

## **WORLDS** by Vladimir Zarev

translated from the Bulgarian by Zlatko Anguelov and Elizabeth Frank

### **1.**

[Diana is the main female character in the novel. She was at one time married to Ventzi, an actor with a prestigious theatrical company in Sofia, and they have a daughter. Diana and Ventzi are divorced, but during rough times with their daughter, she gets in touch with him. In the excerpt below, Diana remembers their first date as she waits for him in a bar after one of his performances. (pp 161-168 of the original edition)]

She had met Ventzi at the National Drama School's annual ball. The Drama School would throw these signature balls around Christmas. Grads from the Academy of Arts had decorated the lobby, the hallways, and the big stage, trying to ridicule in their own ways both the authorities and the stuffy tone of pretended decency. The place was full of college kids from all the faculties, of devil-may-carelessness, of young writers and rising t. v. stars; it also was full of plainclothes cops, recognizable by their short haircuts and neckties and by that tight look such types have who consider themselves more knowing than others, bearers of some deep secret and, therefore, by their omnipresence, guardians of the State.

Music blared, couples rock-and-rolled, twisting all over the place and filling up every last square meter. Everybody else tried to walk, ran into each other, exchanged smiles and nonsense, carrying cardboard cups of draft *rakiya*, bitter wine, or tart port; they were simply present, but in their presence there was so much intoxication and such a feeling of freedom that everyone felt as if they were dependent on everyone else, connected, like relatives gathered for a family holiday.

Ventzi played a part in some grotesque sketch, and while she couldn't remember the plot, she recalled that the words uttered from the stage, viewed in that public limelight, had struck her as fiercely valiant. She was struck as well by his smooth confidence, naturalness, pale pointed face, and ability to draw out others that only later did she realize that he had been drunk. It had been an awfully long time ago, perhaps toward the end of 1971.

Without asking for it, without even wishing it, she later happened to be seated across from Ventzi at a table just in front of the women's restrooms; in the commotion, someone had introduced them to one another. Now she managed to observe him up close. Tall and athletic, though not bulked-out, but agile rather, and constantly changing. He had long, striking blond

hair, lips and brows that looked penciled, but a lean face, with an absorbed expression, his eyes gray-blue like still water she might have seen if she'd leaned over a well, and they exuded malaise, "the sadness of Jesus Christ," she then said to herself. He appeared to her handsome and, who knows why, betrayed.

[...] He talked to her a good deal, empty talk, but maybe it was exciting, because he addressed her with exclusivity. For the first time in her life, she felt not only courted, but unique and distinguished; in his magnetic way he somehow pulled her out of the common excitement and uproar, out of the leering male glances and the jealous looks of her girlfriends. He had populated her with himself, fenced her off with himself: as if there were no one but the two of them. And she felt moved by that. This enticing but excessive loyalty was just an accessory to his learned-by-heart aptitude; he was so demonstratively obsessed with it that he gave the false impression of flirting with all the girls at the table.

"Oh well, an actor! A full-blown *player*," Diana thought soberly. [...]

Then they danced a sluggish blues in the coziest and duskiest hallway. He had grabbed her by the waist: no hurry, no impertinence, a bottle of *grozdova rakiya* "Academician Nedeltchev" behind her back as an ultimate icon of manhood: the cheapest brandy ever for just one leva and eighty stotinki. Taking sips. "Like life in a magazine ...," he told her, after which his silence was selfless and endearing, like a whisper.

[,,]

Diana and Ventzi left the party at one in the morning. The street was deserted and the traffic lights on Rakovski Avenue blinked drowsily. She knew that her father was smoking anxiously in the kitchen and would wait up for her, if need be, till dawn, immersed in the sad pleasure of someone persuaded that all in the world are guilty. Furious because of her running around so late and clad in his striped pajamas, he was most likely pacing back and forth between the "Frost" fridge and his own dauntlessness, between the oven "Rahovetz" and his need to punish her or someone. She had a moment of indecision, but then surrendered to the melancholy in Ventzi's eyes, to that adoration with which he had forced her away from the others and made her feel like a goddess.

An outsider to the capital—he had grown up in Pleven, a town right in the middle of Bulgaria—Ventzi carried her off to his little attic, which he rented on Count Ignatieff Avenue, just across from the statue of the Patriarch. He showed her up the staircase, breathed heavily

while unlocking the cardboard door, didn't say anything to her in the dark, didn't even turn on the naked lightbulb, but simply took her clothes off expertly and ravenously, like someone peeling a banana. She kept silent—absorbing the faint odor of cooling-off roof-tiles and urine—the smarting pain in her loins, she focused on his eyes, which were changing, now viciously bluish, now spilled gray, an entire bottle of *grozdova* in his blood slowing him down.

“Like life in a magazine,” he whispered in her ear, but her vagina was bleeding, and in the early morning light, this indelible symptom of her newly achieved freedom blended with the colors of the sunrise.

“So you were still, you know, a vir...? Gee, if only I'd known ...” a sobered-up Ventzi said, pulling off the sheet, and throwing it in the corner, his eyes seeming to become both reasonable and contentious. Without compassion, he'd consigned her with all the others, as if it weren't he, after all, but *she*, who had deceived him.

Her left arm was all pins and needles from the uncomfortable bed. An early streetcar shook the building; a pigeon was perched on the sill of the garret-window, which had been left ajar. Diana went to the pantry-turned-bathroom, scrubbed her body, and felt no regret under the shower, her lacerated innocence flushing into the rusty drain. When she came back to the room, Ventzi was asleep, half-uncovered, looking like a butcher. She bent down and kissed him.

He called her a week later, pretended to be melancholy, and then turned on his groping wit. “Like life in a magazine,” he said. Diana gave in right away and went to see him, hand-scrubbed the sheets piled up under the poky roof, washed the windows, fed the pigeons, and waited until he half-emptied the bottle of “Academician Nedeltchev.” This time the pleasure knocked her out; she gave herself, forgetting reason and propriety. Ventzi made her a gift: a little mother-of-pearl cross. He claimed that he had inherited it from his grandma; his grandpa had been a pilgrim to God's Tomb and brought it from Jerusalem.

They saw each other infrequently; he was the one who called from payphones since she was the one with a landline. At the end of the summer, he invited her to his premiere at the Drama School, Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. Ventzi played Lord Goring; in fact, he played it so that she forgot everything about him. He was so different, and so changed into someone other than himself that she couldn't recognize him. After the performance, he told her that he had played for her only, but she clearly recalled how the hushed breath of the audience, followed by

thunderous applause, had separated him from her. Ventzi just couldn't belong to someone; he belonged to everyone. She knew she ought to think about it, but she didn't.

A month later her period was worryingly late and, following Sonya's advice, she bought a pregnancy test from the pharmacy. It turned out to be positive. She had already gotten the money for an abortion and had set up an appointment with her friend's gynecologist—"no need to worry, darling, it's like pulling a tooth," Sonya had said—when she decided to share the news with Ventzi, she thought shame and guilt might cause a temporary breakup, but death, a premeditated, innocent death, could separate them forever.

He staggered and started to whine. He was in his socks and boxers only, and in his helplessness looked ridiculous; someone had encroached on his freedom, and, consequently, on his ownership of himself, on what was different about him. The expression on his face kept shifting, as if he were constantly trying on different clothes. He stared at her nudity as if it were a thing apart from her body, as if he were searching in his mind for some character in a drama he had memorized who could match him and shelter him, and, most important, get him to act himself out of this situation, to find a substitute for himself; but Diana believed that he was playing only himself.

"I can't, I'm not ready. On the other hand, how can I lose all this?" he said, caressing her erect tits, then the goose-fleshy curliness under her belly button. "Even if you aren't a goddess, you're an attempt at a goddess, a part of the perfection." His parochial pomposity was disturbing and annoying to her.

"You have to decide by tomorrow morning. At 9:30 I'm going to ..."

Evidently for him the easiest role to act was that of a man betrayed and sacrificed. His proposal almost failed to cheer her up, since it felt somehow trite and stupid.

"Whaddya know, baby. I meet a virgin for the first time, and for the very first time I knock someone up." Only this time he didn't pull her out of the others, he didn't distinguish her and fence her off with himself; he just searched for a justification for his unexpected decision, for the impossibility of acting the scene in some other way that would be more secure and beneficial to himself.

In the evening, he showed up at her home with a huge bunch of white roses, bought with money she had given him, and asked for her hand. Her parents were shocked: her mother immediately liked Ventzi and submitted to him with devotion, loved him at once with her entire

devastating selflessness (“An actor! Oh my God, my little Diana, when did you grow up? ... but he is theater itself!”), while her father kept irritatingly silent, chain-smoked his second-rate cigarettes, and couldn’t hide his scorn toward Ventzi, couldn’t hide his firm belief that this handsome peacock who had turned his daughter’s head must be guilty of something. They got married. On the wedding day, Ventzi showed up about an hour or so late. He looked emotional and rather confused, but this was because he was sober. Diana stepped on his foot during the ceremony; from his friends’ and colleagues’ eyes he got the point that Diana was memorably gorgeous. She felt happy. “Was I really happy?” she later asked herself without pity.

## 2.

[Samuel is the main male character in the novel. In the following scene, he is shown in bed with his wife, shortly before she leaves him for good. (pp 9-15 of the original edition)]

The closet mirror reflected her back, the shape of a perfect violin that glistened with sweat, as if the instrument, which his fingers clutched convulsively, were soaking up its own silence. Then the quenching ups-and-downs of her bottom, pacing the rhythm of their shared oblivion. He felt her belly like the foreboding of twilight and the beginning of night, yet outside the day was just about to break. In this instance of madness he wished she were another kind of woman.

Once in a bar on the next block, he had glimpsed a prostitute with spilling breasts and ample cleavage, smeared make-up, and white socks. She drank Coke and stared though the window at the rain. Just minutes ago she had been made love to, her insides were still overpopulated with somebody, but she looked lonely. She had come in to warm up, to rest, and to get away from herself for a moment. She didn’t look sad, abandoned rather, a dreamy, inscrutable smile crawling along her lips; she reminded him of a violin encased in its self-sufficiency, cast aside, yet still sounding.

He stared at her hypnotized, unable to unglue his eyes from her lurking impropriety. Aware of his nailed stare, she turned, grinned, opened her white teeth, and jerked her legs open as if biting him. It struck him that under the lassitude of her wilted laces she might be naked. He couldn’t spot anything; hence, he saw everything. He was twelve and she was a colored. She

stuck out her tongue, and he blushed. Giddy, crushed by his sudden hard-on, he rushed into the house, and, ignoring his mother's wail that the hamantashen had failed to rise, locked himself in the bathroom. To jerk off. "A Jewish boy and a brown-skinned girl," he thought then, stunned that he had been trying to imagine God since the age of five. To find the right word for Him, for His desert-like omnipotence yet helplessness in the real world. To have a glimpse of His exhilarating image in the reverberating emptiness of the synagogue, that inscrutable oneness of simultaneously unimaginable greatness and utter impotence. His own hope ... The sanctity in himself. He pulled the handle to flush the toilet, and the water tempered his vision of the Almighty with the mocking eyes of the girl.

For five long months he saved every penny; he kept the piggybank under the mattress, away from his brothers. When at last the pennies made up the cherished twenty dollars and he consolidated them in the pharmacy, and when, squeezing the creased banknote with President Jackson's face on it, he went to search for the brown-skinned prostitute—to compare her with God—she was no longer at the corner of the movie theater on the next block. He burst into tears. At his powerlessness before her endearing impudence. Out of shame—shame like the blow of a fist right in his face.

Doris's hair fell around and obstructed her reflection in the mirror of this unnerving Munich hotel. He was gripped by the sucking-in sensation that she wasn't with him; it was like pain, like the pleasure in his tense groin. Finally, he heard her breathing as it rose in frequency and frenzy, and his worries dissipated. Now she was the same, like her true self. Habitually, at the moment of mounting excitement, she would start talking. Clear, brief, and business-like, as though she were cutting a deal in a Wall Street office.

"So?" her voice scratched the air between them.

"No," he said.

"This isn't an answer ... at least, it isn't the answer I'm expecting, darling."

"No," he said again.

She threw her hair back and made herself comfortable on top of him, but did so using the curve and fierceness of her thighs. Her back didn't budge.

Two months after their wedding, he had stumbled upon her frigidity: a frigidity so crushing and so tempered by her crotchety character, like a wall. All his life his innate potency had remained unsatisfied. First, at Brooklyn Tech, where only boys were admitted, then at Penn

State, because there he had to support himself: he had worked as a waiter in the cafeteria at lunch and in the college restaurant at night, and there had been no time for girls. Later, the drought continued in the Navy where they hung for months in the blue transparent femininity of the Mediterranean, and finally, his jobs at AT&T and on Wall Street sucked him up like a vacuum cleaner. The girls he knew from high school and college had turned into women who changed clothes, haircuts, and habits, gave birth to kids and ruled over the boredom in their tacky households. They were other, no longer familiar creatures.

Doris ... Six months after the wedding, she took her heating pad, nightgown, and cantankerous un-belongingness and moved into the next room. She fell asleep hugging a ragged little stuffed bear and sucking on her right thumb, like a child who can't grow up. Chronic sexual hunger sharpened his senses; like any cruelty, it cleared his mind yet rendered him irritable, and most of all it amplified his fatigue. This thumb in her mouth drove him crazy, while the recesses of her body under the covers and the piercing innocence in her sleep made him so dizzy that he retreated into the sticky whiteness of the sheets, into the desolation of the family bed. He tossed and turned in it; sometimes, to shake off the pent-up yearning, he masturbated, just like a college boy enamored of a virgin girl.

"I missed you, my dear," Doris said edifyingly, "in truth and a lot. Not just sometimes, but all the time. Not just on the street or in the grocery store, but everywhere, which means I missed you in my thoughts and my little soul. The same way that I miss Dad. Something that's unimaginably far away is in fact awfully close to you."

He gathered his saliva and swallowed. It had a bitter taste.

"Something that's not there is there. It comes over you without your having experienced or remembered it."

"No," he moaned.

"Don't cut me off." Her behind stopped for a second, erect like a question mark. "So, that magnetic feeling recurs constantly, torments me exactly because it's inside me but it isn't there. Do you get it? If I knew that Dad had passed away, if I was sure that he'd found peace at last and was gone forever, that would mean that I'd found him. In the same disturbing way I also feel your absence, darling. Can you imagine?"

Goosebumps crawled up his body, but the ecstasy was stronger than the horror that had befallen him. In their rare and precious instances of intimacy, so well memorized by him, Doris

would sometimes change beyond recognition, as if she turned into some totally unknown woman. She, who was shy about undressing in front of him, who blushed when hearing the word “ass” and who imagined mental disorder behind every inadvertently uttered obscenity, turned into a street whore. She made him whisper obscene words in her ear; herself spoke with delight those spicy “teasers” that, during the following six months of sexual drought, she would find gross. This seemed to be a part of her lie, a part of her eternal misfired search, as if their life were a show and Doris an actress fully immersed in her next role. She found substitutes for herself; she slipped out just because she constantly played somebody else within herself ...

And now, in this Munich hotel, he had the feeling of attending her new show: Doris treating herself to the role of woman betrayed, who, despite her un-belongingness, and despite her growing disgust with fleshly contact, was ready to lay herself down, to sleep with her man, to realize herself with her legal spouse of twenty years. It was her latest impossible state of delirium. He was just a supernumerary boy or a supporting actor or, worse, just the audience.

“No,” he groaned.

“And you know what ... when we’re apart, you kind of stop being Jewish; something mysteriously liberated and Irish comes out in you. Like a smell, Samuel, like clean sweat. Don’t answer me, because I say yes, yes, yes ...”

She rode on him astride, as if she were on a horse that had driven them right into the heart of combat, right into the ferocious burnish of the fight. Her behind was dancing wild, rounded, playful, like the keys of that upright piano that his brother Paul had gotten for his tenth birthday. It was a German *Blüchner* with an ivory keyboard, two brass chandeliers, and chiseled front legs. To extend the pleasure, to delay the explosion, Samuel found her back with his fingers and played on it the “Cat March.”

She was really an admirable actress and simulated real passion. The fleshy sound of the contact between her belly and his belly erupted like applause. Sucked him in and squeezed him. He knew her body, its china color, its tang of sea, the taste of fresh oysters between her legs. But her womb, where time had stopped, didn’t bear his child. Cunningly throughout those years, Doris hadn’t wanted to or couldn’t get pregnant! He used to take her by surprise either hanging over the dishes in the kitchen or bent over the vacuum cleaner on the rug in the living room or sitting on the uncomfortable edge of the bathtub, because they did it on even rarer occasions, they did it with offending rarity. To possess her, he had to force her, even though Doris was his

spouse under the law and before God. They scuffled, he tore down her underwear, she pulled his hair until he could break open her tightened legs. She was unpredictable, quite often crying while he made love to her. Her tears were without reason, just another expression of the reproach in her steadfast repulsion. She cried and smeared her snot. He used to take her by surprise even in his own forgetfulness, when he exploded prematurely in order to stamp his slimy seal in her, then, bitterly kept her in his embrace to prevent her from washing it out.

“A child,” his mother used to say “a wild and unmanageable child like you were, Samuel, would turn her around, would change her like a glove turned inside out.” But this dreamed-of child escaped him, delayed himself eternally; it was like bad luck in a lottery. Yes, they’d had Michael for three years, but Michael was not his son: Doris had taken him; maybe she had bought him, from a home for abandoned children in Florida.

Her strong, pleurably softened breasts, which had nursed nobody, pressed upon his face and smothered him. He got a mouthful of one of them, wanted to play, and began sucking. Men exchange their toys, but remain children forever, especially as their fifties creep up on them.

### 3.

[In the final excerpt, the love encounter between Diana and Samuel takes place in a typical Balkan setting, far away from the world, amidst gunshots, self-aggrandizing talk, madness, and mysticism. It is the plot’s culmination where two people from two worlds far apart meet and strive to achieve an impossible liaison. (pp 348-373 of the original edition)]

Diana entered the hotel lobby at three minutes to nine exactly. She wore her long fur coat and familiar tailored suit; always elegance itself and so obsessively different from his wife, she nevertheless once again reminded him of Doris. With her head proudly erect, she advanced toward him, and Samuel suddenly realized that he could no longer regard her simply as an interesting and gorgeous woman. He’d had the misfortune of reading her manuscript, which had not only had a depressing effect on him but had in all likelihood alienated him from her. But now Diana seemed to be a different person. More remote. Elusive. Beyond his yearning for them to be together.

“I didn’t bring your folder, Ms. Popova, because I don’t know where we’re going.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said with a smile.

“But I think I understood why you needed the books by Jung.”

“Please, let’s not talk about it,” she said, cutting him off tactfully. “Outside the sun is shining. It’s a wonderful day.”

“We’re not going to talk about it ... and the day with you is going to be really wonderful.”

Two husky guys with butch haircuts burst into the lobby in black outfits, with black T-shirts beneath their jackets, black sunglasses, gold chains flowing down their necks. They were noisy and as if faceless, brazen no doubt like their master—for it seemed unlikely that behind such an unabashed display of freedom there stood no master; handguns swung under their jackets. The men showed Diana and Samuel to a new Mercedes, also black, and polished like a cavalryman’s boot. On the seat next to the driver a Kalashnikov had been propped up; its cartridge clip shone with grease. They drove out of town, took off on a deserted highway, then began moving uphill.

“Where are we going?” asked Samuel.

“Top secret,” answered the shorter of the men, stroking his bristling head, and shifting the automatic rifle to his other side.

“Is smoking allowed?”

“Everything is allowed,” he replied, grinning mischievously. His teeth were horse-like—yellow and big.

Diana huddled in her corner; she looked worried, perhaps even scared. Attempting to compose herself, she told him that they had driven into the *Stara Planina*—she translated it, Old Mountains, or, in the Bulgarian vernacular, simply *The Balkan*—and that this was the longest mountain range in the region, cutting across the entire country. They passed through several tunnels and began to descend on the other side of the ridge; the sky was a stunned blue, held together by the surrounding hills, which merged into one another. It was beautiful and somehow unforgettably wild. The highway ended abruptly and the car continued on a muddy road, then turned right and came out on another one, with a rundown tarmac.

“But *where* are we going?” demanded Samuel, this time angrily.

“Surprise,” the driver said, scratching himself uningratiatingly. “Right into the secret; we have orders to keep our mouths shut.”

They passed by tiny, emptied, godforsaken villages; at a turn they ran over a hen, but didn't stop. The road was obstinately climbing higher and higher and getting narrower and narrower. They crossed a stream over a wooden bridge and leaned over a precipice on the right, for an instant the wheels didn't grab hold. It felt at once dangerous and sickeningly beautiful.

"This friend of yours, Ms. Popova, is he a real businessman?" Samuel couldn't restrain himself.

"Yes, but I warned you," Diana replied rather to herself.

Unexpectedly, the boggy lane came to an end, and they found themselves right up against an old, squat, sprawling building. Its roof-tiles were covered with mold, and the surrounding wall ended in a tin-rimmed wooden gate with an iron cross sticking up above it. He felt kidnapped, and most likely he really had been. For miles around there was nothing but this cheerless, snow-covered wilderness without a single living soul. He didn't cower; his fear, rather, was odd and untamed, like that he had felt yesterday while he was reading, in bed, Diana's dissertation. It was a fear at once abstract and full of detail. "They're going to ask for a ransom" flashed through his mind; he felt feverish. "Oh man, I'm carrying four billion dollars in my briefcase. And they know it!"

Suddenly a bell chimed: soothing, mellifluous, improbable.

"Here! They meet us" said the big-toothed guy in broken English.

"Thank God, a monastery ..." Diana said. He felt her relief but couldn't understand it.

"But what if she's in it too?" This repulsive question took possession of his mind once again and displaced his fear. He gave her a menacing look. She smiled back encouragingly. Temptingly. The tin-rimmed wooden gate before them opened wide and the car crawled into a spacious yard, paved with cobblestones; a poky church stood shyly crouched at its far end. There was a long building to the right with flowers peeping through the windows. Next to the well with its hanging bucket bonfires were burning and tough guys in the same black outfits were turning whole lambs on a spit. The roasted meat was seared and covered with crackling; he felt it sizzle. Hens strolled about, a goat stuck its head out of the pen, a spotted cat was sprawled next to her little bowl and licked her paw in complete bliss.

"Thank God, a monastery ..." Diana said again.

They got out of the car. In the effort to keep his presence of mind, Samuel lit a cigarette. A man sprang out from the distant and lowest building and charged toward them. Diana and the

man embraced; “twenty two years ago he and I were close,” Samuel recalled her saying and instantly took a dislike to him. The two of them were chatting intimately, laughing aloud and time and again throwing themselves into each other’s arms like people who haven’t seen each other for a long time, yet haven’t forgotten anything about their common past. Left out and somehow feeling squalid, Samuel turned his head away.

“Mr. Greenberg,” said the man, breathing out cordiality and alcohol; he was clad in a loose but expensive tweed suit, his bald head gleaming with sweat, “Over the past thirty years I have bowed down before your brother. Now it’s a true honor to meet you.”

“Is this your office?” asked Samuel coldly.

“This is my freedom ....” The man winked familiarly.

Ringling and soothing, the bell continued to chime, as if Christ were just risen from the dead or as if a dead man were being seen off at the monastery.

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The room in which they put him up was on the vaulted second floor—Diana called it *tchardak*, translating it for him as “gallery.” To reach it they had to climb up screeching, wormeaten stairs. The room was huge and hot like a sauna, stuffed with pricy furniture, which, however, couldn’t conceal the lumpy, whitewashed walls. By its aristocratic outline the queensized double-bed reminded him of the one in the Sheraton; across from it prominently stood a couch upholstered in lozenge-patterned leather, a small table with twisted little legs, and a facsimile of a bookcase with empty shelves. Two electric stoves with open resistors and another, antiquated one, which burned wood and ended with rusty pipes, were heating the room. Smoke poured out of the latter, and its sides glowed red as if they were on the verge of melting. The four little windows peeked marvelously out toward the mountain, but they shared only a single sash and through the hinge-gaps there was blowing in a terrible draft. The door opened right onto the *tchardak*. The floor was made of boards in a washed-out color—later on Diana explained that they were scrubbed with a roof-tile—covered with hand-woven Persian rugs. It smelled of desolation, smoke from logs, burned incense, and geranium preserves: a smell that emanated the presentiment of something pagan and cast about an unwarranted melancholy.

There was only one common bathroom with a shower in this wing of the monastery, and it could only be reached through the *tchardak*. Inside it was ice-cold; the moisture had worn out and eroded the walls. The floor was cemented and lightbulbs blown with flies flickered from the ceiling. The remaining accessories, from the toilet bowl to the bidet and the towel racks, were brand-name and ultramodern. A disheveled, filthy broom had been tossed into a corner.

Samuel spat squeamishly, flushed the toilet, and returned to his quarters. The whole way the room had been furnished was stupefyingly eclectic, ornate, and at the same time pitiable; it had all been done in a tasteless hurry, lacking in everything but money. Such an incredible mixture of reckless luxury and tyrannical meanness he hadn't seen even in the port brothels of Portugal, Greece, or Turkey, where they'd been anchored during his service in the Navy. He didn't dare unpack, but sat down on the couch and lit a cigarette.

He felt confused to the point of impotence. It was as if everything in this unknowable country were disguised, losing its focus, being flushed away, breaking down into meanings that he succeeded in grasping one by one, but which afterwards there was no way for him to assemble into a logical whole. Today, he had prepared himself to conduct business negotiations, to meet with one of the successful new entrepreneurs. However, this Mr. Evstatiev, who looked like a touring fire-juggler from a circus, had brought him to this sacred, out-of-the-way place and was having these thuggish-looking guys roast lambs just twenty feet from the altar. Years ago, Samuel had been given a kaleidoscope as a gift, an invaluable object in which the little colored glass pieces shaped themselves into magical figures. Now this kaleidoscope had broken, scattered its colors, and morphed into chaos. It was hard for him to judge whether he ought to leave, and, most disgusting of all, he didn't know whether he ought to laugh at the situation or dread it.

There was a knock on the door. Diana came in; she too looked troubled.

"Mr. Greenberg, they're waiting for us" she said without enthusiasm.

"You know what I've been thinking?" He was at a loss for words; his head suddenly emptied like a bucket. "That I've been kidnapped, that you and I have been kidnapped together. I'm scared."

"Me too, quite frankly."

"What's really unfair is that I came here with an open heart, utterly committed to helping. But even such criminal impertinence would follow a certain logic, would have a clear and

discernible cause, compared to,” he made an unconscious gesture toward the incandescent stove, “what I’m seeing.”

“I did involve you in this story.”

“Yes, you did!”

“But my intentions were good.”

“You did it because I asked you to. But there’s something else that doesn’t add up. Since the age of five I’ve always believed that life is manageable, that it’s not only something inside me but something I have control over.”

Diana jerked her hair back and smiled as if he were an unruly, boisterous child.

“I quit the Navy on my own steam. I got a lot done in business and alone I blew a lot, too, but it was all because I had a vital goal. Arriving here I’ve been positive that I’m in the right place at the right time. But even to manage myself I need at least to understand whatever’s going on around me.”

“Mr. Greenberg,” Diana said quietly, “we are a part of this accident called life.”

“Everything is predetermined, because it is accidental,” he quoted from her dissertation. “I don’t accept that. Accident is not an argument!”

“Accident is everything we have,” she replied in complete seriousness, “everything that is ordained for us to possess in this world.”

He was reluctant to argue with her; there was no point. The wood in the stove crackled.

“The only thing that inspires me is that you’re with me. God help us!”

He rose to his feet and followed her; outside, the scent of melting snow and roasted meat wafted toward them, redolent of mountain purity and a binge orgy defying reason. Evstatiev’s tough guys were knocking back *rakiya* right out of the bottles and turning the spit; oil was dripping from the fat. With the skill of surgeons, they were using a butcher’s knife to skin another lamb, flaying the hide, peeling it off as if they were turning a glove inside out. The meat was a ghostly blue; their faces were glowing with a kind of audacious, barbarian absentmindedness.

They went down the stairs, crossed the cobblestone yard, and entered a basement-like space. The dusk inside was the gloomy color of a shrine and stuffy. A fire burned in the fireplace. The floor was covered with unpolished tiles; a long, crudely assembled table for about twenty people slashed the room in two. Behind it copper bells hung from the ceiling—Diana

called them *tchanove*—and the stone-built wall was decorated with a stretched bear hide and the antlers of a noble deer. Here at least everything was authentic.

Ignat Evstatiev and an elderly gentleman with silver temples had made themselves comfortable at the head of the table. The old gentleman exuded strength and power; you could say he was a handsome man had it not been for his cleft lip, a visible defect that halved his face. One of the halves left the impression that he was constantly smiling—in a sinister way. Trays with all kinds of nuts and bottles of sparkling water were scattered across the table. A bottle of that whisky, the seventeen-year-old *Ardbeg* with its color and flavor of smoke that Doris had bought for their dinner with Oldon, gravely sat there as well. It had cost three hundred dollars a bottle, he remembered, but here a whole case of it had been just left in the corner.

“Welcome to my cloister, Mr. Greenberg,” Ignat Evstatiev grinned familiarly.

“I can’t stand twilight,” Samuel replied sharply. “Especially when I have a deal to make, I insist on being in daylight.”

The bald-headed man made an agile leap and turned on the chandelier. Like everything here, this particular fixture was odd: a wooden wheel turned lightbulb-frame, an old-time wooden wheel, from a donkey cart, wrought with a tin rim.

“I came here to make a deal with you, but feel as if you’ve kidnapped me,” Samuel said with unflagging peevisness.

Ignat burst into laughter. The other man remained rigidly serious; only his right half was smiling.

“I invited you here because I adore this place. During the socialist times atheism in this country was compulsory, but my mother believed in the Savior,” Ignat observed. “To avoid prying eyes, they baptized me in secret in the midget-church outside. I was already ten when I waded in the font—trust me, I’m a sentimental person, I cry at the drop of a hat—so I decided ...”

He poured whisky in the clay mugs and added water and ice cubes without asking anybody if they wanted some.

“You can take it that this monastery is mine,” he announced rather menacingly. “You are a preferred guest, and consequently, it is also yours. Make yourself at home.”

“Did you buy it from God?”

“I paid his proxies ... the Holy Synod. Actually, let’s drink to Diana. She deserves it, doesn’t she?”

Without concealing his admiration, he gave Diana an odd look—a look of unsatisfied lust. Once again Samuel felt the tension between Ignat and Diana and shivered. Diana didn't say anything: she either couldn't or didn't want to take part in their conversation. She was simply translating. They took a sip of their drinks.

“Indeed, she does,” Samuel answered anxiously.

“Later on I'll give you a tour of the estate, the church too; its frescoes date from the fifteenth century. But for the time being, please meet my uncle, he and I are partners in ‘Balkan Investment.’ Ours is a joint holding.” He uttered the word “holding” with special pleasure, as if it were a spell.

The silver-haired man stood up and bowed respectfully: his hand was dry and hot, his face impenetrable and smiling on the right.

“He too is an Evstatiev, Peter Evstatiev Senior. I am Ignat Evstatiev—Evstatiev Junior. I have read that the hereditary industrialists in America refer to themselves in this way.”

“They do, but only when they are father and son. You're not.” Samuel said. He was wondering what he was doing here, smack dab in the remote recesses of The Balkan, in a monastery that was a negation of his own faith, amidst this unknown pair, Senior and Junior, both of them most likely two provincial hustlers. His stomach was churning from the whisky; he was starving. ‘At least,’ he thought, ‘I'm gonna stuff myself.’ His stretched stomach grumbled as he sniffed the sizzling aroma outside.

“This is a Bulgarian specialty—the lamb has to roast over slow heat for twelve hours; it's called *tcheverme*,” Diana would tell him later. Right now, Evstatiev Senior was reaching out to one of the bowls with nuts: something next to him slipped involuntarily and rattled heavily on the floor. It was a brand new Kalashnikov, polished as if for a parade.

“Something's been bugging me. I've been wondering,“ he didn't even blink, “why have you chosen Bulgaria? Four billion is serious loot, in fact a really impressive amount of dough crying out for a matching mouth, a huge fish ...”

Samuel had no desire to explain the thrilling triviality that there had to be plenty of well-prepared technologies and computer specialists here, that the Bulgarians had saved their Jews, that he was a sentimental person too, that he had flown over the ocean to get something going for this people, but he was sick of repeating all that, and besides, they wouldn't understand him.

“I’ve been in the business for quite a while” he said. “I know it—no, I’m quite positive that I’m in the right place at the right time.”

“And you would pour all this incredible money into the pockets of the communists?”

“But isn’t the current government a democratic one?” wondered Samuel.

“Oh yes, but two thirds of them are former communists!” uttered Evstatiev Senior with unruffled calm, patting his smiling half with his hand. “Give us a chance. Trust us, Mr. Greenberg.”

“Even if I wanted to, I’m not authorized to do it: I only carry a letter of intent. The negotiations will be conducted at AT&T headquarters.”

“But it’s you who pushes the buttons?”

“In a certain sense ... It’s my idea, and I have voting rights.” His stomach was rumbling with hunger. “Thanks to Ms. Popova, I know that you’re in the field. Can you provide enough specialists who are also knowledgeable about software?”

“Absolutely no problem,” brashly responded Evstatiev Junior. “The plants are in complete decay, absolutely dead, the Institute for Computer Technologies is a mess—how many top-notch guys do you need? A thousand? Two thousand?” He placed an almond on two fingers, slapped them with his other hand, and caught the almond in the air with his mouth.

“I was hoping to hear that.”

“Look, we’re in a position to play around with at least three to four hundred of your dapper millions.”

“The millions are not mine; neither are they dapper.” Samuel was no longer interested in talk, but asked, in any case, “What do you mean by that?”

Evstatiev Junior laughed broadly, and, who knows why, winked at him.

“I mean spending these hard-working monies!”

“Spending?”

“What my nephew has in mind is... appropriating,” Evstatiev Senior coldly interrupted.

“In other words,” Evstatiev Junior smiled obsequiously, “we and you each get about fifty million green ones.”

“Listen to yourself! Do you hear what you’re saying?” Samuel had barely taken two sips of whisky, but he became instantly sober, as if he’d just been sucker-punched. They had assaulted his self-respect: these weird, grotesque speculators had hurt his integrity. Did they have

the slightest idea what integrity meant for a Greenberg? On top of everything, in the refectory, where it reeked of cellar, burnt candle, and spilled wine, a recording device could be turned on; any trick could be set up beforehand to trap him. “When I get back to Sofia—if I ever do,” the thought sharply crossed his mind, “I’ll have to check and see if someone hasn’t opened my suitcase!”

Diana caught his fit and desperately turned her head away; she took a gulp of whisky for the first time, and firmly clutched the glass. She couldn’t or didn’t want to interfere in such a lowdown game. She was simply translating.

“But you’re offering me a bribe!” Samuel grew furious.

“Don’t be offended, Mr. Greenberg, my nephew is a bit tipsy. He slipped up a bit, uh, what he meant is that you will receive the usual ten percent that is legally commissioned in any deal. That’s quite a hit!” Evstatiev Senior said with disappointment and hurled the kalashnik—this was how Bulgarians affectionately nicknamed this famous weapon—on the sofa behind him.

“Business is not about making hits, Mr. Evstatiev, but about perseverance and morality. The art in business is not to trick anyone, not even once. The fine line is to manufacture a good product at an affordable, competitive cost and to look for a minimal but long-term profit.”

“Seems to me it’s like brewing beer,” Ignat Evstatiev said condescendingly. “You waste a lot of time with beer ...”

“And morality in business derives from the fact that,” Samuel pressed on as if he hadn’t heard him, “when you make a profit, you, as a matter of fact, also help your partner make a profit. Money, the world’s money, is like water in connected vessels: keeping it in balance is what is called integrity.”

“Looks easy, and too beautiful to be true,” Evstatiev Senior said between his teeth, in apparent disbelief.

“If you think of it, that’s actually what’s hard, awfully hard, but it’s really beautiful,” Samuel said in a calmer tone. “Everything has its price.”

“Yes ... even human life!” Ignat Evstatiev uttered threateningly.

“Even human life ... I’ll get big money for the Inter World, but I’ve fought for it for thirty years. It’s my life.”

“I’m sixty,” Evstatiev Senior cut him off coldly, “and I don’t have thirty years to waste.”

“Suppose I make a presentation about your company before AT&T,” Samuel said, following his train of thought. “They’re going to want—they’re going to insist on knowing ...”

“Knowing what, Mr. Greenberg?” The left side of Evstatiev Senior’s face looked frozen.

“The source of your capital.”

“Ah, don’t worry ... our money is clean.” He turned his smiling half toward him. “Let’s continue this conversation in our office, with clear heads. Mrs. Popova gave us the heads-up that you like *shopska* salad.”

He clapped his hands and instantly two of his boys dashed into the room. Owing either to the *rakiya* or the fire outside, they looked warmed up; they had thrown off their jackets, and their guns, hung on broad elastic holsters, were shaking as if having a heart attack. An authentic earthenware baking dish was brought in, filled to the very brim with *shopska* salad. Steam breathed out from the lamb roast, and he could feel the scent right in his stomach. The pieces of meat had also been tossed on the monastery’s traditional earthenware plates. To blunt his hunger Samuel lit a cigarette and leaned in closer to Diana.

“Ms. Popova, did you get any of this?” he whispered to her reproachfully.

“Take it easy, Mr. Greenberg, all is accident. Enjoy it,” she retorted with a sickly smile.

#

From this moment on Samuel began to lose track of time and reality. People came and went. Around the long table the mayor of the nearby village seated himself, wearing thick homespun woolen trousers and a plastic anorak, as did the boss of the local hunters’ society who brought in pheasant and hare; also present were the district ranger and a veterinary doctor with small, timid eyeglasses, tarpaulin winter jacket, and the odor of chloroform. All were red-faced, raffish men with bull necks; all exuded, like a smell, unpredictability and force. They wolfed their food down and drank non-stop, voraciously, with the dangerous joy of water let loose from a dam. They were all talking at the same time: everyone had his own story and was in a hurry to tell it. They sat as if nailed to the table, but everything around them was in motion and changing places, and their clumsy laughter was soaked up by their agonizing implacability. Soaked up by some ancient, sour effort to survive, to be, to endure.

“Are all these guys buddies of yours?” the stunned Samuel asked.

“This is my freedom.” Ignat Evstatiev’s eyes shone like little glass balls. “These oafs are ready to die for me.”

Although the expensive whisky ran like water, every single one of the newcomers carried with him a bottle of *rakiya*: twice brewed, with anise or with herbs collected at dawn or aged in oak casks. A dispute erupted about which made the better cask: oak or beech. Samuel was also forced to try this devastating liquor. Diana grew quiet next to him; among these wild and noisy men she looked even more delicate and inscrutable. She had locked herself in, but he sensed that she was no foreigner to whatever was happening here, that she was subconsciously participating in it, and that it was a solace to her. It was as if she were at home, though this home was not her own apartment but some time long past and these men were her fathers. They avoided looking at her, but they were watching over her, guarding her even. They had recognized her: she was their child.

Later on Samuel had to listen to the incredible story of Evstatiev Senior. He spoke dryly and concisely, with the confidence of someone who must be heard and, most important, who carries in himself an unspoken secret. He himself is part of a world secret. The left half of his face became gloomy while the right side smiled serenely.

“Let me tell you about myself,” he began both hypocritically and threateningly, “so that you know where Ignat’s and my capital comes from and can relax about it. Because for everything we own we have gone through hell; we are not among those who’ve got money in wads, in briefcases full of uncounted bills.”

At the Bulgarian sea resort *Zlatni pyassatzi*—“Golden Sands,” Diana translated—he had met a German woman: blonde, buxom, and divorced. For three days they didn’t come out of her hotel room; then she proposed to him. He left at once for the GDR. Her father happened to work in the Stasi and, thanks to his protection, the total stranger Peter soon made a breakneck career. In the span of just a few years he became assistant to the chief of the air force in the GDR, received a high salary, and was awarded a medal; at the same time, however, his every step was closely watched.

“Those were cruel years. They had just shot down your Gary Powers in his U2 over the Soviet Union, remember? Even that bitch Ulrike, my wife, spied on me,” he said and splashed the contents of his glass on the ground, “while I’d be out walking in Berlin, at the movies, in stores ... she used to rummage through my pockets as soon as I went into the shower.”

Finally he'd had enough. He was pissed off at being simultaneously everything and nobody: a successful loser. Using his Bulgarian passport, he crossed Checkpoint Charlie into West Berlin. He knew a lot and, relying on that, gave himself up to the Americans. They put him in an apartment on Kurfürstendamm and interrogated him there. At midnight on the tenth day, some men rushed in, among them one of his interrogators, who turned out to be a Stasi guy. They threw a black hood over his head and kidnapped him back to East Berlin. From there, they extradited him to Bulgaria; the Bulgarians stuck him with a life sentence. It was hell in the Lovetch prison: they had to work in a quarry. He became buddies with some excavator-man—"he died, poor guy, but I covered his kids with gold"—and one drizzling night Peter sneaked into an empty dump truck, while the pal buried him under broken rocks.

"They were falling over me, cutting me, chopping me up—I was choking, I was going to be smashed alive," he said and poured himself more whisky.

He made it to Turkey. There they beat him and derided his man's honor, using him as a woman. At last, he made it out of the camp, but instead of going to the Americans—"I didn't trust America anymore," he added, his right half smiling guiltily—he somehow got to Sweden. There he graduated for the second time from college and became a professor at the Technological University; but then, in 1975, a truck hit him.

"On an empty dead-end street, on an intersection with traffic lights," he said and gulped his drink thirstily. "That was a clear attempt on my life, Mr. Greenberg. They found me, just as if they'd in fact dug me out from under the sandy rocks in that rusty dump truck."

In the hospital, he managed to survive. For many years he had paid for an insurance policy for accidental death and dismemberment with "Allianz;" he successfully sued the company, changed his name to Levski, folded the wads of money inside the underwear he'd packed in his suitcase, and cleared off to Spain. There he turned a corner in the construction business, but "my first real million," he said with pleasure, as if he were gargling the words, "came from something else, a phenomenal invention of mine." He had figured out how to neatly drain flooded skyscrapers and big buildings and patented the process in the U.S., where they had instantly taken the bait.

He doggedly stared at Samuel with his twisted lip, his face cut in halves: his left side had grown dark while his right was incessantly smiling.

“Forget about what I’ve just told you,” he said, but Samuel felt that, as a matter of fact, he would have to remember it; this whole weird, extravagant, absurd story had not been told to him by accident, there were real grains of truth in it somewhere, yet the deceit and the lies were more impressive and more important than the truth. It was as if Evstatiev Senior were telling him to get a grip on his suspicions and yet, while repeating the story to himself, quite possibly to be taken aback and then really scared. To experience fear! He leaned toward Diana and her hair brushed happily against him.

“Do you believe him?” he whispered.

“No,” she said and didn’t pull away.

“Why not?” Their touching did not arouse him so much as make him feel something far more powerful associated with the idea of becoming master of her fragrance, of her body’s aura.

“It seems to me pretty much concocted,” she said and didn’t pull away.

“And too naïve, too heroic ... just like that, out of the blue, to be promoted to assistant to the chief of the GDR air force?”

“And to be buried in a dump truck”—she didn’t pull away—“under tons of stones. I’ll ask my father.”

“How would your father know?”

“He spent many years in the intelligence services.” Her blushing caressed the air between them like a breeze, estranged them, but she didn’t pull away. “He was a high-ranking officer in intelligence.”

What were the secrets this devilish woman was keeping? What was her real relation to the beaming Evstatiev Junior, whom he had loathed since their first encounter, or to this slippery Evstatiev Senior, whose vita Samuel had to remember as a threat to himself? It was an enigma, a rhetorical question asked to a blind wall in a dead-end hallway. Yet at this moment he realized that he not only wanted her but wanted her forever. He was struck by love—beyond recognition, to the point of absurdity. And most merciless of all: he was utterly helpless to do anything about it. He hated this word love, but now he was experiencing it in its full and unfamiliar mockery, in its burlesque of power. “For I’m prepared,” he thought, growing stupid, “to suffer!” He was capable of and actually insisted on inflicting pain on himself, on humiliating himself if need be. But such a yearning would be mindless, outright impossible in America. There, he always was Samuel Greenberg. Here, it felt as if someone had substituted some stranger for him.

A ferocious debate was taking place around the table. Apparently, the men were talking politics. The mayor hit the table with his fist. The veterinarian rose to his feet opposite him, opened up his winter jacket, and tore off his shirt. His chest was yellowish and hollow, and you could count his ribs; *rakiya* frantically shone in his eyes barely curtained by his gentle little eyeglasses. He yelled on.

“What’s he saying?” asked Samuel.

“I’m a communist now and forever,” she translated, but she didn’t pull away, “because this fucking communism provided food and education for my kids.”

A crumbling, violent silence fell over the table. Ignat Evstatiev burst into laughter and it was as if a lightning rod had defused the tension. The fireplace in the corner was dying out.

“Mr. Greenberg,” he said, drunkenly, “I’m giving you my freedom as a gift! Take it ...”

His uncle’s right side was smiling.

#

At that moment the door opened and right out of the dying day there entered four men and a woman, clad in picturesque folk costumes. Flushed with cold, their faces were lit up in excitement. They brought in the savor of winter, a tang of night snow. They had on them a clarinet, an accordion, an impressive kettle-drum, and something reminiscent of an Irish bagpipe, the kind Samuel had seen only in the movies. They apparently knew the people sitting around the table: they started hugging the mayor and the ranger, while Ignat Evstatiev threw off his tweed jacket and unbuttoned his shirt.

“A band,” he said. “They will play to our little ear.”

“What does it mean—‘to our little ear’?” asked Samuel.

“That they will play for us only,” Diana replied.

“Where did they get this carnival band?”

“Mr. Greenberg, it isn’t carnival,” Diana said and at last she pulled away. She jerked her hair back, and when she asked something in Bulgarian, Evstatiev Junior offered a generous smile.

“They brought my drum-beaters from Turnovo.”

“How far is Turnovo?”

“Some sixty miles,” broke in a stern-faced Evstatiev Senior.

“My God ...”

With their sunglasses, the beefy guys from outside reminded him of blind men. They had just brought in two baking dishes with *shopska* salad and a second lamb. Whole. With crackling crunchily seared. Exhaling a savory steam, garnished with stems of green onions and bunches of mint. Someone’s skillful hands split it open and flung pieces of it onto plates. Samuel had never had a more delicious roast: the meat fell off the bones by itself and melted in the mouth. In a sign of respect, they served him the kidneys: they were superb. The food eased his mind; he wanted to doze off, but he sensed that a communal charge was building up around the table.

The musicians had the same burly, memorable faces; the guy with the bagpipe had a drooping mustache. The girl was blond, busty, and seductively young. First they each took a gulp of *rakiya* from the table; then, they were offered shots of the invaluable, seventeen-year-old Ardbeg. “Each one of them is holding in his hand at least fifty dollars’ worth of priceless booze,” Samuel thought, and then, with rising wonderment: ‘I’m making much too much of this, I just want to get some sleep ... but I’m not tired.’ At this point Evstatiev Senior nonchalantly clapped his hands and then, amidst the general carousing, there began what Samuel would never forget.

The bagpipe and the clarinet screamed, the accordion cried, and the kettle-drum started beating as if right inside his chest. The girl began singing in an astounding, heart-wringing voice, the whole band joined in, then the whole table, and this response brought all of them together and in a magical way rendered them equal. The implausible had happened. It suddenly occurred to Samuel that Ignat Evstatiev was the master no more; he and the ranger were now equal. The tune itself was sorrowful, setting the soul ablaze; he noticed how next to him Diana was all goose-flesh. She was trying to translate, but this kept her from listening, from being an accomplice, from adding in her own acquiescence, her equal status in the common choir as it rendered the unbelievable pain in the song “He’s Lying Ill, My Mile Popyordanov.”

“You would not understand,” Diana said, breathing heavily. “You will never understand, Mr. Greenberg,” How foreign could he have been to her in that moment? “My God,” crossed his mind, “where is [my brother] Paul to hear this, where is [my friend] Ira to see it?”

The door opened wide and along with the blizzard in came the monastery’s Father Superior, Anissiy. Limping. One of his legs was shorter than the other. He was dressed in a simple, discolored cassock patched at the elbows, and bore a resemblance to his clothing. His

hair was curly, his scanty beard long and unkempt, and his brows beetled over his rheumy eyes, which ran incessantly. Samuel had had just a glimpse of him while he was feeding the chickens in the yard. He had called them up to him saying “*cut, cut, cut,*”—the Bulgarian sound, Diana had explained, for calling the chickens to their feed—with arm movements that made it look as if he were sowing millet, and the hens crowded around him as if he were their rooster.

“At last, Father,” the crowd hollered, “who would fail such a company?”

“After the Almighty, it’s your turn,” said the Father, and then: “You know, I have my *rakiya*, with herbs and without herbs; so why don’t you pour me some of this damned whisky?”

Through their laughter they poured for him and he instantly knocked back the fifty dollars; they poured for him again and again he drank bottoms up. He had to catch up, to become equal with the others, to fuse with them. With eyes streaming brightly, he sat next to Samuel and made the sign of the cross over him.

“But I’m Jewish!” Samuel felt embarrassed.

“And I belong to everybody,” the Father replied with humility. He had a bass, velvety voice, just like Ira’s. He lifted his voice with the crowd’s on “Sister Invites Brother to Dinner” and Samuel felt how the languorousness, the life-giving pitch of this communal singing, glued him to his seat; the onerous beauty of the tune gave him a lump in his throat.

“The brother gets mixed up in a brawl,” translated the weary Diana. “Then, in the tavern, he murders a man, another strong fellow. He doesn’t hide. He must pay with his blood. He must die!”

“But why should he die? Isn’t there a law, won’t he be prosecuted?” Samuel asked naively.

“Because that’s the way it’s got to be; you pay for everything in this world, Mister Greenberg. This is our law, the law of blood,” she said. She wasn’t smiling but growing faint. “And the sister invites her brother to dinner: to beguile him and console him, to tell him that she’s going to dislodge—she uses this exact word: “dislodge”—her dearest son, her youngest baby, she’s going to sacrifice him: with him she’s going to slake the others’ thirst for revenge, with him she’s going to pay the blood tax.”

“Oh God!” Samuel groaned after her, yet he wished to join in the singing. Father Anissiy downed his third glass of whisky and wiped his mouth with his cassock sleeve, his eyes still warmly running. The vet picked up a whittled stick from who knows where and swung the

bells—what Diana had called the *tchanove*—and they clanged as if a whole herd of sheep had occupied the refectory.

“Eh-hey,” they bleated “Eh-hey.” The priest roared something.

“What did he say?” asked Samuel.

“He said,” Diana translated, “‘fuck this life.’”

Then the clarinet and the bagpipe swayed to another endless tune, “Wild Falcon Drinks Water a’ the Vardar River,” and silence seemed to fall upon the room, since the singer’s lonesome voice held sway, soaked in rapture and grief. Ignat Evstatiev pulled out a fistful of uncounted notes, crumpled them in a ball and shoved them in her cleavage. The veterinarian was leaning on the stick; the toothless mouth of Father Anissiy, like a gaping wound, had dropped half-opened; even the right half of Evstatiev Senior wasn’t smiling anymore. Diana was tense, squeezing her fork like a dagger.

“With nine sore wounds, all bullet-made, but the tenth the stab of a knife,” she translated. “You will never understand, Mister Greenberg, it’s easy to kill a man with a gun, from afar and anonymously, but it’s so frightening to kill him with a knife, to make this wound with the knife.” Diana was another. Changed. Crying. “That wound is a curse right in our heart, in our womb, within us!”

Father Anissiy leapt next to him, standing at full height, pale and hollow-cheeked. He looked drunk and wobbled, then opened the window across from him, got hold of the kalashnik that Evstatiev Senior had hurled over onto the sofa, and cocked the hammer: his untidy beard bristled. The vet swung the ceiling bells—the *tchanove*. The kalashnik had tracer bullets and they drew a beautiful curve outside in the night. The refectory was shaking, filling up with powder smoke, with the gasp of love and violence. The *tchanove* were moaning. The kettle-drum resumed its tum-ta-tum, the bagpipes and the clarinet screamed; the whole crowd resumed its chant. Ignat Evstatiev reached inside the pocket of his jacket, drew out a shiny wad, flashed it around, and stuck it inside the rounded bosom of the singer.

“This is *our* freedom,” he mumbled; this time he didn’t say “my.”

The *tchanove* were chiming in. Diana’s face brightened; she was singing along. Samuel caught himself also singing. Out of tune. Enraptured. In English, repeating the line “with nine sore wounds, all bullet-made, but the tenth the stab of a knife.” He wasn’t under the influence of the booze but of the ecstasy, the madness of sorrow. Of the never-experienced bacchanalia, but a

bacchanalia all the same made up of all the ancient woe, the glee of sadness, its vitality, the intoxication of pain, the repetition of centuries-old grief that turns it into a feast.

At that moment the pack of rough guys rushed into the refectory. They hadn't taken off their sunglasses, and they reeked of crime. Someone was calling Ignat Evstatiev on the Mercedes radio. He grabbed his jacket and dashed outside. The band stopped right then and there; there still hung a smell of powder and battle in the air. The anarchy complete, everybody then recoiled like washing dampened by the rain. Samuel noticed that the fire in the fireplace was extinct. Evstatiev Senior forcefully put on his coat.

"They've blown up one of our warehouses, Mr. Greenberg," he said.

"I'm sorry ..."

To Samuel's amazement, no one showed surprise at what had befallen them; neither did he.

"We must immediately take off for Sofia. I do hope to see you in our offices shortly." The left side of Evstatiev Senior's face had dangerously darkened, the right one was smiling.

Outside, the cold was numbing. A troubled darkness had set in. The monastery gate gaped like a mouth beaten to toothlessness. The bell didn't chime. The two jeeps and the Mercedes filed off like dinosaurs. The rest of the gang and the band had to squeeze into the third jeep; the drum was tied with a rope to the roof. Samuel called to the guy with the mustache, the bagpiper, and somehow discreetly tucked a hundred dollars into his hand.

"*Blagodarya*," Samuel said, thanking the man in Bulgarian. He had learned this word at least.

"Tenk you," replied the bagpiper and sank into the car.

On the side, the sprightly singer had bowed and was kissing the Father Superior's hand. He blessed her and made the sign of the cross over her. With his winter jacket smelling of freshly cut wood, the mayor came up to Samuel and gave him a big hug and a wet kiss on the cheek.

"Hey, you American," he said, grinning familiarly and poking him in the stomach, "life is a rubber band. You pull tight and let go ..."

Father Anissiy closed the gate and dropped the latch; he made his final sign of the cross over them and melted away into the dark. Samuel and Diana were left alone. Improbably alone, so alone they felt on the verge of fainting. The sky above them was shining majestically: it was populated with huge, astonished stars that gave it depth. An alive sky, a difficult sky. It was

freezing in the crystal silence, a silence in which anything could happen. The cat with the red fur walked by like a little flame and disappeared toward the pen. They took the screeching stairs up to the gallery. They stopped in front of his room. To hold Diana up, to guard her for himself just one more second, he asked:

“Ms. Popova, explain this to me ... ‘life is like a rubber band’?”

“You pull tight and let go ...,” she said, completing the saying.

“Please—its meaning! I insist. I’m paying you after all.”

“You can’t understand, Samuel,” she said quietly, somehow desperately. ”You will never understand ...” He noticed that she had let go of the official address between them.

“I’m trying,” he said.

“Your eyes, Samuel, are different,” she said. “Can you read beyond what they see?”

“Read what?” he asked.

“Me, Samuel. Inside of me.” Her hand rose blindly and reached for his stubble.

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They made love in a daze; it was, like everything here, a cataclysm. The stove was roaring with the grin of an idiot, its red gleams playing up against the ceiling. Their nakedness looked bloodied yet common and conjoined. It smelled of ashes. It hurt.

It hadn’t been like this with Doris. Samuel and Diana gave themselves to one another. They flowed into each other with the freedom of their exchanged moans. Every touch increased his fear, reached the next degree of panic: he was scared that he might inadvertently offend Diana, that he might wound her. Her breasts stood upright and had the taste of motherhood. Not wanting to peek between her legs, he stared at her eyes. It hurt. Diana’s eyes were wide open. Then Samuel became aware of his own pain: of the premonition that he would lose her. As if she were inside herself and in some remembered but illegible world. In someone’s after-world. Diana’s eyes remained wide open till the very end.