

SUDDEN STREETS
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translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

Sofia, February 2012

I met a man. I didn't notice him until he began to play. Then I didn't notice anything else. His eyes were closed, his face and body rippled like flowing lava, his hands were so quick it's as if they didn't exist. When he stopped playing, he turned to stone.

I took out the first thing my hands came across – one of the two photos of the city that Ossip had given me. An old, dilapidated building, with the sign for a jazz club by the entrance, and an arcade at the end of the street. I scribbled a few words on the back of the photo, went over and handed it to him. He looked at the photo, read what I had written, and looked at me – his eyes were a faded blue, like frozen lakes. You fall into them – and hit the bottom. He was about to say something, but people were crowding around him. I heard them praising him, asking him when he was taking off. That's how I found out that he was leaving immediately. Some plane would take him to a city where I had never been. He left. I met a man. I never spoke to him, but I love him and want to see him again.

Sofia, late November 2011

Old people. Sometimes, when I'm out walking, I see one or two of them pressed up against the windows, blinking with tired eyes. Sometimes there's a smile on their faces, but in most cases they're frozen in a grimace somewhere between bitterness and curiosity. When they live on one of the upper floors, only a silhouette stands out against the pane. Something always makes me imagine how they've lived, how they pictured their future and how they now get by.

Once I waved at an old woman – the sun was setting on her face. She pressed against the glass so hard that I thought she would break it. She didn't. Her smile literally knocked my legs out from under me. Ever since then I've avoided going down her street.

I don't say "hello" to them. Sometimes I even force myself not to look at them, even though they are everywhere. You just have to lift your head... Maybe that's exactly why

people walk down the streets staring straight ahead or with their eyes fixed on their feet. No one wants to see what's in store for them.

It always seems to me that in that black hole of a room, the backdrop against which the gray head is outlined lurks at least one secret that deserves to be told. Secrets are the crossroads from which stories begin.

I had also seen him many times. He lives on the third floor, I had never run into him on the street, but sometimes, when I lifted my gaze towards his glassed-in balcony, I got the feeling that his glasses were knocking against the window.

A couple of times it occurred to me that he knows what's in my shopping bag better than I do. I wasn't annoyed by the dogged surveillance I suspected he was doing. He probably needed a daily stroll, albeit vicariously, because he was surely unable to walk. Perhaps he was afraid of the thought of climbing three flights of stairs. Surely, when he'd moved into that apartment in his younger years, he had been happy to live on the third floor, in a place with big windows. Now he probably finds his home impractical, hard to heat and uncomfortable. "And those kids from the school on the corner are always screaming their heads off... back in my day, we knew what discipline was. But now..."

I know the faces of all the elderly people on my street and on the neighboring ones. Sometimes we run into each other. They come home loaded down with jugs of mineral water from the fountains by the covered market or stop into the store to buy yoghurt, bread and some cookies for their grandchildren. They chat with the saleswoman and dig around in their wallets a bit too long. Finally they dump all the coins and paper money into their palms and she picks out what she needs.

Her job as the owner of a small neighborhood store in downtown Sofia, surrounded by super- and hyper-markets, is not to lose her cool. The rest of us in line have far more pressing things to do and impatiently tap our feet. They don't usually hear us, thank God.

When I found myself out of work – without either the kind that pays the bills or the kind that makes me happy – I stopped tapping my foot. I wasn't in a hurry. I purposely went out every day – shopping at the store, taking out the trash, aimless wandering, interviewing for jobs.

When I was going to an interview, I never looked around. I didn't want to distract myself with other people's stories. Four months of mandatory daily strolls and absolutely no change in the situation. I used to think that if I lost my job, it would be my golden opportunity

to write. But now I couldn't write at all. I filled my day with small, mundane tasks so it wouldn't turn out that I'd spent it in absent gaping at the monitor. I searched the want-ads morning, noon and night, wrote cover letters, and sent my professional resume to people who had placed an ad looking for a specialist exactly like me. Over four months I got seven responses and five interviews.

Every time I opened my inbox and saw only spam, I would chant to myself: "I'm the best. I know I'm the best." The truth is that already during the second month I had started having my doubts about that. Why should I think so, since no one else seemed to think the same?

By the end of the third month, only one of my job criteria remained – that someone hire me to do anything whatsoever and to pay me at least some small amount for it. I had never imagined that when I turned thirty I would be living like this. I had been sure that by that time I would be enjoying fame, wealth, my own home and the peace and quiet to write to my heart's content.

For the past few years, that peace and quiet had been menacing. After they laid me off, it became numbing. I can't write a single sentence. I used to track stories like a bloodhound, picking up the scent and writing, patiently following until it lay down tamed on the page. Then I stopped seeing them. I couldn't catch a glimpse of even a single one. When I was working, I'd had minor victories – mostly with scripts for TV shows. I had also had enough money to travel and told myself that I was gathering material. I've never thought about anything but writing. Unfortunately, in those past several years of thinking I never had any time left to write a single line.

I'm getting better and better at cooking, cleaning and re-cleaning. The apartment I rent is small. I sweep, hoping to gather in the dustpan all the slag built up inside me. I have to be ready. Perhaps the tide that brought my first successes would roll in again.

One day I gather up my courage. I hand a carton of yoghurt to the neighbor from the fourth floor, and the saleswoman takes the coins out of her shriveled palm. I wait for the tapping of her cane to die off down the sidewalk before asking: "Excuse me, you wouldn't happen to be looking for someone to help here in the store?"

They aren't. Especially not someone whose business is writing – how much writing is there to be done in a store?! They tack up daily sayings and wise thoughts on the bulletin

board on the cooler, to entertain those restlessly fidgeting in the check-out line. But there's wise thoughts galore on the Internet.

"I'm looking for work as a salesclerk," I don't give up. "I can lift, bag groceries, smile and stock shelves. And write something new for the bulletin board every day!"

I don't know which I'm more afraid of – her agreeing to hire me or refusing to do so. I can see she's hesitating. I sway slightly.

She'll think about it and let me know. I can probably take a few shifts after all, because right now the other clerk is going on leave to help out her daughter. And besides... I've been on TV, so the clients will surely be impressed... Except that precisely because of TV, it might be a little awkward.

"It was only twice," I smile, "as a guest on a talk show. It was no big deal. I'm sure your clients never saw the one show – it's on way too early, while the other was a really late night show about culture. You've surely only seen it because you follow those sorts of things."

After having written thousands of pages, gained work experience on several different television shows and with several screenplays promising a bright future, I think up my first address to the local neighborhood population and pin it up on the bulletin board with a red tack.

My first day of work is ahead of me.

Sofia, December 2011

The tips of my fingers are red. I'm ashamed to be working as a shop clerk and I'm upset that I feel that way. I clumsily dig through their parchment-like palms. I take the money for their purchases. Almost all of my customers are kind, helpless, and longwinded. They are the future, which stutters from its overly strong desire to be heard. It wants to warn us, to give us a sign, to make the rest of us change something in our lives right now. The future insists on telling its past.

I try not to forget that my job is not only to take the money out of their outstretched palms – touching is sharing, no matter what may have brought it about. I am a neighborhood shop clerk with a mission. I've always said there's no such thing as a shameful job, yet I still notice with surprise how the tips of my fingers flush as I dig around in their palms. I feel like

I'm doing everything wrong. It's like I've stopped in the middle of an intersection and the cars are honking at me, then people try to cross and run into me, but despite this I keep standing there – deafened by the curses and honks – and I don't know which road to take, because all paths come together in the lines of an elderly hand, which I pick coins out of.

The store owner – she takes shifts as a clerk, too – is watching me. She is pleased with the way I treat the customers. Two weeks after I've started, she calls me into the back room and hands me a bag of groceries. She informs me that she's sending me to an important, long-time customer who never leaves his home. He orders his groceries over the phone and they deliver them to his place.

She sends me to his building – I've long since noticed the entryway, I know what floor he's on and I've even calculated which apartment door it must be. The fact that I will meet my constant companion from my walks face-to-face makes me feel slightly keyed up.

Elderly people's apartments are cozily empty. The sun always lets a few rays stroll across their floors – a supreme act of mercy. Then you can see the dust motes dancing through the house. But I haven't seen that yet.

I ring the doorbell and hear: "Come on in!" A warm voice, ever-so-slightly scuffed by time. "I'm in the kitchen!" The kitchen door is across from the front door – white, with a window in the upper half – completely ordinary. I push it open and see him. His hair is black, with many silver threads running through it like a patina. A tall, slim man with long fingers, when you see him up close the word "old" simply isn't on tip of your tongue. His nails – well shaped, slightly yellowed – a heavy smoker. His whole being resembles a thin rod of sturdy metal, slightly bent in the middle.

When he sees me, a loud "Ha!" escapes his lips and he rises from his chair. I am not surprised, I just clutch the bag of groceries more tightly than necessary.

"Nice to meet you," I say and start taking the groceries out and setting them on the table.

"Please, miss, don't bother, it's nice to meet you, too" – he yanks the bag out of my hands while I mentally note that he suddenly has become much more formal. Then he hands me the money. "Thank you very much for the groceries, miss."

This is a hand that I wouldn't dare touch – it doesn't curl into a cupped palm. I take the bills and slowly arrange them in my wallet.

“Goodbye.”

He doesn't try to keep me there.

The rest of the day at the store passes normally. Only I'm smiling more than usual. I always smile when I'm nervous. I casually ask the owner about him, but she can't tell me much. One evening he came into the store late, did his shopping and then asked whether he would be able to order what he needed over the phone and have it delivered to his home. It struck them as a bit strange, but he was willing to pay well, so they agreed. Nowadays, it's not so uncommon, but back then no stores made home deliveries.

“When back then?” I ask, as I stock out the new sodas in the refrigerator.

“The store opened up more than fifteen years ago, hon, and he's been our customer ever since.”

“I see. But why doesn't he go out?” I rearrange the yoghurt as well.

“Honey, people have thousands of reasons for doing what they do.”

And usually not a single one they say out loud is true – I think to myself on my way home. That's why it's no use asking them why they do what they do. I sleep well for the first time in four months. Some things are still stronger than shame.

The next day passes without any home deliveries. And the next. Then one more. Perhaps he simply doesn't like me bringing him his groceries. Perhaps he likes seeing the same people's faces day after day – he wants his everyday life like to be smooth and shock-free. I can see where he's coming from, that's how I like things, too. I've been living that way for years already. There is nothing more reassuring than the smooth passing of days, in which you know what lies ahead and are capable of finding beauty in that repetition of views, words, images, gestures, habits. Most likely that's exactly what he needs right now, when his time's expiration date is rapidly approaching. But when and how did I end up in this bog and why did I allow the calm, heavy waters of expiring time to well up over my shoulders so early, such that I have no chance of escaping? Sometimes I ask myself this question and cannot come up with an answer.

More days pass – the tips of my fingers no longer flush. Sometimes they send me to deliver his groceries. He always asks me: “How are you, miss?” while taking out his money. “Fine,” I murmur in response to this question, which is so pointless between two strangers. I

feel like giving him a different answer, but he never looks me in the eye when he asks. I don't know why he even bothers.

“Say ‘hello’ to Ms. Katya from me. I’ll call to tell you what I need next time.” There’s nothing left for me to do but leave, but I feel like staying, he intrigues me. He doesn’t act like other old people. They always want to tell me some story or give me some advice. They smile at me, ask questions – they try every which way to stretch out that small scrap of time in which they can talk to someone else, and not just to ghosts and the pigeons on their windowsills.

I’ve seen only a very small part of his apartment and it has given no hint of what kind of person he is and why he doesn’t go out. He looks healthy, he can walk normally. There is no photograph of grandchildren on the sideboard. There are no paintings on the walls. OK, so it would be strange to have paintings hanging in the kitchen. The hallway is always dark. A coat and hat are hanging on the hooks. A pair of shoes has been placed beneath them. What does he need them for if he never goes out? The tiled floor is old, there are cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling. If you haven’t gone into the kitchen, you’d think no one lives there.

I get my first paycheck – it’s reassuring. I make my usual purchases. I go home. No trace of any desire to write.

On morning I awaken amidst the silence of snow. It’s early and only one sound rings out – my footsteps in the whiteness heading towards the store and then to his place, along with the bag of groceries. As always, I ring the doorbell and hear: “Come in, please!” There’s no longer any need to say: “I’m in the kitchen!”

The hallway smells like coffee. On the table, between the coffee cup and his ashtray, there’s a piece of paper folded in half, and a CD next to it. While setting down his groceries, I look at the cover – *Shadow of a Woman Unknown*. I had watched the film in college, it was part of our required material. It swept the awards at Cannes in 1989 – for best director, best screenplay and best set design.

“How are you, miss?” he asks as he digs around for his money.

“Fine,” I reply, and once again I want to keep the conversation going, forcing him to snap out of his self-absorption and to notice me, but everything that comes to mind strikes me as too nervy. I don’t want come off as rude.

“Here you are, and please say ‘hello’ to Ms...”

“Good movie...” It’s so quiet that I can hear the snowflakes falling on the railing by the window.

“Pardon?”

“*Shadow of a Woman Unknown* – I’ve seen it, it’s a very good film. It won three awards at Cannes in 1989, one for best screenplay.” I can see his lower lip hanging slightly open, while his eyebrows are raised above his glasses. He looks like someone who has just woken up.

“Hm...hm... you’re quite right, miss. It is a good film... yes. Say ‘hello’ to Ms. Katya. I’ll call to tell you what to bring me next time.”

Budapest, February 2012

I met a woman. I didn’t notice her until I started playing. When she listens to music, she looks like water – she takes on the shape of the melody. She pours everything into it. I opened my eyes and met hers. Her eyes are like hot chocolate. Her gaze clung to me and I sank, smothered, and was happy.

She gave me a photograph. With a message. I don’t know her. I don’t know how she knows that I played at that bar shortly before it ceased to exist. But there’s never been an arcade at the end of the street.

I wanted to ask her when the picture was taken, but other people were tugging at me from all sides, getting in my way. I tucked it into my accordion case before leaving for the airport.

Sofia, early January 2012

The store is open on holidays, too, we’re only closed on New Year’s Day. I celebrate with friends without feeling too festive, thinking about him from time to time. Last time Katya delivered his groceries – he hadn’t ordered anything special. I would be surprised if he marked the last day of the year at all. He’s so absentminded that I’m convinced he lives outside the calendar.

In the first two workdays of the new year, I wait for them to send me to his place again. On the fourth day, Katya hands me the bag and I go.

He has made coffee. He invites me to sit down, pours me a cup, and cuts right to the chase – he has found out that I write. What do you mean how? From Katya. She is such a chatterbox! She always informs him of what’s going on outside, complains about her hard lot, the crisis and the dwindling customers. “God, I’ve got it rough!” When she hired me, she had warned him that she would be sending a new person from time to time. Then she had lowered her voice and confided that I was “proof positive of how desperate people are these days. A writer working as a shop clerk!” She hadn’t known I was a writer until she saw me on TV. Only then did she realize that things must really be going to hell in a hand basket, since I had had to stoop to their store. Can you imagine “since people like that, the ones we see on TV, are flat broke, that doesn’t bode well for the rest of us!”

It’s the first time I’ve heard him speak for such a long time and I jump when his story ends with “Now I hope the mystery has been solved and I’d like to know what you write.”

I can’t help but notice how one side of his mouth flashes a smile when I say I’m a screenwriter – as if a ray of light has fallen on the point of a needle. I’ve written scripts for television shows and documentary films. Would I like to write a screenplay for a feature film? I would, I’ve even got one started. Great! Can I bring him what I have written so he can take a look at it?

“Who are you?” I ask.

“My apologies,” he pushes his chair back a bit, leans over the table towards me and holds out his hand. “We didn’t get off to a proper start. Nice to meet you, I’m Max. Max Reinhardt.”

He is one of the mythical monsters of European cinema. If you watch the end titles of most French and some Italian films from the 1960s until the 1980s, you’ll see his name – set design by Max Reinhardt. He won an award at Cannes for “Shadow of a Woman Unknown.” He had designed the sets for some of my favorite films and yet I don’t know anything more about his life.

Later I would discover his picture in old issues of French and Italian newspapers. Young, with two parallel wrinkles between his eyebrows, and long, thin fingers with well-trimmed nails. He isn’t handsome, but you can’t take your eyes off of him. In front of his name stand appellations such as “the best young,” “the genius,” “brilliantly wise beyond his years”...

I have a vague memory of learning about him in my “History of Cinema” class. They didn’t ask about his biography on the exam, we didn’t do any analyses of his work. Maybe the set design students did, though. For us, he was two paragraphs in the professor’s notes and a maximum of three sentences in ours. I didn’t know he was still alive. Much less living in the building next door.

I bring him my stuff the next day – printed out and carefully bound. I know what I’ve written is good, but that’s not enough. My big break, the story I’ll tell that will change my life, is still ahead of me. I’m weak in the knees, dozens of written pages feel as if they’re fluttering around in my stomach. He doesn’t ask me how I am today. I see that he can’t wait for me to go so I leave him to smoke, hunched over the stack of papers.

Thank God, I’ve got a day off from the store. I sit down and start doing research. I read everything I can find on Google, I dig out my old lecture notes and textbooks. I call up friends and acquaintances – “yeah, of course I’d be happy to hang out, yeah, next week would be great, whenever works for you, hey, by the way, have you heard of Max Reinhardt, remember, they mentioned him in class... do you know anything more... OK, thanks.”

By the end of the day, I can’t say I’ve made much progress. I’m left with only one option – Ossip.

Sofia, early March 2012

It’s not clear whether he’s saved the photo. Even if there were witnesses who could say, I don’t know them. What is certain is that he’s left. A tall, arrogant man with frozen lakes instead of eyes and unusually long fingers, who checks in, gets on the plane, sits by the window and takes off on time. No one can say whether he has pulled the picture, signed in a slightly scrawling hand, out of his pocket. Whether he looked at it carefully. Whether he read what was written on the back. It’s not clear. What is certain is that he got off the plane at the airport. Most likely his eyes reflected the lighted signs showing arrivals and departures and there was nobody there to meet him.

I would guess that he took a bus or the subway to reach the city. He came out onto the surface, looked around, took a deep breath – he loves that city where I’ve never been. I suspect he also loves arrivals and departures.

Maybe he's got a girlfriend waiting for him. She knows what time his plane is landing and has gotten everything ready. There's beer, wine and rum in the fridge, and in the oven – lunch and lots of untold stories that she reheats periodically. Most likely he doesn't let himself in, he rings the doorbell. She opens up, they kiss and sit down at the kitchen table. They have so much to tell each other! Maybe, during lunch, silences fall, during which one of them looks out the window. Then the conversation continues.

Sofia, early February 2012

“What do you know about ships, *dura*¹? About the ships those future Americans sailed on? What do you know about the beginning of the last century? Back then my grandmother wore a small brimless hat with lots of sequins sewn to it, and a necklace that hung down to her knees and a backless dress that made all the men cough a little too hard from the smoke of their cigars. I wish I had been born back then and had lived there – on a ship with a piano and a dance floor. Every evening I would put on my tux, tie my bowtie, and go down to the first landing on the staircase, where the love of my life – for that voyage – would be waiting for me. She would give me her hand, encased in a lace glove, and I would lead her to the ballroom. In the morning I would kiss her before the first rays of sunlight had done so and would fall asleep, filled with music and the movement of the sea. Did you know that when you've danced all night, you've actually done just that – imitated the motion of the waves?”

Ossip's green eyes look at me mockingly. He's in high spirits. He dances between the kitchen and the living room, spilling coffee into the cups and around them, putting on records for me. I don't know anyone else who listens to jazz on a gramophone early in the morning and drinks coffee out of Chinese porcelain cups.

The truth is that I don't know anyone else capable of living in two eras at once, but he has mastered this to perfection. The most distant time in which he can hide away is usually the one most precious to him. Sometimes he puts on a black tux, slips on gloves, puts a flower in his buttonhole and dons a top hat. He strolls around his place while the gramophone plays “Puttin' on the Ritz,” and does a few dance steps. I've seen him – a living, breathing Fred Astaire, only slightly taller – with a cane, tap shoes and his eyes sparkling as if he's dancing in front of dozens of people who are watching him, having forgotten to drink from their glasses, smoke, get together and break up. Then he pours drinks for himself and his guests. He

¹ *Dura/Durachka* (Russian) – little fool.

sits down with them at the kitchen table, just as he is in his tux, gloves, and cane in one hand, and takes a sip from his glass. “There were times, *durachka*, when people lived with a flourish, which we can’t do now, even if we were to practice for it our whole lives. Back then there was art, back then there were grand gestures! Just imagine, *durachka*, history was made between two drinks and three dances!”

This man in the prime of his life is so completely unmoved by everyday existence that it’s painful to watch the students in his tap-dance classes. They are lined up in rows, without the proper shoes. They ended up there by chance or under obligation – after all, an actor has to know these dances, too, right? They stand there and wait for him to show them the basic steps, to teach them a few moves and how to stomp along in rhythm, while he sits there regaling them about grand gestures and dancing like the sea.

The girls – heavily made-up and looking bored – don’t understand why this man – so handsome, so lively – doesn’t see them, why he doesn’t want to teach them to dance, pressing them close to himself, but instead harangues them for hours about how they need to move like a wave and to pass through all the moods of the sea. The guys think he’s a crackpot. While hanging out by the big windows in front of the theater academy, from their disdainfully curled lips with cigarettes hanging between them – because that’s just oh-so-manly – the mildest appellation that squeezes out is “nutjob.” When they’re in the studio, they whisper behind his back and secretly glance at their watches.

I had heard so many absurd stories about the dance teacher that when I went to pick up my friend from her tap-dance lesson, I didn’t recognize him. I didn’t realize that this was the man everybody made such fun of. I thought their teacher must be sick and someone was subbing for him.

I fell in love following all the classic rules – at first sight. Time stopped, which was fantastic, because that was the only way I could truly meet him. Because of Ossip, his habit of running away from the present and his love for the musicals and jazz from the 1930s, I lived a whole year in that period. Then I left him there and came back to reality. It’s impossible to live with a man who never steps out of his time machine. The only solution is for you to never leave it either, but writing is a different kind of journey.

Ossip is the best-informed person in town. He collects everyday stories about grand gestures. All those behind-the-scenes, secret, agonizing moments that a person lives through in torment – he sniffs them out. Always. People confide in him. Some because they know he

will understand and preserve them and the words won't roll around in their mouths in vain – heavy, empty – before falling cheapened to the floor. Others because they are sure that sooner or later he will tell them to someone else and in this way, their lives will become legend, at least for a few minutes. Third, because they sense that he is like them, he has simply chosen a stranger method of escape.

The coffee has been served, the record has been changed, Ossip has finally settled in across from me, exhaustingly vivacious for nine o'clock in the morning.

“So tell me, *dura*, what brings you here? Come on, lie to me and say you simply wanted to see me!”

“I cannot tell a lie, your dancing highness, I'm here on business. I need to know everything you can tell me about Max Reinhardt.”

“He wasn't a tap dancer, *dura*, yet he was nevertheless one of those people who carries the sea in their soul. He simply expressed it in a different way,” he says, then gets up and switches off the gramophone.

Max transformed into Reinhardt a few years after leaving the country. He graduated from college and disappeared. After some time, his name began to crop up in French newspapers ever more frequently. “Set designer Max Reinhardt, who defected from Bulgaria several years ago...”

“As you can guess, that wasn't his real last name.”

“Did he name himself after the director?²”

Why he didn't keep his own name but instead chose precisely that one remains unclear. Time passed. He grew more and more famous. If you dig through magazine and newspaper archives from the 1970s and 80s, you can find pictures: Reinhardt on the red carpet; in a fancy convertible sports car; arm-in-arm with a charmingly smiling actress, whom we've seen in thousands of films and sighed “classic!”

He lived in Paris, Rome, Barcelona, he never married, never had kids. He won the prize in Cannes when he was fifty-two – a stunning success. Then the Iron Curtain collapsed and five or six years later he came back here to Bulgaria. He hasn't taken part in a single

² *Max Reinhardt (1873 – 1943) – an Austrian theater and film director, head of the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. He is known for paying special attention to all aspects of the theatrical performance, including set design and lighting. His productions were marked not only by strong acting, but also by their spectacular visual effects.*

Bulgarian film production. It's not clear whether he has kept in touch with his friends. Most likely not. There was no one waiting for him. Reinhardt was a star and had come back to pitch a project – the construction of a huge city, a permanent set by the seaside. He wanted to bring together the streets, squares and buildings from the most beautiful cities in the world, so that many and various films could be shot there. He promised that the place would become a wonderful base that could be used for decades. Tourists could wander the areas not being used for filming, drink coffee, climb on the attractions and in short – have fun as if “in the movies.”

He had secured international investors, all he needed was local support and a building permit. He got both and construction commenced. It turned out that the blueprint has long since been finished. Rumor had it that Reinhardt had been working on it his whole life. The newspapers followed the unfolding events with interest. TV stations invited him for interviews. He always showed up with a French producer, Vernan. Actresses were falling all over themselves to invite him to dinner and shower him with gifts. It was well-known that the first film to be shot in the new city would be a grandiose production, and he, of course, would be the main set designer. Word on the street was that he had hired screenwriters and was looking for a director. Everything seemed completely backwards from the usual way of making a film, yet fully in keeping with it. After all, we're talking about a star of international magnitude! Why shouldn't he have his eccentricities?

Many of the city's streets were already built and construction continued non-stop. Just as Reinhardt had wanted, Barcelona's Catalonia Square led directly to Paris' Latin Quarter and Istanbul's winding alleyways came out on enchanting cliffs over the sea. The film itself was still kept utterly secret. Everyone was trembling with anticipation – what on earth would it be about?

Work on the city continued, but rumors started to fly that Reinhardt had disappeared. The French producer denied this. He explained that his colleague needed peace and quiet to concentrate and that was why he'd stopped giving interviews and appearing in public places. In the beginning, even the investors believed it – except that Reinhardt didn't come to construction site or to the business meetings, so they started to get worried. Journalists caught wind of the scandal and soon the front pages of newspapers had headlines of the sort: “Set designer and producer pull off the swindle of the decade!” These articles coincided with the collapse of Bulgarian banks in 1996. The producer couldn't handle the accusations – the reason being that he could not and would not say where Reinhardt was.

The project's prime mover had disappeared and nobody knew where to find him. It turned out that of all those actresses, no one had managed to get further than a friendly dinner with the notorious bon vivant. Reinhardt had no relatives, no mistress, no friends. Besides the investors and the journalists, nobody cared that he had vanished from the face of the earth. The police conducted an investigation. For a while the press kept tabs on whether some upstanding citizen wouldn't report stumbling across an unidentified corpse of a man around sixty found in the Perlovska River, for example. No one made any such reports. The investors surely didn't like that combination of a disappearance under mysterious circumstances, a shady producer, and an ever shakier economy.

"You surely remember, *durachka*, the banks collapsing, the lines of people trying to get their money, and then those same people standing in front of the change bureaus, watching the exchange rates on the sign change almost minute-by-minute. Surely back then you kids were on break from school for lack of heat or you had skipped class to go to the protests." Ossip pours more coffee, not glancing at his watch. I'm afraid he'll be late for his classes at the academy, but I don't want to interrupt him.

"I remember the cold, how people were striking and shouting, the evening concerts on the square... I don't remember reading newspapers."

"Even if you had, it wouldn't have mattered, there were too many things going on that were too important for anybody to waste much time on some vanished set designer, even if he was a star. People felt like their lives were melting away, along with their savings. No one had the time to think about presumably pilfered millions, besides the investors themselves."

Unfortunately, or fortunately for Reinhardt, the scandal blew over quickly. People's attention was focused on piling up rocky barricades around the party headquarters in various cities, listening to patriotic liberation songs, jumping and down and hoping that this time, things really would get on the right track.

Time passed, governments changed, enthusiasm faded, everything was forgotten. Except that along the seaside, on the site of the former military zone on Kaliakra Peninsula, some streets and squares are still standing, choked with weeds – Ossip himself had strolled around there.

"I'm late for my class!" he jumps up.

"Why did he flee the country when he was young?"

“It’s not clear, *dura*.”

“Why did he decide to build that magical city in Bulgaria? Why not somewhere near Paris?”

“Probably due to nostalgia for bygone times, for his youth, for his homeland. Perhaps some desire arose within him to leave something behind besides his films, precisely here where he was born.”

“Why did he disappear?”

“Given all the unknowns about his life, could anybody really answer that question?” Ossip murmurs as we get into the elevator. “And why do you need to know all this, *dura*?”

We’re already on the ground floor.

“Because I found him.”

Sofia, early February 2012

Reinhardt carries an enormous city inside him. He wanders its streets, contemplating the sea in winter and feeding the seagulls. He heads down Grafa³ and then turns onto La Rambla⁴, finally reaching Place Stravinsky⁵, from where he can hear the muezzin’s voice twisting out from the Blue Mosque, yet he never meets the woman he is looking for. At night he turns on the street lamps, gives a bottle of wine to some beggar and hurries home, without looking towards the arcades – dark, dank, reeking – out of which thugs and muggers could jump to attack him. He’s very afraid of getting jumped and never waking up again, leaving this city forever unfinished.

I’m at work. Katya hands me the bag of groceries for Max Reinhardt and I set off through the muddy remnants of snow towards the entrance to his building. Ossip has given me two photos he took when he was in the city. He had gone to see it years ago. He had waltzed alone down its deserted streets while the sea had roared out its evening roll-call of the stars.

³ *Graf Ignatiev – a main street in Sofia.*

⁴ *La Rambla – a street in central Barcelona.*

⁵ *Place Stravinsky is a square in central Paris. It features a fountain with sixteen sculptures that move and spray water, which are inspired by works by the composer Igor Stravinsky.*

Before I go in, I glance up at the glassed-in balcony. He is not at the window. I feel my pocket once again – the photos are there. I’ve been looking them over from time to time since yesterday. I’ve seen a lot of sets, but these streets definitely look real to me.

The folder is sitting next to his coffee cup. My stomach is in a knot. I’ve set down the bag full of milk, bread and eggs. It’s slumped over slightly and I’m waiting for it to slide down the wall any minute and then lightly thump down on the counter. If that happens, we’ll hear a “plop,” the eggs will break and run all over.

“Well, now... your dialogue isn’t great,” he says while lighting a cigarette, “but you can think up stories.”

“I don’t think them up – I see them.”

“How did you end up at the store?”

“The financial crisis hit, the TV show I was working for was taken off the air, other stations were cutting back their crews. Nobody was looking for screenwriters – I didn’t even bother trying to get into the film industry” – I feel like I can hear the bag sliding down the wall. That must be why I’m on guard, ready to jump over to the counter at any moment.

“Yes... We could work on that... On the dialogue. You’ll learn, if you want to. I have a proposal for you... I’ll tell you the beginning of a story, and you’ll think up the rest. And you’ll write me a screenplay.”

Are pale rays of sunlight hitting the rims of his glasses or are his eyes glistening strangely? I don’t have much time to think it over, he clearly wants an answer now. I hear a soft, rattling sound and can’t figure out where it’s coming from.

“Are you going to film it?”

“I’m not sure, first I have to see what you’ll write.”

I’ve hung my jacket over the back of the chair. I turn around, take out the pictures and put them on the table. His lower lip sags a bit – his cigarette is stuck to it. Then that smile appears again – a ray of sunlight falling on the point of a needle.

“And what if you hire me to write it and then disappear?” I notice that the rattling has stopped.

“Ha! Where did you get these pictures?”

“A friend of mine has been to the city.”

“So you’ve checked up on me. Good! I won’t disappear. That is the goal of your script – to make me live on. I can’t promise you that I’ll film it, I’m too old for that already, but I will pay you to write it. Call it blackmail, but it seems to me that you don’t have any other enticing offers – Miss Katya or a slightly crazy set designer.”

“Does the story have something to do with the city?”

“Yes.”

“When do I start?”

Budapest, February 2012

Finally back home after so many days of flights and concerts. I saw my friends, kissed my darling, and played and played and played. I drank my morning coffee by the window. I watched the street. I played. I have a few hours before I need to pack my suitcase and hit the road again.

I go down to Kertesz Street. The building is still there. The sign is gone. I can’t remember when they got rid of it. For some time it was left to sway in the wind and creak, all rusted out. In the picture the sign is relatively new. Only slightly smudged by urban grime. No rust at all. It’s as if any second now the doors will open and a few folks will stagger out. It’s as if any second now I’ll come out of the bar along with my fellow students. We’ll head somewhere down the streets of Pest. People will give us a wide berth so as not to bump into our instruments. We will once again be the masters of the widest and narrowest streets. No disasters await us. Unfortunately I know that only bums come out of there now. I leave the mystery behind me and set out towards its solution.

Victor is a friend from my university years. A tall man with puffy cheeks, a slightly sulky mouth and curly hair – too long for my taste – which he tucks behind his ears. An architect. It’s warm in the café. He is sitting in front of a glass of cognac, staring out the window. When I hand him the picture, he blinks for a long time and examines it in bewilderment.

“What is this?”

“A woman gave it to me. I want to know if there was ever an arcade at the end of that street.”

“Hm... that’s Kertesz Street. I don’t recall it ever having one.”

“I don’t either. I want you to check. Please. Perhaps before...”

“Are we going to talk about the bar again? I’m sick of it” – he starts nervously twirling his hair. I can’t look at him when he does that. He looks like a hysterical young lady who for propriety’s sake refuses to raise her voice, turning all of her fury on her ringlets.

“Victor, you’re going to look like a Renaissance damsel soon.”

“What?”

“You’re tearing out your hair again. Relax, man, there’s no need to get so dramatic.”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree. How old do you think that bar is?”

“I played for its 30th anniversary. It shut down shortly after that. And we both very well know why. Your bangs are going to fall out soon.”

“I’m positive that even thirty years ago there was no arcade there. You know that place like the back of your hand. You know every detail of its history. I’m sick of rehashing it with you over and over again. It wasn’t Angelica’s fault, it would have happened sooner or later.”

“I’m not talking about that. I just want to know if there was ever...”

“No, there has never been an arcade there.”

“Yes, but...”

“As I’ve told you several times before, there were also other attempts to shut down your favorite bar, but certain interested parties always stepped in. That’s why you managed to play for its 30th anniversary. If it hadn’t been for Angelica – don’t make that face at me – or rather, the hype around her late husband and the strange accident, most likely during one of your trips down there, you would have ended up buried under bricks and beams and you wouldn’t be here to torture me with your nostalgia about something that was falling apart in any case and which was unsalvageable. Period!”

I notice that a few strands of hair are left in his hand. He takes a sip from his glass and I take advantage of the pause to squeeze in: “I won’t bring it up again. I promise. Please, just check whether there was ever an arcade there.”

“OK, I will, but the photo is most likely a montage. You’d be better off looking for the photographer and asking him. And where did you really get this photo?”

Sofia, early February 2012

I wrote the final inspirational thought for the bulletin board in the store on Friday evening. On Saturday morning, with a voice recorder, a stack of white paper and three pens, I settled into the kitchen chair across from Reinhardt.

“How do you want to proceed? Where should we start? Should I ask you questions? Will you explain more precisely what you want from me? The recorder makes some people nervous, I could hide it or not turn it on at all and just take notes by hand.”

“Have you had coffee yet?” He interrupts my stream of questions.

“No.”

I fiddle with my pen while he pours me a cup. If my hand slips, the pen will smack him right in the glasses. I tuck my hands under the table.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty.”

“Isn’t it strange that a thirty-year-old woman doesn’t know what to do with her hands and can’t have a normal conversation with strangers?”

“Isn’t it strange that a seventy-five-year-old man hasn’t left his home for ten years and offers to pay for a thirty-year-old woman to write a script that may never be filmed?”

“How do you know I haven’t left my apartment? I may simply not like shopping.”

“I don’t know, I’m improvising.”

“Why don’t you call me ‘Max’? If you have any questions, ask me them calmly, one by one, while we drink our coffee. If not, turn on the recorder and let’s get to work.”

Sofia, 1959 – 1963

Before existing as Reinhardt, Max above all existed as lovestruck. It happened too early, even though that’s easy to say fifty years later. Back then it had seemed right on time to him, because she was... oh, she was... As he describes her, I hear the telltale distortion of the sound on the recorder... It’s not a problem with the recording – I insist on pointing out – because she was the most beautiful and single most wonderful thing that could ever happen to him.

He had been sitting on the corner of a small street – wedged between two boulevards – in the center of Sofia. He had been drawing the houses, the windows with their lace curtains and flowers, the cats basking in the autumn sun. He was practicing his sketching. Then he saw her. She was standing across from him and taking his picture. That was how they met.

This was followed by cafes, movies, walks around the city with sketchbook and camera in hand. Then their first kisses, their first fight, their first snow. She wasn't studying at the university, but was already working.

They were a strikingly absurd couple. She was short, curly-haired, talkative. He was tall, thin, dark, with long fingers, thinking twice about every word before he said anything, if he even decided to speak at all. At first their friends didn't believe it would last very long. Especially, when waving her camera around or pulling her hair back into a ponytail, her brows would knit into a scowl and in a serious tone, she would start in: "I don't agree, Max, because..." and he would just smile at her and adjust his glasses.

At the beginning of summer, Max had to go on the students' work brigade. His friends teased him that he wouldn't have room in his bag for all the letters he had gotten. He laughed right along with them and replied that if need be, he would throw every last one of them off the bus and fill it up with envelopes and sheets of notebook paper.

I remember seeing that in one of the old films that he had been set designer on – a bus completely packed with letters driving away down a dirt road. White envelopes were flying out through its open windows.

In any case, the letters were not only his connection to her, he also saw them as his connection to the world. She told him about everything that was going on in Sofia, about the new books she had read.

He came back in the middle of summer. They wandered through the streets together. He liked gathering green plums from the trees for her or lifting her up, so she could reach the high branches. People would pass by on the street, looking at them indignantly. They would fill up the pockets of her dress and laugh.

Sometimes they would play checkers, hide-and-seek, or cowboys and Indians with the kids in her neighborhood. Sometimes they would discuss plays, films, books, the future.

In the autumn, Max went to his classes, but Matilda...

"Was that really her name? Isn't it a little strange?" I interrupt him.

Her real name – Maria – got tangled up in his mouth.

Matilda kept working at the factory. In the evenings they would meet in front of the phone booths by the university. She was always late. He would get restless and angry that he had to wait for her. How could a person get lost three times on her way from work to the university! Her excuse was that she always found something to take pictures of and she simply had no time to remember the side streets. During that first year they didn't have any major fights – just “small flashes of lightning on their romantic horizon.”

If times had been different, they probably would have started living together. Marriage was still out of the question. Neither her parents nor his approved of their relationship. They needed to wait until Max finished his studies and started working. Sometimes they managed to hide out in some friend's villa or to go to his place when his parents were away on business. She would tell her parents she was visiting a girlfriend. The few mornings they woke up together were filled with silence, calm and sunlight, even if it was foggy outside.

Somewhere between the sweetness of those mornings, the evening outings with Max's friends from the academy and conversations about the future, the first signs of the gathering storm appeared. He wanted to live in Bulgaria, she wanted to run away. “Where will you run to?” – he would ask her – “when you can't even find your way from here to downtown? What will you do there? Where is there, anyway? And who will be waiting for you?”

The answer he always got was that she had no future here. During their first quarrel, he couldn't find any argument against this.

Reinhardt pours himself more coffee, hands me an apple, settles back in his chair and slips the important details into the story.

Matilda lived on one of the little streets off Tsar Simeon past the Women's Market. Her mother was a seamstress, her father a history teacher. After the Soviet coup of '44, he had run into trouble with the new government – he was fired from his job, banned from teaching and took up a job as a driver at a factory. Matilda graduated from high school, but it turned out that coming from an “untrustworthy” family, she wasn't allowed to study at the university. Her future was clearly sketched out and it ended in some factory. She had no choice, so she started working. Her schoolmates went to the university and between all the student brigades, meetings, clubs and parties, they didn't have time to see her. After work, she would either read at home or crisscross the city with a camera in her hand. It had been a present to her father from his students.

Over time, Matilda's hobby turned into a passion. She read books about photography whenever she could find them and experimented. She and Max spent hours discussing composition, lighting. The only thing they didn't talk about was the most important topic – her future was still sitting there on that dead-end street that was the factory, and he knew that very well.

What could he tell her? As the son of party members and with his father occupying a relatively high-ranking post, his future looked sketched out as well, but it reached much farther and even allowed for slight deviations from the predetermined route.

He was working on his thesis project when he found out that the votech was offering a new course in photography. He saw salvation in this bit of news. All she needed was a high school diploma and the tiniest bit of luck, so she wouldn't be rejected again as "untrustworthy." Who knows how, but this time she got lucky. Matilda managed to fly under the radar and started taking the class. It was unusual for a woman. It was a hard job from the purely physical point of view, but she could handle it. She was even – in the words of her instructor – quite promising, among the best in the class. While recalling this, Reinhardt's voice filled with satisfaction.

He had hoped that this would make her give up her dream of searching for a future on the unfamiliar streets of far-away cities.

"Weren't you interested in what was going on outside the Iron Curtain?"

Of course he was interested. He read what he could about performances, exhibits and concerts, but he didn't dream about living on Saint Germain in Paris and drinking coffee at Les Deux Magots, while Jeanne Moreau strolled down the sidewalk across the street. It turned out that despite that course in photography or even more so after it, she began dreaming precisely of that. She couldn't imagine snapping shots of "the heroes of labor" lined up under a portrait of the Great Leader. "And I can't imagine her doing it either" – I interrupt him. Here there is a pause in the recording.

They couldn't come to a decision, but they also didn't talk about it much. Usually only on those stolen mornings when she woke up in his arms and still sleepy, they would begin making plans for the future. It always turned out that one of them wanted to wake up in Paris, the other in Sofia. Max now had a serious argument to use against her – they both – together and separately – had a future in Bulgaria. Their arguments ended with kisses and, when possible, those mornings lasted until evening.

Max graduated and was assigned a job as an assistant set designer – he would shoot his first film. Thanks to guarantees and recommendations from one of her teachers, she managed to get a job at *Reklama* advertising agency.⁶ Both of them seemed excited by this new start. They couldn't wait to meet in the evenings and tell each other everything that had happened during the day. They discussed the set designs, the ads, there was no time left for the future. Max relaxed – Matilda was busy and happy, she didn't even grumble about the required Monday evening meetings devoted to “political and party enlightenment,” nor about the required group visits to cultural events. She was busy taking photos and loving him and for him, that was enough. More and more often, as he commuted to the cinema center in the morning, he would see their life spread out before him like a train track, passing through fields, forests and mountains, warmed by the sun. He was so dazed and swept away by his work and by hatching shared plans that he didn't even realize that he had landed right in the eye of the storm. Yes, Matilda had complained a few times that they had rejected her photos, that they didn't give her any freedom, that they told her how to do her job. She was angry that some of her coworkers advised her not to rock the boat too much, because there wasn't any point, but she was still indignant. Max understood where she was coming from, he felt for her, gave her advice, argued or agreed with her, depending on the situation, but he was unprepared for the evening in which she arrived at their meeting place in tears, offended, and asked him whether he still didn't want to make plans and run away once he'd finished his work on the film. He fell silent. He didn't know what to say, because more than anything he wanted them to choose one single life path and it had nothing to do with the dangers and deprivations of emigrant life. He described his idea to her. “Your path sticks to the tracks,” Matilda replied, “that's the difference between us.” Then she left.

Over the next few days he was forced practically to sleep on the set and he didn't have time to go looking for her. He felt bad, out-of-sorts, but still he wasn't too worried. Amidst all the details, the most important thing still remained – when he started a sentence, she finished it or vice-versa. True, she did dream about Paris. He was sure that she dreamed about those streets that she hadn't even seen in a photograph and that her dream had become ever more real. But Paris is an abstraction, how could you live there?

They had a friend who worked at a bakery on Grafa – they would leave notes for each other there. That's why during his very first free hour, Max went there. His friend told him

⁶ *Reklama* [lit. “advertising”] – in 1958 Bulgaria's first and only state-run advertising agency Razglasa [lit. “publicity”] was founded, which in 1960 transformed into *Reklama*, as part of the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Services.

that Matilda had stopped by once two days earlier, but hadn't left him a note. He wrote her that he would wait for her every evening at the Priest⁷ at 8:30 until she came. Then he raced back to the set. In the evening on his way back from work, he asked an old woman in Boyana to gather him a bouquet of peonies from her garden. She sent him off with a whole bucket of flowers. He had brought a scrap of cardboard and a pen with him. When he reached their meeting place, she still wasn't there. He scribbled "Peonies of the Matilda variety" in pen and fastened the cardboard to the bucket.

He waited a long time, but she never came. The bakery had long since closed, there was no way to check if she'd left an answer. Before leaving, he placed the bucket of peonies and the sign such that they could be seen from everywhere. He went to the bakery the next morning. His friend shook his head – she hadn't stopped by, he had no message for him, but to cheer him up he told him what he'd seen when he'd opened up in the morning. Three school kids with their backpacks were holding bunches of peonies, chasing one another and hollering. White and red peony leaves were flying all around them, while a dog with a torn cardboard sign reading "Matilda" around its neck was running at their heels. "Funny, huh? Those crazy kids... so early in the morning." "Funny, yeah," Max had likely answered before setting off for the cinema center once again.

He waited a whole week for her before deciding to go to her home.

He spoke to her father. She had introduced them a year or two earlier, but he, just like Max's own parents, was not particularly thrilled about their relationship, so they never met again. He knew that Matilda didn't talk about him at home. They had decided to get married and then tell their parents. But still, Reinhardt got the feeling that the man remembered him. He told him politely that his daughter was visiting relatives and that she would return soon and ushered him out. Max waited another week. His work on the film wasn't going well anymore. He was making mistakes, he'd gotten some comradely talking-tos – but he didn't care. He stopped by the bakery every morning and evening. After a week he went to her house again. He knocked on the door, peeked through the fence – there was no one home. A neighbor woman passed by: "They're not there, my boy. They don't live there anymore, they moved the whole family." She didn't know where, it had all happened so fast. One day she had talked to Bozhana – Matilda's mother – and the next day they were gone.

⁷ "The Priest" is a statue of Patriarch Evtimiy in central Sofia used as a common meeting place.

Max went back home, had dinner with his parents, and went to work the next morning, then came home and so on for a string of long days. He tried to find them, asking here and there. One evening, his parents were waiting for him not with dinner, but with angry words. They accused him of trying to ruin the family and his future all because of some girl. He should quit asking. Since the authorities decided those degenerates needed to be interned somewhere, there must be a good reason. Max grasped at the word “interned,” but didn’t manage to find out anything more. His mother was crying, leaning on the table with the lace tablecloth in the living room. His father pounded on that same table, saying that it was time he grew up and that he wouldn’t let his son risk the family’s good name and standing because of some youthful infatuation. It was pointless to respond. He kept quiet.

The premiere of his first film, albeit as assistant set designer, was approaching. One morning he stopped by the bakery as usual, left a little package for Matilda along with a note and no one ever saw him again. After more than a year of wandering and seeking asylum, he made it to Paris.

“How did you know she was there?”

“I didn’t.”