

Footnote Stories

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You know what a footnote is – you're sitting there reading your book and at a certain point a reference sends you briefly outside the main storyline towards something tangential, something that can't be read along with the main text.

A footnote story is something very similar. Life goes about its business, people get stuck in traffic jams, earn their paychecks, try to spend them and in the best case manage to sleep in on Sunday mornings. A short story (or at least the ones here), with its modest number of letters, can never realistically and plausibly describe all that – it only has enough strength to amble down some trail of its own, having more or less strayed off the asphalt of reality, and in the best case it may manage to leave a few breadcrumbs or pebbles in its wake.

At www.jabberwacky.com you can chat with a completely genuine robot – a remarkable AI machine, created and programmed to have conversations about, as they say, *Life, the Universe and Everything Else*.

Sunday, January 14, 2007, 14:51. I haven't changed a single letter:

User: Do you think that the meaning of life is 42?

Jabberwacky: Stephen Hawking?

User: No, Douglas Adams.

Jabberwacky: I like Douglas Adams.

User: Do you know whether the meaning of life is 42?

Jabberwacky: Yes, I know that too.

User: What is 42?

Jabberwacky: The meaning of life.

User: Why?

Jabberwacky: Because Debbie is everything.

User: Who is Debbie?

Jabberwacky: We are Debbie.

User: Thank you for that excellent explanation.

Jabberwacky: Thank you for the memories.¹

¹ In the beginning there was all in all: one pig, one forage mill and plenty, and I mean mind-boggling plenty, of room for wandering around. In fact, wandering around was the pig's sole intent and purpose and it doggedly fulfilled its task. Meanwhile, the forage mill contained all the matter and space in the Universe, diligently stirring and mixing everything so as to ultimately produce the notorious transgalactic forage "Ambrosia." And when the pig got hungry, the forage mill would release just enough grub for it to regain its strength.

All of this could certainly be related to the Big Bang Theory, which also claims that in the beginning the Universe was concentrated in a single place. That theory, however, fails to explain the initial trigger that caused space to start expanding. Here we offer the most reasonable explanation. First, it should be noted that the pig's primal nature was constantly compelling it to fatten up. Yet this was impossible, since the forage mill fed it exactly as much as it needed and never a speck of transgalactic forage in excess. At a certain not-so-stupendous moment the pig could not control itself any longer and barged its way into the mill. Let us not even for a moment underestimate what an unfathomably gigantic quantity of Ambrosia was required to sate its hunger. The pig ate and ate and ate

until it suddenly realized that it had grown so huge and fat it could no longer squeeze back out through the forage mill opening.

And thus it found itself trapped – with only the entirety of the Universe for company.

It is not clear how time passed for the pig, but one thing is certain – at some point the forage mill stopped grinding away, since the pig had already eaten up all the available matter. However, it was still hungry and thus began to gobble up the only thing left: namely, the emptiness. So the pig devoured the emptiness and space materialized in its place. Yet it is a well-known fact that emptiness can never come to an end and that's why it always managed to fill up the forage mill. Space, for its part, was growing proportionally with each and every bite and voila! the Universe began to expand.

OK fine, you ask, if the pig had eaten everything up, how did all those planets and constellations come into being? The answer is simple, but rather unpleasant, I'm afraid. As we all know, food is swallowed, digested and finally the waste... well, the waste must be dealt with and there's only one way of doing that, now isn't there? As far as the pig's fate is concerned, it is highly probable that its overzealousness with the emptiness diet caused the most whopping cosmic ulcer ever. It is believed that this ultimately resulted in the pig's self-annihilation.

Today, proof of the existence of the pig that led to the creation of the Universe as we know it can be found in black holes (the remnants of its ulcer).

BONITA

Premium Pack Bananas

Class: I

Variety: Cavendish

Minimum length 20 cm

Net weight 40 lb – 18, 14 kg

Product of Ecuador²

² The events along Count Ignatiev Street in Sofia follow their daily rhythm:

Around 7:30 a.m. the first carts appear in front of cellars throughout the nearby streets. Then comes the usual loading of boxes, invariably accompanied by pushing, groaning and thawing of icy limbs. Considerable efforts are made to pile the cart with the maximum load of banana crates and when this is finally achieved, muscles give the first hard shove and the cart begins screeching slowly along the desolate asphalt. With almost as much pushing, groaning and thawing of somewhat warmer limbs, everything is heaped on the sidewalk next to the stalls. The only thing left is to arrange it all, so that finally around nine the stalls gleam with all those Turkish tomatoes, Argentinian cherries, Greek cabbages, Lebanese figs, Macedonian apples and all other fresh produce you can think of. (Here we should also bear in mind the extreme unlikelihood that the unpacking of one of those hundreds of boxes – bearing brands such as *Dole*, *Premium Bananas*, *Bonita*, *Excelban*, *Chiquita premium pack bananas*– might actually reveal the yellow bunches in question, picked somewhere in the distant plantations of the unsuspecting Ecuadorian jungle.)

One hundred and fifty meters further down “the Count” absolutely the same events are taking place, the only difference being that the sellers here let themselves sleep in a bit longer.

Absolutely identical carts screech slowly along the nearby streets, trundling absolutely identical loads of banana crates. On the sidewalk beside the stalls, absolutely identical heaps of cartons appear, except for one minor detail: instead of an atlas of fruits and vegetables, the stalls soon gleam with *The Da Vinci Code* and all the accompanying apologetics; the uncompromisingly inexhaustible series of Paulo Coelho novels; philosophical essays by four Buddhist monks and the selected revelations of at least seven other wise men from the Far East; the fundamentals of Tibetan dream-interpretation yoga for dummies; an endless catalogue of the ultimate guidebooks for success in love, eternal life, dog breeding, graphic design, tantric sex or wine therapy; antiquarian tomes at staggering prices and grubby comic books not worth a cent; brand-new detective bestsellers, action-thrillers and sci-fi; luxury editions of *The Kama Sutra*,

Andersen's Fairy Tales and *500 Cities You Must Visit*; the biographies of Madonna, the Bulgarian communist dictator Todor Zhivkov and David Beckham; everything sensational about the ancient Bulgarians, the Second World War, lunar diets, secret gospels and life after death; and finally, of course, a few decent and admirable titles, deserving of their proper place on the shelves of any self-respecting home library.

Stall # 2: *Well then – welcome to Slaveykov Square, Sofia's happening book market. Don't let the bad weather deter you! So what if it's seven below? So what if this damn wind shows no signs of stopping? Rest assured that in five minutes you'll find the book you're looking for. If you don't see it, just ask – it may very well be hiding in one of the other boxes, and if not here, certainly my mates from the neighboring stalls will find it for you. After all, that's why we freeze our asses off here every day, right?*

Stall # 17 can't help but join in: *And do say what you're looking for rather than just coming and gawking around. How come you always run away when we ask if we could help you with something? "Jus' lookin'" – that's my favorite. As if it's a shoe sale here or something! But you know what the scariest part is? You can't imagine how many people come by here every day, yet at night when I start counting it turns out that I've sold no more than ten books and that's it. And nobody counts all the time you've spent freezing here. I reckon today won't be any different – what else could you expect in this crazy weather?*

You could expect anything and everything – especially in a footnote story. And in fact: not even half of the boxes have been unloaded before the stalls are flocked with kids, who immediately obliterate every remnant of Harry Potter, Terry Pratchett and any other fantasy you can think of. Then two armored Mercedes SUVs block the tram lines with their requisite obnoxiousness. An impressive bodyguard springs out of their somber depths, heads towards the stalls and in a matter of seconds coordinates the purchase of all the Paulo Coelho available and *you'd better keep quiet, 'cause I know where you work*. White collars from cubicles near and far swarm *Slaveykov* during their breaks and return to their desks clutching something like *Aquarius Horoscope for 2007*, a Feng Shui handbook, an encyclopedia of alternative medicine or some romantic crime novel. More impressive still is that even the most unremarkable titles in Bulgarian contemporary literature have sold out well before lunchtime. The stunned booksellers manage to call some of the authors with desperate pleas for new deliveries, but soon even those dusty copies are out of stock. Hoards of diligent students blow their scholarships on the list of recommended reading and in the name of their educational vision-quests. Even the most frostbitten passersby can't resist tossing a glance at the books on display – they, too, inevitably toddle off with some title from this year's bestsellers list.

Believe it or not, as the day goes by, lines of customers start snaking in front of each stall like eager comrades queuing for Cuban imports at the Great Banana Sale of New Year's Eve 1984. Moved by unknown forces, crowds of people pour into *Slaveykov* despite the blizzard's ever-increasing rage. The booksellers are literally astonished. They've taken

off their coats and with a speediness unexpected from their normally dignified bearing, they are thrusting what's left of their stock into the fanatic buyers' hands. Even some local junkies have lined up in front of the piles of used books, patiently waiting their turn to join the sudden, pervasive veneration of the printed word.

Around seven, however, everything starts to quiet down, due to the simple fact that almost all the banana crates have been emptied. Left with no other choice, an elderly gentleman buys both volumes of *Custom Tariffs of the European Union* and by all indications leaves satisfied. But how could we possibly describe the mood of the booksellers, who frantically pinch each other to make sure that the past day was real, while suspiciously patting their bulging pockets and yet more suspiciously surveying the heaps of empty boxes beside the stalls.

The next morning, however, the events along the Count followed their daily rhythm:

Around 9:30 the first carts are once again parked in front of cellars scattered throughout the nearby streets. Then comes the usual loading of boxes, invariably accompanied by pushing, groaning and thawing of icy limbs. Considerable efforts are made to pile the cart with the maximum load of banana crates and when this is finally achieved, muscles give the first hard shove and the cart begins screeching slowly along the desolate asphalt. With almost as much pushing, groaning and thawing of somewhat warmer limbs, everything is heaped next to the stalls in Slaveykov Square. The only thing left is to arrange all the books.

And all of a sudden this task proves extremely difficult, considering that when opened, each one of those boxes – bearing brands such as *Dole*, *Premium Bananas*, *Bonita*, *Excelban*, *Chiquita premium pack bananas* – actually reveals the yellow bunches in question, picked somewhere in the distant plantations of the unsuspecting Ecuadorian jungle...

“Dear fellow mechanics, dear fellow engineers, dear fellow programmers, dear fellow technicians, you are now about to face the most complex machine ever created...”

Excerpt from the Freshmen Address by the dean of Sofia Medical Academy³

³ There was knock on the door and they brought him in. His right sleeve already rolled up, he immediately headed for the chair, but abruptly stepped back once he saw who was waiting in front of it.

“What’s going on? Where’s my doc?”

“*The nurse* you are talking about,” the doctor said emphatically, “no longer works here. From now on I’ll be handling these procedures. Your name, please.”

He hesitated for a moment and even turned towards the door, but then shot out his name, ID number and blood type.

“Type O? So we’ve got a universal donor here. Do you know what a universal donor is?”

“Yes, sir.” The veins in his arms bulged. “Type AB is called the universal recipient, while Type O is known as the universal donor since it may be used in transfusions to individuals with any blood type. Each blood type contains different antibodies in the blood serum and if you accidentally mix them, it will provoke an immune reaction. Thus, Type A is allergic to antigen B, and Type B to antigen A. Type AB does not contain any antibodies, while Type O contains both A and B antibodies. A successful blood transfusion depends mostly on what antibodies are present in our organism rather than on the antibodies in the blood bag. That’s the reason why Type O blood can be mixed with any blood group, although it contains antibodies A and B. So if the hospital’s supplies run out, mine could always be used.”

“Good, very good, indeed.” The doctor smiled. “And have you been sick recently?”

“It’s been ten years since I had my last cold. I take care of myself, sir, really good care, ‘cause I know health problems are dangerous... for the blood, I mean.”

“Good.” Another smile. “And have you lost any blood recently? You know, you should let at least two months pass before...”

“Every two weeks I give 500ml to the bank, sir, a liter if it’s Christmas or Easter.”

“What!?” The doctor froze. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? It’s pure suicide! You’re the one who needs a transfusion! I can’t believe you’re still alive!” He stopped to take a deep drag on his cigarette. “And how long have you been doing this?”

“It’s been ten years and two months, sir, 152 liters, 304 blood bags if I’m not mistaken.”

“You’re lying! That’s impossible!”

“If you don’t believe me, you can check my file, sir.”

“But... but... that nurse... I’ll report her immediately. It’s against all rules and regulations, it’s harmful to the patients! Our bodies need at least two months to restore blood quality. Most likely all your blood has been essentially worthless!”

(This is where he went too far.)

“That’s enough hysterics, doctor.” An icy voice and a deadly stare. “And save the insults, please. My doc always had me tested – I’ve never had any problems with my hemoglobin levels or my thrombocytes and globulin... everything’s been great. Do you have any idea how many surgeries my blood has been used for?”

“That’s beside the point, there are rules and they must be strictly followed... Goodbye, you’re free to go now. I’ll see you in two months. Meanwhile make sure you eat more...”

(The most precise thing to say here is that his blood boiled.)

“If you don’t want to do it, doctor, I’ll do it myself, just give me the needle. I’ve seen it done so many times, I must’ve learned something.”

“Impossible. Let me tell you once again – it completely flies in the face of all medical guidelines. Our body has certain needs – take the red blood cell count, for example...”

“I also have needs, sir, and there are many others in need, too. You surely know that there are some operations that require as much as 12 liters of blood. But what if the hospital’s bank has been exhausted? What about your rules then? Would anybody wait five years for me to supply 12 liters in accordance with your damn rules? Let’s say someone’s been shot; with a shotgun for instance. He’s taken to ER, they operate on him, but the blood is still gushing out all over. The docs start the transfusions and do everything else necessary, but what will they do when all the bags are used up? Should they start scooping it up off the floor?”

The doctor just listened, puffing heavily on his cigarette.

“You know what? You don’t know anything. I’ve simply decided to help out as best I can. 152 liters – that’s a respectable amount, I would say... Look, I’m no good at anything else, I’m a universal donor, nothing but a blood factory and that’s it.”

The doctor lit his fifth cigarette and continued listening carefully.

“You’re wondering how I recover. It’s not a big deal, really. It all comes down to your mind, your thoughts. *Blood, blood, blood, blood* – all day long I sit by the window thinking – *blood, blood, blood, I need more blood, a lot more blood*. And somehow my body gets convinced and really makes more.”

The ashtray was full; a swarm of tobacco phantoms wandered about the room.

“Of course, food is important, too. Chocolate, red meat, lots of fluids... But it’s your thinking, doctor, your thoughts – where blood comes from, where it will go, who it will help – that’s what’s really important. Everyone should help in whatever way he can. Like I always say – if I’ve saved just one person, that’s more than enough for me. Over these ten years I must’ve saved somebody, at least one person I hope. To donate and help, that’s my destiny, I suppose... You know, sometimes when they see the bank is drained, the doctors themselves donate. It’s impossible to donate every day, though, you know this far better than I do, yet every day there’s the need for it. That’s why I’m doing it, that’s what my factory is all about...”

The doctor still did not utter a word. Instead, he stubbed out his cigarette, handed the man some kind of form to be signed, then grabbed his right hand, took out the needle, pierced the vein and after a split second the blood started snaking through the transparent tubing.

“This is an exception, so don’t get your hopes up,” the doctor warned as the blood bag filled slowly and magnificently.

Ten silent minutes and everything was ready. The doctor took out the needle, cleaned the puncture with a gauze pad and stored the blood in the fridge.

“Thanks, doc,” the prisoner said finally, just before the guard arrived to take him back to the cell where our universal donor was to serve the rest of his life sentence.

Without parole.

“Article 32. The privacy of citizens shall be inviolable”

The Bulgarian Constitution on reality TV shows⁴

⁴ A woman tells her man she loves him.

The intro is so ordinary that it may well prove meaningful. And that’s exactly how it should be! Enough of those fake Latin soaps, those impossible twists upon twists in Sunday happy-end movies, enough of that life-style gargle on the talk-shows and why the heck have you still not cut all that political crap! Show us real stories, something plain and simple, something that could touch us all, something **really** significant, so that we could turn on the TV and, as they say, enjoy wasting our time.

A woman tells her man she loves him.

Here’s her letter – she’s written everything in it. Concise and clear, no useless explanations, no impossible outcomes and sensational revelations, nothing pretentious or ambitious. Their anniversary is coming up and she simply wants to thank him and say he’s a dream come true. How else could she do it if not on her favorite show? They have no idea how grateful she is that they trusted her and decided to invite her here. (Her face quivers a little just to show she still hasn’t gotten quite over the jitters of going live on the air.)

She has come all the way from the little town of Kavarna on the coast – remarkably auntie-esque and blue-eyed. On each one of the four hundred thousand TV screens projecting a close-up of her face this very instant, her dreamily penetrating and pervading stare can clearly be seen: despite all broadcasting conventionalities there’s no doubt she is looking directly and only at you. In fact, that’s how your casual TV watching has just transformed into a much more focused and momentous pursuit – anything else would be far too rude and disrespectful to her.

A woman tells her man she loves him.

She thanks him... he’s incredible...gallant... attentive... The theoretical humming of women’s magazines suddenly finds its concrete incarnation... breakfasts in bed... flowers for no reason... he’s never jealous... So such men actually exist!... a firm body ... good at everything (here she blushes) ... she feels protected...

This is a surprise for their anniversary, she answers, that’s why he is not with her. She knows he’s watching, there’s absolutely no way he isn’t and then he’ll surely do something to return the compliment. Their relationship is still fresh though – she’s absolutely sure their best moments are still to come. The best and the happiest, anything else would simply be unreal.

So let’s wish you all the best then, followed by the lights and the final credits.

A lonesome lady sighs deeply, a retiree wipes her eyes, a student adds a new post to the largest blind date forum, a housewife decides to cook something really delicious for her husband, any chance vodka or whisky orders have just doubled (and on top of all that it would be no surprise if the flowers by the TV set have just blossomed.)

Surely none of that would change, even after the e-mails and phone calls from her neighbors and relatives right after the end of the show. The problem is she's never been married, they write, she's always lived alone in her apartment and there have never been any men in her life. How could you possibly have not realized this, they say, why didn't you at least notice those eyes of hers? It's sheer ignorance and lack of professionalism, they haven't stopped calling, you believed in her fairy tales, you've got no idea how long we've been listening to these stories of hers.

Surely none of that would change, even when a week later her man suddenly turns up in the studio, just as she had described him. All he wants to say is how impressed he was by the show and to tell them he's ready to do anything for her. Well, that's all he had to say, he'd better get going, he's got to catch the bus to Kavarna, the last one, that's for sure...

*Sofia Public Transport Company wishes you pleasant and safe travel...*⁵

⁵ Such is the nature of the drivers – they leave the doors open as if waiting for the woman sprinting with her shopping bags, but just when she is about to get on, they slam the doors, throw up their hands in a helpless *got-to-catch-up-with-the-schedule*, *y’know* gesture and chalk up another hit for the day.

And such is the nature of the passengers – they never fall into despair. Even when at the next stop the doors hardly open at all, even when it seems that there are twice as many people on board as the vehicle’s capacity normally allows, the people waiting at the bus stop never give up their attempts to storm on.

By and large, such is the nature of public transport – under absolutely no pretext and under absolutely no circumstances should your morning ride to work, school or the market constitute anything less than the constant test of your will, patience and endurance in the most extreme and experimental urban environment.

And so on this Sofia morning our bus riders once again take part in the grandiose session of mass mutual massage between bus stops. Here and there one might hear some murmuring about the constant nudging and elbowing, but in other areas it is quite quiet, because everyone there is concentrated on the headlines of a newspaper belonging to the lucky passenger who won the bonus prize of an empty seat. Behind the second door three late students copy the answers for their unfinished homework, while at the rear the main event is the chain passing of a ticket with the sole purpose of its resolute validation and its due return to the original owner.

In the meantime, the bus has approached its next stop and slows down, while the people on the steps pack in as tightly as possible to prepare for the opening of the doors. But suddenly the bus resolutely speeds up, releasing a burst of black exhaust in the faces of the hoodwinked crowd waiting on the sidewalk.

“What are they gaping at? Don’t they see there’s no more space here?” Snaps a venerable auntie with four even more venerable plastic bags.

“Fine, but some of us wanted to get off, y’know. Hey driver, open the doors, we gotta get off!”

“Hey, open the doors!” Someone takes up the chant from the rear and the signal slowly ripples forward.

“Open the doors! The guy wants to get off!”

“OPEN THE DOORS!” The chant continues along the chain.

“Jeez, what do they pay you for anyway?” It has finally reached the driver’s booth. “Can’t you hear that there’s people wanting to get off, why don’t you open the doors?”

And thus it is precisely this final wisecrack who has the honor of seeing the driver's blanched face.

"See this here? It's the button for the doors. Can't you see I'm pressing it? But do you see anything opening up? Check this out, too." Letting fly a stream of curses, the driver sharply jerks the wheel almost 180 degrees.

The bus, however, resolutely continues straight ahead, the same black cloud of exhaust in its wake. The driver vainly shifts gears, pumps the brakes, gives the button for the doors one final, forlorn try, but it's no use – absolutely nothing evokes even the slightest reaction from the machine. The crowd around the front doors has grown, and some of those able to witness the driver's futile attempts to control the bus have started to get worried.

"Come on, buddy, turn off that autopilot, you're gonna freak everybody out. That's enough, we got the joke, there's no need to toy with people anymore."

"What autopilot, for Christ's sake?" The driver jumps out of his seat. "Autopilot? This is a crappy twenty-five-year-old Icarus with a recycled eco-engine! What shyster told you this bucket of bolts had autopilot?!"

"So what's going on, if it's not on autopilot?"

"Hell if I know! Something must be stuck. And since we keep barreling straight ahead, I reckon we'll just smash into something and that'll be that... So why don't I see anybody calling the cops?"

At the next moment, however, this suggestion turns out to be absolutely pointless, as a majestic view of Sofia's eternal traffic jam suddenly looms before the bus' windshield. With every wildly traversed meter, a collision with the cars packed into the morning mega-tetris becomes ever more real and inescapable. The last cars wedged into the kilometer-long columns are barely crawling, while behind them the Icarus is slicing the air with its huge red snout, ready to swoop down on them in a matter of seconds.

"Hang on, hang on" – is the only thing our driver manages to say before squeezing his eyes shut, paralyzed by adrenaline.

Suddenly, however, just as it is racing along in a perfectly straight line, the bus surprises everyone right before the anticipated crash by making a sharp left turn, plowing through the guard rail and – amidst the horns and bewilderment of the thus obstructed oncoming traffic – somehow managing to turn around and keep going. Neither the passengers, nor the drivers, nor the eyewitnesses in the nearby cars are able to offer any adequate, logical or even describable reactions, hence I won't bother recounting them for you here (what's more, I myself am not too clear on what exactly happened). This is certain, however – there is simply no way such a thing could've happened. Okay, fine – there's no way, but yet it did happen.

“We’re being kidnapped, people! The whole bus must be packed with explosives!” Someone in the center hinge of the bus begins wailing, and a new wave of fear sweeps the crowd before the previous one has even started to die down.

“Yes, that’s it! Can’t you see where we’re headed? They’ll take us out of the city and then...”

Indeed, the bus is no longer following its usual, time-honored route – instead of heading downtown, every passing minute brings it closer to the Ring Road on the city’s outskirts.

“Let’s break the windows and jump out!” – and amidst the general panic one strapping and decisive young man begins hammering away at the side windows with all his might. He tries everything he can think of, a few other passengers join in to help, but in vain – it is as if the glass were made of steel.

In the meantime someone has finally called the police and soon a patrol car is tailing the Icarus. *Just like in an action movie*, one of the policemen draws his gun and fires two rounds at bus’ wheels. Every single one of the bullets, however, bounces off like a tennis ball, without inflicting the tiniest bit of damage whatsoever on the maniacal machine.

Now it’s the cell phones’ turn to get in on the action. People start calling their loved ones, telling them about the kidnapping in shaking or hysterical tones, bawling with fear, dictating their last will and testament, declaring their love and anything else they can think of. Some, however, have not yet lost their self-control and first call the office to let their coworkers know that they’ll be late due to problems with public transport... But three cheers are most certainly due to the woman who had the news station’s number in her phone, since she is the one who managed to inform the whole country about the unbelievable kidnapping of the bus in special newsflashes on TV.

“How do you feel?”

“Of course I’m afraid but otherwise we’re fine,” she says, amidst the nearby passengers’ cries for help. “I thought that these sorts of things took place only in movies... But it happened just like that – the bus didn’t stop at the bus stop, then the driver said he had lost control...”

“Do you have any idea who might be behind the kidnapping?”

“I have no idea who the kidnappers could be and why they’ve done it, nobody has told us anything. There’s nothing suspicious at all, except for the fact that the bus is driving itself... I don’t know, we’re all wondering what the motive could be – I was hoping you could tell us something more, that’s why I called.”

That something more consists of the fact that the police will try to stop them on the Ring Road itself. They have stopped traffic and somehow managed to get their hands on two semis and a dump truck, which they are using to block the road. They warn the

passengers by phone to hold on tight and brace themselves for the impact. For its part, at the sight of the barricade, our Icarus with its recycled eco-transmission merely accelerates all the more and rest completely assured that it manages to hurl itself over the barrier like an angry toddler tossing its toys on the floor. From here on out it's even easier – the traffic has been stopped, so now the bus has the whole road to itself. It floors the pedal, juddering down the last bolt, while the roar of the engine even drowns out the passengers' ever more frantic cries.

Shortly thereafter the bus heads towards Vitosha, whose roads have not likely witnessed such a powerful attack on their curves ever before. Even on these serpentine twists our jam-packed bus never goes below 70 kph, to say nothing about what happens on the open stretches... Black clouds from the recycled engine waft between the unsuspecting beeches, while the roar of the infuriated bus scares off the local birds, who are otherwise used to mountain traffic. Inside, however, the people have forgotten their initial purely theoretical and abstractly formulated hysteria, replacing it with the far more practical task of surviving in the pogo pit created by the wild jostling around the curves. Even our venerable auntie with the four plastic bags, well seasoned in all the tricks of transport survival, barely manages to stay steady for more than two or three seconds, to say nothing of those less experienced than she... The driver, who has long since left his booth, is now attempting to pry open the hood near the middle doors so as to block the engine, but people are constantly falling on top of him or even openly trying to crush him. In the meantime, the bus has already climbed high above the shroud of Sofia smog, a difference that can be clearly sensed, even amidst the stuffy crush of bodies. In fact, the clean, fresh mountain air only makes things seem more suspicious.

Suddenly, as abruptly as it had begun, the whole furor breaks off. The bus stops in a huge meadow and gallantly opens its doors in front of a freshly built bus stop. The people instantly pour out like boiling herbal tea from a steaming teapot, finding themselves amidst the unbelievable calm of buzzing flies, moss-covered stones and bright sunshine. Just then somebody happens to notice the sticker above the door to our driver's booth: Three stylized blue peaks and the slogan: *Let's celebrate April 22 together – Earth Day.*

*No refunds after seven days...*⁶

⁶ And that's how on this late pre-Christmas Boston afternoon, only twenty minutes after she has bought them, Martina returns the Italian boots along with the receipt for over \$450 and asks for her money back.

"Is there something wrong?" the girl behind the counter asks anxiously, knowing full well that whatever the answer, she is legally obligated to return the client's money.

"Well," Martina begins but immediately realizes there is no way she can explain it.

There is no way she can explain why, as she was leaving the shopping center, she was struck by the memory of how she and her father would buy shoes for her in Sofia a little more than ten years ago and how instead of wandering the aisles of a mall with its seductive shops, beautiful saleswomen and sophisticated fashion consultants at ready, they would go to choose her new shoes from among the epic, almost mythical, handmade stalls at the Iliantsi Market. And only when her last year's sneakers were completely worn out on both feet. Could the salesgirl understand at all what it meant to cram into a streetcar and ride from one end of town to the other in fluttering anticipation of coming home with those ghastly, low-grade "NICE" or "ADIBAS" Turkish trainers, which with a little imagination could pass for the originals, at least in the three weeks before they started coming unglued. It was absolutely impossible and pointless. The salesgirl didn't even know where Sofia was.

And how could Martina explain the concrete housing blocks in Sofia? Could she explain at all how important it was to actually possess a basement? And that precisely because of this, in the tall apartment buildings in Bulgaria, there was a specially constructed *middle floor of basements* so that every inhabitant could have access to this supreme treasure? How could the salesgirl in question possibly imagine what it meant to live in such a place with a two-meter high ceiling, surrounded on all sides by pipes and leaks? Did she know what it meant never to have had a birthday party because you were always afraid that your classmates might find out where you lived (and reveal that you'd been lying about having a house in the foothills of Vitosha, sometimes even adding a villa at the seaside).

And because she had just paid \$450 for some pathetic shiny boots, could the girl on the other side of the counter imagine what \$450 would have meant to Martina in 1996? That back then, this was all the money her parents would've earned in six months? And that while the salesgirl might had played Scrabble and Monopoly here in America, Martina and her classmates had engaged in the following pastime—checking the local exchange rates for the dollar and the deutschmark and competing to predict how much they would rise by the time they got downtown to their school (and afterwards buying pastries to split because almost nobody had enough money for a whole snack).

Actually, despite the deprivation, Martina's school was excellent, as were her grades, which she complemented with victories in a variety of competitions and math Olympiads. "I'll buy you new trainers only if you get straight A's," her father would say to motivate her – and it seemed to work. Every year at the beginning of July they would set out on the

streetcar, cross the entire city, and find themselves in Iliantsi's maze of stands, warehouses, and stalls, which they scoured down to the furthest flung and most out-of-the-way corner to assure themselves they had found the hardest, cheapest, and smartest trainers. Her father would pay readily, she would put them on immediately, and they would go somewhere to drink a Fanta.

“Well...” Martina begins again and unconsciously continues in Bulgarian. “*Ne mi e udobno da gi nosia.*”

“I beg your pardon?” Baffled, the girl turns toward her. Afterwards things got better. Their new apartment was finally ready and they eagerly moved in, her father found a much better job and even bought Martina brand-name shoes for her birthday, which she was at last able to celebrate normally with her classmates. A little later she was accepted into college in America, where her studies also went excellently and here she is now—a young economic analyst with future prospects to make your head spin...

“Sorry,” Martina pulls herself together. “I simply don't feel comfortable in these boots, that's all.”