

## **FROM GREEN AND GOLD**

**by Silviya Choleva**

translated from the Bulgarian by Irene Boykikeva; edited by Angela Rodel

To my father

She has no idea if the time she has left is enough. But the desire is stronger than common sense and she starts piling up pillows to hem in the corner of the huge bed where she can sink fully in her thoughts and find peace at last. In the house time has its own clock, slow and different. She hopes nobody is going to look for her.

She falls asleep before she knows it, carried away by shouts and voices distant as the world outside this room. Everything starts from the beginning like the breaking day.

### **Summer**

A little girl sitting on her heels is busy digging mud for the little bricks she is going to shape using a box of matches. Then she'll try to build the first wall of the little house, but the wall will fall again and again. Don't cry, come here and drink your milk. Her granny is standing there with her hand outstretched. The milk in the cup is hot and greasy from the extra spoonful of butter. This time I'll be watching her right to the end, until not a drop is left in the cup, and she won't be able to pour it out into the roots of the vine-arbour. Her stomach shrinks in pain, the liquid goes all the way back up to burst into a beautiful fountain forward and upward, but the grandmother is already shuffling her slippers back to the house and cannot enjoy the event. Suddenly, the gate in the yard opens. The child turns round fast. Daddy! Her cry reaches the father as quick as her bare feet.

Here the dream comes to an end. Before waking up she is not sure if she had reached her father or not; and the running towards him – doesn't it happen over and over, isn't it too slow, who is the one she's hugging in the end, grasping violently at the emptiness.

Years have passed since then, and her father and grandma are gone. It has been quite a while since daybreak and it's high time she got up. She has come back to the village to do some work but, to be honest, for some days now one and the same thing has been happening over and over again: all night, time after time, she's telling the story to herself.

Her mother opened the drawer of the wooden dresser and started fumbling around inside. Ah, we'll be tidying up again. She smiled and headed down the creaking steps. She had been there for a few days, and they managed to get into a fight five times and make up

again. That's why now she preferred not to say a word and to have her coffee at ease. In the summer the vine-arbour cast a spotted shadow in their village yard. The coffee tasted different here, rich with the blending smell of sheep, pigs, wet grass and figs.

I found them! Her mother's voice came from above. She got up reluctantly and climbed the stairs again. She was holding something wrapped in crumpled paper. She unfolded the paper to show the rolls of black and white film. Every summer we come here I say I'll give them to you to have them developed in town – the words came from afar, and while turning the page, she realized only boredom triumphed over this morning. Bored to death by her mother, shoveling through old cupboards, wardrobes and drawers and by her amazing ability to always find something for you to do and to interrupt you at ill-timed moments – when you're reading, writing, or just thinking.

The other day she had finished Daniela Hodrova's book, *Double Start – A Novel about the Dead*, and thought that it would be a good idea to make her mom and dad read it – such a bright story about death. The day passed in trivial things.

On the next day early in the morning her father died.

They had nothing to do in the village house anymore. It looked unusually empty in the light of this August afternoon. In four hours they were back in town.

While I was growing up, the folds in the trunk of the vine-arbour I used to lean on doubled, and the knots got bigger, hurting my back. Reading books in the long summer hours makes the body lazy and cultivates an ability to focus on the insignificant stories filling the pages, or to gaze idly at the green leaves above. The green grapes have the property of attracting a child's curiosity – the taste of sour fruit lingers in the mouth to be slowly replaced by the sweet feel. I put so much passion into squeezing the green grapes and with the same vigour I tortured the rosebuds still holding their fresh petals and the young stigmas tightly inside.

Today I have noticed the same pointless cruelty between the tender fingers of my children. The cruelty we nourish all our lives, fooling ourselves in childish unawareness, in adolescent insecurity or the vengeful nature of old age. We have been so cleverly cheated that it's gone – the cruelty to ourselves.

The goatherd is walking down the next street and I can see nothing but his broad back and the wide step. I can only imagine his beard and picture every other detail from his deep-toned voice: *Yaa, ya-a, yaaa, whew!* What does he want to say? He's probably the only man

in this village who went to live in Sofia, but couldn't stand it and came back here. All the others have stayed. They had horses, my grandma told me, stout and strong people they were, not afraid of any kind of work. Once his father was busy plowing or what not and the horses dropped down dead beat, but he didn't. He stood there wondering how to gear up his motorcycle and be able to both ride it and do the plowing or whatever he was doing. Now his son, the new goatherd, had a donkey and a cart. As for us, we have already sold the goat, and the buffalo-cow before that, and we don't have a pig or hens, either. Our dog died, and a cat that used to come up as soon as we were back in the summer got lost somewhere. It might have followed the car on our way back to Sofia in the autumn, but I don't believe that was the case because I have read that cats get attached to houses and not to people, or at least not so much. I like dogs better.

The baby goats disappeared, too, when they were quite little, with their soft earrings, wet muzzles, and the small round balls I collect after them. My grandma and grandpa are also gone on their heavenly roads – years have passed since then, and I have seldom dreamt about them. Otherwise, the house is still there, somewhat repaired by my father, the son; the yard has been slowly growing grim and wild; snowdrops and crocuses grow in spring, the walnut tree has been cut down, the barn has been taken down together with the empty sheds for the animals. The salt is also gone; it might have melted in the rain, I don't know. The sprayer, filled with blue stone for the grapes, is still in the cellar together with a brown raincoat from before the war that grandpa used to wear. My father also used it not to spoil his clothes, but no matter how we tried to cover the box-tree and the roses with plastic, a while later the leaves were spotted with white dots, as if looking through dirty glass. The blue stone solution dripped from above, and there was nothing to be done. The *mules*, as grandpa used to say, are also there in the row of old shoes, hidden inside the cellar. Everything is soaked with damp and the smell of wine, old jars of pickles, plum jam and treacle. At the far end of the cellar is the chest for flour, eaten by woodworms. Their eternal dust settles over the place, ground-up wood dust turned to ashes just as all the people – as if physically present in the air of this house, but they're gone, gone forever, and I feel empty, but I can hear them. I hear granny's hiccups or grandpa's loud snoring in his midday sleep, and my great-grandmother's mumbling as she pounds the 'knob' she's holding between her thin feet. As she goes on grinding, the herbs get sweeter and sweeter. The voices of the other people mingle and vanish into the swarm of kids and grandchildren. I have always wondered, expecting no answer,

whether they hear the same sounds because people are different and they have the choice of remaining silent.

I liked this goatherd very much, I liked watching him walk and shout. What the goats left behind was the jangling sound of goat-bells, offhand bleating, and the sound of broken twigs and leaves fallen from the trees along the road. The same jumble of sounds could be heard on the way to the mountain in the morning and on the way back at 9 o'clock in the evening, but not in our street. Not here. There's nobody here to pick the crops, and to sow them before that, to feed the animals, to gather the hen's eggs, and to call out for the little chickens before that. In the long autumns, springs and summers loneliness has settled for good in this house, which, wrapped in itself and lost in memories, is fading away like an old man.

The strangers do not make a fire in the stove. They block up the chimneys and wall up the fireplace.

The coffee has already been sipped down with some milk; I get up, brush a few vine leaves from the tablecloth and set out for the backyard to see how the cherries have shrunk on the trees.

There's a story grandma and grandpa used to tell at night before bed – it's one of those fairy-tales you love to hear when you are lonely and sad. No matter that they're here for you and they love you, they're still not your parents, are they, they're the parents of their own children and there's something wonderful and strange about them – the way they love you more than anything in the world; oh, how they love you, sleep, sweet child, sleep... You drifted off and twitched in your sleep, railed in by the netting of the metal crib. And then you suddenly jumped up half asleep in the bed crying: "I want my dad, I want my dad, I want my daaad!" You said that very quickly like a tongue-twister and then flopped down on the bed and slept through to the morning, my granny told me.