

THE BLACK BOX
by Alek Popov

translated from the Bulgarian by Charles de Lupe and Daniella de Lupe

NED

For a long time I thought I was happy, or if not exactly happy, then at least content with my life. Objectively speaking, I am not lacking for anything. I am officially in the category of Successful Bulgarians Abroad, SBA. Unofficially though, things are slightly different. Happy I am not, neither am I particularly content. The only consolation left is that I am SBA, which is unfortunately not enough. In this life one needs something more than the jealousy of the NSAB: the Non-Successful Arses, stuck in Bulgaria. And that something is what I lack.

I think I always knew it, but stubbornly hid my head in the sand. I tried to look at the situation positively, like they taught us at the University and when your salary increases around 10 percent a year, that's not particularly difficult. You progress through the hierarchy. You learn new things. You travel - until one day things start to repeat themselves. As do the destinations. The lavish evenings on your company's credit card don't do it for you anymore. Neither do the luxury hotels, nor the flights in first class. Imperceptibly, but irreversibly, you ripen for the truth.

You've reached the peak of your possibilities. The ceiling is as transparent as a glass floor. You see the people walking above you clearly; you even hear the squeak of their \$2,000 shoes. You can look up their wives' skirts as much as you like, but you can't join them up there. I don't fool myself any longer: the ladder I was climbing ends beneath their feet. When you understand that at 50, it probably doesn't matter. You've already flowed through the system's sewers and you float around the edges until the tide erases your memory like it would an oil spill.

“Do you feel successful?”

The question is put by a Bulgarian journalist, who is making a series of “portraits” dedicated to the phenomenon of SBAs for a big Bulgarian newspaper. I have no idea how she got my details. She mentioned the name of an old acquaintance of mine who went back two years ago to become a big shot. But I reckon her hidden agenda is to grab some desperately lonely office zombie and get a ring on her finger. It's not gonna be me, although she is a dish. Success, I hold forth, is relative. There are different levels of success. And things of that sort...

This year for the first time I didn't get a raise. Actually, if I have to be completely honest, they actually cut half a percent. That's some puny \$1,500 less per year, but it's the attitude that

counts. Of course, I'm not the only one who's been hit. Most senior employees received lighter paycheques. Official explanation: we are overpaid - and the worsening economic climate. We all know that. I don't see how my half a percent will help a company with a yearly turnover of two billion though. More like they're testing us. Will we give in to our anger and disappointment? Will someone slam the door behind him? Nothing of the sort happens. We drag our sour faces around, swear through our teeth, but actually we are dead happy, me included, that we haven't been given the push. The murky waters of unemployment are rising daily. Nobody's ready to throw himself in to save his "amour-propre".

Yuppie sounds glamorous, but only while you can pay your rent...

Unfortunately it's too late to persuade my brother that now is not the most appropriate time to come to America. Any comment in that direction will be seen as an attempt to avoid my familial responsibilities. Angel, or Ango, as everyone calls him, has won the green card lottery. He played - he won. I took part too, and not just once, didn't have any luck though. Whatever. Ango boy has to hang around here at least a few months a year, otherwise he will lose his status. The green card in itself doesn't mean anything, but losing it is just as preposterous to think of as the opposite.

Ango boy also wants to be a SBA. I can't blame him, of course. Basically speaking, Bulgarians can be divided into three categories: SBAs, NSABs, which I mentioned earlier, and TBWs - Thieving Bulgarian Wankers who, in practice, presuppose the existence of the former two. Any attempt to formulate subgroups, or in-between categories, smells to me of opportunism, with the aim of blurring the boundaries between things. But a logical question crops up: aren't there any unsuccessful Bulgarians abroad? Well, none that I know of. All of them boast that they are successful, even hyper-successful; how they gorge great handfuls from the cornucopia and drink directly from the fountains of heaven. The rest end up quietly back in Bulgaria. So they are NSABs again. Following the same logic there are no successful Bulgarians in Bulgaria. If you believe their stories, even those who enjoy relative abundance are actually balancing on the edge of misery, their existence is woven from insecurities and mishaps, as to the future - there is no such thing. The truly successful do not hang around for long, they go abroad to join the ranks of SBAs. Those of them who stay on often prove to be the stupidest TBWs.

My brother's arrival fills me with joy and worry at the same time. I've been living alone for three years already and it's as though I'm starting to get fed up of it. On the other hand it's not

that bad. I don't have to cater to anyone. Most of my friends got married ages ago, some have already got divorced and remarried, others cohabit... That's no reason to rush! Women, on the whole, are like leeches. To get together with a woman just because it's expected is a sure recipe for a headache. That's the reason I avoid going back to Bulgaria. The moment they see you're a SBA, in good shape and free, something happens to them. It's like they go crazy, they fly at you from all sides, they show their goods, they try to ensnare you emotionally, they wait for you to put a foot wrong and then bang, harness you amidst the victorious howl of the entire tumult of NSABs, jumping around you with their wooden wine vessels and traditionally made towels like Native Americans dancing around the cadaver of a noble deer.

No thanks!

Some, of course, go back to Bulgaria just to shoot their load. Not me! And not for a shag! I can have it whenever I want in America. A) There exists the institution of paid sex. B) The offices in midtown overflow with desperate ambitious bitches with polyvalent vaginas. And all that pours onto the streets on a Friday night. No problem to pick up one of them and have a sex life. Provided they don't stay over to sleep, of course. If they start to stay - it's over! Women's bodies release a poison that makes men dependent on them, that was my ex Beatrix's theory. We split up three years ago. Actually "split up" is a bit over the top, because we never spent more than a week together. She lived in Toronto. We met on a management course in Florida, where some Dr Kandzebuo Oe enlightened us to the secrets of the six sigma way - at the time an avant-garde method for extrapolating profits. I guess I liked her, liked her a lot. From time to time Beatrix would hop a plane to New York, where of course she slept over at mine. Then she threw it all in and went to South America. She was trying to persuade me to go with her, to join some newly formed commune somewhere on the Amazon River. Not on your life - abandon the civilised to run off and chase the wild! Beatrix never did get the meaning of that Balkan idiom. At that time, I still believed I could pile up enough money to retire without worries at 44 and enjoy life.

"Forget it," she waved a hand. "It's not gonna happen."

And she put her enormous rucksack on her shoulders with some funny little shiny pan dangling off the bottom... Sometimes, in reality more and more often, I miss her. The poison of her fleshy pale body with its pointy breasts apparently worked its way deep into me.

Ango's attitude to women is quite different and it's precisely what worries me. He is one of those men who have nothing against women staying. He always wanted to get married, always had some female creature hanging around him; I have the nasty feeling something like that might happen here too. He'll install some woman in the house! I can imagine myself coming back from some business trip and finding them bonking on the sofa. Her breasts are sticking out from underneath the sheet, on her shoulder a tattoo of some sinister figure with hair like the Iron Maiden emblem. The woman moves in. My brother cooks. We eat together. Sleep together. The woman brings a girl friend. We swap them. It turns out that one of them has AIDS. The sink is overflowing with dirty cups and dishes. A child is born. My bank account is in the red. I quietly cut my wrists in the basement, crouched between the washing-machine and the tumble-drier, and stare at my runny HIVcontaminated blood, as it trickles into the drain and forms a little whirlpool. My ashes arrive in Sofia in a black plastic box like the one my father arrived in...

ANGO

The Walking Dog Service was situated on the lower-ground floor of West Eighty-third. On the sign mused a moping blue dog on a lead disappearing in the hand of an invisible presence. That created gloomy associations. I went down the steps, careful not to hit my head on the upper sill. I was dressed up, despite the heat, in long trousers and a jacket. Shortly before I arrived I put on the trendy tie I had nicked from my brother's wardrobe. I looked at myself in the glass door - super! This morning for the first time I dared to put the ultimate nose-hair remover in my nostrils. The result was amazing despite the tickling. Clean nostrils, clean heart, I hummed to myself.

I was greeted by a blond cow, in her 50s, with a creased knee-length skirt and a white knitted top, through which I could see her bra. The walls were covered with pinned-up pictures of dogs. The air-conditioner was quickly turning the air in the small space and the corners of the pictures were trembling like butterflies.

“Grace Kozlovsky?” It took some effort to say it without giggles.

“That's me,” she said in a business-like tone.

“What can I do for you?”

“We spoke on the phone yesterday. I have come for the interview.”

“Aha! Mister...?”

“Banov. Angel Banov. Or just Ango.”

“Aha! Sreten's friend.”

I nodded, although “friend” was a bit over the top. I had bumped into him in Central Park two days ago, he was tangled in the leads of five rabid dogs. The sixth one was heading straight for me. “Aaah, fuck you all, fuck!” I heard a Slavonic language. The dog was jumping up and down around me, licking my hands and leaving marks on my clothes. I couldn't guess its breed, it was pretty hairy. Its lead was dragging along the concrete.

“Homer!” The man shouted, with no particular result. “What a dog-lover!” I said to myself about the small but wiry man with round glasses and a worn T-shirt. I caught the lead and returned control of the mutt to him. He thanked me. I hadn't spoken with a living soul for days and I was longing for a gulp of communication.

“You have lots of dogs, huh?!” I ventured.

“They're not mine, I just walk them.”

I replied, “Where you from? I'm Bulgarian.” He giggled, “Ah, a neighbour then. Me, I'm from Serbia” and we shook hands. I asked, “Do you earn enough from this job?”

“Pay's ok,” he said, “but it's tiring...”

The rate was 10 dollars an hour - per dog. When you take out a pack of five, twice, you've got 100 dollars a day. For about two hours.

“But you've taken out six!” I pointed out.

“I got greedy,” he admitted. “The optimum number is five.”

When he saw I was interested, Sreten went through his pockets and handed me a business card. Grace Kozlovsky was the manager and owner of the agency. “Call her,” he said, “she's recruiting people at the moment. I'll put in a good word for you.” He gathered his mob and was away.

“Do you have experience with dogs?” enquired Madam Kozlovsky.

“Oh, yes!” I nodded energetically. “I had a dog.” I had worked out my lie since dawn.

“Which breed?”

“Cocker Spaniel.” I had decided that suited me. “Capricious dogs...” she sighed.

“Depends on how you train them.” I tried to pass as an expert in the trade.

Grace Kozlovsky looked at me icily. “You are required to walk them, not to make out you're a trainer!”

“Of course!” I shivered.

“There are professional trainers for that purpose.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Did you bring a CV?”

The CV, as my brother says, must be functional, not laudatory. If you're applying to be a concierge, you don't put that you've published André Gide. People will think you play with books all day and you look down on your job. I tried to concoct something simpler for the purpose, but I couldn't find it in me to omit my degree, even though it was obtained from some pathetic Eastern European university. While Grace was looking at my short CV, I continued to look at the gallery on the walls. A number sat in the corner of each picture. The dogs were grouped by breed. There were all sorts of poodles and also some silvery short-haired mutts like slugs. Most of them looked companionable with the exception of some really ferocious specimens.

Grace informed me, not without a certain pride, “We are the oldest agency in the West Side!” She gave me some form to fill together with a nondescript brochure. “I will ask you to familiarise yourself with the instructions. You can start immediately. I have a client for you.”

Grace rummaged through her folders and took out a slightly blurred snap-shot. After a long stare I found a tiny black creature, sticking up on thin legs, cuddled in the skirt of some impressive lady with a fantastic yellow hat.

“This is Zucchero. They are very attached to him...” My enthusiasm didn't seem so sincere to her. “Do you have anything against pinchers?”

“Actually, no,” I mumbled.

“Good luck, Angus!” I didn't move though.

“What's the matter?”

“I can walk another one too...”

“Don't rush so much!” She laughed, “Sreten has been working here for a whole year. After a week or two, if everything is going well, we'll trust you with one more dog, then with another. Am I clear?” I nodded unenthusiastically. Put the hat on and put the packet under my arm.

“Pay is at the end of the week,” was her parting shot.

The pincher's nails grated on the concrete with the ticking sound of someone eating sunflower seeds with the speed of a machine gun. From time to time it turned round to look at me contemptuously with its bulging little round eyes. I had the feeling I was walking a rat.

The park was crawling with people. In the heat, skaters and cyclists, with phosphorescent T-shirts like tropical fish, were shooting soundlessly around. Followers of the forbidden Chinese sect of Falun Gong were doing exercises to detach from their bodies to a monotonous chant. In the shade of the magnolias, young gays were eating watermelon and sending wet looks at the amateur Tribeca team who were warming up on the baseball field. The professional dog-walkers could be recognised from miles away. They had wiry, tanned calves. They were walking purposefully, without looking around. They were pulled by a bunch of specimens of different breeds. Compared to them I was just strolling around. The pincher had a repellent effect on the passers-by, so it could hardly act as bait for exciting introductions. It made me look like a wanker with a taste for antique porno postcards. Otherwise the job was not difficult. Zuccherò was ticking in front of me on its thin legs.

We walked round the green and headed for the reservoir. At one point the creature stopped, bent its back like a camel and produced a small greenish shit. I hadn't taken more than five steps when I heard a voice behind me: "Hey, sir! You, with the dog!" At the scene of the crime, a giant policeman had appeared out of the ground. The end of his nightstick was pointing to the microscopic pile at his feet.

"And?" I shrugged nonchalantly.

"You just broke the law, sir."

"Really? What did I do?" I felt a bit awkward.

"Your dog shat in the alley."

"I can't forbid him," I replied.

"Do you know how many dogs are in New York?"

"I guess a lot."

"Hundreds of thousands! If all the owners followed the logic of your behaviour, sir, we would be in shit up to our ears." I looked around as though surrounded by piles of dog manure.

"But we aren't," he continued seriously, "because we obey the law!"

"Look, sir," I said. "I arrived in the States recently.

And I have a certain idea of the basic moral norms on which public order is based, but I haven't learnt the details attendant to the local system." He stared at me, aghast.

"Pick up your shit, son!" I heard a benevolent little voice.

Kibitzers were already gathering. One slender skater slowed down and gave me a quick contemptuous look from beneath the silvery brim of her helmet.

“Did you hear what the lady said?” frowned the policeman. “Do you have a little bag?”

“Nobody told me I had to!” I shook my head.

“Well, I'm telling you! Resolution E1999/20567 of the Municipal Council: You are obliged to always carry a little paper bag and a spade when you take your dog for a walk. You put the shit in the little paper bag and throw it the nearest litter bin.”

“Ok. I'll bear that in mind. Thank you for enlightening me.”

“And now clean up your shit.”

“But I don't have a paper bag, sir”

“I shall have to fine you 100 dollars, sir, if you leave it on the path.”

“America is a clean country, son!” The voice belonged to a plump person with a straw hat from which a small flag fluttered. I looked around, but I didn't see anything appropriate to pick the damn thing up with. I didn't spot any litter bins either. The pincher was sniffing its shiny excrement grumpily. Go on eat it, I prayed, but nobody heard me. I definitely didn't want to give him 100 dollars. I reached out to pick a large leaf from the nearest bush.

“Do not touch the flower, sir!” The policeman warned me.

“But it's only a bush!”

“What a destructive element!” Comments echoed.

“Leave the wildlife alone or I shall have to arrest you!” growled the keeper of public order through his teeth.

“Fuck you,” I said to myself. I dug in my wallet and demonstratively pulled out a one dollar note. I made a funnel out of it. I knelt and looked at myself in his shiny jackboots and folded the shit in “in God we trust”. Finally I opened my pocket wide and dropped it in. “Well, are you happy now?”

“Good day, sir!” he grinned.

I walked away like a zombie. Blood throbbled in my head.