

Alexander Shpatov:

#livefromsofia

Experience Sofia:

In the catacombs under St. Sophia; in an attic with a view of St. Nevski; with pink tomatoes from the Women's Market; draft Stolichno in Krivotto during the winter; Ariana cans in front of the National Theater when it's warmer; and definitely go inside when the season starts again in October; go up the boulder rivers on Vitosha; climb its highest peak *Cherni Vrah* (also hit Mt Kamen Del and the Boyana Waterfall); go down the Roman stairs at Arena di Serdica; take the metro all the way from Youth I to Obelya and back; sit in an hour-long Tsarigradsko traffic jam, in a Friday rush to the seaside; Sofia Film Fest at the House of Cinema; drink from the hot water springs by the Baths; see Levski – CSKA live; play ball in Sportna Sofia; night skiing on the slopes of Laleto; wakeboarding after work in Kazichene; share a first kiss on the Lily Pond in Borissova Gradina – then a follow-up in the lift to Aleko or a classic selfie on the Lover's Bridge; munch sunflower seeds on a bench; wander the empty streets when everyone has left for the holidays; block the Eagle's Bridge at least once or protest in front of Parliament; Opera in the Park; Sofia Breathes Fest; a tour of the wreath of monasteries around Sofia (my top five: Klisurski over Bankya, Seslavski, Lozenski below Mt Poluvrak, the monastery in Ravno Pole, and of course - the Dragalevski Monastery); push a stroller around South Park; picnic on the lawn of the Vrana Palace; party down in Malinova Dolina; meet someone at the Priest; chill by the Soviet Army Monument; roam Shishman St.; see Vitosha from Vitosha Blvd; Friday night at Bar Friday; smoke up at Mt Kopitoto; enjoy the view from the rooftop of the Architecture University; run away from ticket inspectors on the tram, or – for that matter – from stray dogs in Lyulin; make an emergency visit to Pirogov Hospital in the middle of the night; take a cab for a Big Mac at the NDK 24/7 drive-in and eat it in the car while debating capitalism and the Bulgaria Blvd traffic jams; take a tram – for shopping at Ilentsi or just for a ride through the woods of the Orthodox Seminary; take a walk to Pliska all the way through the alleyways of Borissova Gradina; take a *marshrutka* van to NBU; take Bus 280 on a safari through Students' Town; buy bouquets of snowdrops from the old ladies on Grafa; lay flowers at the Vassil Levski Monument; hear the new year's fireworks in between the panel apartment blocks of Zona B-5 – and the seagulls over the former Communist Party Headquarters; catch the five o'clock bells at St. Sedmochislenitsi, when the clouds of doves fly away; catch a concert in Hall 1 of NDK; a club party in Mixtape; the buskers in the Sofia University metro station; the bagpiper behind Parliament; visit the Bells of the World Park; or head further down to Lake Pancharevo; jump over the Perlovska River – or the ruins behind the Rotunda; get lost in a remote panel block complex; sit next to the Slaveykov brothers; or on a bench in the Crystal Garden; buy a book from Nisim or Bulgarski Knizhitsi; scarf down a midnight pizza at UGO; chug draft boza from Pchela; try a döner from Mimas; princess toasts from Rakovska; soup-in-a-breadbowl from Divaka;

Have a home here (not an apartment); make friends (not acquaintances); fall in love (this alone is more than enough, actually);

Anything else?

Yellow Brick Road

“Believe it or not, an elephant was shot here ” – the guide points towards the main steps of Sofia University, then turns toward the park with the Soviet monument and tells the group how it used to be the zoo, how way back in '69 some freshmen snuck inside and let all the animals out of their cages, how the police, scared by the elephant and rumors about Prague Spring, immediately opened fire even though the zookeepers had already arrived, how once again thanks to the Czechs no one said so much as a word about it in the newspapers and how in the end all the freshmen were tossed into labor camps, while the animals were packed off to another place much farther from downtown with concrete cages suited to the purpose and the spirit of the times.

There's no point in rehashing Wikipedia, plus what are the chances that anybody in the group would remember what year parliament had been built, who the architect was and that it is actually called “The National Assembly,” rather than parliament? That's why he always added a little something of his own in the tours. When he was in a good mood and had a cool group like the one today – he would even slip in whole new stories and landmarks that nobody here even suspected existed.

Now, for instance, they're in front of St. Alexander Nevsky and the guide recalls that when they decided to guild the dome, it turned out they didn't have any gold – after all, the country was gearing up for the Balkan Wars and all its resources had to go towards that. But Sofianites started a campaign, three dentists lined up in front of the unfinished cathedral and in four short weeks armed with only pliers and incense, they had extracted more than ten thousand gold teeth from the mouths of otherwise miserly laymen, some of whom had come from as far as Ruse or Turnovo especially to that end, so enthusiastic were they to see the church finished.

But there's no way he can make up the bombing raids of World War II. He just points at the Englishmen and Americans in the group and leaves them to nurse their guilty consciences. To comfort the little girl in the yellow jacket who immediately gets angry at her mother, as if she personally were to blame, he also tells them about the miracle that saved St. Sophia after a bomb fell through its roof, landed on the ancient mosaic floors, but merely bounced off and rolled under the altar, without exploding. Then he goes on to explain to everyone that the city got its name precisely thanks to this basilica, it was one the first things people saw, when entering the city. And St. Sophia means “Holy Wisdom,” Divine Logos, in case they didn't know. “Philo-soph-y” comes exactly from the same root. In fact, the city should really be called Saint Sophia, like San Francisco, Sao Paolo or Saint Petersburg, for example.

Then they head towards the Military Club and as they pass the old Turkish barracks he tells them how rebels set the whole city ablaze to take revenge for the hanging of Vassil Levski, and how thanks to the April Uprising that followed there was not a single old house left downtown, and when they reach the yellow cobblestones,¹ he gathers them all together, points at a furrow in the road and explains that on this exact spot, the Mercedes of one of Bulgaria's most powerful and shady businessmen was blown up, because no matter how many SUVs full of bodyguards he had protecting him, traffic is traffic and there's no getting around it – they should keep that in mind,

¹Laid down in 1909 on the occasion of King Ferdinand's wedding, the yellow cobblestones on Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd have become one of Sofia's biggest landmarks. A bit slippery in the winter, though.

in case any of them are mafiosos or drive armored Mercedes. This is one of his requisite jokes and he surely would have drawn it out even longer if the little girl in the yellow jacket hadn't tugged at her mother and pointed at the yellow cobblestones.

"What is it, sweetie?" The guide breaks off his latest story, but the girl feels shy and turns to her mother.

"Mommy, don't you see? It's the Yellow Brick Road!" Of course, it's a road with yellow bricks, honey, what else could it be, the mother replies drily, glancing rather anxiously at the suddenly inspired guide, who immediately jumps at this response and tells the little girl that he has something really special to show her – the others can follow along if they like.

The Yellow Brick Road, why hadn't he thought of it until now! The road from the *Wizard of Oz*, the ancient via Diagonalis from Rome to Constantinople, which Dorothy follows to reach the Emerald City. Now there's a story!

Practically running, the guide leads them on, paying no attention whatsoever to the Russian Church, despite the fact that the group is ready and willing to snap at least a gigabyte and a half in front of it. They merely pass by the place where the mausoleum with the mummy had been – the mummy had refused to burn when they tried to cremate it – past the royal palace, on whose grounds rise the two ancient hills of Serdica, and past the national bank, whose vault was dug right on top of an underground river, which was why gold seemed to pour in there of its own accord, and only a minute later they are in the underpass in front of the Presidency, where the guide grasps the little girl's hand and leads her to the very end of the Yellow Brick Road.

Of course, only the foundations of the gate have survived, as well as the paving stones worn smooth by time and thousands of feet, but imagination fills in the rest. The gigantic doors with golden studs and door knockers held in lion's teeth, the flags waving from the tops of the five-cornered towers, the stern guards behind the crenellated wall and, of course, the wondrous Emerald City, which Dorothy would enter to find the Wizard of Oz, who alone could help her fly home to Kansas. So it *is* real, mom, the little girl jumps up and down, pointing at the ruins, we'll finally get to go home again, right? The mother doesn't know what to say, in any case she's sort of forgotten what happens in the *Wizard of Oz*, but like all the others in the group, she doesn't believe a word the guide says, it is as clear as day that he's been making stuff up the whole time, but what else could he do in such a dull city? There's no way three dentists could have yanked so many teeth on their own and car bombs leave far more serious traces. To say nothing of this last story – she just wonders if he does that trick with the Yellow Brick Road every time so as to cut the tour short, or only pulls it out it when there are kids in the group.

The group soon starts grumbling about wasting so much time in front of a pile of rocks, so the guide finally tears himself away from the gate and leads them back up the stairs. They come out of the underpass right when the sun is setting over the boulevard in front of them and exactly at that moment from somewhere near Lyulin a tornado swoops down on top of them, following the wave of green lights on the boulevard and only a minute later the vortex will have lifted them into the air to carry them far and wide through the skies of the world – returning everyone to where they belong.

Princesses from Slaveykov

After ten missed calls, she finally calls back and amidst the noise of the elevator she reads aloud the text from 5:30 that morning: “*Got any ground beef at your place? It’s urgent. Five exclamation points.* What’s going on? Please tell me this is some kind of autocorrect gone bad.”

“It’s not. That’s exactly what I meant.”

“Ground beef? I’ve heard of weed being called ‘salad,’ but never ‘ground beef’ before. What I mean is, imagine if I sent you a text like that at 5 a.m...”

“I can imagine. But if you’d answered I definitely would’ve been able to explain it better...”

“Just don’t tell me you’ve started doing drugs, please, spare me that at least. I know how you like to get your drink on, I’m already used to turning off my phone at night, but still – there are limits, you know.”

“Sorry, but it really was urgent and I really did need ground beef. But whatever, it doesn’t matter now. It’s already too late.”

“Actually, it’s early, if you ask me. I’m just taking the dog out.”

“I heard her barking while you were going downstairs... Hahah, actually I was just talking about her with Ivan today.”

“With who?”

“With Ivan from Friday, he was on the night shift and you know how it is – after last call but before they’ve closed the doors it’s the best time for a heart-to-heart.”

“Yeah right, just talking. And then you don’t remember a thing. I’ve seen that enough times.”

“That depends”

“It never depends on anything. But whatever, what were you saying about Liza?”

“Hahah, it’s a bit of a long story. If you want I can call you back so I don’t run up your bill. You’re still one of my free numbers.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay so, me and Ivan have discussed this before, too. All night I was trying to close in on this girl, I even left to see her home...”

“To *close in*, is that the word?”

“It is.”

“Well, if that’s the word, I don’t know why you think anything’s gonna come of it.”

“Precisely, that’s exactly what we were saying – there’s no chance of finding a girl using that scheme. In this case, even less so, because we were supposedly talking for an hour and everything was fine, but in the end when I hauled her towards the cab...”

“*Hauled?*”

“OK, fine, when I suggested we share a cab, she suddenly told me she had a boyfriend. I’m no longer in this game, so I just asked her one more time whether she was sure she had a boyfriend, she said she was and so – I left her to take the cab herself. I went right back to Friday for a nightcap. And Ivan was like totally stunned, ‘cause he thought I’d gotten lucky or however you’re supposed to put it, but when I told him how this chick suddenly remembered her boyfriend and he told me what you always tell me as well – with your kind of lifestyle, that’s what you get. What else could you expect? And he was like it’s happened to me so many times - while I finish closing the bar, while I’m cleaning up, putting on the alarm and going out – the sun has already come up and all those people have flocked to the bus stop to go to work. And when I cut through the park, what do I see? Chicks. Chicks walking their dogs all over the place, man. And I’ve thought to myself – what the hell could you have in common with these girls when you haven’t even gone to bed yet? Nothing! Because she might go out Friday, but it’s always in the back of her mind – tomorrow I’ve got to walk the dog. Get it? And I’m like you’re right, Ivan, you’re absolutely fucking right. Take me, for example... and I told him about Liza, hahah.”

“About *Liza*?”

“Well, about you, of course. Me and Ivan had this mega-heart-to-heart. A bar just sets the stage for that kind of thing, especially when only an hour earlier it was packed, then suddenly all that’s left is the music as a backdrop and the empty glasses to be gathered up. And of course, he’s had his own stories like that, too... so we have a good long chat, hahah. But whatever, suddenly I get really hungry so I tell him, sorry, Ivan, I’m gonna hop over to Mimas. But at Mimas they were out of döner and were like we can make you a hamburger, if you want, but as you know I don’t like their hamburgers ‘cause they fall apart in your hands and so I headed over to the sandwich place on Slaveykov. I was totally up for a princess. The ones there are the bomb, as you know. So I go down there and see that dude, the one who’s been pulling the night shift for ten years now.”

“The tall guy? The one who’s seen so many shitfaced idiots that he could blackmail half of Sofia, that guy?”

“Yep, that’s the one. And he hasn’t changed a bit – the same bags under his eyes, the same haircut, the same look. He just asks you what you want and that’s it. So I tell him to make me a princess, but I’m like a real princess, man, ‘cause I’m damn hungry for one. I’ve dragged my ass here all the way from Friday for it. And I think to myself, now’s the time, man, I feel like this guy is finally gonna start talking to me while I’m waiting for that princess, I’m on a roll today in any case... But he keeps quiet. He just takes the slice of bread with the raw ground beef out of the fridge, puts it in the toaster with his zombie-like movements, turns on the timer and that’s it. Not a single word. But me, I don’t know what got into me, I’m like dude, I’ve known you for ten years now, and you’ve never said shit to me. And he – all calm and everything – is like whaddya want me to say? I’m like I have no idea. Something. Whatever. Like, for example, why are they

called princesses, do you have any idea?² I don't know. That's all he says *I don't know*. But again he says it all serious like – so you can't laugh, but you also can't think up any way to keep the conversation going. I don't know what's gotten into me, but I won't let it drop – OK fine, but haven't you ever thought about it? It's like we're cannibals, man. Just imagine: some foreigner comes to visit you, you take him all around Sofia the whole day, at night you go on a bar crawl and finally: *now, for dessert, let's eat up a princess*. Can you imagine what he'll think? And the dude surely would've said *I don't know* again, but right then two guys walk in to get a pocket sandwich, so he goes to take care of them. And while he's warming up the buns in the toaster and putting on their toppings, my princess is ready, too. *Seasonings? Mayonnaise or ketchup?* He asks me again, but I've already started in again so I'm like, no man, I want a real princess, is it that hard?

“What do you mean, ‘real’? You haven't started using those hourly hotels, have you?”

“That's exactly what he said first: *Buddy, the real ones are at the Paris bar*. We've only got ground-meat princesses here. But I explain to him that I'm serious – I'm talking about a real live princess. I tell him that right before coming here a bartender friend of mine and I were talking about it. All girls want to be princesses when they're little, but when they grow up – they become the exact opposite.”

“What's the opposite of a princess?” The voice can hardly be heard over the phone, drowned out by a sudden bark. “Sorry, she's in heat...”

“Pardon?”

“Never mind, other dogs are always coming after Liza. She's gotten very flirtatious.”

“Yeah, I mentioned that, too.”

“Oh, please. As if you're one to talk...”

“Hahah, of course I'm not.”

“And what happened in the end? My arm is going numb from holding the phone.”

“What happened? The dude started talking! I couldn't believe it. For the first time ever. So you want a *real* princess? I tell him, yes, isn't that what everybody wants? And so he went into high gear and there was no stopping him – so look here, in the strict sense of the word it's a no-go. A princess by definition is the daughter of a ruling monarch, the eldest daughter, if possible. But you need her to be unmarried, because that's what all the fuss is about in fairytales, right? – you have a big fancy wedding and snatch half of the kingdom. That's right, I say, and everybody lives happily ever after. Who doesn't want that... But he's like – dude, as of the present date, September 26, 2013, insofar as we can trust Google, the choice comes down to a single person –

²While building the Youth Center in the city of Vratsa, the construction workers discovered a Thracian grave where some young girl was buried, which more or less coincided with the moment when the local food industry was unveiling a new item consisting of a slice of bread smeared with half a raw meatball. Since there was already a “Vratsa” snack, they decided to name this new sandwich with ground beef in honor of the great discovery and thus at the end of the 1960s, the “Thracian Princess” was born – although the first half of her name was soon chewed up by hungry snackers impatient to place their orders.

Alexandra, the daughter of Henri, the Grand Duke of Luxembourg, who is also the only white sitting princess according to those criteria. Incidentally, she's not half-bad, judging from her picture on Wikipedia, and she's the perfect age for you – born 1991. How possible it is, though, is another question entirely, if I were that kind of magician I'd hardly be pulling nightshift to sell sandwiches to the likes of you, now would I? But in any case – at this point he's firing all this off like a robot – after Alexandra, you find yourself in over your head real quick – starting with the seventeen-year-old Iman of Jordan and Their Royal Highnesses Azemah and Fadzillah of Brunei, passing through the Arab harems where no non-Muslim is ever going to set foot and finally arriving at the six royal heiresses of legal age at the court of the King-Inseminator of Swaziland and the Tongan princess Lātūfuipeka Tukuaho. Her name says it all. Those are the princesses who are available. All the other unmarried ones (including the Belgian, Dutch, Danish and Japanese princesses) are still underage. You're gonna have a hard time pulling off a romance with any of them without doing some time. But now, if we expand the definition..."

"Hang on a sec, my arm is totally asleep from holding the phone... OK... I'm back. So what were you saying... if you expand the definition?"

"So he was like, if we expand it, we can include all unmarried aristocrats, not just the daughters of a monarch. In that case you can count on a lot more Europeans, but as you know very well – after centuries of keeping it all in three or four families, don't be expecting much (besides ever-improving prenatal diagnostics). Fine then, so you'll ask me – and not without justification – why does everybody want to find a princess? The one and only reason lies in the stability of the notions we create for ourselves. Now, when he laid that one on me, he flat-out blew my mind, I swear. He's like, it's the same as how kids draw little houses with red roofs, a smoking chimney, a wooden fence, a doghouse and all the rest, but in reality they all live in apartment blocks and high rises here?... He goes on: Here's where it all comes from – how did people live back in the day? And I'm talking real people, not aristocrats. They lived in shacks. No hot water, no sewage pipes, no education, they had a few clothes from their dowery and that was it. And nobody gave a shit about them. They had no rights, nothing... While princesses were another game entirely. They ate regularly, bathed whenever they felt like it, slept in real beds, they could read and write, they were respected, in short, you get my drift. Nowadays, almost all girls everywhere that fairytales are told de facto live exactly that kind of life. The only difference is the lack of a title. So, if we're talking that kind of a princess – a good, well-bred, pretty girl – then I can help you. And I (after I managed to pick my jaw up off the floor, I mean) was like: that's it, man, what more could I ask? What do I need to do? And he's like: it's very simple. I'll make you a very special princess, you just need to get the ingredients. Give it to the girl of your choice walking by here, she takes a bite and she's yours. Forever. And you catch me drift, right? We are on Slaveykov and Rakovska, you have no idea how many fine girls pass by here every day..."

"Only someone like you would fall for that."

"That's exactly what I asked him – has anybody ever fallen for it? But he just laughed – of course, he says, what, you think you're the first one to come here and ask me for 'real' princesses? You think you're the only one who's thought of it? And then completely business-like – you've got two hours to find the ingredients."

"And so instead of going to the first 24-shop, you call me to get your ground beef, is that it?"

“Well, it turns out it’s not that simple. For it to work, he tells me, you’ve got to get the bread from the first mega-pretty girl you meet. Otherwise you’re dead in the water. So what could I do, I was like: relax, man, no problem, and I go out to look for a girl. But the street is deserted, there’s not a soul in sight, let alone pretty girls. So I tell myself – where would they be nearby at this time of night? The only thing I could think of was BIAD – there was nowhere else at that hour. So I tear down Rakovska, then turn onto Gurko and try to go inside, but the bouncers are like: we can’t let you in, no shorts allowed. They pull a dress code on me, can you believe it? I try to explain that it’s hella important, but they can tell from a thousand miles away that I’m not the BIAD type, no way. And right at that moment I see this awesome chick coming out, looking at her phone and heading off on foot. I take off after her and I’m like: here’s the deal I’ve got to buy bread from you, it’s super important. Of course, she doesn’t get it at all, but in the end she’s like – you’re cute, I like you. So if it’s only about some bread, no worries, I know a 24-hour store near my place, you just gotta pay for the cab. So we go there, get the bread, I drop her off at her place and bring the bread back to the dude. And he’s like – 40 minutes so far, we’re doing well. Now it’s time for the cheese. You gotta get the cheese from the ugliest girl you’ve been with.”

“Who is?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ve only used her for booty calls these last few months.”

“*Booty calls? You are a gentleman.*”

“Hahah, thanks. But whatever, I grab a cab and head straight to her place in Beli Brezi. There’s no point in calling her to ask where she is, we had already agreed on the booty call. I called from down in front of her entryway and she was like: *c’mon up, but just so you know, I don’t have time to get dressed. I’ve left the door open.* So I take the elevator, go into her place but instead of going to her, I head straight for the kitchen. I open up the fridge and dig around. No real cheese. Just a chunk of parmesan. But I’m like, parmesan, it’s still cheese, right? And I’m just slipping it into my pocket when she comes in. Wearing only a thong. And she’s like, are you crazy or what? You got far better places to be sticking your nose, and you’re wasting time with my fridge?”

“So what did you tell her? I’d be very curious to know.”

“The truth, what else!”

“About the cheese?”

“Of course, a true gentleman never lies, hahah. I needed to get rid of her anyways. Plus, I’d told the cabbie to wait for me downstairs, otherwise I’d run out of time. And so, all I had left was the ground beef from you. I started calling you already from the cab, I wrote a text, called again, but as you know – it was all in vain. So I go back to the dude and I’m like – there’s no way to get through, she turns off her ringer at night now, and there’s no point in going over there because the doorbell doesn’t work. It’s never gonna happen. And the dude looks at me somehow more friendly-like and says: fine, it doesn’t have to be your ultimate girl, any of your top three would work. And I’m about to tell him that there aren’t any others for me, but then I’m like: he has no way of knowing. So I tell him – OK, lemme call. And I pretend I’m talking, being all charming, laughing – in short, an Oscar performance – I even cover up the mouthpiece to ask him if ground meat from a meatball counts, ‘cause that’s all she has. He said it was no problem and so – I get six meatballs from the same store as the bread, bring them to him, look at my watch, I’ve made it

with not a second to spare, but the dude just looks at me with those bags under his eyes and is like: sorry, man, those tricks don't work on me."

"Ha, like I told you, he was bullshitting you the whole time."

"And that's what I tell him. Why would I lie, man, I really got 'em from that chick. And he was like: I've made so many of these princesses before and there's one thing I know – if you'd really gone to see your girl about the ground beef, you definitely would have brought her back here. So I try to bullshit him again, saying the girl was at work in the morning, that her office was super far away, that she had to walk her dog first, but he was like: Sorry, your time's up, there's no way to make the princess now..."

"That's not true," she interrupts him.

"Pardon?"

"I've got ground beef in the fridge." Her voice is once again warm. "It can happen."

*

The recipe for real princesses: Spread a thin layer of ground beef on two slices of bread. Generously grate cheese over them. Turn on the toaster oven and put the bread inside. While waiting for them to be ready, go into the other room for a coffee, you have so much to say to each other. You don't drink your coffee or talk.

While you're together, your princesses burn.

Test

“It’s just one line,” the inspector begins reading in his trained, flat tone, “but it is not a hat or a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. Actually, it does not have a definite shape at all - it depends solely on what point of view you chose. It’s easiest from some high-rise in Gotse Delchev or from the roundabout on Tsarigradsko Highway, it’s the most magical from the metro bridge in Musagenitsa, and the most authentic when there’s fog or you’re far away. It is Sofia’s most urban landscape, yet the roofs and chimneys only get in the way. But if you have really and truly seen it at least once, if this outline has made an impression on you, you will be able to sketch it out immediately, no matter how cloudy it is up there.”

Here the inspector closes the folder of instructions, takes out a blank sheet of A4 paper, signs the top corner and hands it through the window to yet another resident waiting to be verified.

“You can’t be serious, inspector.”

“Indeed, I am. You need to be inspired, sir. You’re supposed to start drawing now...”

“Draw what?”

“Vitosha! The full view of the mountain. As seen from Sofia.”

“Is that why you called me here, for some make-believe art class?”

“A test of your cognitive abilities, to be precise. Please draw from memory, sir.”

“Wait, what am I supposed to draw? You said so yourself – it doesn’t have any definite shape!”

“It doesn’t, it always depends on where you look at it from. Now please...”

“But I’m a 100% native.”

“Then you shouldn’t have a problem confirming that.”

“I was born in Sofia, both my parents were, too, what more do you need to check?”

“Oh, there’s more, sir, of course there’s more.”

With that, the residency permit inspector gives his most bureaucratic smile, hands him the blue mechanical pencil emblazoned with the logo of Sofia Municipality, and the first part of this dialogue ends. Actually, only the direct speech ends. Now comes the time for some explanations, since we have not yet lived through the years preceding the time of this story and because far too many things will have happened in between.

First and foremost, the obvious will have happened – Sofia kept growing, feeding on the whole nation’s hopes of something better. It gorged itself on fresh manpower, digesting the lives of thousands of raw souls and thus grew fat with new neighborhoods in all directions both within and beyond the Ring Road.

And so, for every new problem, Sofianites readily blamed the newcomers, *That commie Zhivkov may have had his faults, but as far as residency permits are concerned – hats off, he was right on.* At first, the idea of reintroducing them roved aimlessly across the deepest abysses of social media. Come election time, though, it reared up again. Some fringe candidate put it officially as the first point in her political platform, desperate to win the hearts of the hardcore locals. Of course, in the end somebody else became mayor, but there it was - the ball was already rolling down the slopes of Vitosha. Soon after that yet another crisis hit. Somebody trotted out statistics about double-digit unemployment and - *those invaders are stealing our jobs* - blue blood boiled and the idea of residency permits suddenly turned out to be a very good solution. The only one actually, *after all, we locals have the right to defend ourselves, don't we?*

The outcome of the referendum was clear from the start. (Only Sofianites were allowed to vote). Everyone wanted to keep their jobs. It was very easy to forget how and when they had come to live here themselves. The problem with the last ones to jump on the bandwagon still remained, though. They formally had the right to residency permits, but did they really deserve them? Here is precisely where the newly created Inspectorate stepped in – it alone could verify whether you were truly a Sofianite or not. And what better way to check than this simple test? After all, Vitosha is right in front of your eyes every day, you can't get it wrong. Even if you can't draw.

"I'm sorry, but I can't accept this, sir." The inspector returns the test to the resident after only a quick glance at the crooked line. "But don't worry, you get one more chance. Use the back side of the sheet."

"But I can't draw! Why are you asking me to do this?"

"Believe me, sir, the test has nothing to do with drawing. We are looking for something else entirely. Take a moment and rack your memory – where is Mt Cherni Vrah, where are the Chimneys..."

"What chimneys? I thought you said they only get in the way..."

"I'm afraid I can't give you any more hints, sir."

The would-be resident picks up the paper again and starts sketching something out. He tries to cheat by looking out the window, but the day is cloudy and it's no use. Finally, he is more or less ready. His outline shows Mt Kamen Del higher than Mt Cherni Vrah, though, and – since he definitely knows it should be the other way around – he erases what he sees as the problematic sections and applies the corrective elevations. Despite this, the inspector only needs one glance to decide.

"That's not Vitosha. I'm sorry, sir.³"

"But I've lived here my whole life, you have no right!"

"The tower on Mt Kopitoto is missing, sir, if you had at least noted that..."

"So you're resettling me because of some TV tower, is that it?"

"I'm not the person who will resettle you, the Commission makes the final decision, as you know – they take into account many other factors, but I can tell you with certainty that you have not passed the test. I cannot say that black is white, sir."

³ Please see Appendix B for a correct answer to the test.

Only now does the resident in question realize that the situation is rather dire. Resettlement was unconditional. He had witnessed himself how a neighbor in his high-rise had been chased out of her apartment. She was given exactly five days to put her affairs in order before being packed into a Dacia and chucked out beyond the Ring Road once and for all. But that case was clear, she had come to work in Sofia less than two years earlier, there was no way the Inspectorate could let her stay... His own situation was completely different.

“Please, there must be some other way you can test me. As for Vitosha, I live on the second floor, I don’t even have a view of it. But I really am a Sofianite. Give me another test and I’ll prove it easily.”

“There’s no point, sir, believe me.” But still, the inspector takes out four unlabeled bottles of mineral water and presents him with his new task.

“What’s this now?”

“Another test, of course, isn’t that what you asked for? You must identify which one of these waters can be tasted in downtown Sofia.”

“You mean by the Baths?”

“I mean identify the taste of the water, the same taste well-known even to the ancient Romans, to be maximally precise.”

The inspector unscrews the caps and hands him the bottles one by one. The resident is tense, he never expected anything like this. He had lived in Sofia all his life, it seems surreal he could be kicked out of here just because of Vitosha. He definitely had not voted for this.

He asks for glasses and carefully pours the water from the bottles into them. He first smells it, then takes a sip, imagining that this, most likely, is what sommeliers do. Afterwards he even pats his lips with a napkin. He takes a few more sips, straining to recall something; anxious, he is bathed in sweat, and the next few sips of cold water hit the spot, allowing him to calm down and give some kind of answer.

But in any case his answer is wrong. It’s a trick question, aimed only at those who have actually tasted Sofia. None of those bottles could truly capture that. The water by the Baths is always drunk warm, that’s the key. Anyone who’s tried it will realize this immediately. (As long as they’ve really gotten a true taste of it and so on and so forth, but when all is said and done, there is no point in giving away the answer to a question which no one has ever gotten right after flunking the Vitosha part of the test.)

Endekaria

“Welcome,” A. smiles at the next participant, handing him the program along with a specially hand-painted wad of banknotes made from a linen-cotton blend. “Your subsidy from the NDK⁴ bank.”

The people hand over their invitations and smile back. Most of them immediately get the idea – after all, the topic of the conference is the crisis in culture. Others, however, will need to have it spelled out for them, but in the meantime so many other things will have happened that it’s unlikely they’ll get around to it.

The conference begins. Hall 1 is bursting along its concrete seams with hundreds of authors and artists who have arrived to discuss the financial, moral, creative and you-name-it **CRISIS**, written out expressly with caps lock and bold. Things had even gone so far that no one at all was interested in culture – not the people, not the government, not anyone else, besides the artists themselves – and in their case their interest only went so far as their own work. The future honorary president A. would recall this on every anniversary of the subsequent events, but the more time that passed, the more his words would become incomprehensible to listeners and only five short years later hardly anyone would even believe there had been a time in which no one could earn a living from culture, even if he had talent and everything else.

The speeches at the conference continue, from which it becomes clear that decisive measures must be taken. Producers and actors cannot stop repeating that they’ve done enough talking and that now is the time to act. After that, some tenor takes the mic and repeats the very same thing, adding a spontaneous rendition of “Onwards, Enlightened People”⁵ for a more convincing conclusion. Somewhere at this point the floor is taken by A. himself, whose speech does not sound as good without the violins and close-up shots of wild applause, which would later be added to recorded history, but still, it has the necessary effect:

“We’re dependent on some colored paper, my friends” – that’s exactly what A. says, immediately seizing Hall 1’s attention. “And there’s more than enough colored paper.”

A. tosses out a wad of the colorful bills that would soon become the world’s most stable currency. After all, they would be backed by culture, and not by some virtual gold standard or whatnot.

“Who’s complaining that they don’t have any money? NDK Bank will subsidize each and every one of your projects!” Here even those who haven’t quite caught on yet join in the wild applause, taking him for a real representative of some new bank that would finally give them the respect and support they deserve. A., of course, has no way of knowing this,

⁴ NDK, pronounced *en-de-ka*, is the Bulgarian acronym for the National Palace of Culture, a hulking socialist-era building in central Sofia housing numerous concert halls, exhibition spaces and leather clothing retailers.

⁵ A patriotic hymn dedicated to the patron saints of Bulgarian culture, St. Cyril and Methodius. [Spoiler Alert: The story ends by quoting the culminating lyrics of the hymn.]

and so is fired up all the more: “We don’t need a state, now that there’s NDK Bank! I declare our independence from Bulgaria!”

New rounds of applause, this time far more spontaneous, since everybody is sick of the state.

“Long live...” Here A pauses to think what exactly should live on and says the first thing that pops into his head: “Endekaria! Long live independent Endekaria!”

Hall 1 explodes in classic conference style, and when everything quiets down a few minutes later, one old school critic takes the floor, apparently speaking seriously, as usual:

“An excellent idea: the first building-state in the Balkans and the world! The Vatican of culture! I move to vote on a declaration.”

The problem wasn’t with the declaration, however, which in any case passed with unprecedented unanimity and which would one day become the most-read document in the history of contemporary art. The problem was that there were also journalists in Hall 1, who rushed to announce the news with caps lock and bold, which resulted in **A NEW VATICAN IN SOFIA!**, which, after a few rounds of copy-paste by the lazier media outlets, who used Facebook as a primary news source, became: **HAS NDK SECEDED FROM BULGARIA?** Of course, once the building was surrounded by the riot police, who had been immediately alerted, the question marks disappeared, leaving only the threat by cultural separatists, who were just then streaming out of Hall 1 to attack the modest cocktail reception in the foyer.

In the future film about Endekaria, the next three days in the besieged NDK would be recreated as far more epic than they were in reality. Indeed, there would be clashes, but the heroic deaths of the virtuoso violinist and the poetess were nevertheless later embellishments (that’s usually the case with love stories in such films, anyway). The truth is that the riot police didn’t know what to do – they had arrived more as a precaution and no one could have imagined that writers could be so stubborn. The government found itself in a fix – it did not want to slaughter Sofia’s cultural elite, nor did it want to become a laughingstock. The news story spread around the world, first as a novelty, later on CNN’s World Report. The future honorary president A. gave interviews with the ever-growing conviction that *everyone has the right to self-determination, NDK is the new Kosovo, and much more*. No one, however, could say whether everything would have turned out the same in the end if it hadn’t been for the international support of artists from around the world. Danny Boyle, Banksy and Victor Pelevin wrote letters of solidarity, Christo promised to wrap NDK, while the Beastie Boys up and came to Sofia and joined the Endekarians.

The question would finally be settled, however, only after Jimmy Wales announced that in a gesture of solidarity, the Wikipedia servers would be moved into the basement of NDK. Endekaria was the ideal option for the complete independence he had long since sought. Faced with the threat of losing all the information about the world’s civilization and culture, America and Europe beseeched Bulgaria to accept the new status quo. The government called off the riot police *so as not to disturb the creative processes* and two years later even an improvised consulate was opened in a booth near the NDK flag poles. Then everything just kept rolling of its own accord. After five short years, Endekaria was already the greatest attraction on the Balkans, beating Hagia Sophia and the Acropolis hands-down,

with millions of tourists visiting programs and exhibits in the halls of the new Vatican, while Endekarians became the most prosperous and civilized nation in the world.

Without a doubt, Endekaria shall first annex the park about the building-state; then, when the right moment comes, it shall seize crisis-riven Sofia itself. A little later, it shall occupy the whole of Bulgaria as well, along with its neighbors, and in no more than 50 years Endekaria shall be an empire, because – as its anthem has already prophesied to the Endekarians – *you conquer with the spirit those countries vanquished by your sword.*

Lasting

That mutt in front of his high-rise in Lyulin finally comes in handy. The repulsive mongrel with the gouged-out right eye and mud-caked fur is dragging itself on its front paws towards the dumpster, rubbing the enormous tumor on its groin up along a crate of old pickles, helping to make this story last longer than ten shameful seconds, and, if all goes well, involve at least two more positions. The mutt, which had made her so happy when it had sauntered over to them, now gets run over by the Titan⁶ truck, the garbage jockeys scoop up the whole mess with a shovel and toss it straight into the compactor, and while the gore mixes with bags of ripped-out tiles, fish innards, onion peels and old sneakers, she gets up and turns around on the back seat, hiking up the skirt she will be leaving in even higher.

Things had started right before he left for the seaside. There was some cool show with new local bands and lots of ouzo at this open-air bar in Borissova and during one of the last songs which neither of them could now remember, he had simply put his arm around her waist, she had glanced at him in surprise at first, but she must have liked what she saw because in the end she hadn't blown him off at all. Only after the second encore did he think to ask her name and it was somewhere around then that they had started in on the big summer ouzos at the bar, such that exactly what they talked about and how they hooked up shall remain mere speculation (which was why, incidentally, they always told the story of how they had met in some strange past tense, always making sure to point out that even though it hadn't been mega-romantic, it still hadn't been half bad – except for a short time the next morning, of course, but they had easily been able to make up for that...)

They were in a terrible rush to get to the airport, which is surely why they got there at least an hour early. They were the first to check in, then they started kissing, supposedly for goodbye or farewell, it still wasn't quite clear, but instead of passport control, they ended up in the parking lot. Straight in the back seat.

After they had had coffee on their first morning, he had gotten into his Renault and gone to catch up with the others at Gradina Beach, without any great expectations whatsoever that she would call him again (she had said she was thinking about heading to Lozenets, so if nothing was biting around Sozopol maybe he'd text her to see how she was). But wouldn't you know, already on Saturday she called him and asked how exactly to find the campgrounds and just an hour later showed up with a carload of girlfriends. Lozenets turned out to be a lot more boring than they had expected and so they had come to see how things were at their place. Their first meeting was a little awkward, of course, and resulted in a half-kiss somewhere between the cheek and the chin, but that evening things fell into place. The boys from the campground besieged her girlfriends. Neither he nor she had to worry about them. The next day he suggested they check out the mouth of the Ropotamo, she hadn't ever been there and immediately took him up on it, but somehow it got late and in the end they simply forgot to come back.

That night, just when the campfire on the beach flared up, he kissed her for the first time without the ouzo being to blame. In response, she told him (she couldn't keep it from him any longer) that

⁶ Titan – undoubtedly the best name in the universe for a garbage collection company.

in September she was leaving to do her Master's in Barcelona.

Back in the parking lot, he stops for a second and makes her turn around – he knows very well that when he comes, the end of summer comes, too. For a moment, he imagines her in Park Guell, in Rambla del Mar or in some little bar tucked away in the alleys where autumn never comes. Yes, she belongs there, he can't fool himself, and not at some bus stop amidst the panel-block jungle of Hope VI⁷. And yet, he could still steal just a few more minutes before the gate for Barcelona closes – as long as he can concentrate and forget that her arms are around him. As long as he can turn the clock ahead an hour and find himself back in workaday Sofia between September and the coming year, where she would never be. Otherwise she would leave right now.

He closes his eyes and instead of her naked back, sees two Gypsy kids digging in the dumpster in front of them. They jump out, having found his used rubbers, get back in their cart with the mangy horse and blow them up like balloons. They never spit.

The weird thing was when they met, he could last as long as he needed to. Not only because of the summer-loads of ouzo, but also because everything was so spontaneous that it could end whenever they decided to end it. It was only when he found out she was leaving that he really started caring. Before that the whole thing had just somehow been going through the motions.

The smell of piss and rust at the Central Train Station, the traffic jams on Tsarigradsko, sweaty matrons on a crammed, run-down city bus. Black slush at the bus stops.

There by the campfire on the beach, for the first time lasting became a problem. But lasting was far from the whole story, they had forgotten about the others and with his Renault they had made the rounds of all the sunrises and sunsets the Bulgarian coast had to offer. She didn't talk about Barcelona. He didn't ask...

Patchwork insulation on apartment blocks, Chalga music in Students' Town, crumbling sidewalks, the seven-winged ghost of communism with all its aborted socialist fetuses.

He lets her lie still beneath him. He doesn't know how much time has passed, but it has surely been more than ten seconds. This reassures him, his technique for lasting is working. Who knows, if he keeps going, the gate might just close before they leave the parking lot, she'll miss her flight and then, who knows, there are actually so many more things in Sofia besides mutts, trash and sweaty matrons on city buses, they could have a great time here, too, he thinks.

And that's it – a moment later summer comes.

To an end.

⁷ Sofia boasts some really bombastic names for its panel block residential quarters - Hope (parts I - VI), Youth (parts I-IV, plus part IA), Comradeship (parts I and II, this double partition comes rather naturally) and finally Freedom (the one and only, located on the very outskirts of Hope). More on this subject, when we get to "My Mother's Birthday at Youth II".

A Girl from Sofia

As a first paragraph on the topic, here's the following quote:

"I, the guy who waved at you on Bus 604 seeks you, the green-eyed, red-haired girl who smiled back at me." This message was pasted up all over Sofia, and the love-struck romantic even created a special email account, iseektheone@gmail.com, at which he is waiting to hear from the beautiful anonymous girl from the bus."

Surely people just wanted to help – at least the poor guy's luck might turn around, even if their own never did, or they wanted to somehow play the romantics themselves, or to drop a hint to someone to get their act together, it must have been something along those lines. In any case, near the end of April 2012 this bit of news started spreading over profiles and sites, something positive amidst all those murders and lay-offs, something that shows that love still exists, that in Sofia stories unfold that are worthy of a *Hollywood romance*, as the Late News put it as a kicker.

These sorts of news stories are flash-in-the-pan, of course, since so many other things deserve to be reported on, plus there's no full-time reporter assigned to the "feel-good" beat to follow up on it. And so – if we wait around on the media, we'll never find out what happened. Our only option is to find the guy and ask him ourselves. We send a message to iseektheone@gmail.com, and while waiting for the reply, we might as well jot down several possible endings.

For instance, the girl from the bus may have long since learned about his search, but the truth is that she's used to smiling like that, it's not easy being a pretty girl and having everyone constantly staring at you, maybe smiling is her job, she might do liquor promos at clubs or hand out samples of French cheese at the supermarket. She could, however, have a boyfriend, a serious one, openly declared on Facebook, or a brand-new one, who arrived along with the first beers and nights out by the National Theater, or maybe she is sick of her boyfriend at this point, but they live together and split the rent, which makes things slightly complicated, or maybe things are a lot more complicated, since that second little line has already shown up, either before or after the ring which the boy had no way of seeing through the window of the bus...

Perhaps somebody has already written an email. *I'm not much of a red-head and I don't take the 604, but I really like your idea. I didn't believe such guys existed anymore. If that girl doesn't write to you soon, I'd be happy to meet up. And even if she does write you, I'd still be happy to meet up, you never know. :)* Maybe he answered her, maybe they met and hit it off, maybe it turns out that he answers and meets absolutely every girl who writes to him, maybe he does it only to make sure she's not the one he seeks, or maybe it's all just a front to get some regular action. Maybe by May he's already fallen in love with some other girl, in any case he clearly falls in love easily, and when the girl from the bus finally does write to him, he doesn't care anymore and the only trace left of the whole deal are the dog-eared stickers pasted to the backseats of 604.

Perhaps the girl from the bus wrote to him and voila! only a day later she is smiling at him again face to face as they test the waters with a pizza in *UGO*, and the waters turn out to be so inviting that they keep on seeing each other every day, even during final exams and before they know it they're listening to their favorite song at the Spirit Fest in Burgas and then camp out somewhere down south or in Greece, it doesn't matter where, the important thing is that it will have a happy ending, at least as long as the weather is good, but we don't have time to think it through much

beyond that because it turns out the boy has written me and we find out that the truth is something else entirely:

Hi, Shpatov,

As a rule I don't bother answering messages at this address anymore; you're not the first to ask me what happened, but I've read a few of your stories online and I think you might be able to make sense of this one better than most. Things worked out rather strangely with the so-called girl – of course, I never assumed it would be a breeze – but it's easier if I just send you all of our emails and Skype chats instead of trying to explain it. I'm not much of a writer, after all. And it wouldn't be much of an explanation in any case:D Anyway, I'm pasting everything we wrote into a file for you – as for the ending, I think you'll figure it out for yourself.

Cheers from the seaside,

Chris

We immediately open the file and start reading the first message from the girl, which arrived a few days after the ads went up and long before the sappy news reports and so on:

Hi, Christian,

I'm the girl who smiled at you on the 604, I remember you very well and I'm truly delighted by all your attention and everything you've done for my sake. Except that, Christian, the truth about me is slightly different from what you think it is and for that reason – for your own good, I mean – it's best that we don't see each other. You are a great guy and I'm sure that very soon you'll meet the perfect girl for you, but believe me - it won't be me.

Wishing you the very best,

Sophie from Sofia

>>>

We already know from Chris that Sophie really was the one he sought, but at that moment he obviously couldn't see that yet. He had gotten a lot of spam on his mail, all sorts of jerks had written to bust his balls, so this is what he wrote back:

Hahah, so whats this awful truth about you, are you a trannie or what? I know trolls when I see them. And whats this Sophie from Sofia? Give me a break

>>>

Hi again, Christian,

I knew you'd respond like that, so I'm not mad at you. Sophie really is my name, Sophia to be more precise. No matter where you put the accent, Sophia means "Wisdom," but I doubt that's news to you. And that's my name, Christian, because in a certain sense I really am

wisdom itself. You've surely heard a lot of things about wisdom, but I bet you've never heard that it's like a woman with three eyes – one watching the past, the other seeing the present, and the third – looking towards the future. Well, Christian, I am that woman. I hope that now you realize why it is better for you that we don't meet. (But since I really can see the future with my right eye, I want to tell you even now that I know that you'll understand where I'm coming from, believe me.)

Eternally yours,

Sophie

This is followed by a few messages, in which Chris grows ever more convinced that it's not someone trolling him and gets ever more confused by Sophie's explanations, especially her assurance that he will understand where she's coming from. He insists that they meet, he at least wants her number, and when he doesn't get it, he gives her his. *We have to meet up, Sophie, ever since I saw you on the bus I can't stop thinking about you.* In the next message she clearly takes pity on him and at least gives him her Skype, that way it will be easier for her to explain.

Hello, sophiawisdom! I would like to add you on Skype. Chris88 – read the automatic box that popped up, even though if it had been up to him, he would have thought up something a lot more beautiful. She replied immediately, or at least that's what it seems like from the file he sent.

<<hi Chistian:)

>>Hi Sophie:)

>>Great to finally meet you, even if its only online:)

<<:)

[Chris's next message comes five minutes later, he's clearly spent a long time mulling it over and rewriting it before he sent it]

>>Sophie, like I told you, I would like to believe that its really you, in any case no other girl has written me, but if we assume that you really are the girl from Bus 604, what youre telling me about your third eye simply cant be true. Because I saw you very well – you had two eyes :D

<<its just a whole lot easier for me to blink with my third eye. I don't actually need it to see the present

>>Meaning?

<<the present only lasts a moment

<<when it passes, it immediately becomes the past and i can see it with my other eye

<<plus, before it becomes the past, i can see it with my eye for the future, if its that important

>>Hahah, thats a good system

>>But doesnt it make you cross-eyed?

<<true, I am going to need glasses soon:)
>>So that third eye, what do you really need it for, since you dont use it?
<<i have to have three eyes, thats the whole idea
>>!?
<<its simple – i am a metaphor for wisdom, chris
>>Hm... so youre Saint Sophia, is that it?
>>Now I get it – so that’s why you’re in Sofia!
<<no no no, youve got it all wrong! Saint Sophia is a man
>>LOL, yeah right...
<<seriously, google it if you don’t believe me. he is actually much more than a man. and much wiser than i am, thats for sure
>>Then who are you?
<<i already told you – the idea of wisdom as a woman with three eyes
>>Ive never heard of that idea
<<yes, which is why you could see me ...
>>???
<<if i had been some really important idea, then you wouldnt have been able to see me
>>You lost me completely:)
<<ok. have you ever seen an idea in real life?
>>Yes
>>You:D
<<besides me, i dont count to anyone anymore
>>Well, no then
<<exactly! if i were a good idea, the gravity of the whole database of ideas would not let me go and would keep me in its orbit. but as i told you – i am a completely forgotten idea. thats why i can escape the forces of the database and materialize here easily
>> So why cant we meet then if youre here?
<<the problem is that i know what will happen, chris
>>And what will happen?
<<we will agree to meet at the priest, you will see me again and take off running, because you will realize that all of this is true
>>It wont happen like that, nobody meets at the Priest anymore:)

<<so where, then?

>>In the underpass in front of the SU station, it's much more convenient⁸. Looks like you've been checking out Sofia with one eye only

<<on the contrary! this city is always an eyeful – for all three of my eyes, i mean:) i absolutely adore sofia!

>>Hey, that's my line ...

<<no, it's not, believe me, when you see how hideous i am with that third eye in the middle of my forehead, you will run away asap

>>So why don't you use your system with keeping it closed?

<<if its a really important moment then i cant control myself

>>So that means it's important for you, too?

<<of course, chris, youre a great guy. nobody has ever done anything like this for me<3

>>So lets hang out, then! You will see, it wont happen like you think

<<if it doesnt happen in the next hour, i dont know if it ever will ...

>>I will be there then:)

Here Chris's file ends without a single bite about their meeting itself. Looking it over carefully, however, I think that everything worked out all right and Chris found a way to solve the problem with the third eye that had plagued Sophie so terribly in her dealings with people from the normal material world. An hour later in the underpass in front of the Sofia University station, he simply brought her a pair of glasses – sunglasses or prescription, it doesn't matter, what's important is that this way Sophie could easily use her system for seeing frames from the past and future and didn't need to worry anymore that he would run away when he saw how ugly she really was with those three eyes.

Sophie's most beautiful smile lit up her face at the idea of the glasses, it was quite a clever solution and would surely have made everything all right, if there hadn't been yet another problem. If he now truly believed that she was wisdom who could see the past, present and future, the idea would no longer be completely forgotten and hence she would once again dematerialize and be pulled back by the gravity of where she had come from. Only then would Chris finally realize that she had been right and there was really no way for them to be together. Still, he couldn't help himself and hurried to kiss her before she had vanished.

The kiss lasted at least five minutes.

It's not that Sophie wasn't enjoying it, but there were lots of people in the underpass, a few of them even seemed to recognize him from the TV report or her from the stickers all over town, in any case – the point is that they had already attracted too much attention. So she took him by the hand and told him that it was time for them to go. *Will you take me with you then?* Chris asked,

⁸ It's true – it really is more convenient. Everyone used to meet at the Priest – a statue of the last Bulgarian patriarch before the Ottomans, Patriarch Evtimiy, since it towers in the very heart of Sofia. But now that the metro station below Sofia University is finally up and running, it makes much more sense to meet there, check a map if you don't believe it...

but the girl didn't say anything more. They just started walking up towards Borissova and when they reached the Lily Pond, she told him the truth.

And the truth was that she really liked him, too. Nobody had ever done anything like that for her, he had impressed her so much that she decided to think up something really special for him as well. She was glad that he was such a good guy – OK, maybe he shouldn't have been so quick to believe her, and still... *As you saw, I can put on quite a show as well, y'know* (We find solid evidence her story was made up in the fact that they actually arranged to meet at the SU station, as he had suggested, rather than at the Priest, as she had "foreseen.")

After which followed all those evenings and parks that usually follow in Sofia at that time and in such company. Then it was time to go to the seaside, where Chris had written us from while Sophie snickered somewhere over his shoulder, but it's hard to imagine it much beyond that, as so many things can happen between a boy and a girl, in this case all good, we hope...

In any case, all that's left in the end is to check whether we guessed right. I highlight the last few paragraphs, paste them into a message to Chris and send it to iseektheone@gmail.com. The message bounces back and it turns out the address no longer exists.

Personally, I take that as a confirmation.