

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL FATHER
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translated from the Bulgarian by Christopher Buxton

I told my wife on the telephone I was coming back. I would be catching the bus in an hour's time and by the evening I'd be at home. I wasn't home that evening because – although unwilling, I was duty bound to catch another bus which drove me in a completely different direction. Come off it, I told myself, stop mucking about. Get the job done and get home! Sometimes I talk to myself. My wife rang and I explained what had happened. She believed me and said she loved me very much. And I love her very much too. Later I'll let her read these words from the story. It's not difficult for me to tell folk I love them. It's a piece of cake even. I convinced her that I'd be coming back really soon. I just needed to finish the story because the Publishers are awaiting for it.

I rang her and shared the idea of her reading in my story that I really love her so as to convince myself that it's the truth. She liked the suggestion. And she asked when I was coming. From the town where I was, there were just buses to other towns, where I could change onto a bus home. I answered my wife that I was starting out in fifteen minutes. That's how it was. I set out. I got to a town, where I could catch something for the town where my wife and two children were waiting. I wrote this in an email to her. She replied that she would be really happy for us to see each other. I hadn't been at home for three weeks already.

My wife was waiting for me in Burgas. This time I managed to catch the bus, but at some stop or other, I got down for a quick visit to the toilet and while I was hanging about, the bus left without me. I had to hitch-hike. I got to Silistra this way. It was just that I had nothing to do there. So I carried on hitch-hiking to Nikopol. In Nikopol nothing much happened to me. Then I got myself to Vidin by boat, because that was the quickest way to get out of there. And at Vidin I got on a train and by the evening after several changes I appeared in Pazardzhik. My wife was now sobbing on the phone and handed me over to the kids. I was terribly upset. And I promised to return as quickly as possible. Only instead of taking the right direction, I somehow got muddled and sat in a bus that unloaded me in Petrich. There I met a hang-glider who promised to fly me straight to my family home. He even promised that in mid flight we'd write "I love you" just over my balcony, before landing in front of my wife. Take a good grip on those straps, he told me, it's a long trip and you have to be comfortable.

We took flight from some hill and we soared quickly into the sky. I had telephone coverage and I rang my wife from high up in the air. I told her to reassure the kids and to really prepare for my homecoming. She asked where I was. I answered that at the moment I was somewhere above Karlovo. Her voice sounded happy. How much I Love her! After an hour and a half the hang-glider touched down in Muglitzh, because he said that he had a girlfriend there and he had to see her. He suggested that we both stay over. I asked him wasn't he going to get me off home, hadn't he promised? Give it a rest, we'll only stay one night and then we'll carry on, he promised me. So we stayed in Muglitzh. His girlfriend greeted us. She opened a beer. Then she opened another. We drank beer and chatted. I explained that I couldn't wait to get home, because I hadn't seen my wife for quite a long time.

Afterwards two friends of the hang-glider's girlfriend joined the party. Late into the evening my new friend and the hostess disappeared somewhere and I was left alone with the two females. They looked at me quite oddly. I told them my story, they began to laugh. I didn't understand why they were laughing and asked them. One said to the other "Look at him, what a sweetie!" I begged them to explain what they were whispering and why they were laughing. And then one of them told me that if I wanted, it could be that they strip naked. I'm not sure that I understood the suggestion too well, but I made it clear to them that I love my wife a lot and I owed it to her to get home as quickly as possible. I added that I didn't want to see them naked, because I would have thought that it was improper. Well but how could it be improper, they wondered. You'll see that it'll be fine. Yes, girls, I like you, you're hot, you've got everything in the right place, your legs go right up. Your eyes really do it, but still I don't want you to strip naked. The two females however would not give up. Look here, darling, they declared, as I sipped from my mug of beer, we two have to commit fornication with you here and now, that's how it's been planned. The Publishers have ordered the story this way, and you have no chance against them. The Publishers, I replied, by now completely exasperated, don't control my free will. And so I have no intention of committing any sins with you. And then they looked at each other, open eyed – what do you mean, they don't control you. This story is theirs, and as they've decided there'll be sins, it means there will be, whatever you think.

With such empty phrases, a lot of time passed by. At last I managed to convince them that neither publishers nor any natural forces, nor whatever monsters could change my decision. I'm sorry but I've taken this decision and I'm not going to agree with you, girls. They looked disappointed. Well if we're not going to perform all kinds of fornication, what

are we going to do? Let's open another bottle of beer, I suggested and they agreed. Then we turned on the television and watched a film about some Yanks. When the film finished, we took a bit of paper and played noughts and crosses and then towns, villages and rivers. At some time I must have fallen asleep on the sofa, because the film broke and I don't remember exactly. What I know for certain is that next morning when I woke up, still on the sofa, I saw lying on the bed opposite two and a half crocodiles. The half was a stuffed toy, but the other two crocodiles were still asleep and were real. With bulging eyes. I crept out of the room and found the hang-glider. I told him to come and see what the sight for sore eyes there was in the room – two and a half crocodiles. He came and gaped at the crazy scene. Lizards. Big, green and slobbering. And they twitched their tails in their sleep.

“Look man,” I began. “I don't know what's happened here. One time there were two females, we drank beer. They wanted to commit fornication with me, then we played at something. And then I don't remember anything.”

“Calm down mate. There must be a logical explanation. Perhaps the Publishers just decided to turn them into crocodiles. It's happened before. These here Publishers are omnipotent. If they make up their minds your stories become a best seller, but if something doesn't chime with their secret plans, they always find a way to trounce you... They don't give a damn. But maybe yesterday you had hallucinations. Maybe you overdid the adrenalin.” My new friend stopped his chattering suddenly and looked at me.

“Well but you've never I mean to say – e-e-r committed fornication?”

“Me?” I was amazed at the stupid question. “Of course I haven't. What do you take me for?”

“Don't lose your rag mate, I'm only asking. Because I rarely meet people like that.”

“OK, let's go, or I'll go bonkers” I suggested, but I saw from his look that it was not written for us to continue further together.

“Bad news, man, The glider needs repairs, the wing flaps are bent, the whole geometry needs to be checked...I'm staying here in Muglitz. I can't carry on, but I can tell you where you can catch a train for Burgas.”

“Thanks a lot mate. Maybe one day we'll see each other again.”

And I carried on my journey. To the furthest reaches. There was no town or village left which did not accost my lost body. Because of these circuits I hated all the publishers for all time. They sent me through needles' eyes, the vermin; shoved me between Scylla and Charybdis, they sent me journeying all the way to Eldorado, where I had to undertake serious negotiations on buying the Golden Fleece from the Chinese, because due to the financial crisis, they'd raised the price. And Burgas where they were waiting for me with such a thrill remained still far away and unattainable. It was though it had never figured on a map. When after twenty two years I managed nevertheless to get home, my children had grown up. And I'd grown old. My wife was pleased to see me. She was just so pleased. She was filled with real joy. But she told me that it was too late. "Too late for what? I asked her. But she did not answer me. She just asked whether I'd cheated on her throughout this whole time. "Well...no. Not once. Honour bright," I replied and kissed her. And my son caught the most fatted calf from the herd, which he looked after on his farm, and slaughtered it in my honour. My wife just shook her head in resignation – she'd stuck to him through thick and thin, she'd made so many sacrifices for her son, but he did not treat her as he treated me... The lad laid on a banquet to which all his friends and acquaintances were invited, as he never stopped repeating: "He was lost and now he's found! He was dead and now come back to life!"