery, and for the night I sheltered in a huge dormitory meant for 60 people, heated by a single boiler.

The territory of the Holy Mountain is divided between twenty monasteries, which are like independent kingdoms. All of them accepted workers, without offering any pay; that is, only in exchange for room and board. I liked it both at the Zograf and Hilandar monasteries, but there were too many Bulgarians passing through and I risked being recognised.

After trekking across the eastern half of the peninsula, I managed to find a job as a blacksmith in the Greek monastery of Philotheou. The monastery was built high up in the mountains, about 300 meters above sea level. It had grown a lot in the last twenty years before my arrival. The stable housed 24 mules and 18 horses. Someone had to shoe them.

The forge was located outside the walls of the monastery, a hundred paces from the gate. It was built into the ground, with its stone walls constructed centuries ago. There was a wonderful view of the sea through the window. On clear days, one could make out the outline of the island of Thassos.

In the first week after my arrival, I slept in the common cells with the pilgrims, but after that I built myself a plank-bed behind the furnace in the forge. At least it was always warm there and no one snored at me at night.

I ate with the monks in the refectory. Although it's lean fare, there's no better food than that in Athos. On holidays, they cooked dishes with fish, squid and octopus, finger-licking good.

I had more than enough work. Mostly I made horseshoes and shoed the horses and mules that roamed all day with pilgrims on their backs or carried loads along the steep paths between the Great Lavra and the monasteries of Iviron and Karakallou.

Sometimes I was sent to help out at the incense workshop. Philotheou Monastery produced large quantities of that product and distributed it throughout the Holy Mountain.

The main raw material that incense is made of is the aromatic resin extracted from the frankincense tree. This plant grows in the stony desert regions of the Arabian Peninsula. When they turn at least ten years old, incisions are made in the trunks of the trees to produce exuded gum, which appears as milk-like resin.

In our workshop, this resin was ground into powder and mixed with a bit of water and a variety of fragrant oils. Long wicks were twisted into the resulting thick paste, which we then cut into pieces and left to dry.

After each contact with the aromas of the frankincense resin, strange dreams engulfed my nights. I mostly dreamed of angels with white butterfly wings.

Soon after I settled in Philotheou, I found a faithful friend there: a huge, shaggy shepherd dog, whom everyone just called "Dog." Apparently, some Bulgarian, devoid of any imagination, had named him that. By day, Dog guarded the horse herd and bravely repelled the attacks of the pesky jackals, who had bred enormously.

In the evening, right after the horses were back in the stables, the mutt would come to me, in need of food and petting. I petted him and gave him bread from my ration to satisfy his constant hunger.

I spoke to him in Bulgarian, and it seemed like he understood me. Dog was not so lucky—he'd found himself in a place not suitable for dogs, where none of the humans ate meat. I made a wooden hut for the mutt near the entrance to the forge. He accepted it as his home and started sleeping there. Sometimes at night, driven by his wild instincts, Dog went hunting for game in the woods. Afterwards his breath would stink of carrion.

A week after Easter, the monastery's chief horse-herder, Stavros, a wiry blue-eyed man from the island of Lemnos, in his forties, came to the forge.

"Grandfather Abbot sent me here," he said, "to look for a tool."

"What tool exactly?" I asked.

"A special one," said Stavros, "which both cuts like scissors and squeezes like pliers."

We rummaged through the crates and found the peculiar tool, the name of which I never learned in Bulgarian. Stavros had me sharpen and grease it. When he came the next day to collect it, he explained: "This iron is used to geld horses. We have five two-year-old stallions in the herd. They're very violent, and it is high time to free them from their male yearnings. They'll never meet a mare on Athos anyway, they'll never even see a jenny here."

They called me in to help the horse-herders castrate them a few days later. The stallions, separated from the herd, were wandering around and meekly grazing in the meadow.

"We'll begin with Leonidas, he's the wildest," ordered Stavros and pointed to a beautiful agile stallion with pitch-black fur.

First, they tied the horse's muzzle with a rope, so it wouldn't bite. Then, with another, thicker rope, they bound up his chest, front legs, and back left leg, so Leonidas was forced to lie down on his left side.

Even though he was tightly tied up in knots, the horse made every effort to free himself, and the five of us could barely restrain him.

Stavros did his job diligently. First, he washed Leonidas' male attributes with soap and water, then doused them in brandy. Before cutting them with the special tool, he made sure to tighten a thread around the flesh above them.

The other stallions saw what was in store for them but were forced to submit, and one by one they lost their manhood.

Finally, Stavros collected all the testicles, cut them up and fried them in olive oil. As he tasted the dish, he said to his assistants: "Mmm... This is our reward. There is no better food for a man."

"Do we have Grandfather Abbot's blessing to eat meat?" asked one of the horse-herders.

"We can't ask the abbot about every little thing," said Stavros. "It's the Easter holidays, we are not monks, and we are not forbidden to eat meat. We'll eat here, in the meadow. We won't bring the meat inside the monastery so as not to annoy its inhabitants."

So I, along with the other men, took some chunks of meat and sat down on the grass to eat them. The white kidneys were very tasty.

While we ate, the five gelded horses had already overcome their pain, and grazed meekly in the meadow, raising their heads from time to time to gaze at us.

The mutt Dog appeared out of nowhere and circled around me as he licked his chops.

"You're in luck today," I said and tossed him a chunk of meat.

Dog sniffed the white kidney, but instead of gobbling it up, he shot me a

look, then turned his head towards the horses. It was as if he understood what had happened to them.

"Eat, eat," I urged him, but Dog pushed aside the piece of meat with his paw, without sniffing it again, wagged his tail and went to talk to the horses.

About a month later, Stavros stopped by to drop off a pair of stirrups for repair. He'd been on his way with the herd to a watering hole, and as we were talking, the animals outside were snorting impatiently. He apologized for being in a rush as he was walking through the entrance to the forge on his way out, when the black Leonidas whirled in front of him. The horse suddenly bucked, kicked Stavros right in the forehead and knocked him to the ground.

The man couldn't say a word.

I ran up to him and put my hand under his head. He was breathless from the impact, life leaving his body. A red horseshoe print appeared on his forehead. His blue eyes were wide in astonishment—he had realized that he was dying, but he didn't want to believe it.

Sudden death is the saddest. It doesn't leave you with even a fraction of time to recall at least your happiest experiences. You cannot even dream up a place where you hope your soul will go.

When Stavros's eyes went still, I reached out and closed his eyelids over them.

The chief horse-herder was a salaried employee of the monastery, so he was buried in Philotheou cemetery. This cemetery was too small. The bodies of the deceased monks were buried there, but then, after at least three years, they'd dig up their remains, placing the skulls on special shelves, and storing the bones in the common monastery ossuary, to make room for others who had recently presented themselves before the Lord.

Stavros' soul summoned one of Europe's largest moths, called the blue underwing. Its Latin name is Catocala fraxini. Its wingspan can reach 11 centimeters.

It is included in the list of the 88 most remarkable butterflies. I caught it with little effort at dawn by the chief horse-herder's fresh grave.

This butterfly inhabits deciduous forests. It spends its days resting on tree trunks. As it lands there, it covers herself with its front wings, marked with protective coloration—gray-brown, streaked with stripes imitating the cracks of tree bark. The butterfly's brightly colored hindwings are revealed only in flight. They are black with a wide blue horseshoe-shaped marking running through the middle.

The caterpillars are gray with black dots, with large heads. They can reach a length of seven and a half centimeters and feed on the leaves of ash, aspen, poplar and other trees.

I didn't have much time for butterfly hunting in Mount Athos. In addition to the blue underwing, I caught two endemic species that I was never able to pinpoint because they were not depicted in my reference books.

One afternoon, as I was hammering iron on the anvil, I felt someone watching me and turned around. The abbot of the monastery, Grandfather Callistratus, had slipped into the forge. He was sitting on the stone steps by the entrance, looking at me and twisting the ends of his beard with his index finger.

I put down my hammer and went to kiss his hand.

"I like to stare at the fire," smiled the abbot, "the tamed fire."

Grandfather Callistratus was a small, nearly hundred-year-old man. Despite his advanced age, he had a sharp mind. The monks venerated him as a saint. Many years ago he'd lost one of his legs from the knee down and had used an old wooden prosthetic for a foot ever since. The abbot's staff, thick with a metal ball on top, served him as a cane.

"I appreciate your diligence," said Grandfather Callistratus. "God rewards good workers well. Our previous blacksmith was a monk. In time you may follow in his spiritual path."

"I'm not yet sure if I belong here," I said. "After all, I am Bulgarian."

"What of it, that you are Bulgarian?" The old man smiled." The monastery books say that four centuries ago Philotheou was ravaged and fading into ruin. Then Bulgarian monks settled here and managed to revive it. Our monastery has survived thanks to their diligence."

I promised grandfather abbot that I'd consider his words. I began to observe the monks around me and to put myself in their shoes. I admired their self-sacrifice during the gruelingly long services. I began lingering longer and longer in the church.

Mount Athos is an amazing national entity. All of its inhabitants have voluntarily chosen to live there, consciously obeying its ancient laws. For their work, the monks do not ask for or receive a salary, nor do they need any money, as they'd have nowhere to spend it.

The central governing authority on the Holy Mountain is the Holy Assembly of the monastery abbots.

Each of these abbots is the absolute master of his monastery, a kind of priest-king, and his subordinates are arranged in a strict hierarchy. All monks, regardless of rank, are obliged to periodically confess to the abbot. Thus, the absolute power of the priest-king is protected from intrigues and conspiracies.

In 1903, Mount Athos was part of the Ottoman Empire, but despite the strategic position of the peninsula, no Turkish troops were stationed anywhere on its territory.

The Sublime Porte collected a tax from the monasteries but preferred to not interfere either in their administration or in their spiritual affairs.

I liked the Holy Mountain. Philotheou was flourishing. All members of the monastic order followed the established rules, life went on calmly, without any great worries or doubts. I often conversed with educated and spiritually elevated people. I began to convince myself that this world was the closest thing to perfect freedom, but I was also aware of its main flaw—women were not allowed on Athos, and children were not born there.

Every evening after dinner, Grandpa Callistratus stood at the exit of the refectory and blessed the monks and pilgrims. Once, on my way out, he said to me: "If you have decided to take the first step, come to my cell to confess."

I mustered up my courage and appeared before the abbot that very evening.

He questioned me for a long time. As I was telling him of Ada Kaleh, a gentle smile spread across his face, but as soon as I began to describe the murders I had committed, Grandpa Calistratus began tapping the floor anxiously with his prosthetic. At some point he couldn't hold back his anger anymore and yelled at me: "Why did you become the executioner of innocent people? Why did you stain your hands with the blood of an Orthodox Greek?"

"I was doing everything on the orders of an Organization whose main goal is liberation," I replied.

"An organization that allows innocent victims to be killed is not pleasing to God," the abbot pounded the table with his fist. "Every person is obliged to think with their own head and to look to the salvation of their own soul above all else. Liberation is available only to those who follow God's laws."

"Innocent victims have fallen in all revolutions in human history so far," I muttered.

"And what did these revolutions lead to?" Grandfather Callistratus raised his hands. "Only the shepherd of the flock changes, and sometimes the dogs, too. At best, the herd is moved to a better pasture to produce more milk and wool. That is why any person seeking liberation is doomed to wander alone... Pour me some water from the jug, my mouth is dry."

The abbot drank the almost-full glass in one draught and looked me dead in the eyes:

"Your sins are unforgivable. Or at least I cannot absolve them. You are still very young and if you live righteously, God may have mercy on you. Now get out of here and get out of my sight! Don't try to find work in another monastery, your place is not in the Holy Mountain."

The next morning I packed my things and left Philotheou after exactly five months at the monastery. Dog followed me along the road for a long time, wagging his tail. A little ways before Iviron, the mutt saw a rabbit, chased after it and forgot all about me.

At the port of Dafni, I took the steamer back to Thessaloniki. A passenger on board told me about the assassinations of some Bulgarian anarchists who had flooded the city with blood just after the Easter holidays.

"Do not say that you are Bulgarian anywhere in Thessaloniki," the man advised me. "Otherwise, you risk a beating."

I couldn't find my brother in the city. He had left his quarters. His landlord told me that he was not sure whether he had survived the attacks and subsequent outrage against Bulgarians.

Momchil *M*ILANOV

_Summer in Burlandia

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Summary

Summer in Burlandia begins with several seemingly unconnected events occurring in the city of Graystadt and in the tiny private world of eight-year-old Stern and his family. Shoes start disappearing from random houses situated in different parts of the city; a mysterious aristocrat with ambitions plans arrives with his dirigible balloon to the dismay of the locals. His flying residence hovers menacingly above the city, thus embodying the feeling of threat and disquiet, which settles in the air. As part of the crowd on the square, Stern watches the baron's arrival with his best friend Mish, trying to make sense of the mysterious man's arrival. The baron has a cunning plan that will be revealed much later—to steal the dreams of the inhabitants of Graystadt.

The city is suspiciously reminiscent of Sofia, but it can also easily be read as another Central/Eastern European capital. It is equally unclear when exactly the story takes place—indirect references to the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, late 1980s, or even the present moment are scattered throughout the narrative. This creates a dream-like ambience of *déjà vu* and *déjà vécu*, invoking the feeling of the repetition of history, of memory and trauma. The novel is characterized by the blending of parallel plotlines and allusions to delicate issues such as populism, paramilitary far-right organizations, and the nefarious effects of social media.

"Summer in Burlandia defies any easy definition or genre; it actually contains in itself all the elements of a fantasy, historical novel or adventure story with a demonic villain. [. . .] Winter in Graystadt is for everyone. Summer in Burlandia is only for those who can invent an escape. An internal escape through dreaming. Precisely this possibility for escape—this bright personal horizon—makes the book so gentle, lyrical and easily accessible. Although the story takes place in the threatening shadow of the dirigible balloon hovering above the city, there is nothing scary or hopeless. This is an effervescent and playful novel about dealing with and overcoming evil."

—Julia Rone, researcher, University of Cambridge, *Toest*

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EXCERPT
Translated by Ekaterina Petrova

Chapter One

Some rather strange things were happening in Graystadt lately. At first, rumors started to spread that shoes were vanishing from different districts around the city. At roughly the same time, fogs appeared that were quite unseasonal for this time of year, while many residents of Graystadt began complaining of severe headaches. Two brief articles about the strange phenomena appeared in *The Early Evening News* and *The Graystadt Telegraph*, although they went unnoticed. But the shoes continued to go missing. All sorts of them were disappearing, too: boots, clogs, sneakers, galoshes, loafers, brogues, and occasionally even house slippers; they went missing individually and in pairs, vanishing from the landings by front doors and from the cupboards in hallways, and that gave rise to certain questions. The law enforcement agencies, in the person of Chief Commissioner Baum, did not take these developments seriously. When asked what measures would be taken, the Chief Commissioner—known for his peculiar brand of humor—replied that he would look into these incidents only when the citizens' socks begin to disappear, too. Until then, he had much more serious crimes to worry about and asked the residents of Graystadt to be so kind as to display a little more vigilance, since the police did not have the necessary resources to protect their precious shoes. With that, he considered the matter concluded. It's true that socks never did start disappearing, or at least no more than the usual percentage that got devoured in the washing machines' bowels. And yet, the shoes continued to vanish, persistently and without a trace—from different districts, but most frequently from those around the train station, as well as near Arsenal and Nagelstein Boulevards. The missing shoes were in a great variety of colors, which led some observers to speculate that the thief was motivated by aesthetic considerations. What created even greater confusion was the fact that the residents of Graystadt occasionally found other people's shoes among their own, and they wondered how anyone might find this amusing. And since the problem did not merely remain unsolved but only kept growing, Chief Commissioner Baum had no choice but to assign one of his younger subordinates, Junior Inspector Beyeler, to the case. Unfortunately, he also disappeared without a trace. Many people, including Stern's father, The Director, were at a loss as to who might possibly need that many shoes. Director Stern was quite an agreeable person, but like many adults, he was capable of reaching completely incorrect conclusions on the basis of unimportant things. At the beginning, Aunt Bou had no clue, either. She usually came over to The Director's home every Thursday, in order to have coffee with little Stern's grandmother. Aunt Bou worked for the city metro and was supposed to have retired long ago, but since no one knew the tunnels under Graystadt better than her, the Planning Department could not find anyone to replace her. She was small but bossy, and with quite an indelicate mouth, which was why she was permanently on bad terms with all of her relatives, but genuinely loved Grannyzou and little Stern, and never came over without bringing some Turkish delight, some sugar-coated lemon slices, or his favorite Sly Fox chocolates. That was a time when the shelves in stores often gaped empty, but she never had trouble finding something to please Stern (and he didn't mind at all). Aunt Bou loved him as though he were her own. Many years ago, her son—who was a promising mathematician and had just won the National Math

Olympiad—had been found dead at the bottom of a shaft in the Mathematics Department. It never became clear exactly what had happened. Some claimed it was an accident, while others asserted that he'd been involved with some secret organization. Stern's own mother had even been a little bit in love with him, so on the days that Aunt Bou visited, she usually came up with some errand and left the house, or just stayed in the studio on the upper floor later than usual. She did that for her own sake as much as for Aunt Bou's, since she did not want to serve as a living monument to something that had been irretrievably lost. Much later, Stern realized that the start of the whole chain of events that eventually followed could be traced to one particular Sunday at the end of March, when Aunt Bou came over unexpectedly (she invariably visited on Thursdays). She left her shoes in the hallway by the front door, not outside of it (out of security considerations). Stern was just getting ready to go over and see Mish, his best (and, coincidentally, only) friend, who lived in the house next door, at No. 67. Mish was eight years old as well, and he dreamed of becoming an archeologist or an entomologist. His father had no clue about his intentions, or about the fact that such occupations even existed. He was a practical man and hoped that his son would take on a serious profession. On that particular day, Stern was hiding behind the armchair and making a list of supplies he would need in case he decided to lock himself inside the house (sometimes his mother's moods became quite difficult to bear). Such moments were not rare, but whenever they occurred, he always ended up unprepared. The list would help him acquire a new level of independence, so that he could latch the door at a moment's notice. If things came to an insurmountable standstill, he would ask Granyzou to act as mediator. He'd heard the term from his father, Director Stern, and he'd immediately taken a liking to it. But something else happened instead. Hidden behind the armchair, he remained unnoticed by Aunt Bou, as well as by Grannyzou, who at that moment was coming back with the tray, on which she carried the coffee, the sugar bowl, and the blue tin box of Danish butter cookies. Magnanimously, he decided not to startle her, so he lay low in the behind-the-armchair darkness. Aunt Bou was visibly excited. She'd barely sat down on the sofa when she made a sign to Grannyzou and whispered: Come, come! I have to tell you something. Stern pricked up his ears. I know today is not Thursday, but I needed to talk to someone because something very strange has happened. Grannyzou didn't know what to say. Her best friend of thirty years had never before used such words. She was a serious person (even too serious), to whom strange things never happened. What's happened, dear? Grannyzou asked compassionately (the two of them addressed each other as

"dear"). The thing is that I'm having a hard time even putting it into words (for some reason she continued to whisper). Aunt Bou sighed and fell silent, as though she were collecting her strength. It was like a dream . . . but in reality! Aunt Bou dreamed a lot and loved recounting her dreams in great detail, while Grannyzou was the perfect listener, patient and well-intentioned. You won't believe what I saw, Aunt Bou continued. I'm getting goosebumps just thinking about it. She took a deep breath. From his position behind the armchair, Stern could sense Grannyzou leaning forward and her pupils dilating. Don't look at me like that, but listen, Aunt Bou whispered. Do we have to whisper, Grannyzou asked, also in a whisper, but Aunt Bou waved her hand dismissively. Yesterday, we ran out of strawberry jam, so I went down to the basement to get a new jar, since as you know Robert can't live without jam (Robert was her husband). I went down, unlocked the door, opened it—she was giving a list of her actions in their precise sequence—turned on the light, and . . . —at this point Aunt Bou held her breath theatrically—I couldn't move from where I was standing. I. Just. Froze. In the middle of the basement, there stood this . . . creature. A little dwarf, with its hair all messy and its eyes glowing like marbles, dressed in little purple checkered trousers with suspenders, and . . . And then? What happened? Grannyzou asked. It stood there and looked at me for a while, though to me it felt like hours had gone by. And then? Then it seemed to mumble something. I'm not even sure anymore if I made it up, but I think it said, Kugler, march! then snapped its fingers and disappeared. Grannyzou was perplexed. The only thing she could think to ask was: And now? And now what?! Aunt Bou exclaimed. I'm a reasonable person, I have good sense and a sound mind. I never drink alcohol except on New Year's Eve, I don't smoke, I do wear glasses, but that thing was, so to speak, right under my nose. What could it be if not . . . If not what? If not an alien. Come on, dear, you probably saw one of the children—you know how they sometimes sneak into the basement and cause trouble . . . And then disappear with a snap of their fingers, right? Aunt Bou added sarcastically. But that's nonsense, I swear I saw it. Believe me if you want, or don't. Grannyzou fell silent, had a sip of her coffee, then fell silent again. I've never heard anything so strange. But since you're the one telling me, of course I believe you. You're my best friend, and I trust you just as much as I trust myself. Aunt Bou swelled with pride and satisfaction. Behind the armchair, Stern was also quite impressed, but knew that retreating now was completely out of the question. He had to remain undercover until Aunt Bou went home, which meant no earlier than seven, when the *Reluctant Wanderers* show on TV ended, after the coffee was drunk and the cups were

turned upside down (Aunt Bou was a reasonable person, but even reasonable people like to turn their coffee cups upside down, so as to see what shapes might emerge from the cloudy black sediments). The next forty-five minutes seemed to him like an eternity. Finally, the TV show was over, and Aunt Bou got ready to leave. Don't tell anyone! Grannyzou whispered conspiratorially. Ha! Aunt Bou let out a little shriek, intended to demonstrate that this was nothing short of obvious. You think I'm crazy, or what!? Then she closed the door. Stern could hardly wait for the sound of her heavy footsteps to fade away, then rushed out and down the stairs himself.

He found Mish struggling with his violin. (His mother had certain ambitions regarding this issue.) While Stern was taking his shoes off, he heard Mish's father complaining: Let him grate away on that thing when I'm not home, you hear me? Son, just drop this whole business, it makes my soul weep to listen to you. Then he noticed Stern rushing in. Hey, little man, can you please tell my son and his stubborn mother that this whole business is a lost cause? I couldn't do that. It would go against my principles, Stern replied solemnly. Karadiamandiev theatrically crossed himself. Good God! Young people these days! Nia Karamandieva, a five-year-old doll, was sitting on top of the stove uninterestedly and swinging her legs back and forth. I have to tell you something, Stern told Mish in a barely audible voice. Mish put his violin down and dragged him into the other room. Come here, so the big tattletale over there doesn't hear! I'm not a tellertat! screamed Nia, and made like she was about to start crying. You're not, of course you aren't, don't listen to your brother, her mother consoled her. Once they were in the other room, Stern recounted the events that had just occurred at his place. To his great surprise, Mish was not impressed. It's completely possible, he replied apathetically while tickling the curve of the bed frame. My uncle also claims to have seen an alien, even two of them. So? You see! Stern livened up. That means it could be true. Not quite: my uncle drinks, watches TV, and says the Earth is flat, so I don't really believe it. Does this auntie of yours drink? No, Stern replied, almost angrily. And what does she have to say about the Earth? I don't know, to be honest. Then ask her. Stern fell silent. A shadow of doubt seized him, but only briefly. He was certain Aunt Bou was not making it up. Mish turned his attention to a model airplane (a prematurely discovered Christmas present). I actually wanted an airship, but a real one, he whined. This business with model kits is a joke. Am I supposed to spend my whole life assembling little model airplanes? he protested. Your violin is real! his mother, who'd been standing behind the door, scolded him. Yes, but I don't want it! You're so ungrateful! How

can I make you see that this was an unwanted gift, and that's the fate that befalls unwanted gifts. It's an ungrateful fate. Why don't you two go out for a bit, because your father has a headache, his mother suggested. Karadiamandiev was still reading the morning newspaper and silently moving his lips. These trade union people should stop making threats, no one listens to them anyway. All they do is complain. Why don't you go buy a copy of *The Graystadt Telegraph* for your father, Mish's mother said, and the two boys sensed that this was, in fact, an order, badly disguised as a request. Mish went to the hallway and dutifully started putting on his jacket. Stern also threw on his coat. And if they have Danish butter cookies, buy a box of them, too, Mish's mother said as she gave him some money. Everyone was nuts for these cookies lately. The two boys stomped down the stairs. That apartment's way too small, Mish remarked when they were already headed down the street. We're packed in there like sardines. Have you seen what sardines look like? I haven't, actually, but I can imagine. And all my mom does is issue orders, like I'm in the Navy, except I have no uniform and I don't get to travel around and see interesting places—I only get the worst part of it. Even with the radio I can get a word in, but not with my own mother. Well, my mother never says anything, Stern said. And that's not any better, trust me. Our place is so big that you can roller-skate around it. By the time I make my way from my room to the kitchen, I'm already hungry. I'd trade places with you, at least for a week, but my sister is such a crybaby that you wouldn't be able to stand it. The guy who marries her won't know what hit him, Mish added pensively. Stern actually wouldn't mind marrying Nia Karadiamandieva, but there was plenty of time until then, at least fifteen years, and that was as long as eternity. Nia Karadiamandieva–Stern, why not? Well, he'd also like to get married to Vera from his class, but some solution would certainly be found. Maybe Vera could be first? What exactly does your dad do for a living, by the way? Mish asked, interrupting his scheming. He's a diplomat, Stern replied. Right, but what does he actually do? Well . . . if you ask me, he smokes cigarettes, reads newspapers, and carries around documents. Oh, yes, and he's always traveling around. Wow! Mish said. Except for the smoking, I'd take the rest of it in a heartbeat. Stern shook his head. Impossible, you're required to smoke. They won't accept you otherwise. All right, then, it's decided—I'm not going to become a diplomat, and that's that, Mish noted. One less profession to worry about. I told my dad yesterday that I want to become a writer, Stern said. And he'll let you? Mish asked. Stern almost got angry. I wasn't asking for his permission! I was simply letting him know. He didn't ask for my permission when he decided to become a diplomat, did he? But

that isn't logical—you weren't even around then! He could've guessed, Stern snapped, it's not my fault that he's never around for the most important moments. But anyway, he didn't say anything. Just sat there and smoked. The two boys had now reached the newspaper kiosk. Mish leaned toward the little window (he was a bit taller) and peered through the dusty glass. You never knew whether anyone was in there or not. The dust, ashes, cigarette smoke, and the smell of ancient newspapers had produced an indestructible alloy. It was either primordial matter or the stuff that would remain after the end of the world, or both. On the inside, something stirred, then the window, which was taped with ugly brown tape, slid open. The sharp smell of alcohol and cigarettes immediately hit him, while two bleary eyes fixed on him. Can I have a copy of *The Graystadt Telegraph*? We're all out, the vendor replied with a grin, which revealed his yellow teeth. And how about *The Early Evening News*? No *Earl-y Evening News,* and no *Baron-y News* either. Everything sold out an hour ago. In no time. What do you mean? Mish was confused. Because of that Baron Nulde, haven't you heard? Mish had no idea what he was talking about, but didn't want to ask and risk looking stupid. I still have some copies of *Fist* and *Storm* left. No, thank you, Mish said, and took a step back. We don't read the newspapers of those "two-headers." The little window shut behind him. They've sold out? Stern asked. Yes, Mish nodded. Have you heard anything about some Baron Nulde? At that moment, a terrible sound thundered over their heads, and two fighter jets flew very low in the sky above them. Someone screamed: The balloon! Baron Nulde is coming! and dozens of index fingers shot up toward the sky. Stern and Mish looked up and saw a machine that looked like a cross between a blimp and a dirigible balloon. It was floating slowly, like an enormous ghost, through the gloom over the city. In the bottom part of its hull miniature portholes were lit, while the bright ray of light streaming from its bow was reminiscent of a submarine. To the square, quickly, run! Mish shouted, and the two boys took off, while the balloon disappeared behind the rooftops. A crowded tram clanked past them. Mish momentarily considered whether they should try to get on its back platform, where two people their size could fit, but at that moment he almost ran into a tall man in a black coat who stared at him under raised eyebrows. Where to, young men? Well . . . to the dirigible balloon, M-M-Mr. Director, Mish replied breathlessly. We're going to go watch it land, Dad, Stern added. Aha, I see. Off you go then, but keep your hands in your pockets, so that you don't get robbed while you're out there gawking. And you, Mister, I want you back home in an hour, he turned to Stern, who nodded in response. The crowd observed the machine swaying over their heads. Who's that Baron Nulde? a man with a funny hat asked, and his companion shrugged: I don't know, but they say he's very rich. No one in Graystadt had any idea who he was and what he wanted, nor how long he was planning to stay inside his flying residence, but as often happens, the fact that someone was rich made people curious and trusting. Thick clouds started gathering over the onlookers' heads. Mom, isn't the balloon going to land? a little boy asked, and the crowd laughed. The dirigible really did sway like a drifting ship, and it neither attempted to land on the square, nor was a ladder lowered from inside of it. Soon, several fat policemen appeared and started telling the crowd to scatter. Go on, disperse! Scat-ter-and-dis-perse! Nothing to see here! they shouted, as though chasing off chickens. Let's hope "the two-headers" don't show up, Mish whispered. They make my stomach turn. Who are they? Stern asked. Haven't you seen them? With their gray uniforms and their empty stares? Stern shook his head. Well, you'll see them soon enough. They're everywhere. Let's go home, nothing's going to happen here. The dirigible continued to hang over the main square like an unfinished film set, and the disappointed crowd slowly began dispersing. And although nothing had really happened, many of them went home in a strange mood. The dirigible balloon's arrival caused quite a stir. It cast a heavy shadow over the city, and with it an invisible weight descended, which had already been floating around in the air, but now took on a tangible shape, and everyone sensed it internally, as a vague premonition of danger. Graystadt's residents kept pointing their fingers at the gigantic machine and felt the power that emanated from it. Though it was enormous, it swayed as lightly as a boat over waves. The two boys hung around and gawked a little longer, but since no one knew anything, and it got even colder, the crowd soon scattered. Should we go to Gianni's? Stern asked. For ten years now, Gianni Orpheo had been making the best ice cream in town, and it could be said that he'd already achieved the status of an institution, of an absolute constant, similar to those daily 3pm radio announcements of the Danube River's water levels. But this time, Gianni's turned out to be closed. Mish went home without a box of Danish cookies, saying that the store was all out of them without having even checked, but his mother believed him, since most products were in short supply lately. His father did not scold him for not bringing home a newspaper, but mumbled something about how, at this rate, the printing presses would also go on strike and how "a possible lockout would benefit no one." What's a lockout, Dad? I'll tell you some other time, his father replied halfheartedly since his attention was focused on rolling a cigarette. Mish looked at his father's fingers, yellow from the tobacco, and his ginger mustache, then thought about how all his

father did lately was complain about everything, and made a mental note to look up the word in *Jäger's Dictionary*. They purposefully do small print runs, so as to keep people in the dark, his father mumbled. That's nonsense, don't be so dense—since when do people get their news from newspapers? his hefty wife asked from behind a pile of dirty dishes. Mish's father scratched his neck with a pencil. All I'm saying is that Ström's people are about to do something stupid, and we're only going to find out about it a week after the fact . . . And what if you find out sooner? she snapped. Are you going to go stand on the bridge with a wrench in your hand and stop them? Karadiamandiev gave a snort. Things are trickier than they seem. Everyone knows it but they pretend not to understand. I may be a simple welder, but I've been around long enough to know a few things, and I'll tell you this: there's nothing good in store for us. Now it was his wife's turn to give a snort. He was relieved when the children in the next room began quarreling and their mother went over to reconcile them, which put a natural end to the conversation. As for Stern, he had a quick dinner with his father. The Director was engrossed in thought and seemed to occasionally be mumbling something to his plate. He did that whenever he was ruminating on something, as if he were casting a spell on his dish or trying to convince it of his opinion. Dad, are you going somewhere again? His father startled. Yes, tomorrow—then he quickly added—but I won't be gone too long. I hope so, said his eight-year-old son, feigning sternness, or I might have to disown you. His father laughed. Let's not go to extremes. I'm not making threats, I'm just saying, so that you know, little Stern said seriously. I love you too, his father replied. And now I should go pack my suitcase. By the way, did you finish your homework? Of course I did. Little Stern headed to bed and only then realized the Baron's name was still on his mind—strange and completely unfamiliar, brand new and rustling like an unwrapped present. Until that point, he didn't even know that barons, which he'd thought dead and buried in fairy tales, still existed. He tried to draw the dirigible, but got distracted by the sight of the building across the boulevard. This was the ministry where his father worked—with its two towers and the dome between them (there was a round clock in the middle, like the eye of a Cyclops), with its zinc roof and its neat rows of windows, it was without a doubt the most beautiful building in Graystadt. The building was always bustling during the day—some people were going in with serious expressions, while others, usually young interns, were coming out giggling and heading over to Gianni's, since the desserts at the ministry restaurant were outrageously pricey and incomparably less exciting. The boulevard and the ministry building were like a living canvas, a kaleidoscope of countless possible combinations, and Stern's room luckily looked directly out to it. Even at that moment, the lights were on behind one of the windows on the last floor. It was 9pm on Sunday, as the bells of Saint Nicholas just indicated. It was more than unusual for someone to be working at this time, but on the other hand, nothing could be that unusual on a day full of unusual things. Stern realized he'd forgotten to ask his father who this Baron Nulde was after all, and then he fell asleep.

Nevena *M*ITROPOLITSKA

_Along the Tracks

Nevena Mitropolitska was born in Sofia in 1969. She studied Russian and English Philology at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and Library and Informational Sciences at the Université de Montréal. She is the author of the novels *Anna and the Mountain* (2015), *The Gift* (2019), and *Along the Tracks* (2021), all published by Janet 45. Since 2002, she has lived with her family in Montreal.

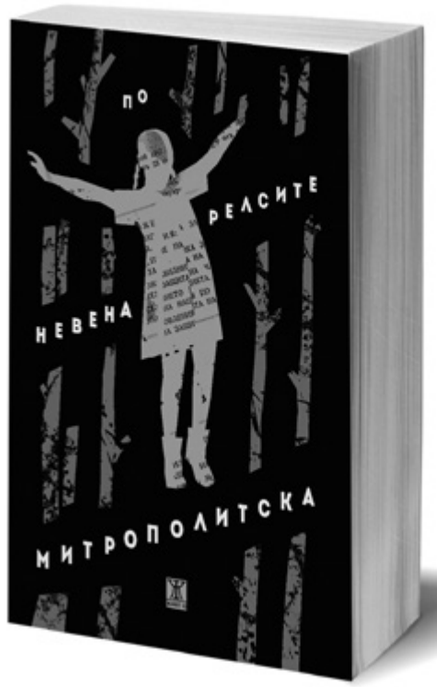
Summary

"This novel tells of moments of the history of the Jews in Bulgaria – both the survivors and the deported – with finesse, ease, and empathy. The text complements and complicates the image of the past, interjects the themes of foreignness and emigration, of the complexity of being and remaining good, and of the difficulty of maintaining even those threads that connect us with those closest to us."

– Prof. Amelia Licheva

"Nevena Mitropolitska is an exquisite storyteller. A storyteller who narrates insightfully, empathizing without judging. In this story of three generations of women – a story of survival, which is a never-ending process – she follows the thread of destiny with understanding, insight, and depth. And this classic and rare love of mankind is a great virtue – both in life and in literature."

– Elena Aleksieva



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EXCERPT

Translated by Traci Speed

Rebekah, April 1944

"I'm just a poor tailor, how can I ask for your hand?" exclaimed Leon – that is, Motel.

"Even a poor tailor is entitled to some happiness!" I replied with ardor, perhaps excessive, in the role of Tzeitel. And I cast a quick but eloquent glance at my father. My father – both in life and in the play *Tevye the Milkman* – had slipped off to the side and was waiting his turn.

The scene ended, a new one began, and finally, the Jews of the village of Boyberik in tsarist Russia were exiled from their native land. Tzeitel and Motel, however, in defiance of everyone, fought for their right to be happy – they got married and had children. I wanted the same for myself and Leon, and I was ready to fight to achieve it. "Even a poor tailor is entitled to some happiness!" I yelled at him, arguing with the whole world. "Even I, a despicable little Jewess, am entitled to happiness with Leon!" I wanted everyone to hear it and accept it. Mama had refused to come and my message wouldn't reach her, but Papa was there. He was there, and he was listening intently.

"This is selfish, Bekah," Mama had told me not long ago, when she saw Leon come into view of the window. "It is not possible that your family is in danger, the world is so cruel, and that you are thinking about love."

I didn't answer her; I couldn't find anything to say. My family really was in trouble, and my friendship with Leon brought me happiness. Misfortune and happiness, against a backdrop of war. In the middle of funerals, a wedding – that's how Mama saw it. And I, of course, felt guilty. But also offended. My mother was right, to some extent. To exactly what extent, I did not know. Up to the day of the performance – nine days already – I could not accept her words. My own happiness, either. And I was always arguing in my mind – mostly with her, but also with myself. I so wanted her to understand me, for her to smile at me and Leon again, to feel her support. She, however, did not notice me. And Papa – he simply stayed silent.

But Mama had been right about one thing – the world was cruel. The war was omnipresent; blood was spilling everywhere. The bombardments in Sofia, Budapest, Romania, Germany, Vienna, Italy, Estonia. Ships and submarines sank in one or another ocean or sea – the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Indian and the Arctic, in the Mediterranean Sea, the Norwegian, the Baltic, the Barents. The Red Army invaded Romania, Germany had just occupied Hungary, and in Italy, the Americans were advancing toward Rome. At home, in Kyustendil, we had our own, supposedly trivial problems. They must have looked trivial on the world map. For us, they were everything.

Grandpa Bito's soul had dried up – that's what *Gramama* Mazal said. We were happy that our deportation had been called off, but he stood grimly aside. "And Roza?" That was the first thing he said to us as soon as we visited to congratulate them. Papa also grew somber. As Jews, we had no right to a telephone, and so my father had sent her a letter back on the tenth of March. My grandfather couldn't wait, though, and he sent her a telegram the next day. No answer came. We knew about the transport trains of Jews from the newly acquired lands, but we had heard they were from the Greek areas. My grandfather had gotten in touch with a friend who was close to the mayor, and they went together to ask him. But he had not been informed. Then grandpa showed up at the police station for a travel permit to leave for Skopje. They refused him and cursed at him: "It's not enough for you that we didn't load you, but now you also want to take a vacation." He contained himself in front of them, but back home, he fumed long and hard. He took to snarling at everyone, and only Gramama could subdue him. She would put up with him for some time, but if he started yelling a lot, she would grab her rolling pin and chase him around the house. Grandpa did not give up. He got in touch with a merchant traveling to Skopje who promised to check for him. The merchant did this at the beginning of April. He had found the address, but the Jewish houses were sealed. He said he spoke to their neighbor, who told him that one night in March, soldiers and the police had surrounded the city, barricaded the Jewish quarter, moved out the Jews, and taken them away in trucks. They later heard they had been imprisoned in a tobacco warehouse in Skopje, guarded by machine-gunners. The neighbors saw police officers and soldiers appearing from the Jewish houses – one carrying a tablecloth, another, a set of dishes, someone else, a carpet. Soon the houses had been sealed, and at the end of March, the detainees were loaded onto trains and taken away. Where – no one knew.

"I'm going to the police station, let them arrest me, let them send me to Poland!" Grandpa shouted after the merchant had left. He grabbed his cane and headed for the door.

"Where are you going, old man!" shrieked Gramama and clung to him. Grandpa angrily pushed her away, and she squealed, but didn't let go. *Tanti* Franka and the cousins came running from upstairs, and they joined the people who were trying to pull him back. Grandpa Bito finally gave up, but he banged his head against the wall. When we came running, summoned by a cousin, the worst of it had passed. Grandpa was lying on the floor with a swollen blue and red forehead, whimpering, while Gramama had laid his head in her lap and was wiping his tears, stroking his head and singing "*Durme, durme*." She had put four children and seven grandchildren to sleep with this song. With this song she also put to sleep her stricken husband.

From then on, Grandpa stopped shouting, but he also stopped talking to us and smiling. "His soul dried up," Gramama would say, and she would touch the ends of her unabashedly colorful apron to her eyes. I would often see him scribbling something, his bony body folded on the three-legged stool and leaning over the coffee table – according to Gramama, he was writing letters to Tanti Roza and accumulating them in a box. He continued working in the store – he had quit, but she reminded him that two of their sons were in labor camps, a third was in poor health, and they had grandchildren and daughters-in-law they needed to help. It did not take long for her to convince him. The same merchant visited them again later and said the government in Skopje had opened the Jewish houses, removed the furnishings, and sold them at market. Grandpa went out that day and came home in the middle of the night. My brother and I stood in for him in the shop, and Gramama searched the town for him all day long. When he would come home from work, as long as the weather permitted, Grandpa Bito sat beside his wife in front of their gate – she, knitting socks, and he, holding onto a handkerchief with a crooked *S* and *N*. The same handkerchief on which a four-year-old Roza had embroidered her father's initials to give him as a gift. Only that the Sabetay Nisim for whom she had fashioned it was a different one than this one who sat before us clutching it – one who still believed that his daughter would outlive him. Still with his entire soul.

If the Jews in Skopje had disappeared, those in Kyustendil had increased in number. At the end of May – beginning of June of 1943, more than nineteen thousand Sofia Jews had received notice that they were being relocated to the provinces. The deadline for leaving: three days. The town they had to travel to, the number of the train, the hour of departure, the kilograms of luggage to which they had the right were written on the notices distributed to them. Where would they sleep? What would they eat? How would they survive without a house or work?

They reopened the Jewish school and the hall of the Bright Future community center – and in this same building, they first accommodated the new arrivals. In the Third Middle School as well. They slept on the floor, family next to family, the elderly along with the infants. Some of them marked out the territory with chalk so their luggage wouldn't get mixed up. In the courtyard of the synagogue – shared with that of the Jewish school – the Jewish community placed a cauldron and cooked soup, and the Sofians lined up with mess tins in hand. Gradually people settled into houses, some – renting rooms among Bulgarians. My cousins from Sofia, Rachel and Itzhak, and their mother, Tanti Regina, moved in with Gramama and grandpa. At Tanti Franka's, on the second floor of the same house, her second cousin came with her mother-in-law and her two children. The men were in labor camps.

One Sunday at the beginning of June, Mama returned from the market with a stranger, a woman with a pointy nose, sallow skin, and dark shadows under her eyes, followed by three girls. She introduced her to us: her name was Malka Aroyo. Her husband had been a teacher, but he had died three years ago. Mama had met them by chance beside the synagogue – they looked confused, so she said hello and started talking to them. They had no place to live, and they were almost without money. Papa invited them to sit, offered them tea, and told them that we would be happy to share our modest home with them. A bit later, he and Aron accompanied them to the school and returned with their bags. They built wooden plank beds in our room. I and the girls – fourteen-year-old Inez, nine-year-old Linda, and seven-year-old Malvina, as well as Mrs. Aroyo, would sleep there, while Aron would move to the built-in bench in the kitchen. These changes had significant consequences. One was that I gained one of my best friends – Inez. The other was that our house ended up with four more mouths to feed.

When the new family came to our house, the women like Mama who processed the tobacco harvest had just finished their work for the summer. She went to each of the neighbors again, offering to sew for them. Malka also started looking for someone to hire her, and occasionally she would find something – sometimes by the day, sometimes by the hour. Laundering, cleaning, or helping out in a workshop that repaired ladders, where they kept her a little longer. We, the younger ones, did farm work during the summer. We often stopped off at the Agricultural School – they were kind to us there and would find some minor task even for the children, Linda and Malvina. They would feed them and give them

each a little something to take home. And we, the bigger kids, would do anything – we gathered crops, weeded, picked fruit – anywhere they would hire us.

The new 1943-1944 school year came, but because of the restrictions on Jews, they refused to enroll me. Leon also dropped out. "I'll work and I'll help the family," I announced at home, trying to hide my desolation. Mama and Papa looked at each other and simultaneously cried out, "No!" They decided that I would sit the exams as a private pupil. They bought me used textbooks and I began reading. For the Russian language that was being taught then, Leon's father made a deal with a Russian, a White Russian émigré, to instruct us. I was thankful for every lesson I read, for every minute spent with a book. I had not appreciated it before, but at that time, I felt blessed. And so that autumn came, in sorrow and joy. The fall of forty-three.

A revival – that's what I connect that autumn with in my memories. Life for the Jews in Kyustendil was difficult, but our spirits had risen above daily life. In spite of the poverty and humiliation, the old and newly arrived Jews united. We, the young, formed groups of common friends – Aron found the Workers Youth League, and Leon, Blanca, Inez, and I, along with some other girls and boys, established our own little clique. Back in the summer we had worked together in the fields and orchards, and we strolled through the town at dusk; when it started getting cold and there was no work, we would gather in different houses. Someone would take out an accordion, and it would begin – songs, comic verses, recitations, book discussions, joking, and laughter. We had fun in spite of the air raid sirens, the fear, and the poverty. We knew we may not have many days left, and we intended to fill them up. To make them beautiful and meaningful.

And it wasn't just we young people who were like that, but our entire augmented community. The activities of our community cultural center were forbidden, but this didn't stop us – our cultural life moved into the synagogue. The place where the rabbi would conduct the service was three steps higher, and we turned it into a stage. That's where we held talks, literary evenings, and concerts. We had two choirs and a small orchestra, and they regularly performed musical compositions. Once, at the insistence of Leon and together with other poets, I recited my poem. I did it because of him and I never repeated it – they applauded, but the exposure was hard for me to take. Leon also joined in – they found a piano and he gave two chamber concerts. The finale of both was the "Serenade."

The last initiative came from my father – to put on a play. It would not be his first – he had also done this in the Bright Future cultural center, but during happier times – when he was a school teacher, he had free time, and he was healthy. That winter, though, he worked all day tinning troughs, ovens, funnels, stoves, and stove pipes; his hands were lacerated, and he would come home exhausted, sometimes clutching his heart and unable to catch his breath. I didn't believe he could find the strength for anything else, and I was astonished when I saw how, returning home from work, he would wash up, have a frenzied bite to eat, and leave for rehearsals. He directed the cast with passion, and also acted in the main role, that of Tevye the Dairyman, and he spared nothing there, either. As I acted, I watched him sidelong – I feared for his health, but I was also proud. There was no one else like my papa – artistic, sensitive, charismatic. His presence could be felt like a flame. And when our family was shaken up again, nine days before I called out Tzeitel's words from the stage, it was precisely this dedication and responsibility of his toward people that kept him from going under.

"You're leaving, aren't you?" I asked Aron.

I had finally gotten the rare chance to be alone with him. We were in the kitchen. He had just eaten his breakfast and was getting ready to go out; as always, he was in a hurry. He gave me a startled look, opened the door, listened intently in the foyer, and peered out the window. Slowly, he turned toward me.

For three days now I had looked for an occasion to ask him this question. Our house was teeming with people, and I couldn't find an excuse to get him outside. Three days before, I had gone down to the cellar to get the old textbooks, and among all the junk, in the most out-of-the-way spot, I found a suspiciously clean bundle. I untied it and saw new men's clothing: a sweater, a windbreaker, hunting trousers, and military boots. On the very top – a revolver. My legs grew weak, and I sat down on the chest. I tied the bundle up again and hid it in its original place. Unlike other times, I didn't confide in Leon or my father. I wanted this to just be our secret – mine and my brother's.

"I was in the cellar…"

He nodded. He was staring at me defiantly, his brows furrowed, all their hairs seeming to bristle. I was used to this look: quarrelsome, often sarcastic, bold, disdainful. The look of a big brother. I usually tried – unsuccessfully, of course – to respond to him with the same. But not this time. I looked at my brother and I wondered how I would live without him. What would Rebekah be without Aron? What would the world be without direction? I ransacked my memory for the last time we'd had a friendly chat. I couldn't recall. And only then did it occur to me what good fortune it was to have had a brother like him. And

that while I was struggling to catch up with him, my time with him had run out. We looked at each other that morning, my brother and I, and told each other with our eyes what had not been spoken over the years. I didn't notice when exactly his bold gaze softened.

"Yes, Bekah. I'm leaving."

Where will you sleep? I wanted to ask him, but I was afraid of irritating him. Did they dig themselves holes in the earth, or did they lie down on the leaves under the sky? Was there still snow in the mountains? Would they encounter wild beasts? And I thought of our room, before Malka and her children had come – our two identical beds with thick quilts, the little writing table piled high with books, the roaring stove. How we had set out in life from the very same place, what different choices we had made, and how these were sending us in different directions. Him – into the cold in the mountains, among the beasts and the bullets, and me – to the shelter of home, with Mama and Papa.

"I should go with you."

"No, you're needed here. You know how delicate Mama is, and Papa's health is shaky. When they find out at the police station that I'm not here, they'll call all of you in for questioning, they could arrest you and send you to a camp. I'm counting on you to support them. It will be difficult for you."

"Not as difficult as for you. They'll hardly be shooting at me."

"I'll manage, no matter that I'm young."

"Do you know how to shoot?"

"I do, my aim is even accurate."

"But have you…"

To my shame, my palms flew up and covered my mouth.

"Have I tried it on people?" He smiled at me. "No, so far, only on trees. But when I aim, I imagine the tree's a fascist."

A fascist without a mother, a wife, or children, I dared not utter.

"I want to give you my brown wool cardigan," I said. "It's big on me and it'll fit you."

"I have what I need. I'm carrying a lot of baggage, not just for myself."

"Will you be able to send word from time to time?"

"It's difficult, and risky – don't count on it. I'm not going to a resort to send postcards."

"Will you tell Mama and Papa?"

"No, I'm entrusting that to you. Here's my identification card" – he pulled it out of his pocket and gave it to me. "I'm not going to mention a thing to them because Mama will get upset and Malka might guess. If I don't come home tomorrow, then the following morning, give my card to Papa and tell him. He'll decide how to present it to Mama. Try to be near her, she'll be worried – for me and for you. When the police realize I'm gone, they'll call Papa in for questioning. Maybe not just him. You'll say that you don't know anything. I've disappeared without warning."

"They won't believe it."

"That's true. I feel terrible that you all will pay for my actions, but that can't stop me. This will be your part in the struggle."

I nodded. The thought that I would have my own modest contribution consoled me to some extent. And at the same time, the future stood ever more frightening before me – interrogations, maybe a camp, torture, without my home, my friends, my books. A future without Leon, it occurred to me, and alongside the pain, shame cut through me as well – I was probably seeing my brother for the last time, and I was worrying about my own petty happiness.

"And remember, little sister, this will end." Aron stepped toward me, and I was grateful to him that he interrupted my thoughts. "The more decisively we act, the sooner the end will come. Difficult times lie ahead of us, but think about the day when I'll come back. Just imagine how we'll celebrate together."

I was still clutching his identification card and I brought it to my eyes: Aron Mois Nisim. The name sounded both close to me – the brother I'd played ball with; and like a stranger's – a man with a revolver. I looked at his photo and saw not the young man who'd grown up before his time, talking about a struggle, but a skinny boy gazing absentmindedly off to the side of the camera lens, staring into a future in which he was not shooting, but sketching buildings, building cities.

"Fine," I said and cleared my throat. My voice was betraying me, my emotions threatened to burst out, and he was the last person in front of whom I could allow that to happen. "I'll do it."

I stuck the card in my pocket and headed for the door.

"I'll miss you, little sister."

I turned, took a stiff step toward him, and started to reply, but no sound came out. He smiled, opened his arms, and I sank into his embrace.

The play ended and the packed synagogue burst into applause. We, the actors, gathered in the center, bowed dozens of times, but the clapping did not subside. I met my father's gaze, and he smiled and nodded at me. This filled me

with joy, but something remained incomplete: Mama. I knew she wasn't there, but I searched for her in the audience anyway. While I was acting, while Tzeitel was leaving the place of her birth and her home created with love, I was gripped by panic – I had no time! I had not been granted the luxury to grow up with my beloved, for us to swear our love to each other, to fight for it, to create a family and build a nest before our shared happiness was swept away. I was barely sixteen, we Jews were the enemy of our homeland, my brother had become a partisan, and my father had been interrogated twice in nine days. He would come home and collapse into bed; I was afraid he might die. Mama cried, and everything could fall apart. Everything I loved could be destroyed at any moment. When Leon had kissed me the previous evening, I told myself that it might be for the last time. I might be seeing him for the last time. This might be our last performance, I told myself, walking out onto the stage. I had no time to live out my life, I had no time to taste love. And even I, a despicable little Jewess during wartime, with a brother who was a partisan, was entitled to some happiness. And this evening, Papa had understood that.

Radoslav *P*ARUSHEV

_On This Side of Death

Radoslav Parushev was born and lives in Sofia with his wife and daughter. He is the author of the short story collections *Donteverbeunhappy*, *Life Isn't for Everyone*, *Death Isn't for Everyone*, *Weed and Read*, and of the novels *Stalking*, *Project Dostoevski*, *From the Inside*, *Raped by Wonders* and others.

Summary

Parushev doesn't give up, he's back again. This time as the author of what might be his best work yet. The nineteen stories in this book run the genre gamut, creating a colorful, slightly manic collection that unites the historical with the dystopian, the serious and rational with pure and to some extent vulgar comedy. Traumatic key events from European civilization's history and present day are experienced via a non-standard, philosophical-ironic and provocative point of view, with an emphasis on bureaucracy and kitsch, with the fall of Constantinople, terrorist attacks, the Covid crisis thrown in as well… All of the with the single goal of making the reader happy, or at least a little less unhappy.

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Short Story "On This Side of Death"

Translated by Traci Speed

A resident of the capital who had, from childhood, spent a lot of time at the seaside got pretty tight with a couple, a husband and wife, who were coastal villagers. They'd met up quite a few summers in a row, dined and drank, haha-ed and heehee-ed, and along with their friendly relations, the capital dweller shared with them that he wanted to make a big investment, to buy a ten decares or so with a terrific view of the sea. The guy from the capital was looking to buy around ten decares of undeveloped seaside, suitable for paving over and building a private resort for Russians. The village couple who, like all normal villagers on the seashore, had a finger on the current pulse of the real estate market, shared with the other villagers what was on offer, and so, early one angelic November Tuesday, they called the capital resident to come immediately and buy from their fellow villager and friend, a really decent man, the dreamed-of ten decares of oak forest on the very shore of the Black Sea – the oak grove ended and the beach began, covered in fine golden sand. It was a former military zone, nothing around, nothing inside – the soldiers once kept some freight boxcars there, that's all, but now there wasn't anything, just pure nature, ready for paving over. Everything would be legal, they said they'd even talked to the lawyer, the night before already. The Sofian arrived with 200, immediately having figured out what kind of paradisiacal little place it was they were talking about; he bumped, metaphorically, his bottom on the ceiling out of joy. He signed the notary documents that same afternoon and transferred to the villager seller a sum that was, how should I say, monstrously high. At that time, a decare of agricultural land on the seaside had reached a price per decare equal to the First Bezirk in Vienna, built up with cathedrals. Afterwards, the capital dweller left for the capital very satisfied. Incidentally, in a fit of joy at this spectacular deal, he had intended to sleep in his just acquired oak grove that same night, to simply lie down on the ivy under the stars, but he changed his mind since the wind was already blowing mercilessly from the sea at night near the end of November. Before leaving, he asked his friends, the village couple, whether they wanted him to leave them a few euros as gratitude for the valuable contact, but they said no, no need, are you crazy, we did it purely out of good will. But did the villager

and his wife know that, in fact, these ten decares weren't suitable for any kind of investment except going for strolls around them? Yes, they did. They knew very well that there was an explicit, eternal, and irrevocable ban by the allied NATO fleet on building anything whatsoever on the territory of even former military objects situated on the coastline, out of considerations for some secret security there and, most of all, so Russians wouldn't come. But our villagers kept this fact to themselves in front of their friend from the capital. You don't play cards blind. And as soon as they saw his back, that very same night, they went out in the dark (from the mountain, an ill-omened hoot owl hooted and a hoopoe screeched, one that – the hoopoe – should have by that time in November flown off to Syria or Iraq, where they overwintered, in principle) and they went to their fellow villager, the seller, to ask for the promised forty-six thousand euro commission.

Their fellow villager said fine, a deal's a deal, and handed them a bag from Billa with forty-six thousand euros inside, in denominations of five and ten euros. Well, wasn't there any way to make a bank transfer, for instance, the village husband and wife asked. Well, now, by bank, snapped the villager, what good would it do you, you'd have to declare it, pay them taxes, so, isn't it better like this, in a Billa bag, isn't that best, you should be happy instead of complaining. Well, yeah, sure, but we're ready to pay whatever taxes, we agreed for the deal to be out in the open, what do you mean giving us so much money in cash, you, the person paid you by bank, didn't he? Well, yeah, sure, but that's the situation, the villager knit his brows, do you want the money or don't you, for fuck's sake? And our people, since they did – like all normal people – want their money, they took the bag and, filled with unpleasant premonitions, went on home.

Afterwards, they couldn't fall asleep all night, tormented by the suspicion that the money was, in all likelihood, counterfeit. And how could you go to the police, take them some forty-six thousand euros, and ask them to check if they're phony or not? Or rather, you could, but most likely you'd never see the money again, and on top of that, sundry people would come to you wanting even more. Man, what to do! They called another fellow villager, a little more shrewd and canny, who had moved to Burgas some time back, a person with multifarious contacts, whom they more or less trusted, and asked him for help and advice. The Burgas fellow said give me some time to ring up two or three numbers. The next day he called and suggested a deal – give him the bag with the forty-six thousand euros and, regardless of whether they were counterfeit or real, he'd give them another bag in exchange with twenty-three thousand euros in it, which he could already guarantee with certainty to be real. He'd take on the risk and they'd be left with peace of mind about the money, reduced by half, yes, but then everything would be legit. Well, sure, our people got indignant, but what if this, the twenty-three thousand turned out to be counterfeit, then what? Well, that's exactly it – this money for sure wouldn't be counterfeit, are you listening carefully to what I'm telling you, the Burgas fellow started getting irritated, but the man and woman hung up the phone, because they realized that his offer was not an option.

And so the man and woman lived in their seaside cottage along with their Billa bag, and they started pulling out fifteen or twenty euros here and there and taking it to the nearby Billa to shop for this or that, their daily household provisions, bread, you know, tinned meat, cleaning products. Let's spend it, they thought, so it'll run out, get rid of these damned euros. But first of all, with fifteen or twenty once every few days, they'd never see the end of so many euros at all, and second, our people realized that if they systematically exposed themselves to the risk of being charged with using fake euros (if the euros really were counterfeit, and if they were fake or real, there was no way for them to check, as we explained above). And the people started living in such a way, on this side of death, in suspense. And this wasn't at all cool – they weren't happy on this side of death.

Yordan SLAVEYKOV

_Family for the Holidays

Yordan Slaveykov holds an MA in theater directing and works as a dramaturg and playwright. His play *The Spider* was nominated for the national Askeer Theater Award in 2011. His most recent play, the monodrama *Victoria*, has been translated into Ukrainian, English, Russian and Macedonian, and in 2021 it was staged at Anton Panov Theater in Strumitsa, North Macedonia. His was part of the screenwriting team of the first season of the Bulgarian television series *Path of Honor*.

In 2015, Zhanet-45 Publishing released Yordan Slaveykov's debut novel *Final Step*. The book won the Silver Pegasus Prize in the Prose Category at the national Southern Spring Competition in 2016. The novel also won the Pencho's Oak Prize awarded by Professor Svetozar Igov in the same year. As of 2020, *Final Step* has gone into a second printing, thanks to strong reader interest.

In May 2022, Zhanet-45 published Jordan Slavejkov's collection of short stories *Family for the Holidays*. Both of his books are included in the Sofia Literary Agency catalogue, where they are on offer to foreign publishing houses.

"Stories filled with a different form of amorous longing—the desire of the living for the dead, a desire that cannot be fulfilled and for that reason can continue without end. These stories' common theme is the collision with death while being deeply in love. Or not the collision, but rather the condition of the living one, in which he starts to recognise his newfound longing for another who remains eternally unattainable."

Zornitsa Hristova, author and translator

"I was sure that after his novel Final Step—one of the most sharply penetrating texts I've read by a Bulgarian author—Yordan Slaveykov would not offer anything gentler to his readers. A painfully sensitive person, delicate towards his friends and his audience, crazily honest, artistic, elegant in his thoughts, daring in his actions, uncompromising towards himself and that which he does. There is much human pain in Family for the Holidays—whether it springs from love, which very rarely gives us what we expect from it; or whether from the world, which is so often rude and cruel. Yet in these stories there is a muted light, a soft consolation, that we frequently seek and rarely find."

Krasimir Lozanov, critic

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Tongue

Translated by Christopher Buxton; edited by Milena Popova

Between the diagnosis and the operation, a little more than three months passed. Three months in which life didn't just turn him upside down, but shot him as if from a gigantic catapult straight into the open cosmos of despair. He flew through the pain and darkness of the diagnosis, near him like tiny unpopulated planets, his family, friends, colleagues, work whizzed by. Only two of the planets were habitable. One carried the name "Hospital" and the life on this planet took his.

From the first check up, he didn't want to be deceived—and the doctors didn't lie to him, they didn't spare him anything. He felt as though he'd been sucked up by a gigantic vacuum pump, he wanted to move, to shriek, to run away but he couldn't. The pump swallowed him, made him helpless. Fear robbed him of his humanity, gnawed at his sense of pride with its sharp teeth. Even after the operation, he did not stop being amazed at how quickly everything happened. "Like in a film," he thought, as he walked to the bathroom on his floor, which seemed to him infinitely distant from his hospital room. With this difference that his life really was a true horror film. A film in which the leading character, on the strength of someone's whim, is transformed from a normal guy into a disgusting monster. Just that for him, there was no unexpected turning point fifteen minutes before the end of the film. no-one rescued him. "You're not going to win an Oscar, Dobromir," he thought. He laughed, his smile was pitiful and hurt; it caused him inhuman pain, his eyes swam with tears, saliva dripped from his open mouth. He didn't even notice this. He managed to muffle his cry, he heard how he groaned. He hoped that none of the night-duty nurses had heard him, so they wouldn't turn out of their staffroom and send him back to his bed. He walked slowly, down the corridor, with his left hand holding on to the wall and his right hand touching one end of the nasal feeding tube. The other end had been carefully inserted by a doctor, whose family name he forgot every time he read it on the little tag on his apron. His legs shook, but he made an effort to get past the nurses' staffroom more quickly. The door was ajar, it was lit up inside, but there was nobody—or at least he saw nobody. As he took the last steps towards the bathroom, he asked himself what he would do if there was no mirror. He carried on because there was no answer to this question.

In the bathroom's foyer, over the double row of wash basins, there wasn't a single mirror. He saw a hole made by a nail—he came closer—underneath there was a whiter rectangle. There had once been a mirror even so, simply some merciful soul had spared the sick the evidence of imminent death. He wanted to pee, the toilet was opposite the showers, he crossed the corridor, entered. The smell of urine and lime chloride wafted over him. The mirror regarded him with its huge round unblinking Cyclops eye. He approached, pressed his head against it, part of the surface misted over from his breath. He closed his eyes, pulled back, took a breath and looked at his reflection. He opened his mouth a little, then made an effort to open it wider. He turned his head to the left, then to the right, lowered it, raised it quickly, so that something in his neck popped. He didn't blink, he carried on looking, searching. He began to put his finger in his mouth, decided against it, closed it. He sobbed. His tongue was cut out.

And the other planet, around which Dobromir wished to orbit for all his life, was called Matthew.

Dobromir was a reporter for the local cable TV channel, he covered all fields, as he liked to joke about himself, and he took the lead in a weekly culture program, which every month was under the threat of cancelation because, "there's no cinema in our town, Dobri, our theatre is an 'open air stage,' we have some kind of mediocre orchestra which gets by because third class Asian composers pay to conduct," that's what the owner of the channel said, but Dobromir did not give up—here, he'd invite some local poet or writer to his program, there, a folk dance group from a library, evening class, there again a folksong group from a pensioners' club. And once even the deputy mayoress for cultural affairs who painted with her hands—talentless but with vim—and whose latest exhibition was called "Ukrainian Fantasies." When Dobromir mentioned that he hadn't known she'd been to Ukraine, she responded a little snappily, that she'd dreamt the title of her exhibition. After her participation the channel began to transmit District Council meetings live. The position of the program was assured. In the first week in May they sent Dobromir to the Mathematics High School, whose debating team had won some district prize. He went, interviewed the three girls and two boys and left. The cameraman said he needed to get home urgently, but he wouldn't delay and would think how to edit the material, so that it came to "no more than a minute and twenty seconds," Dobromir set out on foot for the TV

station. In ten minutes' time he got a message on Messenger along with an invite for friendship. They were from Matthew. The message read: "You're really sweet, what about a coffee."

He laughed, he turned down the friendship invite, put his telephone back in his pocket, muted it and entered the TV station. The cameraman came, they edited the video, they cleaned the noise from the recording, they imported the material into the editing suite. Then they chatted, drank coffee—a normal working day in the town where customarily nothing interesting ever happened. When after a few hours he left the TV building, he turned to the left towards the food shops and bumped into Matthew. He was smoking a cigarette, he was holding it a little unsurely between his index and middle fingers. He took a deep drag, threw it aside, exhaled out a stream of smoke straight into Dobromir's face and said, "Don't you dare ignore me, old codger."After that he added quickly, "Sorry, I'm not used to waiting long, I wrote you three messages, and you didn't even skim them. Let's go for a coffee, or tea, or whatever you want. I promise to be on my best behavior."

They drank coffee. Matthew behaved himself, he promised to write again. He asked for his telephone number "just in case" and left.

The next time they saw each other was two and a half years later. Matthew was again waiting for him in front of the TV station, he was smoking again, he held the cigarette more expertly, he'd grown in height to be manly and handsome. He shot the cigarette from his fingers in the same assured way and spoke as though their last meeting had only been a few hours earlier and the afternoon was smoothly turning into evening.

"I didn't get on with applied mathematics, its calculation, methods and modeling. I dropped out. Take me to dinner, I'll tell you everything."

In the restaurant Matthew moved his chair quite close to his and let his head fall on Dobromir's shoulder. Dobromir's body tensed up.

"I could be your father."

"You could be, but you're not."

Matthew straightened up, looked him in the eyes and said, "I'm stuffed, let's go for a walk."

The few customers paid them no attention, the waitress gave them an evil look, because she'd cleaned the table because of them, and they'd left even before ordering.

They walked through the town aimlessly, they stayed silent a long time. Dobromir coughed, but Matthew got in first, "I don't know why I didn't forget

you in these two years. Maybe because you were the first man who'd ignored my messages. Or then again because when we drank coffee, you didn't try to grope me"

"I…"

Another interruption. "You are on my side of the river, I don't need to be a detective to see that." Then he suddenly stopped, "It's struck me, right now it's struck me. I fancy you because you're a decent guy."

Dobromir laughed. "I didn't know that decency is sexy."

"And I didn't know, but I do now. Hold me."

Dobromir held him. They spent the night together. Matthew woke up late, he saw the serious expression on Dobromir's face, and he giggled.

"Now it will turn out that the morning is wiser than the evening, it'll bring out the morality in you. I don't want to hear such a lecture. If you want me to go, just tell me."

"I don't want you to go."

That's how it began.

What began lasted almost three years. It could have been called anything, but not a normal, calm relationship. In those three years they separated at least five times, if we don't count the occasions when Matthew slammed the door and returned after a couple of days. Before one of his short disappearances, Dobromir asked him: "What are we?"

"People!"

"I mean what are we one to the other, what are we for each other?"

"I can't answer on your behalf, Dobri, I can speak for myself. I feel good with you, I don't like men of my age. I like grownups." When he wanted to tease him, he'd call him elderly.

"Is that it? You just like me?"

"What do you want from me?"

"To allow me to make you happy."

"There are no happy homosexuals. There are just successes."

Matthew stepped towards the door. For him the conversation was over. Dobromir shouted after him, "And me, who's not a success, what am I?"

"Nothing."

He left hastily, suddenly, not accepting a word from Dobromir that might be some kind of criticism.

Once they were in the pizza parlor. Matthew ate a little pizza, drank a lot of Coca-Cola, he burped and laughed loudly.

"Don't behave like a pig."

"Don't tell me off. I'm not your child. Just because you're old enough to be my father doesn't make it so. I have a father, I don't see him very often. If you want, get married, make yourself a baby and don't allow him to burp."

Dobromir sighed, "Matthew…"

But Matthew crushed the Coke tin, threw it on the table and left.

This is how they didn't live together. Through most of the time. Matthew lived with him but refused a key from his home.

"I'm not really into this kind of thing, Dobri. I'm not going to come and water your flowers if you go to the seaside without me. I want to be free. What do you want?"

Dobromir stayed silent.

"You want us to become lovebirds and destroy our lives? No thanks."

And he left again. He knew, however, how to return with dignity and knew on his return how to preserve Dobromir's dignity as well.

"Please let me be forgiven, I'm a fantastic idiot. Can I come in?"

At the time of their first big row, Dobromir said to him, "I know that every relationship contains all the seasons within itself, but with ours it's always winter."

"We're not in a relationship. It's good in bed, and I manage to put up with you."

"You put up with me? You me? You don't know what the words mean."

"On the contrary I know exactly. I put up with all your attempts to train me out of using English words when I talk. I like it that way, that's how all my friends talk. I know we're from different generations, but that's the situation. I put up with the faces you make every time I pay attention to one of my friends on chat, and you want me just to yourself. I am not your property."

"Really? Well, don't pay me any attention then, zombify yourself with your phone. It's clearly more important than me."

"Don't be pathetic, don't compete with my telephone. Be a man."

"I am a man."

"OK, OK. You're not more important than my phone, because…"

"Because what?"

"Because you kiss me like no one has ever kissed me."

Matthew came close, grabbed Dobromir's face in his hands and began to kiss him. He pulled back, then he yielded, the kiss became passionate, aggressive. They had sex. In the morning Matthew had disappeared.

In those four months and seventeen days, in which Matthew did not answer his messages, didn't answer the phone, and then turned it off, Dobromir realized

that he'd fallen in love with this boy, almost twenty years younger than him, with all the force of a solitary man on the brink of middle age. And this force was devastating, because of it he spent the first days expecting Matthew to turn up. He even knew exactly what he was going to say, then he wrote some really long messages, he didn't send them. After two days he wrote another, longer than the previous three, sent it, every minute he'd look at his telephone to see if Matthew had seen it. Then he got angry with himself, he told himself that he should immediately forget him. One Friday evening, he could not hold out, he got up, got dressed, he went through all the bars in the center of the town, he peered into the discotheque, he went to the station, the bus station, he went to Accident and Emergency, they told him that since he wasn't a relative he couldn't receive any information, even if the guy had been with them. At two in the morning, dying of shame, he rang at the door of his home. No one answered. He began to feel sorry for himself, to blame Matthew, to blame himself. He began to drink, and when he was drunk, he'd swear. He saw him on the street on a foggy November evening. His heart stopped when they came face to face. They were silent. Calm reigned.

"Why can't we stand like this, opposite each other more often and let things between us get sorted out?"

"I don't know. I came back."

Matthew entered his home. In his home the five months of his absence left, as though they'd never been there.

At the beginning of December, Matthew had just put up the Christmas lights on the tree, he'd turned them on and was drinking vodka from his cup when Dobromir came in. His whole face shone.

"I won, I won the competition. I'll be the host of the Sunday afternoon program on Bulgarian National Television, I really didn't believe it, when they called me.. We'll move to Sofia, you'll come with me, we'll live…"

"I don't want to go to Sofia. I won't go to Sofia."

The smile on Dobromir's face fell. "Why?"

Matthew said nothing.

"I asked something."

"Because if I come with you to Sofia, I'll let myself down, I'll drink, get high, I'll cheat on you, it'll end badly."

"What are you on about, why are you saying this, there's no way of knowing?"

"There is a way, Dobri. I've already done it."

"What have you already done?"

"I'd reached the edge, the very edge, I even looked over it."

"I don't understand. Tell me."

"You don't need to know."

Dobromir stepped forward. Matthew stopped him with a gesture.

"I didn't simply leave university, I ran. I…had a man of my age… I don't want to go into details. He broke my heart. And I busted his arse," Matthew laughed nervously. "I don't want to go back to Sofia, I won't go back there. I wouldn't last out being in that town with him and not going looking for him. That's it. I'm telling you the truth, if you want to leave, leave, without me."

Dobromir stayed. They didn't raise the subject anymore, but the shadow of the invisible third person was hanging over their world and slowly stifling it. Dobromir became short tempered, began to be jealous. One day Matthew came out of the bathroom and discovered him trying to unlock his phone. He pulled it out of his hands, put in the code and handed it back with the words, "Go on, look."

The only messages on Mathew's messenger were from Dobromir. There were also dozens of photographs of Dobromir—how he slept, ate, drank water, read a book, watched a film. He left the phone, he went out. He disappeared for the whole day. He came back, said nothing. Now they weren't having sex. His mother didn't understand why her child "was letting his golden chance go," he explained to her that it was just an idea. She didn't give up, she went to the TV station to talk to the owner. Nedyalkov told her to talk to her son and her son-in-law. She froze, put her hands in her lap, gathered her strength and said, "My son isn't, he isn't… he isn't."

"You tell him then."

"My son isn't…"

"Your son is queer, I keep him on because the deputy mayor likes him."

His mother went pale, left the office, dialed his number, began to speak with no lead up. "I didn't give birth to you, so you could become…"

"I didn't become, Mum. It's not a job. You become a doctor, teacher, tractor driver. I was born like this. I was born this kind, I like and I love men."

"You're not like that, it's because of him."

"Him's got a name. He's called Matthew."

"It's because of him, you're not going to Sofia."

"Yes."

"What will your father say?"

"I'm forty-two years old. I'm not interested in what my father will say."

Dobromir put down the phone and looked at Matthew, and he said, "I'm leaving. Now."

He went out. Dobromir wept. This was about two months before he became ill.

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At the outset, he paid no attention to his bad breath, he was more concerned at the coating on the back part of his tongue. His GP sent him to a lung specialist because this coating was often an almost sure sign of chronic bronchitis. And he had that, so he was reassured and didn't go. The dentist suggested a water-alcohol mouthwash and said that it would go in a week. After three days his tongue began to hurt, and after another two he began to babble. He immediately went to his GP, who sent him to Sofia. They examined him, they took a biopsy and tested the tissue. The doctors were categorical: "Advanced stage of tongue cancer." He could ask for a second opinion, of course. He asked for it: "Advanced stage of tongue cancer." There followed a short and unsuccessful course of radiation therapy. Before chemotherapy they told him there was no point, and they had to operate. In the days before the operation, he wasn't able to talk anymore. In spite of this, he tried several times to call Matthew. He invariably heard, "You have dialed an incorrect number. Please check and dial again." He'd deleted his Facebook and Messenger profile.

Two days after his nighttime search for a mirror, his mother and father came. His mother began weeping from the door, howling, lamenting, she threw herself to the floor in despair. His father swore, and she fell silent. She stood up, cleaned her smeared green eyeliner, sniffed and said, "That guy wanted to see you. I don't know how he found out that you're in the hospital. I told him he'd only come over my dead body."

Then his father, a former soldier opened his mouth. "I told him."

His mother simply didn't take a breath, but groaned. His father didn't let her talk. "I told him. My son is dying, he's at least got the right to be happy."

He approached the bed, he caressed Dobromir's head, like you caress a child. He turned his back and left the room. His mother followed him. On the day before his release, the doctor told him, "Seventy percent of patients like you have a life expectancy of between five and seven years." He wanted to ask about what happened to the remaining thirty percent.

On the next day Matthew was waiting for him outside the hospital. He helped him get in the car. On the road from Sofia to the town by Okolchitsa, they were silent. One because he didn't want to talk, the other, because he couldn't.

Later in the evening Dobromir refused Matthew's help with a categorical gesture, but he quietly insisted. They went into the bathroom. Matthew sat on the toilet lid. Dobromir slowly undressed, stood utterly naked in front of the mirror, didn't immediately recognize the gaunt, bearded man who looked back at him. He passed his hands over his unfamiliar skin, it was yellowy and hot, it touched his fingers, it was as if his blue veins wanted to hide, from fear of becoming yellow. His legs were slightly twisted from weakness. They looked like the legs of a scarecrow. He touched his loins. He felt nothing. Then he pressed one hand to the heart of the unknown naked man, while the other felt the pulse in his neck. He stayed like this a long time, he took the pulse like Morse code, he measured it, he decoded it. And he very slowly caught on to the fact that the unknown man and he were the same person. He just about managed with his hair and beard.

He just turned on the shower hot tap. He stayed a long time, immobile, leaving the water to wash away the smell of the hospital and death. He saw nothing through the steam. All the time Matthew spoke not a word. He just stood up, took off his wet clothes, embraced Dobromir and led him to their bed. They lay in the dark, they didn't sleep. Matthew left an arm over his body, Dobromir wanted to remove it, instead he grabbed it, took it to his lips to begin to kiss it, he bit it, then let it go, squeezing into the naked body next to him. His groin awoke. Afterwards they slept in each other's arms.

Dobromir refused to write messages, he lost his temper and threw out all notebooks and notepads that he found left by the bed, he ignored the sticky notes with short messages on the table or over the fridge. He was a man of words, his whole life, his whole career had been dedicated to words. He wanted to continue to work on television, he wanted to talk, talk, talk, raise a ruckus, argue, sing, tell jokes, read books out loud, mutter under his nose, while he prepared to tell Matthew how much he loved him, he wanted to talk, talk, not till he got tired of talking, but until he just died from talking. Instead, he was forced to be silent. That's why when on the next appointment the doctor told him that a tongue could be made from the muscles of his hand, he did not hesitate.

His new tongue flapped in his mouth like a fish out of water. He couldn't control it, he swallowed with difficulty, and three months after the operation his attempts to talk still resembled mooing to the unpracticed ear. Matthew understood him because he loved him and wanted to understand him. Dobromir only pronounced vowels clearly.

"I-a-a-a-o-a," for example, meant "I want a glass of water."

And when he tried to swallow real food, a little soup, instead of feeding from the nasal tube, he threw up in Matthew's lap.

"O-o-I-i-a o-oi-u," meant "sorry, I am horrible."

One day they talked.

"I-u-o-a?" (Why you come back?)

"Because I love you."

"I-u-e-e-e" (Why you leave me?)

"Because I was scared of loving you."

They fell silent.

"A-a-u-i-i-o?" (And what are you missing now?)

"You kissing me. You kiss me like no one else has ever kissed me."

"O-i-o-a-e-e-o-o-i-I" (So I do have a reason for living).

Matthew hugged him. They stayed cuddling the whole night.

Translators

Izidora Angel is a Bulgarian-born writer and literary translator in Chicago. She is the author of two book-length translations from Bulgarian, Hristo Karastoyanov's *The Same Night Awaits Us All*, which *World Literature Today* called "a bold novel of resistance," and Nataliya Deleva's *Four Minutes*, which *The Irish Times* hailed as "immensely effective". Izidora's criticism, essays and translations have been featured in *Astra Magazine*, *Electric Literature, Sublunary Editions*, *Words Without Borders*, and elsewhere. Her projects have been supported by English PEN, ART OMI, The Rona Jaffe Foundation, and others. She is a co-founder of the Chicago-based Third Coast Translators Collective.

Christopher Buxton is the author of four novels published in Bulgaria by Znatsi: *Far from the Danube*, *The Return*, *The Devil's Notebook* and *The Curse of Undying Dreams*. His published prose translations include: Rumen Balabanov's *Ragiad* (Dalkey Press, 2013); Izabella Shopova's *East in Eden* (Inkwater Press, 2015); Alek Popov's *Mission London* (edited, Istros 2014); and Kerana Angelova's *The Interior Room* (Accents 2017). He has had four anthologies of translations of classic Bulgarian poetry published, and his work has appeared in various magazines. He regularly translates for the European Prize for Literature and is currently working on *Absolvo te* by 2021 winner Georgi Bardarov. www.christopherbuxton.com

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Ekaterina Petrova is a literary translator and nonfiction writer. She holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Iowa, where she was awarded the Iowa Arts Fellowship and helped edit *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation*. Her work has appeared in *Asymptote*, *Words Without Borders*, *The Southern Review*, *91st Meridian*, *European Literature Network*, and elsewhere. Her translation-in-progress of Iana Boukova's novel *Traveling in the Direction of the Shadow* received a 2021 PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant. She has also received fellowships from ART OMI, the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, and the TRADUKI literature network.

Angela Rodel is a literary translator who holds degrees from Yale and UCLA. Her translations have appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Two Lines*, *Ploughshares*, *Words Without Borders*, etc. She has received NEA and PEN translation grants; seven novels in her translation have been published in the US and UK. Her translation of Georgi Gospodinov's *Physics of Sorrow* won the 2016 AATSEEL Prize for Literary Translation, and was shortlisted for the 2016 PEN Translation Prize and ALTA's 2016 Translation Award. Her translation of four novellas by Georgi Markov come out from Penguin Random House in 2022, while her translation of Georgi Gospodinov's novel *Time Shelter* will be published by Liveright in 2022.

Traci Speed is an American who became interested in Bulgaria and its language after a trip to Bulgaria in 1990. She had previously studied Russian and began her formal study of Bulgarian while earning her PhD in Slavic Linguistics from the University of California, Berkeley, where she focused on South Slavic languages, language contact, and the Balkan Sprachbund. She also became involved in the lively Balkan music and dance community in the San Francisco Bay Area, and she still enjoys participating in Bulgarian folk dancing. After going to Shumen, Bulgaria, on a Fulbright research grant in 2017, she stayed in Bulgaria, where she now teaches translation at Sofia University. In addition to translating Bulgarian literature, she also works for several art museums in the country, translating catalogs and exhibition materials.

Desislava Toncheva works as a translator and senior editor in the English Service Department of the Bulgarian News Agency (BTA). She is also a clinical psychologist with her own psychotherapy practice on the side. In fact, she discovered her passion for translation when she was studying to be a therapist and helped out with translating lectures by foreign trainers, which inspired her to get her MA in Translation and Editing. She still often translates psychology-related events. Toncheva feels that both of her career paths complement each other perfectly, as in essence both are about the support of understanding and communication.