

THURSDAY

by Zdravka Evtimova

Perhaps I behave so foolishly on account of my confused childhood and the endless July evenings when I was alone with my enormous mass.

The trucks loaded with scrap iron would roar at night, reeking of diesel, shaking the windows with the reverberating sound of their engines, and I could not sleep. I had the feeling that a line of two hundred trucks crept along my aorta and would burst into my heart-- I had always imagined it was a defective organ that would put its owner in jeopardy. The trucks were my father's; he was ruining himself to make a bright future for me, exporting pig iron from the metallurgy plant in the town, importing scrap iron - meaning heaps of rusty iron wires stolen every now and then from different places. In general, he was killing himself quite successfully. A few thugs had shot at him a couple of times. He was no lesser a thug than they were, but he had a convincing excuse: he loved his fat daughter very much. But why should he love me? I was a greasy bulldozer for whom the seamstresses had to sew special jeans into which a hippopotamus could comfortably crawl.

Bombs exploded twice in front of our house. On one of the occasions my mother's upper arm was wounded: a scratch. She then spent twenty-five days in the hospital. After that incident she left us and went to live with the doctor who had healed her wound. My mother was a very beautiful woman with green eyes that contained falling oak leaves in autumn and sprouting oak trees in spring. Actually, there was a whole calendar in her eyes, but it wasn't so much her eyes as her endless legs that compelled the doctor to fall head over heels for her. I have inherited her green eyes, but in my case they are almost always invisible under the hills of fat that surround them. I have inherited something from my father as well - he was enormous, with a broad back and a popping belly.

My mother left us before the trucks started rumbling at night. After she ran off with all her belongings and boxes and bottles of make up, Daddy made up his mind to become the biggest, richest player in town so mother would drown in a lake of misery asking herself why she had cut the throat of the hen that would have laid golden eggs for her.

My father could read a little and was quite familiar with the multiplication table, which was just enough for his business. Perhaps it was the hardness of his skull that made him the proud proprietor of two hundred completely different trucks with which he sold iron, cucumbers,

potatoes, condoms, medicines, and the rest. Mother used to tell the story of how, before she married my father, other guys used to beat him up at least twice a week. Later, she seemed to take a certain twisted pleasure in this memory, seeing nothing in the man she married, that enormous semi-literate oaf, but a swamp of love and sympathy for me, with nothing left over for her. That must have made her furious. I was his only child and had heavy breasts under which the greasy pillow of my belly began; below it my gigantic thighs jutted out, jiggling like bowls of soup. Let me not speak of my behind whose volume probably put to shame that of the sand in the Sahara.

For quite a while my swollen body didn't get me into trouble; even when we were poor my father left rolls of one hundred dollar bills in the drawer of the kitchen table. He never counted them, saying the money was mine. Mother, whose name was Kalina –(I guess her name hasn't changed yet), used to nod her head enviously remarking that the wad of bills in her drawer was smaller than the one in mine.

She had everything. The best massage expert in town, Maria by name, came to take care of her beautiful figure. The most distinguished beautician was responsible for her face--the most famous artist in Pernik, a bearded phoney with a bald head and the manners of a well trained pug, had already drawn seven pictures of my mother in different poses. Her flesh twinkled on the canvas, and my father would rush towards her, with his eyes first, then with his body, flowing hurriedly to her. She was a shrewd woman, my mother was.

She got a degree in law from the local university even before she left us and started integrating herself into the cultural elite of the town. Perhaps she is integrating herself perfectly in the house of her new husband; Doctor Xanov was one of the richest surgeons in the region, younger than she was and very tall. He worked in Pirogov hospital ¹, had a staggeringly large number of private patients on his list, and, unlike my father, he never swore.

Doctor Xanov made great efforts to diminish the fat under my skin; he was unaware of the fact that my lard thawed whenever I looked at him. My father often fought with other guys when brandy turned his brains into soup. Even when his chauffeurs, time and again, brought him home bashed, thrashed, and very bloody, he looked at me as if I weren't a fat, female

¹ Pirogov Hospital - the National emergency hospital in Bulgaria

colossus but the most beautiful girl in the world. Sometimes, in the evenings, he used to put his enormous hand on my head. His palm was the size of a small pillow and had an indefinite number of notches, scars, and wounds from his fights, but on my head it felt smoother than honey. My father didn't say anything, just looked at me, peacefully. I suppose he might have felt sorry for me, for he knew women well, and felt that a fat one like me had no chance whatsoever. He simply loved me as a dog loves his puppy even when it is ugly.

In happier days when the guys brought Dad home drunk and squashed after his regular sprees, Doc Xanov would come to our house to patch him up. Of course, he got juicy fees for his services. My mother helped and did her best handing him bandages, little squares of gauze, or disinfectant. It was perhaps at that time that they fell in love, however that was not the subject of my curiosity. It is curious for me that, after my father was shot, Doctor Xanov and my mother stood by my side at his funeral, looking so sad, as if they both suffered from a splitting toothache.

It was at that time that Doctor Xanov let his hand drop on my shoulder; compared to my father's paw it felt like a slimy hen's beak pecking at my hair. Doctor Xanov's eyes were brown, the color of frozen leaves fallen long ago from their autumn branches that had just begun to decompose in the first warm days of spring.

As doctor Xanov examined me, he stuck his forefinger into the lard of my belly showing my mother that the finger sunk in to the knuckle. His forefinger certainly did not sink into my mother's belly because her belly is flat and hard as brass. Her green eyes were of the same quality and that was why I avoided looking into them.

The police didn't find out who shot my father, and that was only natural. They almost never did unless you were some big shot whose widow would be willing to speak to the press about it. Mother was not at all willing to do that. Perhaps Father had thrashed and flogged many of his enemies, for before he died somebody set fire to the cafe he had built, and twice bombs exploded under his Mercedes. She might have been upset, but she didn't show it. Finally they killed him without dramatics; two bullets in the forehead and that was that.

Doctor Xanov thought I went off my hinges, but he didn't use those exact words when he diagnosed me. "A permanent shock" was how he put it. The truth was I was not scared of blood. At least once a week Father was brought home dripping and stained with blood. I

suddenly was aware I would never again see his brown eyes that looked at me as if I were a perfectly normal seventeen- year- old girl. I would have done anything to make him come back to life.

He loved me as the sparrow loves its little sparrows, not with his brains (for is it possible for a human brain to love the equivalent of twenty-five frying pans of bacon?); he loved me with his blood, which had spilled and splashed onto the pavement.

My mother and father used to sleep in a spacious bedroom situated very far from my own but on the same floor of the house. In the middle of the night, I often heard screeching sounds and moans, so it was evident they made love. I would feel my blood howling in my ears. I would take a shower to cool the flaming lard of my body, but instead of getting cooler I had the impression that the water evaporated at the touch of my skin. The bathroom had mirrors on all its walls--mother had wanted it to be that way so that every square inch could reflect the perfection of her pearl-like body.

Sometimes I stayed with her while the masseuse labored diligently over her thighs, feeling transfixed, enchanted by her beauty. She looked at me with green jungle eyes with liana vines that strangled my throat. I could not imagine how she looked in the spacious bedroom with the marble floor and pictures drawn by dubious painters who pawned their splotchy works of art off on my father at incredible prices. How would he know what a good painting looked like?

My grandfather owns seven nanny goats and one cow; my father's mother, big and strong like the motor of a BMW car, herded the cow non-stop, silent, severe and grim. One day she remarked to my father gloomily, "She will be the death of you," meaning, of course, my mother.

I could not imagine mother under the silver canopy of their matrimonial bed; but she might have been very good for she conquered the most prestigious catch, Xanov the surgeon, seven years her junior.

Doctors, artists, and teachers in the provincial high school I attended fawned before my father. The brilliant female teachers in the private college I chose to study at did exactly the same because he paid them well to teach me the latest dances--rock-and-roll and tangos -- me, under whose steps the parquet floor in the dance hall became unglued. My father couldn't spell the word "address" correctly, but he had all those rolls of one hundred dollar bills which

were stronger than any doctor, policemen, or teacher, more powerful than the whole group labeled 'the elite'. He had money to burn. So did I.

I had never bought porno DVDs or porno magazines. I once found some Italian ones, which my mother kept at the bottom of her chest of drawers; I looked at them for no more than ten minutes. The next night I ran a temperature, felt giddy, and threw up. And that was not an insignificant event considering my imposing mass. It was that night that I made my decision: what I could not achieve by myself, my father's money would secure for me. How could I invite a man to my room considering the fact that in all the four suburbs of the town everybody worked for my father. The drivers of the 200 trucks, the petty scrap iron traders, the owners of car services, my father watched everything closely, businesses thrived under his shadow, the city cops and the best lawyers worked for him. How would I find someone who didn't know my father—and how much would I have to pay him to keep it quiet?

My father had appointed a brawny man named Dancho for my personal chauffeur and he drove me in my jeep wherever I wanted to go. He was always with me, my shadow. Once my jeep was shot at because the attackers thought my father was inside. Bullets splintered Dancho's left shoulder destroying some nerves making his hand droop like a rag. He couldn't raise it to the steering wheel. He couldn't even make a fist. But he drove on, blood pouring from the wound, more concerned about what my father would do if he did not get me to safety than his own skin. Dancho was my body guard; he guarded it better than his own. It would not be easy escaping his shadow.

I would have to get out of our neighborhood of tall houses with courtyards and swimming pools. I could only find the man I needed where the eight-story flat buildings were; there lived the sacked workers from the steel combine that went bankrupt three years before. Most of the men were unemployed now. My father hired a few of the lucky ones and the rest stayed in the rooms of their small apartments in the daytime and got drunk in the evenings at "The Last Penny", a cheap pub run by my father where lousy alcohol was sold.

In those old blocks of flats I hoped to find my man. Although rumors about my father, and about me and my fat haunches, sprang up almost every day, and songs about Mother circulated—with the occasional pornographic lyric and inaccurate descriptions of her body parts—and flooded the town, the people from that area had never seen me in person.

I told Dancho that I was going to the town library, but I snuck my way to one of the dozens of little shops selling second-hand clothes. Most of the town's population bought their

shirts and trousers from there, but who would ever think that the only daughter of Bloody Rayo would go shopping in the sleazy districts that smelled of sweat and urine? I dropped in at exactly eight neighborhoods like this and intentionally hung around in the sleaziest one; the cellar of one building was flooded. The water in it had turned into slime and pond scum, half of the first floor was abandoned, and in one of the remaining empty rooms there was a second-hand clothes shop. I guess it would be more accurate to say *fifteenth*-hand or *twentieth*-hand shop. It was evident that the shop assistant didn't recognize me.

She was very dark and there was dirt under her nails, her face was wrinkled and hidden below a layer of makeup some miles thick.

"What do you want?" she asked me, adding acidly, "You are very fat and I don't know if there are any clothes that will fit you."

"I'd like a skirt," I explained to her.

"Um, uh you'd be lucky if I found any dress for you at all. I haven't got a skirt that big. Try this dress on, but it is expensive, mind you. It's the only one I have that large." She wanted one lev² for the dress. For the first time in my life I was told that something that cost one lev was expensive. I paid her without any hesitation; the woman gave me a dragon's grin, causing the make-up to melt, and it flowed, mixed with sweat, down her cheeks towards her wrinkled neck. In a flash, she offered me two more dresses, as enormous as the previous one, but this time she said they cost ten levs apiece. She showed me a pair of shoes as well, so warped and torn that you could only use their heels to hit a stray dog on the head with or simply throw them in the trash.

"Wonderful merchandise," she boasted. "You can walk with these shoes for six years. They're already patched up so you won't need to bring them to a cobbler."

I did not buy the shoes. I chose a pair of slippers instead, which hardly clung to my heels, and gave her five levs for them. The woman grabbed at the money, stuck it right away in her bra and scratched her hand as if the bill had burned her skin. Then she jumped up, squeezed my arm, and dragged me to the upper floor; where she had "posh merchandise for big babes like you, love". She showed me a bathrobe mended in seven or eight places, worn and frayed as if a combat tank had driven over it several times. Then she unlocked a chest of drawers that was full of blouses--yellow, green, pink, and faded as if all that *posh*

² Bulgarian currency - 1 lev is equal to 50 American cents

merchandise had been soaked in sulfuric acid. “Five levs apiece,” the woman announced generously without letting go my hand.

Her palm was very warm; then she took hold of my shoulder with both her hands and offered me a pair of underpants the size of a tent. I bought them for ten levs which made the woman gape at me. For maybe a whole minute she stood dumbfounded, then she hugged me and kissed my cheek.

“God bless you”, she whispered, her mouth dripping with saliva. “God be with you every minute of your life!” At that very moment it dawned on me that I could ask if she knew of a guy for me.

“What’s your name?” I asked. Suspicion shone immediately in her eyes, black and slippery like a skating rink.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I want to come back to shop from you.”

“My name’s Natasha”, she answered. “But my true Gypsy name is Fatma.” I thought about the fact that I could buy all of her posh merchandise, the whole block of flats, the cellars of slime and mold with the smallest of the rolls of money my father had given me. The woman had sunk her black eyes into mine and refused to let go of my arm. “You want something else. I can tell that by looking at you.”

“Listen, Fatma. Can you find a man for me?”

She went on plunging her eyes deeper into my head.

“You want a man?” she repeated slowly.

“Yes” I answered. Her eyes left mine and crept along the hills of my breasts, balanced on the greasy pillow of my belly, and then descended to my thighs. After that her hands let go of my shoulder, patted my stomach and back and, without any decorum whatsoever, groped my ass as if it were a vast unexplored part of the globe.

“You are fat”, she clicked her tongue several times. “Very fat, I tell you. Tell me when you want to marry him and I’ll tell you how much it will cost.”

It was clear she had not understood. Her words made me shake as a result of which my belly and the cushions of lard above my waist wobbled like sacks stuffed with cabbage.

“You’re really fat,” she went on. “Are you sick, is it some illness that makes you so fat?”

“I’m healthy.”

“Then you eat too much. That’s good. It means you have a lot of food at home. Don’t you, eh? You bought so many things. I wish I were fat myself,” she sighed and groped me once again, this time on my belly. “Can you breed?” she asked. I didn’t answer. The whips of suspicion lashed me.

“Does your monthly blood flow regularly?” she added.

“Yes, it does.”

“What sort of a guy do you want, scrawny or a fat one like you?”

“I’d like a skinny one. But...”

“What?”

“I don’t want to marry him.”

“What!” she hiccupped heavily then surveyed me carefully, her face underneath the make-up so deep in thought that the wrinkles stretched and shone like parallels and meridians on the globe of her cheeks. “Oh, yeah,” she patted my arm once again and winked at me. “Oh, yeah. I’ll bring a married man to you, and you’ll give him something for his kids. He’ll be pleased and you’ll be pleased. Kiro has five children. You’ll have to fetch two doughnuts for each kid. I know a bakery where they sell them cheap.”

“No. I don’t want a married man,” I thought about my father, about me, my mother, and suddenly I was out of sorts imagining the children and the doughnuts from the cheap bakery. “I want to get to know a guy well,” I lied to her.

“Oh, come on,” Fatma winked at me. “Do you want him now?”

I was not ready to make such a quick decision but I thought that I might not be able to free myself from Dancho the next day. Mother had invited a brilliant family of lawyers to dinner. She was in her second year of studying law and a number of bright constellations from the law universe were always visiting our home. Any barrister or notary was flattered to be her guest, of course.

She had not graduated yet but tributes were sung in her honor noting her particular legal talents. I still cannot explain why she forced me to attend these dinners; my father

usually stayed with us for no more than eight minutes--that was the length of time he could endure without cursing--then somebody would call him on his mobile to sign an important business deal.

It was mother who always arranged this, carefully selecting the person who would telephone my father. She chose my attire for the dinners as well. "We'll hide your thighs with this", she would murmur, slipping a black skirt on me; her theory was that the black color concealed the extra fat. Alas, under the black skirt my legs were like mountains of the Himalayas. "And we'll hide your belly with this. Can't you suck your stomach in a little?" she would ask, very concerned; in those moments I hated her. "We must find a dancing partner for you."

Now Fatma, who perhaps was my mothers's age but looked three times older with the plaster of make-up on her face and the parallels and meridians under it, repeated her question: "Do you want him now?"

I had to make up my mind.

"I want him now," I answered, meditating no further. "But where will we get to know each other? I can't bring him to my home."

"Your parents will object, eh?" Fatma winked and patted me on the cheek. "Your folks have fed you well, that's why they protect you so much. And they're right. If you don't mind using one of the dresses you bought to spread on the floor, you can get to know him within a minute." Then she scrutinized me from head to toe. "Honey, step out of my shop," her chin pointed at the old cardboard boxes full of rags. "You might steal my merchandise while I'm gone. Wait for me outside. I'll bring the guy in a minute."

"How much will it cost?" I asked her. My father always started any negotiation with the question "How much? US dollars, British pounds or Euros?"

"I want five levs. You can give him ... well that's something between him and you. Work it out for yourself."

Fatma took me out into the corridor. People must have been living there for there was a picture of a family on one of the boxes, a father, a mother and three kids, boys whose hair was cropped to the very bone of the skull. I figured they'd had lice. There was purple wallpaper on all the walls with some variation of a horrible flower pattern that had surely brought both parents and children to the edge of insanity. The strips of wallpaper were ripped

off and stuck desperately to the floor; the cracked brick masonry covered by thick patches of mold was visible under them.

I thought about the wallpaper in my room, about the marble floor and my bed, which my father had bought for me from Austria. There was a button I could push that would lift it to a certain angle whenever I wanted to sit up; there was another button that made the bed sway like an ocean liner. I had a waterbed as well that mother had bought for me during one of her excursions to North America. I took out one of the dresses that I had acquired; it was dark red, faded and frayed at the hem. Mother wouldn't even have allowed me to throw it into our waste-bin for fear it was full of nits, tapeworm, ticks and other vermin. I could spread that dress on the floor, but where? Suddenly I was scared.

What was I doing?

It was summer. My father had made plans to go to Austria and import a new batch of used automobiles; he intended to import two tractors at a very advantageous price. He was a successful international businessman. What was I doing in this narrow walkway; the scorching heat outside had made the ground split the way men severed the bones of a slaughtered pig. Even the flagstones of the sidewalk had become unglued from the sweltering sun, but the slime in the cellar had not yet dried up. A suspicious stink reached my nose.

"Men are wicked and envious, love," Fatma had remarked when we entered the room I was to wait in. "They want to ruin my business, so they throw dead puppies in the flooded cellar. It's not dangerous. No one from this block of flats has died yet. Some guys coughed a little on account of the smell, but then they forgot about it."

After a short time of waiting I heard footsteps along the flight of stairs that reverberated like slaps in my face. After several seconds Fatma appeared, her make-up smiling greasily for it was evident she had plastered another layer of it and had erased the sweaty streams leading to her withered breasts.

"Here he comes", she announced, leading by the arm a mere strip of a man whom she pushed towards me. "He's very scrawny, it's true", she admitted. "But the guy is tough and strong, mind you. Every night he unloads marble slabs at the station in Pernik," she looked at me closely, slapped my cheek and suddenly snapped, "Spread your dress here and don't make the bloke wait. I won't let you in the shop, you might pilfer anything, just anything," then she turned around, the slaps of her steps echoed down the stairs of the flooded cellar.

The string--the thin streak of a man that unloaded marble slabs at the station-- and I were alone. He was much taller than me, lanky and narrow-shouldered like a shoe box, and his hips were as broad as my upper arm. He was wearing a dirty lilac T-shirt and a pair of jeans that were cut off above the knees, and from there a net of tousled threads hung loosely to the concrete floor. The maypole immediately took off his cut jeans.

His eyes were muddily green, almost yellow; then he took off his dirty T-shirt and flaunted his lusterless puny chest before me. I remembered the men in the pictures of my mother's porno magazines which I had peeked at; their muscles had been taut, bulging like fighter aircraft, while the muscles of the maypole were practically invisible. It was impossible to miss the detail that the man wore nothing under his jeans, and it felt awkward staring at the part of his body that interested me most.

He came toward me and didn't make any efforts to undress me. My blouse had pasted itself with sweat to my paunch. It turned out I was incapable of taking off my skirt, so I let him help me. His efforts were great and futile, which made me doubt that he could actually unload marble if he couldn't manage somebody's backside—even if it was my backside. I took hold of his shoulders, which felt brittle beneath my fingers.

“Say 'I love you,'” I ordered.

“I love you,” the guy repeated obediently.

“Say 'You are the only girl I love in the world,'” I commanded.

“You are the only... It's too long,” the maypole complained and added, “I want ten levs.”

“Ok.”

“I want them now.”

“No. After.”

My father's favorite saying was “Don't pay beforehand if you want good service.”

I touched him, the place on a man's body I had always dreamt of touching. My hand burned. He groaned. My father's groans were the same: like when a bone gets stuck in a cat's throat and the cat tries to spit it out. It was strange I didn't feel the pain I had read about. It didn't hurt at all; it didn't feel so great either. I simply had to live through it and explore the sensation again. The man's eyes had become purely yellow and shone like crystals of cracked

mica on his dark face. He clung to me, a drowning rat clutching at the skin of a whale. It felt as if he were driving nails into a bag of down, rocking slowly, his eyes of mica hidden under shut eyelids.

His narrow shoulders could sink effortlessly into every part of my big body; I myself sank pleasantly downwards into the concrete floor, nurturing a vague idea that I'd bore a hole in it any minute.

Suddenly the man relaxed with his eyes still closed. Saliva ran from his mouth resembling the glitter of the mica I had noticed in his eyes. The guillotine of my buttocks pressed a little pool of blood to the concrete floor, which did not make any impression on me. Theoretically I had been prepared for it. I could already report that in practical terms no matter how fat I was I had become a woman. The sliver forgot to get down from me, yawned, and fell asleep in the comfortable nest of my blubber. Even though he was scrawny, I could feel his weight heavily on me, so I budged and his head hit the floor. The guy was startled, but only for a moment, then yawned again, revealing a lake of saliva shining in his mouth, his dark hands clinging to me, like pencils writing the enormous sentence of my body.

Suddenly the beanpole broke into a sweat and started slithering on to me, and then unexpectedly his lips grounded inaccurately upon mine. I don't know if I could count this as my first kiss with a man; but since I hadn't experienced an event like it before I decided I might as well accept it as such.

This happened when my father was still alive.

I felt overwhelmed with happiness and wanted to get out of there before the happiness melted like everything that came my way, so I shook the guy who slept quietly on top of me and whispered in his ear, "Say 'I love you'". The tone of my voice was the same as my mother's when she talked to the notaries and lawyers, offering them her perfect profile or a glimpse of her pearly leg. I couldn't explain how an intonation like that was born in my throat.

The beanpole did not obey. His yellow eyes hung over my face, his mouth pressing mine. I had some money in the pocket of my blouse. It was very hard to thrust my fingers in the silk pocket glued to my skin. It took several minutes to extract a ten-lev banknote, which I left on the floor saying, "Take it."

"Wait a minute", the man said. His hand, rapid and scorching like lightening, grabbed the money, then he left me on the dress I had bought from Fatma. At that moment I felt the

stink. Fatma was probably right; her neighbors had thrown dead puppies or worse in her cellar.

After five minutes the guy returned carrying two bottles of beer and a package containing the cheapest possible, suspiciously rosy-colored, sausage a man could buy in the cheap shops, squeezed in cellars and bungalows along the Struma river.

He opened one of the bottles, poured half of it down his throat, burped and gave it to me. I tasted a gulp of the liquid and was about to drop dead instantly; the beer smelled no better than the puppies ruining Fatma's business. The man ripped the sausage into two equal pieces, not bothering to peel its skin, tearing it with his teeth as if he hadn't eaten for four years. I felt nauseated watching the beanpole eat the sausage; I suspected I might have to drive him if not to the morgue, then at least to Pirogov Hospital.

"Eat", he said. "I bought the sausage for you."

"And spent all the money", I snapped angrily. He made no comment on my remark, just went on chewing with his mouth open and stuffed with pieces of the cheap sausage soaked in the nasty beer. Then his head dropped to the ridge formed by my breasts. He pushed aside the last piece of sausage and turned again to me.

It felt so good that for a moment I thought, "God bless you, Fatma!" Before I went home I remembered only the guy's scrawny ribs bulging like piano keys in his chest. My mother had had her heart set on making me play the piano and wasted heaps of money on tutors Dancho, my father's loyal chauffeur, would drive directly from the Academy of Classical Music in Sofia to my music room.

I reached almost to the man's dimpled, stubbly chin. He let his hand drop on my head; his fingers felt like my fathers, although some of the nails were crushed and warped. He ran them through my thick, toothbrush-bristles hair and mumbled, "Your hair's red like a bundle of carrots."

My hairstyle resembled a helmet, and mother criticized me severely on that account. How was it possible, she asked rightfully, that a young promising lady would get her hair cut like an infantryman? I was fat, and the hair baking my skull in its red-hot furnace made me feel hotter.

The lanky man's hair was black, dirty, tousled, and covered his shoulders. I didn't ask what his name was.

As I walked down the stairs to the cellar full of bilge water, slime, and pond scum, his steps behind me did not sound like slaps in the face, they reminded me of the first drops of rain after a two-year drought.

“Hey”, he shouted. “When will I see you again?”

When? I wouldn't be able to get to this shabby suburb in the near future. All over the district the eight-storey flat buildings juttred out from the sidewalks with drab balconies covered by necklaces of drying clothes and linen. Among the blocks, cars, trucks, even several buses were parked and between them stray dogs sauntered, lolling out their tongues, some sprawled like corpses under the buses parked on the asphalt, which melted in the heat.

I didn't think even for a moment that my father would ever allow me to come here. If mother learned that her daughter had been wasting her time in this lair of thugs (let alone the fact that she had visited the building with the flooded cellar and dead dogs!) she would convince my father to buy a house in one of the upscale districts of Sofia, the capital city. I wouldn't be able to see the lanky guy ever again.

“Listen”, I told him. “Come to the Snowdrop Cafe tomorrow evening at seven . Then I'll tell you where you can meet me.”

For there could be no doubt that I would be seeing this man again. There could be no doubt that it had been the most marvelous day of my life. In my chest of drawers I had a lot of money; if I bought a small flat, a flat with one single room and a bathroom - one rotten flat in this swamp of crumbling buildings--then everything would be all right. If I spread an old mattress on the concrete floor I could invite the beanpole and no one would know anything about it. Even Fatma wouldn't. Where could I buy the small one-room flat? It would be best to choose one in the center of town, near the library, for what sort of place could be honored by the visits of Bloody Rayo's daughter but the library?

My father would often remark, “Read, my girl, read. Science was out of my reach, but it will be within yours.” My mother paid the best teachers in English, in computers, modern and Latin dances, and good manners to train me. Most recently, she stumbled upon the idea to get a German teacher as well: a spinster with withered cheeks who always visited our home in smashingly expensive shoes. My mother adored her for that--she could adore only expensive things. That was the reason she had been so impressed by the young doctor Xanov who patched up my father after his drunken sprees.

Yes, the only place I was allowed to go was the library. I never visited any fitness clubs; I was too fat, so my father built a gym onto our house and hired a personal trainer to set my targets and measure my progress. But my father, no matter how generous he was, wouldn't be allowed to buy the public library even though he had donated a dozen grand to repair the broken roof tiles. I doubt, however, he was interested in the books for himself, rather his interest in one of the librarians could account for the generosity: a puny woman with the most unhappy eyes that you could imagine, as if someone beat her non-stop around the clock. I wondered why my father liked small women with eyes as sad as death himself. The only exception to this rule was mother who was neither sad nor small, but she left him all the same.

Well, my point is that I had more than enough money to buy a rotten one room flat. If I did buy it myself, though, the news would spread through town like fire. I had no friends I could trust. The second most beloved saying my father used was "Money is the most loyal friend to man". I could ask a lawyer to acquire the flat for me. If I added two or three rolls of bills to his fee everything could be arranged within 24 hours and any lawyer would willingly keep as quiet as the eel in Doctor Xanov's aquarium, an animal my mother often admired.

"Don't you want to do this again?" the lanky youth asked, pushing his dimpled chin into the bristle of my thick short hair.

"I'll tell you tomorrow," I answered. "Seven o'clock at the Snowdrop Cafe. I'll give you more money."

"And we'll buy beer and sausages", he snorted happily.

All this happened before my father was shot, perhaps half a year before his funeral. Neither he nor mother had any inkling about my decision to take money from my drawer.

The apartment was desperately small. An empty room in a block of old flats, with its window facing north, a roof made of worm-eaten logs, crumbling plaster on the ceiling, a small empty kitchen, and a bathroom so tiny that I had to enter with my shoulder first to relieve myself. There was electricity, but unfortunately there was neither hot water nor any heat whatsoever. I bought a mattress and a cheap blanket, then I invited the maypole whose name I still didn't know.

The room was as narrow as a coffin; the lawyer was so curious about why I wanted it so badly that I had to lie to him. I told him that I intended to house my German tutor there. The lawyer smiled, which, according to the code of judicial behavior, meant, “Bloody Rayo’s fat cow has a screw loose, no doubt about it. Her father has stuffed so full of money that it’s interfering with her brain Well, I didn’t give a damn about his inferences.

I became the owner of the room with the mattress in less than twenty-four hours. This event once again confirmed my father’s thesis that money would do more for you than your best friend. I didn’t have any friends.

Before the battered entrance door banged shut behind his back the beanpole had taken off his jeans and his dirty lilac T-shirt, the same one as before. And, like before, he did not have any underwear on.

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

“Simo”, he said.

“Don’t you want to know what my name is?” It was evident he didn’t and so he clung to me instead, a thin rope spiraling about the masts of my endless buttocks. “Aren’t you interested in what my name is?” He didn’t answer, and couldn’t possibly do so because his mouth was full of saliva that shined in the light like mica. My mother had a diamond necklace that shined like that--and a diamond ring, and there was a diamond on the belt of her formal evening dress. My father had brought it to her from Austria. So I decided that the saliva in his mouth wasn’t mica; it was diamond. “OK. My name is Moni. Did you hear me? Moni. Here’s the money. Take it.”

He didn’t look at the money because his body had already started swinging over me. I pushed him aside, which wasn’t difficult at all. He banged against the floor but his reaction surprised me.

“You’re pretty”, he said. “You are pretty.”

It was at that moment that I understood how the other women felt. My mother. My classmates in the private school for girls, my tutors in English, German, modern dances, fitness and good manners. The other women whose boyfriends told them they were pretty, that they weren’t fat bulldozers but simply pretty women.

“You are off your rocker”, I objected, but he didn’t hear me.

..... On the fortieth day after my father's funeral mother paid for a solemn church service and invited all the intellectuals and financial elite of the town. Or, I should say, all the people that mother considered elite. The church service was an excellent opportunity for her to show off her mourning attire. On such occasions (and by "such occasions" I'm referring to opportunities for my mother to show off) she always hired the cook from "Casablanca," the most expensive and posh restaurant in Pernik.

All were enchanted by the menu she offered and by her fashion. I was already very familiar with the cook's menus because mother abided by her sacred law once a week, on Friday, to take me out to dinner to "Casablanca". I had the feeling that the waiter knew when we were about to arrive by the sound of my mother's jeep. The same very tall and attractive man always met us at the door, taking my mother's hat or cape and bowing gracefully, down to the last vertebra in his spinal cord, and whispering very sincerely, "You look just wonderful, ma'm"

The words would rattle like pebbles in his mouth, his eyes following my mother with such demonstrative admiration that I suspected he was ready to kiss the pavement beneath her shoes; it was hardly surprising when she would leave him fabulous tips.

Then the waiter would take my hat or coat and bring the menu, his eyes shining proudly for he had again anticipated what my mother would order. "Shall it be shark's loin prepared in the Saragossa way, ma'm?" My mother made it a special point for all her guests to be aware of the fact she ate shark's loin in the Saragossa way.

She had grown up in a family of waiters. My grandmother and grandfather, her parents, experts in this trade, had weened several generations of drunkards at "The White Elephant" restaurant, and after the establishment went bankrupt they set up a pub in one of the most backwater suburbs of the town. My grandmother Shar (I suppose it was probably an abbreviation of "shark") was slim and still had her sharp green eyes even though she was getting on in years. Compared to her my grandfather resembled an obituary notice. He made cheap cocktails behind the bar but more often drank quietly and sadly with his regular customers, not giving a damn about the rest of the world. His only daughter, my mother, had money to burn and therefore was happy. Grandfather was given to noble charity, ordering free drinks for his old friends, a bunch of poor pensioners with receding hair who poured the cheap cocktails into their brains, blessing him day and night.

Grandma Shar looked at them with disdain, burning them with the green flames of her eyes. In her rare fits of wrath she would throw my grandpa's friends out of the establishment in a most ignominious manner, but this happened once in a blue moon so they waited for death peacefully, full to the brim with brandy my grandfather sold to them cheap. For although my grandfather was a drunkard with thinning hair he never swindled his old pals.

As my mother entertained her guests, barely remembering the reason for the occasion, I was wondering if it was a good idea to introduce Simo to my grandfather.

***** *****

Thursday was the only day of the week Becky detested. On Thursday she made Theo's acquaintance and a month later he became her husband; her son was born on Thursday. Too late and too sadly she lost her virginity on Thursday. It was cold and rainy April, and the sky was sick and tired. She lived in a prestigious quarter of the town. No stray dogs roamed the streets, and discreet bodyguards were on the alert in their gables on the top floors of the house. Becky knew the man on duty in their villa; he was her husband's loyal watchdog and his eyes descended to his shoes whenever Becky happened to be around.

She was thirty one when she married Theo. He was eleven years senior to her. Becky had studied law in Germany and had got accustomed to punctuality and discipline so she vaguely guessed her father's money came from some shady petrol business. She always made careful use of it; she had seen beggars in the streets and their outstretched hands had disgusted her. If only her father had not insisted on Becky's getting married so early, if only her mother had not harped on the same old string how empty their enormous house felt without grandchildren! Becky would have never allowed Theo to creep into her thoughts.

She hated Theo the minute her father introduced her to him, his most brilliant expert. She had closely watched the guys her father trusted since she came back home from Germany; Theo was the most tight-lipped and the drabbest among them.

After her father left the room, she told Theo she would like to invite him to her place. She had a small Citroen, and she took him to her house in Boyana, the most prestigious living

suburb of the capital. She made Theo wait for her in front of the door of her bedroom as she undressed, then she summoned him.

“Come on,” she had said.

She had never had an intimate contact so far and the very thought of it sickened her. Before she made up to marry Theo, Becky had drunk a glass of Sovignon Blanc and had thrown up. It was Thursday; it was foggy outside, the flat sky trying to devour the city.

The contact with Theo was painful. His body scalded her unpleasantly. It was not necessary for Becky to pretend she enjoyed sex. She was pleased he had finished quickly and did not torture her with explanations how beautiful she was. She appreciated his silence and the fact he had not looked her in the eye cheered her up.

Theo did the thing she had summoned him for. In the end she crawled over his hot belly, went to the bathroom and called out “You can get dressed.”

“Would you like something else, Miss Saeva?”

His voice made her think of a stone hitting laminated iron. Becky could hardly bear such voices, she ended up imagining them shriek.

“Would you like something else?” he repeated.

“Yes,” she answered. “I want you to marry me.”

That was the price her father wanted his daughter to pay before he sent her to Germany. Becky would not have to stay with her mother while the middle-aged lady enjoyed the company of “her young friends”, the men she paid to share her loneliness with. Becky would not want to push her way in the streets of Sofia through shabbily dressed people. She hoped she’d get away from the garbage-bins and the beggars who accosted her at every corner. Her mother had read somewhere that sex with young men prevented aging so she hired a new bodyguard every two months. On the other hand Becky’s father was a famous man, and the family name Saev was as famous in Sofia as the Pope’s in the Vatican.

It was Thursday again. Becky’s son was two years old. Her father died under very vague circumstances in Red Lion hotel in a comparatively small provincial town. Her mother ceased hiring bodyguards, and Theo took over her father’s business. Stingy and immaculate, dressed in a perfectly ironed gray suit - Becky detested gray color - he faced her mother on the first Thursday every month, handing her a bunch a bank notes. It seemed he took evil pleasure in her mother’s humiliation; he gave her the bank notes one by one never failing to

remark, "Elinora, I do not want you to make a laughing-stock of me. You are too old for amorous pranks." His voice was lukewarm and disinterested like a trigger of a gun. Although he never shouted and the words he used were soft and smooth, his sentences were a speedway that led her mother to insanity.

At the very beginning her mother asked, "Who are you?" then answered the question coldly, "A mean upstart."

Theo took back the money he had just given her, and put it in his pocket. Elinora learnt to hold her tongue. It appeared Becky's mother was capable of putting up with all kinds of sneer; she was tough and vital. It seemed nothing could destroy her.

It was true the old one had been a beauty, She had blue eyes, hazel-hair, fair complexion, she was generous to her present boyfriends and poisonous to her ex ones. Elinora regularly showed up at her daughter's villa, her chauffeur opening reverentially the door of her Mercedes for her. Then her mother went to the cot where Theo junior slept, most often than not left a cheap present at his pillow and started again the same old cantata, "I need money."

Becky wondered if her mother had not been at it with Theo but this issue was of no consequence to her. The thick tense hatred she felt for him had become something normal in her daily routine like the vase of flowers on the table or the mute bodyguard at the front door of the villa..

"My dear," her mother told her after her grandson was born, "Theo was a sleazy law student who didn't have money for his lunches. He crawled into favor with me and I introduced him to your father. Now I regret it," Elinora had nodded her head. "He is a man of great potential but you can hardly assess that. God---"she looked at the ceiling as if the Almighty might take a look at her from behind the chandelier. "Unfortunately God has deprived you of the ability to enjoy love."

Theo came to Becky's bedroom on Thursdays as punctual as the weather broadcast on the National Program of the TV. She never bothered to pretend sex with him was a pleasure. His body had become hotter, the contact with him more repellent; the only positive development was the fact that every Thursday he left a roll of bank notes under her pillow.

"I'm sure you like your massage girl better than me," Theo often made that statement and it was undisputedly true. Becky found it was not necessary to confirm it for him.

“Why don’t we get divorced?” she asked once in an expressionless voice.

“You are pretty” her husband answered calmly. “And my son needs a mother.”

There were grayish wallpapers in the bedroom that Theo had chosen, dark gray window frames, and gray carpet. His eyes, popping slightly forward, covered under the carefully sliding eyelids were gray as well, his grey presence squeezing all her patience. Perhaps he found pleasure in humiliating her, in the physical suffering he made her put up with every Thursday. Becky had invented a clever protective device against Theo’s invasions; she had a secret account in the bank. Her father, may he rest in peace, had taught her to spend very little; she had learnt to ask Theo “Can you leave some more money for me?” at the moment he was about to go to sleep.

She informed him time and again she took lessons pointing out she was endeavoring to play the piano well. The truth was Becky couldn’t care less about music. The vague circumstances enveloping her father’s death as well as her mother’s permanent loss of face prompted to Becky money was of crucial importance. She wanted to go to Germany, so begging about money was never a source of pangs of remorse. On the contrary, she was proud of herself. It was not that much the money, it was the thrill she had wrenched it from Theo’s tight fists that made her happy. The roll of bank notes under her pillow was the evidence she was more resourceful than he was.

“Look me full in the face,” Theo said one Thursday evening and she obeyed him. “I know you are not interested in money. What do you constantly want it for?”

“I want to go to Germany,” Becky answered. She did not attempt to lie to him because she knew it would fail in the long run. His gray eyes pierced hers and sank deep into her, reaching as far down as her throat. Theo could hire the best detective agency; fighting him made no sense, each word Becky dropped unwittingly prolonged his stay in her room and that was a nightmare scenario poisoning her months to come.

“You don’t give a damn about what is going on at home,” her husband accused reading her thoughts. “You lack originality. You are not hospitable or friendly. You are pretty and that’s your only asset. No, you will not go to Germany. I’ll buy a house for you here, in Bulgaria.”

“Can you give me money for that house now?”

“You want money again.”

“A house costs money, Theo.”

“You don’t take good care of our child. You go to check on him only is I remind you to on the telephone.”

“Yes,” Becky answered quietly. The only tone of voice that Theo adopted as he communicated with her was a highly imperative one.

“I will not give you money for the house,” Theo declared. At that moment Becky’s hatred for him soared but she knew that any effusions on her part would make her life none the less bearable. So she looked through the window; it was raining again. Her life was like this: useless cold drizzle in April.

“You will stay here”, the gray asphalt in her husband’s voice crept on towards her. Becky was not scared. She did not fear anything. “You will attend the meetings with my partners. You must be brilliant any time I summon you. I know you are not clever but the other people don’t. Your beauty beguiles men into believing you possess refinement. Well, you don’t. I might summon you at 10 PM, at 9 AM, at midnight - you must be pretty all the time. That is the only thing you are good at: being my pretty wife.”

“Yes, Theo,” Becky said. “Beauty costs money. Equitation, exercises, healthy diet.”

“You want money again.”

“Yes. I need money.”

“I had asked your mother to convey a short message to you.” Becky did not respond and Theo warned her, “I don’t like your silences.”

“What was that short message about? Please remind me.”

“It was about a lady I spend much time with at Escalibur Hotel.”

“O, yes. My mother described that lady in great details. I am happy for you.”

“So you didn’t fly into a rage,” Theo sounded interested, his gray eyes chasing hers.

“I was enraged,” Becky answered.

Her husband took off his gray jacket.

“I have to go out,” Becky ventured.

“You want money,” his voice thickened and slithered along the floor then hit her breasts. “Take your clothes off.”

Becky bristled up. Theo was a patient man; he watched her undress his eyes squinting. On Thursdays she put on several layers of pullovers hoping she could put him off. Her movements were abrupt as if she were plucking the feathers of a dead bird. It was evident Theo got excited by that too. She knew she would survive that. She could survive anything. Theo's gray eyes licked her breasts and got stuck on her pelvis, then he stood up and the thick asphalt in his voice filled up the pores of her skin.

“Lie on the floor,” he commanded.

Orders had never frightened her.

Her mother knew Di did not go to teach the Anevs French. Her mother did not approve of Di's foolish ideas; she thought that touching the shiny, often sweaty and greasy backs of strange people was pretty dangerous. She herself was an ex-research associate at the Institute of Linguistics to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; she had graduated Russian studies and took pride in the fact she was capable of reciting most of Lermontov's poems by heart. Alas, those skills did not help her pay the electricity bills. Nobody invited her to translate books and articles from Russian into Bulgarian.

She had bought a coat eight years ago and its frayed sleeves could not persuade anybody that exquisite morality still governed her judgments.

Arma Kumova performed miracles trying to conceal her patched shoes; her inventiveness verged on magic: she sewed eight different collars to her coat and managed to mask the frazzled fabric at the shoulders under a gorgeous white shawl. If a friend asked her to a cup of coffee, she answered she was busy at the radio and that was a lie. No one was interested in Arma Kumova. Not a single soul. She didn't count the retired senior executive from the Bulgarian Telecommunication Company - a bachelor, or perhaps a divorcee of many years; the man had said vaguely he might start thinking... who not make Arma his beloved Misses?. His pension “was absurdly small”, he said. But he had bought some shops in the capital and he sold fashionable clothes, boxes of matches, socks and lipstick.

One day the tycoon asked Arma to a cup of coffee and dropped hints about his lonely bed. Then he mentioned he possessed “a magnificent apartment” plus a house he had let; so the senior executive concluded he had even bought new sheets for the bed and had the toilet washed with special disinfectants.

Arma had explained she was on her way to the radio. The “radio” was one of the picture galleries open at that early hour, a magnificent place where she stared at the pictures hours on end. It was not cold inside the halls and some of the pictures impressed her. The curators noticed that the sleeves of her coat looked suspiciously frayed and were by no means amicable to her. Life and Arma glowered at each other and her struggle was a project doomed to failure.

Di, her daughter, had suggested, “Mother, I’ll explain to you the basic principles of the It is true people prefer young masseuses but there are always aging gentlemen who gladly trust mature ladies with gray hair and golden autumn in their eyes.”

“I can imagine their greasy backs,” Arma said and added she planned to go “to the radio.”

Several years ago, her husband, a man who boasted he was a sculptor, but who in fact repaired damaged cars, abandoned Arma. He told his wife he’d go to his studio, interpreting the word “studio” as the villa of a woman he’d been seeing.

“I need money to study at university,” Di told him.

She made friends with his girlfriend and if her father’s partner was in cheery mood, she bought Di a dinner at not very expensive restaurant.

“It is nice you want to study,” her father had remarked leaving his sentence hanging dubiously in the air. “Find a job that will bring you steady income... massage for example.”

In the beginning, Di massaged her father’s girlfriends in the narrow room at the back of his improvised car service. The place was grimy and smelled of lubricants, but Di had a talent for rubbing people’s backs. Her father’s girlfriends appreciated the touch of Di’s exquisite fingers; the nervous tension ebbed away from their thighs and shoulders as Di stood silent, swarthy, taut as a bow-string watching them with her inscrutable black eyes.

Di dreamt of remaining as long as possible in a client’s house: it was warm in it, and the carpets felt soft, clean and thick.

Di and her mother lived in a one- room flat in which the central heating was out of order and there was no running hot water. The refrigerator was damaged and in winter they stored the food on the balcony. It was a nerve racking experience to wait for the pot of French beans to boil on the only hot-plate of the cooking stove. It was a miracle the stove had not disintegrated. It was so old.

Di constantly dreamt of a lavish dinner. She had the impression that instead of blood her heart was full of saliva rushing to her mouth at the smell of baked bacon. Di tried hard to be friendly no matter her mother despised the young women her father preferred to her. Slowly, Di's aversion to naked female bodies gave way to dull indifference.

Yes, her mother knew Di did not teach the Anevs French. In the evenings Arma and Di almost never talked, but their silences were cozy and rich.

"I had some cake," the mother whispered some evenings. Di knew that Arma had had a long coffee session with an old friend enjoying the warmth of the coffee house and the free apple.

"She was horrible," Di said sometimes meaning that Becky Aneva had asked her prolong the massage session.

In Di's opinion, Mrs. Aneva was a queer fish. When her client wanted the massage repeated she stirred the forefinger of her right hand.

Mrs. Aneva's skin was snowdrop white; Di's dark fingers glided over it drawing hot swarthy spirals. Mrs. Aneva always left a little pile of bank notes on the little table by the couch, and Di put all the power of her will not to think about them. Very rarely Mrs. Aneva would call "Dora!" and another young woman, strong and sturdy like an unconquerable fortress entered the room carrying a tray in her hands. Di didn't care about Mrs. Aneva or Dora. She tried to riddle out what there was on the tray: perhaps Viennese rolls and coffee? Perhaps roasted lamb sandwich. The thought about food made Di dizzy and her dark fingers pressed harder Becky Aneva's tender shoulder blades.

Di was constantly hungry; her stomach had turned into a separate being that wanted more food. That tray on the table looked magnificent.

"You hurt me," the client whispered once and her hand fell onto Di's dark fingers. Then deliberately, like a guillotine severing the victim's spinal cord, Aneva took the cup and sipped at the coffee. Di could smell cream in it. Then Mrs. Aneva sank her white even teeth into the sandwich. Di had the feeling she was about to faint. Her client did not offer her to help herself some food. She chewed on slowly and Di instinctively pressed harder the tender flesh under her swarthy fingers. How long did this torture go on? For Di, a whole era in the evolution of mankind elapsed. As Becky Aneva nibbled her sandwich, amoebae slowly evolved, turning into invertebrates, amphibians and finally roared like dinosaurs raging with hunger.

“You are hurting me,” Aneva whispered again, Under Di’s dark fingers, her flesh appeared red. Di was wrenched out of her stupor and raised her startled hands from the pink skin. “Dora, bring something for the girl, please,” Aneva said.

After a minute Dora, the unconquerable fortress, rushed into the room. There was something on the tray: three fish sandwiches, sausages and salad that threw Di into wild fits of palpitation. Then the fortress brought coffee in a tremendous pot that could hold a whole lake. Dora surely possessed a brilliant mind: she had sensed Di was hungry, and Di was grateful to her.

“You can eat now,” Mrs. Aneva’s voice was quiet as if she were praying. Di took a sandwich, her dark hand flying like a raven to the tray. She forced herself not to masticate too quickly, and not to swallow at such a dangerous speed, but her stomach, crouching like a beast of prey, wanted more. Di planned to wrap up some food for her mother.

“Can I take a sandwich home?” Di asked.

“No,” Becky Aneva responded looking at her closely. “Eat but do not take too long. I’m waiting.”

The beast in Di’s stomach calmed down after the second tiny sandwich and pleasant languor overwhelmed her, but she knew: now was not the time to stop eating. She started gorging herself on the salad letting it slide down her throat with the help of profuse gulps of coffee. Becky Aneva’s gray eyes followed her. Di didn’t mind; she had learned to survive humiliation. It felt like a pair of narrow pinching shoes that she could put on and get out of the room.

“Why don’t you buy food with the money I pay you?” Becky asked.

“I have to save it for my education, Ma’am,” Di answered. Her dark fingers touched the white skin that turned red under their pressure.

At the end of the massage, Becky Aneva said, “You are pretty. Why don’t you find a man to live with? He might be willing to pay for your education.”

“I have never tried,” Di said and that was the truth.

“Whatever,” Mrs. Aneva said. “Now give me a massage and please, do not talk to me. I need peace and quiet.”

Di grew up a lonely child; perhaps that was why she liked empty rooms, deserted beaches, empty buildings and old deserted villages. Di had no friends. In school, she had sat at the first desk by the window, surrounded by her immaculate notebooks that her teachers admired. At home, in the one room apartment, everything was neat orderly as if there was an axis, around which the scanty pots of flowers were arranged symmetrically like exhibits of an ancient gold treasure.

Sometimes Di worked and thought of her mother: thin, exquisite like a porcelain ornament in the house of a rich man; a thin woman looking funny in her frayed brown coat.

...One day Di saw her mother standing in front of a picture. Her face was nappy and her admiration genuine; therefore she had forgotten she owed the ex-tycoon from the Bulgarian Telecommunication Company one hundred lev³.

The ex-tycoon was a funny geezer, he kissed her mother's hand and then explained he had eaten smoked salmon. He assured Arma he'd treat her to something very delicious, roast beef and milk with cocoa for example.

Her mother was a proud woman but not proud enough to turn down the invitation. Her mother even had ... Well, one night the snow had turned the streets into a gray desert of mud and icy lumps. Arma had come home freezing cold and had said to Di, "I slept with him." It was the first time they had talked about sex.

Before Di was accepted to study at the University of Sofia, her mother found her with a guy.

He was the Wretch of the neighborhood. His mother was a gynecologist who had an imposing list of patients. Her son was big, his abdomen had the form of a tank cupola, and his chest was so huge that no single girl took him seriously. The guy was given to long silences during which he was unnoticeable like the dust on the sidewalk.

Di hoped that he was exactly the type of man she needed; she was afraid of being scoffed at more than she feared hunger. Two years ago, Di had thrust a Valentine in the coat pocket of a guy of her high school maths class. The guy tore up the Valentine; unfortunately most of her classmates were around. The Wretch could make fun of her, too, but no one would know.

Di had met him in the street and had told him, "Come to my place at 4 PM."

3

Clumsy like an iceberg, the Wretch pushed his way through the door. Di quietly led him to the kitchen. She didn't want to let him enter the only room of their flat, the place where she and her mother slept. She didn't offer the Wretch anything to drink, just pointed at a chair. He refused to use, he said he had broken several pieces of furniture under the mighty press of his buttocks. Di had pointed to a small divan, that used to be her cot transformed by her mother's ingenuity into an elegant bed, but the Wretch shook his head. Then Di asked him to sit on the cement floor.

She carefully kissed him on the cheek, and still more carefully her lips descended to his mouth. The Wretch froze under her. Di did not want to hurt him. Her hand slid lightly to his belt; the Wretch shook and Di was scared. She tried to soothe him, and kissed his mouth again. At that moment, her mother entered the kitchen and froze in her tracks.

...“This is ... this is the Wretch,” Di had said to her mother. The older woman's face glowed red as if she had a million crimson carnations in her blood. Di loved her. She knew she'd do everything for this thin ethereal woman in her frayed coat, her mother. Di felt sad she had not cooked a meal, had earned no money. She was kissing a man she'd met in the street. She didn't even know his name.

From that day on Di saw the Wretch in the old cold “Botev” cinema. She touched him tenderly, shyly and he sat frozen under her fingers, enormous and handsome in the narrow chair. Then the tickets in the cinema became very expensive, and Di asked the Wretch to wait for her near the front door of Becky Aneva's villa. In the beginning he hung around the beautiful building jutting out like a colossal molehill. One day Mrs. Aneva's bodyguard grabbed him by the collar and kicked his head a couple of times. The Wretch sank into the world of chaos and pain. He had suffered a severe brain concussion. The gynecologist, the big guy's famous mother, tracked Di resorting to the services of a private detective agency, as she was kind enough to explain.

...“You are blackmailing my son,” the doctor declared the icebergs of the Arctic Ocean in her voice. Di froze. “I am familiar with the fact that you are a masseuse. The way you earn your living is your own business. Let me be clear: I don't like it. I know that you eat cheap rolls you buy from stalls at different bus stops. Your mother regularly eats food provided by charity associations.”

“Yes, Madame,” Di confirmed. “Your information is correct.”

“Of course that it is correct,” the doctor said and informed Di how much she had paid a detective agency of a high repute. Suddenly sunshine sneaked its way in the intonation of the well-known gynecologist. “I’d like to offer you something, Dina.”

Di stared at blizzard raging in the woman’s blue eyes and shivered.

“I think you exercise a positive influence on my son’s intellectual and physical development, Dina. He’s no longer.. how shall I put it? He’s become a self-assured and mature person after he made your acquaintance. Now I see pictures of women in his room, a thing that has not happened before. He expresses interest in some other girls and that is again a step in the right direction.”

Di had not said anything.

“You don’t seem very interested in what I am saying.”

“I suppose you will tell me about it even if I am not interested,” Di ventured.

The meeting took place in the reception room of Doctor Metova’s clinic. There were colorful posters on all the walls advertising some absolutely innocuous contraceptives that had no side effects.

“I suggest you continue seeing Peter,” the gynecologist’s powerful voice echoed riveting Di to the spot. “I recommend you carry out an intimate contact with him. Of course, you understand the meaning of the phrase “intimate contact”. Di was silent as the gynecologist spoke, her words congealing into thick black clots. “ Of course, if some problems or complications arise you can rely on my medical assistance. You know what I have in mind. The services in my clinic will be free for you.”

Di’s dark skin pulsated. Her fingers tingled. What the hell, she thought, She was not scared any more.

“I can assign a generous monthly allowance to you,” the gynecologist added in a business-like voice.

Di stood up.

“It was a pleasure talking to you, Doctor Metova,” she said. “I am sorry your son was beaten by the bodyguards. I hope he is Okay now. I cannot accept your proposal for reasons of personal nature that I cannot share with you.”

The ice of the Arctic Ocean burst into the reception room. The doctor stood up.

“You do not know what you will lose, Di. Just think, you can bid farewell to massage and to all skin diseases provoked by saprophytic fungi.”

“There are girls who will gladly accept your proposal, Madame,” Di answered thinking about her mother’s frayed coat. She saw the cooking stove with the single hot-plate, the old sink and the faucet in the bathroom. She thought of her mother and the ex Telecommunication tycoon. Di thought about the Wretch, huge and handsome and meek. He would be taken ill if Di told him that she wanted to break with him. To break? There had been nothing to break between them but a few films in the cheap cinema. She had kissed him as he waited scared, immobile, tractable.

Di was sure she could never have another boyfriend like the Wretch. She feared relationships. Her parents’ marriage was a trap that had crushed her Di would never get involved with any other person. She had no relatives but her mother. The thought that she, too, would be dogged by humiliations and divorce, by perpetual lack of money filled her with cold panic. No, this would never happen to her.

The Wretch was sure to fall ill if they split.

His father was a physician, owner of a thriving surgery clinic; the Wretch’s parents had divorced but probably both had ambitious plans for their son’s future.

“Eight hundred lev a month,” the gynecologist said.

Di choked on her own tongue. Eight hundred levs were eight hundred levs no matter how one earned them. Di kne: if she remained in that room a minute more, she would accept the offer. She stood up and made her way to the door.

“Nine hundred levs a month,” the gynecologist called out. “Nine hundred. Take it or leave it.”

Di turned around and dived into the bluish gaze of the famous doctor.

“Peter said he felt lonely in his apartment,” she said.

“Shall I infer Peter has taken you there?”

“He has. Your private eye has perhaps informed you the central heating is dead in the building I live.” Di said. “Perhaps my mother can clean Peter’s apartment?”

“Instead of hanging around in picture galleries?” the physician added in a businesslike tone of voice.

“She can prepare low calorie food for your son as well.”

“No,” the doctor cut her short. “Nine hundred levs. If you go on wasting Peter’s time in that cinema, I warn you: there other methods of dissuading you from pestering him.”

“I understand, Doctor Metova,” Di answered. “Where can I meet Peter if I accept your proposal?”

“I cannot have you in my house,” the Doctor declared, her face lighting up just the same. “I see we are making some progress. I have a small luxury flat two blocks away from here. You can use it.”

“When shall I get the money?”

“At the end of the month,” the gynecologist answered. “Of course, be advised that my son will let me know how you treat him. I’ll be well informed if you are friendly or not. Let me make it absolutely clear: by the adjective “friendly” I mean not only physical contact but warmth and understanding as well.”

In other words apart from being his whore you want me to be his nurse as well, Di thought, then said, “I am not sure if Peter will accept your plan.”

“It is only natural he will,” the gynecologist assured her.

Di remembered the quiet eyes of the Wretch, his efforts to repair the old tiles in the bathroom and then patch up her mother’s boots. The Wretch studied medicine and had flunked three exams.

Di had seen the Wretch many times sitting on a bench in the City Park before she learned he was the famous gynecologist’s son. He stared at the trees or smoked. He had a book by his side when she had stopped and talked to him for the first time.

“I’ve noticed you often come here,” Di had said. She had saved some money and planned to do something about the old TV set that had suddenly gone blind. “I have to bring a TV set to the shop to have it repaired. It’s quite near. Can you carry it for me? I’ll pay you.”

The Wretch accepted right away but when Di handed him the bill, he refused to take it, then assured her it was a pleasure for him to help. Several afternoons after that Di sat on the bench with him and one evening she kissed his forehead before she went home. The Wretch’s skin flamed crimson from his forehead to the neckline of his enormous T-shirt. Di liked that.

“Tomorrow wait for me here,” she told him.

To her surprise the Wretch not only waited for her; he had bought a bag of popcorns and two sandwiches. Di told him about the backs she massaged, about her study at the university and before she went home, she kissed his forehead again.

“I will kiss you like that until you become a happy man,” she said. “I want you get out of that dreary park.”

“But then I can’t see you, and I want to,” the Wretch said. His eyes were peaceful and he smiled. That day Di took him to their one room flat where her mother found them.

The gynecologist was sure Peter would accept his mother’s plan. Well, what the hell! Nine hundred lev were nine hundred lev. Di didn’t know why she felt so sick.

“Now we can talk,” the quiet pleasant voice brought Di back to reality. “Have you got a boyfriend, Di?”

She started. For a second, she could not understand the question. Mrs. Aneva’s soft, sweet-scented skin glowed under her hands. That woman was a rich and exceptionally squeamish client. The acme of the massage was approaching: the moment when Mrs. Aneva would dial a number on her cellular phone. That call would pull strings in the mysterious interior of the house and in would rush the young lady, strong like a medieval fortress, carrying the tray with sandwiches and the enormous coffee-pot. The thought of that made Di’s hair bristle up.

Di was hungry; quite deliberately she had not had lunch preserving the plate full of stewed leeks for her mother.

“Your boyfriend, Dina?” Mrs. Aneva repeated. That was quite untypical of her; she was never curious about anybody’s business. “You started pressing me harder so I assumed you were thinking about him.”

“I have no boyfriend,” Di answered.

“Why? You are a pretty young woman.”

Di said “thank you”. She carefully avoided the slippery path of long explanations: her mother’s divorce, her fear she would become the object of ridicule and gossip. Was the Wretch her boyfriend? She still had not taken the nine hundred levs from the gynecologist.

“Sometimes I suspect you have a peculiar attitude to me,” Mrs. Aneva started her beautiful lips kissing the air around Di. “You possess high professional skills, however of late you press me in a particular manner. Why?”

“I assure you I have no other concern but your highest satisfaction, m’am.”

“You used the word “satisfaction”. I like that.”

“I assure you my desire is to make you feel satisfied.”

“Isn’t there something more to it?”

Di did not answer. Today the sandwiches did not appear on time. It occurred to her that she was hot, so hot that she felt rivulets of sweat digging crimson canals down her face. Well, the fee she would get after the massage was over was attractive. Di and her mother would spend it on food.

“It is my pleasure to work for you, Mrs. Aneva.”

“Aren’t you my husband’s spy?” The client’s skin reddened furiously and she added, “Perhaps you are aware that the fee I pay you comes from his account in the bank.”

“No, Madame, I am not Mr. Anev’s spy.”

“Aren’t you?” the beautiful woman sighed. Silver bells sang in her bosom, and her bright eyes the color of cornflower spilled their golden dust over Di. “Please, repeat the last series of spirals on my back. Thank you. It is strange,” the silver bells rang once again. “My husband had a serious conversation with me this morning.” Di felt the sweaty rivulets had reached her heart. Her fingers suddenly grew wet.

“Your fingers sweat,” Mrs. Aneva remarked, but the golden dust in her eyes descended onto Di’s swarthy face. “I don’t like your fingers when they are wet,” she added. “No, you needn’t go to wash your hands now. Do you know what my husband asked me in the morning?” Di started. “He pointed out that I spend more time with you than with him. Then he asked me if I preferred your company to his. Don’t stop, please.” Di had instinctively lifted her palms in the air and Mrs. Aneva’s skin recoiled like a frightened child. “Do not press me so hard.”

Di looked through the window. It was raining. Di remembered that her boots of artificial leather had cracked and would leak. Perhaps she could get warm if she ran all the way home.

“My husband would like to make your acquaintance. It seems your popularity as a massage therapist is growing,” Mrs. Aneva said softly. Di was silent. “He’d probably want you to give him massages, too. What will you say to that?”

Di said nothing.

“I would strongly recommend you decline the offer, but of course it is entirely your choice.”

The eyes the color of cornflower weighed on Di’s face then drew a deep, blue parabola over the unobtrusive oval of her breasts. “So you don’t have a boyfriend and would not tell me why you are not looking for one. Well, I don’t offer you sandwiches today. We both know their wonderful taste.”

Di did her best to drown her sigh deep in her throat.

“I do not offer you sandwiches today, Dina, because you pressed me so hard and because my husband will meet with you today, at 6 o’clock. Don’t be in a hurry. Do not finish my massage earlier than you should. I’ll decrease your fee if you do. Do you understand?”

Perhaps one of the lavish garden parties thrown by my mother marked the beginning of Gallantine’s era of fame. He used to be and still is one of the exceptionally interesting types in our backwater town. When God created humankind He gave Gallantine too many teeth; I had the feeling he looked at me with his teeth. My mother sighed and pined for him. After she had integrated herself in the city elite, she developed a taste for refined gentlemen and Gallantine was so refined he could not recognize his own image in the mirror.

Probably the bevy of young swallows (that was how the daughters of the elite families were dubbed), would stone me dead if they read my description of Gallantine. He was the delicacy dish on the menu of my mother’s parties. It was at one of those parties that the above mentioned male individual courted me in the most refined way.

Of course, I was sprawling in a custom made easy chair the size of two easy chairs. I suppose my buttocks were overflowing in pessimistic waves toward the floor as my mother hurled the nets of her eyes to catch Gallantine. That gentleman was a lawyer or was on the verge of becoming one if you judged by his great pains to stand out by juridical terminology he lavishly used. So that remarkable legal functionary sat by my side, stuffed two hundred

Latin wise sentences into my ear, then whispered, “Can I have the pleasure of dancing with you?”

Had I been a more sensitive soul I would have eaten the carpet under his boots and then would have jumped with happiness. But I imagined he would look like an exhausted exclamation mark at the end of the interminable sentence of my body. His smile consisted of honey and sugar syrup that streamed down my breasts. That sobered me up.

“Yes, you can dance with me, but I will be free in about twenty five minutes,” I declared with the hesitant voice of a beauty whom the whole wide world was dying to dance with.

“It will be my pleasure,” Gallantine lied.

I went on studying the group of the intellectuals invited to my mother’s party: two financiers plus wives smelling sweetly of French perfumes. My mother hung about them rustling the skirts of her dress in a very concerned manner indeed. It was Italian and cost 6 000 US dollars that my father had paid. I provide the precise price of the dress on purpose: my mother respected people who discussed how much her garments cost. She rushed enthusiastically to Gallantine bathe him in the golden torrent of her voice.

“Mr. Taley,” she exclaimed. “I suspect you might be a little bored here. Could you possibly tell me what you think about...” and he ran to tell her what he thought but returned to me very quickly. After exactly twenty-five minutes he was holding me trying to make me dance. I’d rather say I squashed him under my mass, the eyes of the whole party glued to us. I supposed that the prevailing part of the guests were expecting I’d trip over the carpet and spread Mr. Tavev in a thin layer on the floor under me.

“Do you know you are a very charming young woman,” That was the young lawyer’s first sentence, and it sounded quite promising. It was evident he made efforts to smile at me watching intently Veronica in the meantime. She was a magnificent blonde who studied pedagogy; my father sponsored her scientific research, torn between her pedagogical endeavors and my mother’s attractions. I suspected that in spite of his immense loyalty for my mother my father indulged a little in pedagogy every now and then. Apparently Gallantine was attracted by that science as well. It would be my pleasure to stick a pin in his juridical ass but the event that followed shook me, then made me stare at my mother. It was the first time I had seen her so miserable. She looked sour as if she had just been kicked out of the Institute of Social Sciences where she made titanic to study law.

“I heard many people talk about your sharp wit,” Gallantine continued spilling the cologne of his flatteries. “In fact let me admit I am a little afraid to tell you about the thing I have on my heart.”

“There are no reasons to panic,” I encouraged him. Wild curiosity was eating me; what sort of a favor would he ask of my father? The compliment he bestowed upon me made think the man had set a very high goal before him.

“Will you marry me?” he said.

It was only natural I stopped dancing. Perhaps I had stepped too heavily on his toes for his face blanched.

“Didn’t your mother prepare you for our conversation?” Mr. Talev wanted to know. “I asked her to.” For some incomprehensible reason mother had failed to provide that precious information. My suitor’s zest for life had obviously abandoned him. “Will you marry me?” the lawyer repeated this time he sounding rather more convincing than before.

“This is a topic of a serious conversation,” I remarked. I had noticed that that my prospective husband watched the blonde pedagogue putting all passion and despair in the world in his eyes. “I would like to discuss things with you in greater detail.”

His pale face grew almost as green as my eyes.

“You do not trust me,” he concluded. After a minute, however he seemed to recollect something and added, “Okay. Now it’s as good as any other time.”

He touched my elbow tenderly his palm sinking up to the wrist into my blubber then dragged me towards the terrace. My father had bought marble from Torino, Italy, for mother was delighted when the elite spoke about her terrace and her marble from Torino. At such moments she felt like a full-fledged lady.

“It’s so wonderful here!” the lawyer sighed and stumbled over a little naked statue of Eros in the middle of the terrace, around which Torino marble vases jutted out.

“Gallantine,” I grabbed him by the hand and lifted him from the roseate marble he had hit his head against. “I will marry you.”

My instantaneous consent to become Gallantine’s wife made him very happy. He started coughing, and droplets of saliva flew at a considerable speed in all directions around his head. When at last his jubilation abated he took a deep breath, looked into my eyes and

said, “It is all right, dear. Now I’d like to elaborate on some conditions you have to bear in mind.”

The denouement in the play approached: I was going to learn all crucial considerations on the part of the young semi-god who was making serious efforts to become my husband.

“I am listening to you,” I reminded him.