

**THE SAME NIGHT AWAITS US ALL: DIARY OF A NOVEL**

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translated from the Bulgarian by Izidora Angel

*Sed omnis una manet nox  
Et calcanda semel via leti.*

Quintus Horatius Flaccus

*The same night awaits us all,  
And the road to death is to be trodden once.*

Quintus Horatius Flaccus

**[One]**

*“...I’d be far from able to fully satisfy your interest in the friendship of our two dearly departed—Geo and Georgi.”*

From a letter written by Mila Geo Mileva to the Plovdiv-based anarchist Dr. Konstantin Kantarev, October 30, 1944

[Saturday, December 29, 2012]

“It’s over,” he must have thought, while they unhooked the chains tethering his leg to some gruff, petrified villager from Novozagorsko and shoved him with all their might toward the dark car parked at the train station. “This is it.” He must have thought that. He’d escaped from everything and everywhere before, even from the Sofia prison, where they all knew for certain he would in fact escape, and watched him intensely—not so intensely as to actually keep him from escaping—but more so from the itch to see how he’d do it. They watched and watched . . . but, well, how closely could they have really been watching him? True to form, he stayed just long enough to incite a riot—and then he left and life was once again before him, whatever that may have meant.

But at that moment, at that train station, beneath that mountain, without a doubt, he would have been deathly exhausted: it must have been so.

But be that as it may . . .

The chains they took off, but the ropes remained. Then they forced him into the car all tied up, steering the automobile up the precipitous road and he never did find out what had happened to the poet.

[Sunday, December 30, 2012]

The laden vehicle’s headlights cut through the darkness ahead, but they managed only to illuminate the boulders on the side of a road stripped white from the incessant rain that spring and planted with black puddles which the car tore through, dispersing the drops far and way like precious gems. The skilled driver took the turns up the steep road violently, and he, all knotted up in those ropes in the back seat had no way of grasping for the bronze handle on the side and instead swung back and forth with the car.

They drove him across the mountains, to Gorna Dzhumaya, where they waited for him: the same pathological slaughterers whose names had been on everyone’s lips that year—the year an undeclared, loathsome war pitted neighbor against neighbor. And it is said that these thugs then began to *assess his verdict*. But he wasn’t about to have any of that.

“Me,” he said, “you don’t sentence. Me, you either shoot or you let go.”

Who can say if that’s how it really happened? It may not all be true, but it’s faithful.

[Tuesday, January 1, 2013; New Year's Day]

He must have known that exactly two weeks prior the poet had already been to court and that his lawyer had quite deftly not shown up on time, forcing him to act as his own defendant—that much was written in the newspapers. The case itself had been absurd—he'd been sentenced for crafting an innocent poem. The people in the dust-filled room had not taken into account a single word the poet said—that everything he'd written was done in the name of humanity, brotherhood, and love and peace on earth, that this was an idea anchoring his entire body of work, and the real question at hand for the Bulgarian court was: would it convict a poet for his words? But when has a court ever listened to a poet? He was found guilty, and it was then, in the middle of May, beyond the Balkan, amidst the vigorous, cautiously pale green of the forests above Kilifarevo that Sheytanov likely read the headline in that rag *Utro*: “*Guilty: Provocateur Author of September Poem Convicted for Instigating Class Division and Hatred!*” And perhaps while reading that same paper he had also learned what the sentence had been, and who knows, maybe he simply groaned that a year in jail along with a twenty thousand leva fine was the lesser of two evils. The money wouldn't be a problem to attain, just as the five thousand set for his bail before it hadn't been, and he brought it to Mila, the poet's wife, after they first arrested the poet back in January. Mila had been running around in despair, making the rounds at all the publishers her husband worked with, the bookstore owners and the newspaper stands who owed him money—a hundred leva here, two hundred there—all the while growing languid with the knowledge that she'd never actually come up with the full amount. Sheytanov had brought her the cursed money in the afternoon: ten lousy bills the color of dirty violet . . . Her eyes, behind her thin as a spider's web frames looked worried, and he, seeing her so scared, had, for the first time in his life, lied: he said *everything would be all right*. But they both knew that nothing was solved by these ten worthless pieces of paper, that the bail guaranteed nothing, that January was not the end, but the beginning, and that everything was just getting started . . .

The twenty thousand at hand now really didn't seem that big of a deal, either, and the year in jail . . . well, what's a year in jail? Nothing. He'd done it.

“He got off easy,” he said to Mariola and ditched the paper. “What's a year compared to eight! I bet either the prosecutor or the judge were fans . . .”

That's how it had been, indeed. The prosecutor, one Manyo Genkov, really had tried his best: instead of asking for the minimum three-year sentence he had asked for one, and the judge had groaned with hasty relief and struck his gavel. And as Sheytanov sat there amid the Kilifarevo forests, he probably wanted nothing more than to have been inside that courtroom, slinging jokes at the poet to cheer him up, shouting: “Milev! I disagree with the sentence. This man is making a mockery of your work. Only a year for that poem?! For shame! These people are not taking you seriously, Milev. You should have been hit with the maximum for writing that fine poem!” Or something in that vein.

But who could have possibly told him that while he read the now three-days-late newspaper the poet had already been summoned for an “informal inquiry” in connection with the ostensibly already settled case? And how could he have known that the poet wasn't summoned to the courthouse—but to the police headquarters?

And that was that.

[Tuesday night, January 1, 2013]

In late afternoon on the fifteenth of May, nineteen twenty five, the poet's wife and her sister made their way to the police headquarters, a building right next to Luvov Most\*, erected of white-stone with a pentagram above, which had only yet an insinuation of the ghosts, vengeful vampires, deaf spirits, bogeymen, and angels with blood-drenched wings that would one day reside there. They brought the poet's coat, because they had sent him off with nothing more than a handkerchief at dawn, and it had been a frigid day this fifteenth of May. It had been so cold, in fact, that both women's fingers had frozen inside their lace gloves—as if it weren't spring but as if winter had returned.

It goes without saying that they weren't at all allowed in, and while they stood outside and the murk above Sofia descended, they caught sight of him behind a window on the top floor.

He in the Kilifarevo hills had no way of knowing this. The poet too had no way of knowing the last thing he would write was his signature on a note acknowledging receipt of a three hundred leva loan from the secretary of the Disabled Union of Officers, which he would not live to repay . . .

[Wednesday, January 2, 2013]

The poet had a strange attitude towards death in general. He had lived through her once, when she held him in her dark embrace for seven days and seven nights. She had ostensibly let him go, but from then on she followed him no matter where he went and what he did. It was for this reason Death had become tedious—because she perpetually reminded him of herself. It was enough to simply look in the mirror. Or to feel the guilt-ridden horror in the eyes of those who saw him for the first time . . . Only Mila had not so much as flinched when she met him at the corner of Legé and Dondukov on that December day in nineteen seventeen. Only she had not been even the slightest bit repulsed by the hideous dark abyss behind the black bandage he wore then, or by the disheartening marks all over his entire face.

And the poet would never forget that.

[Thursday, January 3, 2013]

The reminder of Death's nod most infuriated him while he was in the midst of giving one of his lectures. Whether because of the intensity, the penetrating smell of floor oil in those claustrophobic community center salons, or because of the muted lighting above the stand on which he had his papers—as soon as he reached the pinnacle of the discourse, tiny rivulets of amber mucus began to trickle down his right cheekbone. Agitated, he briskly turned his back to the concerned audience, took off his glasses with

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\*Lions' Bridge, built by Czech architects, connects the Maria Louise and Slivnitsa boulevards, as well as the city center with the Central Railway Station.

the darkened right lens, wiped his face with two rapid motions then shook the forelock of hair back into place above his right eye and started back up exactly where he left off. But he became petulant in the process, coming across as if he were now yelling at his audience rather than giving a speech on expressionism and futurism.

At any rate, the Dutch doctor from Leiden, one Johannes Esser, esteemed member of the Berlin University and a talented plastic surgeon had done an outstanding job, but the German-made glass eye was overwhelmingly uncomfortable, and the poet had bought another from the specialty optical atelier Schlesinger & Co. on Alabinska Street.

It was as though death somehow lived inside of him, in the pulsating pain above the right brow and in the piercing pain in his chest where Esser had cut off a chunk of his rib to put in his forehead, replacing what had been blasted away by the British shrapnel. But aside from that, his brain was covered only by skin. If it weren't for the forelock of hair, the pulsating blue veins below would be visible to everyone. He only had to sit bent over his writing table for an hour before his head began throbbing with unbearable pain. In moments like these, he'd ask himself whether it wouldn't have been a good idea to have stayed for those last two surgeries in Germany, as the good doctor Esser had suggested one February day in nineteen seventeen. But he, still sunken into a sticky, tar-like sweat following yet another dose of anesthesia, had only shot back: "Not a chance! This is it for me. Are fourteen operations not enough? No more—I'm leaving and let whatever happens, happen." The doctor had then turned to Mila and attempted to convince her. "My dear lady," he assured her. "It is only a matter of one more surgery! I promise you, he will have his looks back. Tell him, I beg of you." But the poet snapped that *his* wife would never disagree with *her own* husband, and on the first of March they set off to Budapest from Berlin. From there, on to Orșova, and from Orșova, to Lom, and after twenty days of trains, hotels, and cruise liners, they arrived back in Sofia . . .

The pain got to him, but the poet walked around with the dark pride of a swan to spite it. He'd trip up occasionally since he couldn't judge the height of steps . . . Or he'd look around nervously before venturing to cross the tram-filled boulevard. And so it went.

In that respect, death really did live his life alongside him. At home, nobody had raised the subject for ages. He'd forbidden them to. His only concerns were the magazines, the books, the printers, the zincographers—who never managed to get the engraving plates for the vignettes and the illustrations right, the inks, the paper, and the booksellers . . .

And then the money, which was never enough for any of these things.

[Friday, January 4, 2013]

. . . The idiots assessing his verdict in Gorna Dzhumaya, all those Vanchos, Ionkos, and Peros had shut themselves in the other room to decide his fate, and he had been left alone with two of their goons. They had dark faces and reeked uncontrollably, glaring at him with empty opium eyes. He knew their type—they killed without a second thought.

"There was no first thought to speak of," perhaps he had thought to himself and vowed to remember the joke so he could share it with the poet in the coming days so he could include it in one of his poems or in his enraged diatribes.

There was no way for him to know that another group of angels with short black jackets had already cracked the poet's skull with a bludgeon thick as a man's arm. That's how it went down: the others just got strangled, but him, they shattered his skull first.

The poet's skull had cracked from the left temple all the way to the nape of the neck with just the first hit, but the goons kept going until they broke him entirely. Then they threw a black rag over his face, and only then did they finish him off—strangling him like they did everyone else, with the nearby rope prepared for this very occasion.

[Saturday, January 5, 2013]

Meanwhile, he sat with his hands tied in a room that reeked of rotting wood, soured wine and opium. It was quiet and dark, save for the rusty voices scraping the silence in the next room over . . . The two goons across from him probably thought they'd done a good job frightening him to death, but they only made the whole thing tiresome for him. "What do I have left to be afraid of?" he thought.

He let out an impulsive laugh.

"Excuse me, friends. Have either of you ever taken a bath?" They froze.

"My apologies, gentlemen, I just couldn't help but laugh when I saw you," he continued. "You're quite pungent. Do you at least change your underwear? Why am I even asking . . . You probably don't even wear any, do you? You probably just put your breeches right on over your ass—and off you go, huh? Come on, you're still young! The ladies are going to spit in your direction!"

Then he sighed and added that clean underwear is half the battle to good health.

"Civilization!" he went on. "How can you not love it?"

And the goons? One of them shot snot out of his nose and wiped his fingers on his leg, and the other spit out an unintelligible curse.

[Sunday, January 6, 2013]

The grey morrow followed on the thirtieth of May, but the Vanchos and the Ionkos kept on bickering in the room next door. He put his head down on the cot, and that's how he fell asleep, all tied up. He'd been so exhausted, he slept for ten hours and by the time he awoke, it had already darkened again. The goons across from him had changed, but it was as though they were the same, like they'd come out of the same mother.

"What's happening, *druzia*? Anything new?"

The goons groaned in lieu of a response and put a hand on the Mausers sticking out of their waist-belts.

"Oh well," he sighed. "I thought we could make some small talk, make the time go by faster, but I can see talking's not your thing . . ."

He shrugged and shut his mouth and they stood there in silence as the night passed, all while the voices of the Peros and the Vanchos kept mumbling behind the locked door. They didn't come into the room that night, nor did they come in the whole next day . . . In fact, they didn't appear at the door again until late on the night of the

thirty first of May, and, tired and sour, informed him he'd been sentenced. Then they nodded at yet another pair of goons to take him out of the house.

They took him out to a yard encircled by a stonewall, and either Vancho or Ionko, or some other of the tsar's men in these combustible places cut his head off. The others then wrapped it in rags, put it away in leather saddlebags and stuffed his body back in the car.

All this happened at the precise hour in which the wrecked body of the poet, stuffed in a sack, was thrown from a black truck into a muddy hole by the Ilianski Base\*. They threw a bit of garbage and five dead do

[January 7, 2013, Monday]

gs on top of it, so that if by some chance someone were to start shoveling around these parts—he'd see nothing more than a bunch of dog carcasses and wouldn't try to dig any deeper.

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2.

[Tuesday, January 22, 2013]

What might have he thought when a handful of unkempt idiots in breeches jumped out from the side of the train tracks with their crooked rifles? . . . He knew exactly what they were—mobilized idiots from the surrounding villages. The whole country knew that the authorities gathered armed groups in each village and asked them to patrol the train tracks since killing thugs was still legal, a law left over from Stamboliiski and his Law for the Protection of Bulgaria\*\*, with its newly added eleventh article . . .

He could have easily escaped the mangy scrag—it wouldn't have been the first time. The wheat had grown high that spring, and if he slipped into the surrounding fields he'd disappear in five minutes and after an hour or two, he'd be in the graying mountains to the north . . . If he took off to the east, he'd be in Yambol by dark and they'd never find him.

But he could see these guys were already scared to death and if he took off they'd start shooting at random with their carbines.

And they would get Mariola . . .

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\* Located in Ilientsi, a location of many military bases. It was there that those murdered by the 'rogue agents' were buried. Since 1961, it is a residential district, and today it is an industrial and commercial region.

\*\* A special law passed by parliament on January 4, 1924 and enacted on January 23, 1924, which set a precedent in allowing literary works to be incriminated.

He sighed and stood up.

“Stop, don’t move!” the others started screaming. “Stop, don’t move, we’ll shoot!”

“Relax,” he groaned. “Can’t you see I’ve got my hands up? And put these rifles away before someone gets hurt.”

[Wednesday, January 23, 2013]

He looked into Mariola’s eyes and his heart broke from anguish and powerlessness: there was no hope in her eyes . . . only fear.

A few days earlier they had made a fatal mistake and there was no use now in laying blame on each other: they had sent the miller to Urvata for provisions, and the grocer had to have been an idiot not to figure out what was happening when the person in front of him asked for sixteen packs of cigarettes, all different brands. It didn’t take long for the search party to come after them—an entire horde of savage, anti-partisan rogues from Turnovo. He yelled up at his men to keep running, and sprawled across the mill-stream, shooting at everyone from the enraged gang who showed his head above the piles of last year’s foliage—just so he could make them panic even more and lose time. Somewhere behind him, Mariola attempted to take her own life with a gun, and were it not for Zhelyo, she may have. “Mariola!” he hissed in her ear. “I’ll rip your head off, girl! You’re gonna stop with this shit.” He then dragged her up between the trees—away from the ambush and into the icy rain, which had gone on for days in that spring of twenty five and all of them were soaked down to their frozen bones.

[Thursday, January 24, 2013]

He caught up with them all the way up at the Predel. And when he laid eyes on Mariola, drenched like a frightened forest animal and with the same spring coat she’d put on in Kilifarevo on the Monday after Easter, he quickly took off the Poseidon raincoat from his shoulders and wrapped her up in it. He pushed the wet strands of hair from her forehead, but he had no idea what to say to her.

[Friday, January 25, 2013]

Back in Kilifarevo, they couldn’t get enough of the story . . . When, on the tenth of June the previous year, a day after the coup, the bells in Kilifarevo started ringing and the crowd gathered in protest against the coup organizers, it was none other than Mariola’s father who came out to talk to the dyspeptic people in the village square: either in his capacity of army reserve captain, or as the former district constable of Turnovo—either way—those in power now had made him the chair of a three-person committee in the Democratic Alliance party, which they had put in charge by removing the village administration. But nobody wanted to hear a word of it. They told him that the fascist

committee of his wasn't going to be doing any work here and announced they were dismantling it and reinstating the village counsel.

And there you had it: her father had joined the fascists, and here she was running away with a band of anarchists. Not with the agrarians, not even with the communists, but with the anarchists . . .

[Saturday, January 26, 2013]

And so it went.

Twelve of them had taken off from Kilifarevo—and by the time they reached the Konyov road house number twenty four, it was only the two of them: him and the girl. Even Zhelyo took off for Turnovo, Seimen, and Harmanli to look for Mityo Ganev so he could take him into Turkey.

When he saw the hopeless fear in her eyes he reached out his hand, helped her to her feet and probably wanted to tell her that everything would be all right . . . but why lie to her? Nothing was going to be all right . . .

“Calm down!” he said to those villagers. “Take it easy or you’ll do something stupid with these rifles you’re waving around . . .”

[Sunday, January 27, 2013]

[. . . A long time later, in a completely different time, there would still be those who remembered how in the late afternoon of may twenty sixth, nineteen twenty five, a whole herd of police officers—military and civilian murderers—took in two people, a man and a woman, into the station in Nova Zagora. They were tied to each other by a very short rope—his left hand to her right. And it wasn't until they got them in that muddied yard that they separated them.]

[Monday, January 28, 2013]

[Dusk was setting in when about ten guardsmen arrived at the police station. They were led by some sort of lieutenant. Darkness had set in completely when this lieutenant took out a sheet of paper and started walking around the cells, calling out each name on his list. When an inmate heard his name, he got up, and the guardsmen then dragged him out of the cell, pushed him outside and chained him up. Each time they hammered down the wedges into the shackles' rings, the yard echoed with a steel clang.

They took Sheytanov out last.]

. . .

[Wednesday, March 6, 2013]

. . . Mariola had a strange attitude towards death in general. She'd seen her once, and there was nothing enlightened about Death; she isn't the way she's described in books. Death had been ugly. Ugly and repulsive, and smelling of sweating, snorting men who poured their scorching seed wherever they pleased. Mariola had already wished for Death—real and instant—instead of the fear and helplessness that killed her slowly every day. One June day in twenty three they had come to her school and arrested her, after which the policemen took turns raping her at the Pleven police station, as ten of them watched, stifling their shameful and squeamish laughs. She had wanted to die, but she couldn't: her young woman's body, broken and destroyed by the men's vulgarities never gave up during the twenty months she spent locked up inside the Pleven jail, and after the amnesty in twenty four, she came back to Kilifarevo alive. She began to loathe men and Sheytanov had to resuscitate her slowly for weeks on end before finally managing to pull her out of the vortex of melancholy. He turned her into a woman again.

She knew Sheytanov back before her father sent her to Pleven—far away from her wanton friends. She'd been a diligent high school student before some friends of hers took her to a shack behind the vines over Turnovo and she had seen him for the first time. She still remembered he'd spoken to them about Kropotkin, Senkevich and Chernyshevsky that night, but what exactly it was that he had said she could not recall. She listened to him speak like everyone else in the shack but heard only his gravelly voice, the words passed through her without meaning. She could only watch him. The same thing would happen every other time someone brought him to some student apartment in Turnovo to speak on Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, whether somewhere high up in the forest or under the Kilifarevo poplars, where, during the spectacular, quiet nights he would speak of future uprisings and battles, and about the enlightenment of the masses . . . He spoke of these future uprisings and battles, and about the enlightenment of the masses, but Mariola looked at him and what she felt had nothing to do with an impulse to grab a gun and fight for social justice and universal human rights . . . What she felt was something else entirely and Mariola flushed, then felt embarrassed . . . And his black eyes glistened in the coppery half-light . . .

During those gatherings Sheytanov never read from a piece of paper. Instead, he would ask them what it was they wanted him to speak on. "My friends," he'd say. "I'm simply not interested in reading you something I've already written down . . . So might I suggest you pick the subject and we can begin . . . and if and when I don't know something, I'll let you know, I promise." He'd then speak as if he had spent days in libraries and reading rooms, preparing. They all aahed, how was it possible and how did he know all this. She would just look into his eyes.

Then he'd disappear for weeks and months on end . . . and all she could do was agonize . . . At first the price on his head was a hundred thousand, then it became two hundred and she opened her father's newspapers horrified she would read that the most dangerous criminal in the kingdom had been caught or killed unceremoniously. A rumor circulated that someone called Mara Bargazova from Russe—like Mariola, also a student—had drowned in the Danube because of Sheytanov. Mariola locked herself in her room and wept for a long time . . . She cried until she suddenly realized that she wasn't crying from sadness but from pure maniacal female jealousy. She cried even more when someone gloatingly whispered in her ear that some Stoyana one or other had her stomach out to here because of Sheytanov. She had no way of knowing whether it had

been true, but her jealousy only became fiercer. She had difficulty going to sleep, and when she did, she dreamt dark and sad dreams. When she woke up, she wept again.

[Thursday, March 7, 2013]

They let Mariola go from Pleven after the amnesty during the late summer of twenty four, and she took off to Kilifarevo. She was most afraid of running into Sheytanov. She did. He was terribly attentive: he did not question or interrogate her—not about Pleven or anything else, he only stroked her hair and took her to a movie. At the Modern Theater on Samovodska Charshia they had just started showing Chaplin’s “The Kid”, which began with a white subtitle: this was a picture with a smile, and perhaps a tear, it said, and in the dark salon that smelled of wood the patrons periodically burst into laughter, but she did not laugh even once. Pleven had made her incapable of laughter. She cried for the little boy, whom Charlie Chaplin had taken in, and whom the government was trying to take away. The little boy outstretched his little arms towards Charlie, and then towards God, and Mariola wept. She wept even when Charlie ran on the rooftops, jumped into the truck taking the kid away and beat up the government official as the kid clung to him. She wept even as everything ended happily. The white sheet across from them flickered and blurred inside her tears, and as she hiccupped and swallowed the lump in her throat, she cried from indignity and from relief. After the film, Sheytanov got a taxi and took her back to Kilifarevo.

And so it was.

She then took her final eighth grade exams in Turnovo, but without the right to ever qualify to attend university. She was now twenty years old.

From there on out, their two-story house in Kilifarevo became a true mecca for communists and anarchists from the area. Her father Milko Sirakov, army reserve captain and former district constable from Turnovo, indignant at being named chair of the three-person committee in Kilifarevo, had otherwise been a decent man: he saw what was going on and scolded his daughter, but Mariola let his criticisms wash over her; he had been more afraid for her than he was interested in political loyalty. She walked by him with clenched teeth and silent as the moon, and he withered behind her: the bureaucrat and fascist—as he was known in Kilifarevo—turned into a crestfallen and dumbstruck old man, which, by the way, he really was. Mariola hurried between Kilifarevo and Turnovo, where she went every other day to buy medicine and gauze, becoming a charitable nurse and ward maid in the process since they were constantly bringing her someone wounded to hide and bandage up.

That’s how it went that entire fall of twenty four when the tattered and gloomy fog smoked and drifted down the valley . . . After that, right on the first of January, when Norway renamed its capital from Christiania to Oslo, lightning struck the colossal statue of Jesus Christ in some forgotten little town in Guidaliolo, Italy, somewhere close to Rome, shattering it from its pedestal and everyone in Italy prophesied bad things and all sorts of cataclysms. As it happened not long after, a mysterious fire destroyed the biggest English airship, R33, over the English Channel, a wild explosion inside the Magirus automobile factories took four lives and critically wounded around fifteen, the rebels continued to destroy the Spanish armies in Morocco, and Italy’s big cities (where Mussolini had just

decided to abandon his longstanding plans to become a founding father and the top leader of a future fascist international) were now host to loud quarrels and gory encounters between the indignant fascists and their most bitter enemies from the other parties. All of Europe sat under a rising smoke, and even before the old one could be forgotten the smell of a new war began to permeate.

Bulgaria was no different. It was barely February when a band of hoodlums crossed from the Serbian border and attacked the village of Godech. About a hundred of them split up in three groups: one group broke into the postal and telegraph station, another into the municipality, and the third into the police station. They cut the telephone and telegraph lines, killed a warden, wounded another then pulled back and got back into Serbia scot-free. Only after that did the police and some troops finally show up in Godech. The cold spring showers followed, the surrounding hills turned black and ugly, and the trees awaked in a cautious, scant green. Mityo Ganev's band suddenly took off, pillaging anything and everything from Haskovo on out—through Kavakliisko, Kara Bunar and Malko Turnovo. The story went that they were all armed to the teeth, that they even had a Hirem Maksim machine gun, as well as another, medium sized one—a Schwarzlose, long range carbines from the arms factories of one Ferdinand fon Mauser in Obendorf, good French automatic rifles, piles of bombs and excellent semi-automatic Nagants, a prototype made in the now phantom-like eighteen ninety. Some wrote that all these weapons were brought to them by Soviet Russia, others explained how they got the shipments by sea from the Turkish sailors, while others arrogantly declared that smugglers of tobacco paper bootlegged the weapons for them on donkeys via Strandja and Sakara.

“Don't believe a word of it,” Sheytanov assured Mariola. “It's bullshit! As if Mityo Ganev needs machine guns in the thorn bushes and mud . . .”

Such was that rainy spring of twenty five, all the way up to that sixteenth of April, when the gates of hell finally opened . . .

[Friday, March 8, 2013]

On the Monday after Ester Sheytanov told her softly, “It's time to get out of here.” And he took her to the group. Death followed them there too, together with the rain, which was incessant even during April, and then May. And so it went. Death was constantly at their heels: she screamed commands and orders hysterically from behind the trees and bushes, she thundered behind them while the bullets hissed and snapped twigs barely above their heads. They escaped her, but she would catch up to them in another place and with another ambush.

Once more Mariola wished to die, and when the search party caught up to them yet again by the Urva neighborhood, she ducked into some bushes and raised the gun to her head to end it. But Zhelyo saw her and pushed her hand away, took the gun and began dragging her through the forest and when he saw she was limping, he threw her on his shoulder and carried her. Zhelyo was a big man. And strong. It's probably why everyone called him Bolshoi . . .

Sheytanov caught up to them and they all took off towards the Predel. With their faces and hands all scratched up they climbed over the Balkan and slid down the previous

year's foliage into the precipices. At Borushtitsa they crossed the tracks only a second before the troop train carrying soldiers and gendarmerie passed thunderously, and a heavy black rain poured on them again, continuing even as they separated by the riotous village of Enina and each group took off on its way, not even as they reached Nova Zagora where only three of them remained—Mariola, Sheytanov, and Zhelyo.

In Nova Zagora they hid at the house of someone named Minka, whom Zhelyo and Sheytanov called 'auntie' and who lived without a husband—only with her daughter Mariika, a student in her last year at the local high school.

Every bone in Mariola's body ached after the endless walking from Kilifarevo to Nova Zagora, she was soaked and scared. She shivered pitifully in her drenched city coat and was very grateful to auntie Minka when she cleaned the scratches on her face and brought some of Maria's dry clothes. They fit her.

This auntie Minka worked at the train station and told them about the mobilized idiots, who now for the third week in a row guarded the train tracks—she warned them to stay away, because they were armed and scared, and something bad was bound to happen . . . She told them about the groups of armed fascist gangs they'd brought with two covered trucks—one from Stara Zagora, one from Sliven. She gave Mariola Maria's ID card, made the beds for them in the other room and left.

Zhelyo again tried talking Sheytanov into heading towards Haskovo and from there, to Harmanli, where Mityo Ganev would take them to Turkey. "It's not a big deal for Mityo Ganev at all. It's a short walk to take us into Turkey." But again Sheytanov refused. He probably had another idea in mind: take Mariola to Yambol, where they could disappear into the maze of old alleys and wait until the storm subsided . . . all of this had to end sometime.

Mariola did not sleep a wink all night. She lay nestled into Sheytanov's arms, listening to his deep sleep's even breathing and looked out towards the wooden ceiling's scattered shadows, altering between being paralyzed with desperation and being overcome by obscure hopes which filled her with energy and an anticipation of a new life.

They went their separate ways in the early dawn: Zhelyo embraced Sheytanov, promising to tell Mityo Ganev to wait for them at Sakara on the other side of Maritsa, while Zhelyo himself would meet them in Odrin, if it so happened that Sheytanov changed his mind. He then turned to Mariola and muttered: "Don't you dare get scared, girl! And don't think for a second of shooting yourself again, because I'll kill you myself, you got it! . . ." And he headed South.

While the two of them, Mariola Sirakova and Georgi Sheytanov, the most wanted man in the kingdom, left the town and the grey morrow of that twenty sixth of may, nineteen twenty five found them on their way to the workman's lodge, number twenty four. And as they walked, Sheytanov told her stories about some monk from the Order of Capuchin Friars Minor, who died a hundred and fifty years ago, but they had recently discovered a parchment paper manuscript of his. And what do you know! When they deciphered it, it turned out that the manuscript contained prophecies from seventeen sixty three—all the way up until the year two thousand. The papers in Rome were all competing to publish every single little detail, the whole thing had become a veritable sensation.

"And as you probably know," said Sheytanov, "all the old prophecies come true."

Mariola couldn't tell if he was serious, but he kept going. It also turned out that the monk foretold the French Revolution, and the manuscript also detailed a new machine, which was going to be used to behead the king and queen. He predicted the revolts and mutinies of eighteen forty eight, the Polish uprising from eighteen fifty and even the Great War of this century, which devastated all of Europe and caused the famine that spread throughout the world.

"For this year," he went on, "for nineteen twenty five, he predicted earth quakes, floods, and all types of natural disasters. But the most important thing he said, is that three suns will appear, can you imagine that?"

"No!" she laughed.

"Neither can I," he said. "But that's what the man said! And if he wrote it, it must be true. Just wait till you hear what else is going to happen in this century."

In nineteen sixty, he told her, the island of Sicily would sink, while during the seventies France and Spain would be destroyed by an earth quake, and in nineteen ninety—the guy did his prophesies on the decade—there would be a big solar eclipse.

"How big?" Mariola couldn't stop laughing.

"Huge," Sheytanov said. "It'll cover the earth in darkness and it will be six whole days before a single star will appear in the sky . . . Death will devastate the world and people will leave the cities en masse . . ."

"How is that going to happen?" she became incredulous. "You're making it up. If death devastates the world, who's going to be left to leave the cities? I don't buy it."

"That's what it said in the paper!" Sheytanov defended himself. "Have you ever known a newspaper to lie?! . . . So then if that happens in the nineties, and in the year two thousand, the world will end. And that's it . . ."

"That's terrible!" Mariola exclaimed. "I'm going to be only ninety six . . ."

It was likely lunchtime by now, so they stopped to rest by a water fountain near the roadman's lodge, sitting near the stone basin. Sheytanov covered her shoulders with his raincoat and out of nowhere said:

"One shouldn't get old. It's ugly and disparaging." Mariola looked at him stunned, because she had thought the exact same thing at the precise moment.

"We had this really old woman at the Kargonne," he went on, "all of Yambol knew her, because she was something of a mid-wife, so she was constantly surrounded by people. Women she'd raised, almost as old as she was, people whose children she'd delivered once upon a time, piles of relatives, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren . . . They did not let her out of their sight for even a minute, despite the fact she was a tough old granny who could take care of herself. When she surpassed ninety, one day she turned to my mother and said, you know, sister, all these people around me at all times make me feel so wonderfully superfluous. God gave me too long a life: what a cruel blessing!"

Just then men armed with the crooked rifles jumped out from behind the yellow lodge. They screamed that no one move, but their faces betrayed a primal fear. Mariola was certain that Sheytanov would dash into the waist-high corn-fields and in five minutes be far away; after an hour or two he'd be in the mountains, or if he headed East, he could have disappeared into the streets of his own Yambol by nighttime. She imagined that and became indifferent to everything . . .

But Sheytanov only stood up, raised his arms and yelled at the panicked scarecrows to put down their carbines, before someone got hurt . . .

. . . They took them to the nearby Mladovo where something happened that no one could have thought was possible. When, at the municipality, they looked at their documents, someone remembered to send for an officer to bring the local high school teacher . . .

She told them that she knew the student in question—Mariika Vasileva—from the Stara Zagora high school, but as soon as she laid eyes on Mariola, she said it was not the face of their Mariika . . .

. . .

### 3.

[Friday, February 1, 2013]

One Wednesday in November, a little after the National Assembly elections, right on Archangel Michael's holiday, November eighth, when butchers marched on the streets to celebrate their patron, the two of them already had an editorial office and an address: the small apartment of one Marcho from the village Marcha. The office was located on one forty five Rakovski, and the poet joked that he worked across from the council of ministers. Marcho's landlord—a civil procedures lawyer, a civil law *specialist*, as the sign outside proclaimed—was already an old man completely disinterested in politics, and even less so in literature. He had a son who was studying somewhere in Europe and a paralyzed wife, whom he had to take out for a walk in a wheelchair every day, so keeping track of who was coming and going from his one-story house was not a priority. He ignored even the sheet of paper stuck on the brick-colored paling with four drawing pins, which said *Plamuk Magazine* . . . The poet went around all of the Sofia presses, waving his hand disdainfully at any mention by the directors of their unreasonable prices, announcing coldly that money was no issue and all that mattered was the quality of the publication, so he wasn't there to haggle. Their mouths opened and who knows why they started even lowering their prices, and immediately scattered all sorts of samples on their writing tables: beautiful typographic paper, matte and glossy cardboard for the covers and inks and letters made of lead and antimony for color supplements. They sent the workmen to bring artistic jobbing fonts and all sorts of engraving plates: right and left-pointing arrows; vignettes with grape leaves or finely engraved fascicules, ornaments with interlaced designs and monograms with Latin letters, anything you could imagine . . . The engraving plates, their precious copper glowing, weighed no more than a feather because their overlays were made out of hollow cubes from an unknown African tree—light yet resilient. It was reliable and made to last forever . . . They explained all this in great detail, but the poet again gave a disdainful wave of the hand and told them they could put away this garbage. He asked them not to waste his time with unsightly stock imagery, as the magazine would be new and different.

“You can sell this bullshit to Podvurzachov. But not to me. I’m going to work only with original lithographs. The typeface will be Korina and that’s it, I’m not discussing this further . . .”

The printers would quickly agree and begin to imply of even deeper rebates. He responded that he still had to think about it, and went to yet another printer.

And so it went.

[Saturday, February 2, 2013]

Right around that time Geo Milev sat down and wrote to five people he wanted to invite as contributors. He was starting a new magazine, he wrote, which was “superb” and which would, as its name *Plamuk* suggested, set the literary world ablaze. It would be something entirely different, it would be exactly what everyone had long ago agreed was missing. He wrote that it wouldn’t be “expressionistic,” it would be nothing like *Vezni*, and that Georgi Bakalov, who had somehow gotten it in his head that he was going to use *Plamuk* as a communist pamphlet, had already been cut from it. New! Every time he got to the part that *Plamuk* would be illustrated, he swelled up with pride. “*Illustrated.*” he wrote. “*We have the funding.*” And he especially delighted in ending each letter with the following: “*Circulation: 3,000. Honorariums: substantial!*” He signed off with, “*I am eagerly awaiting your response. Yours, Geo Milev.*”

Whether because of these letters, or because word had somehow gotten out before the invitations had even been officially sent out, the news that Geo Milev *himself* was starting a new magazine spread so fast and so fiercely around all of Sofia, the tiny room at one forty five Rakovski became a veritable madhouse. Disheveled poets with yellow-tinted lenses flocked from all over with bags bursting with titanic opuses and the poet read and read and read . . . He read everything, skipping nothing and swearing through it all. “Oh, here’s another one!” he roared and recited out loud: “*Poor, pallid Bedouins, amid desolate deserts, mounted on camels, legs thin as pins . . . Unbelievable!*” he yelled out and pulled out another piece of paper from the piles of poems. “*When the beak of the black owl knocks on the tired tree . . . Bravo! You’re one dangerous forgeron, my friend. Very modernistic, I’m simply speechless. I haven’t been privy to such literary crap in quite a while . . .*” and things of that nature. He’d then dress them down even further, address them with a fierce derision and tell one he didn’t know the difference between Thermopylae and Propylaea, or palindrome and palisade; another that he wrote madrigals with the exquisite touch of an iron stove; and a third he told to, quite simply, eat shit . . . It was as though he was possessed by a condescending demon. He threw the folders at them and exclaimed he’d better not see their faces back there again, uniquely giftless as they were, then rudely threw them out, while they demanded to know the meaning of *forgeron*, and when they found out—they conceived a hatred for the poet deep within their wounded souls. “Opa!” he would yell after yet another hurt crying loser slammed the door. “Ladies and Gentlemen, yours truly has gained another savage little nemesis! . . . This one here, *zum Beispiel*, I fully expect to become a mighty literary warrior.”

And he would laugh darkly, unaware of exactly how right he had been. (Or maybe he had been very aware, who can say.)

[Wednesday, February 6, 2013]

The ones whose essays he did like—he cursed them too, but instead of getting insulted, they turned scarlet with pride. He alternated between calling them literary heroes and a literary army supply train, army privates and feeblers, demons, waywards and lambs and a literary band of brothers, until they became enraged, suddenly vociferous, taking off and returning before dark tortured by love and hope and with still more poetry in their hands. Sometimes they materialized wearing two different shoes—let’s say one black, one red—and the poet would sourly remark: “Fools! So that’s how you become bohemians . . .”

Once, Sheytanov heard him explain writing to a young kid. At first he barely contained his laughter, but then thought better and listened, and suddenly it ceased to be funny.

“Listen to me boy,” the poet declared, “here’s a little piece of advice from me about what it takes. You buy a notebook. You sit down and you write on the first page—write whatever you like. A poem, a short story, doesn’t matter, just write. The next day, get up, tear out that first page, rip it up and throw it in the fire. Or in the garbage, all the same, the important thing is that you throw it out. The next day, write some more—again you’ll be on the first page, right? On the third day, get up, tear it out, crumple it up and throw it out, then sit back down and write! You follow me? Keep going until you are out of pages in your notebook. Then go and buy a new one and start all over again . . . That’s it. Somewhere around your tenth notebook you might have something worthwhile.”

The young man looked at him with the devotion of a neophyte.

“Do you get it?” the poet asked, but the other kept on staring.

“Well I just don’t get you!” the poet would get angry. “Are you dumb or just an idiot?”

Then he’d get over it.

...

## 5.

[Friday, February 15, 2013]

After that night in Benoni, Sheytanov disappeared for a whole two weeks,

[Saturday, February 16, 2013]

and while the poet’s father sat in Stara Zagora incredulous that the new magazine *Plamuk* was selling so well, the poet finally decided to legalize the family’s Sofia address at the sixth residential commission. He’d delayed it for months and he could tell Sasselov, his landlord, was starting to become on edge about it. The man had thirteen apartments in Sofia alone, a summer house in Borovets, villas in several villages in the Plovdiv region and who knows how many other properties, so it hadn’t come down to their measly rent,

but he was a lawyer—and as such he was very well aware of the awful residential demand law, and what’s more, its addendum with those inhumane domicile decrees and registrations. He may have had millions but they weren’t going to save him from the residential commission, which was merciless and uncompromising.

The air had heavy with fear that year. Everyone was afraid of something. Mila had been urging him gently but she grew increasingly persistent—they’d already moved twice and that hadn’t been that big of a deal, but now the kids were growing, and they had more things, so if their landlord decided to kick them out . . . —and, well, she had been completely right.

The poet let out an annoyed swear that he had to stop his work, got up and went down to the station to fill out a residential housing ticket. Inside the dusty chancery, a young man—the secretary of the commission—jumped toward him and practically fell all over himself with exclamations of amazement, invited him to sit, begged him to sit, and then, while he anxiously dug through all those files, did not cease to repeat what an honor it was to meet him, that he was a regular subscriber to *Vezni* and how he had read the first issue of *Plamuk* cover to cover and couldn’t wait for the second. He didn’t have anything against Teodor Trayanov’s “Hyperion,” but that had had an air of wilted chrysanthemums, of something threadbare and decaying—people had forgotten about symbolism—while *Plamuk* represented the new and the authentic. He humbly threw in that as a matter of fact he too dabbled in poetry, but of course his couldn’t dare mention his own work in the same breath as the poet . . . But he did indeed have an affinity for serious magazines!

“What can we even call serious,” he added bitterly. “Bai Atanas Damyanov at least says it right! Surely you’ve heard him speak, Mr. Milev? He wasn’t trying to start a magazine for the intelligentsia. I, he says, am after the numbers! I, he says, need the masses, the worker, the cabby, the villager, the chimney cleaner, the barkeep. In other words, he wants to publish newspapers for people who move their lips while they read. And he’s right. How else can you print that many newspapers and build that kind of a printing business?\*

The poet grunted impatiently. He had galley proofs to read and an article to write on women’s poetry, which left him with little patience for the young man’s chitchat. He gave him a sour “sure, sure OK!” and asked him if he would be so kind as to hurry the whole thing up.

The other mumbled nervously that of course, of course he would, inserting the blank sheet of paper into *Ideal*—the typewriter big as a threshing machine. He glanced at the application for only a split second before his fingers leapt on the keys. He wrote impressively fast and did not stop speaking while he typed. He explained that residential dealings in Sofia were too intense, endlessly unfavorable rather, and had in fact become calamitous. Sofia was growing vigorously—not so much growing as bloating. Officially, there were around a hundred and fifty thousand people but nobody knew the actual number for certain, it was quite possible the number was closer to two hundred. Too

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\* Atanas Damyanov (1876-1953) held the biggest printing monopoly in Bulgaria—United Printers for Publishing and Graphic Arts. He was the sole and enduring shareholder of the controlling interest of the company and the newspapers under its umbrella: *Utro* (Morning), *Zarya* (Fireworks), *Dnevnik* (Journal), and *Ilustrovana Sedmitsa* (Illustrated Week), *Nedelno Utro* (Sunday Morning) and *Kukurigu* (Cock-a-doodle-do).

many—a veritable megapolis! In his mind, this wasn't a housing crisis anymore, but a housing distress. Austere measures were needed to eliminate this distress, but the state didn't care for rent housing regulations, because Bulgaria today was a country owned by money-grubbers. The young man knew what had to be done but he was a nobody, who would listen to him? Nobody asked him, of course, for he was but a speck in the grey mass of archivists, a plankton in an ocean of clerks. What a pity! If they were to ask him, he would explain what stood at the center of the solution . . . He went on, and the poet wondered how this person was able to derive such groundbreaking conviction from stringing together newspaper clichés and slogans stolen from impoverished people's rallies.

"The answer to the problem, Mr. Milev," he exclaimed, "the answer is in the creation of reasonably priced housing and affordable rent. And not," he stressed, "in housing market speculation as the current situation dictates . . ."

He then pulled the sheet of paper out of the typewriter and read it out ceremoniously. Residential housing ticket, station one, located at twenty three Maria Luisa Street, owner Sasselov, Dimitar . . .

"Geo Milev," he read on with a deep, tubular voice, "Eastern orthodox, Bulgarian citizen, born on such and such date, on such and such month, in such and such year in Stara Zagora, writer, college educated, served conscription duties in such and such infantry regiment, married, spouse—Mila Keranova Mileva, two children—Leda and Bistra, previous residency at twenty six Lomska Street. Application for address approved on the twenty seventh of February, one thousand nine hundred twenty four. Applicant: Geo Milev."

He reached over all the folders and papers that covered the writing table, handed him the sheet of paper and said:

"Congratulations, Mr. Milev! . . . You don't have anything to worry about now."

"Is that all?" The poet asked and rose from the chair.

"Oh yes, yes," The young man jumped to his feet too.

Then, just as awkwardly he took out his business card and handed it to him with a sort of pleading smile.

"If there is anything at all," he said, "it would be an honor to help you out as best as I can . . . Us intellectuals, if we don't stick together . . ."

The poet absentmindedly pushed the little white piece of paper into his overcoat—he would certainly forget it there, as he always did—and attempted to run out.

"By the way, Mr. Milev," the clerk suddenly remembered, "do you know that you and I almost served together?"

"What do you mean?" the poet became even more annoyed.

"Well, I also graduated from the Military School for Reserve Officers!" the other declared excitedly. "Quite before you, however. I was there in the summer of nineteen fifteen. So it comes out to about two years ahead of you. They got our entire cohort to sign up right after high school, so we could learn to defend the king, the motherland, and the flag. The European war started right after that . . . but you, well you were at the battlefield, a hero, you got wounded, and I, well, I got placed at the freight battery of the sixth artillery and we hung around Dupnitsa the whole time . . ."

"There's no flying from fate . . ." the poet interrupted, shrugged and quickly departed with a wave of the hand.

He would never learn the name of the young man—this insignificant little clerk in the housing commission: Geshev.

Nikola Geshev.

[Would you look at that . . .

From nineteen twenty four to nineteen twenty five Nikola Geshev is secretary at the fourth and sixth housing commissions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and National Health, but he leaves when the position is eliminated.

On May twentieth, nineteen twenty five he is appointed to a criminal pursuit-party. His salary would be eighty leva a month. If he caught a criminal—at least five thousand. If he killed one—up to twenty thousand. If he got killed—fifty thousand leva for his family. If he became disabled—another twenty thousand.

And a disability pension.

But even before that, in April, actually, right after the attack on the St. Nedelya Cathedral, Pane Bichev himself calls him in to help . . .

. . . Geo Milev disappears on May fifteenth . . .]

. . .

[Saturday, July 6, 2013]

Sheytanov had a strange attitude towards death in general. He'd caused her to many more than once, but that spring Death had begun to repulse him. He had begun to think that he'd long turned his back on the times he, like many others, did not leave his house without a gun under his belt and he got a kick out of shooting his pistol at night at the poor policemen and scaring the field-keepers. There were many he'd shot dead in those years.

One day it suddenly occurred to him the policemen hadn't actually done anything to wrong him. He'd been surprised by the realization. It was then he decided he was done with guns and bombs and people couldn't figure out how he, the fearsome Sheytanov, the most wanted man in the land, could walk around without so much as a pocket knife. Some would ask what was wrong with him, and if he saw they were actually interested in the answer, he would take the time to answer.

Once he got word that locals from Nova Zagora were muttering he wasn't the same person anymore. He'd thrown away his guns, maybe he'd gotten the jitters . . . and so forth. So he hopped over the Balkan to Nova Zagora, where twenty scowling men waited for him in a room. He took out his gun and slammed it on the table.

"I've come," he said, "to work it out."

One of them yelled pitifully from across the table:

"Don't let him speak! He'll only wheedle you in."

"Shut it for a second." He put down a freshly printed copy of "Ethics" by Kropotkin right next to the rifle.

One of these will kill a man, and one of these will make him come with you, he said.

"So what?" the same man yelled out again.

“So nothing. You can either go it alone, or you can inspire someone to come with you, so that there are two of you.

“I told you he’d try to wheedle you,” the other tried to object again, but Sheytanov simply put his gun and the book away and told them that he hadn’t come to convince them of anything. Better that he tell them a story . . .

During the Yoke, a voivode sent his men down in the village to do some of their war-lord things. They grab their guns, girdle their swords, wave their flag and set off. Suddenly, they spot two zaptiehs headed towards them. The haidouks immediately run back through the shrubs. The voivode intercepts them at the top of the hill and questions why they’re already coming back and empty-handed to boot . . . They start explaining themselves and the man cannot believe his ears at what he’s hearing. “What could we have possibly done, voivode,” they say. There were two of them and we were just by ourselves!”

“I knew he was going to wheedle you into believing him!” the same man called out again, but then was the first to laugh.

Them he may have won over, but Vassil Iconomov he couldn’t. They stopped speaking to each other for a long time, despite the fact it pained both of them tremendously.

And so . . .

Another time, he told Mosko Moskov:

“Mosko, Mosko my dear man. . . the way we’re going, by the time we liberate these people, we’d have killed all of them!”

Mosko replied that he’d shoot him too, right on the spot, if he ever saw him in a police officer’s hat.

“Why,” he asked. “Won’t you recog. . .?”

This Mosko guy loved to act like a foolish country boy, walking around with a worn out vest, a tattered hat and a pouch over his shoulder, all of which he could pull off because he was wide-eyed and round-faced.

He never took anything too seriously, even when it came to his reputation as a ladies’ man with countless lovers. He once recounted that his new lady friend had a twin sister, and when they asked him if he was having any trouble keeping track of who was whom, his round face lit up triumphantly and he happily responded that *they* should be the ones keeping track of him. Or he’d say, “Like Chekhov put it, ‘People should be beautiful in every way. Especially in their guns!’” And he’d convulse with the innocent laughter of a street urchin.

But he was sharp as a razor.

Sheytanov knew this and asked him to stop acting.

“Do you mean that anytime someone looks at me sideways I should pull out my gun and shoot him? Don’t agree with someone? Let’s get out our gun and shoot. Let’s get out our swords and stab each other. Is that right? Leave that thinking alone, boy.”

Mosko gave him a look and responded:

“What are we supposed to do instead? Let the wolves eat us?”

“Mosko,” he said, “you’re asking for trouble, my friend. Can you really not tell the difference between bravery and idiocy?” He couldn’t tell if Mosko had heard him or if he had, if he’d understood him.

He feigned ignorance yet again, putting his hand on his heart and went on:

“Sheytanov,” he said, “wait a second and hear me out! This is how it all happened—I was walking, I wasn’t bothering anyone, they stop me. Why, they couldn’t tell you, either. If they’d only stopped me, I would’ve been OK with that, but, no, they ask for my identification card. I say fine, I’ll show you my identification card, if that’s what you want. I’m keeping the peace! I go into my bag and get out my gun . . . So I ask you, what right do they have to ask for identification? Me . . . with an identification card? Are they out of their minds or what? So I ask you—which one of us is looking for trouble?”

“I just want you to remember,” Sheytanov interrupted him, “that you are an anarchist, not a malefactor. Don’t forget that.”

Mosko suddenly grinned and said:

“Sheytanov, funny thing is, even if it were you in an officer’s hat, I’d still blow your brains out.”

His laugh sounded like the howl of a young wolf.

Sheytanov sighed.

“No, Mosko. The funny thing is that I believe you . . .”

He was serious. Both he and Mosko Moskov were very serious . . .

And so it was . . .

*[Sunday, July 7, 2013]*

. . . He got back to the Kilifarevo monastery soaked to death. Zhelyo and Mariola, who sat frightened with bad presentiments, both waited for him. He flopped down tiredly on the bench and told them what he’d heard from the Hero. Zhelyo grinned darkly and let out a cuss, telling him that he’d prefer to at least not have to worry about Vasil, because he’d started to worry about him too: For Vasil to shoot and miss . . . it was worrisome. He took a look at Mariola huddled into Sheytanov and said it was time to clear out.

“Sheytanov,” he said, “My men are in Harmanli. They’re just waiting for my signal. One snap of my fingers and we’re in Turkey, brother. Tell me, what are we doing?”

But Sheytanov sighed.

“It’s not that simple. We didn’t start this circus, but we’re in neck deep, we gotta play it till the end . . .”

“Like hell we are. And when they kill us like dogs, we’ll really knock into their cocked hat! I’m not telling you to run like a coward. I’m offering you a common sense option.”

He groaned and punched the wall with his enormous fist.

“Think about her!” he said. “She hasn’t even tasted life and you’re leading her to slaughter. Has she not suffered enough in Pleven?”

Sheytanov didn’t respond. He only held the girl closer to him and told her: “Don’t listen to him. It’s going to be fine,” and then he got quiet, while the shadow rose up behind the monastery walls, rustled past the trees, and dissipated in between the bristling hills . . .

. . .

**16.**

[Tuesday, July 23, 2013]

Mila had a strange attitude towards death in general. She'd almost seen her with her own eyes on the twenty first of August, nineteen eighteen, when, after the extensive surgery inside Dr. Vayer's dark as a basilica field hospital, they took her husband, patched up by Johannes Esser's magic hands, back into Cecilienhaus with an ambulance—and into the exquisite Vereinslazaret Cecilienhaus building, located on Berlinerstrasse, originally designed by Walter Schpikendorf and Rudolf Walter as a women's hospital and maternity ward and now used as a military infirmary. One thirty seven Berlinerstrasse: the first of their many, many future addresses.

She had walked behind the covered vehicle with the large red cross and the horses in front of it, mournful like angels, and she would not forget the feeling she had until the end of her life. She had felt as if she were walking behind a hearse. That she, together with this carriage of death, had already entered the world of the dead. It had all been a terrifying and all too real sight because of the long trains of brutally maimed soldiers—victims of the still raging war—close to death as you could get and suffering from the final indignity of not yet knowing it. Even the green hat veil she wore

[Wednesday, July 24 2013]

resembled a mourning veil. She loathed Death for this reason. Regardless of whose death it was.

But she mostly despised Death because of her husband, because she saw her every day—when she cleaned his porcelain eye, when she saw the pulsating blue veins below the deceptive skin on his forehead, or when she simply watched him trip over a threshold. He'd forbidden them—her and her sisters-in-law—to speak of his lost vision and of the small abyss behind the blackened right lens of his glasses and they never spoke a word of it. But this didn't chase Death away.

Mila didn't know what the English may have thought, but she nearly fainted. For a second she saw herself a widow, and her children—orphans.

“Knock on wood, he'll be all right! . . .” she attempted to joke, but her voice was raspy and the joke fell flat: Death was already mockingly peering behind her husband's shoulder.

[Wednesday evening, July 24, 2013]

[From: Hristo Karastoyanov [hr\\_karast@hotmail.com](mailto:hr_karast@hotmail.com)  
To: Georgi Yanev [g\\_yanev\\_sz@abv.bg](mailto:g_yanev_sz@abv.bg)  
Sent: Wednesday, July 24, 2013, 19:53:14 EEST  
Subject: Mila Geo Mileva

My Dear Mr. Director Yanev,

I have searched the whole world wide net, but I have been unable to find so much as a grain of information about when Mila Geo Mileva died. Isn't that strange? I find it rather strange. Do you happen to know anything on the subject?

I also wonder how she raised her two little girls—where they lived and how they lived after their father's death. Things of that nature.

Eternally Yours,

Karastoyanov

From: Georgi Yanev [g\\_yanev\\_sz@abv.bg](mailto:g_yanev_sz@abv.bg)  
To: Hristo Karastoyanov [hr\\_karast@hotmail.com](mailto:hr_karast@hotmail.com)  
Sent: Sunday, July 24, 2013 23:10:13 EEST  
Subject: Re: Mila Geo Mileva

Dear friend, жаркий и прочее Karastoanov,

Mila Geo Mileva-Keranove died on March 10, 1969. This is what it says on the necrologue we have at the museum\*. I have no idea why the people in the internet don't know this.

As far as where she resided following Geo's death . . . in different apartments throughout Sofia. They moved frequently. She provided for her children alone, tutoring rich people's kids in four different western languages; she also translated continuously.

After Geo Milev's disappearance, she begins work at her best man Nikola Ikonov's travelling theatre. It is how she is able to support her family and she pays a woman to take care of the children. In 1927, she goes to work for her brother Dimitar Keranov's troupe, where she takes part in a theatre tour of Northern Bulgaria as its lead actress. However, the children are about to start school, and you yourself can understand how grandpa Milyo may have looked upon his daughter-in-law's being in the papers because of the types of roles she's taking . . . So Mila makes the categorical decision to end her artistic career and to support her family from then on doing what I described above.

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\* Geo Milev House Museum in Stara Zagora. I like that place a lot.

As to her personality, I have heard about it through her daughter Leda. According to her, her mother was an incredible optimist. Unflinching. She'd laugh recounting a story about the three of them renting an apartment from a Jewish landlord. One day, he knocks on the door, and Leda and her sister Bistra are alone in the room, as their mother was giving a lesson. The landlord politely informed them that their mother has not paid rent in two months, and he told them that he would give them until tonight—but no more than that.

“When Mom got home, we told her what had happened with sinking hearts,” said Leda. “She only laughed and said ‘there is a lot of time until tonight, we’ll come up with something. And she did! At dusk, she grabbed me by the hand and took me to the landlord’s apartment. He let us in, and offered us coffee and chocolates right away. He was apprehensive as he started to say something, but Mom interrupted him. She said she was here to ask for a big favor. The landlord jumped and said: ‘Of course, anything!’ Mom explained that she had temporary financial difficulties, but is awaiting payment on her lessons. She asked him for a short-term loan, if possible. She even mentioned the exact sum she needed—a hundred leva. But, Madam, of course, he jumped from his chair again and pulled a drawer then counted several large bills and gave them to mom. She took the money, counted a few back to him and told him that this was the rent money. The rest she would return very soon. That night we had treated ourselves splendidly!”

At one point Mila agreed to look after her sister’s daughter as well (her sister died young). Her brother-in-law Ivan Radoslalov was a weird type, he lived in Plovdiv, where he worked as the library director, leaving his daughter alone in Sofia. Mila took her in and the girl lived with them for many years.

You should also be aware that before the Socialist Revolution of 1944, she harbors people hiding from the authorities without blinking an eye—anarchists, communists, agrarians. Who knows, maybe she had something of her mother’s. She was a highly energetic and lively woman, she would sing Russian romance songs wonderfully, and had, at one point, been an actress, and aside from that she was a socialist, not a communist, but a real socialist, which likely means she was a right-wing socialist.

Leda recounted that once, “our mother asked us if we’d agree to take in a little girl to look after. She said they were giving a hundred and eighty leva. Mom thought that way we’d help the girl and we wouldn’t have to worry about food.” So they became a kind of foster family to the little girl, and she grew up alongside Leda and Bistra, and Radoslavov’s daughter like a sister. They paid for the girl’s education and even had a wedding for her.

Now, comrade Karastoanov, can you see why Geo Milev loved this wonderful and resolute woman, why Sheytanov trusted her, and why she also loved the former until her dying day and is in awe of the latter also until the day she dies. And if you only knew how beautiful she was too . . .

An incredible lady she was, Mila Geo Mileva.

I leave you wishing you good health!

Yanev

From: Hristo Karastoyanov [hr\\_karast@hotmail.com](mailto:hr_karast@hotmail.com)

To: Georgi Yanev [g\\_yanev\\_sz@abv.bg](mailto:g_yanev_sz@abv.bg)

Sent: Wednesday, July 24, 2013, 23:53:14 EEST

RE: Mila Geo Mileva

And so it is, Yanev, and so it is. We leave pale shadows of our former selves and we are forgotten by the ninth day. Shakespeare said it best:

*The evil that men do lives after them,  
The good is oft interrèd with their bones.*

Thank you and I hope to see you soon!

Karastoyanov]

