

## REARVIEW MIRROR<sup>i</sup>

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translated from the Bulgarian by Eireene Nealand

‘Never love a wild thing, Mr. Bell,’ Holly advised ...

‘If you let yourself love a wild thing, you’ll end up looking at the sky.’

– Truman Capote, *Breakfast At Tiffany’s*

I got married right after being discharged from the army. I don’t know how it happened so fast. Only few days after coming home, I was invited, along with my dad, to my cousins’ in a nearby village. There was a huge feast with multiple bottles of wine and long, broad tables of food. You know how it is when you return to your kin after being gone for a long time. At the table, I sat next to my cousin, lobbing jokes. All of the sudden he shot me a conspiratorial look, indicating with a glance, a girl across the table, the neighbor’s daughter. “Take her, brother,” my cousin said. “How can I take her?” I said. “C’mon Cuz, I’ve given my heart to another. You know how it is, I can’t.” Couldn’t I? In the whirl of the night, drinks were thrown back. From one moment to the next I don’t remember what happened. I only remember that it was great fun. In the morning I awoke and what did I see? Snuggled up next to me in the bed, the neighbor’s daughter, naked as in the day she was born and gentle and fragile as a dove. “Christ,” said I to myself. “What have I done?” No secrets exist among relatives. She was still a child—I, her first man. “You have to take her, son!” the girl’s father said when he heard. “It’s you, or no one. You created this mess, now take the girl!” So, that’s how it went. In more or less two weeks, we were married and moved in together. I came to love my dear Catherine. She turned out to be a good, sensible girl, and a decent housewife with skillful hands. After a year she gave birth to our son—the proud successor to his dad. Soon after a daughter arrived. We went on to become a good family. The years passed. The children were growing up. Along with them, it was as if Catherine was growing up too. When we first got together, she was still a girl, but now she was beginning to become a woman. And little by little something started to change in her. She did not like how we were living. The small town was choking her, it seemed, and not only that. She started to look beyond Bulgaria. Someone put a bee in her bonnet—the real freedom was in the West. Back in those days, you know, these were dangerous thoughts. Just the idea of escaping abroad could have thrown you into prison. But she kept nagging me to join her in her plans for escape. “Come on, Catherine! Stop fogging your head with these crazy thoughts,” I

said. “You don’t want to destroy our family, do you? This is my country. Take it as it is. As for the kids, you’ll get them over my dead body!” But it was no use. Madmen, like strong winds, can’t be stopped. My Catherine disappeared! On Easter morning she went out early, said she was going to church, and never returned. Okay, she left me...These things happen. But... the kids?! To leave her own children... Was she brave? Was she mad? I ask myself that even today ... Well, but one learns to get used to anything. Twenty years have passed without news from Catherine, not a scrap. The children grew up. Don’t ask me how I managed it on my own. How they felt without a mother, I don’t dare inquire. With all the problems of that time, the daily chores, I gradually learned not to think of Catherine. As they say: what you can’t forget, you can at least try not to remember. One night, I was coming home late from work—crushed and tired as usual. That whole day I just turned the steering wheel here and there. It was in this same taxi that I’m driving you in now. Well, the phone rang and I was startled! At that time of day, late at night, the only call I would usually have was from my dear old mother, but she’s passed away. Since then, rarely has anyone been calling me, and I never expected the phone to ring. “Hello,” I said, after picking up the receiver. On the opposite end was silence—just silence. I felt, however, as if someone was breathing into the phone. “Hello?” I repeated, half, annoyed, half scared, not knowing why. “Who’s there?” On the other end, again—silence. At this point, something clicked. Strange thoughts spun through my brain. All of the sudden a familiar voice said through sobs and tears: “The children... How are the children?” My heart clenched. I froze and barely managed to say: “Catherine! Is that you, Catherine? Hello. Hello ... Catherine!” Unexpectedly, the connection broke and the phone went dead. Was that really my Catherine? Or was it just my imagination? I couldn’t say! And, well, I didn’t hear anything more from her. The kids are grown now. They went away too, and have their own lives. My son is thirty years old, a builder in Spain, with a family of his own. My daughter is a waitress in England. Thank god she’s left me her kid to care for. My granddaughter’s my only happiness now. It’s for her sake alone that I still drive this taxi. But I put the photos of all of them around the rearview mirror so that when I look back to see if cars are coming, I always see them, my son, my daughter, my grandchildren ... Oh, yes, and there is a photo of Catherine, too. Look at her, how she smiles at me. In this picture she’s only twenty-two. It doesn’t matter that the closest people in my life are present only in these pictures. I look at them and they make me happy. Sometimes in real life they are good, sometimes not, but always, so that I don’t worry about them, they smile before me as up here. That is how I see them every day in the rearview mirror, slowly receding into the distance while I continue to drive straight ahead.

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