Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2026



NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE
CONGRESS CENTRE SOFIA

NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE



ТОЗИ ПРОЕКТ Е РЕАЛИЗИРАН
С ФИНАНСОВАТА ПОДКРЕПА
НА МИНИСТЕРСТВОТО НА КУЛТУРАТА

Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2026

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BOOK CENTRE

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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 close cooperation with the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria, and the Bulgarian Book Association, 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.

Contemporary Bulgarian Prose 2026



Photo: Yana Lozeva

Yordanka *B*ELEVA

God's Mercy

Yordanka Beleva (1977) is considered one of the most distinctive female voices in contemporary Bulgarian literature. A short story writer and a poet, she has authored four poetry collections: *Peignoirs and Boats* (2002), *Her* (2012), *The Missed Moment* (2017), *Evening News* (2024), and five short story collections: *The Sea Level of Love* (2011), *Keys* (2015), *Keder* (2018), *Hedgehogs Come Out at Night* (2022), *God's Mercy* (2025). She has won national awards for both poetry and prose and her short stories and poems have been translated into Arabic, English, French, German, Polish, Spanish, Ukrainian and published in numerous anthologies. Beleva's short story collection *Keder,* translated in English by Izidora Angel, won a National Endowment for the Arts prose award in the US at the end of 2022. *Keder* was published in Macedonian (Blesok, 2019), Turkish (Metis, 2024) and in Czech (Runa, 2025). It is forthcoming in Arabic (Al-fouad Publishing) and Tamil (Discovery Publications). Beleva's poetry collection *The Missed Moment* was published in German by eta Verlag in 2021. Many of her short stories have been filmed and won awards at international festivals (*His Cannibal Granny, Family Portrait of the Black Earth* and others). Beleva's short story collection *Hedgehogs Come Out at Night* is already published in Spanish (La Tortuga Búlgara, 2025) and is in the works for Macedonian (ILI-ILI).

About the book

God's Mercy is Yordanka Beleva's fifth short story collection. It contains 17 new stories in which nostalgia and longing, loss and tenderness, childhood and immortality do not alternate but move in parallel. If we had to sum up the distinctive quality of these stories in a single word, that word would be restraint—this is how Rositsa Chernokozheva from the Institute for Literature at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences defines Yordanka Beleva's writing: "Yordanka Beleva's talent lies precisely in this measure, so difficult for a creator to achieve. Indeed, to take nothing away, yet to add nothing either."

The meaningful title of the collection—*God's Mercy*—as well as the story of the same name, suggest the idea of an antidote. The overall message of Yordanka Beleva's writing lies in this: storytelling as an antidote.

Short story collection,
100 pages
ISBN: 9786191869770
Janet 45 Publishing House,
2024
Rights inquiries:
Sofia Literary Agency (sofialitag.com)



Stories from GOD'S MERCY

Translated by Izidora Angel

Snowplow

Uncle Misho was a snowplow driver, but in life he was never able to differentiate between warmth and coldness. It's probably why he married and divorced several times. His last wife, Aunt Boryanka, knitted *terlitsi* all day. She said knitting the thick house slippers calmed her. That she felt her hands were of no use if she were not knitting.

Once, I asked her when it was that a woman's hands became of no use to her and instead of answering she dropped her handiwork, then bent down to pick it back up and went on looping her stitches. A good while later, realizing I was still waiting for her to answer, she muttered—*when she loses her eleventh finger*. I didn't understand what she meant by that, and I simply decided she'd lost her mind after they fired her from the hospital.

Aunt Boryanka had worked as a midwife for many years. She was so skilled that years after she retired she still kept going to the maternity ward to help deliver babies. But when a woman died in childbirth on her shift, Aunt Boryanka stayed home for good to knit her *terlitsi*.

I don't know how she and Uncle Misho ended up together. He liked to say that it was his snowplow that brought him the women in his life. They'd all been stranded in their cars in the snow. He helped each one get out of her car, then warmed her up in the cab of his plow. The warming typically lasted a year or two, and then it was time for the next lonely woman driver to come along. After the fourth wife, I stopped counting who was living with him.

Aunt Boryanka didn't come in winter. She moved in with my uncle in July. After the first heavy snow fell, we kept watch to see when he'd leave her, but every night, after he was done clearing the roads, he came home alone. Later, because the physiological limits of age meant nothing to our bursting anticipation, we stalked them to see when they'd have a baby, but as time went on, we stopped peeking over the fence to look for that particular joy. *Don't wait for a baby, it's never going to happen*, said Aunt Boryanka once. *For many years I brought life out, but I never did take it into myself.* And that's when I saw her eleventh finger.

The eleventh finger is like one of those little boxes with a double bottom that hides the inventory of a woman's soul. A phantom digit that makes a woman's grip even stronger. The guileless padlock on her hands which protects from the trespass of strangers and simultaneously unlocks with only a word or a look. The capacity to survive in hopeless times. Everything that a woman will never birth but carries in her womb for life. Aunt Boryanka's eleventh finger was hidden in her yarn: before she knitted anything, she first unraveled herself and it was with those threads that she warmed our frozen feet.

Sometimes she knitted in the dark, lit only by the television screen. Once, the electricity went out and for a few brief seconds I saw sparks flying from her knitting needles. Physics isn't really my thing, but that's when it dawned on me how she must have put Uncle Misho under her spell—with the static electricity in her hands.

It's how I still remember her, sitting on the couch, ball of yarn and needles in her lap, taking stitch after stitch to knit bright *terlitsi*, surrounded by the endless radio and television programs, their signals crossing in an intricate tapestry of words.

When Uncle Misho retired, it's as though Aunt Boryanka turned into a snowplow: her hands took on a seasonal nature. They awoke only in winter, with an ever-diminishing amount of warmth. Like the burner of a stove whose lingering heat suggested that there'd once been a fire under it, but that the bitter cold was now far closer than the fire.

Her last years she lived out in a kind of daze. Sometimes in spring, the cry of a cat in heat would briefly startle her out of her stupor, and for a minute or two Aunt Boryanka would gaze pleadingly at the balls of yarn and the needles in her knitting basket. As though she could set a ball rolling with just her eyes and follow the thread all the way back home. I thought I heard her pray once for the way back to be quick. Midwifery had taught her this: the way in and the way out were one and the same, only the traveler's names changed depending on whether one was arriving with her first breath or leaving with her last.

The *terlitsi* I have from her are worn down in places, but I can't bring myself to throw them out. One of them even has a hole in it. Sometimes I hold it up, look at the world through that hole and understand that everything is simply a matter of time. And I keep wearing them. The hole grows wider. It's still early, but one day it'll dilate enough so that brand-new knitting will be born from this *terlik*.

Bad Prognoses

You asked to know what the different weather patterns have in common. I can only speak for the hospital. We can call it hospital weather. The good news is always delivered by the doctors and the nurses, but when there's bad news, they send me out to deliver it. Maybe because there's a disarming, almost infantile sweetness to my face and the way I speak, quite slowly, so sometimes even I get carried away by my own voice. It's a nice voice—it calms and carries the listener to a faraway place. My grandfather sang in a church choir, it was he who perhaps bequeathed to me the talent of suddenly deploying the listener to a better place.

This might come out wrong but I love seeing people debilitated by grief. Their hanging eyelids have always looked to me like flags flying at half-mast for some kind of national mourning. I peek under the flags—to move them, to raise them back up, to call off the mourning. To do what I can to slowly transition from nationwide mourning to nationwide celebration. Thus far, I've not been able to succeed in this endeavour. I remain somewhere in the debilitating grief. Do you know what someone debilitated by grief looks like? Her soul is dehydrated, all its vital fluids have been drained, it's hung out to dry like clothes long-ago forgotten on the line. I want to put away the clothes, to arrange them by color and purpose, but I'm not allowed to do that. Instead, I hand the grieving a bottle of water, wait for them to take a sip and begin to speak: there are words that hydrate the soul.

For instance, how their daughter smiled in her sleep this morning, revealing a dimple in one of her cheeks. How I got close to her, anticipating her opening her eyes. I make up a name she mumbled in her lifelessness and lie in wait for the parents to reveal more information about the person whose name it might be. I'm like those phone scammers—I dive into the shallows of the conversation and feel my way forward depending on the types of words they toss into the water. From those words I craft sentences, and from those sentences—a story with a twist. Unlike phone scammers, I'm not looking to enrich myself, but my methods are quite the same—after I ascertain how much despair they've accumulated and where they store it, I move quickly to take it away. Unfortunately, I can't carry everything all at once. Sometimes I manage to gather up ten-twenty sighs and a few stray tears that weren't absorbed by the skin. Tears are all quite different from

each other. I can figure out when someone is crying for someone else and when they're crying for themselves. There's something quite dense about the tears one sheds for others. Once, I gazed deeply into one and turned its pages. It was a novel about a dead child.

Hospital weather resembles weather forecasts, only it's harder to learn and harder to pronounce. Instead of forecasting rain or snow or sun, we forecast life or death and in between sometimes there are other seasons. The prognoses here are mostly short-term and no one really knows what will happen in the long-term. As the hospital's weather forecaster, the hardest words for me to say are *prepare for the worst.* It's not exactly the same as saying *tomorrow, keep your umbrellas handy.* I know exactly what it means: they must prepare their hearts. A devastating hurricane is on its way. I don't give hurricanes people's names, because there's only one name, and it keeps repeating itself. It isn't even a name. It's a preposition: *without.* This is the weather without someone, and it's always in the forecast.

I remember having to tell a mother and a father that their son would lose a leg. The father took the news harder. He kept saying that his boy was an athlete, that he had to keep training, how important sports were. The mother was simply grateful that her son was alive. Only we'd gotten the prognosis all wrong. Their son was discharged from the hospital in a wheelchair and eight months later, the young man took his own life. I would never have known this, were it not for the young man's parents coming back to the hospital to look for his leg. The amputated one. *It's the only thing of our boy we have left, let us have it so we can bring it back home. Please, tell us where you keep the legs, we'll recognize it right away, he's got a scar on the back of the thigh. Here, we've brought a photograph. That leg is everything to us now. We can't go home without it. Dear God, you didn't burn it, did you? Or cut it up? It must be hurting so much now! You didn't throw it to the dogs, did you? We'll press charges if that's the case. We want our son's leg back. If you need legs that badly, take ours. His grandfather will give you his leg too. Just give us our son's leg back.* They had a sock and a shoe so that they wouldn't be taking their son's leg bare. The mother had nail clippers on her too.

I'm not a medically trained professional. I ended up in the hospital because I was a patient there first. Nothing serious—I got hit by a car. Really it barely grazed me, but they had to examine me anyway. I don't know what exactly I said while the doctors were examining me but I had a very calming effect on them. I liked them too, I stayed until the end of their shift and the very next day I returned as part of the staff. I'm not on the payroll, I don't have a contract, I'm practically undetectable in the hospital system. I've never set foot in the operating room,

or the ICU, I stay mostly by the entrance. Sometimes that's also the exit, it just depends which side of the portal you're on.

I've heard people say they know it's going to rain by the pain in their knees. Me, I can tell death is coming from the pain in the dying's loved ones. Mothers hurt the most. You had wanted to know how hospital weather and real weather are alike. They both bring cold spells, and minuses. And after their forecasts, people know how to dress: warmer or in all black.

The Cookbook

We had a neighbor once who was always complaining that her husband was eating her alive but I didn't believe her: she stood before me whole and unharmed. I couldn't understand what she was complaining about. I was ten and thought being obsessed by love was the height of romance. (I dreamed of looking at Tom Sawyer the way Becky Thatcher did, so that he'd know just how desperately I longed to be his prisoner.) I got annoyed with our neighbor that she didn't appreciate her husband's love: if he ate her alive surely it meant she was delicious, that her husband was insatiable with hunger for her.

I oftentimes imagined their life together—she as the food, he as the glutton. His hunger, which drove him to gnaw at her the way our dog gnawed on the bones we tossed him in the yard, led me to theorize about love long before I experienced it. I studied his face, trying to divine when his wife had been oversalted or sour or bitter, but his face was inscrutable, while hers always looked like an open book. An open cookbook.

People said that back in the day she'd had many suitors, and I suspected that she'd also threaded men's hearts onto skewers like chicken hearts. *Prep time: 90 minutes, cooking time: 30 minutes.* Then she devoured the hearts with some kind of salad or a sauce. People also said that when she married the neighbor he'd clipped her wings. *Maybe when he clipped them he also made her marinate them real well and then he ate them with a crisp honey glaze.* She often walked

around with bruises on her body, and I knew that it was her husband who beat her because he loved steak, and if you want a steak to be tender you have to pound it well.

One day the neighbor ran off with my older brother. My parents had no idea what to do about it. My mother thought that my brother had been led astray. My father was sure the whole thing wouldn't last very long. The neighbor's husband first wanted to track them down and then kill them, but before long he also disappeared. People said—*thank God they didn't have children who'd be forced to suffer such parents.* I, meanwhile, worried that the cookbook had disappeared, and the people looked at me as though I'd lost my mind. They just didn't know that the cookbook contained the answers to all their questions. Back then I didn't know the answers either; years later I still stumble through them.

For example, that it's possible to overeat someone. To stuff your heart with them until it swells and starts to sag. That often you can't offer a better meal than the one you were fed as a child. Is there such a thing as moderate portions when you love someone. Does monotony in the kitchen kill? How many times can you reheat the same dish? What do we do when the meat of love becomes old, hard to digest, develops bad breath?

A year after he ran off with the neighbor, my big brother came back home alone. He tried to act as though nothing had happened, but the way he looked towards the empty house next door gave away the fact that something had been left unfinished. Like a garden harvest left unpicked, a meal cooked and left uneaten. He and I never discussed what his life was like during the time he ran away. We deliberately avoided mentioning the year he was gone. We deleted it from the family calendar and substituted it with a sprinkle of domestic cheer.

Sometimes I tried to divine from my big brother's face what he'd lived through with the neighbor woman. Whether he'd eaten from her just as her husband had, or if he possessed a more refined palate. Nutritional experts recommend chewing every bite forty times, though they're adamant that even twenty-five is enough to turn the bite into pulp. I never did find out just how many chews were necessary for my long-ago neighbor. I hoped my brother had swallowed her a long time ago, but I was more inclined to believe that there are people who live as leftovers, and those for whom leftovers are a blessing.

An elderly couple lives in the neighboring house now. I watch them take slow walks, feed the birds by the lake, smiling at everything and everyone. I

really want to tell them about the people who lived there before them. About the neighbor who ran off with my brother. About her husband, who tried to eat her alive every day, and how she complained about it. I want to tell them the story of the saying *somebody's eating me alive* and how its meaning has changed for me over the years. That I no longer connect love with food and no longer search for a cookbook in someone's face, how I much prefer discovering poetry collections or novels in there.

But anytime I think it's the right moment to tell them this, I look at their faces and see nothing but a prayer of gratitude. And I can't bring myself to cut it short.



Radoslav *B*IMBALOV

Wall

Radoslav Bimbalov (1973) was born in Plovdiv, where graduated from the English Language High School before pursuing his higher education at the University of National and World Economy in Sofia.

As founder of The Smarts advertising agency, his major interests include mass communication, as well as social and charitable activity. He has been a long-time contributor to *Manager* and *Dnevnik* magazines and other periodicals in print or online. Often invited by the national media for his analysis of general political themes, Radoslav Bimbalov is a popular keynote speaker at conferences. He is one of the founders of one of the most successful platforms for education in the mass communications sphere—"Praktika".

His work in short literary formats led to an aphoristic blog, "Bulgarian Citizens' Travel Guide" which gained serious social media popularity. His short stories were published in the anthologies: *Slow Living and Life's Pleasures* (Colibri 2020), *Truth/Fire Walkers* (EuroChicago 2021), and *Love for Advanced Learners* (Colibri 2022). His debut novel, *I the Maniac* (published by Hermes 1999) was a bestseller, so a mere twenty-three years later, he decided to follow up on this success with *Shut Up*, an anthology of short stories (Ciela 2022).

After the anthology of short stories, *Shut Up*, the publicist and social commentator Radoslav Bimbalov plunged down the narrow alleyways of major literary exploration and turned immediately into one of the most inescapable names in contemporary Bulgarian prose. The writer's penetrative pen cheered us with the hypnotic novel *Ecstasis* (Ciela 2023), its rich seductive prose, which is at once intimate and exquisite, yet also merciless in its powerful insights into the contemporary world.

In 2024, as a logical continuation in the arc of themes underpinning the mythology of Radoslav Bimbalov's explorations, the boldly outspoken novel *You, My Likeness* appeared. This is the story of a society, scarily similar to our own, which officially declares empathy to be a disability and a crime. The story is told by our very own Creator.

Now in 2026, Bimbalov returns with his new ruthlessly relevant novel, *Wall,* in order to dig into one of the most topical and painful wounds in our contemporary world: *How far are we, as a society, ready to go in our divisiveness?* Ironic and open, the novel, *Wall* explores the human impulses that drive us headlong towards division, causing us to wall ourselves up in our fears.

About the book

Can we survive two sides of one and the same truth?

In a world where we all feel more alienated from those who think differently and gradually enclose ourselves into the comfort of our own social balloon, Radoslav Bimbalov returns with an entertaining and frank novel about the absurdity of extreme division.

An ironic performance of virtuosity, *Wall* made its debut in bookshops at the peak of the International Day of the Book and Authors' Rights, in two editions—in hard and soft covers—posing the question, "As a society, how far are we prepared to go in our divisiveness?"

In a peaceful Balkan town, a seemingly harmless argument about the origins of the local people turns into a deep and inevitable conflict about identity. Carried away by the passion of two opposing truths, fear and outrage replace the understanding between people, neighbors turn into enemies, words become weapons. And down in the gaping chasm between the two opposing sides we

find Stefan and Philip—two brothers who grew up together, speaking a common language of shared memories, but now finding words for each other has become more and more difficult. Without realizing it, the two brothers are left on opposing sides of one and the same conviction—that they alone are right.

The small town's inhabitants find a fragment from their past and use it to destroy their present. They go to dramatic extremes in their division, they take a decision by themselves to build a towering brick wall through the town's center.

The Wall is a savior. The Wall is a balance. It's not normal over there like it is here, that's clear to everyone on each side, full stop.

Wall portrays a society in which everyone walls themselves up in their own convictions, turning them into their only measure of truth, a border beyond which the other does not exist.

Wall is a brave parable about the absurd way people seek their identity through the denial of others. This is a painfully relevant story that attacks the very idea of polarization at its core.



Novel, 240 pages
ISBN: 9789542854081
Ciela Norma Publishing,
2026

Wall

EXCERPT *Translated by Christopher Buxton*

The author of the first poem about The Wall is a local poet, also known in the town as a chorister, but otherwise a railway worker, his life smelling of faraway steel, machine oil and a sweaty cap.

During the night shift, since almost no trains pass through this station now, those on duty still doze in front of a quiet television, but not the railway poet—he scratches with his pencil in his little notebook.

No bird will ever cross, no horse will leap… he orders his rhymes, lying on one of the hard benches in the waiting room. He writes with the determination of a first grader, his hand is not the same since they crushed it, on that night years ago.

He lifts his head, thoughtfully sucks the lead tip, *actually, if he could be a bird himself, would he have crossed over from the other side of The Wall,* he asks himself, but he quickly shakes his head, he hasn't forgotten—not the pain and humiliation, nor the clashes and the flames. He also remembers those in glazed carnival masks with holes cut for three eyes, bristling animal skins thrown over them.

He also remembers the ice in the gaze of the sadist, who smeared his hand over the asphalt. Black memories, from before.

He reads the first poem about The Wall, his very own, but truly the first one—out loud, from under a thick moustache and without any special spark, he's now standing up straight to his full two metre height by the fizzing oil-filled radiator in the office of the duty station-master some time towards three at night.

No bird will ever cross,
no horse will leap,
no snake will creep,
crowned by sun and its gloss,
evil will not pass,
as it watches over us.

The audience, in the person of the duty policeman, nods his approval, knits his brow and coughs the sticky tobacco smoke from his throat, before giving his

hesitant opinion: *well now, it's all right, only what that "crowned" is doin' ain't very clear, but let it go, what do I know about poetry?*

The railway worker doesn't expect understanding from the policeman, quite the contrary—it is clear to him that if the poem remains incomprehensible to his colleague, then it is a suitable entry for the competition in the *Khursk Honour* weekly. They've announced a prize, a monetary one, but this doesn't excite the poet. *This time they'll publish you*, the policeman adds reassuringly, while putting on his peaked cap, then he shines the torch into his face, to check it has a battery, lets the blindness shock him, so he's alert in time for the train at 3:10.

The two men come out onto the cold platform two minutes before then, at least according to the hands of the clock hanging from the bracket above their heads. With every breath, the steam from their throats mingles with the fog, swept low over the greasy rails.

In the cold, the silence weighs more, the railway worker composes as he fixes the top button of his work-coat and the policeman beside him lights a cigarette to warm himself. The flickering lamps engender new creatures out of everything on the platform, these reflections—of benches, litter bins, display boards and signs—rise up like bristling wolves and witches, quivering ever stronger with the vibrations of the approaching train.

The lights from its headlights come first, they crawl along the rails and light up something, bricked and massive, they pick it out of the dark and reveal its soaring orange expanse, looming over the station building. The railway line meets the long wall that bisects it at the very rails.

No train whatsoever can proceed further, the little town station is the last stop. The railway worker and the policeman fix their eyes on the brick wall lit by the halted train, they know it well, yet every time it strikes them dumb.

Can you imagine, the railway worker spoke in a low voice, *how some driver or other will forget about it, will hit the brakes too late, sparks will start to fly, but he won't manage to stop the train and it will drive in recklessly head-first, shattering the wall's orange bricks, piercing it through the smoke and dust, penetrating beyond it?*

The policeman listens to the choric question, looks at his colleague in alarm, then turns his eyes towards the brick giant, thinks for another moment, then finally shrugs. *No, he says. I can't imagine,* he tosses away his cigarette butt over the rails and just before beginning his routine check of the newly arrived empty train, he adds out of nowhere, *Well, do you know what…I think at the end… "it stands, unbroken still" would be better.*

The railway worker doesn't manage to react, he watches the policeman disappear into the stationary train and looks timidly up at the vast wall, before taking out his notebook and pencil to correct the last phrase in his labored handwriting:

carving our path until
it stands, unbroken still.

- 0 -

Beneath that high mountain, whose summit stays white the whole year—here and there a melted patch showing through—and whose slopes are covered in evergreens, somewhere beyond them, out in the flat lands, lies this town. Before reaching it, you wind along a road twisting around the ridge, trees above you stretching their branches toward one another so their shadows fall beneath your car, and then, suddenly, the green tunnel ends and you come out onto a wide, level plateau, broad enough to hold a town.

A provincial town: many single-family houses, some crumbling since the days when it was still a village, others new and proud; above them rise identical grey apartment blocks, three, four, up to six storeys high, set among small, awkwardly kept gardens overtaken by cars, here and there. The school in the centre has a worn asphalt yard, cracked into pieces and swollen by rain. The church bell has carried a fracture for decades, and so its voice is weak. Beside the town hall, the square stands silent, quietly waiting for occasions for celebration, while on the outskirts a cannery sprawls, long since shut down.

Like many places in these latitudes, this one only appears quiet at first glance. In fact, some thirty thousand people live here; wedding drums burst forth in sound, children cry out for the first time, old men are buried with swallowed grief.

An entirely ordinary place—at least before the Wall.

- 1 -

"In the first millennium B.C.", one of the curators at the town museum said, "The ancient Huri tribes lived here, known to have inhabited vast parts of what is now Central and Eastern Europe." The visiting teenagers—about a dozen from the graduating class of an elite high school in the neighbouring regional capital—were not listening at all. They drifted through the rooms of the old house with a single aim: to find better reception for their phones. The curator, a small, refined man with thinning, neatly combed silver hair, smoothed the sides of his milky-white jacket with his palms, reciting in a sing-song tone.

"The Huri were a skilful people, with a developed sense for the arts—gentle, without malice—and yet surrounded by cruel, bloodthirsty tribes such as the Ashiyans and, especially, the Grasi, who imposed their military order upon our lands at the price of blood and destruction," the curator said with well-trained pathos, not in the least shaken by the fact that the students were not listening. In the half of the museum entrusted to him, dusty display cases held medieval regional costumes and archaic tools—such as that strange sieve made from an elongated stone with a carved, rough trough, "with which the ancient Huri who lived here had searched for gold in the river mud in order to adorn our well-known amphorae," he added.

Those vessels were the main attraction, the most valuable exhibit in this half of the museum. Just two had been found during excavations in the hills above the town, inlaid with gold. The amphorae stood beneath an armoured-glass dome in the centre of one of the rooms, yet they had also become a symbol: their shapes were carved into wooden doors and embroidered onto tablecloths spread over old sideboards; in souvenir shops one could buy refrigerator magnets, coasters, keychains, bottle openers—all shaped like amphorae.

From the wide vestibule of the old house one could not enter the rooms on the other side; the space was divided by a red rope stretched between metal posts. Another man served as curator in that half—small, with the same mild features behind the thick frames of his glasses. He conducted the tour of the other half of the museum in a low, heavy voice, yet spoke of entirely different things.

"Our town was the capital city of the ancient Grasi, also known as the Grillari; they followed the cult of Heres," the other curator declared, surrounded by his group—three elderly couples. These visitors were far more curious than the teenagers across the rope, or perhaps simply more polite; at least they nodded in understanding towards their host.

"Our town was founded by three sisters, the leaders of the Grasi," he continued evenly: "Harna, Calypto, and Epiphania—they built the temple to the god Heres, believed to have stood in the area above the river," the curator recounted confidently, until he was suddenly interrupted by a question from one of the women:

"I read that in fact it was not the Grasi but the Huri who were the first settlers in these lands. Is that true?"

The curator's face changed; the lines above his smooth cheeks tightened. "Utter nonsense," he said quietly and went on with his account, though for a moment he slowed his pace, having, from the corner of his eye, caught sight of his counterpart entering the large vestibule with the group of students. Their customary tasting was beginning there.

"This is our pride, our honey, prepared according to a recipe preserved from the Huri," the curator on the other side was saying as he ushered the teenagers toward the exit—each holding a wooden spoon dipped in forest honey in one hand and a glowing phone in the other.

The curator on this side watched them coolly, then turned back to his own group. "Please try the one true symbol of our town—the famous wild blackberry wine; even the ancient Grasi prepared it in honour of Heres." The tourists licked their sticky lips after sipping from the small glasses.

Soon the visitors from both halves of the divided museum had gone. The creaking of the old floorboards ceased, the house fell empty, the silence grew heavy. The two curators now stood side by side before the large gate at the exit, almost equal in height, thin, desiccated by time. One reached into the pocket of his jacket, took out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, and managed to light one—not with the first match, nor the second, but only with the third. Then he broke the silence and, without shifting his gaze, asked quietly through the smoke: "Is Maria well?"

The other paused before answering dryly: "She is," and after a short pause added, "Thank you."

They stood like that, silent, unmoving, like two identical statues guarding the museum entrance. It was no accident that they resembled each other; they shared the same surname, inherited from their father. Philip exhaled smoke; the wind carried it toward his older brother, Stefan, who at that very moment inhaled it unwittingly, blinked behind the thick lenses of his glasses, choked, coughed out the sudden bitterness, then turned on his heel and set off to the left. His brother went to the right, and the museum remained alone, dark and silent—in both of its evenly divided halves.

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A short while later, Philip flicked ash from his cigarette as he climbed up the steep street. The pavement was warped and narrow, low buildings pressed shoulder to shoulder. A hungry cat darted out and, with a thin meow, tail raised to the sky, brushed against the curator's legs and began rubbing against him. He merely slowed, did not reach down to touch it, waited for it to lose interest and slip back through the bars of some fence, then continued up the hushed street covered in fallen leaves, the same street he had walked morning and evening for almost his entire life—with one known interruption, more than half a century ago.

Philip knew every smell along the way: rotting vegetables at the bottom of crates outside the corner shop, singed hair from the dryer in the small salon. He was familiar with every sound, every dip in the pavement where a puddle always formed. If he wished, he could walk with his eyes closed and still find his way to the three-storey building with identical rectangular balconies and a sagging gate of rotting wood, slowly climb the grey-and-white mosaic stairs, and grow short of breath on the way up—he was not as spry as before.

He unlocked the door and entered a dimness of old wallpaper and creaking parquet. He had changed almost nothing in the apartment: the same small kitchen with its eternal oven and refrigerator frozen in what seemed a decades-long agony; a living room with sagging armchairs and a three-doored Bavarian sideboard.

It was as if only yesterday their mother's voice had echoed here: "Stefan, Philip, never leave wet glasses on top of the sideboard—you have no idea how expensive it is!" They knew, of course, but they knew even better how convenient those deep cabinets were when you needed to hide. They would bend down and crawl into the hushed darkness, which smelled of old wood and mothballs from the folded blankets stacked inside. Those wool blankets were far from soft; they pricked the bare skin beneath the brothers' short trousers with thousands of sharp hairs, yet they did not dare move or make a sound.

Then they would hear their father's heavy steps, his muttering, his calling to their mother in the kitchen—"where are those rascals?"—and they knew he would at any moment press the button on the black-and-white television set standing on the massive sideboard. *Click*. They heard it, and seconds later, once the tubes inside the television warmed up, from the shelter of the cabinets came a terrible crackling and popping, the noise of no signal.

"Damned TV," their father would shout, and they would shrink deeper into the prickling blankets at the back of the cabinet to listen to the casing booming

under his blows. This classic repair trick did not help—there was no signal—but the vibrations echoed through the cupboard, and with every strike to the television's top, the hearts of the two boys jumped, not from fear, but from satisfaction.

Nearly five decades later Philip stood beside that same wooden sideboard, staring at the closed cabinet doors, unable to remember who exactly had disconnected the balcony antenna back then—he or Stefan. He was so lost in memory that he nearly left his glass of water on top of the sideboard, but caught himself in time, lifted its damp base, and instinctively wiped the surface with his sleeve.

As for memories: many in town still remembered how it had all begun. In a trench. And, of course, by accident.



Demetra DULEVA

Avenue Versailles

Demetra Duleva is a philologist, novelist, and diplomat. Her debut novel, *The Wandering Albatross* (Hermes, 2019), won the Peroto (Quill) Award for Best Debut. It also received the Second Prize for Prose from *Portal Kultura* and was nominated for the 13 Centuries Bulgaria Novel of the Year award. Her second novel, *Overturned Constellations* (2021), further established her as a significant voice in contemporary Bulgarian literature. *Avenue Versailles* is her third novel.

About the book

What happens to people's lives when time suddenly comes to a standstill?

This novel follows the intertwined lives of eight people confined to Paris for three months during the COVID-19 pandemic. They span generations—from the ninety-year-old painter Balthazar to the twenty-two-year-old Anna-Maria. Some were born in Bulgaria, others are French; some are related, while others have never met.

What binds them is their connection, however tenuous, to Avenue Versailles, a boulevard lined with magnificent linden trees. It may be pure coincidence—unless we accept that fate often brings people together according to a plan beyond our understanding.

As extraordinary circumstances draw their lives together in unexpected ways, each must confront life's most fundamental questions: Who am I? What matters most? What is worth fighting for—and for whom would I be willing to sacrifice everything?



Novel, 336 pages
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Ground Zero

EXCERPT *Translated by Izidora Angel*

Balthazar

1.

I often have erotic dreams.
Memories of a body during sex.
Something long gone in my waking life appears to me in a dream and for the rest of the day the remnant of arousal remains in my body, fluttering inside me like a butterfly.

The alms that dreams offer to an old man.

In the morning, when I wake, I wonder which of all my lovers has visited me in my dreams, but I never remember the face, only the feeling. And I always come to the same conclusion: it wasn't any one of them, but all of them together, fused into the ideal woman.

Sometimes I dream of Mars. Though it's not really Mars, but Earth, transformed into a red desert, where the atmosphere has vanished, the oceans have dried up and everything is covered with sand and jagged rock. I must have seen a film set on Mars at some point. I don't remember. Perhaps before turning into an endless wasteland, that other planet was also full of life. And then everything disappeared—the entirety of civilization, without a trace.

The same will happen to Earth. The same will happen to me. My body is drying up like sand…

What was the point indeed of all those worries, all those rivalries, all those loves?

Everything seems to me so utterly hopeless and pointless. What a man I once was. Women fought to pose for me. Without so much as an invitation, they rushed to my atelier and undressed themselves, begging me to paint them nude—the more wanton the better. Then we fucked like animals, without questions or expectations of what might come after.

Sometimes I searched for love or at the least for some sort of tenderness in their eyes—there was none. There were no regrets either. They simply took pleasure in their bodies. In the fact that, aside from sex, their youth was immortalized.

The large canvasses bearing female bodies made me famous.

And then I ran dry—as an artist, as a man. I wonder if it wasn't all the same anyway, whether the heart and the hand drew on the same source of energy. I don't know. First the gallerists stopped calling, then the women stopped coming to see me. I don't know when I got this old.

But I never stopped working. Even now I paint every day, I just don't show anything. Who would I show it to anyway? Nobody wants my paintings. They called me vapid, uncompelling, said all I did was repeat myself… Every morning I shave my face until it is smooth, as though I could turn back time and then begin yet another self-portrait: my sunken face, which grows older and more shapeless by the day, my cheeks, which sink further and further, my nose, which doesn't stop growing… And I still can't quite capture that which I now am.

The floor of my atelier is littered with all of my rejected sketches, most of which are in pink. I don't ever pick any of them up, the layers pile on top of each other. All day I stride atop my own bulging-eyed faces, trampling my pink cheeks and foreheads… Sometimes an earlier image resurfaces from under the pile, and a ray of light or a passing shadow turns my face into a sunflower, a fish, or a stone…

I'm entering a territory where I'm make-believe.

I live only with a rat, which I chase and attempt to kill and whose noises drive me crazy every night. His claws scratch against the pipes as he scales the plumbing. I know he's no bigger than my hand, but the scraping sounds magnify him into something monstrous. The other day, I saw him for the first time—a fat rat shadow darting across the rug.

2.

I paint life, yet life is in constant motion. And there's no way of stopping it. All you can do is try to adjust to it, master it, fall into step. Nature doesn't create perfect forms; perfection is a human construct. The female form is depicted, described, painted, studied more than any other. Because it's an object of desire.

I am inhabiting my final body. I somehow still fail to grasp its essence. Perhaps it is why I have no luck painting it. There's nothing more beautiful, nothing more full of life than youthful female flesh.

Lately I spend a lot of time thinking of Anna-Maria, I dream of her often. She, naturally, has no idea, but as soon as I see her, I feel somehow more buoyant,

happier. Until recently she came to the apartment to clean and do some of my shopping. Back in the day, it was her mother, that wretched Portuguese woman, small and spiteful like a pinscher, who came twice weekly. I'd forbidden her to come into the atelier, I'd pointed to the spiral staircase and told her—threatened her, nearly—to not so much as peek upstairs or she'd be fired. Clean the rooms, stock the fridge, take the money from the table, leave.

With Anna-Maria, it was different. She could come up to the atelier and stay as long as she wanted, though she almost never did and in the instances when she did, she rarely ventured beyond the threshold, staying just long enough to leave a bowl of fruit, a tray of sandwiches, or some freshly made coffee.

I'd like to have her over for dinner, just so I could have her near me, look at the curve of her neck, the whiteness of her teeth, the fullness of her breasts, so I could breathe in her scent. It's been so long since I felt the presence of a woman's body so intensely. Though it's not really a presence at all, only the idea of it. Dear God, where does this longing come from? Me, longing, with my one lung, the other half cut away because of the metastases. That was three years ago. I survived then, and I'll survive this now too.

It's increasingly hard for me to breathe. There's not enough oxygen getting to the internal organs. The brain suffers most of all, maybe it's why I'm always a little light-headed. The world moves as if in a slowed cadence.

Anna-Maria passes through it like a patch of sunlight.

But who's to say that when this is all over I can't invite her for a glass of wine? I'll apologize to her, invite her to start coming back. I want to paint her.

I'll have to tidy up this old lair, throw out the pink portraits, how am I not yet sick of painting myself every morning…

I'll finally frame my new canvasses and put up a show. I'll invite Anna-Maria to the opening. She'll come, we'll drink port. There'll be lots of people. It'll be noisy, lively, festive. I only have to make it to the end of this pandemic…

Some of my latest paintings I've done with my palms and elbows, it's become too difficult for me to hold a brush. Anytime I try to hold up my hands they start to tremble and go numb rather quickly. Monumental canvasses, full of color and shadow. Female bodies again, bodies I know so well. Our ghostly lives sliding down the facades, then across the wet asphalt of the streets, until at last they drain into the Seine.

Or it's just the two of us—Anna-Maria and me (she doesn't know). The young woman is that beautiful red smear with supple curves, slowly turning into a pair of glossy red lips. I sink my teeth into them, and there I am, my shriveled old carcass twisted in the serpentine coils of her gorgeous body.

In this one, I'm handing her a glass of wine. Her back's to you, though her smile and her eyes are looking at you. She's turned toward me, and I'm nothing but a formless sack of flesh with a cut out lung.

I remember the day Anna-Maria finally dared to enter the atelier. The door opened, everything around me grew radiant and I almost forgot my ugly old age. She walked around, studying the unfinished painting for a long time, then said to me, a tinge of provocation in her voice: "I have a feeling that's me."

I said nothing.

"*Is* that me?" She asked again.

"No, that's Maria."

"So it is me. Maria's my middle name."

Again, I said nothing.

"And is that you?"

"No, that's Victor."

"Who's Victor?"

"That's my middle name."

Anna-Maria stayed in the studio to watch me paint. She sat with her legs together, fanning herself with the skirts of her dress, which rose and fell slowly, like a fan, revealing the long line between her thighs, from whence emanated—or so it seemed to me—the scent of a female in heat, a scent that mingled with the intoxicating fragrance of flowering lindens and struck me squarely in the back of the head.

All while my hand painted dense, sun-darkened patches, a black slit down their middle, from which welled a pink cloud flecked with delicate gold leaf, touching the dark wet spot at the bottom of the canvas—my murky black semen.

Emboldened by her presence, I spoke to her directly. I shouldn't have; I still regret it: "I've wanted to paint you ever since I first saw you."

She flinched and made as if to get up, but I went on: "A large portrait. Would you like that? Stand by the chair, that's where the light is best."

She moved over, but almost mechanically, like a child trained to obey. "Undress yourself."

She stared at me, astonished, I was nothing but a dirty old man to her, and she quickly left the room.

She stopped coming.

My desires can now only be realized in my paintings.

3.

Pascal called, he's not coming, he's sick with the new virus. I attempted to reassure him: "You're young, Pascal. You'll get over it quickly."

"Everyone's dying from this. I'm watching horrific reports on television."

"During the war I saw dozens of British prisoners of war who'd been executed in the yard of a factory. The sight of mass death is terrifying, but I'm telling you: everything passes. It'll be forgotten and it'll disappear."

Perhaps what I said worked. He promised that once he was feeling better, he'd come visit me on a regular basis. That he'd wear a mask the entire time he was there, to protect me, that he'd never be able to forgive himself if I were to get sick because of him.

Years ago I was afraid of death, I thought about it. I don't anymore. Nature has devised a clever mechanism: if you live long enough, you begin to think of death as rest, deliverance, the passage from gray to black—a gentle transition, only a few shades apart. No more.

They say life is the road you travel. At my age, life is the time you have left.

What am I to do with the time I have left, and what will be left behind once I'm gone? Those are the two questions that have occupied me lately.

I've been thinking about the soul. The first time I felt its existence was as a student, when I went to Florence and visited the Uffizi. Standing before the paintings of the great Renaissance masters, I trembled with emotion. It was as though God himself had poured undiluted divine energy into their paintings, and humanity has carried it through the centuries, passing it from one generation to the next... But for how long? Science can calculate the position of the moon a hundred years from now, but it cannot foresee the future of humanity, because humanity contains creativity. The nature of human existence cannot be studied scientifically; it can only be expressed through art. Every attempt to rationalize it destroys its meaning, kills the mystery of life. That's what I believe.

Even before COVID, I liked to spend long stretches at the window, watching. I know every mood of the neighborhood: the morning bustle, the rush-hour crush, the Friday night clamor, the lazy Sunday afternoons. Even now, the sight of a city without people still shocks me. Dusk, too, is no longer a moment of peace, a brief romantic pause before night falls. Now, as darkness descends, emboldened rats dart across the streets as pigeons and crows rummage through half-empty trash bins, fighting over every scrap. Geronimo, the neighborhood bum, has made himself a bed over the subway vents. He's taken off his shoes and left them

just beyond the outline of the metal grates, the way we leave ours on the doorstep. He's already asleep, surrounded by the warm breath of the millions of human bodies passing beneath the city. Beside him lie the remains of his dinner: a bottle of wine, a grease-stained wrapper, a plastic bag with a slice of bread.

Like a scene from a second-rate film, rats race across the street. I focus my binoculars. A dead pigeon lies in the middle of the road. The rats gather around it, biting into it. Soon, another rat approaches, larger than the rest, so dark he's almost black. The moment they see him, the others scatter, leaving the entire feast to him. Like a true king rat, he settles in comfortably and begins to eat, unhurried and undisturbed. He lifts his head, looks up at my window, and seems to twitch a whisker in my direction.

The rat has returned…

Time is a spider's web and it's trapped me once again. I'm freezing in the basement of a large, half-dilapidated house, thinking of my mother. In one of her rare letters, she'd asked whether our Hitler Youth units were issued real rifles, guns we could actually shoot. I wrote back that we only ever did drills at the military training camps, that we weren't sent into battle. I didn't tell her the older boys were already at the front. There's a corpse in front of me—I can smell it. I watch rats stream toward the rich bounty in the gathering darkness. The dead man's blackened face is turned toward me. The leader of the rats turns his snout and looks at me before setting to work on the ears and the nose. This nightmare has never left me.

I hadn't seen such an apocalyptic sight on my street before, and I was overcome with revulsion, as though the end of the world were approaching. Never, never before had Paris seemed a frightening place to live, especially in this wealthy part of the city. I've lived in neighborhoods where poverty was visible even in broad daylight, but here it's always been pleasant. I stepped away from my lookout, disheartened by the sight of misery creeping into this neighborhood as well.

The streetlamp flickered a few times, then went out. I drew the curtain. The scene was over, the curtain had fallen—but why do I have the feeling that this is only the overture, that the terrifying spectacle is only just beginning, and that the real actors have yet to step onto the stage?

I'm going to bed. I'm exhausted.

I'm nothing more than a bag of old bones held together by ever-thinning skin.



Photo: Vladislav Hristov

Dejan *E*NEV

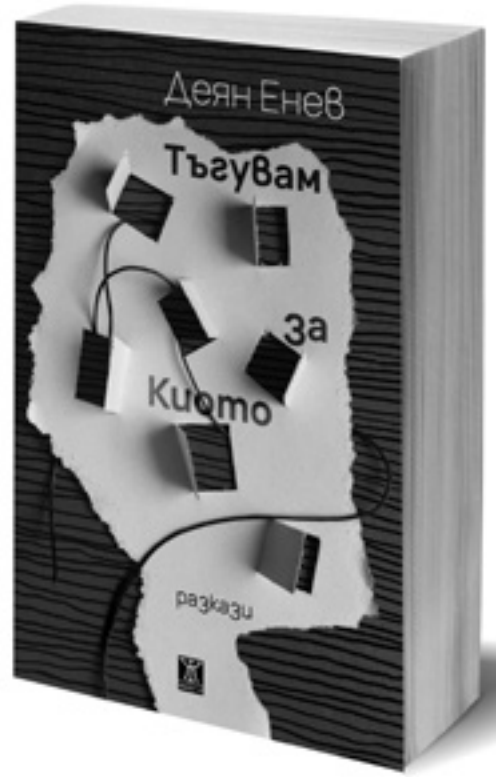
Longing for Kyoto

Dejan Enev (1960) has authored twenty-four books. He is the recipient of major national literary prizes such as the Chudomir Award for a humorous short story (2015); the Yordan Radichkov Prize twice — for *Lala Bosa* (2020) and *Sixty Stories* (2024); the Aleko Award from the International Humorous Short Story Competition (2025); and the Yordan Yovkov Award (2020). He was also awarded the Order of Saints Cyril and Methodius, First Class (2016). In 2008, the Austrian publishing house Deuticke published a German-language collection of his selected stories under the title *Zirkus Bulgarien*. In 2010, the London-based publishing house Portobello Books released the English edition of *Circus Bulgaria;* the book was included in the longlist of the Frank O'Connor International Short Story award for two consecutive years (2010 and 2011). In September 2023, the Italian publishing house Bottega Errante published *Everyone on the Bow of the Boat* in Giorgia Spadoni's Italian translation under the title *Circo Bulgaria*. The book won the Polski Kot Award for best Italian translation of a book originally written in a Slavic language.

About the book

This seemingly small book contains a multitude of micro-worlds, in which the opposing aspects of the human soul are emphasized. The minimalist works, written in an unusually concise, yet powerful language, are divided into two sections. The first section is imbued with military themes, while the second presents various philosophies of life through the chronic grayness of everyday existence.

Empathy is the invisible thread uniting these stories, weaving them into an inseparable whole. At the same time, the author has also embedded symbolism in the title, which lends itself to different interpretations. On the one hand, judging by the first section, Kyoto symbolizes the unattainable longing to return to times of peace—a nostalgic yearning that remains unheard, as though it were only whispered quietly to the wind. If we broaden the scope of our interpretation by considering both sections together, Kyoto comes to embody the sorrow for what has been lost.



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Translated by Yana Ellis

The Balcony

That place was no café whatsoever. It was simply someone's grotty garage where they sold coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, pretzel sticks and stale biscuits. To the side, in the tiny garden, under the shade of a large pine, there were two tables with a few chairs scattered around. That was all.

That place had served me for a seaside and mountain resort in the summer just gone by. When I finally managed to break away from family chores, I would come to sit at dusk for half an hour under the pine tree. I'd buy cigarettes, a coffee, a bottle of water and a packet of pretzel sticks and sit at one of the tables and watch the expensive cars driving along the boulevard, drinking my coffee with a few cigarettes, and then so as not to smoke too much, I'd start munching on the pretzel sticks.

Often, at one of the tables, I'd see a middle-aged man, in his fifties. I found out that he was a foreigner, a lodger in the house with the grotty café in its garage. Perhaps he was working on one of the building sites because he was often in stained dungarees, and now, at the end of the day, was having a breather. He always bought a mini bottle of vodka and a beer. He would have a few rounds. But I never saw him drunk, except once. Then, as he was getting up from the chair, he collapsed to the ground. By the time I got up to help him, he had managed to get to his feet and, staggering, headed for the entrance of the house.

The man usually stared silently at his phone. Because we saw each other regularly, we started acknowledging each other, but I wasn't nosy, I wasn't interested in what wind had blown him to Bulgaria.

One day, I found him unusually happy. He gestured for me to join him at his table and went to get himself another round of vodka and beer. He came back, sat down on his chair and offered his hand.

"I'm Andrey. Or Andrij, as they say in my part of the world." We shook hands.

"They released my son from captivity. He was one of the two hundred boys who they recently exchanged with us. He's already home. He's been fighting from the early days. He was wounded, then recovered and returned to the ranks again.

And then they captured him. He was in captivity for a whole year. He's lost forty kilos. He's a big lad, and yet he's shrunk from ninety to fifty kilos. But he'll be fine. The most important thing is that he's made it home. I didn't believe it would happen. We spoke the other day. He said he couldn't believe it either. He said, 'Dad, what saved me was the thought of our balcony.' On the seventh floor. Our apartment had a beautiful balcony. Two by five metres. My wife had arranged hanging baskets with flowers on the railing. My little girl used to water them. When the nights were warm, we would sit there, chatting. And, my son said, 'that was it; I was constantly thinking about our balcony. I imagined how I'd come back, step inside the apartment, make a cup of tea and sit on the balcony. Just like before. I constantly imagined our balcony, I somehow knew, it would wait for me.'

'"And here I am, I came back. Hurrying towards our block of flats. I could see it from afar. I got closer. Then I saw it had been hit by a missile, smack-bang on our block. Destroyed in many places. Licked by long black tongues of fire. I start running. Around the side of the building. I look up towards our balcony on the seventh floor. Iron rods protruding from the walls of our apartment, the block of flats destroyed, gone. Only the balcony left intact, as if suspended in the empty space. Still there. Our balcony. Even the hanging baskets are there, whole and alive."'

The man looked at me. I saw the eyes of a person who had forbidden himself to cry. He lifted the mini bottle, finished the vodka, then finished the beer. Then he got up and headed towards his lodgings.

Pinocchio

On a small street in the centre of a big town, there was a studio-turned-gallery where artists could buy everything they needed for their craft: paints, pencils, canvases, frames, tripods, palettes, as well as chisels for woodcarvers and spatulas for sculptors. And there, in the window, which people could stop to admire, was a screen showing a film of how to make a wooden figure: the arms, the legs, the body, the head, the nose. The little mannequin was assembled and then dressed in paper clothing. It came to life and took a step towards the people on the pavement. Then the film started all over again.

It didn't take much to realise this was Pinocchio himself.

But, as we all know, sometimes technology breaks down. Late one evening, when the gallery had long shut its doors and the pavement was empty, the film froze just as Pinocchio was walking towards the window. Then came a tinkle of broken glass, and Pinocchio stepped out onto the pavement.

He looked around and shivered in the cool night air. At one end of the street, the traffic light flashed yellow.

Pinocchio headed that way. He reached the junction, looked both ways and crossed the street. A path led him through a small park. Two men jumped out of the shadows; one had sunglasses, the other an elongated, fox-like face. "Do you have gold, do you have gold coins?" the two men shouted. Pinocchio broke into a run and managed to escape. He pushed on, glancing back every so often.

Soon, the tall, stone buildings gave way to low, crooked houses behind rickety fences. The few passers-by reeked of alcohol. One of them reached out to grab Pinocchio by the shoulder and ripped his colourful shirt.

Finally, Pinocchio found himself in a large square. Opposite him was a long building. He walked towards it. When he entered through the high-arched entrance, he realised it was a train station. The waiting room was crammed with people. In the middle of it stood an enormous wood-burning stove with a long flue pipe that reached the ceiling. People gathered around the stove, seeking its warmth. Filled with grim silence, they sat or lay on their luggage. Many of the men had lost limbs—a missing leg or a missing arm. Pinocchio realised there was a war raging somewhere, these people had managed to break free from it and were now desperate to leave it behind, to run away from it. But trains were probably few and far between or didn't run at all and they were forced to stay here.

Pinocchio approached a young soldier; at first glance, he thought he was short, more or less Pinocchio's height. The soldier was sitting on a wooden chest. His right leg below the knee was missing.

"Do you want me to give you my leg?" Pinocchio asked. "They'll make me a new one."

The boy looked him up and down in disbelief. Then said: "But how're you going to walk?"

"I can hop on one leg."

"Ok then, let's try."

Pinocchio removed his right leg at the knee and gave it to the soldier. He managed to somehow attach it to his own knee, then used the crutches to lift himself and take a step. The wooden leg was doing a good job. The boy smiled through the thick layer of sweat and grime and gave a thumbs up.

Guards in greatcoats with machine guns waded through the densely crowded mass of people. They kept order and checked everyone's documents. During one of their rounds, two of the guards stumbled on Pinocchio.

"Ha, look! Wood. Unbelievable. Our stove is hungry for logs," one guard said to the other. "Pick it up."

And they carried Pinocchio towards the cast-iron stove, enormous, ravenous, red.

The Ants

…and the ants' funeral cortege
in an autumn leaf sarcophagus
the dead cricket carries...

Georgi Nikolov

They lived on the second floor. Ants had appeared in their living room in previous years as well. They would criss-cross the floorboards for a few days and then disappear. But this year it was different. The woman spotted them one morning as she switched on the light and pulled back the curtains. This time the parquet floor had turned black with ants, it was as if it had come to life, the whole thing moved. As if someone had spilled an entire ant hill, happily brought it into their home. The man also got up. They sprayed them with washing up liquid, they'd heard people do this. But it didn't help. Nothing worked. The ants kept coming in throngs, they crawled onto the kitchenette floor and the tiles in the corridor. The woman was in hysterics, "They'll devour us!" she screamed.

Her husband thought of pulling her leg. "We'll stand the legs of the beds in tins of water, like they do in Africa," he was about to say. But luckily, he didn't. He decided it was not the right time to make jokes.

It was probably because of all the rain. The earth was soaked, waterlogged, choked on water and the ants were looking for new lodgings. On the edge between spring and summer there were always surprises.

The man was eagerly awaiting his annual leave, so they could escape to the village. He loved that opal hour of dusk there, when the surrounding hills, which pretended to be mountains, turned violet, and from the gardens and the field beyond aroused the choir of crickets that rocked the village in its cradle all night long. This image carried him in a flash, like a bobsleigh track, into his childhood memories when the stove glowed, his granddad, red pencil in hand, corrected pupils' homework, his grandma made the salad for dinner, and hidden somewhere in a corner of the room, a cricket constantly wound up its barrel organ.

And as usually happens, he realised that he had heard that same sound at home only a week ago but failed to recognise it. How odd. Was it possible a cricket dwelled somewhere in their house? He was thinking of talking to his wife about it when the noise ceased, just like that.

And now these ants. What was going on?

They copied the number of the first pest control company that popped up on the Internet and dialled it. The person on the phone was polite and promised they'd come tomorrow.

The following day, the phone rang at the agreed time. The man was expecting a whole squad of grim-faced men in rubber overalls, but instead, a beardless boy with smiling eyes, holding a pump, turned up.

"No worries," he said. "We'll sort it all out now."

He walked around all the rooms, carefully examined everything and then began spraying along the skirting boards and the corners with some yellow liquid.

"This product is not dangerous to humans," he reassured them. "But you shouldn't wash anything for three days. Don't you worry yourselves, we'll come again if need be.'

The boy left. They swept piles of dead ants into a black bag with a dustpan and brush and threw them in the wheely bin downstairs. The ants disappeared and never appeared again. His wife relaxed. But one evening, while the man was sitting on the balcony, trying to discern that opal hour here, in the big city, he suddenly jumped. Somehow and without any supporting evidence, he understood why the ants had come. And he was overwhelmed by sadness and guilt. Did the ants manage to fulfil their duty before the boy with the smiling eyes exterminated them with his frightening yellow liquid?

Treasure Hunters

They didn't know minibuses like this one still existed. It was like a film trailer from the last century. But they were moving, it was a fact. The minibus dropped them off at the village square.

Initially, they thought of driving there but in the end decided to turn up incognito, like real treasure hunters. The small shop was closed. Not a soul was around. And the rain. It kept pouring!

They found shelter under the shop's eaves and took out the oil skins. One of them had a ponytail, the other a shaven skull. They got dressed, pulled their hoods over their eyes and looked like agents on a secret mission.

That wasn't far from the truth. Anton, who owed them big time—with tears in his eyes, sweaty, drunk, soft as a boiled potato with fear, promised that he would enlighten them about a treasure. And he certainly did that.

The treasure, he said, was in his granddad's house, under the threshold. His granddad was an odd fellow who crisscrossed the mountain for mushrooms all day long. They were to go to the village, find the house, smash the threshold, and take the treasure. Easy-peasy.

And off they went on a wild goose chase. They had no choice. Otherwise, they would've had to punish Anton, and frankly they were both softies. They weren't keen on breaking Anton's fingers; after all, he was a good musician, both a clarinettist and a traditional kaval player. If he'd been persistent, he'd still be playing in posh restaurants for good money. But he took up gambling and followed the path to ruin.

Still, before leaving for the village they threatened him that if they didn't find a treasure, they'd return and wipe the floor with him. Anton nodded, "Okay."

The house was at the edge of the village on a narrow dirt road hidden by bushes and brambles. There was a tall pine in the garden, Anton had told them. They spotted it and approached. The cast iron gate was ajar, they pushed it and it swung open. An obituary with a photo of an old man with white hair and a coppery, weathered face was stuck on the gate. They walked further into the garden along a cement path, grass protruding from its cracks. The two-storey house was still in good condition. By the door, under the awning, was a travertine water fountain with a cement countertop and a small crooked wooden table next to it. A pile of dirty dishes had been discarded in the trough. The door to the house was unlocked. Both men called out, but no one answered. So, they decided Anton

hadn't lied to them; his granddad had really gone to forage for mushrooms. The door was warped, but the threshold was solid, old-fashioned, made of a single large stone slab. There would be digging aplenty here.

They looked at each other, smoked a quick ciggy, walked around the garden, found an old rickety tool shed, and inside it—voila—a pickaxe and a crowbar, as if they had been waiting for them. Then they got to work.

After two hours of digging, they managed to remove the stone slab. They pushed on, taking turns with the pickaxe. And soon there was the clang of iron underneath it. They stood up and exchanged glances. Everything was going to plan.

They pulled out an old tin, eaten by rust, lifted it onto the fountain's top, and opened the lid. Inside it was an object wrapped in a resin-soaked rag: two wooden tubes with holes on top. The one with the ponytail was the first to work it out. "It's a kaval," he said. "Look. A kaval." He tried to put it together but couldn't; the wood had swollen.

"Is that the treasure?" muttered the one with the shaved head, not really asking but more talking to himself. "Now what!"

"Aha, you've found it," said a voice behind them.

They swung around simultaneously. That must be the Granddad. He looked like a tough old boy.

"I see," he said. "Come over here, I'll tell you all about it."

He sat on the two car tyres by the door, covered with a woven rug. The men pulled up a chair and a tree stump and joined him.

"This is my grandfather's kaval. He was a mountain shepherd. And back in those years, what was a shepherd without a kaval, hmm? We had a large flock, kept it high up there, on the meadow. I don't need to tell you how many sheep we had, all I'll say is that we had six guard dogs. They drank two buckets of whey a day, if not more."

The old boy passed his hand before his eyes and carried on: "A beautiful kaval! Anton learnt how to play on it. And he learnt well, devil that he was. But then he rushed off to Sofia. I told him: When you've learnt how to be a man, come back. I'll give you the kaval then. Lots of house robberies in our neck of the woods, that's why I hid it under the threshold. I told myself, when Anton turns into a man, I'll give it to him."

The men exchanged glances.

"Well, we'd better be on our way."

"You must know Anton. Surely. At least take the kaval to him. You've dug

it up anyway. I haven't seen him in years. He hasn't been back. My grandson, Anton."

Suddenly, the eyes of the man with the ponytail widened in bewilderment. The old boy's face looked familiar, he had seen it somewhere. The white hair, the russet brown face.

"Hold on a minute. You…aren't you the man from the obituary? The one stuck to the gate?"

"I'm the one," the old boy confirmed. "You know, around here you never know when you'll kick the bucket. So, when we get the chance to pop over to town for something, we make our obituaries on the photocopy machine and stick them on the gates. A little in advance. Well, you know, when death comes, it doesn't catch us, so to speak, napping."

The two men got going. They tottered half-backwards along the cement path, cutting across it.

"Take the kaval, then!" called out the old boy.

"Your Anton will come on his own. He'll get it himself."

"Well, at least pick some cherries. Or shall I get you some?"

The cherry tree was just outside the gate. They grabbed a handful or two of cherries, stuffed them into their mouths, and hurried along the dirt road.



Angel *I*VANOV

Play. 25 Stories about Children in the 1990s

Angel Ivanov (1988) is the author of the short story collection *Technical Drill* which received an award in the Southern Spring national competition for debut literature (2019). His journalism and literary texts have come out in various print and online publications, such as *Christianstvo i Kultura* (Christianity and Culture), *Portal Kultura*, *Stulbata* (The Ladder), *Manager*, *Ah Maria*, *WebCafe*, *Actualno*, *Kinematograf* and others. He has worked as a journalist, reporter and copywriter and has been scriptwriter for a great many television programmes. At the moment he is writer and presenter for the Bulgarian Orthodox Eparchy of Sofia's YouTube TV.

About the book

Angel Ivanov's second book, *Play. 25 Stories about Children in the 1990s* is about those who remember what it is to play outside until it gets dark. A short story collection about a generation born on the boundary between a lack of freedom and problematic freedom. A generation who grew up among the ruins of one time so as to build some kind of present from them—with imagination, obstinacy, love and those little plastic lorries we collected bricks in at one time. This is a book about the children of the 90s — about the lost generation of our parents and about us, their descendants, about the sacrifices, defeats and small victories our life is made from. About that childhood which today seems very distant, but continues to live in us. A book about memory, growing up and the times that have made us what we are.



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PLAY

Translated by Tom Phillips
From "Five Murders (One Double)"

Genady

He was frighteningly single-minded on the pitch—both in training and during matches. A hardman—he would drive in sliding tackles like swords, sometimes late, and the opposing striker would shoot past him. He played as a central defender—sometimes sweeper, sometimes blocker. But he'd also join the attack. He was plump, with rolls of fat bulging out of his tight shorts and a low-slung saggy arse like a rock fan's backpack carried with very loose straps. He was ungainly, making turns like a number five tram outside the Palace of Justice, but made up for it with passion and gusto. He had a specific way of running, head bent and mouth open—an expression of the excessive effort he was making. That's how he created the impression he was fast, but alas, he wasn't. What was clear, however, was that he loved football. He was proactive in training, constantly talking during practice games. He gave instructions, directions, advice. He'd fight, not with personal, but with sporting venom, because he wanted to be among the winners even in training. Shaved on the back and sides with more hair on top and with characteristically sticking-out ears, each like the volume dial of a radio, he looked like Bert from *Sesame Street*.

He was from the class of '86, two years older than me. A few of us boys from the class of '88 trained with them, the band of brothers. We were said to be *good*. Being *good* was important, especially when it came to technical sporting abilities. I'd chat with Gena, mainly about football, because he wasn't interested in topics incidental to it. He lived and socialised on the pitch. Stories about misdemeanours and truancy from school, about mischief and destruction, games consoles and girls—no, for him, there was nothing besides kicking the ball. We gathered on stadium benches, changed in the locker room, travelled to away games—his voice was rarely heard.

Probably because of this, but also because of his weight and his inconsistent performance, he came in for terrible taunts from the team. Taunts that bordered on intimidation, to which, however, he didn't respond. He didn't lose it, he

didn't take part in disagreements and quarrels, he didn't act like he was hurt by or took the attacks to heart. He simply accepted them and kept silent. He would wait for the match to start to express himself physically and verbally, but never spitefully and abusively against the others, not even the ringleaders who tormented him.

One day we were ready in our kit, sitting in the changing room, socks pulled up over our knees, shin pads bulging inside them, tapping our studs on the floor impatiently and expecting the trainer to come out of his room at any moment to give his talk and assign tactical team and individual tasks for the forthcoming duel. It was a time for puffing ourselves up—for jokes and jibes, that is. One of the old hands began to take aim at the usual target—Genady: *Gena, be careful you don't stuff your arse with grass like last time! There was a whole swathe missing in front of the penalty area! You don't do those sliding tackles for nothing! You could at least hit the ball, but you're like a herbivore—you eat grass but with your arse!* The next one took it to the next level: *An arse that eats a lot, shits a lot! Gena, do your jeans smell of shit?* All-round thunderous approval ensued. Again he didn't reply to the cross-fire and kept pulling up his sock, higher and higher, almost to breaking point. It was obvious he was doing something unnecessary simply to avoid open conflict and to make it clear that that's not what he wanted.

I sensed the occasion—a youthful turning point. With the big guys, you had to prove yourself not only on the pitch but also in your general behaviour. To impress the leaders whenever possible, to deserve and get their admiration, for them to like you, to be with them, to be of them, to be like them …

To be *good*.

I stood up and crossed the changing room on the diagonal. My studs clattered on the bare concrete. I felt their *eyes* on me physically and a shiver ran through my body. Halfway across I was surprised I was doing it, but there was no turning back anymore. I stood in front of the seated Genady. I leant slightly towards him and smelt at close range the underpants hanging on the nail above his head. I wrinkled my nose, looked down on him imperiously and grinned: *Someone really has summoned the guts of the Serengeti and not cleaned up …*

You could hear a pin drop. Even the ringleaders were shocked by the audacity and ingenuity on display. Then devastating laughter erupted and it was still resounding when the trainer appeared in the doorway, totally confused: *What's going on, eh? Everyone in their places for the team talk!* I sat down and sought out Genady's eyes with mine, but he carried on needlessly tugging at his socks and staring at the ground.

During the match he didn't once make a call. When it was over I caught up with him on the track: "Gena, why didn't you pass it to me? I was on my own on the penalty spot …"

Silence. He wiped his sweaty face with the front of his shirt.

"How could those imbeciles beat us, it can't be true …" I persisted.

Silence. He snorted up phlegm and spat it onto the brown cinders.

"Will you watch Chelsea-Juventus this evening?" I made a last attempt.

No reaction.

He no longer came to training. I saw him neither at the stadium nor in the arena called "Life".

Dimitar

The last entrance to the block, he lived up there, I was at the other end, the other last entrance. We got to chatting during street games outside the oblong cooperative, built in the 1970s. Mitko was an eternal child in the body of a twenty-five year old man: mentally ill, disabled, with mental problems, something … For us he was the relatively harmless neighbourhood loon. At the same time we respected him because for ten year olds, everyone twenty and over is big, grown-up, mature, they've seen and experienced a lot, but at the same time we realised that because of his illness he was on our mental level and below.

He was tall and thin, in a worn-out denim jacket-and-trousers combo with a shirt underneath it. Both his trousers and his jacket were on the short side and his socks and shirt sleeves, his white hairy legs and arms stuck out of their ends accordingly. He went around in worn and unstitched black formal shoes. Always in these clothes—like a cartoon character or like an unkempt mentally disabled person who couldn't support himself. Or had nobody to support him. His hair—unwashed, matted and uncut without being long. Thick black eyebrows like arches that met in the middle—*the bridge of friendship* as we used to joke. We didn't yet know the challenges of the excessive growth of facial hair or other kinds. He often grinned, revealing his big yellow teeth with even more yellow tartar plastered on them. He smoked, which earned him our respect. But the most impressive thing about his face were his huge great lips chapped with sores. The magic words for completely freaking him out so he'd chase after us were: *Eh, Gobby!*

He would slowly roll his eyes and speak slowly too, more like a drawn-out audio recording played at reduced speed. It wasn't clear whether all this slowness

was caused by the medication he took or didn't take. His parents were old and quiet, hardly seen, hidden away from the public gaze and noise in a panel-block apartment up above. Dimitar also had a pretty younger sister who, for all those years, didn't make friends in the street and didn't join our company, probably because she was ashamed of her brother. She seemed embarrassed when she had to go past us and he was there. She walked in a peculiar way that betrayed her inner tension, stupor even—she didn't move her hands, which stayed firmly stuck to her sides.

After breakfast I usually went out in front of the block first with an emblematic Striker rubber ball at my feet. But Mitko was already there. He was outside the whole day. Left to his own devices, he belonged to the world and the world belonged to him. We would chat and give each other little things. We'd take turns striking penalties at a rack for beating carpets. Gradually the others would join in. We'd make up the numbers for a match. We'd choose teams by lots and begin. I suppose we were an attractive sight for the passers-by on the pavements who watched how this big, gawky and ungainly man ran after the rubber ball among a pack of brats.

After two hours, now worn out and having made a worthy sacrifice to the *gods of football* (according to Michael Mindcrime and his book-game of that name), we decided to mix it up. How? By teasing Mitko. All casual like, someone would toss him a line like *Gobby, pass the ball!* Or *Gobby, you did really well today!* Or *Which class are you in, Gobby?* And he would go crazy.

I said such things, too.

He would pick up stones from the ground and aim at us as if we were street dogs. We'd only just manage to hide behind trees and in doorways. He'd chase us and whoever he grabbed, he'd hit on the back of the neck with strong, but not devastating blows. The thing that was most fun and that we were actively seeking, however, was when he picked up the Striker in his hands, took a few steps back for added strength and kicked the damned thing high into the air. That's how he demonstrated his age and power, as far as he understood them, and we jumped for joy, watching the ball tear through the azure expanse. Sometimes he'd even send it up onto the block, which meant embarking on a favourite adventure—climbing to the top floor, then onto the step-ladder leant against the wall beneath the heavy metal attic dormer window onto the roof, pushing it open with its awkward painful handle, which required not boyish, but manly strength—a test of whether you'd grown up or not—and all these hindrances would be finally rewarded with delightful views across the chimneys, aerials and lightning rods

up there: the houses' brick-red hats floating in the green trough of the Balkan foothills; the stadium; the girl who walked around at home wearing only her bra and pants in a room with see-through curtains …

So that's right—Mitko was our fairground bear. *Gobby* was precisely the right note on our little vocal lutes to make him dance, and the ring in his nose with the chain we confidently held onto was our childish and our totally primordial human cruelty and the *evil* that possessed our otherwise innocent hearts.

But also the evil that we chose ourselves.

At one point Dimitar and his family unexpectedly disappeared from the face of the earth. I heard they'd moved to a country house of theirs on the outskirts. Later I ran into his sister several times in various places, but I was afraid to ask her for details. I was afraid because of my shame relating to the past and because of her shame relating to the past, present and future.

A dozen or so years later I was driving around the outskirts of the city with friends. On a remote third-class road with lots of vegetation on either side, our car passed a man in denim clothes. He was standing on the sandy edge of the road, greeting passing motorists. There was no way to mistake him. He was as young as ever, as if he was a traveller in time. The same absent-minded look which for one brief but somehow *eternal* moment met mine.

I don't know whether he was a traveller in time or a pseudo-manbaby like Keanu Reeves, who'd never grown old, but I know that for close-on a quarter of a century now he hasn't stopped popping into my head.

Or more accurately—into *my conscience*.

Eva and Buba

The two were sisters with a few years age-difference in favour of the first who bore the name of the First Woman in the history of humankind. Our little street Eva was my age, but didn't seem twelve years old so much as five years younger. In fact they looked like peers, equally frail and somehow underdeveloped, probably due to their gender, but also their generally desolate way of life. They lived on the first floor of the neighbouring block. Their mother was a prematurely aged thirty-something woman, their father had run off at some point, and they had an older brother and sister too. It was a case of *full house—empty table*. When we called on the boy to come out and play, we'd see and smell the poverty that oppressed

them through the chink of their half-closed front door. We didn't know the name of the younger one, we never asked about it and we readily adopted the nickname imposed by her sister, liking its eccentric sound—Buba.

In front of the block there was almost only one thing we played—*football*. But there were exceptions, especially once it started getting dark. The streetlamps were a monument of those times—they were there, but they didn't work and there was no way to chase the ball in the fading twilight. But something else too—we began to include the girls in various games. We were inclined to sacrifice a kickabout because of them—what heroism! The opposite sex began to interest us. Well, not Eva and Buba, who were small fry even for us. Those two were more like parts of the surroundings and the environment—*the babies of the neighbourhood.*

Either way, the darkness contributed to the dramatic run of events in hide and seek, tag, cowboys and Indians, Hurrah! … We went on with *Coming, ready or not!* And *Come out, come out, wherever you are!* until midnight and beyond. Irritated adults came out onto balconies with tired faces, nervously smoking cigarettes and grunting at our unbridled enthusiasm—the boyish screams and girlish shrieks. Sometimes they'd make a loud comment or even tip a bowl of water on our heads, but that only fired us up even more …

Sooner or later, though, children tire of good-natured games. They tire of the Good, of joy and laughter, and want a different kind of laughter—laughter at the expense of someone else's grief. The time had come for us to provoke a *fight* between the two sisters—the daily midnight culmination of our street activities, after which we headed for home, quickly gobbled down the *bread after the circuses*, the cold supper mum had left on the table, and went to sleep sweetly intoxicated in expectation of the following day which promised new and old-as-the-world feats and adventures.

There were two successful methods for lighting their fuses—one for each of them. You might pull Eva to one side and lie to her that Buba had said something bad about her. That she smelled, for example, or that her hair was greasy or that she ate her own boogers. Then, without any ceremony and mortally wounded, she would find her sister in the crowd and slap her. Or again you might incite Buba to go up to her older sister and actually insult her or pull/pinch/bite her. The smaller one always accepted the mission with alacrity and carried it out with a smile. In a similar way Eva accepted the lies in the insults directed against her as pure truth. The two took on their roles and performed them conscientiously. That's how they knew that their place in our games was secure. That they were

valuable. If they didn't fight, we'd turn them out of the gang, like a bitch weans her puppies when they grow up.

More than once I personally took on the job of pitting them one against the other. I was good at convincing communication. I was a good *motivator*.

We formed a circle around them like in *Fight Club*. We supported both of them with breathless instructions. With whoops and applause, we cheered on every slap that reddened the opponent's cheek and loudly echoed in the dark. Someone would take it upon themselves to commentate as if they were Peter "the Rooster" Vassilev at a Strandzha Cup boxing match. Bloodthirsty, we enjoyed the commentary, but even more—the subject of the commentary. Eva and Buba were our gladiators in our Rome—*the Street*. We were the emperors—a host of immature Neros, Caligulas and Diocletians.

The battle always unfolded in a similar way. At first they were equally placed, almost always aiming at the enemy sister's hair. At some point they would manage to free themselves from each other's grip and a storm of continuous quick short blows with little force would set in. Their hands went back and forth, driven by a common invisible dynamo. They resembled those toys that we wound up with a spring. Next came the phlegm—they spat in each other's faces until their mouths were dry. The fight was accompanied by the pair's laughter. Their laughter—taken up by the laughter of the crowd surrounding them. Sooner or later the big one would prevail all the same, managing to land a few kicks in Buba's kidneys—whose giggling gradually turned into groans of pain. Finally the groans merged with the piercing scream of a demon born in the dark. She would bend over and squat with her arms crossed on her stomach. The moon would light up her tear-stained face. Eva would triumphantly raise her arms. The crowd went wild. The sisters left the street coliseum and retreated, sniffling, into their entrance to the deafening applause of the group. One of them—proud and arrogant, the other—beaten, bent and crying. We slowly headed to our beds for the night. The show was over, leaving us satisfied, at least until the following night.

A crucial point—we didn't act like this when their brother, who I was actually close to, was with us. Besides football, I also joined with him in the building of *summer base camps* (as we called them) out of dirt, with special grooves we could stand our bikes upright in, and winter fortresses out of snow which we then destroyed. Another crucial point—the oldest sister in their family was a strange soul. She didn't play with us because she was of high-school age, but she had a wonderful attitude towards me personally and always teased me with sympathy

and affection when our paths crossed outside the block. And to this day I miss her the most, even though I haven't met her in ages.

When most of us went on to high school and technical college, it's no surprise that the street games came to an end. We now had a new environment, new challenges and friends, new enemies and victims. I watched from the balcony when Eva went out and came home in absurdly short miniskirts, tight leggings and open plunging necklines. She had a bad reputation. Years later I saw Buba pushing a pram, but not with a doll in it. Both were the same clumsy, underdeveloped little girls who'd wanted to be women prematurely. Farcical monsters had been born from the collision of reality with mixed-up plans, self-assessments, dreams and traumas. Their faces were excessively red from thick make-up—like matryoshka dolls, like unsuitable make-up on children's corpses, disfigured victims of serious accidents. Wax figures scrawled on by hooligans.

After that the family left the apartment in the neighbouring entrance. And since then nothing: no news, not a word; no Eva, no Buba.



Photo: Ivaylo Petrov

Zachary KARABASHLIEV

The Last Dolphin Hunter

Zachary Karabashliev is an award-winning Bulgarian novelist, playwright, screenwriter, and editor-in-chief of Ciela, Bulgaria's leading publishing house. He is one of the most widely read contemporary Bulgarian authors. His novels include *The Last Dolphin Hunter*, *Wound*, *The Tail*, *Fallow Lands*, and *18% Gray*, and have received major national literary awards, including four Novel of the Year distinctions, the Elias Canetti Award, the Helikon Award, the Hristo G. Danov Award, and many others.

His work has been translated and published in the United States, France, Germany, Poland, Turkey, Russia, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, North Macedonia, and other territories, and has appeared in the American anthology *Best European Fiction 2018*. His debut novel, *18% Gray*, was adapted into a feature film, and several short films have been based on his stories. As a playwright, his work has been staged in Bulgaria, New York, and Chicago.

Karabashliev is the founder and creative director of VarnaLit International Literary Festival. He lives in Sofia, Bulgaria, with his family.

About the book

In the dim light of a small screening room at the Bulgarian National Film Archive in Sofia, a man will come face to face with his past, his future, and a far more ancient story.

The unnamed narrator works as a translator and script consultant on a major international film about the rescue of Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War. Quite by accident, he stumbles upon forgotten documentary footage of dolphin hunting in the Black Sea during the 1950s. In the grainy black-and-white images, aboard a dolphin-hunting vessel, he recognizes his own grandfather—a man he knows only from a few photographs in a family album. Until that moment, all he knew was that his grandfather had been convicted of murder and had died in prison. All memory of him had been erased. But was his grandfather, Ivan Branev, truly a dolphin hunter? That question draws the narrator into an investigation of his family's buried past.

That same day, in the same building, the narrator meets Darina—a marine biologist who has returned to Bulgaria after completing her studies in California in order to research Black Sea dolphins. From her he learns that only a few decades ago, these remarkable creatures were slaughtered on a massive scale. How could an entire society forget the dolphin hunts?

Darina's research revolves around one major scientific question: whether dolphins possess collective memory—and whether knowledge, trauma, or survival strategies can be transmitted from generation to generation. A romantic relationship gradually unfolds between them, offering a fragile tenderness to balance the weight of the past. Her research into dolphins becomes a counterpoint to the narrator's descent into the depths of both personal and collective memory.

Through archives, testimonies, and official documents, the life of the history teacher Ivan Branev begins to emerge from oblivion. It all begins with a train journey and a chance encounter with Magda—the woman who will become the love of his life. Shortly after their wedding, during the final stage of World War Two, when Bulgaria joins the war against Germany, Ivan Branev is sent to the front as a company commander. But while the Bulgarian army fights Hitler, the country falls under Soviet occupation. In the aftermath, thousands are executed without trial or conviction, and mass repression is unleashed against politicians, entrepreneurs, officers, intellectuals, and religious leaders.

When the war ends, although Ivan Branev is a committed democrat, he is denounced for holding "fascist views." Without trial or conviction, Branev is interned in a concentration camp for nine years and officially branded a "former

person"—deprived of his profession and basic human rights. Upon his release, Branev is a widower, with no right to teach and left to care for a nine-year-old son he barely knows. Forced to survive, he accepts the only work he can find—as a diver aboard a dolphin-hunting ship.

Beneath the historical and contemporary layers of the novel runs a third, mythological strand. Across centuries, in the legends of ancient civilizations and in the oral traditions of Indigenous peoples, humans have spoken of their mysterious bond with dolphins, who appear as guides, saviors and bearers of memory. These myths echo both in Darina's scientific inquiries and in Branev's lived experience, most powerfully in the dramatic episode in which a dolphin guides the hunting vessel through a violent storm, only to be shot by Nichev, the communist functionary who commands the boat and is himself pushed overboard shortly afterward. In the subsequent trial, Branev assumes responsibility for Nichev's murder — but is that the whole truth?

The Last Dolphin Hunter intertwines history, memory, and mythology in a story about inherited guilt, collective forgetting, and the resilience of the human spirit. Archival documents merge with personal memory, while intimate human drama unfolds against the violence of the twentieth century. At its heart, the novel asks what survives tyranny—memory, love, or truth itself—and whether light can still emerge from darkness.

The Last Dolphin Hunter

EXCERPT *Translated by Angela Rodel*

But who was Ivan Branev? And how did I ever find my way to him? Or maybe it was the other way around—he found his way to me. I'll try to keep this brief, because although the story touches my own life, it isn't really mine. It's his.

And now I wonder: would I ever have learned any of it, if it hadn't been for the dolphins?

*

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA
CITY OF STALIN DISTRICT COURT

Criminal Division
Investigative Case No. 511/1954

MINUTES FROM A COURT HEARING

Today, 29 August 1954, in the City of Stalin District Court, Criminal Division, wherefore the proceedings in the above-entitled matter commenced before **PRESIDING JUDGE** Yordan Gulev; **ASSOCIATE JUSTICES** Atanas Novakov and Zhelyo Enev; **PEOPLE'S LAY JUDGES** Krastyo Penev and Kateliya Stoynev; and **SECRETARY** Atanas Atanasov, appears **PROSECUTOR FOR THE STATE** Racho Dimitrov Radev, in an open court hearing for a criminal case of a general nature No. 511 against defendant **Ivan Branev**, charged with having caused the death of **Peyko Nichev**, born in the village of Hinovo, Silistra region.

The defendant was born on 3 April 1913 in the city of Varna. Nationality: Bulgarian. Religion: Orthodox. Socioeconomic status: petty bourgeois. Education: higher, baccalaureate in History, Sofia University. Marital status: widower. Occupation: general laborer, fishing vessel *Bulgarka*. Party affiliation: non-party.

The **PRESIDING JUDGE**, after confirming the defendant's identity and noting for the record that he declined legal counsel for the charge under Article

127, paragraph III of the Criminal Code, which carries the most severe penalty, proposed that a court-appointed public defense counsel be assigned to him.

DEFENDANT: I do not need a court-appointed public defense counsel. Thank you.

PRESIDING JUDGE: If that is your decision, so be it. Let the record show that the defendant knowingly, competently, and voluntarily waives his right to legal counsel.

(Reads charge.)

Do you understand the charges against you?

DEFENDANT: I understand. I received the indictment and submitted a written statement admitting guilt on the first charge, with the clarification—

PROSECUTOR: You admit guilt on the first charge.

DEFENDANT: —with the clarification that it was unintentional—

PROSECUTOR: The court will determine whether it was intentional. Let the record show that the defendant pleads guilty to the killing of—

DEFENDANT: I admit responsibility for the death of Peyko Nichev, but I did not kill him.

PROSECUTOR: Do not interrupt. Do you plead guilty to the second charge?

DEFENDANT: I deny the charges under Article 86, paragraph I, and Article 70. I have not engaged in anti-state activity. I have not taken part in subversive acts or actions against the People's government. I have not acted with anti-revolutionary intent to weaken or obstruct the authority of the People's Republic of Bulgaria. I have not formed or led any group to commit crimes against the state or to attempt harm against state officials.

PRESIDING JUDGE: Let the proceedings commence.

(The proceedings commence.)

PROSECUTOR: Let the record show that the victim, Comrade Peyko Nichev, served in the Great War on the Northern Front and took part in the 1918 soldiers' uprising in Vladaya. In 1923, he participated in the organization of several anti-fascist movements in Sofia and later in the attack on St. Nedelya Church, after which he was granted political asylum in the USSR, where he received special training. After returning to Bulgaria on 9 September 1944, he held a supervisory position in the People's militia.

(Leafs through documents.)

Since 1954, he served as captain of the fishing vessel *Bulgarka*.

(Leafs through documents.)

Soviet citizen.

PRESIDING JUDGE: Let it be entered into the record.

PROSECUTOR: Comrades judges, before we proceed, let the record show that the accused Ivan Branev is a recidivist.

DEFENDANT: I have never been convicted.

PROSECUTOR: In 1946, he was accused of anti-state activity—

DEFENDANT: —based on denunciation and slander.

PROSECUTOR: If you interrupt me again, we will promptly conclude these proceedings. Tell us about your role on the fishing vessel.

DEFENDANT: It's not a fishing vessel.

PROSECUTOR: How is it not a fishing vessel? What is it for?

DEFENDANT: Hunting dolphins.

PROSECUTOR: There's no difference.

DEFENDANT: If I may—a dolphin is not a fish.

PROSECUTOR: Neither is a crab. So, what is it?

DEFENDANT: It resembles a fish, but it's not. It's a mammal. Warm-blooded. It uses lungs to breathe—

PROSECUTOR: Enough. This isn't a classroom. So, you were a teacher. Why did you become a fisherman?

DEFENDANT: I was stripped of my teaching rights.

PROSECUTOR: Good. People with pro-fascist ideologies shouldn't teach!

DEFENDANT: I've never held pro-fascist ideologies.

PROSECUTOR: How will you prove that?

DEFENDANT: There's no way to prove what principles one does not have.

PROSECUTOR: Here it states, and I quote: "He did not believe that 9 September* would happen."

DEFENDANT: That was written by an informant.

PROSECUTOR: Did you or did you not believe the Ninth would come?

DEFENDANT: I don't need to *believe* that 9 September will come. If a date is on the calendar, it will come.

PROSECUTOR: Let the records reflect that the witness maintains his hostile positions.

DEFENDANT: Mr. Prosecutor, I served in the war against Nazi Germany.

PRESIDING JUDGE: And what was your involvement in the war?

DEFENDANT: I served as company commander since September 1944. I received a military decoration for—

PROSECUTOR: Many traitors received decorations. We're not here to debate your awards. Or the pro-fascist article you wrote on 8 October 1942.

DEFENDANT: I've never written any pro-fascist articles because, as I've stated, I am not pro-fascist.

PROSECUTOR: And the other—the one about politics and ethics—

DEFENDANT: That is a historical overview of democracy and tyranny. From the ancient Greeks to—

PROSECUTOR: Enough.

(Leafs through documents.)

So. You began work on the vessel?

DEFENDANT: Yes, sir.

PROSECUTOR: Did you have experience as a fisherman?

DEFENDANT: No. But I have—

PROSECUTOR: What was your relationship like with Comrade Nichev?

DEFENDANT: Professional.

PROSECUTOR: Go on.

DEFENDANT: Nichev was the shooter and captain-brigadier of the vessel. Angel was the mechanic. He used to own it but after the boat was nationalized, he stayed on as mechanic. I was one of three crew members.

PROSECUTOR: Cut to the chase. Why did you go out to sea under worsening weather conditions?

DEFENDANT: The dolphin population had been dwindling. Since the State Fisheries were created, the number of dolphins decreased. The State vessels are larger, better equipped, and when they deploy the purse seines—

PROSECUTOR: Deploy the…what?

DEFENDANT: Purse seines are long fishing nets. There are also aircraft, which locate the pods from above—hundreds, sometimes thousands of dolphins—and send information down to the vessels. Then, the vessels deploy the purse seines, enclose the pods, and begin shooting. The crew fires as though they're in battle. They slaughter all the dolphins, then haul the nets aboard with cranes… the whole bay turns red with blood. There have been times where over a thousand dolphins are netted, shot, and dragged toward shore—like to the Fishermen's Beach. Then the workers wade into the shallows. They finish off the wounded animals and drag the rest onto dry land. The dolphins squeal, rattle, slap their tails, thrash on the sand…they slaughter them right there on the spot, butcher them…the entire shore becomes a slaughterhouse. It smells of blood for kilometers…

PROSECUTOR: Enough. What does this have to do with you?

DEFENDANT: I'm explaining why our small boat *Bulgarka* was forced to go farther into the open sea, even under worsening weather conditions. We had

been unable to meet our quota because industrial hunting had diminished the population and what few dolphins remained fled farther out to sea.

PROSECUTOR: Are you saying the vessels of the People's government prevented you from doing your job?

DEFENDANT: I'm saying it was becoming increasingly difficult to hunt in the traditional way.

PROSECUTOR: You like your traditional ways, don't you? Explain them, then.

DEFENDANT: Dolphins live in pods. And when we see a pod, we approach. They don't usually flee. Quite the opposite, in fact—they let us come close, sometimes they even play around the vessel…and the dolphin, especially if it's an *afala*—

PROSECUTOR: What's an *afala*?

DEFENDANT: A kind of dolphin, the largest one. It jumps very high, throws itself onto the school of fish—

PROSECUTOR: How is the hunt actually carried out?

DEFENDANT: When a dolphin jumps above the water, its lungs are full of air…that's when Nichev shoots it with the Mannlicher. That's a rifle that—

PROSECUTOR: I know what a Mannlicher is.

DEFENDANT: If the dolphin is shot at that moment, it doesn't sink. It stays on the surface of the water, and the gaffs men pull it out. But that requires accurate aim, which was rare with Nichev. And lately, even rarer still.

PROSECUTOR: He didn't have good aim?

DEFENDANT: His hands trembled. Before noon.

PROSECUTOR: Are you saying that Comrade Nichev was a drunk?

DEFENDANT: All I'm saying is that his hands trembled before noon, and it made his aim inaccurate.

PROSECUTOR: And after noon?

DEFENDANT: Usually not. When he drank *rakia*, they didn't tremble at all.

PROSECUTOR: Carry on.

DEFENDANT: If Nichev shot the animal and it sank because he accidentally hit its lung, someone would have to jump in the water and retrieve it. That someone was me. I'd dive into the sea and bring it to the surface, then the hookmen would drive gaffs into its back, haul it onto the deck, and process it.

PROSECUTOR: How?

DEFENDANT: They skin it, butcher it…and I dive for the next one.

PROSECUTOR: Why were *you* the diver?

DEFENDANT: Because I had been a national champion in swimming. I'd taught swimming technique and theory, I led the school swimming team, I was chief judge at the Summer swimming competitions "Cape Galata – Sea Baths, Varna."

PROSECUTOR (*correcting*): Stalin.

DEFENDANT: It was called Varna at the time.

PROSECUTOR: You haven't gotten used to the new ways, have you, Citizen Branev? How many dolphins are caught per shift?

DEFENDANT: Some days we caught twenty to thirty dolphins, even up to fifty.

PROSECUTOR: And then what?

DEFENDANT: As I said, they're skinned and butchered. The skin and blubber are sold separately—the skin for export, and the fat for aviation fuel, but I don't know, we don't deal with that. The meat is salted.

PROSECUTOR: Get to the point.

DEFENDANT: When I started working on the boat, shortly before the incident, we were finding fewer and fewer creatures, and they were getting smaller.

PROSECUTOR: Why?

DEFENDANT: The large dolphins are usually males The *afalas* are the biggest—over two hundred kilos, some over two hundred and fifty—but by my time they'd been mostly wiped out. We encountered more females—often nursing calves. That's why we had to go farther out to sea.

PROSECUTOR: So, you would leave the borders of the People's Republic of Bulgaria?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

PROSECUTOR: You entered international waters?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

PROSECUTOR: How far out did you go?

DEFENDANT: We reached Snake Island once. That's in the USSR, toward Odessa.

PROSECUTOR: I know where Snake Island is. What did you do there?

DEFENDANT: We spoke with the border guards. They questioned us. We explained who we were.

PROSECUTOR: And did you question them?

DEFENDANT: We asked questions.

PROSECUTOR: You were gathering information? What kind?

DEFENDANT: About the weather. About dolphins.

PROSECUTOR: Any other information? Of some other nature?

DEFENDANT: Mister Prosecutor…

PROSECUTOR: Don't *Mister* me. Answer the question. Yes or no?

DEFENDANT: No.

PROSECUTOR: We'll see. Did you end up anywhere else? Any other countries?

DEFENDANT: Turkey.

PROSECUTOR: Did you have contact with Turkish authorities?

DEFENDANT: Yes.

PROSECUTOR: Go on.

DEFENDANT: We were sheltering from a storm.

PROSECUTOR: You were what?

DEFENDANT: Sheltering from a storm. That's what it's called when a storm comes—we were hiding from the weather…

PROSECUTOR: Carry on.

DEFENDANT: Once, we found ourselves near a Turkish island. We waited for the storm to pass. Some border guards came. They didn't do anything to us. They treated us well.

PROSECUTOR: So you established friendly relations with Turkish authorities.

DEFENDANT: They treated us humanely. They gave us cigarettes.

PROSECUTOR: Are you saying that the hostile Turkish authorities treated you humanely, while the friendly Soviet authorities did not?

DEFENDANT: I did not say that.

PROSECUTOR: Surely, in that very moment, you got the idea to flee to Turkey?

DEFENDANT: I've made no attempts to flee.

PROSECUTOR: But the idea crossed your mind?

DEFENDANT: I haven't done anything illegal.

PROSECUTOR: Or perhaps you decided to remain in the Motherland and become a foreign spy.

DEFENDANT: I am not a spy.

PROSECUTOR: That is for the court to decide.

DEFENDANT: I am not a traitor.

PROSECUTOR: You know Greek, yes?

DEFENDANT: My maternal grandmother was Greek. I learned some from her. We also studied Ancient Greek at university, so you could say I have some proficiency.

PROSECUTOR: Did you speak with any Greek citizens while fishing?

DEFENDANT: We didn't encounter any Greek citizens.

PROSECUTOR: But if you had, you would have spoken Greek, isn't that right? Let us return to the crime. What happened then?

DEFENDANT: I saw the cloud from the west. I heard Angel shout to Nichev, "Comrade Captain, let's head back, the weather is not on our side. A storm is coming."

PROSECUTOR: How did he know that?

DEFENDANT: The sea begins to murmur. Then it ripples. Then the wind comes. When the first drops struck the deck, Angel shouted, "raise anchor and run for it." But Nichev refused. He said we hadn't hit a single fish yet—he called the dolphins "fish." Angel was right about the storm, but Nichev insisted on going farther out to meet our quota.

So, we went. Suddenly a wave came. A big one. The compass was broken, which I had reported beforehand, but the captain didn't heed my warning. Clouds gathered, heavy rain fell, the wind rose. The sea darkened. Turned black. The storm reached us. And when you get caught in a storm and the rain starts falling a certain way...

PROSECUTOR: What is that certain way, Citizen Branev?

DEFENDANT: It starts raining from everywhere—from above, from the sides, from below. You don't know where you are, where you're going. It's pouring down from above, it's beating at you from the sides, you can't see anything, you lose your bearings. Normally, you'd meet a wave with the bow of the ship, that's the way it should be. But in a storm, the waves are…all mixed up. They hit the sides, the stern, everywhere. And you can't see anything because of the rain and fog. We're yelling at each other on deck, screaming, shouting, and the waves are just spinning us around and around. And we've completely lost our bearings. Which way is north, which way is south, you don't know. Where's up, where's down, you don't know. And the compass is broken. And when you can't get your bearings, you're lost.

PROSECUTOR: Bearings?

DEFENDANT: To get your bearings? To know where you are. To know where north is. If your compass is out of order, if you can't see the sun or the stars and

you don't know where north or south is, you can't get your bearings. And in a storm…the Black Sea gets worse than any other sea. It's no accident that the ancient Greeks—

PROSECUTOR: No more lectures.

DEFENDANT: Angel said he'd never seen such a storm. He was frightened, pale, turning the rudder left and right, crossing himself, praying. The small boat was threatening to capsize with every wave. And just when it seemed we were completely lost—the dolphin appeared.

PROSECUTOR: A dolphin appeared.

DEFENDANT: Yes. To the right of the bow. Huge—at least two and a half meters, maybe three. It jumped high, as if to draw our attention. Dolphins make these peculiar sounds—whistles, clicks. This one did too, like it was signaling us. And I realized then that it wanted to help us.

(The defendant falls silent for some time.)

PROSECUTOR: How did you realized that?

DEFENDANT: We had no choice. Huge waves, darkness, wind, rain. Angel turned the rudder, crossed himself, and began following the dolphin. We let it lead us.

PROSECUTOR: Lead you where?

DEFENDANT: Well, we followed the dolphin. At times it vanished, and we panicked, shouting that we were lost. Then it would appear again, leaping over the waves, and we would follow it once more. Little by little, the storm—after all its roaring and rage—began to ease. It was only a summer storm after all. The clouds pulled back, the sky cleared, and suddenly there was light, as if nothing had happened. And that was when we saw the storm had carried us all the way up to Kaliakra.

PROSECUTOR: Go on.

DEFENDANT: Angel relaxed and lit his pipe. He had that old sailor's habit—always with a pipe in his mouth. We rested, relaxed, said to ourselves—hey, we saved our skins this time. Then suddenly—a shot. Then more shots. I saw Nichev with the Mannlicher. And I saw the dolphin above the water, lying sideways and waving at us with one of its fins. But blood was pouring out all around it, a lot of blood, and it was barely staying afloat. And he looked at us, about ten meters away from the boat. Nichev was shouting to me, "jump, Branev...grab him before he sinks." The dolphin that just saved us! He waved like that with one fin, side-to-side, as if for help, just ten meters away. Blood everywhere. And Nichev yelled, "don't look at me like that, jump, you fascist bitch, jump right now!"

To kill this creature that looks you in the eyes like a man, this soul that...

"Jump, Branev! You haven't caught anything all day! Jump, you bastard, this will be our catch!"

I didn't jump.

And then he raised the Mannlicher at me.

"Jump," he shouted, "pull it out before it sinks! We haven't ever seen one this big!"

It's true. It was the biggest dolphin I'd ever seen.

"Jump," he shouted, "right now!"

PROSECUTOR: What did you do, Citizen Branev?

DEFENDANT: I did not jump.

PROSECUTOR: Why didn't you carry out the order?

DEFENDANT: Nichev flew into a rage.

PROSECUTOR: And what followed?

DEFENDANT: He shouted, "that's an order. I will count to three. One. Jump. Two. Jump. Three—"

PROSECUTOR: And that's when you pushed him overboard?

(The defendant looks ahead and does not answer.)

PROSECUTOR: You pushed your captain overboard. You maliciously and deliberately pushed your commander overboard. A fighter against fascism. A citizen of the USSR. Overboard. Is that so, Citizen Branev?

(The defendant remains silent.)

PROSECUTOR: How did you do it?

(The defendant remains silent.)

PROSECUTOR: I request the court summon the witnesses Angel Angelov, Garabed Melkonyan, and Marcho Nikolaidis.

DEFENDANT: There is no need. I assume responsibility for Nichev's death.

PROSECUTOR: That's not a plea.

DEFENDANT: I am guilty of his death.

PROSECUTOR: You plead guilty to the death of Comrade Nichev.

DEFENDANT: I plead guilty.

PRESIDING JUDGE: The court withdraws for deliberation. This concludes the hearing.

PROSECUTOR'S NOTE

The defendant shows signs of a hostile attitude toward the People's government. Speaks evasively. Displays inappropriate emotionality regarding the object of

industrial hunting. A more thorough examination of his connections with other hostile elements is required.

The minutes were drawn up in three identical copies.

PRESIDING JUDGE: (signature)
PEOPLE'S LAY JUDGES: (signatures)
SECRETARY: (signature)
Certified true to the original.
[Seal of the District Court – City of Stalin]



Novel, 320 pages
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Albena STAMBOLOVA

Until I Can't

Albena Stambolova is a Bulgarian writer, translator, and educator who specialises in the field of psychoanalysis and social psychology. She holds a PhD and an M.A. from Sofia University, and an DEA in Semiotics and Psychoanalysis from University Paris VII, D. Diderot. From 1991 to 1999 she worked at the University of Paris IX, Dauphine and lectured at the University of Paris III, Censier. Since 2017 Stambolova has been a specialized consultant at the New Bulgarian University, and head of the Specialized Consultancy Unit.

She is the author of four novels, two collections of short stories, and the monograph *Sickness into Death, a Psychoanalytic Study of Marguerite Duras*. Her second novel *Everything Happens as It Does* (Stigmati, 2001) was nominated for the H.G. Danov Award, and published in English (Open Letter Books, 2013, tr. Olga Nikolova) and Polish (tr. Anna Ksitsova). Her 2007 book *Adventure to Pass Time* was nominated for the Helicon Award. Stambolova's short story collection *Buckthorn and Blackberries* (Fakel Publishing House, 2020) won the prestigious Yordan Radichkov Short Story Award and the 2021 Portal Culture Award. Her latest collection *Until I Can't* (University Press: St. Kliment Ohridski, 2025) was nominated for the Portal Culture Award. Her work has been published in the US, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Serbia. Albena has translated works by R. Barthes, C. Levi-Strauss, M. Mauss, M. Druon, M. Duras, J. Kristeva, D. Boulanger, and A. de Saint-Exupery among others.

About the book

In the short story collection *Until I Can't*, existential themes serve as a background for the unfolding of individual human stories in our modern world of uncertainty. The unpredictability of how each of the situations might develop dominates, offering a sense of life itself: mysterious, full of secrets and untold stories. It is this wonder at the world as it is that is the main driving force of the narrative.

Some of the stories are narrated in third person, others in second. As in any prose, whether biographical or not, the narrator is a fictional character, not directly tied to credibility, and in this sense they are the person on whose behalf the story takes shape. The narrative plays with this approaching and distancing from reality. The connection with the biographical should be understood more as a way of experiencing the world, its perception and elusive impressions, which search for their own words, so they can tell their own stories, but also as a way of making sense of why it is worth living and loving despite sorrow, loss and separation.

The themes covered in these stories touch upon family and social relationships, the passage of time, history, the experience of love, alienation, loneliness, writing and survival.

Albena's concise and precise language creates a rhythm of its own. The stories are highly expressionistic, injected with unexpected twists and humour.



Short story collection,
248 pages
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UNTIL I CAN'T

Translated by Yana Ellis

From "The Last Day"

The end of a home. Is this even possible? And how long could the end be if this is the home of five generations of the same family? And nothing has been thrown away from it, or almost nothing, or only a few things, because of their extreme unsuitability and because for a long time they had cohabited with their new, more modern versions, which have distracted their owners so much that in the end the old object has survived in an attic or a basement, peculiarly alien, but carrying the unmistakable testimony of time spent there.

On that day, I had to clean up after the removal company had carried everything out. But everything is a relative term. One everything is to put all selected and indicated items in the boxes, another everything is to decide what is to be thrown away, and yet a third everything is the confusion between the first two everythings.

It so happened that I had a day to prepare, which was good because it gave me time to correct myself. After a few hours, I'd decide that something had to be kept and not thrown away; I'd look through the open boxes and take out one thing and put another in its place. It was like balancing scales, the scales of my conscience. I kept thinking I had plenty of time to distribute between that 'yes' and that 'no'. With the passage of this time, I was slowly overwhelmed by panic and the accompanying daftness, which made me do the exact opposite of what I had already decided. It was dawning on me that I had not penetrated to the bottom of each and every cupboard and wardrobe; I knew there were objects there that had remained unseen for years. I wasted hours contemplating some of them, imagining what they were for and mostly how they were used. Others transported me back to my own migrations from house to house, or to the initial impulse that led to choices I had once made. In this way, I found in a chest in the basement not only my great-grandma's famous quilt of golden satin, but also two rolls of woollen fabric from the Rhodope region for pillows or maybe aprons, as well as a cambric cotton tablecloth, which my grandmother gave me as a wedding present. And for every big or tiny thing, merely because I had seen, or even touched, and remembered or imagined its purpose, I summoned its soul to

life, so deciding its future seemed impossible. Only because I had spent almost a month in such investigations, accompanied by imagined or not imagined woes, I had convinced myself that this whole business with the clearing was done. This was refuted on the last day when four or five young men nimbly filled the boxes and rearranged the house from a horizontal to a vertical state, while I paced like a lunatic from room to room, staring without any emotion at everything that fell into my field of vision, and strained my already abdicated mind to decide again and again what was 'yes' and what was 'no'. A lot of objects fell victim to the 'no' and many, far too many, took advantage of the 'yes', only to throw me into utter despair afterwards.

Anyway, on that last day I had to clean up, and I discovered there was nothing to do it with—no vacuum cleaner or mop, no bin or dustpan and brush. There were only bin bags. It was drizzling, a grey, calm, June day; later I was astonished to find out that it had been the day I got married.

A neighbour and a friend, who had already made the reasonable assumption that this whole cleaning job would not be harmless, kept calling me every hour, trying to persuade me to go round to her place afterwards to drink wine. I had even parked my car outside her building as an anchor that would force my day to end precisely there.

I went to the local household cleaning supplies shop. I walked out of it equipped with two large black bags full of detergents, a bucket, various brushes, sponges, a mop, dustpan and brush, a broom, and I cursed myself for not having kept all that stuff, which was available until yesterday and which I had personally ordered to be thrown out.

I like using new things, particularly ones just bought. They create in me the illusion of something interesting, something different from the present with its familiarity and therefore boredom. They transform the chore into a role in a film and make it easier to endure the task at hand.

I started with the kitchen, with the dirty rectangles under the already departed oven, fridge, and washing machine. I scrubbed diligently and with a feeling of satisfaction that I was doing something properly. This feeling was absent in the preceding days when it had felt that the house, multiplied by its bulk contents, would crush me with the spectacle of the now-metamorphosed monstrous passage of time within it.

I was sufficiently exhausted by the time I finished with the kitchen. I had yet to do three large bedrooms, an enormous living room, a bathroom, a toilet, a hallway and a large bay window, something like a winter garden, where I was

totally amazed to find very much alive and healthy plants in heavy ceramic pots. And then I was stung by the thought that there was an attic and a basement. No, I'm giving up on the basement. And on the attic. And I hadn't even remembered the balcony. After doing each room, I had a cigarette, rewarding myself for having the courage to take on something impossible to complete in a day. The ashtray, which for some unknown reason was still in the apartment, turned out to be on the mantelpiece, abandoned by all the objects that once upon a time adorned it. While I was smoking, they hovered like ghosts, having become ethereal and ungovernable by my decisions on their way to the 'yes' or 'no' of the boxes.

Actually, everything cleared out was not really gone. It only looked that way. My mind was tirelessly reconstructing what had been where and where it had been moved; it kept going back to the home it once was time and again; it walked around the rooms; it felt at home. My brain turned into a vampire, the rooms into ghosts. It was filling my legs and arms with lead, and my head, weightless, floated away from it all like a deluded balloon.

I kept telling myself that I had to push on, that the worst was over; now there are only one or two sweeps with the broom across the floor, no need to do a spring clean, the new owners would start tearing apart the panelling, the built-in wardrobes and cupboards, the bookcases, empty as if forever. For nearly a month afterwards, my old neighbour called repeatedly to complain that he couldn't sleep because of all the hammering and chiselling.

But back then, on that last day, it was dead silent. The rain drizzled on and on, drumming into my head that it would never stop, like those tears that don't trickle from your eyes but run down like a salty taste in your mouth. I was still trying to believe that I was there to clean, that it was necessary, and that there was no way the clumps of dust, appearing like balls of thorns rolling on the floor, could be left there. I was convincing myself that I was there to clean, but the cleaning was just a pretext to walk around the echoing rooms again and again, and to greedily swallow the salty taste. Watches were created for just such moments as this. And thank God! They're useless if used for waking up, they are even harmful then. But on days like this one, a day of a great clearing of the slate and the rooms, the watch measured the seconds and established a virtual end, a virtual conscience. Like a perpetuum mobile, it propelled me back and forth with the mop and the broom, making it seem that whether I moved or not, everything would collapse.

My wet footprints through the rooms traced the common path of the family's geography and history. The family had governed here; it had accumulated its furnishings generation after generation, it had crammed them in ever more

rationally with minimal losses, thanks to the ever-more-rational arrangements, and thus it had resisted the temptation to throw cargo overboard. It had propelled itself according to nature's laws until crashing into the reef of my decision to tear myself away from this place.

I had met the new young owners, who were also planning to bring their children up here. I had managed to convince myself that they were the best heirs, if not of the history, then at least of this apartment's geography. And on that last day there, I knew I was swimming in a place between two currents, a true back and forth, from which I wouldn't find the energy to escape. My feet would take me to the spot for drinking wine at dusk, my mind would roam like a sovereign through my new apartment and begin to get used to it, and my soul would remain lost in the old one with its fireplaces, empty bookshelves and inconsolable wooden paneling.

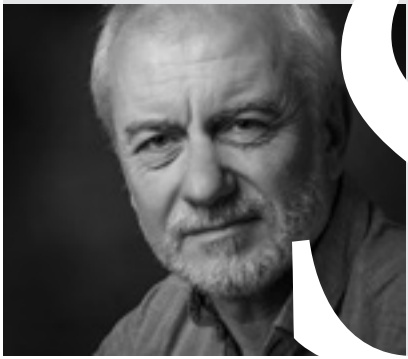
I had distributed the plates, the books, and the clothes among the boxes, but now I realised I was distributing myself as well among the directions taken by my feet, my mind, and my soul, and that they would never again merge into one. I did this to myself, but I had no choice; I wanted to survive, finally to live in a space created by me and according to my own tastes. I wanted, I wanted…now this wanting sounded as quiet and as monotonous as a single string. The other five strings were silent, or perhaps they were sticking out, snapped and dangerous, so they could pierce my skin at every attempt to touch them and stretch them. To begin a new life and to live it are two different things. You can begin a new life without actually living it, I kept telling myself, and you wouldn't even have enough time to find out whether you occupied both dimensions or just the one.

Darkness slowly fell, the way it always does in June. It was in no hurry to be done with the day. I had to choose one pot, only one. I had no energy for more. Begonia, crane's bill, geranium, a second and third begonia, another geranium, a giant weeping fig, red clover and that plant with the spiky fleshy stems, left over from my grandmother, which had died several times and then sprung back to life. Again, a choice, choices to the end. It's time, it's time.

Finally, when I slung the handbag on my shoulder, I embraced begonia number two resolutely and with the conviction I was taking it because of the pot. It's possible that was the reason.

I was walking down the staircase in the dark thinking that if I were to trip now, I would break the pot and the hands, which were not going to let go.

The rain was still drizzling down, it didn't care that night had fallen and it had missed the opportunity to stop. It's a good thing there is wine in this world!



Ivan STANKOV

Life Is Thereabout

Ivan Stankov was born in Gomotartsi, Vidin District, in 1956. He is the author of scholarly books on the works of Asen Raztsvetnikov, Yordan Yovkov, Dimitar Talev, Vassil Popov, Boris Hristov. He is Mircea Cărtărescu's translator to Bulgarian.

Ivan Stankov is the author of several novels: *Memories of Water. Dm* (2014); *Streets and Ships. Gm* (2017); *Names under the Snow. A7* (2019): *Evening Wedding* (2020); *Late Death* (2022); and *In Two Voices* (2024). He is the winner of the Elias Canetti National Literary Award, the Stoyan Mihaylovski Literary Award, as well as the Helicon and Culture Portal literary prizes.

About the book

Ivan Stankov's latest novel has its origins in the canonical life of St. Nicholas of Sofia the New, a 16th-century Bulgarian saint, a great martyr who refused to convert to Islam.

The book *Life Is Thereabout* is a story about his life with a Gospel-style architecture: it consists of four "apocryphal" parts that partially overlap. Each of them has its own "author". The first part was written by Nicholas (Nicola) himself; the second by his wife Teodora; the third by Tudor Kostel, a scribe at the princely court in Wallachia; and the fourth by a young man, a poet and friend of the saint's deceased sons. In form and internal rhythm, the entire text recalls biblical verses.

All four parts tell, from a different perspective and with different language, episodes from Nicholas' life, some of them real, others entirely fictional. The story takes place in Ioannina (Greece), Craiova and Targovishte (Romania), but mostly in Sofia. Nicola is a prominent shoemaker, respected by all communities in the city. At a gathering at the home of his Turkish acquaintances, he is forcibly gotten drunk and circumcised—as a sign that he has converted to Islam. Nicola is put on trial three times, but remains steadfast in his faith in Christ. The judge finds no fault in him. He hands him over to the crowd, which humiliates, assaults, kills him and burns his body.



The relatively simple web of events weaves a difficult question around the characters: if everything in this world is determined by Divine Providence (even down to the number of hairs on a human head!), where is the place of human freedom and how far does it extend?

Novel, 104 pages
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Life Is Thereabout

E X C E R P T *Translated by Marina Stefanov*a

FROM NICOLA

Chapter 1

1. Tomorrow I am to die. May nothing go astray. What has been written must come to pass. Yesterday on the road from court to my prison one Hagarene from among the crowd smote me with a stone and mine eye came out, oozing. By a miracle Jesus returned it unto its place, yet that was not what I besought of Him.

2. I only asked of Him to take away my unbelief, and not to turn His face away from me, the weak. But with the strength of His divine hand to keep me straight before the heathens. In the wonder He did unto my eye, I saw therein a sign. It befell just as written by Matthew the Grammarian in the book of my life and suffering. I believe all else shall likewise be fulfilled.

3. Yet, come what may—fear not. Whichever way I die, is it not true that together with the man dies his own death? Death which tormented him his whole life.

4. It is revealed to me I dwell within a book! I have been the book. With my life I wrote it. But is the life of every man not a book to be read upon the Day of Judgement?

5. Tomorrow my book shall be closed, and I shall remain as aforewritten within. Nothing may I add to it, and nothing may I take away. Nothing may I alter.

6. With it I shall appear before the almighty God. Will Michael the Archangel and Satan get into a fight for me? Will Jesus say a good word about me or—as He himself has said—will leave it all to his Father, for Him to judge me against the book?

7. But why needeth God the Father to read? Does He not know all books from before? Didn't He write them all? For that is why on every page He knows how many are the hairs on one's head and how many thousands of moments remain before the end.

8. For could the grass blade sprout without His will; or the fragrant blossom come to this world upon a whim; or could the sun cut the day short, and from sunrise go straight to sunset, of its own accord? It may not be, it may not be. It is said in John: "All things were made by Him; and without Him was not any thing made that was made."

9. Nothing is to be outside His providence. All was there before the beginning of time. Thus, I must be as well—providenced from the very beginning to my end. Thence why need I fear if something is to change? If it befalls otherwise, not as described by Matthew the Grammarian, then such was His Providence.

10. And what of the book then? What will then happen to its last page? What if I live? What if somewise the Hagarans show mercy? Twice now I stand up before their court, and twice they pronounce no judgement. This time I am to be judged by the chief qadi. Just as it was written by Matthew the Grammarian in the book of my life.

11. I will enter the light of day, Jesus by my side, and all shall pass as foretold. With strength as until now, and with faith as never before. As written (until tonight it has all come true!) tomorrow they shall stone me to death and thereupon burn my body.

12. And before the day comes to its end, I am to leave all things perishable to this world—the blood, the flesh, and the bones. I am to have lived in Christ at least in my final hour. And the sin for my martyr's death shall weigh on the shoulders of the heathen.

13. And from his aureate cloud Christ shall call my soul to its duskfall. And He—who loveth mankind, the Son, who is one with his Father—shall welcome me as a witness of His undefiled glory.

14. It shall all end then. And there will be no more time. And the book shall close, decided for eternity.

Chapter 2

1. I was born in white-stone Ioannina, ornate in all four directions with many a monastery. A pious city on the shore of a lake—immense and blue in daytime, but at night large and ominous.

2. The soul of a man, born on water, resembles a boat. She has a sail, for the good winds to carry her. Some have bigger sails, some smaller. But the boat also carries oars, so when needed the oarsman may drive it against the wind.

3. My parents were likewise pious people. I was conceived in heavenly and earthly love. When I came to this world it was night, and mother claimed that through the window came light—great and white. According to her telling, beneath our window passed Jesus Christ.

4. After I uttered my first cry, as is becoming to every newborn, I did not stop crying, like a bagpipe, till my bag ran out of air. And my mother said: "Cry, son,

cry! Blessed are those who cry, for their tears shall be dried." And thus the whole of my life—my eyes are evermore tearful within. One time for a dead offspring, another for the anguish of some fellow stranger. Tears shall always find a reason.

5. This life is overflowing with tears. In the prophets' scrolls they are plentiful. Tears are meant for all times. But within the life I was never to reach—though it was ever somewhere thereabout—I hope there are none. Neither weeping, nor gnashing of teeth.

6. The other life is not in heaven, not all the more in hell. Not there anywise. It is here. Just thereabout. The world life. The world of a life wherein I could never dwell. Had not Jesus himself once said: "God's kingdom is inside us." No, it is not yet in me. But at the least, it is thereabout.

7. Blessed are those who dwell fully within it. Yet ever do I lack somewhat. Ever but a step away, yet never to enter. When I ask myself why, I answer: I am still seething. I have not fermented. I am not ripe for Christ. Or am I, for I am still living?

8. But tomorrow the last hindrance shall come to naught. And I shudder. Therefore, I too write following Matthew the Grammarian: first, to bid farewell on my own, but more so to get courage before the last battle for faith tomorrow. In this last night I was called upon by a union of love and fear. The two must be together to lead you to God. I do have one night before death. And all time before death spreads long. Thus it must be enough.

9. I am the son of Martin and Euphrosyne. Blessed in the sacrament of marriage, for many years they were not blessed with children. Countless nights they spent in fervent prayer to the tender-hearted Son and his immaculate Mother for grace and for a gift. In these prayers I was promised to Jesus—to serve Him in return for my birth.

10. With me in her womb my mother iterated words of gratitude from dusk till dawn. In front of the icon with the pair of them, Mother and Son. "Guide him alive to the light and I shall return your gift."

11. Such was my mother's vow. And I, promised to Christ, lived among dust, children, and icons, with the vast waters before my eyes, and the most favored chants in my mind—be it for Christmas or for Easter, be it for baptism or a funeral. Everywhere and in everything I arrived at Christ. He was by my side in joy, and in sorrow.

12. After my mother and father prepared me for Him, He took them away. Such was His will, He who is before the times. My father perished quickly and without complication, as if such an end was promised to him from before.

13. Mother passed unto Christ without haste, as one who felt her way thither by the touch of her fingers. A twelvemonth she suffered from the wasting sickness, a twelvemonth her mouth whispered His name.

14. And she babbled words in some unknown language, which is not spoken in our town—not Greek, neither Bulgarian, nor Turkish, Shqiptar or Jewish.

15. Her eyes, thirsty and benevolent, betrayed no fear, but a prayer for forgiveness. What trespass had this saintly woman committed, I know not unto this day.

16. From my father I inherited a noble craft—shoemaking. So men shall not run barefoot in winter and shall not bruise their feet on the stones.

17. From him I learned that for the boot of the rich man I am to ask a price according to the leather, the thickness of the sole, and the strength of the thread. And that the poor man's *tsarvuli* I am to do without charge. When he comes to get them, I am to add some bread for his children.

18. From my mother I learned the most difficult craft—love. Is it you, mother, whom I should love most dearly, I asked her. No, no, no, she would answer. Jesus is the one you should love most dearly. Fear His Father, and Him you shall love with the purest heart. Only after, love me.

19. But not only me. And not only your father. You are to love every man. Even the ones who hate you and desire your death. Because if we only love those who love us, what reward are we to expect?

20. What about the tree? Should I love the mulberry tree in the garden, mother? You shall love it. It gives birth to silk. And the flowers—just notice the aroma they give us! The little thorn too—it matters not that it hurts your foot—it is also Godsent. Our road to the Creator can only go through His creation. If you hate the worm, it is God you hate. If you love the worm—you are on God's road, Nicola.

Chapter 3

1. I grew up amid care, faith, and the spirit of God. Even today in my dreams I see mother, father and myself as the family from the churches' walls.

2. A prayer upon waking, a prayer before sleep. A prayer before the meal, a prayer thereafter. Mother once said that Jesus was glad when He listened to us. And to me prayer was no burden, for it was as if speaking straight to Him, the tender-hearted.

3. Then I became literate. In reading, writing, and numbers. From Father Stephan of the big church in Ioannina. Read, read, he would tell me, and you shall see how all that was chronicled in the holy books is fulfilled in life just as foretold.

4. And every man is just so foretold, and every goat, tree, and flower. Every needle on the back of every hedgehog has been providenced even before the beginning of times. And every little cloud, and every wave in the sea. From Divine Providence, our Lord, the Eternal.

5. And he ended: it is not God who helps the Christian. The Christian helps God to fulfil His providence. How does he help Him, asked I, still a child. By abiding the law, and doing what is good, Nicola. That is what he would say every time before I leave for home.

6. Whilst helping father in his workshop, I got to know many people. I divided them not into Greek, Turkish or Bulgarian, but into rich or poor, sad or gleeful. The rich weren't forever gleeful, and the poor weren't forever sad. Man is a curious creature. And an immense mystery. Even as I was for myself. I often asked myself: Nicola, is this you? Wasn't Nicola someone else, someone better?

7. I do not remember when it happened, whether I already had down upon my upper lip, when a window entered our shop. She ordered shoes for her orphan. While father measured the feet of the little one, I unwillingly stared at her.

8. I had no knowing of what it meant for a woman to have beauty—was it the depth of her eyes? In the curves of her eyebrows, the raspberry-colored lips, the grace of a doe, or need she look like my mother? Upon this day today, the day before my death, I do not know. But that woman was beautiful. And sorrowful, and frail. That was the first time I saw beauty face to face. And warmth came upon me.

9. Several times thereafter did she come unto me in my dreams. Alone. Ever in her long undershirt. Her hands searched for me, and found me, and startled, I awoke in shame and lust. Was it sinful? I do not know to this day.

10. Thus, years thereafter unto me came Teodora, my wife from Sofia. And my flesh burned in lust like live coals. Hers too. Was it wrong? But I told myself—it is human, God himself told us to marry, to love each other and breed offspring.

11. Once to the workshop came a man from the villages, barefoot and haggard. Master, may you abate the price, for my son is to be married this coming Sunday, and I want to order him a pair of shoes? Abate I shall not, answered my father, for the other craftsmen in the guild will scold me.

12. But if I make them without pay, they shall not scold me. We shall not let your son be wed barefoot. Come back on Saturday, midday. Do bring me a gourd of wine for your son's health. And my father sent the man off, joyous.

12. Once more I saw him aglow from within—fulfilled. Same as a glass overflowing its brim. It was midday. And scorching hot. My father banged his wooden hammer onto the wet calfskin, so it lay flat on the last, and dried on it. I stretched threads on my big toe and ran them through wax.

13. Then lo and behold, at the door stood mother with the bread. She was all light. You couldn't see her face or anything else of her. She was cut out from the white air outside. She had descended from the skies. The Holy Virgin was bringing Joseph his meal.

14. My father opened his mouth, but no words came out. As if he saw the light of Tabor. All tongues had escaped his mouth. His eyes dark and olivelike, peered into the heavenly wonder, blinded by love. Then he took a breath, and he caught some of the words, still wondering the air about us, and put them in order: Do you see this, do you see this, son? It is now that I am in life.

15. The next day for the first time he got up not to work. Nor did he move, nor a word he uttered. Mother and I knelt by his bed, praying. "Don't take him, Father. But let it be your will, not mine." Thus whispered my mother. Father did but breathe. In the evening, he breathed no more. He had arrived.

16. After mother passed on, I was alone—at home, in town, in the world. I made shoes, I put shoes on the feet of everyone about. I read all that in the centuries had reached Ioannina. All the scrolls from the old prophets, most of all the Gospels, the apostles' epistles, especially the ones to the Thessalonians, for Salonica is only a stone's throw away.

17. I lived in respect with all people, with all of Ioannina, but I still was not fulfilled. I feared the Father, loved the Son, but still was not alive enough. A chasm was open within me. Vast it was not, but deep it was. Hereabout I had nothing to fill it with.

Chapter 4

1. Then upon me came, not by my desire, the time to be called to leave, like Abraham was. For once more I studied the scrolls of Father Stephan, when, lo, mine eyes fell suddenly upon: "Now the Lord had said unto Abraham, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee."

2. Even before this, I purposed to set forth into the world. Yet, in what I read I found blessing. For in the book my life was also foretold. The scroll of Moses had read me. And lo, I shall walk in the way of Abraham, that is God's way, for God is also Abraham's and Isaak's.

3. My seed shall not endure long. Nations are born and only slaughter each other. May the Lord bless me upon my journey. God did not appear, nor showed me the land to travel to. But Father Stephan told me: "Stop in Sredets, known also as Sofia. For this city will shine aglow with new saints and martyrs." Still, I was already looking that way. Verily, my book was leading me there.

4. And because it is said that everyone shall receive as he himself has given, I gave my house to my neighbors, poor and wretched, with eight children on their shoulders. Not expecting any return. For the workshop and the tools I got from a Spanish Jew five Venetian ducats and two Sultani coins, so I might continue with my craft in the new place.

5. I gave my farewell to my perished mother and father and put them to rest in the arc that is my heart. Father Stephan blessed me. Paul the Apostle has wandered these lands, west of Thessaloniki, he told me. You too hold the righteous ways. Befriend goodness. Yourself be goodness, and you shall be saved. And when it is all fulfilled, you shall sit at the right hand of the Lord.

6. That same day I left. Spring frolicked about the lake of Ioannina. The winds of the south passed their combs through the leaves on the trees. Herbs and flowers let out the fragrant breath of exultation. The grass crunched, green and drunk on all that spring. I turned not around to see the town. For not to dispirit myself. In my mind and heart I shall carry it. It brings me warmth. Even now, on my last earthly night.

7. Many a man I met along the way, and with many did I walk for a time. Grave merchants, with long caravans, and paid retainers; warriors clad in shining brass; the Bey's huntsmen, with their fine-bred hounds; a wretched and impoverished family, hurrying through their tears with a sickly child in their arms; men wasted by hopelessness, and women cast down, the knots of their headscarves hanging

like drooping wings, dragging their weary feet behind the horse-carts… Lustre and might, yet darkness and feebleness too—it is all to be seen upon the road of men. Which of these two sides is for me?

8. One evening in May, darkness befell me below a peak in the Belasitsa mountain. The bells on the necks of the he-goats dangled, the she-goats and kids bleated. The shepherd nodded unto me to get into his hut, but not a word he uttered. We ate bread with white cheese, and once more not a word. He spread bedding for me beside the fireplace.

9. That man was born dumb I thought. Or went dumb with all these goats, and not a soul near him. The next morning, he fed me, and put a loaf and some cheese in my bag. I handed him a brass coin, but he closed my opened palm. Then he uttered with clarity and benevolence: Wanderer, how do I know you are not God?

10. With another one, night befell us in the woods. He asked not of me who I was, nor what I was. By the fire he shook and wept. He was from Sredets. Possessed by demons one day he had raped his own sister. Could I forgive him? Lo, he cut off his member himself.

11. Even if I forgave you, what good would that be? I am the last man on this earth. Turn to God, repent to Him. Or repent to a saint, holy man. You are not worse than that thief on the cross.

12. Lo, I do repent. Every night I repent in front of a stranger such as yourself. Even my name, Kayo, is remorseful. But hope is nowhere to be found. And I am to wait for it no more.

13. In the morning he had hanged himself. Between his neck and the lowest tree branch, his sash swished red, like a hot sharp blade.

14. The sharp blade of the sash is stuck into my consciousness for all eternity. I was then bad. I turned the man away. For in front of my eyes was the terror on his sister's face. He had sinned. But who am I to judge him? For it has been said: "Vengeance is mine; I shall repay." I have judged another; I have made myself the same as the Lord. Is there a bigger sin? For thus that life is ever running away from me. I am too weak for it.

15. I ought to have availed the man with a prayer. I ought to have taken his side, been a witness to his woeful repentance. Repent alongside him in sackcloth and ashes. But I too, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "for the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do."

16. From the oak tree I did take him down. I washed his face. I did shed tears, mourning his self and my own self. Before I laid him down unto the earth,

I kissed his feet to ask forgiveness. I swore to seek Kayo's sister in Sredets and beseech of her eternal peace for his soul.

17. Then I turned to the daybreak and set out along the valley of the Struma river. I reached the Rila mountain. I stopped to pay honor to Saint Ivan of Rila, who in life traded all things seen for the unseen and withdrew to the mountain desert. It is said that his holy remains were carried here from Tsarevgrad Tarnov more than fifty years before. For he was born in Sofia, where I am headed, I shall pray to him to stand with me before Christ, and He in turn before His Father.

18. His monastery is a marvel to behold. Amidst steep standing woods, as if in God's cupped hand. And chants rising above it like haze in August. For peace, quietude, for the depth of the soul and for wings—to fly to the kingdom of heaven. Seven nights I stayed and set out along the Struma river again.

19. Upstream the river came to be stunted. Around it the fields grew ever poorer. Around there the men made earthen pots. And coalliers aplenty. Their song was desperate, curdling mine blood. Anguish arose from the heels of their feet, and it came forth as a song out their mouths.

20. One collier sang me a song of some father, unknown and unremembered, who labored in the field upon a holy day. And they asked him, "Why do you labor now, when the day is given to rest?" And he labored so as not to be in the village. For his son had fallen in the war. And his son's woman was to take another husband there. Thereupon he remained in the field, lest he should hear the beating of the drums and the merry clamor of the wedding guests—every one of them alive, unto the very last of them.

21. Oh, mountains of grief piling up upon this earth. Each of us adding a pebble. Lord, in your goodness, console all grieving fathers! And all mothers howling in pain toward the skies. Promise they shall meet their children again. There, beside you, after the time has ended. For it not what is foretold? Tomorrow, if Jesus turn not His face away from me, I shall meet my two dead sons.



Georgi *T*ENEV

Bulgartabac

Georgi Tenev is a writer and playwright. He graduated from the National High School for Ancient Languages and Cultures and studied at Sofia University. In 1991, he enrolled in the National Academy for Theater and Film Arts. He was selected as a Herder Fellow by the Bulgarian Herder Award winner Konstantin Iliev and continued his studies at the University of Vienna. He is a co-founder of Triumviratus Art Group (1994), along with Javor Gardev and Nikola Toromanov.

He is the author of the novels *Christo and Free Love* and *Party Headquarters* (VIK Award for Bulgarian Novel of the Year, 2007; published in Spanish in 2010; winner of the EKF and Open Letters Publishing competition; published in the U.S. in 2016 and in German in 2018). His novel *Mr. M.* was inspired by the work and life of the writer Georgi Markov. The American PEN Center awarded translator Angela Rodel a grant to translate the short story collection *Holy Light* into English. In 2020, his novel *Balkan Ritual* was nominated for leading national literary awards, including Novel of the Year and the Elias Canetti Award. His novel *The Residence* won the 2021 Helikon Award and was a finalist in the Novel of the Year competition, as well as a nominee for the Culture Portal Awards. His novel *Atlantic Express* was nominated for the 2022 Quill Award

About the book

A brutal terrorist attack in Varna sends shockwaves through the Bulgarian capital and the world of politics. A journalist is fighting for her life, while the president is caught between a divorce and public failure. Behind the visible world of politics lies a mystical struggle—demons are stronger than the intelligence services, while incorporeal beings penetrate the secrets of the state and of human hearts. Only Orlin, the blind clairvoyant, can see the threads: magic is at work in Bulgaria, guided by an unknown Forest Spirit. He has come hunting for minds and hearts.

The owner of Bulgartabac realizes that he has privatized not only the famous Bulgarian tobacco company, but also a part of Bulgarian history. Two Bulgarias—one visible and one invisible—are contained in a novel recounting 36 hours of life in power and life without any power at all.



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Bulgartabac

EXCERPT *Translated by Traci Speed*

Letter from the Mountains

I came here to die, on Athos. I am a forest spirit, and the brutal, ancient call of the woods dwells within me. It is a spark of insubordination, this fierce passion for freedom. I discovered who I am relatively early, and in this way I was spared much suffering. Once you grasp that you're a forest spirit, you can adapt to life among people.

There are few of us on the Council of Elders; our number is already limited. Despite this we try, and even succeed, in steering history in the desired direction. It is not what it was years ago, but still...

The most important thing for a true forest spirit is to make it through passport control in Karyes and to end up in the Holy Land, on Athos. There, too—I succeeded, here I am. Now I will sit and write a letter to the elders. A letter from the mount. When it is finished and you read it, you will understand many things.

A letter like this is easily written. Like a confession—you know what you have to say, you remember how everything happened, and you only have to decide to say it. I have nothing to hide, because the end is coming, at least for me. The remains of my living being will disintegrate, and along with them, everything I have seen and heard. So what should I do with the secrets of those people whom I know inside and out? Must they depart along with me? Because the contents, my forest spirit memory, will dry up in the wind, under the rays of the sun. Someone will only need gather me up and fling me over the chasm of the sea. To scatter me in the wind.

It will not be so simple, though. We like to create work for the Athonite monks. This is the curse with which we leave the earth's atmosphere. Now the spirit of the forest will speak, your evil friend whom you allowed in such proximity to yourself. Your life became mine. Now I will speak, a companion to your misery and your freedom.

Part One

The Explosion

1.

As of recently, there are two new males in the dolphinarium. They arrived separately, one from Cuba and the other from West Africa, where fishing for them is not forbidden. They came by roundabout routes, on ships under a foreign flag. The new dolphins have no names for now, nor do they have a personal trainer. They are simply called One and Two. Dolphin One has a wound on his head, beside his eye. The other looks healthy on the outside, but constantly acts defensive, ready for an attack. They keep swimming in a circle, afraid to relax. The dolphins defend their cramped territory in the service pool, keeping a delicate distance between them. The pool is ten meters by six, four meters deep—not nearly enough for the two-hundred-kilogram mammals.

Emel thinks about them as she stares out the window. A discordant January rain falls outside, but it does not manage to turn into snow. It is too warm; snow rarely sticks in Varna. The young woman sees her reflection in the glass. Now she is without make up; without her foundation and mascara, her freckles stand out. She has fine, pale skin, sometimes quite sensitive. Emel is a bit over thirty. Her hair has not been dyed recently, and the border between the rust-red locks and the natural black of the roots is clearly demarcated.

Emel stares at herself for several seconds. She doesn't like herself this way. She returns to the table where her computer is open and waiting for her. There is no way to avoid the unpleasant task—she has to change the beginning of her article. "Someone in Moscow does not like this president"—this is the first sentence. She wrote it just minutes ago, and now she deletes it. She has looked at it on the screen long enough and knows that she cannot begin this way.

Emel is talented, with imagination and a way with words. She can write quickly and her work gives her satisfaction. She is not simply a journalist, but something more: a real artist, insofar as her profession allows. What she is working on is close to her heart, but the article is just not coming together. She stumbled at the very start and does not know how to continue. Bulgarians have been all too sensitive on the topic of Russia lately. Emel has to finish this piece, but her head hurts and the phones are suspiciously silent. The January rain keeps droning on the street outside. Varna looks ugly today, which is unusual—after all, Varna is the most beautiful city in the country. It was not without reason that the journalist moved here with

her dog. And with the fear that she would never go back. She realized it after she moved into a townhouse with a view of the sea. At dusk the sky hinted at something unpleasant, irrevocable. The young woman could not have known that this evening they would blow up her car, that she would lose part of her body and part of her life, forever. The serenity that we know ourselves and have a memory of who we are—this is the most important element of our personality. It is half of us. The enduring consciousness of where we come from and how we are guarantees and determines our path. But Emel will end up in an empty place, with no connection to the present and no bridge to what came before.

She works as a volunteer; she will go to the dolphinarium this evening. She will head there in the cold darkness and will think of something pleasant. She will pull on her neoprene wetsuit and dive into the pool. The water is no more than fifteen degrees Celsius, but this is warm compared to the temperature outside. Only volunteers are taken on for this work in the winter months. The two dolphins who recently arrived need socialization. If they are released into the large pod too early, the others will attack them, they'll injure them, and they might even kill them. This is a fragile biosystem.

The volunteers come here guided by the conviction that they are doing something good for intelligent creatures, not mere animals. They also do it, to a large extent, for themselves. Maybe they even overestimate the dolphins, equating them with humans. This is compensation for the impotence they experience outside, in the world of two-legged mammals. There, every attempt at practical good is too costly and leads to side effects. It is more painless at the dolphinarium. Emel has also thought of these creatures as individuals; she has imagined talking to them and hearing their answers. But she no longer harbors illusions. The dolphins are forever wrenched from their natural environment; they are traumatized and have no chance to return to their previous state. Even if they were someday released into the wild, this would be a new shock. They are diminished and crippled. Emel recognizes the trap, but she too enters it with a certain resignation. Into the pool, into the prison of these beautiful and powerful bodies.

There are also several athletes, students, and nature lovers who participate in this group, but most of the volunteers are people like her. Affluent enough to have free time and to afford the special wetsuit. They will boast, sharing photos on Instagram. When they do good, people usually realize they're doing the right thing. But Emel is aware that her goodness here is artificial, minimal. The animal inside may well be intelligent, the creature that rests its rostrum on her thighs and nudges her, slips under her and makes circles in order to touch her hand over and over again. It is not a person, though. It is only a part of the accumulated

suffering that exists in the world and about which she has already learned; it is impossible for her to be innocent by forgetting it. Nor is there any recipe against it: suffering + awareness = guilt. Emel feels these things, but she has given herself over to the general lifestyle. She has a conscience, so to speak, but what of it? Emel repeats the patterns of life and behavior that her group offers her. The same concerts, magazines, mobile phone apps. The same causes and a shared circle of topics. How long has it been since she chose something herself? Without the new iPhone, without a hybrid car, without the planned purchase of her next car, fully electric, without regular sessions on social networks—without this and a whole heap of similar things, she would fall apart. Her identity would be lost, and Emel would be left wandering alone within herself. Just as she would without her manicure, without her salon styling, without some new outfits—not necessarily expensive, but fashionable. Without the new issue of *Monocle* or *Portfolio*, without the unconventional scents of Commes des Garçons, without regularly leafing through Nicopanda and Uniqlo catalogs. But Emel is bigger than all of this, even if she does not know it. There is something her own, something preserved, which she likely only suspects. But the time has not yet come for it to rise to the surface.

The television is broadcasting the president's visit to Paris. The customary shot of the entrance to Versailles. Talev stands with the French president, shaking her hand. The television is too large, Emel doesn't like this kind, but it came with the furnished apartment. The screen is so wide that up close, the figures of the two presidents, the woman and the man, seem larger than life. That's how it seems to Emel; she knows the figure of Angel Talev quite well. She knows where her shoulder comes up to when they stand beside each other, where his chin is in relation to her face, the height of his hand when he lets go of hers and walks beside her. Emel knows at close range the eyes and the breath of this man, the president. Closer than is permissible, dangerously closer than is good for her.

The journalist's relationship with the head of state started at the beginning of the second year of his term and continued until the beginning of the third. Without having made any calculations, she senses that a certain season has passed. Emel still experiences the individual moments. The tension and the expectations still exist within her body. As well as that entire drama through the summer and, finally, the denouement. So little time has passed from the ending, not enough for the wound to disappear. Because it was a wound.

She still has an instinct to think of him as her person. An unpleasant shiver creeps along her spine as she reads about yet another coordinated attack against the president, vociferous critics each time he resorts to his right of veto. Talev and Emel have not met in a long time, have not spoken at all. No one is asking for

her opinion or her help, but she keeps thinking about what happened there, as if she is a secret ally, an invisible and confidential presidential advisor. She does it now for herself, not so much for him. Emel writes opinion pieces defending the president's arguments for one decision or another, even when his position is quite weak. More or less objective—but always somehow tendentious—texts take shape in her head all by themselves. Because she knows that Talev is on the right side, while his enemies are, in most cases, exponents of the interests of the mafia and big business. Or sometimes even just paid manipulators under foreign influence. That is what she thinks, and she writes:

Where Is Their Conscience? Where Are Their Convictions?

By Emel Veysal

From behind the shield of immunity, members of parliament are advocating extremism. On the streets of the capital, radical associations parade under flags of foreign states with empirical aspirations. These groups repeatedly and dangerously threaten civil rest. Their speeches reiterate arguments of Eurasian totalitarianism: "Power is a law unto itself." This is their philosophy. They form their posses and declare as enemies anyone who dares object to their shocking behavior. The leader of Republic on the Attack thrives on protests with extremely provocative messages and seeks out conflicts through which to sabotage the public peace. The only ones who benefit from this are those powers outside the country who want to see it shaken and incapable of maintaining its democratic direction. These exponents of anti-European pressure are not ashamed of any means, nor of the transparency of their goal.

For the first time in Bulgaria's most recent history, members of parliament—people who are neither members of the military nor officers of law enforcement—enter and exit the chambers armed with knives and guns. These deputies want to abuse their power—after having swindled voters and secured themselves a place in parliament with its concomitant immunity, they now wave the populist flag from a position of impunity. Their goal is to attract the most marginal circles of society into their dangerous demagoguery. Who allows an MP to carry his personal weapon into the parliamentary chamber? And against whom is he arming himself there?

It is as if a junta is operating in the country. The majority in the National Assembly not only close their eyes to this abuse of Art. 70 of the Constitution of the Republic, but they also grant leading positions on their commissions to these proponents of extremism.

And finally, this—the attempt to appoint a director for the National Agency for State Security without coordinating the nomination with the Office of the President! Which is not only in violation of the regulations governing the organization of NASS, but, first and foremost, represents an egregious act and provocation. As a precedent, this is already engendering dangerous results, cloaking lawlessness in the garments of the law. It is obvious that some of the deputies voted for this exceptionally important parliamentary decision under pressure, and not in accordance with their own conscience and convictions. Some of them publicly admitted to the fact and expressed their discomfort and shame. This is in violation of Art. 67 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. Let us read the full text of this article of the Constitution together: "Members of Parliament act in accordance with the Constitution and the laws, in accordance with their conscience and convictions."

Where is their conscience, however? Where are their convictions? The parliamentary leadership, divided into factions—and thereby significantly weakened—cannot unite even over such elementary and principled matters such as isolating the extremists and neutralizing their destructive rhetoric in the chambers. Moreover, this leadership intentionally turns a blind eye and tolerates extremist utterances of ultranationalism on the far right and the far left. As ridiculous and fringe as their displays may be, this is an outrage nonetheless. People are left with the impression—and the fear—that some law of lawlessness is about to take over here, a period of gangster terror, exercised by fascists. And how convenient that against this ostensible—but obviously fomented—danger, they immediately offer us a "new antifascism," manipulated by foreign headquarters, as well as the readiness of paid international brigades, some of them overt sympathizers of the Ring paramilitary group. We know who would be happy to see the offshoot of Ring in the Balkans, where the same scenario would arise that has played out in Moldova, Belarus, and the Crimea.

Emel understands, however, that all of this is too verbose and will not do the job. She herself does not believe her own pathos. Does she have the right to be so angry, considering that the world is so clearly divided in two and Emel herself obviously belongs to the privileged part? In her world, there are neither

anxious and impoverished people who can be described as "marginal circles of society" nor the so-called "manipulated masses." She and her close colleagues, as well as most of her friends, are intellectuals, at times even cynics. None of them can be led by the nose; they know the bitter borders of the truth and attempt to achieve happiness within a narrower or wider framework. Emel does not have to communicate excessively with folks defined as "the people," to look at their faces close up. Only sometimes, this hidden form of deception, of excessive professionalism that verges dangerously on emptiness, pains her. Which is why her work is not going well.

On her desk lie scattered notes, yet more unfinished research on the privatization of the tobacco factories. On the licensing of Bulgarian cigarettes abroad, the property of Bulgartabac. Emel is ostensibly persisting in seeing the investigation through to the end, but she no longer has the necessary team. She does not have her previous colleagues or even just experienced assistants who could supply the information from the archives and business registries. This Bulgartabac business is doomed for now. A pile of interesting things still lie in the folder of documents and notes, but they have lost their charm. She has been handed unique letters from the opposition movement of the Bulgarian Turks. From the early illegal years of the organization. It was expected that Emel Veysal, as a Turk, could more easily read and more passionately tackle the history of the Free Rights party. But she must first verify the authenticity of everything, and this also requires time and focused effort, patience, and more time. Emel is everything else, but lately she is not focused. She is experiencing an unexpectedly diminished desire to work. As if she has been replaced. But this evening, something personal has turned out to be the last straw. She is sad, she feels like cursing and screaming, but this meandering text has escaped from her instead of a cry. Everything written struck her as a history essay, dry and formal. She should have given up this sort of editorial writing long ago, even the profession of journalism, if she wanted to achieve real goals. Maybe get into politics? How, with Angel's help? To whisper in his ear: I have this dream, what do you think?... No, Emel never wanted that. Even if she had fantasized about it, she had suppressed these very thoughts. And then came the slap in the face.

2.

She received a sign, they gave her a signal. She had never supposed her personal life would pass through something like a filter that would change the taste even of what was most intimate. She thought that she was in control of her business and it depended only on her. A few months ago she'd had to reexamine these

two concepts, "her own" and "control." She was a journalist, and she graphically imagined the editing, the mark ups of them both. There was no *her own*, and she did not *control* anything, since she could not keep her love in check. Yes, from the very beginning she had realized that Angel was not necessarily the romantic and burning love of her life, but he was definitely the most exciting man she had met. Besides, there was no arithmetic in her relationship with the president. Emel did not know what to hope for, she made no plans. She experienced something intense, and the feeling brooked no projections or plotting. It was attraction. And when did it stop being? How is it possible for environmental resistance alone to put you off? It can, it turned out. And what will you do now? It is not fair to ask a woman questions like that, even less so Emel in her circumstances. Her affair was not merely extramarital.

The ambassador of bad news was called Sotirov. She had seen him a few times, but she did not know exactly what his position was. Maybe he was not officially part of the team of the Presidential Office. Some guy from the party and political cabinets. He wore glasses and had a memorably sharp nose. In her mind, Emel had recorded only that, his nose and his glasses. While the two of them conversed, she also noticed his watery eyes, blue and seemingly leaky. As if through those eyes she were looking somewhere on the other side of his head. And even though she was listening to him, she did not understand what he wanted. Finally she understood.

"It cannot go on this way," said Sotirov.

Emel did not ask what "it" was. She realized that Angel was behind this meeting; he had allowed them to talk to her this way, or at least he had not objected. Otherwise, they would hardly have dared to attack her. This suddenly sapped her strength. She felt as slack as a rag doll whose seams had been ripped and whose stuffing was spilling out. The conversation had already finished; the man stood up and headed for the exit without turning around, without saying goodbye. As if he had not spoken to her at all, but simply passed through the hall—a disinterested traveler in the gray, impersonal space of the airport. Emel stayed seated on the bench of the domestic terminal. The place had been cleverly chosen. Sotirov and the people behind him had intentionally tracked her down there. She was leaving, she was about to board the plane. This was intended to tell her, "get lost." Did she only now understand that she could not have hoped for anything different in her relationship with Talev? What else? For the president to get a divorce right before his second term? To leave his wife, Zhana, and to marry her, Emel, a Turkish woman?



Vladislav *T*ODOROV

The Infernal Happiness Machine

Vladislav Todorov holds a PhD in Philosophy and teaches Cinema and Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. His first book, *The Adam Complex*, was published in Bulgarian in 1991. His second book, *Red Square, Black Square: Organon for Revolutionary Imagination* was published in New York in 1995 by SUNY Press, followed by *A Minor Paradox of Theatre and Other Life-Figures* and *Chaotic Pendulum: Political Commentary*. His first works of fiction were published in journals ranging from *Postmodern Culture* to *Chelsea*. He is the author of two novels that have been adapted into films: *Zift* (2008) and *The Zincographer* (2010) (which was made into the movie *The Color of the Chameleon*).

About the book

It is the 1920s in a fictional Balkan country. The Great War has recently ended, leaving devastation, explosive social tensions, and anarchist fury in its wake. Following a military coup, the Bulgarian fascist leader Aleksandar Tsankov takes power. On Cape Sultana, the newly formed anarcho-terrorist organization Arms of Chaos is preparing a unified strike against the ruling elite. The secret police, employing social engineering methods, unsuccessfully attempt to neutralize the brewing class unrest.

Central to the narrative are the ironic vagaries of fate and their role in propelling history forward. The protagonist, Zack, a young, sentimental idealist and visionary entangled in a fateful love triangle, attempts to avert the disastrous course of events and the increasing radicalization of the two machines of terror—one driven by the state, the other, by revolutionary groups—in the midst of a bubbling national catastrophe. In a brutal twist of fate, his rational, self-sacrificial attempts at thwarting mass murder ultimately have the consequence of bringing it about.

The pursuit of universal happiness, the eternal companion of human history, and, to a large extent, what steers it into crisis, is the novel's main motif, maniacally pushing both the good and the evil to impose their version of the ideal; an ideal that is rational, but only attainable through irrational means. This clash of dogmas gives rise to an infernal machine which will blow the old and ailing world into pieces.

A speculative work of alternative history, *The Infernal Happiness Machine* reorders the historical course of events and fashions fictional representations of places, events, and people. In its depiction of a possible past dystopia, the novel challenges the cliches formed by propaganda and the politically-motivated distortions of history.

Inventive, grotesquely ironic, and inimitably provocative, *The Infernal Happiness Machine* is a scathing sociopolitical parody, a tale of the pursuit for universal happiness, the sickly obsessiveness that accompanies it, and its crash course towards historical catastrophe, ultimately hurling humanity into an existence forcibly emptied of historical content.

The Infernal Happiness Machine

EXCERPT *Translated by Hristo Karastoyanov*

Cape Sultana

Cape Sultana got its name from the amber grapes that grew in abundance on the hills of this little corner of coastal heaven. Overgrown with wild vegetation, it was surrounded by crystal-clear waters, imposing cliffs, waterfalls, and deep precipices.

Any daredevils who managed to climb all the way to the top of the cape came face to face with a drop so dizzying, it made their knees buckle and their fingers clutch tightly onto the iron-wire rope securing the cliff edge.

Nature had blessed the cape with hot mineral springs, pristine air abundant in iodine, and lagoons full of healing mud. In the middle of the cape was a massive crater called the Moonpit. Its rock terraces, rich in mica and non-ferrous metals, glowed demonically in the moonlight. Legend has it that millions of years ago, two twin Moons hung in the sky. One fell in love with Earth and, unable to resist its pull, hurtled into it, forming the crater. In the past, the crater had served as an open-air mine for non-ferrous metals.

The maelstroms that formed around the cape were capable of wrecking any vessel that came into their embrace. For seafarers, this corner of heaven was instead a bona fide inferno. Groundswells and underwater rocks accosted the ships and smashed them into pieces.

On the southern shore of this wonder of nature, a fearsome sight unfolded: a postapocalyptic heap of steel and brass, of gutted sea vessels, smashed-up keels, torn-up holds, and bent masts, giant propellers biting into the sky, and a myriad other remains rejected by the sea. A rusty firmament of smog and soot pierced by cranes and soaked with the stench of decomposing amphibious matter was draped over the bay. This open morgue of sorts stood in shameless contrast to the heavenly beaches and dunes of fine, golden sand slowly swallowing the jutting piles of scrap.

The deafeningly shrill cranes, with their metal beaks and claws, slowly dismantled this rusty marine junkyard, which had become a refuge for hundreds of shipbreakers. Their sunken, tar-sooted faces flittered in the acrid fog, broken only by the bluish flames of their gas burners. Sunstruck men with crowbars and hammers in hand growled, ready to rip apart any piece of metal that stood in their way.

The syncopated banging and cutting morphed into a spine-chilling rumble. The soundtrack of this sprawling wasteland of twisted metal and crushed humans was deafening.

A nameless city built of scrap iron had emerged here, giving shelter to a whole breed of castaway humans. It was here that the shipbreaker class was illegally born and made its home: a hodgepodge of exiled wretches who made their living here from desperation, side-by-side with hardened delinquents and vagabonds, superannuated eunuchs from the Ottoman harems, castrati from the Italian opera houses, and detested pariahs from the world over.

The shipbreakers, that crazed horde of human rejects, breathed in and sweated out acidic fumes that etched their lungs. The ugliest scum, the loathsome rabble of the Orient and Occident alike, had thronged here to find shelter in the scorching heat. Cape Sultana, with its otherworldly embrace, was the only place under the sun where they found blissful togetherness. They shot milky poppy-seed tears into their veins, sinking ever-deeper as they bathed in the healing mud, until the sulphuric heat made the skin peel from their faces and their lips crack until they bled.

The cape had also become a refuge for all sorts of obscure countercultures, from anarcho-nihilists to nudist-naturists. The coastline, porous with deep caves, also offered a myriad of hiding places for the seasoned traffickers running contraband channels between Constantinople and Odessos. This was the founding place of the terrorist organization Arms of Chaos, the only political movement to call this defective, half-dead mass of people its base.

It was no coincidence that Doctor Abanosov had picked Cape Sultana as a testing ground for his social engineering experiment of creating a pacifying suntrap, or as he envisioned it, a Cape of the Blessed.

Abanosov had to carry out the plan swiftly, as the shipbreakers had become enflamed with revolutionary fervor that fueled their desire for retribution. The weapons and narcotics trade provided a steady flow of cash for the terrorist underground's militarization efforts.

The police had intercepted several seditious proclamations inciting the shipbreakers to join a general strike, occupy the Cape, and declare a sovereign People's Republic. The introduction of martial law would've been ill-advised, only serving to antagonize the already radicalized masses past the tipping point.

There was only one way out: to turn the class enemy into a friend. That approach required a silent, invisible secret policing, not boots on the ground; an occupation would've only hardened the spirit of resistance and encouraged the mobilization of guerrilla forces. And ultimately, for a legitimate state power to be seen occupying its own territory would be a colossal admission of failure.

As head of the Counterterrorism Department at the Public Safety Directorate, Doctor Abanosov had connections in the highest echelons of power and had persuaded the Minister of Public Works, a prominent liberal, to support the secret social engineering project to turn Cape Sultana into a utopian happiness-condenser.

It was high noon on Palm Sunday when Zack arrived at Cape Sultana. It was a cloudless, windless, sunny day. He headed straight for an old wooden cabin now used as a post office.

The postmaster, a sworn naturist-anarchist, was cracking walnuts open with his fingers as if they were pliers. He was wearing leather shorts, clogs, and a nylon shirt with a black bowtie. His left calf featured a tattoo of a wormy apple.

"I'd like to send this to myself," Zack said, placing the box on the counter.

"What do you need the post for, then?" The postmaster looked over the package. "Just take it home yourself."

"I need it dated and stamped."

"Who gives a damn about stamps?"

"The law does."

"To hell with the law!" The postmaster spat on the ground in protest. "The law is the biggest crime of all."

"I share your fury."

"Is that you there, pal?" he asked, pointing at the address on the package.

"Yep."

"And who's the sender?"

"Also me."

"Put your name on the upper left-hand corner."

"Let's leave it without a sender, if that's okay?"

"Well, of course it's okay. We've practically canceled the state here. Only the mail still works."

"The rest is nature!" Zack retorted.

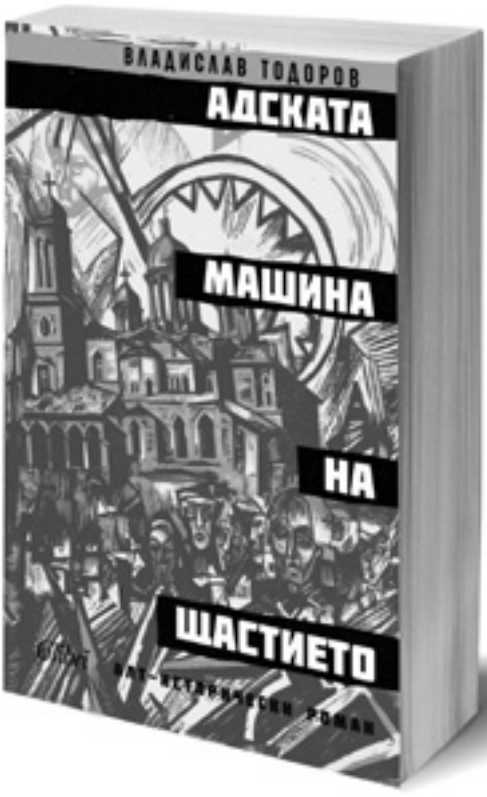
"Well said, you're the man!" The postmaster sealed the package with wax and tossed it onto the mail trolley. "Can I help with anything else?" he mumbled. Not looking up at Zack, he started peeling an apple.

"Where can I find the Condenser?"

"Here's a tourist guide," he said, handing him a brochure. "You've got everything in there: facilities, beaches, caves, viewpoints, you name it."

"Fantastic! Peace and love to you."

"And happy pious revelries," mumbled the postmaster under his breath, laser-focused on peeling his apple.



Novel, 224 pages
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Tsvetozar *T*SAKOV

Dreams and Day Dreams

Tsvetozar Tsakov (1983) graduated with a degree in Communication Sciences and Journalism from Aachen University and Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. He is the author of the short story collection *Vinyl Souls* (Janet 45, 2020), which won the Southern Spring Award, as well as the poetry collection *Sometimes It Happens* (Janet 45, 2023). In 2021, a selection of poems by the Bosnian poet Draško Sikimić was published in his translation (together with Kalina Yordanova). In addition to being a writer and translator, Tsakov is also the founder of Balkans—Ways to Friendship, an association dedicated to promoting contemporary Balkan culture, which organizes events featuring young alternative and underground artists.

About the book

"Tsvetozar Tsakov is a symphonic conductor of dreams, absurdities, and improvisations. The jazz of language. And when the music fades, we witness conversations with inner worlds, through the mists of which a God writes poetry."

Radoslav Chichev, *author*

"Short stories—some ultra-short, ironic, and fast-paced, with a touch of sadness and with flexible language. In the book, dreams and 'realities' coexist, intertwined, inseparable. The funny and the sad are mixed together, with melancholy prevailing, because sooner or later the 'day laborers of fate' arrive."

Sylvia Choleva, *author and publisher*

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Stories from DREAMS AND DAY DREAMS

Translated by Gergana Galabova

Coffee In Jajce

We were in Jajce for an hour, give or take.

I hadn't noticed it before because I'd never been in a hurry in those parts, but in Serbia and Bosnia there are no coffee vending machines on the street. None. At all. In the kiosks they don't brew 3-in-1 sachets to go, and the cafes don't have plastic cups. It's a total nightmare, man, if you just want to grab a quick coffee on the go. There's simply no such tradition. And besides the fact that we were in a hurry to get to our *prenociste*, our hotel, in Plitvice—so sitting down for a drink was out of the question—I really had to pee. God knows how far the next gas station was. And we were right in the center of the old town, in a fortress, surrounded by bars and cafes. It had a touristy vibe, but on a late Sunday afternoon, it felt just like my hometown of Lovech or some even nicer, dead-end town. The difference was that in Lovech, I know the secret spots to pee in case of an emergency. And I can buy coffee from anywhere.

In Jajce, in the middle of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a population of 24,500—a city very important to Yugoslavia and Tito—you can't even drink your coffee or take a quick piss. With no fuss, just on the go. Everywhere I went, they politely refused to give me a quick coffee to go, claiming they had nothing to pour it into, and when I asked if I could use the restroom, they practically snapped at me. There was a public restroom somewhere around there, but it was a godforsaken Sunday in the godforsaken Balkans...

I'm no stranger to the Balkan ways—I found a secluded spot next to a crumbling building, but the coffee issue left me hanging. Like… Like… Let's not say "like what," or it'll sound really Balkan. Aren't we supposed to be the creators and cradles of all European—and even global—civilization in these parts? We still had another 4–5 hours to go, and I had to *vozim*, to drive, for fuck's sake! I needed coffee, and not simply for self-indulgence like in that song, you know. Quite the opposite.

And just when we'd completely lost hope—I was already picturing Lyubochka in the passenger seat next to me reading me Facebook posts by politicians and

other riffraff to keep me awake and ready for those wild mountain curves—a small, run-down little café passed us by, situated right at the edge of the city's lively quarter—the edge of the world—standing as the last sentinel of the stronghold against our somnic disintegration. Whether it passed us by or we passed it by is unclear and unimportant. It's there, we're there too, and the laws of physics and mutual physical attraction draw us into its embrace before we even realize how it happened.

The place is very small and very, very empty. A scruffy old man dozes outside at a small table; inside, there's only the eternally young… Should I call her a waitress, or a *konobarica*? I don't know; she looks just like us—as if she'd wandered in by chance and dozed off out of boredom, her chin propped on one hand, her gaze fixed somewhere in another city, another day, and another world. I strike up a conversation with her in my honest, patched-together, half-baked Serbian. I ask if we can buy *kafu za poneti*. For *uz put,* for the road. For a few seconds, she can't believe that a person is standing in front of her and that he's saying something. Then she snaps out of it (she is a *konobarica*, after all) and fires off something so fast and slurred at the same time that I swallow all kinds of grammar at once, like in low-budget Japanese porn; I stare at her blankly and, flustered, shower her with numerous "huh?", "whah?", "sorry?", and other randomly strung-together sounds. After three quick, consecutive swallows—which I picture in my mind as a powerful surge of blood to the brain—my cognitive abilities return, and I realize she's asking how many of us there are, after first brushing me off with the standard "we don't have cups like that," but then she'd grown discouraged—and, above all, confused by my vacant stare combined with the empty establishment—and in a moment of panic, she'd decided to seek another way to get rid of me.

"Three," I say, "there's three of us." Right? Are there three of us? There are three of us! Trio Bulgarka. On tour in Jajce with no coffee and no bathroom. And rushing off to that damn Plitvice, to snap photos of green water and puny little waterfalls for 40 euros per person. But whatever.

The konobarica—so, so young and pretty, and pretty, but whatever—tells me she'll make us some coffee and just hand it to us right there, in those porcelain cups. "*Dobro*," I say, "*hvala, lepo, thanks a lot*!" But wait, wait... *čekaj malo*! Are you going to give them to us along with the porcelain cups? For 4 euros total? The cups alone cost more than that, girl! And how are we supposed to drink them? I picture the mountain curves, the darkness of the night, us rushing to get there on time, but me, a Balkan tough guy, *mafia man*, holding the steering wheel with one hand, and with the other I'm sipping coffee from a white porcelain cup, with

my pinky out, as one does, without spilling a drop, because I'm inspired by the stark contrast between the categorical refusal and the absurd agreement, and by the *lepota*, the prettiness, of the barmaid, *razume se*. And jazz is pouring out of the radio.

Turn after turn, bump after bump, and my steady hand doesn't flinch. Even the legendary Serbian popstar Ceca would be envious. And she would sing my praises.

Amid the whole chaos of the situation, it's a true miracle that I managed to remember we had a thermos in the car, and the car itself was parked nearby. So we poured the three coffees into the thermos, and we could run with the wolves and keep the cups whole.

We arrived in Plitvice right at the last minute and even managed to grab a bite to eat and have a beer. A huge, huge grasshopper had taken up residence in our little cottage—I'd never seen one that big. But it wasn't bigger than the kindness (or the endless bewilderment) of the terrifyingly young waitress in Jajce, whose terrifyingly crazy idea to give us takeout coffee in porcelain cups made the day at least a meter and a half wider than that nasty green grasshopper, which otherwise would have abruptly ruined the rest of my evening and my view. And I'm absolutely convinced that we caught the very last chance to order food in all of Plitvice precisely and solely because of that coffee.

And because at the border crossings beyond Kalotina, there's no waiting. None at all!

Dedication

It was a spring day, no matter how you looked at it: left to right, front to back, and from any other pretentious angle. Spring was visible on all sides, as if through worn-out tin foil. The sun was shining in that playful way it has, as if gently patting the bears on the shoulders and urging them to wake up from their winter slumber—except that now, at this time of spring, they had long since been awake, and if, God forbid, the sun were forced to wake them after all, it would surely be with slaps, kicks, and hysterical screams of the kind only married women are capable of —it was shining so fiercely and beating the cracked asphalt of the street in front of us so harshly, as if the pavement had wronged it somehow —and not just somehow, as if it had wronged it in a way that, let's say, married women are perfectly capable of wronging you early in the morning before breakfast, instead of screaming at you like maniacs over something only they know you didn't do properly the day before, oh, no—I'm talking about something unpleasant that would provoke the otherwise gentle and radiant Raicho to angrily slam into someone—into the street, that is, or its sidewalks, for example, which are sort of like its shoulders… so the street has done something so bad to the sun—probably even something utterly despicable and capable of tarnishing any street's reputation—and that has made it crawl out of its own skin—you know, that hot shell of helium, gases, and plasma—with which it insists on strolling across the cosmic horizons even on the hottest days—so that the sun would step out of its shell and start furiously slapping and kicking my street, which, as it certainly can't be ruled out, may not have done anything to it at all, but is simply ugly and uncool and thus has brought it upon itself, or perhaps the sun isn't quite right in the head to begin with and such outbursts happen regularly—even more regularly than the screams of married women early in the morning, and even more than... I think this sentence got a little long—I'll stop here!

(Here I take a sip of cold water, imagining it's beer—maybe not completely cold, but slightly cool, because it's been sitting at room temperature the whole time I've been writing this about the sun, my street, and the married women with their screams, but still drinkable and pleasant-tasting, right? Actually, the water bottle turns out to be empty, and I'm too lazy right now to go fill it up—and even if I do fill it, the water will be relatively warm, since I won't have the patience to wait for the ice—which I'll definitely put in it—to melt, and I'll drink it while it's still warm, which will probably annoy me a little… Actually, I think I forgot to fill the ice cube tray too, so forget everything I just said in these silly parentheses!)

So the sun is shining forcibly on this lovely spring day, when surely all the bears have already woken up and have even forgotten that they were ever asleep, and if, let's say, they were to sit down at a table, light up a cigarette with their coffee, and start telling each other their dreams—because they have nothing else to do at the table—an awkward silence would fall, and their troubled gazes would weigh heavily like a guilty conscience and pierce the floor mercilessly—because what is a bear if it cannot recount its winter dreams, which surely must have been plentiful given the long winter months? Has anyone ever seen a melancholic bear in their life? Because that's exactly what a bear would be like—one that doesn't remember its dreams and has even forgotten that it hibernated and dreamed. There are no melancholic bears, I tell you!

On the other hand, I've seen plenty of married women whose melancholy doesn't stop them from yelling about something different every morning. It even seems to spur them on even more. It's as if they deliberately seek out melancholy, embracing it willingly so that, by yelling at their husbands, they can actually yell at melancholy itself—to show very clearly who's in charge, even on bad days. Married women are a force to be reckoned with—bears can't hold a candle to them! If bears could hold candles. If they don't, I'm afraid my words might be interpreted as a threat to burn them with candles, and I certainly don't want that—to stress out the bears, make them mope around, and lose their sleep. Under no circumstances! I love bears. The word "bear" sounds so affectionate and warm, like a hug on Skype. But in no way melancholic! And if there are no melancholic bears, then there are no bears with sleep problems either, which renders meaningless—I'd even say makes a mockery of—my entire first sentence in this paragraph, and probably the whole paragraph... Life is so confusing sometimes.

I'll try again.

The sun was beating down fiercely, pounding the street with fists and elbows, waking up the bears, or whatever it was doing, whatever… That's not important right now. What's important is to mention, that is, to mention how I was walking down that very same street that day. And at that moment, I was busy doing just that, walking down the street—and that action had taken over my entire being and defined my existence, at least for that brief moment in spring. I think a person should do everything they do—even the most insignificant thing—as if it were the only thing that mattered and they were incapable of doing anything else. To find the meaning of their existence in a single concrete action they are engaged in at that moment. And on that action, on performing it without complaint and

unconditionally, one's life seems to depend, as well as the lives of those in one's immediate vicinity. Because sooner or later it will turn out to be exactly that. Humanity needs dedication—more dedication! Until it becomes second nature.

I was walking down the street, thinking about how I was walking down the street, straining all my senses to block out the terrifying noise of the sun beating down on the asphalt and the woman screaming almost out of her mind (surely a married woman!), whose voice reached me from a nearby open balcony, and looking around for innocent people nearby whose lives I might endanger in a moment of slight distraction, for example, because my right leg had started trying to itch, and I heroically resisted the urge to think about it—even though it's scientifically proven that itching is the leading cause of household accidents and divorces, and that's an extremely tempting thought to lose focus on.

Fortunately, aside from a woman's scream in the air and a scruffy pigeon that was so lazy it was hopping from step to step on the staircase of a small apartment building instead of simply flying over it, there were no other living creatures around—it was early in the morning, it was late spring, and I was hungover. I'd gotten pretty drunk the night before, thrown up two or three times, and then gotten drunk again—and so on a few more times—because when I do something, I'm completely devoted to it and don't think about or do anything else.

Devotion to hell and back! (In this case, it was more often to the hellhole of the toilet than to any other hole I'd rather have been in… Say, the neck of the bottle and the rim of the glass—what were you thinking?) And since there was no one around—not even the street was present in spirit, because it had devoted itself to enduring the sun's slaps and fists, and I wouldn't rule out the possibility that it had fainted—had swallowed its tongue or something similar, forcing it to remain silent and motionless—which is, after all, a kind of involuntary surrender —I allowed myself to walk in my absolute favorite way: with my chin slightly jutted forward, my head and shoulders tilted back but keeping my nose and gaze straight ahead (it doesn't look nearly as comical as it sounds), with my hands in my pockets and a piece of last night's pizza in my mouth, which I'd masterfully pulled out of the hole in my broken tooth and was casually flicking around with my tongue. And I was dragging my feet so carelessly along the asphalt that my flip-flops didn't have a chance to enjoy the pleasure of slapping down even once —not even quietly, as flip-flops like to do in such cases—but instead just slid, glued to the ground and emitting a dull, scraping sound of rubber in agony. Or annoyance—with flip-flops, they're often one and the same.

No, I'm kidding—what flip-flops?! I never wear flip-flops outsid—am I some kind of wild peasant?

"Why are you lying? You always wear flip-flops when you go to the store for beer."

"What... Hey, why are you peeking at my screen???" I turned around and snapped at my wife.

"I'm not peeking at your screen! You're talking while you're typing!"That's true. I have this habit—of talking while I write. Of saying out loud what I'm writing, right as I'm writing it. To check if it sounds convincing enough. To see how it will resonate around me—the vibrations in the air have always been especially important to me. But I only do it when I'm alone! I hadn't even noticed when my wife had walked into the room, and now I instantly found myself consumed by questions like, "How long has she been sitting there on the couch behind me?" and "When is she going to start yelling at me about something I didn't do right yesterday (or maybe I won't do right tomorrow—married women have a knack for sensing these things, and it's not hard for them to figure out that a man is going to mess something up, because men always mess something up)?".

Actually, I think I'm a little too dedicated to the text in parentheses. I'm starting to notice it now, and it's getting on my nerves a bit. I have to dedicate myself more to not dedicating so much to the text in parentheses. I'm writing this down right away so I don't forget. As I'm writing it down, my wife behind me is getting annoyed. Or maybe she's smirking. I can't tell for sure, it's often a very fine line with women.

"You know, you need to get your head checked out!" she says quietly but sharply (apparently I keep talking while I'm writing...).

"Who, me?" I ask, genuinely surprised. That she didn't just scream that at me.

"No, my grandma..."

"She's the one who needs a checkup—I've been telling you that for ages! Lately, she's been starting to…"

"STOP PLAYING DUMB, YOU KNOW WHO I WAS TALKING ABOUT! YOU'RE AN IMPOSSIBLE, GOODFORNOTHINGMANOHGOD!!!"

I didn't even realize when she started yelling at me or why. After 15 years of marriage, I should've gotten used to it long ago, but it always catches me off guard. And how she manages to simultaneously scream, hurl clever insults, swing around slippers and ashtrays, and fold the laundry—whatever's on the agenda for housework that day—is completely beyond me. Come on, bro! (I don't usually

use words like "bro," but lately I've noticed it's trendy, and I like to feel trendy because it makes me feel young. However, that particular "bro" sounded totally out of place! I didn't like it at all; I already regret using it. But it's too late, bro! The spoken word is like a thrown stone. Or an ashtray, in this case—good thing it didn't hit its mark, but I'm sure she always aims poorly on purpose, out of love. I just don't know which of my words this particular ashtray refers to.)

"Anyone will do—and it's still not enough! Next time I'll hit the mark… out of love!" (She said that last part with her mouth twisted into a slimy grimace, as if she'd bitten into a rotten or overly salty sunflower seed.)

Damn it! Apparently, I keep saying out loud what I'm writing (…or did I just think that?). Habits are habits; they're hard to break.

"I'll rip that stupid look right off your face! And stop writing when I'm talking to you!" she tells me, now visibly less and less interested in our conversation, while I, for my part, am starting to get a little scared by my inability to control my habits. That's one thing, but… Sometimes this devotion of mine could cost me my life.

While I'm thinking this and wondering if I actually said it out loud, she's walked out the door and scurried off somewhere outside, where no one will make her scream and throw ashtrays in the most haphazard way possible.

And in an instant, I find myself wondering if I actually have a wife.

I mean… Do I actually have a wife?

I don't think I do.

I don't think I do!

Well, yeah—I don't have a wife. I don't even have a girlfriend. I don't even have a mother—well, I do, but she lives in another city. All in all—I'm completely devoid of female presence, and I have to tell you, the feeling is like a cool breeze after the rain. Especially when you've just made this supreme discovery.

Oh, what a relief, bro! Like a weight off my shoulders, I tell you.

Translators

Izidora Angel is a Bulgarian-born memoirist, essayist and literary translator in Chicago. She is the author of four full length translations. Her writing has appeared in *The American Scholar, A Public Space, Astra, Best Literary Translations 2024, Chicago Reader* and elsewhere. She's been recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts, English PEN, Art Omi, Bread Loaf, and the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, among others. Her translation of *She Who Remains* by Rene Karabash (forthcoming from Sandorf Passage and Peirene Press in early 2026) received a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant and the Gulf Coast Prize in Translation. Izidora is completing her debut memoir.

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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