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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

English and Creative Writing

***Reading Through Binoculars* and
Critical Commentary: A Story About Stories**

by

James Oliver Cole

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2013

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

THIS THESIS COMPRISES AN ORIGINAL NOVEL, *READING THROUGH BINOCULARS*, AND A CRITICAL COMMENTARY: A STORY ABOUT STORIES. *BINOCULARS* CHARTS THE JOURNEY OF MITI POPOV, AS HE GOES IN SEARCH OF HIS MISSING MOTHER ACROSS BULGARIA. AN AVID READER, THE BOOKS MITI READS BEGIN TO IMPOSE THEMSELVES UPON THE PEOPLE AND PLACES HE ENCOUNTERS ON HIS TRAVELS. SIDE BY SIDE WITH MITI'S NARRATIVE ARE A SERIES OF SHORT STORIES, *THE STORIES ON THE WIND*, WRITTEN WHEN HE IS MUCH OLDER, AND EXTRACTS FROM HIS FATHER'S NOTEBOOK, *A SENSE OF HISTORY: A BLIND MAN'S VIEW OF BULGARIA*. THE CRITICAL COMMENTARY EXPLORES THE PROCESSES OF WRITING THE NOVEL AND HOW THEORIES OF INTERTEXTUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TEXT AND THE READER, THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN BULGARIA'S PAST AND PRESENT, AND NOTIONS OF COSMOPOLITAN THEORIST'S AWARENESS OF DIFFERENCE WERE ALL INFLUENTIAL UPON, AND FILTERED INTO, THE WRITING OF *BINOCULARS*.

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***READING THROUGH BINOCULARS AND
CRITICAL COMMENTARY: A STORY ABOUT STORIES***

James Oliver Cole

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, James Oliver Cole

declare that the thesis entitled

Reading Through Binoculars and Critical Commentary: A Story About Stories

and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission

Signed: James Cole

Date: May 2013

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READING THROUGH BINOCULARS

Parenthesis I

Dawn, filled with the promise of rain.

Dimitar forces himself up the steep steps remembering that, once, he would have cleared them two, three at a time, only now he is slow and has to steady himself on the stone walls of the stairway cut into the hill. His eyes linger on his outstretched hand that could belong to someone else. In this light, with its craters and cracks and pallid skin, it almost blends in with the stone. In his other hand he grips a heavy briefcase. There is an easier way up, the main route that most people take where the steps are gentler, less steep. Still, he makes the effort and will take his time. There is no hurry. No one will start arriving until much later that day. He is hours early, was lucky enough to be given the keys to let himself in although the metal gate at the bottom of the steps had been tough and resistant and he'd thought for a moment he'd have to turn back or find someone to help him.

A young boy flies up the stairway ahead of him, tauntingly, mockingly; goading him on. The boy reaches the top, calling down to Dimitar, and telling him to hurry up. As he climbs, the old man remembers there had never seemed as if there was enough time as a boy. Not enough hours in the day, not enough minutes in the hour. To see everything, to do everything, to dream everything.

Eventually, he makes it to the top and his legs are tired and nearly give way beneath him; he has to go and sit on one of the benches under the fig trees in the courtyard, facing the two low buildings.

"How many times have I sat in this exact same spot?"

The boy next to him ignores him, bites into a fig that has fallen from the swollen tree and continues to lose himself in the book he'd been carrying. Dimitar cranes his neck to see which book the boy is reading. Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. He remembers it well, the adventure, the sea monster, Captain Nemo's Nautilus and its library of oceanic specimens. The boy is squatting at the other end of the bench, rocking back and forwards, the book resting on his knees. He turns the pages faster than he could possibly read them. Not enough hours in the day to read the book, and all the others.

Knowing the boy will be occupied with the book for a long while, the old man looks around at the courtyard. Grey light is descending through the fig trees and is tinged with the yellow of the coming day. Low clouds threaten rain. Not for the first time he thinks that his agent, Silva, was too hasty in organising the event outside. He remembers September as a warm months, when he was a boy, but now it is as grey as the winter

months, occasionally exploding into a sunshine and deep orange warmth that are short-lived; the dying embers of a fire.

He pictures what the scene will be like later. Silva has ordered chairs for the press and the guests so this whole space will be littered with them and she says she's managed to procure a podium. She says it's because it comes with a microphone and would be easier than fiddling about with a lapel mic but he knows it's because she's seen him shake when he has to hold his books and read for any length of time although she'll never admit that she's noticed. Sometimes the shaking is so bad it feels as if it might never stop.

He can't fault Silva in her choice of location for the book launch. He knows Danov's House well, has been a visitor since his childhood. The two buildings on the edges of the courtyard are at right angles to each other. One building contains Danov's printing press, a black, metallic spider-like contraption, and the second building, sunflower yellow, is the house where Danov lived and worked; now a museum dedicated to the history of Bulgarian publications. There will no doubt be photographs taken outside the house, he thinks, in front of the flowerbeds. If only the rain will hold off.

Searching the bunch for the right key, he walks up to the heavy wooden doors of the yellow building and, after several attempts, he lets himself in, the smell of musty books greeting him like a barking dog at his feet. The hallway is full of stacked chairs, ready to be put out for the launch. He makes his way to one of the far rooms where Silva had told him she'd leave the copies of his book. The room is a replica classroom from nearly two hundred years ago and the boxes are piled up on every surface, bullying their way into the room, pushing aside the scales, a broken abacus, a smattering of old textbooks, some resin casts of body parts, and a poster, dog-eared and faded, that depicts the cross-section of an eyeball. He uses the serrated edge of one of the keys to cut through the brown parcel tape and removes one of the books. Noticing there is nowhere to sit, he finds the replica of Danov's study and goes over to where the desk stands. Luckily they've had the good grace not to pile the boxes onto the desk but instead surrounded it; a lone island in a sea of brown boxes. Behind the desk is a chair. Vacant and inviting, Dimitar sits down to rest his weary legs. Through the window, he watches the boy read on the bench under the fig tree, oblivious to everything, lost in the story.

Dimitar hasn't seen a copy of the finished book. There had been a time when he'd been involved in the whole process, begged to be informed of all the little decisions, pleaded to have control over everything, and the publishers bowed down to him or at least they afforded him the belief that he had control when in actual fact everything had been decided long ago in a board meeting in some office he'd never been to. Now though, even

the writing of the thing was becoming too much of an effort; he was tired, and Silva was lucky if she got even a halfway decent manuscript to read.

He touches the cover, the title he'd chosen in a too-bold print that he doesn't like – THE STORIES ON THE WIND – not subtle at all, he thinks to himself. At least they've used the photograph he'd sent Silva. And on the back, the blurb which makes him cringe:

The tale of a man who can fix anything in the world; the story of a mermaid who can swim between the pages of books; the account of hidden love in a church restroom. Finally, the first short story collection from Dimitar Popov is here. Where his novels explore the world, this not-to-be-missed collection introduces us to a dizzying array of Bulgarian characters and places. In time, *The Stories on the Wind* will come to be known as his 'Bulgarian stories'. Popov has returned home.

He wonders who on earth wrote it, certainly not Silva, she knows he detests that kind of self-indulgence. They are only stories about Bulgaria because that's where the ideas originated. He's not sure what all this nonsense about returning home means; as far as he's concerned he never left. Still, there is nothing he can do now. It is all going to happen, with or without him.

*The boy is still reading outside, mouth full of fig. Dimitar watches him. It all began with a boy, he realises. The characters in *The Stories on the Wind* had been real people at one point; the man who could fix everything, the mermaid, the hidden lovers, all of them, real. And now he is holding their stories in his hands, the ones he's crafted for them all these years later. He takes time to remember them now, how they really were, when he first met them. He remembers the mermaid in particular. She wasn't a mermaid though, of course she wasn't. These characters were part of a journey across Bulgaria.*

It was a journey that started with something lost.

When Dimitar Popov Could Not Sleep

Breadcrumbs. That was exactly what he needed: breadcrumbs, like in *Hansel and Gretel*.

Or a map, as in *Treasure Island*.

He needed something - *anything* - that would help him get home again should he get lost in his dreams or, worse still, his nightmares. For about a week, nine year-old Dimitar Popov could not sleep for fear that he would never wake up again, lost for eternity, wandering around the dream-world or the nightmare-world or a horrid mixture of both. Whilst he lay there awake, he thought about the characters he read about in his beloved books; if they were going on a journey they always had something to help them get home again – a map, a talisman of some kind. Did Theseus not have a ball of thread as he went into the labyrinth in search of the Minotaur? Is there not a map of the Hundred Acre Wood at the beginning of his special illustrated edition of *Winnie the Pooh*, the one his grandparents had sent over from England? Breadcrumbs, all of them.

The more he thought about this, the more he couldn't sleep and one night it became so bad, his body so hot from tossing and turning and his legs so itchy and restless, that he sat bolt upright in his bed and pondered what to do next. He'd tried reading but for some reason books didn't offer him the comfort and relaxation that they normally did and so he decided there was nothing else for it except to get out of bed. The middle of the night, his mother and father were asleep. He crept out of his own bedroom, across the hall and into the kitchen where he splashed his face with some ice cold water from the taps. The night was muggy, hadn't quite shaken the heat of the day. The sliding doors that went from the kitchen to the balcony squeaked on their hinges as he opened them. Outside, there wasn't even a hint of a breeze trying to make itself known. Everything was still.

Through the darkness he could see the other three apartment blocks that rose up to the stars like his own. Pinpricks of light came out of the darkness and so, he thought, he wasn't the only one awake and afraid of getting lost in their dreams. Somewhere, a dog was barking. A car buzzed down the cobbled streets in between the apartments. From within his own block he could hear a television blaring – gunshots and a car chase. Then

he heard something else: an intermittent, out-of-breath whistling. He thought maybe he'd woken up his mother or father but, when he looked around, he was alone.

And yet, there came the whistling again. A tune he didn't recognise. He let the melody sing to him and it was a while before he realised where the sound was coming from. The balcony next door. Standing on tiptoes, he looked over the partition. Madame Zlatka was there, on one of her plastic chairs, sewing a square of cloth onto another piece. Despite her age, which Miti generously placed somewhere around a hundred, Zlatka still had a full head of golden hair and she had three golden teeth in a row, and, of course, everybody knew her name meant 'gold'. Miti thought she must be a millionaire yet he could never understand why she chose to remain in her small apartment if she had so much money and gold that she was named after it. He watched her for a while, sewing and whistling, and she didn't even need to look up to know he was there.

"Can't you sleep, Little One?" She spoke as if she already knew the answer.

"No."

"Nightmare?"

"Not really."

"Then what is it you're afraid of, Little One?"

"I'm afraid of getting lost in them, in my dreams or nightmares." When he said it out loud for the first time it felt foolish.

"Ah, I see," said Madame Zlatka nodding slowly. "Yes, I understand."

"You do?" He was still on tip-toes, peering over the wall joining the two balconies.

"Take off your pyjama top," she said suddenly, in between whistles, still sewing.

He hesitated and stepped back from the partition. "My pyjama top?" He stepped forward again, intrigued. She was looking up now, right at him, through the darkness. The only light was coming from her kitchen window, pale and creamy like spilt milk.

"I have an idea," she said and her eyes were full of excitement. In the light, they sparkled.

He had met Madame Zlatka many times before, it wasn't as if she was a stranger; she'd even looked after him for an evening once when his parents were at a party and she'd cooked him meatballs in watery gravy that tasted of nothing and then read him some fairy tales about a dragon and three brothers and a golden egg. He wasn't sure what she needed his pyjama top for but he pulled it off, right over his head without undoing his buttons. His mother always told him off for doing that. The pyjamas were mostly white with blue polka dots on

them. His favourite pair. With one hand he patted down his ruffled brown hair and with the other he held out his pyjama top over the partition.

Dragging her plastic chair over, she sat back down and surveyed his top like you might an antique in a shop, peering through the thin-framed glasses on the end of her nose. “Now, let’s have a look here,” she said and then she turned it inside out. “Ah yes, that’ll do nicely. I’ll be back in a short second.” She stood, left the top on her chair, and disappeared through her own sliding doors. Miti’s feet were tiring from standing on tiptoes for so long so he moved away from the wall and peered over his balcony once more. He tried looking for stars but he couldn’t see any, the clouds were low and close, trapping in all the heat. He pretended that the lights from the other apartment blocks were stars and when he squinted it was as if he was a part of the galaxy. Maybe he was even a star himself. He liked that idea a lot. “Here we are.” Madame Zlatka had returned, silently, bringing back a pen. Miti watched as she straightened out the tag attached to the collar of his top, the one that used to have all the washing instructions and *MADE IN CHINA* printed on it until it had faded. She took her pen and began writing something, in small letters, on the tag, poking her tongue out in concentration as she wrote. In the dark, he couldn’t see what she was writing. When she’d finished, she blew on it to make sure the ink had dried and surveyed her handiwork with a smile. “There,” she said, handing it back over the wall, “to help you find your way home when you’re sleeping.”

Miti took the top and looked at the tag.

Dimitar Popov

Vasil Levski 17

Plovdiv

Bulgaria

“That way, you’ll never get lost in your dreams,” said Madame Zlatka, “you’ll always return. Safe as houses.” She left him out on the balcony without another word.

From that night on, Miti slept without fear and dreamt without worry, knowing that his address was always with him and would lead him back home if anything were to happen.

Except one night when something woke him with a start.

His mother, Grace, was in the living room by the dresser filled with books. She was picking one up from the floor. “Sorry, M, did I wake you?” She waved the book and smiled apologetically. “I dropped it. Butter fingers.” She went over to the armchair – green and threadbare – sat, and tucked her legs under herself, draping a red blanket over her knees. She was always cold, Miti had noticed, even in the summer. He knew it had something to do with coming from England. “We English are always cold,” she’d explained once, “let’s hope you take after your father.”

“What are you reading?” he asked, wiping the sleep from his eyes and checking the tag in his collar to make sure it was still there.

“Oh, just a book,” she said, opening it to the front page. Like Miti, she was always reading. He was certain that if it was possible, the pair of them would breathe books. “You best get back to bed. School tomorrow.” Reluctantly, Miti headed for his bedroom but he didn’t quite make it. He hovered in the doorway to the living room, silently, watching his mother read. She was silhouetted by the orange light from the tall floorlamp with the shade that looked like a drooping tulip. He watched her cradle the book, holding it in both hands as if it was the most precious thing in the world.

“Is it a good book?” he whispered.

Surprised to see him still standing there, she looked up, the light still behind her. “I love it. It’s my favourite by a Bulgarian author, a man named Ivan Vazov.”

“What’s it called?” He wanted to come forward, take a closer look at the book which, like his mother, was still in shadow.

“*Under the Yoke*. Maybe one day you could read it. Your father likes it too. It reminds me of him, of the good old days, when things were less complicated.”

Miti thought about complicated things. Algebra and equations. The off-side rule in football he’d been struggling to get to grips with. They were all what he understood to be complicated. Difficult. Tricky. He thought about his father and wondered what she’d meant about things with him being complicated. He was about to ask when she turned back to her book.

“Off you go, M. I don’t want you cranky in the morning again from being over-tired.”

He left her in the room with the book she cradled like a baby.

The next evening, he willed himself to stay awake until he knew his mother was in the living room reading. Without saying a word, he sidled up to the armchair and squeezed himself in next to her – he was only small – and he tried pulling the red blanket over both of them but it wasn't big enough so it ended up being half on him and half on his mother. She mentioned something about him going back to bed but soon after she lost herself in the book and seemed to forget his presence.

From then on, he would join her in the armchair every night and he would read whatever book she had chosen to read. Sometimes he understood them and sometimes he didn't and sometimes she read too fast so that she turned the pages before he'd had a chance to finish them but on those occasions he never said anything and he'd make up his own stories about the characters or the places. He never did find out how Bilbo's song that Frodo sang in the Prancing Pony went because she skipped over it but he came up with his own song about hobbits and other creatures that made them come alive for him.

Once, he must have fallen asleep as they read because he was woken up in the morning by his father, looming large over him and telling him that he needed to get ready for school or he'd be late. He didn't know where his mother had gone; she'd taken the book and the blanket.

The armchair would switch allegiances. During the night it belonged to his mother and their books, during the day it belonged to his father, Stoyan. He was a large man. Miti sometimes liked to believe his father was a remnant of the giant era; the last giant on earth. His father was, mostly, a quiet man who periodically erupted into frenzies of excitement, anger and frustration during the football matches on television. It didn't matter where the match was being held or who was playing. He picked a team (sometimes for purely ephemeral reasons, such as the colour of the team's away kit, or the name of one of the players being the same as one of the children in the history classes he taught at the upper school) and he supported the team with the vigour and ardour of a life-long follower until the match ended and the next one began.

Before every match Stoyan would roll up his shirt sleeves and manoeuvre the armchair directly in front of the television, pushing and pulling until it was no more than two feet away, much to the consternation and broom-to-ceiling protests of the angry red man below. But for Stoyan there could be no other way of watching the football matches, cutting out the rest of the apartment as if it didn't exist, as if he was actually there on the pitch, with Miti watching on from the sidelines, slightly in awe, slightly frightened by his father.

And then, one day, it wasn't Miti's father who exploded in front of the television, it was his mother. She stormed into the living room, almost pushed the television off its stand as she turned it off, such was the force of her wrath. And there was nothing Stoyan could do except listen because now Grace was in front of the television, only a foot away from her husband, so she was all that he could see, as if the rest of the apartment didn't exist. And she was shouting, and swearing – in English and Bulgarian – so there was only half of the argument that he could ever have fully understood.

Whilst the argument raged, Miti was in the hallway locked in a showdown with Ivan Vazov's *Under The Yoke*. Ever since he'd seen his mother cradling the book like a baby, he'd tried reading it himself, tried to work out why the story captivated her so much but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't understand what was so good about it. As far as he could see, it was all about a lot of old Bulgarian people talking about the nasty Turks who had been oppressing them for five hundred years. Hardly, he thought, entertaining.

He propped the book against the wall at one end of the hallway, stepped back four paces. A face-off. His fingers twitched by his sides like he'd seen cowboys do in Westerns. He had no gun but his pocket bulged from where his trusty mechanical dictionary lay in wait, the one his mother had brought back from England for his birthday. He was determined to get to the bottom of all this confusion, even if it meant reading the book over and over again.

But for now, Vazov would have to wait. Something was going on in the living room. He walked slowly, reaching for the door handle and he turned it, peering in through the short gap he'd made. There were his mother and father, arguing about something. She couldn't take anymore. Where was this going? Everything was becoming meaningless. (Whatever that meant, Miti wasn't sure.) He wondered if this was a particularly vigorous game of Charades, which they played at Christmas when his mother's brother and sister-in-law, Uncle Brian and Aunty Pauline, came over sometimes to visit with their boxes of chocolates and parlour games. The set-up was all right, at least. They would have to stand in the living room, in front of the television, waving and flapping their arms about. But father was too close, and mother was too angry. No, Miti decided, from what he could see through the gap in the door, this wasn't a game of Charades. Was this what his mother had meant about things being complicated? Difficult. Tricky.

Suddenly his mother is falling to the floor – almost in slow motion it feels to Miti – and his father is cradling her, her head on his knees. She is red in the face, weeping and strangely beautiful, but so is Stoyan; his eyes are closed and serene. Perhaps this was all just a game after all, he wondered, deciding to let them play it

out until they became over-tired or until they got silly and someone got hurt. He must return to the showdown, Vazov was waiting. The hallway wasn't big enough for the two of them.

Yet all this shouting and arguing came after. There had been a time, before, when everything was normal.

The Story of Madame Zlatka

Sometimes I think that it must have been a story; one that I read somewhere, or one that happened to someone else.

This is because there are so many other stories from those years; stories about the way that it could have gone, about the ones who were unlucky, about the ones who didn't survive. It is all right for me to tell you that I survived at this point, how else would I be telling you this story? It doesn't matter about tension and suspense, about finding out what happened in the end because in the fact of me telling you this story, this fairy tale, you already know the ending. I survived.

It might be many years since it happened, many years since I was that young girl, and you could argue that I have forgotten certain things, distorted certain facts, misremembered certain details but I assure you I haven't. The facts of that night are branded on my memory.

This is an inventory of that night, an inventory of my memory.

In the room, there was the following:

An old gramophone – my grandfather's – he'd had it since he received it as a gift from a wealthy couple. He saved the life of their youngest child when he was only a child himself. The child had fallen through a crack in some ice on a lake in the Pirin Mountains and my grandfather, without thinking, dived in and saved her. We used to play happy records by Meg Tevelian on the gramophone; those were the tunes of my early childhood, rousing jazz records that made you want to get up and dance: *Dich Liebe Ich*, *Schönes Wetter*, *Rip-Tip-Tap*. I can hear them now. And then a storm appeared on the horizon. Under government legislation, Jews weren't allowed radios so we had to rely on the newspapers. We read in them, just as we read in the looks on people's faces – our own neighbour's faces – the way that things were going and so we started playing a different kind of record, loudly, so that anyone walking past on the street would have heard, through the open window of our living room, the rising strains of Wagner and Beethoven. Grandfather had to spend a lot of money to procure these records from Germany and when the gramophone started to break – to get through an entire record you had to stand next to it and tap it every so often to make

sure the needle didn't get stuck in the grooves – you could tell Grandfather's heart was breaking because it was letting him down, after all these years, and just when he needed it most. Grandfather died not long after that. One night he was lighting the menorah candelabrum with us and the next morning he was gone, like a happy dream. We were left with fond memories of him but also the heartache of his leaving.

The main table and the menorah – these belonged to everyone; if the house had a heart it would be these objects. We stood around the table and prayed, we ate there, my mother was fond of telling me that she used to set the tin bath on the table and bathe me and my baby brother, Aleksander, until she could see her reflection in our rosy cheeks. I lost count of how many times the menorah was lit and each time it was like a prayer in itself. When we heard that they were coming, when we were told to get out and leave everything behind, the menorah stayed on the table; there was nowhere else it could possibly go. It wouldn't fit into our cloth bags. We had to pack it away into our hearts. That was the only way to keep it and take it with us.

The old bed in the corner of the room – my parents' – they gave me and Aleksander their bedroom when I was seven and he was three; it felt as if we had the run of our own castle although I didn't have the heart to tell anyone that for the first few weeks I was scared of the darkness in that room, its quietness. Where we used to sleep, on the bed in the corner of the main room, there was always noise from the street outside and, as we were falling asleep, there were usually some embers burning in the hearth. Years passed before I realised that they'd given us the darkness and the solitude so they could protect us; as if they knew that with what was coming there would be little chance for darkness or solitude or, even, a sound night's sleep.

The hearth – mother's – she would cook for hours over the hearth in a huge iron cauldron: stews, casseroles with dumplings, soups. When we started packing everything away – hurried and haphazardly – I remember seeing my mother turn to my father and I can still picture the look on her face as she did so. It said: the cauldron is too big and heavy. How will we eat? What will we do? My father's answer was silence.

The cupboard with no door on it – mother's – where she kept her life. Pots, pans, her sewing kit, her clothes, and in the corner, right at the back, a small bottle of perfume. I only remember her wearing it once, at my grandfather's funeral. It smelt of rose oil and honey.

These were the things that were in the room when we knew they were coming for us. Aleksander had heard the shouts down the street. The rest of us thought it must be boys playing as they normally did at that time, the twilight before evening set in and everyone sat down to their meals. But these, we soon realised, were adult voices.

You couldn't escape the stories back then. Our neighbours two doors down were Jewish too. They'd lost a whole family, they'd never heard from them again. And in the papers we read things, awful things. On the day Boris III, Tsar of Bulgaria, was summoned to a meeting with Hitler, we sat at the table holding hands, singing the German national anthem as loud as we could, over and over again, as if our needle had become lodged in a groove.

The voices were getting louder and louder, joining the sound of banging on doors and then the frightened replies from people barricading themselves inside their homes. We knew they were coming for us. Mother and Father tried to push my brother and me into the back room, as far away from the door as possible but we didn't want to go, we didn't want to leave them. We heard the barking of dogs, the stamping of feet. We knew our home would surely be the next.

But they missed us. We were huddled around the table, Aleksander and I were crying. The noises and the banging stopped next door at our neighbour's house and it turns out they weren't the Germans that we'd heard about, it was the Bulgarian police, there'd been some kind of fight up at the old mill, someone had been hurt. We didn't let go of each other's hands until the candles on the menorah had burned themselves out.

So you see, it doesn't matter that you knew I survived because we all did. Not a single Jew out of the nearly fifty thousand Jews living in Bulgaria during World War II was deported to the concentration camps. It was only after the war that everyone left, for the new state of Israel – my mother and father, my little brother Aleksander. Only I stayed. And to this day I carry with me the old gramophone, the table with the menorah on it, the bed in the corner and the cupboard with no door. Sometimes, I wear my mother's perfume.

Rose oil and honey.

When Everything Was Normal

The elevator wouldn't always take you to your desired floor. Miti had been stuck inside no less than seven times, had to wait for someone to realise it wasn't working and call the maintenance man (who was the ancient, grey man who sat outside the front of the apartment block playing chess grumpily, usually by himself). Once, Miti had been trapped in there for nearly two hours because it was a quiet Sunday morning during a harsh winter and nobody had needed to use the elevator. The man came and, resentfully, got it going again. "Why's it always you?" he'd asked Miti, as if he was to blame.

No matter how unreliable, Miti always opted to take the elevator down because that was the start of his journey and Miti was the kind of boy who liked journeys. It had no door, so you had to step back and keep your arms and feet tucked in, like some kind of fairground ride. He would watch the floors and the dirty bricks of the building pass by in a blur and he would imagine he was being taken to the centre of the earth. He'd read in a book once that some mighty adventurers had done exactly that and one day, he knew, he would go with them to see the dinosaurs and stalactites the size of houses and all the things lost and forgotten.

When the elevator arrived at the bottom floor with a half-hearted ping, Miti would leave and pass by the maintenance man who was gravely pondering his next move.

A short way from the apartment block began the larger shops; the modern ones with polished kitchen displays, bigger than his entire apartment, in a garish Formica rainforest of reds and greens with chrome lampshades hanging from the ceiling by invisible wires so that they looked as if they were floating on air – silver hummingbirds with halos. Further down was a large fabric shop selling rolls of curtain or dress material, stacked up like tall, emaciated people lining up in a queue. The window displayed fading pictures of smiling women wearing knitted cardigans and jumpers in kaleidoscopic colours. Next door was a noisy shop selling tyres of all sizes fixed to the graffitied walls which were lit up by neon lights so if you passed at night it looked like a disco where the tyres would congregate, the small ones segregated at one end and the large ones in the VIP section at the other end with their huge silver rims studded with crystals and diamonds. He didn't need these large shops; he was heading for the small corner shop further down the street, nearer the city centre.

It was early but, being late April, the air was already warming up and he could quite happily walk along in his school shirt and shorts without feeling the bite of a chilly morning, even though the new uniform the

school had made them wear was scratchy and uncomfortable. As always, he was too early for the shop to open but the cleaner was already there, her bucket propping ajar the front door. Miti heard her humming from outside, always the same tune, and he entered quietly. The cleaner was mopping the floor behind the counter when she heard Miti slipping out a newspaper from the pile that had been left by the delivery man on the doorstep before she'd arrived.

"Don't forget your drink and your meal," she'd say to him, every morning, without looking up from the sweeping or the polishing or the mopping.

"Thank you," Miti would reply, tucking the paper under his arm and grabbing the can and the brown paper bag that was carefully left on the end of the counter. In its place he would always deposit some *leva* for just a bit over the right amount. Then he would leave and return home, walking past the tyre disco, the emaciated queue of carpet people, past the hummingbirds with halos and the red and green Formica rainforest in which they lived.

Back home he would creep in and leave the paper for his father whilst he was marking school books in the armchair in the living room. His mother was gone; she always started work at the language school early. Miti would then tuck the can and the brown paper bag into his school satchel, make sure he had all the books he'd need for that day, and head off for school, a walk that didn't take him long.

Every day was the same, everything was normal, and that was exactly how Miti liked it.

Only one day his alarm didn't go off and he woke up too late to go to collect the paper and his packed lunch from the shop. His father was already in the living room marking books or planning his lessons, although he looked tired and his eyes were reddened.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" asked Miti, still in his pyjamas, checking for the tag in his collar.

"I thought you'd already gone," said his father and Miti didn't really know what to do because something like this had never happened before.

"You head to school," said Stoyan, "if you hurry you can still make it in time. I'll drop off your lunch later."

And so Miti's journey that morning started a little differently than all the others and he wasn't in the right spirits to think about dinosaurs and journeying to the centre of the earth; his mind preoccupied by the broken alarm clock he carried in his arms.

“What do you want me to do with it?” asked the maintenance man, only looking up once to where Miti had deposited the alarm clock on the table by the chess set. Miti noticed he didn’t have any teeth left and his skin was peeling in places like curled pencil shavings.

“It’s broken,” explained Miti, “I thought you could fix it.”

The man moved his black rook forward three places, taking a white pawn. “I only fix things to do with the building,” he said. “The elevator, faulty door hinges, leaking pipes.”

“I know but...” began Miti. “Please, I’m sure it won’t take you long. I’m sure it could be fixed.”

“There are some things that can’t be fixed,” he said. The white queen took the black rook.

“But you haven’t even looked at it yet,” said Miti.

“I wasn’t talking about the alarm clock.” The black queen put the white king in check.

“What do you mean then?”

“Your mother, the English one,” he said, “she left early this morning.”

“She always leaves early, her job - ”

“She’s been leaving earlier and earlier every morning. Sometimes it’s dark when she leaves.” The white king moved one square left.

Miti didn’t understand the new course this conversation was taking. “So?”

“So,” said the maintenance man, “there are some things that cannot be fixed.” The black queen moved diagonally one square.

Checkmate.

As Miti picked up the broken alarm clock which hadn’t been fixed and walked away, wondering how he was going to explain why he’d taken it to school, he thought that maybe there had never been a time when everything was normal after all.

Things certainly weren’t normal that time when Miti encountered the strange, terrible day.

The Story of the Maintenance Man

When he was seven years old, Kiril fixed a German tank.

They had rolled into Sofia, ten of the tanks, surrounded by German soldiers with their guns. And then, when they were done with whatever they were doing, they rolled out of the city leaving muddy caterpillar tracks and mixed looks of confusion and pride behind them. As the last tank was leaving the city, as it rolled past one of the small houses on the outskirts causing all the windows to shake and the cutlery and crockery to titter and tinkle in the old dresser, it broke down. It came to a halting, irrevocable stop, as if the life had been sucked right out of it.

Two Germans clambered out the top and proceeded to check over the tank for signs of what had gone wrong. An officer up ahead saw the delay and ordered the convoy to stop but one of the soldiers from the broken-down tank told the others to carry on, it was nothing really, they'll have it sorted out in a second, you go on and we'll catch you up.

Except the two soldiers couldn't find the cause of the problem, no matter how hard they looked. They looked inside, and outside, they looked for something blocking the way - although it would take something rather large and noticeable to get in the way of a powerful tank like that - and, just when they were beginning to suspect that it might have been because of an unforeseen attack from one of the locals (who had by now gathered gingerly around the tank to watch on and offer all sorts of handy pointers - "Over there, I think there's something jammed in the tracks!" "It might have been cursed by gypsies!" "I've seen this before with this model, have you checked the engine for a leak?"), one of them stood forward and asked if he could help.

It was seven year old Kiril. His parents hadn't realised he'd left the house; when they heard the tank come to a stop directly outside their front door they went to go and see if they could offer any assistance ("Perhaps it might be something to do with the engine?"), leaving Kiril in the kitchen where he was playing with the insides of a gramophone, all spilled out and open like a body on a surgeon's table. Kiril's mother stepped forward and put her hands on his shoulders, laughed, and said: "Come on, Kiril, let the young men do their job." But just then one of their neighbours stepped forward and said: "Maybe you should let him take a look, he fixed my radio just last week." And then another came forward praising Kiril for having fixed her mangle and then another and another until the

Germans shrugged their shoulders and said: "We're all out of options. Go ahead and take a look, if you think you can fix it."

Kiril rolled up his sleeves, a trait he'd picked up from his uncle who lived in the centre of Sofia and had taught him everything he knew, and got to work. Because of his size, he could crawl inside the tank's engine, getting in further than anyone else could, where it was hot and covered in grease and where the heady smell of petrol fumes made him feel nauseous. Ignoring this, he crawled through the engine until he'd found the source of the problem (a small piece of grit that was causing the internal mechanisms not to turn properly). When he made his way out of the tank and the soldiers started up the engine, the locals cheered and the Germans did too and they thanked Kiril and his family and gave them a handful of Deutschmarks for their trouble (which of course they couldn't use in Bulgaria but which still looked good fixed above the mantelpiece and was a talking point whenever they had anyone over for supper).

The feat of Kiril and the German Tank, which circulated around the neighbourhood like a fairy tale, was certain never to be forgotten and people came from far and wide to bring faulty items for him to fix in return for a small fee which his mother collected in an old threadbare hat or in exchange for some food or an item of clothing or, in one extreme circumstance after Kiril fixed a rich gentleman's car, fifty *leva*.

In his spare time, he built a replica German tank.

He spent months collecting all the parts and pieces he'd need. He was thirteen by then and had taken charge of his payments and so when he needed a cog or some piping or a piece of metal he would ask for it from clients in exchange for some maintenance work. He stored everything in a derelict out-building at the bottom of their property until he was ready to assemble the tank and then he spent three weeks of solid work, one hot and sweaty summer, putting it together under the watchful eyes of his parents.

When he finished, a steady stream of onlookers traipsed their muddy shoes through Kiril's house, to-ing and fro-ing from the garden in order to see Kiril at work, and when he secured the last bolt in place, at least thirty of the locals were there to watch and congratulate him on his achievement. There was a feeling of an anti-climax for those assembled when they realised that the garden was surrounded on four sides by fences or other buildings and that the tank had nowhere to go. Kiril had foreseen this and wasn't bothered. Less than thirty minutes after he had finished assembling the tank he began to take it apart, piece by piece, in the exact order in which he'd put it together.

The feat of Kiril and the Second German Tank made it into local newspapers although the article contained no picture because the local reporter, who was also the teacher, couldn't make it in time before the tank was no more than a collection of bolts and metal and cogs in a garden, but word of Kiril's abilities spread further and wider than before.

When three eminent scientists from a notable Russian university paid Kiril a visit one year later, he was branded a child genius. The world, they said, had been searching for a child genius (it had been over two hundred years since Mozart began composing at the tender age of five years old), and they had heard about Kiril's abilities and had come to perform some tests, should it be in accordance with his parents' wishes. The war was over and money was tight and the scientists promised that Kiril would not be harmed during the tests as they were solely of an academic nature and so his parents agreed, without ever once asking Kiril what he thought on the matter. The scientists tested him in mathematics (he failed miserably, to their lasting disappointment), chemistry (they gave up after the tenth question), biology (sigh-inducing), and physics (why had they wasted the time and money in coming such a long distance?). When they were conferring about what to do ("Give up now" was the consensus they seemed to be leaning towards), Kiril got up from the chair and asked to borrow one of the scientist's watches. "It's been broken for years," he explained to Kiril, "but no one's been able to fix it. I only wear it because it was a gift from my wife and has sentimental value." Within a minute, Kiril had fixed it. The scientist held it up to his ears, tears clouding his face, and listened to the tick-tocking of the watch as if it were the beating of his long lost wife's heart. "Incredible!" he said. "But how did you...?" "I don't know," shrugged Kiril. "I just look at things and know how to fix them."

After that, the scientists led Kiril around the houses in the local neighbourhood and asked if anything needed to be fixed, believing that a practical examination might prove more fruitful than an academic one, but once again were disheartened when every household turned them away and said there was nothing to be fixed. When they returned back to Kiril's house his father explained to the scientists that the reason for this was because Kiril was the one who had fixed everything. The scientists were astounded. "He could fix anything; could fix the world," one of them said, in a hushed, over-excited whisper, half afraid to say it.

But after the Russians left, Kiril simply couldn't be bothered with it all anymore. He no longer found it entertaining to fix people's mangles or repair broken hosepipes or bring to life dusty old accordions once thought dead and gone. And he certainly had no desire to fix the world.

Perhaps it was the pressure of his new found fame or perhaps it was the pressure of the scientists who, upon their leaving, had promised to return with more scientists and more practical tests. Whatever the reason, Kiril ran away from home two days before his fifteenth birthday. Money wasn't a problem, he'd saved up enough from his maintenance work, so as he coursed his way across Bulgaria he stayed in luxury hotels and ate well. He left a note for his mother and father that said, simply: Some things can't be fixed. He took the Deutschmarks from the wall, a bag of clothing, and left.

In a pub somewhere outside of Pazardzhik, he learnt how to play chess by watching two old men. They played each other every day and always argued whenever someone called out 'checkmate' but then made up and played again the next day. They sat in the same corner of the pub every day and Kiril was entranced. The two men taught him how to play without ever saying a word or acknowledging his presence. He enjoyed the challenge, enjoyed the parts that each piece had to play, how they had to work together in order to win - much like the parts of an engine need to work together in order to run.

Eventually, he made it to Plovdiv where he fixed things for a living (his money had been frittered away on hotels and fine dining) and by the time the Communists came, he had found a steady job as a maintenance man in the brand new blocks of apartments that were sprouting up beyond the Old Town like concrete geysers, grey and lifeless.

Somewhere in Russia, a teenage girl turns to her brother and says: "Do you remember that child genius Father always used to talk about, the one that could fix anything he set his mind to? I wonder where he is and what he's doing now."

"I have no idea," replies the brother. He taps the old watch his father had given him, years ago.

The hands have stopped moving.

When Miti Encountered The Strange, Terrible Day

Miti always thought that the days at school went slowly, frustratingly so, because there was never enough time to read. He'd inherited his mother's love of reading like you might inherit red hair or a broad nose. Or perhaps it filtered into him by a gradual process of osmosis, whilst he was tightly knitted together with his mother every night, reading in the armchair under the blanket.

His teachers constantly told him that he could shine, that if he applied himself he could easily outperform any of his peers. But Miti's heart was not made for shining, or so he felt. He would leave that to the other children who clearly wanted it more than he did, their hands always raised in eagerness to answer the teacher's questions. He just wanted to read; to curl up with a book – good or bad – and let his mind and imagination sink into the words on the page. The words were fire; his imagination, smoke. There could be no smoke without fire. He missed books when he wasn't reading them, longed for them. During lessons he would sit and stare and wander about the landscapes of books whilst he daydreamt, walking alongside the characters, becoming a part of the story and apart from real life. It all seemed so natural for him, so normal, that one day during a particularly boring lesson to do with algebra, his teacher suddenly turned to Shere Khan, who had stalked into the classroom and curled up on his desk purring with pleasure, and asked the tiger to assist him with a troublesome formula. Miti thought nothing of it and wondered if Baloo would be out and about at breaktime.

With his mind spanning more than a thousand worlds, school was nothing but a distraction. They learnt French in school, instead of English, which was a shame because he was fluent in the language, his mother constantly shifting from Bulgarian to English in seamless transitions that he'd stopped noticing. He found mathematics and science difficult, was average at geography and art but found some interest in history so did well there. This was partly because as soon as his own school day finished, Miti would go along to his father's school, which was just starting, and sit in the back of the room eating his lunch and watch him, in his favourite jacket, teach history to the older children. He liked hearing him talk, liked the way his giant of a father made history come to life. Stoyan never read with him and Miti had never seen him read anything other than thick books about Bulgaria's history but whilst watching him teach, something told Miti that he shared his imagination with his father. History was his father's story. Every other story belonged to Miti.

Just as all the teachers commented upon Miti's potential, it was also clear to everyone that Miti was an awkward boy. Quite short for his age (a fact most of the other children hadn't failed to notice and remind him about at almost every opportunity) it was as if the person inside him was too big for his small frame, as if his giant of a father had been squeezed into a broom cupboard. Miti would often trip up over his own feet or knock things over, so that PE was a constant source of embarrassment, no matter how hard he tried, to the extent that he would often give up, claim he had a headache and sit on the sidelines, watching the others play their game full of skill and co-ordination that eluded him.

Needless to say, Literature was the only subject that he truly enjoyed.

"You have the rare gift," his teacher, Mr Malchek, told him once, "of seeing into books and beyond them." Mr Malchek was old and, with that age, had accumulated an aura of wisdom that Miti felt sometimes only he could see. The other members of his class misbehaved in the lesson, saw in their tutor's age something of weakness rather than greatness. So he would sit at the front, whilst nearly everyone else talked behind him, and listen to the wise words of Mr Malchek, who read (with a smile) through thick, circular glasses from his backless stool propped against the blackboard. They studied Bulgarian novels and Bulgarian translations of Western books. Miti was excited to learn they were going to study his mother's favourite book, Vazov's *Under The Yoke*. He thought this might be the opportunity to really understand it, to fall in love with it just as his mother had but no matter how hard he tried, he didn't enjoy reading it and couldn't put his finger on why that was.

"What's the matter, Dimitar?" Mr Malchek asked. "You don't seem to be happy with this book."

"I don't think I understand it," said Miti.

"Would you like me to go through it again with you? Explain what's happening?"

"I understand what's happening but there's something missing for me. I don't understand why my mother loves it so much."

"Have you tried asking her?"

"I want to tell her after I've read it. That way she'll be really impressed with me."

"In that case, sometimes we need to search hard to find the answers that we seek. Reading is a journey, perhaps the ultimate journey. The search begins when we read. Keep reading and the answer will come."

Miti said thank you, and felt comforted by the words.

At breaktimes, Miti would find a quiet spot to read somewhere in the centre of the walled school playground because each of the four corners were reserved for the huddles of the more popular children, staking their claims of territory with secret handshakes and the illicit tradings of phone cards.

Sitting in the centre of the grounds, on the bench with cracked green paint in the shade of the sycamore tree, Miti could read until going-in time, only stopping to talk with the three boys who came over occasionally to talk to discuss gizmos and gadgets. It was a passion they assumed they had in common with Miti who had a lot of them but in reality, Miti didn't really think much of gizmos and gadgets. They were just presents his English relatives sometimes sent over.

Nedko, Stoichov, and Milen circled the grounds together when they weren't indoors in the computer suite, because if you weren't invited to one of the four corners and you didn't sit on the bench in the centre under the sycamore tree, there was nowhere much else you could go.

"Anything new?" Stoichov would say, all business.

More often than not, Miti would have to shrug and shake his head, holding up the book he was trying to read. "Just this I'm afraid."

"Boring," Nedko would say.

"See ya," Milen would mutter, disappointed.

Miti remembered when he brought his mechanical dictionary to school for the first time; that's when it had all started. He had been reading his mother's copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, selected from the collection in the living-room dresser because the slim cover had an elegant picture of a woman with short bob and backless dress. He was only on the first page and had already need of the dictionary to supply a word he hadn't come across before: *plagiaristic*. He pulled out the dictionary from his pocket, pressed the power button, then punched in the word. It turned out to be the adjectival form of *Plagiarism* which was:

- 1) *The act of plagiarising or*
- 2) *That which is plagiarised*

This meant that he had to look up another word (which was all part of the fun, because every word leads to another, of course). He typed in *Plagiarise*:

- 1) *To steal and use (the ideas or writings of another) as one's own.*
- 2) *To appropriate passages or ideas from (another) to use as one's own.*

No sooner had he absorbed the meaning of the word and thought how easy it would be to plagiarise (for the very reason that every word leads to another) than Stoichov was by his side, inspecting the dictionary, joined shortly by Nedko and Milen.

“What’s that?” asked Stoichov.

“My dictionary,” said Miti wanting more than anything to tuck it away back inside his pocket. He didn’t feel threatened by The Three because he knew that they weren’t the types to go stealing things, no matter how interested they were. It was just that he wanted to carry on reading his new book and could do without the interruption.

The Three were stumped. As far as they were concerned, dictionaries were big things, made of paper with writing on it. Miti held it closer to them. “If you want to know the meaning of a word, you type it in here...” Miti pointed to the keypad. “And then the definition comes up here...” Miti pointed to the LCD display. The Three, as one, inhaled audibly. “It can search up to 50,000 words.” The Three inhaled again. From then on, they would speak to Miti at least once a week, sidling up to him, on the lookout for anything new. Sometimes, even if Miti didn’t have anything to show them they would still talk, often about PE because they, too, were amongst the last to be picked for teams.

“In my spare time I’m a Squadron Leader for a military task force sent to protect the planet from marauding aliens,” said Stoichov once. Miti hoped that he was referring to some kind of computer game. “I’ve been shot at, I’ve killed more aliens than I can count, and yet because I can’t kick a football in a straight line no one wants me on their team and I get picked last.”

Miti nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“Of course,” said Stoichov. “I don’t get picked last. You get picked last. But second-to-last still isn’t much fun.”

“Can I carry on reading now please?” asked Miti.

“Why do you like reading so much? Computer games are much more exciting.”

“I don’t have a computer.”

Stoichov couldn’t stop his mouth from opening. “You don’t have a computer?”

“My father doesn’t understand them and my mother prefers to read a book. So do I.”

Stoichov evidently didn’t have anything else to say and so, after a brief open-mouthed pause, walked off, leaving Miti to the quiet of his book.

One day, a month after the incident when his mother shouted at his father in front of the television, he went to his father’s school but could not find him. Another teacher said he hadn’t turned up that morning; there’d been no phone call or anything. Miti quickly went home.

“I told you some things couldn’t be fixed,” said the maintenance man but Miti didn’t stop to speak to him, took the elevator, and pretended that he was coming up from the centre of the earth.

“I’m home,” he called as he walked through the front door, tugging off his school shoes straight away and putting on his slippers. A warm day, he went into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water from the bottle in the fridge. “Father, are you home?” No answer. What a strange day, thought Miti, whose father never had days off work. But this wasn’t just a strange day, it was a terrible day.

The day when everything was burnt.

The Story of Mr Malchek

I could begin with a family tree but there's not enough time or space for anything like that.

The Literature teacher, Mr Malchek, hails from a family of teachers, a long, long line of educators that goes back as far as anyone, including me, cares, or has time, to remember. His brother and sister-in-law teach at the same school in Russia - French and Chemistry respectively. His younger sister lectures in something called Film Studies at a university somewhere in Australia and insists on calling him via Skype although, when she does, they only end up arguing over book-to-film adaptations. ("How can you possibly transfer something like that book onto the screen? There is so much lost." "Ah, but think about what is gained." "Nothing. Unless you count the heart palpitations I had when I watched the bloody thing.") His father taught in a primary school and his mother taught in a secondary school and so did his grandparents and their parents before them and so on, right back until you come to the first teacher, which is either God or the snake in the tree, whichever way you choose to look at it.

Yet this story isn't about the teaching, it is a story about the line of men in the Malchek family and the women who put up with them. The marriages were alternately good and then bad - a bit like the Bulgarian governments, if you were to ask a cynic.

Let us begin, then, with Mr Malchek's parents. His father, Ognyan, was a very strict and angry man who barrelled into every room in every house like a tornado, announcing himself with a cough so that everyone knew he'd arrived. Neither was he afraid to tell everyone he met exactly what he thought of them, imposing his opinions on them whether they liked it or not (most often they didn't). Clearly, Ognyan had something to say about anything and everything. He told Mrs Todorova that she wore her skirts provocatively short and that if she didn't look out someone would rape her and it would all be her fault. In 1934 he told everyone in a cafe that Hitler was the way forward but, early in 1945, he saw which way the wind was blowing and switched allegiances to Lenin with such ferocity of conviction that it made it impossible for anyone to remember he had ever believed anything different. He disliked the way that Ivan Tsvetov from three doors down styled himself as a poet but was clearly a madman and should be locked up in a Gulag or, better still, have his pathetic life ended. Most of all though, he disliked the way his wife, Mareva, kept on disappearing. She was, he sometimes thought, like an imp: one minute there and the next,

gone. Also, in secret nighttime moments when the rationality of the day had eluded him and gone down with the sun, he had questioned whether magic was involved. Some said that Baba Yaga in Apartment 249 was a witch (she had chicken's feet hanging up outside her door and there had been rumours of goats and golden eggs). Of course, Ognyan had lobbied for her to be removed from the apartment (preferably to join Ivan in a Gulag) but no one was having any of it and Baba Yaga and her rumours stayed.

Where Mareva went, nobody knew. It was possible that even she didn't know where she kept on disappearing to; it's certainly not my place to assume to know. Her habit of slipping out of a room was in the opposite manner to her husband's arrival: he was a gunshot in a silent night and she, a puff of smoke in the darkness that nobody could see.

Their son, the one we know as Mr Malchek, thought he knew the reason for his mother's disappearances. He believed it to be her way of putting up with her husband. His mother was a brief kiss to the forehead as she came and went, a ruffle of the hair, the scent of her perfume in a room where she was not but had just been. He had no doubt that she loved him but the way his father behaved had meant that his mother could only love him from a distance. She loved him in moments rather than over long periods of time. She loved him in the coming of her going. He could have sworn, once, that he heard her say "It'll get better, I'll take you with me one day," but that might have just been the sound of the door closing gently behind her as she left.

So the boy who would become Mr Malchek turned to stories as his means of escape. It was his form of disappearing, his way of putting up with his father, a version of what his mother was doing. She would leave, unnoticed, through a door and he would open a book and, unnoticed, lose himself in it. That is the beginnings of how he became a Literature teacher.

But what about his parents' parents? What were they like? Let's follow our example of the good and then bad governments and come to the conclusion that Mr Malchek's grandparents were good. They were a sweet and loving couple and nobody had a bad word to say about them.

As I have said, they were teachers. In turn-of-the-century Sofia a man of science was highly sought after. Tzvetan Malchek taught because he wanted to change the way he had been taught (we shall come to his parents in a moment). Instead of being put off teaching because of a bad example, he wanted to prove a point: that there could be such a thing as a good teacher, and his wife, Mira, was of the same conviction.

It was common knowledge that they taught something to everyone they knew. They taught a teenager about an area of science for which he went on to win a Nobel Prize in later life (in his acceptance speech he thanked his first ever teachers, who taught him not just science but the humility to treat science with the respect that it deserved). He taught Mila Nagaleva how to change a light bulb and she taught Stefan Stalinov how an engine worked. Perhaps most notably, they taught their good friend and colleague, Penko Danev, a lesson he would take with him to the grave (the importance of which is not marred by the fact they taught him this lesson on his deathbed in the Sofian State Hospital because even if he had lived to have been a hundred years old he would never have forgotten it, of that I am sure). The lesson they taught him was that a woman could teach. In turn-of-the-century Sofia, a man of science was highly sought after. A woman of science was not. So every day, Mira Malchekova would dress up as Miroslav Malchek, the brother-not-wife of Tzvetan Malchek, the two renowned "Brothers of Science" as they had come to be known. 'But you're a...woman,' stuttered Penko Danev on his deathbed. 'Yes,' said Mira, 'and I've taught you everything you know.'

They kept up the ruse even long after they had had children – two girls and a boy. They smothered their offspring with affection and no one questioned why Mira had never been seen in the same place as her husband's brother. Everyone loved them both and their son, in particular, craved more attention than his parents, though they tried their best, could give him. He craved the attention of everyone else – his parents' friends and colleagues and admirers. That is the beginnings of how he became a strict and angry man.

It is now time to turn to Mr Malchek's Great-Grandparents, the mother and father of Tzvetan Malchek, the ones who had taught him that just because such a thing as a bad teacher existed didn't mean there was no such thing as a good teacher. His mother was an Abbess in a large convent somewhere not too far from Sofia. Her strict adherence to God's true teachings meant very little freedom for Tzvetan. She had planned out his future life as a man of God, an upright member of the Bulgarian Orthodox church. Her husband was secretly an abusive man behind closed doors but who, in front of open doors, was a well-respected man of the community. People came to him for advice and he dealt it out with a smile and open palms. When his wife or his son annoyed him the smile was gone but the open palms were still there.

In their own way they fought the memory of the Turkish Yoke, the five hundred years of which seemed to have built up in them and left them as bitter as rotten figs. Their way was, of course, the right and true way and they would enforce this on anyone they met.

It is no wonder then, that her son became not a man of God but a man of science and love. He had seen what God was like, or at least, what God had turned people into, and this was not the path he wanted to choose.

Mr Malchek sits in his study. He is, of course, reading a book. His sister has recommended it to him, one that has just been turned into a film. He has no wife to put up with him. He broke that chain, that long line of educators that goes back as far as anyone, including me, cares, or has time, to remember. He turns the page and, unnoticed, loses himself in the words. A disappearing, a means of escape.

When Everything Was Burnt

Sometimes, if you take a moment to be still in this world of motion, you can fine-tune your senses to detect the magic or the horror that surrounds us all. In that too-orange afternoon, the sun streaming through the kitchen window and right into the hallway, Miti paused and felt both the magic and the horror in equal measures. The magic came from the drip drip drip of the tap above the kitchen sink; every drip, he felt, was the tear of a swan, an ocean unto itself, the waterfall of life. But then, the horror. The terrible noise was coming from the living room; it sounded like the wrenching out of someone's soul, there could be no other way to describe it. Miti clasped his cup of water and wouldn't let it go, wanting to grab anything to help stabilise himself. He tried to regain the magic of the dripping tap but it had gone, the horror overruled his senses so that he could think of nothing else. Following the sound, Miti peered into the living room, and fought the urge to run as fast as he could back out of the front door.

He saw his father. He should have been at work but he was instead kneeling on the floor of the living room, in tears, a mound of books gathered around him, all split and torn in half, jagged and defunct. He had his large hands wrapped around another book – Miti couldn't tell which – ready to tear it in half but it was too thick and no matter how hard he strained, no matter how hard the veins in his neck pumped red, the book wouldn't split. As he watched his father bend and twist the spine and pages, Miti willed him to fail, willed the book to stay intact. Then he saw the title of the book: *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. *Come on*, thought Miti, *come on and save yourself! Don't just lie there and get torn apart!* He called upon Peter with his sword and Susan with her mighty bow and even treacherous Edmund, who knew no better but who learnt his lesson. They flew from the half-ripped pages and tugged at his father, tried to prise his hands away from their book, their world, but in the end, not even Aslan could have saved them; his father ripped out the pages from the spine – ten, twenty at a time, with that same terrible wrenching sound Miti had heard from the hallway, until the book looked like a disembowelled corpse, its innards tossed onto the pile at his feet, the skeleton landing with an empty thud.

Had he ever seen his father cry before? Now, Stoyan looked gripped by something feral, his sobs shuddered from somewhere deep within his body and erupted outwards; it looked to Miti as if he couldn't

breathe. What was even more strange was that Stoyan still wore the same brown trousers, white shirt and jacket that he always wore to school but the man inside them was changed and unreal and not his father.

Still sobbing, the man in his father's clothing leapt out of the mound of books and grabbed Miti by the shoulders in a giant's grip. Miti was elevated so hard and fast that the water spilled from his cup, and he watched it as if in slow motion, cascading in perfect droplets to the carpet like the waterfall of life again. Magic and horror. The man in his father's clothing hadn't noticed but all Miti could think about was his mother's golden rule about not bringing food or drink into the living room, ever since they'd bought the carpet new from the shop down the road. The water pooled in a puddle. What will his mother say, when she gets home?

Then, silence; the man in his father's clothing had begun to repress his sobs. He returned Miti carefully to the floor, stroking down the collar of his shirt, straightening his tie. His father had returned. He noticed Miti was still holding the cup, half empty. He held out his hand.

"Dimitar, can I have the cup, please?"

Miti shook his head.

"Dimitar, I need to tell you something but first I need the cup, please." Miti grabbed the cup with his second hand. "I won't ask again, give me the cup, Dimitar, please."

The throbbing had returned to his father's veins and Miti thought the man who was not his father would come back so, reluctantly, Miti handed over the cup, ashamed that he'd ever been so thirsty to need a drink in the first place.

"I'm sorry, Dimitar, I'm so sorry, I never meant to..." Miti thought the sobbing was about to return but his father managed to control it with a deep breath. "I'm not sure how to say this, but she's gone. She's gone."

Gone. The magic would have her gone on a journey, some kind of adventure – whisked away to another world for her to explore and from which she would return, the Queen of a new realm. The horror would have her dead. Dead and gone. An ending and a beginning of a grief that Miti now read in his father's eyes.

Miti blinked, hard. He wished he had shields to cover his eyes. "Gone where?" he said, although he knew. Dead and gone.

This time, the sound that came from deep within his father was not sadness but anger, a wild fury Miti had never seen before, even in front of the football matches on television. He stepped back and watched, not knowing what might happen as his father launched himself at the dresser behind the sofa, tearing down more of the books from the shelves. This time he didn't bother ripping them in half, he picked them up and threw them

on to the pile in the centre of the room. Miti watched as his father fumbled around in his trouser pockets, awkwardly, his hands shaking with violent tremors. He watched as his father found the small card of matches he used to light up his cigarettes, took one out and struck it and he watched as the man who was not his father returned and held the match to the open pages of an abridged edition of Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the flames licking the yellowed paper almost tenderly. Valjean was trapped inside. As were Cosette and Marius, and little Gavroche.

Miti remembered how he'd once thought of his words as fire and his imagination as smoke but this fire was more powerful and more real than even the fire of words. He knew, from where he stood, that there was nothing he could do, although he would tell himself years later that he could have done more, that he could have stopped the fire, saved the apartment, saved his father. But it happened so quickly, the orange flames were so feverish, the black smoke so cloying and smothering, that by the time he felt his panicked father's strong hands reach out for him and grab him by the waist, it all seemed a little too late to run, seemed like there was nothing else to do but sleep. The too-orange afternoon was aglow with flames.

The magic and the horror.

~

When he woke up on the hard hospital bed, his first thought was that he'd lost his mother and now his father and that the water he'd spilt on the carpet was the beginning of the end of everything. His throat was sore, he found it difficult to breathe and he was thirsty but, he swore to himself, he would never drink again.

The ward was bright, almost yellow under the glare of the lights; the curtains round his bed were only half-pulled so he could see the bed opposite and the windows to the right. They were barred. Maybe this wasn't a hospital after all, but a prison, he told himself, pulling the covers tightly right up to his chin so that he could half disappear underneath. The man in the bed opposite was old and large with a thick white beard; he looked far too big for the bed, for the ward. He was staring right at Miti, unblinkingly, with almond shaped eyes that peered from under a heavy brow and down a bulbous nose.

Disconcerted, Miti felt he had two choices: to make conversation or to retreat further under the covers, but burning questions hovered at the edge of his lips as he looked at the man and made the decision for him. "Are you Dyado Koleda?" he asked, and then, "Why are you in prison?"

The old man laughed and his belly and the bed shook like trembling jelly. "I can be Dyado Koleda," he said in speech that was slurred and chaotic, and started to sing a Christmas carol with half the words incoherent or missing. Then came the sound of approaching footsteps. A nurse, middle-aged, short hair dyed maroon, came into view from the other side of the curtains. She drew them halfway round Father Christmas.

"Come on now, enough of that. Sleep it off, come on."

She tucked in the sheets at the bottom of his bed where Father Christmas had kicked and squirmed in an odd type of dance out of time with his singing. She repeatedly had to tell him to be quiet but he took no notice as if she wasn't there. Then suddenly he lunged forwards and grabbed her with both hands around her face and tried to kiss her. Horrified, Miti watched as Father Christmas attempted to molest the nurse but she was quick, had probably encountered fools like this before, and slapped him raw across the face so that he let go immediately and sat there, stunned and immobile whilst she straightened her uniform and re-adjusted her blue hat. Then Father Christmas sunk into the folds of his bed and Miti heard sobbing but it wasn't like his father's, it was quiet, childlike. The sudden thought of his father shocked Miti. Tears welled in his eyes before falling in neat lines down his cheeks but he never made a sound because he thought that if he gave way fully to the crying he would never stop.

Done with Father Christmas, the nurse glanced across to Miti's bed and saw him there, tearful and alone. She crossed the aisle and pulled the curtains fully around his bed to shelter him. "What's all this? You should be sleeping, you've had a terrible day." She stroked Miti's hair, flattened the tuft that was sticking up at the back of his crown. "What's brought all this on? I thought you were asleep. Did the man wake you? I'll ask for you to be taken to the children's ward. They were busy earlier when you came in and all the beds were taken but..." She looked at him kindly. "I'll see what I can do. If you really can't sleep, maybe you want to go and see your father."

The tears stopped flowing, his brow furrowed, and he sniffed. "But father's gone."

The nurse's face distorted in sympathy. "Oh you poor thing, no one's spoken to you, have they? What must you have been sitting here thinking?" She looked at the watch on her lapel. "Your daddy's...fine. Alive. He's...well, come on, let's go and see if we can find him, shall we?"

All the words the nurse was saying made perfect sense and yet he didn't understand them. His father alive? How was that possible? Perhaps it was all a big lie. Perhaps it was a dream.

Miti remained silent as the nurse helped him down from the bed and opened the curtains. A pungent odour filled the air and the nurse looked over at Father Christmas and sighed. Miti was unsure on his feet, his throat and lungs still hurt and he felt a pain in his abdomen. The nurse walked next to him, supporting his shoulders and steadying him, down the aisle. All the other beds in the ward were filled but their curtains were closed so he could only imagine who lay convalescing inside. Maybe Rudolph or one of the other reindeer.

They reached a desk at the far end of the ward which led onto a large bright corridor. A young man at the desk looked up over some charts as Miti and the nurse approached. The nurse anticipated his question. “He needs the toilet.”

The man nodded.

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It turned out that his father had his own room, which was appropriate as far as Miti was concerned because his father had come back from the dead. Miti and the nurse were looking in through the window but the lights were off.

“He might be sleeping,” she explained, suddenly looking concerned. “Perhaps it’s not such a good idea after all. Maybe we should come back in the morning, when you’re both rested.”

Then, from inside: “Hello?” Is there somebody there?” The voice floated out through the door which they hadn’t noticed was slightly ajar. Miti looked at the nurse.

She nodded. “I’ll be just outside, if you need anything at all.”

Cautiously, Miti opened the door wider, and entered. The dark room was bathed in a strange green glow from the many lights and monitors that flashed periodically. A steady beep pulsated through the room, oddly calming. A heartbeep.

“Father? Are you in here?”

“Dimitar? Dimitar, is that you?”

Miti reached out with his hands, felt the air in front of him until his fingers touched upon something cool and metallic. He kept reaching. There was some kind of bar, and then something soft – the mattress. “Father, can I turn on the lights?”

A pause. “No, no, not for now. How are you, Dimitar? I’d come and hug you but they’ve got me wrapped up in here like an Egyptian mummy. The burns, they say, were pretty severe.”

“I’m fine. I don’t think I have any burns but my throat hurts. It’s sore.”

“Poor Dimitar. They’ll look after you here, I promise. It’s a miracle, it really is; a miracle that we’re both still here. We must thank the Lord.”

Miti had never heard his father mention the Lord before but he had a vague idea who the Lord was. The Lord was in the corner of his classroom attached to a cross. Mr Malchek at school prayed to the Lord before every lesson. Maybe because none of the children listened to him.

Reaching out, Miti suddenly felt something warm, his father’s rough fingers, although he never remembered them being rough before. He pulled his hands away.

“They’re in bandages. Cools the skin,” explained Stoyan. “Don’t be frightened.”

“I’m not frightened,” he answered, a little too quickly.

For a while there was silence and then his father spoke. “I’m sorry, Dimitar...I should never have...” but it was as if he couldn’t trust himself to say any more. More silence. Then: “We’ll start again, make a new life for ourselves, how does that sound? Then when your mother comes home, we’ll...”

“But Mother’s gone,” interrupted Miti. Dead and gone. He’d seen it in his father’s eyes.

Stoyan was again silent for a while. *There are too many pauses, thought Miti, won’t someone fill in the holes?* “I’m so sorry, you have to believe me, I didn’t mean to confuse you. She’s gone away, just for a while, she’s found a new job, in Sofia. It’ll be good for her, to get away, just for a while. Don’t worry Dimitar, please. I’m sorry if you thought...”

Miti breathed deeply and steadied himself on the edge of the bed. So his father had meant the other type of gone, the gone away, the gone for an adventure, only he realised this wasn’t an exciting kind of journey because he realised that it was a journey that he wasn’t a part of, a journey without him. He nodded and let go of his father’s bandaged fingers. “Why did you burn all the books?”

“The books...” Stoyan paused, the silence only broken by his deep breathing and the beeping of the monitors. “I didn’t burn all the books, Dimitar. Just your mother’s.”

“Then why did you burn Mother’s books if she’s gone away?”

“Because those books were so much a part of your mother. We need to start over, Dimitar. Start again. A new beginning.”

“But Mother will want her books when she comes back.”

“Dimitar. There are things you won’t understand. You’re a clever boy and I know you’ll understand one day. It’s just I don’t think I could explain it properly, not today. Your mother’s books...they corrupt. By that I mean they change people, they influence people. I’m not sure I’m making any sense, I’m tired, Dimitar. I’ll sit down and explain it to you one day, I will. But for now I need you to promise me one thing. I’ve had a lot of time to sit here and think. If you see any of your mother’s English books in a shop, or anywhere else, I don’t want you to bring them in the apartment. Do you understand?”

Miti thought for a moment. “I...” was all he said, whispered.

The Story of Dyado Koleda

That last true Christmas (the one before alcohol came, numbed the pain, and made everything blurry) it had snowed every day for three months. The first flakes fell in October and they never let up, right through November and December. Some, grim, said it was the end of the world and hunkered down indoors with all the tinned and pickled food they could carry back to their homes. Others saw the beauty in it and marvelled at the whiteness of everything.

The man whose real name was Anastas Dimitrov, but whom everybody knew as Dyado Koleda, for Christmas-time at least, was one of those who remained undeterred by the snow. He'd spent four weeks growing his beard for the role he played, a beard, he was proud to note, that was as white as the flakes falling outside the frosted church windows. He rested his gloved hands on the radiator for a moment longer, then turned to the line of shivering boys huddled like penguins against the cold.

"One more time, boys," he said, picking up a pencil and tapping a beat on the lectern. "From the top."

He knew by the time they'd finished singing that they were ready. In fact, he mused, they were more than ready. Quite possibly, they were the best bunch of boys he'd trained for many years. He'd been worried because he'd lost some of the older, more seasoned, singers. Two, the twins Mikail and Deyan, had moved to Sofia with their parents after their father was promoted to a highly-paid job in the city. They'd sent Anastas a postcard saying they were hunting round for a good choir to join but, so far, without any luck. He'd had a falling out with another boy, eleven year-old Timo, last year. Timo was a precocious child who, pushed by his stubborn parents, wanted to only sing Latin songs and not the seasonal *koleduvane* that Anastas had been performing with his choirs around Christmastime for as many years as he can remember. He'd had to say to Timo that there was no room for him in the choir even though he was losing his best bass. Timo was nearing six foot and built like an ox. Before he left, Anastas told Timo that he was built for the opera house, not the church.

All that aside, this year's group had pulled together, and the sounds coming out of their young mouths were, Anastas told himself, nothing short of miraculous. In his prayer at the end of the rehearsal that night, he asked God to look down on his carollers and help their voices to reach the unbelieving of Plovdiv. He saw each one home before it got dark

and told their parents that he would pick them up at midnight on Christmas Eve ready to go carolling.

Christmas Eve was made almost unbearable by anticipation. He tried to sleep during the day in preparation for the long night ahead but his sleep was fitful and restless. On his old television set that flickered every time trains rumbled in and out of the nearby station, there were reports of old folk dying of the cold in their homes or the homeless freezing on the street. He prayed for their souls but consoled himself with the fact that his work was important and the money he raised whilst out carolling always went to a good cause. He decided that this year, the money would go to the elderly and the homeless affected by the snow.

Each time he woke up he saw, by the light of the silent television flickering in the corner of his room, his breath made visible. When this happened during his childhood, he and his brother used to pretend they were fire-breathing dragons and their breath was smoke and brimstone.

Midnight couldn't come soon enough and despite half-frozen bones and joints, Anastas leapt out of bed, put on his Dyado Koleda suit - red trousers, red jumper stuffed full of pillows to give him a round belly, thick belt and buckled boots as black as coal. Mrs Balova, from next door, leant him some lipstick (with a giggle), which he smeared in rosy circles on his cheeks (with a wink), and then he dropped it back into her hand wrapped in a single *lev* note.

He thanked the Lord for the thick boots that helped him trudge through the snow. It came almost up to his knees in the places where people hadn't been before him and cleared the way. He collected the excited boys, one by one, until, by the time they reached the church, he had a line of *koledari* stretching behind him like a row of ducklings. He was pleased to see they'd all wrapped up warm with scarves to protect their throats, just as he'd suggested.

They regrouped at the church, had a last minute warm up and set off at a steady pace; there were so many houses to visit. He hadn't told them that this year he carried treats in his sack. They'd stop somewhere in a few hours and tuck in. He knew they'd be cold and didn't want their spirits to be dampened.

Although, he noticed, there seemed little chance of that happening. As was the tradition, they received a parting gift at each house they went to. Most were donations to the elderly and the homeless - a cause which prompted people to fish deeper in their

pockets for a spare *stotinka* or two. Sometimes the boys received gifts of warm sweet tea, sharing the mugs and savouring the warmth.

A cry of excitement came when, at around about two in the morning, Anastas revealed what was in his heavy sack. They huddled in the entranceway of one of the old buildings near the city centre and shared out bread and cheese and dried sausage.

The beautiful sound of the choristers rang through the village, carried on the wind like church bells.

At about three the same winds started to pick up, threatening a blizzard. Anastas looked back the way they'd come and considered heading back to the church but, looking ahead through the swirls of snow, he saw one last house looming, shadowlike.

'Last one boys,' he said, leading them on. He'd take them straight back after this house, warm them up and dry them off, before dropping them back at their homes. They didn't seem to mind. Like all children, they loved the snow and laughed, pelting each other with snowballs as they walked in the dark.

He knew the man who lived in the big house with the crooked slate roof; his name was Ognyan. He hadn't been to church since the summer, in fact no one had seen him since the accident. They say he hadn't been paying attention when his car veered across to the wrong side of the road on his way to Plovdiv and collided with a lorry. His wife and young son died instantly, they say.

It took the man a long time to open the door after Anastas had knocked and when he did, his eyes were hollow and red as if he'd been crying.

'Hello,' said Anastas but when no response was forthcoming he told the boys to sing just as beautifully as they'd sung it the night before. When they'd finished there was a pause where the man just looked at them all but said nothing. Anastas never liked to ask for a parting gift - normally he never had to - so he waited a moment longer for the man to offer them something before saying 'May the Lord our God bless you this Christmas'. He shepherded the boys back through their own footprints in the snow towards the church.

The noise, when it happened, was so strange. For a moment he couldn't place it, couldn't work out what was happening; it was so incongruous. (You'd think that it would be unmistakable.) One. Two. Three. (But it wasn't.) He had been busy thinking about playing dragons with his brother. It was only when he turned and saw the man's hollow eyes again and saw the shotgun in his hand that he realised what was happening. Four. Five. Six. Dragon's breath rose from the point of the gun like smoke and brimstone. Seven.

Eight. He counted the gunshots like he counted out the collection at the end of each church service.

Years later, every day was the same. He wakes up, around noon, maybe later, depending on what he'd been drinking the night before, and he wonders. He wonders about what would have happened had he not gone to that last house. He wonders whether he could have done anything more. Could he have saved just one of them?

He knows questions like these are futile, he knows it. But it doesn't stop him. The questions keep the memories of the boys alive, makes him think of them. Each one of them. But they also bring with them the memory of walking back to each of the boys' houses, Dyado Koleda, with no gifts in his sack save the horror and his sorrow, his jolly fat suit as red as the blood of the hollow-eyed man all over his hands.

When The Fire Went Out

He was rising up from the earth's core.

Miti watched the rest of the building slide past him as the elevator ascended, though he didn't see bricks and mortar. Instead he saw magma and tectonic plates; the makings of the planet. Another hot day. Sweat was beginning to form on his brow but that's to be expected, he told himself, when you're coming up from the centre of the earth. The innocuous ping heralded their arrival on the top floor and felt, to Miti, like an anti-climax.

Grabbing a solid hold of his father, Miti guided him out of the elevator. "Mind the small step," he warned.

Stoyan lifted his feet up and over the step in what looked like exaggerated movements, the slow-motion dance of a man on the moon. "I'll get used to this, one day," said Stoyan, which made Miti feel a pang of regret, sudden and alarming. "God-willing."

"We're nearing the door, just a few more steps." Miti's hands never let go of his father's outstretched arms.

The door to their apartment opened as if all by itself and Miti thought, *What magic is this?* Yet it was no magic. The door had been opened by Desislava, a tall, angular teacher from his father's school. Miti wondered if she possessed any other clothes because here she was, standing in the doorway in the standard black trousers and plain purple jumper she always wore.

"Welcome home!" she cried, triumphantly holding out a big plate of baklava. Upon seeing Stoyan and the bandages across his eyes she became embarrassed, reddened slightly, pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and smiled awkwardly at the ground.

Stoyan cocked his head. "Desi? Is that you?"

She hastily deposited the plate on a table just inside the door and took both Stoyan's hands in hers. "Yes, Stoyan, it's me." She looked embarrassed again and let go of his hands, picked up the plate of baklava. "I wanted to meet you at the hospital to help bring you home but Miti said he had everything under control."

Stoyan smiled. "From what Dimitar tells me, you've done more than your fair share these last few weeks. How can I ever thank you for all that you've done?"

"Oh, it's nothing really, I - "

“Nonsense. Your staying here has meant that Dimitar could stay here too, in his home, where he belongs. And besides, he’s told me everything. I can’t believe what you and the others have done. It’s incredible, too amazing.”

“It’s the least we could do,” said Desislava and Miti thought she might have been about to cry. Balancing the baklava in one hand, she hooked her arm through Stoyan’s and led him further into the apartment where Miti helped him remove his shoes and put on some beige slippers.

There descended a silence, an important kind of silence, as if the apartment was marking the arrival of the man who had tried to burn it down. It was as if the walls were cautious, the new furniture wary; this was a man who could explode and ignite us at any minute. Miti didn’t like the silence. It had been so quiet these last few weeks, without his father and mother and with only Desislava for company - who kept herself to herself. It wasn’t as if she didn’t try; in fact, the opposite - she tried too hard and sometimes the words stumbled over each other in her mouth like a stutter.

His father cleared his throat and the apartment stiffened in anticipation. “Dimitar,” he said. “Describe it to me. The apartment. You told me that everything has changed whilst I’ve been recovering. But tell me more about it now that I’m here. I want to know exactly what it all looks like, where everything is. I want to be able to picture it in my mind.”

Miti blushed a little, as Desislava had done, and he looked at her. She smiled at him encouragingly, perhaps grateful that Stoyan hadn’t asked her to describe the apartment. Looking around him, Miti panicked, not knowing how he would even begin describing what he saw. The apartment had changed, it had changed a lot but surely his father didn’t just want a mere list of all the things that were different. His father had wanted a picture, he’d said that himself, he wanted a picture in words. So Miti turned to the creators of words whom he knew so well. What would Scheherazade do, he asked himself. How would she tell the tale? Or the Brothers Grimm? How would they describe what had happened when the fire went out? From these questions he seemed to gain courage, inspiration. He looked around him once more, cleared his throat just as his father had done, and he began.

“Where the old sideboard used to be, directly in front of the door, there is a small plastic table like the ones you get for eating outside. It’s green and new and on top there is a brand new cordless telephone. The telephone came from Madame Zlatka next door. She says her son had hundreds of them in his room and is

always tinkering about with them, so wouldn't miss it, but not to mention it if he asks. She winked when she gave it to me.

"Beyond the sideboard is the bathroom but the door was closed when the fire happened and there wasn't much damage, just a few cracked tiles which have been replaced by odd ones my friend Stoichov's dad had left over from a recent job.

"We're standing on an old rug, donated to us by your headmaster, Mr Valcov. It looks like it might whisk us up and fly us away so I suggest you follow me to the kitchen. The fire didn't spread in here, but the smoke made everything black like shadows, so some children from your school came in one day and cleaned and scrubbed and painted the walls cream and the cupboards green like before, but they ran out of the green paint we found in the loft space so one cupboard is red, shining like a ruby amongst emeralds. We have new pots and pans and plates and cups from some other people in the apartment block but I don't know who. Every day I would open the door and there were more piled up on the mat next to our shoes. Opening the door every morning was like opening a treasure chest.

"Desislava has been sleeping in your room since all the smoke damage was cleared up..."

"I hope you don't mind. It seemed...easier," she said.

"Of course I don't mind. I think it makes perfect sense. Dimitar, you're doing such a good job. Tell me what my bedroom's like?"

"You have a new bed," Miti went on. "Mr Vasil from the second floor, the man who used to walk me to school, said he was going to buy a new one anyway. We had to cut it up to get it up the stairwell and Stoichov's dad hammered it back together again. There's another rug on the floor, given to us by the carpet shop down the road. There is an upside down bin as a side table and the room has been painted white. I found some posters rolled up in a box full of old stuff in the loft space which we stuck to the walls. There's one of some big red lips and a long tongue, and one of a white triangle with a rainbow disappearing into the distance."

They walked out of Stoyan's room and back across the landing.

"My room is still my room. We painted it purple and a teacher at my school made new curtains for me with pictures of circus animals dancing and showing off. The children from my class painted pictures of Plovdiv in multi-coloured crayons and my teacher said I could have them, so they are stuck all around the walls. It's like I have thirty windows to see outside. We couldn't save my bed but Nedko's dad had a spare mattress which is comfortable until we can afford to buy a new one. My desk is an old one donated from my school.

“I think you’ll like the living room. The maintenance man from downstairs had to come and take up all the floorboards and re-lay them but he said that he likes to fix things. The walls have been painted white and there are several different rugs covering the floor. It’s like we are a shop that sells them for a good price. Stoichov’s dad made a coffee table out of the leftovers of my old bed, which is in the middle of the room. Where the sofa used to be we have a garden bench with some nice cushions on it. The old armchair with the red blanket is gone and it feels like there is a hole in the room even though Milen kindly gave us a stool and purple blanket. The dresser’s gone. And most of the books.”

That was the real gap in the room, the black hole, the nothingness, but Miti didn’t say that. He remembers the skip that had been placed outside. The one that had been filled with singed furniture, unsalvageable objects. And his mother’s books. The ones that hadn’t been burnt to ashes were charred and scarred and they filled the skip, all the spaces in between the furniture. Some had been saved. His father’s history books were largely untouched because they had been on shelves in his bedroom. He hadn’t taken them to the fire he’d created. And some other books had been spared as well. Some novels, poems, short story collections by Bulgarian authors. His father hadn’t put them on the fire either.

“The television is still where it always was, but we couldn’t afford a new one and had to hollow out the inside and take away the smashed glass. Desislava put candles in there and one of Grandma’s decorative plates. We can’t light the candles, of course, but it still looks nice. Like a real fireplace, which we’ve never had before.”

Miti took a breath and turned to Desislava and Stoyan who had been following closely behind him. Tears were rolling down Desislava’s cheeks and his father’s face was distorted. The white cotton wool patches over his eyes twitched.

“Thank you Miti, it’s...” but he couldn’t manage to say any more.

Desislava led him off to his room. “Come on now, you’re tired,” she said. “The doctors said you still need plenty of rest.”

But later on, whilst Desislava and Miti were picking crumbs of baklava from their mismatched plates in the kitchen, they heard Stoyan finish the sentence he had begun earlier.

“...beautiful...” he said as he shifted in his sleep, and Miti turned to Desislava and smiled, because it was.

The Story of Desislava

This is a true story.

Or at least, it's what I remember of a true story. Several stories in fact; from what I can remember of snippets I overheard Desislava say over the years. These snippets are mostly about her life with her fiancé, Egbert. That's not his real name; I've chosen to give him that name because I don't like him. I met an Egbert once and it's always struck me as a horrible name so I've given it to Desislava's fiancé as a sort of anti-gift. She didn't talk about him much and when she did, she caught herself and stopped, sometimes mid-sentence, so it's hard to remember what exactly was said and what was about to be said.

They travelled a lot. He was in the property market. When things were going well he was all over the country buying flats and selling them on to overseas investors at an extortionate price even though they still thought they were getting a bargain.

PLOVDIV

She met him in the large post office opposite the park. A concrete monstrosity he called it. She liked the sound of heels echoing down the long corridors. They were waiting in line for one of the telephones. My mobile got stolen, he said, flashing her a phone card. I need to get hold of my mother, she said. I have to make an important business call, he told her so she let him go in front of her but afterwards, when he'd finished and when she'd finished, he invited her out for a coffee to say thank you. He told her all about his life travelling the country in the property market and she told him all about her life as a teacher which he said he couldn't understand - being stuck in one place like that all the time; he'd feel cooped up like a hen. After they'd finished coffee, he took her back to the post office where a map hung on the wall, one of the whole country, and he showed her all the places he'd been and all the places where he owned property. She said it sounded exciting and he said he'd like to show her some of it, if she liked.

SOFIA

A date at the Ivan Vazov National Theatre to watch an opera. He bought expensive seats in the box and she could see everything. An Italian opera, she couldn't understand all the words but she enjoyed the show – the colours, costumes and melodies. They'd gone for a meal at a posh restaurant beforehand; she felt very out of place and self-conscious but enjoyed herself nonetheless. He talked more about his work. During the show he'd put his hand on her knee and afterwards he took her to a cheap hostel. He was still waiting to be paid following the closure on his latest property so he'd spent all his money on dinner and the opera. She said she didn't mind but they hardly got any sleep that night because they could hear everything from the other rooms in the hostel; the walls were like paper.

NESEBAR

Off to Nesebar for a holiday in the sun. He'd told her about it two weeks earlier and for two weeks she'd been excited and reading up about what they could do there. She bought new swimwear and several books that she hoped to read by the sea. She planned to do nothing except read, swim, and be with Egbert. The long train journey across Bulgaria was, she thought, painful; she thought she'd never arrive at the station. When they did get there they went straight to the hotel. There were sea views; his brother owned the holiday apartments so they had free reign of all the facilities. She waited by the pool while he had some business with his brother to take care of and she waited until it started getting dark and a chill was in the air. He came back much later that evening and said that business was important and some kind of problem had arisen that he'd have to be taking care of whilst he was here. She'd planned to do nothing save read, swim, and be with Egbert. She read and she swam but Egbert was nowhere around so her lasting memory of the Black Sea Coast was of solitary walks and dinners alone.

ATHENS

In Athens, she met his mother and father, his younger sister and her family, and his brother from Nesebar. She was introduced as a friend. This is Desislava, he said, a friend of mine from Plovdiv; she said she'd never been to Greece before so I let her tag along. The sister had no husband. He'd left her for another woman. Her four children were loud and boisterous so she was gone by dinner time, back to her house which was not too far away in a nearby neighbourhood. Egbert found more business to take care of so went off with his

brother. He took the car and told her not to wait up too late for him. She was left alone with his parents who were friendly enough but not great conversationalists. They'd moved to Athens from Plovdiv when Egbert had found them a nice property there. The father was Greek and they spoke to each other in a curious mix of Greek and Bulgarian that Desislava found hard to keep up with. They were elderly and had tired themselves out playing with their boisterous grandchildren during the day so they went to bed early leaving Desislava in the kitchen with the barely eaten food.

SOFIA

New property was coming up in Sofia all the time but far more expensive than what he was used to purchasing. Desislava had read about a monastery that she'd always wanted to go to and she persuaded him to take her there on one of his trips. She'd been begging him for the whole three hour drive from Plovdiv to Sofia. In the monastery there was a fresco of a church patron, also called Desislava. The whole ceiling and walls of the monastery were painted with other frescoes and icons. The picture of Desislava was of a sad-looking woman, black hair hidden under an ornate hat. She showed him the image; Look, she said, she's got my name. He looked at the picture; She's just like you, he said, you never smile either, not anymore.

RILA

She went skiing for the first time in the Rila Mountains. It took her a while to get the hang of it, to build up the confidence. He left her with an instructor whilst he went down the slopes himself; he used to go every winter when he was young. On the evening of the third night he proposed to her. He bent down on one knee in a restaurant. He didn't have a ring, he said one was on its way, he'd ordered it from somewhere special. She said yes and those in the restaurant cheered and clapped. Good, was his reply. Later on that night he listed the reasons why she should marry him, as if she hadn't already agreed to it. He listed the things he could do for her, what he could give her and it wasn't as if she would be able to find anybody better anyway.

PLOVDIV

Back at the post office she looked at all the destinations on the map of the country whilst he was in the queue to post a special package somewhere. She looked at all the places she'd been and all the places she had yet to visit; the ones he'd promised to take her to – Varna, Turnovo, Ruse. She wondered if they'd be better without him and then chastised herself for thinking such a thing, the wedding was to be at the end of that summer, in Athens, so he'd planned. When he was finished posting the parcel, he found her by the map. Come on, he said, I want to go back home now. On the way out of the post office, they bumped into Stoyan, a teacher from her school and his wife and young son. Perfect, she thought, as they walked off, the sound of their footsteps echoing behind them.

When a Single Book Returned

Weeks later and Miti wasn't sleeping again. If he stopped to think about it, he hadn't had a proper night's sleep since the fire. It wasn't that he feared getting lost in his dreams as before – the pyjamas with his name and address in had been salvageable (though he could never quite get rid of the haunting smell of smoke which lingered in the fabric no matter how many times he washed them). He wasn't sleeping because there were gaping absences in his life; chasms, on the edge of which he teetered. If he fell he would surely die. Chasms so deep that no elevator would be able to bring him back up again should he fall.

Since Stoyan had told him in the hospital that his mother wasn't dead, that gone hadn't meant 'gone forever' but simply 'gone somewhere else', Miti had been happy with this fact and, somewhat against character, hadn't questioned it further. It was enough of a relief to know that his mother was alive that it didn't seem to matter she wasn't around because she'd be back soon and everything would be fine.

In the taxi on the way home from the hospital, Stoyan had told him all about the new job.

"It's in Sofia," he'd said. "A senior position in a language school there, teaching English to Bulgarians; she's got a lot of work to do. You'll be able to speak to her soon, I promise."

But there had been no letter, no phone call to let him know how she was getting on. Years ago, when she'd gone back to England to visit family for a long summer, she'd sent him a letter every week telling him about the story that she was reading so that each evening he would slip into bed and read his mother's own copy of *Jane Eyre*, laughing when Mr Rochester gallops onto the scene, and crying when Jane discovers he's already married, and hiding further under his covers whenever Bertha was mentioned who reminded him of Madame Zlatka next door who hummed to herself during the day and wailed sometimes in the middle of the night. But now there was nothing. For three weeks, nothing.

In the absence of his mother, and in the absence of his mother's stories to read, he tried to turn her into a story. She was a powerful Queen in a castle (the language school) who spent her days slaying dragons (ignorance or her students) and she was so busy being a Queen and slaying that there wasn't any time at all to write or phone home. Once, he imagined her as a pioneering pilot, flying across land and sea for the first time, another reason why she couldn't write: if she took her hands off the controls for even a second, the plane would come plummeting down to earth. Or maybe she was a pirate captain sailing the Seven Seas and she'd tried to

send him messages in a bottle but they'd been caught in a whirlpool and were currently bobbing up and down somewhere in the waters of the Black Sea.

"Can we go to the Black Sea this weekend?" asked Miti.

"What on earth for?"

"To see if Mother's sent us a message in a bottle."

"Oh Dimitar, Dimitar." Stoyan shook his head from side to side. "Why would she have done that?"

"She hasn't called and she hasn't written so it's the only other thing I can think of." But just as he said it, another thought crossed his mind and he started to panic. "What if someone changed our address without us realising it? What if she's been writing to us all this time but her letters have been sent somewhere else?" Then he thought about the address in his pyjamas. "What if my pyjamas are wrong?"

Stoyan chuckled. "I don't know what goes through that head of yours sometimes, Dimitar. No one could have changed our address without us knowing about it. And I'm sure there's nothing wrong with your pyjamas." Sighing deeply, Stoyan sat upright in his bed. It was midday but he'd taken to napping a lot. "Dimitar, be a good boy and take me to the living room, would you?"

When they were in the living room, Stoyan asked to be seated on the little stool that Nedko had provided them with. It creaked under his weight. "Now can you go and find me a story. It's in a collection of other Bulgarian stories; it's called *The Peach Thief*."

Miti found the collection of stories. It was on the shelf in his father's bedroom alongside the history books that had survived the fire. He brought it over. "Here it is."

"Good, now sit on my lap and read it to me," said Stoyan. Miti climbed onto his father holding the book and tried to get comfortable. He remembered the armchair he used to curl up in with his mother to read the books. This was the opposite of that feeling. The stool was hard and uncomfortable and he could feel his father's legs wobbling with the strain of having to keep him from sliding off. Miti ignored his discomfort and tried focussing on the feeling of excitement rising within him. Perhaps this was a first step before the ban on his mother's books would be lifted.

It wasn't such a long story, which was good because Miti really did feel uncomfortable, and when he'd finished, he got up straight away to go and return the book to the shelf. When he came back into the living room he chose to sit on the bench opposite his father.

Stoyan cleared his throat. "Do you know why I got you to read that story to me?"

“Because I’m allowed to read Mother’s books again?”

“No, Dimitar, no. Quite the opposite. I made you read that story to tell you something about your mother. Do you remember in the story when that soldier came to the Commander’s garden every night to steal the peaches?”

“Yes.”

“But in the end he stole the Commander’s wife instead?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Dimitar, there’s an important lesson we can learn from this: your mother’s English books are like the peaches.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will, Dimitar, one day. I promise. I guess what I’m trying to say is that the books your mother read are what stole her away from us. In essence, it’s because of her books that she got this new job and left us to go to Sofia. That’s why I don’t want you to read those kinds of books, Dimitar. Because they’ll take you away from me.”

Miti took his time absorbing all this information. It occurred to him that the books can’t be like the peaches. It was the soldier who came and took the Commander’s wife, not the peaches. They didn’t do anything, except hang from a tree waiting to be eaten. But Miti didn’t say anything, he wasn’t sure if he’d understood properly. He’d probably made a mistake.

Most days, Desislava was around before Miti got home from school and she’d taken the post from the box in the entrance hall of the apartment block.

“Has there been any post?” he’d ask, every day. “Maybe a letter from Mother, or perhaps a message in a bottle?”

“No, sorry, Miti,” she’d say and then swiftly steer the subject away. “Eat up everything on your plate. Good boys never leave a morsel.” As it turned out, he’d need little encouragement. Desislava was an excellent cook whereas Miti had no flair for cooking and the only good thing he could say about it was that time spent in the kitchen was time when he was distracted from the mournful longing for his mother. So he spent as much time there as possible, observing Desislava as she moved around the kitchen baking and sautéing, roasting and grilling - the only time she ever looked truly happy, or at least on the verge of it. She was probably younger than

his father but she looked much older. Her anxieties seemed to collect in the lines of her brow and neck and in the continual wringing of her hands. Even when she smiled she couldn't quite shake away the sadness in her eyes. Like the smoke in Miti's pyjamas, it lingered. Sometimes she would lose herself in the motions of cooking but other times she'd talk to Miti as he watched. She was getting married at the end of the summer, to a man named Goran whom Miti had never met. She didn't really smile when she talked about the impending marriage either; one would think she was preparing for a funeral.

Under Desislava's tutelage, Miti tried cooking simple things and then he started experimenting – all messy disasters. He put too much garlic in the *tarator* and not enough eggs in the *banitsa* so it was stodgy and horrible. None of it tasted like Desislava's cooking. Still, his father ate everything like a good boy who never leaves a morsel.

“It's nice to have traditional Bulgarian food, for a change,” said Stoyan.

“Nonsense,” laughed Desislava, getting up to clear her plate away. “I'm sure Grace's cooking was wonderful.”

Miti looked up and waited to hear what his father would say but he remained silent. He watched Desislava move around the kitchen. It was like a dance. The way she cleared plates, refilled glasses of iced tea, checked on the baklava in the fridge. As he watched he couldn't help but feel as if it should be his mother dancing around the kitchen, not Desislava. He stood up from the table, excusing himself, even before he'd finished.

“What's wrong? Where are you going?” asked Stoyan. Good boys never leave a morsel.

Another night of not sleeping. Miti woke up hours before he needed to, finding that he couldn't get back to sleep. He called to mind his mother's face but found the image floating there as slippery as a fish – just when he thought he'd grasped her image it shifted and squirmed. How short had her hair been? Did she always have a dimple in her right cheek when she smiled? What had her voice sounded like when she read him books? None of their photos had been saved from the fire; all he had were memories of what she looked like. He stayed awake, tossing and turning, counting down the minutes – seconds – until daylight.

Red-eyed and angry, Miti stormed to his favourite bookshop in the city centre, as soon as he knew it would be open, the one the other side of the bustling ancient stadium where stallholders gathered to sell thick oil paintings of the Old Town or jewellery or wooden artefacts with pictures of Plovdiv burned into them. He went

straight up to the second level where the English-language books were and selected the first one he came across. If he read an English book, he told himself, the sound of his mother's voice would come flooding back to him with every turn of the page. It felt wrong, holding the book; if his father ever found out...

"Haven't seen you in a while, Miti," said Todor the bookseller after Miti had tentatively brought the book to the till.

"I've been too busy."

"Too busy to read? That's unlike you. Haven't seen your mum in a while either; everything ok?"

"Everything's fine." Miti handed over the money and left as quickly as he could, wrapping the book in his jumper.

He ran straight home. He called to his father to let him know he'd returned, and then disappeared into his bedroom, shutting the door behind him. Diving straight under the covers of his bed and switching on the torch he kept on his bedside table, he peeled away his jumper slowly as if it was the wrapping on a tantalising piece of cake. He savoured the marvel of the book, thrilled at its illegitimacy and stared without touching it for a good few minutes. Then he couldn't resist any longer and he tucked in, feeling the smoothness of the front and back covers, the crispness of the pages inside. He feverishly skipped past the dedication to Hawthorne, the contents page, etymology and the extracts. Those were boring. Finally, there was Chapter 1: *Loomings* and then, 'Call me Ishmael.' *I will, I will call you Ishmael, friend.* Within a few chapters his bed was the boat and his covers the waves that would crash over his boat and try to destroy him. But nowhere, yet, the sound of his mother's voice. Perhaps if he read more and read out loud: 'Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy?' *Why did they? Why did they?* But he never found out the answer; the illusions dissipating after one cough from his father coming from somewhere near his door.

"What book is that you have there?"

"Nothing. Just a book from school."

"What's it called?" Miti paused, too long. "You were reading it out loud, Dimitar, did you know that? I know the book is in English."

Miti had nothing to say so he battled the tears dancing mockingly behind his tired eyes. He was still under the covers, his book open in his lap, when he felt his father's tentative steps forward, the aching click-click of his stick, and then his weight denting the mattress.

“It’s all right, Dimitar. I’m not angry. But you should take the book back to wherever you found it. You understand, don’t you? It’s for the best, you’ll see. I think I’m going to make a new rule. No new books in the apartment of any kind, unless they’re for school. You’ll just have to make do with the ones we’ve got.”

“But they’re all boring history books.”

“History is important. It’s what makes us. It would do you well to remember that.”

The old mattress stayed dented for a long while after Stoyan stood up and left.

The Story of the Bookseller

Upon a time, once, Todor the Bookseller went to work at the bookshop where he had been toiling for three long years.

He hated them, loathed them, the books. He couldn't see the point in them. Why spend hours reading when you could be listening to music, or walking the dog, or watching a film? When you're reading you can't do anything else. You can't wash the dishes, can't drive the car, can't make love. He'd tried that once and all that had landed him with was a black eye.

By the time he arrived, late, to take over the afternoon shift from the bookshop's owner, Sergei Karelov, he was already having a bad day. Two delinquent children had left breadcrumbs all over the floor so Todor's first job was to vacuum them up (the breadcrumbs, not the children) but the vacuum cleaner was broken, clogged with enough hairs to put together the hide of a wolf, so he had to use a small dustpan and brush.

Over the course of the long afternoon where he had nothing to do other than stare at the shelves of books he refused to read, a total of seven customers came up to him. One had a filthy cold and sneezed over the books which made Todor the Bookseller dislike them more. Another clearly had a crush on him because she peered at him over an open book whenever she thought he wasn't looking, like a poorly acted sleuth in a thriller. She was too shy to do anything about it because she left the bookshop blushing after she'd bought a copy of a book she had no intention of reading. There were two altercations on the second level, in the seating area reserved for those who wish to browse the books slowly. One customer browsed so slowly that he'd fallen asleep and Todor had to wake him up (he'd heard the snoring all the way downstairs from behind the till). The man wasn't happy and claimed he wasn't sleeping and left in a drowsy kind of anger although he wasn't as grumpy as the fourth customer who shouted at Todor for not having any of the books he was after. (Todor's suggestion: "How about you just stop reading?") Then came a Doctor who bought a pile of medical books and who, on his way out, said with a wink: "I'm not a real Doc." Then there was a customer who was so happy she didn't stop chattering and laughing for one whole hour and whose friend didn't get a chance to get a word in edgewise, not that he looked particularly animated anyway, he didn't even look as if he'd be able to talk if he tried.

And then, at about three minutes past three, another customer entered the bookshop. A beautiful young woman with hair like silk, she was being pulled along by a big hairy wolf-like dog on a leash made of leather.

"Is it ok to bring the dog inside?" she asked and, forgetting the owner's rule and the sign on the door that stated, quite clearly, *No Dogs Allowed*, Todor said, "Yes, of course."

"I'm after a book," she said.

"Well you've come to the right place," winked Todor, flashing her a grin.

"Don't be sleazy," she said.

"I'm not being sleazy," he protested, then added with another wink, "I like your hair. How did you grow it so long?"

"Oh, don't be silly," she said, flicking the long blonde hair that fell to the floor and trailed after her, "only freaks grow their hair this long."

"Then how...?"

"Hair extensions. Now, about this book..."

"Yes, what is it you're after? We have adventures, whodunits, science fiction. Wait..." he said, looking at her closely. "You look like a romance girl to me."

"Romance?" she scoffed. "Love's a witch and then you die."

"Oh," he said. "So what can I help you with then?"

"I need a book about apples."

"Apples?"

"What, are you deaf? Yes, apples. My godmother runs a vineyard out of town. She can't get the internet out there so she needs a book about apples."

"I'll search our database," he said, beginning to tap in some information on the computer. A minute later and, "Aha! Oh, wait. I don't think it's exactly what you're looking for."

"Just show it to me." She was distracted by some mice nibbling on a pumpkin just outside the door.

Todor went looking for the book somewhere on the second level. The third customer was back and had fallen asleep on the chair again. Todor found the book and went back downstairs. Now that he looked at her again, he wasn't sure if she was beautiful. Her beauty was an odd sort of beauty he thought, as he walked up to her, and handed her the book.

"Steve Job's autobiography?" she sneered.

"I guess it's not the right kind of apple," he ventured.

Then, suddenly: "Ouch!" She hurled the book to the floor and the wolf-like dog started growling wildly. She sucked her forefinger. "It bit me," she said.

"Books don't bite," said Todor, bending down slowly to pick the book up, never taking his eyes off the dog who had finished growling but who began wheezing instead.

"What?" she said. "Haven't you ever seen an asthmatic dog before?" He was about to say no when she thrust out her finger, a tiny pinprick of blood beginning to pool on the surface. "See, it bit me."

"It's just a paper cut."

"I don't like blood," she said and she took one look at the pinprick and fainted there and then on the middle of the bookshop floor, her asthmatic wolf-like dog huffing and puffing.

A while later, she came round at the hospital.

"How long was I out?" she asked.

"100 minutes."

"It felt like one hundred years. Wait...you counted the minutes?"

"Yes," he said, grinning sheepishly.

"That's so..." The word 'charming' was playing on her lips but in the end she plumped for: "...weird."

"Weird? Oh."

"Yeah, who counts how long people are asleep for?" She leaned forward in the hospital bed and he helped prop her up with the pillows. Whilst she had been sleeping he had counted eight peahens on her blouse.

"Where's the ninth?"

"The ninth what?"

"The ninth peahen?"

"Again, I'm going to go with weird. Where's my dog?"

"He's outside. Don't worry, he's fine. He's not asthmatic though. Turns out it was just a hairball from some of your hair extensions." There was a silence and in the silence he presented her with a shoe. "Somewhere between the bookshop and the ambulance, this fell off."

"Where's the other one?"

"That must have fallen off as well but I didn't find it."

"Shame, they were expensive."

"They're very unusual," he said, holding the shoe up to the light. "I've never seen a clear plastic stiletto before."

"You've probably never seen a Jimmy Choo before," she said. "Not a genuine one, anyway."

"What's your name?" he asked.

She sank down in the pillows and flashed him a coy smile. "I'll give you three guesses."

"Jill?"

"Jill? Do I look like a Jill?"

"Princess."

"Princess? Do I look like a Princess? Hold it, don't answer that. Final guess big boy, make it count."

He said the final name and in the middle of rolling her eyes, she realised he had got it right. "How did you know?" She began to look at him in a different way.

"I don't know, you just look like one, that's all."

"What's *your* name then, big boy?"

"I'll give you three guesses." He winked.

"Don't be ridiculous, I don't have time for such nonsense. Pass me my jacket."

"The doctor wants to keep you in for observation. And it's Todor, by the way. My name's Todor."

"Well, Todor, I feel absolutely fine so be a prince and hand me my jacket."

It was folded over the back of the chair by the bed, her leather biker's jacket with the hood on it, the leather the red of her blood.

"Thanks, let's get out of here, Todor, what do you say?"

"That sounds like a great idea to me," and they left, together, arm in arm, Todor and the transvestite called Emil.

Oh, and in case you are wondering, they didn't live together, ever after, happily.

When Miti Found Some Books And The Lord

Whatever he did, however hard he tried, he couldn't shake the memory of the book under his covers. It now went far beyond a yearning; it became a feverish addiction which was too strong to fight so that he had to find new ways to read without his father ever knowing. Stoyan was always around the house now and although he couldn't see, it was as if he had a sixth sense.

Miti's first port of call was The Three. He accosted them one breaktime before they'd hardly left the building for the playground.

"Can I come round one of your houses to read your books?" he asked. They were the closest things he had to friends and surely they would help him out with this. They'd been so helpful after the fire. He still hadn't had a chance to repay them yet, to thank them properly, but surely one more favour wouldn't be too much to ask.

The Three blinked at him in the doorway as other children barged past on their way to the playground, all shoulders and elbows and errant limbs.

"Whose house do you want to come to?" asked Stoichov.

"Yours, his, any of yours," said Miti.

Nedko screwed up his face. "To read?"

"Yes, to read. Books. That kind of thing."

Milen shook his head. "We only have computer games."

"Do you have another computer game?" said Stoichov. "You can come and play on our computers."

"I don't need computers, I need books."

The Three blinked.

"How's the apartment?" asked Nedko. "How're the stool and the blanket I got you?"

"Hard and uncomfortable," grumped Miti and he stalked off to the bench under the sycamore tree in the centre of the playground, leaving The Three to blink some more and Stoichov to declare that Miti had probably bumped his head in the fire.

After school Miti tried Todor the bookseller at his favourite bookshop. Todor didn't really care what Miti did; he said there was a chair on the second level where people sat and read the books before they buy them. So this is where Miti sat with a collection of Rudyard Kipling's short stories and he was just tucking in when a man loomed over him. For a dreaded second, he thought his father had discovered him but, upon looking up, he

noticed the owner of the store, Mr Karelov, thin and snake-like, long hair fanning out from his head like a hooded cobra.

“Are you going to buy that book?” hissed the man, hands on hips.

“No, but...”

“You can’t read it without buying it.”

“But Todor said -”

“But Todor said nothing. Buy the book or leave. Try the children’s library on the other side of town if you want to waste time reading without buying.”

So Miti had no choice but to leave. As he did so he left the book open on the chair, hoping that after his departure Riki-Tiki-Tavi would jump out and kill the snake-man dead.

Walking through Plovdiv’s city centre, Miti was running out of options and then, suddenly, he came across the huddle of kiosks by the subway near the post office. Most sold only magazines, pegged to the racks in polythene bags, but some sold books. They were second-hand adult books mostly, hardly anything for children, or thick boring textbooks about economics or politics which Miti had no interest in, popular with the students.

Upon searching the stalls for the best collection of books, he settled for a kiosk run by a woman who greeted him with a curt nod of the head and who had the largest amount of books for sale: old volumes of Soviet-era political diaries, plays by German playwrights, collections of Bulgarian short stories and poems, and a smattering of English books – Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf.

After that he returned to her almost every day, on his way back from getting food for his father’s meals. Miti couldn’t tell if she was old or young because her blue eyes were fresh but her mouth had sunken into a chin full of wrinkles. Her voice was deep and cloudy, filled with the smoke of the endless chain of cigarettes she wrapped her creased mouth around. She was kind, and let Miti flick through the books on her stall until one day she asked, brusquely: “Well, aren’t you going to buy it then?”

Miti fought the urge to run away. “I’m just looking,” he said meekly. He replaced the book and was ready to leave.

“You’ve been looking at it for hours on end every day this week. Are you going to buy it or not?”

“I’d like to. But I’m not allowed books in the house anymore, especially not English ones.”

“No books in the house, huh? I’ve not heard of that before. So, kid, are you going to tell me why? You’ve caught my interest.”

Reluctantly, Miti explained the story of his mother going to her new job in Sofia without saying goodbye and then the fire and then how his father had burned her books and then banned all others. It sounded like a Ran Bossilek Fairy Tale. Maybe the woman wouldn't believe him.

"What's he got against her books?"

"He says they corrupt people. He doesn't want them to corrupt me."

She let out a long, dry laugh and then took a long, dry drag on another cigarette. Miti wasn't sure what was funny. "How old are you, kid?"

"Nine."

"Figured as much. Do you even know what 'corrupt' means?"

For a while, Miti thought through his answer. "Something about stealing peaches and peaches being my mother's books. I'm not really sure."

She cracked a laugh again. "Books'll see your father out. Mark my words. These stalls used to be full of CDs, all of them." She looked Miti up and down. "Probably before your time. I had cousins in Istanbul who copied them and printed off the covers. But then they started telling us we weren't allowed to sell them. So we hid the CDs out the back and started selling DVDs but then they told us we weren't allowed to sell them either, not if we wanted the country to get into the EU. Now everywhere there are books, just books. So far, no one's come to tell us we're not allowed to sell these." Another laugh. "I tell you what. Why don't you take one of the books, for an hour or two after school every day? Bring it back to me. No idea why but something makes me trust you, kid. I know you'll bring it back to me."

And he did. He borrowed a new book each day. Sometimes, he'd walk all the way into the Old Town, the book burning in his hands with anticipation. He'd sit on a bench above the Roman amphitheatre where music played from all around. It was the soundtrack to his reading, a moment of quiet before he opened the covers, the music swelling when he turned the pages, and finally the counterpoint before the end. He read *Oliver Twist* to house music from the cafe, the beat propelling him along to the end. *Northanger Abbey* he read to a Wagnerian opera from the amphitheatre; the moments of gothic suspense punctuated by soprano screams. From the Academy of Music behind, he read *To The Lighthouse* in time with the tentative rehearsals of violin and cello. He didn't understand the story but that didn't matter. He loved the sound of the words as he read them out loud and pictured his mother reading to him. The image of her had started to come back to him.

But he soon read all of the English books on the woman's stall.

“I’m sorry, kid. I have an apartment full of counterfeit CDs and DVDs at home I’d give to you in a snap but you just read my very last English book.”

The other booksellers weren’t as forthcoming, even when the woman argued and pleaded with them.

“Bastards,” she called them and Miti pretended he hadn’t heard her.

Just as Mr Karellov had done, she pointed him in the direction of the children’s library which looked more like a child’s bedroom rather than a library. It was tiny with only a few bookshelves and paintings of Winnie The Pooh covering the walls. When he bustled in and started taking the books off the shelves to read in a big pile on a table and chair that were too small for him, three of the toddlers in the room started crying and their parents looked at him disapprovingly. After this, he tried to get a member’s card for the main library, in an ugly building near to the public gardens. The stern man behind the desk wouldn’t let him because he wasn’t old enough. He told Miti to try the children’s library and that was that. On the way out, Miti noticed some graffiti at the start of the steps to the pavement. *Read Mo’ Books* it said, in brazen red English. *I would if I could,* thought Miti, *but I can’t.*

That day, Miti came home in a foul mood. He slung the food he’d bought from the market into the kitchen and the bags hit the cupboard doors with a thump.

Stoyan found his way into the kitchen. “Is everything ok?”

“Fine.”

“Come on now, Dimitar, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said and he pushed past his father to go to the living room. He noticed it straight away, inside the hollowed-out television, where before there had been one of his grandmother’s decorative plates, the ones she used to collect from all over Bulgaria.

“Where’s the plate gone?” asked Miti.

Stoyan joined him in the living room. “Ah, you noticed. I asked Desislava to pack the plate away and put that in its place. I can’t see it but I know it’s there.” He gave a short little laugh. “Faith, I suppose you’d call that.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Ever since the fire, ever since we’ve both come out alive...well, you know things are different, you must have seen a change in me. It’s a miracle, Dimitar, a miracle from heaven. We had no reason to survive but we did. We were saved. We’ve been reborn in the Lord. Come here; let me tell you a story.” He arranged himself

on the stool and Miti climbed on; it still felt awkward and uncomfortable. “My mother was very religious. She was always trying to make me and my brother, your Uncle Ventseslav, believe in God but we resisted and resisted. She used to tell us about miracles. When Jesus turned water into wine. When he made the loaves and the fishes feed five thousand people. She said that if we let Jesus into our hearts then he will protect us. Your Uncle Ventseslav started to believe but I was always resistant to what Mother said.”

“But Uncle Ventseslav is -”

“The point is that I realise where I’ve been going wrong. It’s time we let Jesus into our hearts, Dimitar. Even though I can’t see what’s inside the television I want other people to see it. I want to know that it is there, watching over us.”

Miti stared at the painting of Jesus that stood amongst the candles within the old television. Unlike the Lord in the corner of Mr Malchek’s classroom, he wasn’t on a cross. A gaudy painting, Jesus here wore bright red and green robes and behind his head was a halo of gold, the rays leaping in every direction. His eyes were a bright blue.

“But what does he have to do with it?”

“We are saved because of Him, Dimitar. Now we must have faith.”

“I don’t understand.” The words were becoming so familiar with him lately.

“One day you will.”

The Story of the CD-Seller

It used to be all music and now there was nothing but silence. Pitiless. When the CDs first got banned she had the radio at work, on the stall, but it wasn't the same. They only played rubbish, not the Western stuff she used to sell – the stuff that was really popular with the kids, the stuff that drew them like flowers draw bees. And she had to compete with a dozen other radios from a dozen other kiosks and hers was old and not loud enough so in the end she gave up.

The books were all right; she'd read most of the Bulgarian ones whilst sitting and waiting for customers to show up. They never sold as much as the CDs though. They weren't like honey. The books were passive, lying there dull and old, most of them torn and tattered and neglected, whereas the music used to cry out to people, demand to be noticed.

She sold three books that day. One to a student, two to a German traveller who delighted in finding dog-eared copies of *Faust* and *The Magic Mountain*. Three books. It wasn't enough to pay the utility bills. If things didn't pick up by the end of the week, it would be a disastrous winter.

On the bus home she lit a cigarette and no one said anything even though you weren't allowed to smoke on public transport any more. She tapped the ash through the slit of the open window and hummed to herself. No one minded that either, even though her voice was rough like the crunching of gravel under boots.

In the elevator of her apartment block, she launched into full song because the acoustics were great in there and nobody could hear her. She sang a well-known pop song by a British girl band from a decade or so ago and she wondered as she sang whether anyone else remembered it. It had been big back then, popular with all the schoolchildren who sang it as they walked arm in arm down the street. With her voice though, it didn't sound right; she'd turned a pop song into a funeral dirge. She laughed and lit another cigarette and took a long, long drag. They'd already done their worst, there wouldn't be any point stopping.

She was still singing when she entered her apartment. She slung the keys on the side-table and went straight into her bedroom where she took a quilt off the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. Through her bedroom window she saw nothing but the concrete of the apartment block opposite which looked as cold as her room. Her apartment was littered with CDs and DVDs. Towers and towers of them lined up on every wall and surface. Many of the albums must be ten years old now, she thought to herself. Maybe

older. The ones under the big window in the living room had faded covers from the light streaming through every day.

She picked one and put it in the old CD player she used to have on the stall. Its right speaker was broken but sound filtered from the left, muffled. She smiled and remembered that summer. It had been hot. She'd pitched her stall on the bridge over the Maritsa. You only had to walk a minute before you found another CD seller but hers were a few *stotinki* cheaper than anywhere else and the kids flocked to her. She got to know quite a few of them and some of them tried to offer her their own CD collection to sell for a fee but she already had her supplier; her cousin who came over from Turkey with his suitcases full, a kind of Father Christmas. He'd stopped coming. He didn't have any books to give her. She laughed again.

Then came the thumping from the second bedroom. Urgent and rhythmic, in time with the beat of the song. She turned it up on the player as loud as it would go. "Are you dancing, Vladimir?" she called. The thumping continued and she smiled. It had been a while since there had been music in the house; she'd forgotten the sound of his heavy feet on the floor.

She went to the bedroom and turned the key in the lock. "Is Vladimir dancing? Is he? Is he?" The brown bear was standing on two legs, arms outstretched for balance, his feet pumping up and down, up and down. His mouth hung open in a vague way that could have been from the exertion of dancing. Or maybe it was a smile.

Had he always been this tall? She couldn't remember. It had been a long, long time since he'd danced like this, on two legs.

"You remember the good old days, don't you Vladimir?" She laughed and sang the song, coming closer to him. She stuck the cigarette in his mouth and it hung there idly until it fell to the floor.

In the aching movement of an elderly man, he rose up to his full height, perching his massive paws on her shoulders. She placed her hands on his waist and she moved her feet up and down in time with the new, energetic song coming from the CD player. She laughed and they danced. Vladimir groaned. Then their music was joined by another kind of thumping, coming from underneath them. She realised that the man in the apartment below must still have that broomstick, even after all these years. She knew he'd probably be shouting and cursing at them but there was no way they could hear him.

They were too busy in their own world, dancing to a song already ten years old.

When The Boy Saw The Girl

Sunday.

Sun Day.

The air danced in warm swathes, the mid-day sun fell upon Miti's body as he tried to sleep outside on the balcony but it was too hot and, even though he hadn't slept much at all the night before, he wasn't tired. He was dreading something, something that was consuming him so that all he could do was lie on the balcony and burn and wait. There were only three days left of school until they broke up for the summer holidays. He counted them on his fingers: a Monday, a Tuesday, and a Wednesday. Three short days. The other children had run around the corridors at school on Friday, their parents' reassurances ringing in their ears: "Go on, go to school today, three more days next week and then you can relax. Three short days. They'll fly by."

Miti imagined the days flying in the air, buoyed on the tepid current like kites. He wanted to anchor them to the ground, elongate them, iron them out somehow. He wanted to make them last longer because if he didn't, if he let them fly by – off into their long summer – then all he would be left with was his own summer holidays, interminable.

Last summer, he'd been looking forward to the holidays. He was just as excited as everybody else, he had joined them running around the corridors in excitement and anticipation but this year was different. School had become the only place he could read. He'd exhausted all the English-language books he could find.

Mr Malchek was first to notice a change in him a few weeks back. "You don't put up your hand as much anymore, Dimitar," he'd said after the other children had sprinted from the room on the hunt for more interesting lessons. "I normally rely on you in my class."

"I'm sorry," said Miti.

"It's nothing to be sorry about, I'd like to know what's wrong, if you'd care to tell me of course."

Once again Miti found himself explaining his situation. "And so I'm not allowed any more books in the house. Not the kind I like to read anyway. He'll let textbooks in and then there are his history books but I've read all them and they're boring. I want English books."

"Because of your mother?"

Miti had nodded. Mr Malchek considered what he'd been told for a moment. "Books are powerful, your father's got that part right. But the point he seems to be missing is that books are a power for good, not evil."

Yes, of course, there are those books which corrupt, there are those books written to promote hate and vicious agendas. But not the kind of books you're reading. I've seen the way you read, the way you're absorbed by the books. It seems sad that you can't continue to learn from them."

The next day, Mr Malchek had kept Miti back at the end of class again. On his desk he'd placed a book, a classic of children's literature that Miti hadn't read for a long time. "Read it," said Mr Malchek. "Take your time. You can come back and use my classroom after school if you like, if you need a place to read quietly. I'll vouch for you if anybody asks."

"What will you say?"

"I'll say you're working on a project for me or something. I'm sure I'll be able to come up with something."

"Thank you, Mr Malchek."

"You don't need to thank me, you just need to read."

And now, with school ending, there would be nowhere to go, no place to turn to and read what he wanted. Just endless hot days without the possibility of a book. He sighed heavily. Turning onto his side, he faced the galvanised rungs of the balcony and peered between them, squinting from the shafts of light that broke through. His apartment block curved in a large horseshoe and in the centre, where there had been a small area with trees and a swing that Mr Vasil used to take him to play on before school, there now stood two low-rise houses. They were squashed into the area like flustered commuters in a packed subway train, their red-tiled roofs radiating an abashed air of embarrassment, the apartment block towering over them like bullies. A washing line bridged the short gap between the two houses, strung with giant white knickers blowing on the breeze - a desperate flag of surrender.

Miti looked out at the rest of the apartment block. Washing hung from balconies everywhere; satellite dishes and other aerals tipped their extremities up to the sky like sun-worshippers; a woman beat out the dust from a sad-looking cushion, the motes dispersing like children escaping at the end of school. Once again, Miti thought about the approaching Wednesday and the beginning of the holidays and sunk back on his towel with a sigh, feeling oppressed.

Then he heard the squeak of a sliding door opening next door and the busy, gravel-like humming of Madame Zlatka. She sounded like Marlene Dietrich conversing with herself under water. Miti was at the wrong

angle to see her so he hauled himself to his knees with great effort and looked across the partition and into her balcony.

Zlatka was pottering about on her balcony – she was never still or quiet – one moment sweeping the floor, the next, grasping the items on her washing line, testing them to see if they were dry. But hers was a strange sort of washing line, not with ordinary things like shirts or sweaters or pillow slips. Instead she had hung up oddments: an empty packet of crisps, a torn flannel, a piece of paper with writing on it, the curled black rubber from a burst tyre.

She checked the piece of paper but shook her head, then moved onto the flannel. “Feels dry,” she said, satisfied, and unhooked it from the line, depositing it on a table in the corner of the balcony. Then she seemed to forget about the washing line and busied herself with a row of empty glass bottles that lined the front of her balcony. Miti was reminded of the song *Ten Green Bottles* which his mother sang to him when he was little but here there were thirteen of them and they weren’t all green. Zlatka picked one up, regarded it suspiciously, then held it up high to the sun, peering through the bottleneck as if it were a telescope. Finally, she saw Miti, staring over the partition.

She placed the bottle on the table with the torn flannel. “Just collecting the stories on the wind.” She smiled at him. “It’s the glass, it always causes problems. Such problems. But I think I have the remedy.” Zlatka disappeared for a moment but the sound of her humming floated over to Miti. She reappeared dragging a strange quilt made from oddments of fabrics, light plastics, paper, cardboard – any number of torn and ripped things. She placed it on the table. “These are the stories so far,” she said, without looking up. “Now don’t tell me you can’t hear them. I’ve been in your apartment, remember. It’s a menagerie of books. A cacophony of words. A hullabaloo of stories.”

“It used to be,” said Miti, remembering all his mother’s books which had lined every surface. “Not anymore.”

For the next half hour, Miti watched as Zlatka efficiently hand-sewed a piece of grey flannel to the leading edge of the quilt. She then took a crisp packet and attached that to the flannel, fashioning some kind of pocket. She laid the quilt flat on the table and stepped back to admire her work. Then she picked up the smallest glass bottle and slipped it into the crisp packet which crinkled and resisted but stayed attached to the flannel, the bottle nestled like a Joey in a kangaroo’s pouch.

“There,” she said, now finally looking up, and Miti swore he saw tears on her high, round cheekbones. “The wind. Doesn’t think anyone’s listening but I do, I can hear it.” Miti said nothing as she gathered up the quilt, carefully, and went inside, her humming dimmed by the squeak of the closing door. For a while, Miti pondered Madame Zlatka. She was quite clearly mad; since when did the wind have anything important to say? Although it would be quite something if the wind could talk and tell stories. He promised himself to listen out carefully from now on, on the off-chance that Madame Zlatka wasn’t, in fact, a lunatic.

Thoughts of the impending holidays returned to him so he stuck his head over the balcony in an attempt to distract himself. This time, his attention was drawn to the balcony directly beneath his own and the girl reclining there on a deckchair. Anyone else might have noticed how thin she was, how she wore an aquamarine swimming costume that emphasised her protruding neck bones and made her body look angular and pointed but Miti didn’t really notice this. In her hands was a book, pages open like a prayer, and this is what caught his attention.

He couldn’t see the front cover. What book was it? Was it fiction? Poetry? Even better, was it a classic? He was desperate to know. Who was it by, what was it called? And then he remembered the girl to whom the book belonged. Did she have a name too? He might have seen her before, in passing, but from this angle he couldn’t tell.

Miti disappeared through the door into the kitchen. Stoyan must have heard the door open and shut because he started ringing the delicate silver bell Desislava had suggested might be a good idea. Following the rings, Miti found his father in the living room on the garden bench, propped up amongst the cushions like a stuffed toy. Pink Floyd was playing in the background on an old record player they had been given. Stoyan had developed a keen interest in music.

“The Lord has told me to give up smoking,” he had said one day, “but I can’t see there’s any harm in music.”

He would sit there for hours every day, listening to the records Miti had found in the attic space with the posters and other items his father had called remnants from his youth. When Miti read out the titles of the records, Stoyan became almost giddy with excitement and he couldn’t decide which one to play first. Now the record player was on the coffee table which had been moved closer to the bench so that Stoyan could change the record whenever he wanted. Sometimes Miti would walk in talking but his father wouldn’t know he was there, lost in the music somewhere, his hands in the air waving like a conductor.

This time, the music wasn't so loud and he heard Miti enter. "I wondered where you were."

"I told you, I was out on the balcony."

"Yes. Yes, good boy. Have you done your homework?"

"Yes, this morning."

"Excellent. Excellent."

"It's a sunny day. You should come out." Miti hadn't failed to notice how much time his father was spending indoors, in the living room or in bed. He'd tried to make him leave the apartment before, offered to walk him somewhere, even if it was only to the local shop and back but his father always found some excuse.

Stoyan smiled. "But the music's in here," he said, before adding, "no, but thank you anyway. You go back out, enjoy the sunshine."

"I will," said Miti and then he noticed what he'd come in for. They were over on top of the television. A pair of binoculars, large, heavier than they looked. It had been one of the more curious items left outside the door for them after the fire although until that day Miti was never quite sure how much use they'd be. Had the person who had donated them not heard his father was blind? Quietly, Miti went over and picked them up. He was nearly out of the living room when Stoyan spoke.

"What did you pick up?" A casual question, not one that was meant to sound interrogative.

"I left a cup by the television. I'm going to take it back to the sink."

"There's a good boy," said Stoyan. The music on the record player was turned up.

Miti went into the kitchen, placed the binoculars on the sideboard, and made a fuss of turning on the tap and splashing around in the sink, chinking together some of the cups that were already in there.

As quickly as he could, he was outside again, on the balcony, hanging over the edge and hoping that the book hadn't gone.

To his relief, it was still there, along with the girl who belonged to it. This time he noticed her impossibly long legs stretched out in front of her, browning in the sun. Her swim suit was a swirl of magnificent aquamarines and, were it not for her legs, he might have thought she was a mermaid. Her hair was the colour of sand and was plaited into two long pigtails, one of which she curled in her finger and then sucked whilst she read.

Careful not to make a sound, Miti brought the binoculars to his eyes and looked over the edge. At first the view was blurred, like bleeding watercolours, but suddenly everything seemed as if it had been brought forward or as if he was standing right over her, centimetres away. Everything was in incredible detail, even

brighter and more vivid. He could see the stray hairs that were escaping the plaits, waving in the light breeze; he could see that on one toe nail the blue varnish was cracked in the corner but that's not what he had come looking for. Now he could see what he truly wanted to see. The words on the page. They were lined up all present and correct, regimented, waiting to be inspected.

With a mounting excitement, Miti began to read the left-hand side but almost as soon as he began, the girl flicked over the page. So he started again and let the words peel themselves off the page and dance up through the binoculars towards him. It was a Bulgarian book, one that he hadn't read before. He'd have preferred an English one but this was exciting, illicit.

He knelt there, reading through binoculars, a satiated calm flooding through him until the sun, the book, and the girl, went in.

~

She was out there on the balcony every day after school for the next three days, enjoying the sun and the book. Miti would race home as soon as the school bell rang, even on the last day when everybody slowed down to say goodbye to each other before the long summer holiday. He'd forgotten about his dread of the holidays because now he had discovered a new and exciting way of reading.

He left the binoculars safely by the potted plant on the balcony, the potted plant that Desislava had brought round one day with moussaka and stories of her day at school. Stoyan enjoyed hearing about his old workplace and let her talk for hours but he'd not been outside since the return home from hospital so Miti thought the binoculars would be safe enough tucked away on the balcony.

It was the first day of the holidays and Miti was up surprisingly early and ran straight out onto the balcony. He had to open the door quietly so as not to disturb his father. He always slept deeply but today even more so. They had been kept up all night by the older school leavers who had filled the streets honking their horns and shouting and cheering at the tops of their voices. Every year they became more adventurous. It used to be Limousines and smart suits that didn't quite fit. Last year they drove around the city in tractors. This year they hung precariously out of the backs of ambulances in zombie rags and sang Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, cheering the future that awaited them. Miti left the door open slightly so that he might listen out for his father's bell.

Grabbing the binoculars, Miti went straight to hang over the railings but the mermaid wasn't there. He told himself that it was too early, that she was probably still in bed, so he looked across at the other balconies with his binoculars. He saw a half-naked man standing with his hands on his hips. His body was covered in thick black hairs – even the shoulders! – his stomach was bulbous, his face grim. A dwarf, Miti reasoned, guarding his lair with a miserable determination. Or a king – yes, a Troll-King – surveying his lands, unhappy at what he saw.

The air was warm. Early morning clouds hovered low and blocked out the sun but Miti didn't mind. He had spent a lot of time in the sun and his normally olive skin was beginning to redden. So was the girl's, slowly, in time with his. He read with her, and turned red with her, and marvelled that mermaids could burn in the sun.

His father's bell rang from inside and he went to help him out of bed.

"Were you on that balcony again?" he asked as Miti found his stick and handed it to him.

"It's another nice day," Miti replied. "Cloudy but still warm. Would you like to go for a walk?"

Stoyan thought about it for a second. "I think I'll stay indoors today, if you don't mind. Could you take me to the living room? I want to listen to my music."

Trying not to sigh, Miti did as he was asked. He had come to the realisation that his father must have been upset long before the accident - for that is how they talked about the fire now, if it was ever mentioned, as something that was no one's fault, just one of those unfortunate things - but he didn't like to think about what had really happened, how his mother had just run away to a new job without saying so much as a goodbye, why his father had started the fire in the first place. It made his chest tight, and his stomach sink and hurt.

After settling his father in the living room, Miti excused himself and went back to his balcony vigil. The mermaid was already out there lying back in her familiar pose, the last few pages of the book remaining. In his haste to catch up for lost time, Miti almost lost his grip of the binoculars over the edge.

"Young love!" called Zlatka loudly. "If a little ungentlemanly, mind."

Miti hadn't noticed Zlatka out on her own balcony. She'd been uncharacteristically silent, her mouth closed but not humming. Miti wondered how long she'd been watching him hanging over the edge of the balcony with a pair of large binoculars focussed on the banker's daughter wearing nothing but a bathing suit.

"Young love!" she called again, louder this time.

At this, the girl looked up, first at Zlatka, then at the round lenses staring down at her and the boy attached to them.

Miti had frozen. He couldn't move.

The Story of the Troll-King

We watch with close attention to how he's going to react.

None of us knows. Is he going to be mad or is he going to laugh it off and if he's laughing it off is it going to be a fake laugh, or a prelude to a wrathful outburst, the calm before the storm? He's standing on the balcony, as if it is his stage and we watch on from the main room, waiting for him to respond. His hands are on his hips and he's in full costume, the Troll-King's costume, golden mask with high crown. One of our chorus, the one who makes the costumes, notices the way the sun glints off the crown as if it was made from real gold and we all marvel and remind ourselves to tell her when this ordeal is over that she has done a wonderful job this year, really outdone herself.

We watch him scratch behind his head. The Troll-King's costume rustles as he moves, it is a splendid piece made of feathers and faux-fur so that he looks wild and primordial although sometimes, one of us thinks, it isn't always possible to tell where the faux-fur ends and his real body hair begins and when one of us thinks it, we all think it, and all try and stifle a laugh.

The Troll-King takes a powerful step forward into the room, over the threshold of the door from the balcony; he is the performer and, for now, we are his audience, sitting and watching with baited breath. One of us has forgotten to breathe, so baited was her breath, that she starts to cough and in the silence it sounds like a thousand coughs and splutters, a chorus of rasping breaths.

"Let me get this straight," he says and we all fear what he might say next. "One of you has lost the magic potion?" He eyes each and every one of us, slowly, from the tops of our heads to the tips of our toes. He lingers on our eyes. A collective shudder waves through us. We are united though, and find power in this.

One of us says: "It's just been misplaced, we'll find it soon."

"It'll turn up," says another of us.

"We haven't looked everywhere yet."

"Who had it last?" His question stuns us into further silence; it suggests that one of us is to blame. He's trying to separate us, weed out the weak.

"We've all been taking turns to look after it," one of us says.

"We know how precious it is."

“The magic potion is absolutely key,” says the Troll-King. “Without it, none of the play will make sense. I will kill the hero of the story and the doctor won’t be able to revive him if we don’t have the potion. What kind of a story would that be?”

“If we can’t find it, we might be able to make a new one,” suggests one of us but the look on the Troll-King’s face tells us what he thinks of that idea.

“The show is this evening. We’re performing in less than an hour. It took one of you a week to make the potion look magic.”

“I wanted it to look perfect,” says one of us, the one who designed the props and we all take a collective breath, we are already beginning to separate. We try not to panic; we try not to lose cohesion.

“What about this?” one of us says. The small apartment is packed full of us, we are perching on stools and the backs of sofas and cross-legged on the floor. He spoke from the doorway to the kitchen. He is holding up a bottle of iced tea that was left out on the side.

“How on earth does that look like a magic potion?”

“We could take the label off?” he suggests. One of us laughs and we can feel the cord that binds us straining.

“I want that magic potion found,” says the Troll-King, “or we’re not performing.”

The cord that binds is going to snap.

“The Doctor had it last; I remember giving it to him after the last rehearsal.”

“No, that was the rehearsal before last; I gave it to the hero.”

The hero shrugs and says, “It wasn’t me who lost it; we’ve already checked my apartment.”

“I bet it was the Fool,” cries the costume-designer. “He must have lost it on the bus.”

“Don’t be silly,” says the Fool, “I take taxis nowadays.”

“Then you left it in a taxi!”

“Nonsense!”

“It really did take me a week to perfect it, Your Majesty,” says the prop-maker, sidling up to the Troll-King.

“Silence!” he shouts, and we are as one again in our unified horror. None of us dare breathe. “Leave,” he commands, “all of you leave. I don’t want to see any of you again. The show has been cancelled, effective immediately.”

None of us knows if he is joking or if he’s in character and this is part of his act. When he hits the prop-maker round the head with his Troll-King staff fashioned from an old walking stick and plastic piping, we realise that he means business.

We filter out of his apartment and make our separate ways to our separate lives; only one of us is still left, the youngest of us, hiding under the dining table for fear of the Troll-King. We have no idea we have left her behind. She is watching him go over to the fridge ready to return the bottle of iced tea and, on the top shelf where he expects to find an empty space, his eyes fall upon the bottle of magic potion, green and purple. She watches him blush with surprise and embarrassment and she thinks how un-kingly he looks now, even in all his finery.

When The Girl Found Out

Shouting, a lot of shouting.

Miti stirred himself and turned around, sinking with his back against the railings, the binoculars still gripped hard in his hands.

“What are you doing? What are you doing? Dad, Dad come help me, quick! There’s a boy with...there’s a boy!”

And then Zlatka’s singsong voice joining in with the chorus. “Young love! Young love!”

“Dad! I bet he’s been looking at me all this time! Help!”

Miti heard another voice enter the fray. “What’s all this shouting? Can’t you be quiet for five minutes? What on earth will the neighbours think?”

“But he was looking at me! He was hanging over the balcony staring at me through his big ugly binoculars.”

“What’s this? Who? Where?”

“Up there?”

“Stoyan? *Stoyan!* The man can’t see; he wouldn’t be using binoculars. I’ve never heard of anything so ridiculous.”

“No the boy, *the boy!*”

“The boy? His son! What on earth’s going on? Who does he think he is? Come on out, boy! Show yourself! Come on, you can’t hide!”

“Young love! Young love! We all live in a yellow submarine...”

“Come on, boy, or do I have to come up there and sort you out myself?”

Just as Miti was about to try and calm Mr Angelov down, he saw his father standing in the doorway to the balcony. “What’s all this? Dimitar, what’s going on?”

“Show yourself! Filthy pervert!”

“Dimitar? Is that Mr Angelov from downstairs? Why’s he shouting?”

“Pervert! Pervert!”

“Dad, he kept staring at me through binoculars!”

“...a yellow submarine...”

Stoyan walked over to the railings and cocked his head over so he could hear better.

“Stoyan! It *was* you after all! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!”

“No, Dad, it’s the boy!”

“What’s going on Mr Angelov?”

“Your boy has violated my daughter’s privacy...”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s been staring at my daughter whilst she’s been sunbathing!”

“He has?” Did Miti detect a note of amusement in his father’s voice?

“Tell him to come out here like a man!”

“I’m sure it’s all a misunderstanding; let me speak to Dimitar myself...”

“I don’t think so, I’m coming on up, don’t you dare move a muscle!”

“...Lucy in the sky with...”

“And do be quiet, Madame Zlatka, you’re disturbing the dogs.”

“...Diamonds are a girl’s best friend...”

Miti’s chest tightened and he found it difficult to breathe. He heard Mr Angelov and his daughter go inside their apartment and slide the door shut with a bang. Zlatka continued to sing to herself, even in the absence of an audience. His father just stood by the railings. Miti was crouched by his legs.

Then he felt his father’s hands on his head. “Don’t worry, Dimitar.”

Miti imagined Mr Angelov storming through his apartment, out into the corridor. He’d be fuming as he called the elevator, waited for it to crank up slowly to his floor. He’d get in, thankful that it was only one floor up to Miti’s apartment, but he’d be pacing inside like a trapped animal. He’d leap out of the elevator and along the corridor until he reached...

There came a knock at the front door, loud; they both heard it all the way on the balcony.

“Show him in,” said his father.

“I...”

“It’s all right.”

Another knock at the door.

Miti sidled up to it, turned the latch.

Mr Angelov burst in all angry and even redder than normal. He snatched Miti by the ear painfully. “Where’s your father?”

“On the balcony still, *gospodin*.”

“Don’t you ‘*gospodin*’ me!” Mr Angelov dragged Miti by the ear through the kitchen and onto the balcony. Stoyan turned and Mr Angelov looked him in the eyes and his demeanour changed a little, he lost grip of Miti’s ear and pulled his hat off his head and twisted it in his hands. “Has he told you what he’s been up to?”

“Yes,” said Stoyan, “and he’s very sorry. Miti, would you mind describing to me what’s happening, whilst Mr Angelov and I have a talk?”

Miti ran over to his father, far away from Mr Angelov’s ear-grabbing sausage fingers. “Mr Angelov is standing in the doorway to the balcony...”

“I don’t see why this is necessary, Stoyan.”

“I like to get a sense of the bigger picture. Sometimes it’s like playing a game of chess with your eyes closed and all you need is someone there to tell you what’s happening, where the pieces are. I’m sure you understand.”

“I do, but...”

“Mr Angelov is wearing a pair of beige shorts and a white and brown striped vest.”

“Ah yes, I remember that vest. I think it’s a favourite of Mr Angelov’s.”

“Stoyan, please, about my daughter...your son’s been spying on her for goodness knows how long.”

“Mr Angelov is looking at me angrily. Now he is looking away. Now he doesn’t know where to look...”

“I can reassure you on that front, Mr Angelov, because you see Dimitar had only been out on the balcony for a few minutes before all the shouting began.”

“But he’s probably been out there before with his binoculars. She goes out there every day after school when the weather’s nice.”

“Mr Angelov is sunburnt...”

“We only received the binoculars this morning. A friend dropped them round.”

“It’s only half-past nine.”

“She’s an early bird. Dimitar, please apologise to Mr Angelov.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Angelov. It won’t happen again.”

“Yes...well...it better hadn’t. But if I were you, Stoyan, I’d keep those binoculars where I could see them...I mean...that is to say...”

“Mr Angelov is leaving...”

After Mr Angelov closed the door behind him, neither Miti nor Stoyan spoke for a while. Stoyan seemed to be enjoying the warm sun on his skin. In this light, Miti thought his father looked pale and thinner than he’d ever seen him. Eventually they heard some loud voices coming from below. “Ganged up on me!” and “Laughing at me!” Stoyan felt his way off the balcony and into the living room. Miti followed.

“Can you find The Rolling Stones for me?”

Miti found it and put it in the player. *You can’t always get what you want / You can’t always get what you want / But if you try sometimes / Well you just might find / You get what you need.* Stoyan fell back onto the cushions.

“Dad, I didn’t -”

Stoyan interrupted. “I suppose I shouldn’t have lied. I told him we’d just got the binoculars this morning. That wasn’t very Christian of me.” He sighed heavily. “I’m not very good at this. Not very good at this at all.”

“Dad, I didn’t -”

“It doesn’t matter. Or does it? I need to think about it for a while. I suppose, it’s all part of growing up. But I’d put those binoculars away if I were you. And I don’t want you out on that balcony again with them.”

The guitar riff joined in with the singer and someone thrashed about angrily on the drums and Stoyan closed his eyes. Miti wondered if it became any darker for his father when he closed his eyes or whether, as he imagined, it stayed the same kind of darkness.

~

Over the next week, Miti’s mind was on nothing but the girl, even his desire for reading didn’t preoccupy him with the same verve. He felt humiliated. He couldn’t let her think that he had been spying on her. All he’d wanted from her was the book, nothing else, but of course no one would believe that.

He realised that he'd have to confront her, tell her the truth, when she was alone and not with her father or out on the balcony again, because he could imagine the scene should his head peer over the railings down at her, hopeful and pleading. But first things first: he'd have to pluck up the courage. This was a girl he was dealing with, an unknown quantity. She might have looked like a mermaid but he'd also heard of Medusa – she could turn him to stone with one look into her cold, cold eyes; of this he was quite convinced.

Not tall enough to view his face fully in the bathroom mirror, Miti had to stand on the scales propped up under the sink which gave him a useful estimation, he felt, of how he was growing. Nobody had explained what the dial meant or how it worked but the pointer hovered between two of his favourite numbers so he took that to be a good sign. Then he looked in the mirror.

His mother had used the phrase 'Green around the gills' before but he never really knew what it meant though she'd always been referring to somebody being unwell. Yet here he was, feeling absolutely fine, with a face that looked like an alien's. Miti deduced that, rather than any sudden illness he might have contracted whilst out on the balcony, the green hue of his reflection came as a result of the greenness of the bathroom itself – emerald green tiles, pistachio suite.

His hair was growing long, covering his ears now and down over the collar of his yellow shirt. He'd have to go to the hairdressers but it was expensive so it could wait a while, maybe the whole summer holiday.

Miti squashed his face with his fingers like you might prod a starfish on the beach with a stick; lifted his eyebrows, sucked in his cheeks, stuck out his tongue, pulled down his eyelids. He created all manner of monsters and fiends. If the girl didn't listen to him or started screaming for her dad then he would scare her to death with his best zombie impression – all hollow-eyed with lolling head – or vampire – open-mouthed with index fingers for incisors. She wouldn't stand a chance. She'd have to listen to his explanation and then everything would be all right. So he steeled himself, flexed his arms in the mirrors and wondered when the muscles would grow, and told himself that there was no time like the present.

Attempt One:

The Tiger's-Eye and the Jewellery Maker

He followed her through the town, down the main high street, weaving in and out of shoppers, trying his hardest not to let her see him. She lingered several times by the shops, peering in if something caught her

eye but she never went inside any of them. She carried on walking to the end of the street where the stallholders were out in force, shouting at each other, smiling at tourists. The stallholders gathered around the ancient stadium which partially erupted into the street. Once, Gladiators night have fought there to the death. Now people haggled and bartered and hardly paid the ruins much mind.

She paused at the stalls offering jewellery, of which there were many. Treasure troves opened up revealing bangles, rings, necklaces, earrings; an Aladdin's Cave of discoveries displayed on black velour trays and stands. She stopped at one stall and seemed to know the man who ran it because he nodded to her and brought out a new tray from underneath the main stall without her having to say anything. Miti, lurking in front of a different stand pretending he was an English tourist and interested in what was on offer and ignoring the woman who talked to him enthusiastically, was close enough to see everything on the other stall.

The tray was stacked with the most beautiful, golden Tiger's Eyes, some set into rings, others into necklaces, some just magnificent jewels standing on their own. Shimmering orange, the whole tray winked in the sunlight.

Selecting one at a time, she held each in the air and inspected it closely like someone who knew what they were looking for. After a while of browsing, she picked one out, pointed to it with determination and the man lifted it from the tray and nestled it inside a tiny purple drawstring bag. It was a small Tiger's-Eye, perhaps the least remarkable of the lot, but it was delicate and almost perfectly round like a marble. She placed the drawstring bag in her pocket after she'd handed over some money.

Quickly, Miti followed after her, leaving the woman at her stall cursing loudly at him in a Bulgarian she thought he could not understand. Foreigners were the worst at browsing or time-wasting, whichever way you wanted to look at it.

Then someone grabbed his arm and he thought the woman had come after him but he turned and saw the man from the jewellery stand, his thick hairy fingers encircling Miti's upper arm as if it was nothing but a stick.

"I can see you following Cassandra," growled the man, his brow furrowed and bear-like.

"I'm not! I just want to talk to her."

"Slinking around as if no one could see you!"

"I'm not -"

"Watch your step. She's a jewel amongst paper."

He squeezed even more tightly and Miti thought his arm would pop, but then he let go and turned his attention to a passer-by and potential customer as if nothing at all had happened. Rubbing his arm, Miti scuttled off. He looked up. The girl was gone.

But at least he knew her name.

Attempt Two:

The Old Lady and the Old Town

Again he followed her, this time early one morning, still pleasantly warm. She walked at a brisk pace, not stopping to look into any of the shops that were preparing to open. It was harder for Miti to remain inconspicuous with so few people around, so he hung back and pulled his yellow collar up in the way he had seen sleuths do in detective cartoons.

At one of the courtyards where the stallholders were setting up for the day, she turned right where the streets inclined and became bumpy with broken irregular paving stones. Miti had always wondered where the New Town ended and the Old Town began but he supposed it was where the buildings started to look different, their facades crossed with brown wood, and where their upper floors overhung into the narrowed streets like big-busted women. A range of colours, no two houses were the same.

The streets of the Old Town were curving and endless and always seemed to be going upwards. He followed Cassandra as best he could although he lost sight of her several times as she disappeared round bends and turns in the road.

He rounded one corner but then had to step back hastily. Cassandra was standing only a few metres away, knocking at the door to one of the old houses. If she'd looked back at that point, she would have seen Miti's head peering round the side of the end house as if he was an appendage of the brickwork. A gargoyle. Luckily, she didn't turn and he watched an old woman open the door and usher Cassandra inside lovingly. She must have been as old as the house, with her wrinkled pale skin like creased linen and her gossamer hair.

Miti decided to stay where he was. If he walked out from his hiding place, even if he crossed the street, anyone looking out of the windows would see him there. Miti imagined he was walking on a tightrope so fine as to be invisible to the naked eye. If he found her and managed to explain what he was doing with binoculars, then everything would be all right but if she caught him prowling round an elderly relative's house like somebody

up to no good from an Arthur Conan Doyle mystery, all would be lost and he would forever be a villain in her eyes. No, he would have to wait until she came out and he could approach without surprise.

He waited and waited but no one else entered or left the house. He was there for what must have been an hour, two hours, three hours. His legs ached, his feet were sore and he had no shelter from the now scorching sun which shone down on him without remorse and made him sticky. Still he waited. People passed and regarded him suspiciously. He smiled widely at them to prove that he meant no harm but thought that perhaps it wasn't making anything better, so from then on he glowered or grinned alternately, depending on the person walking past or the mood that took him.

Nearby some cats had a wild and frenzied fight beneath a parked car, their harsh cries ruining the quiet but Miti never let them distract him from his mission.

It reached the point where he began to tire. He decided that there wouldn't be much harm in going up to the house and explaining who he was and that he wanted to speak to her. No sooner had he plucked up the courage to go and knock on the front door, than he heard a wooden gate open and the sound of loud farewells. But he couldn't see anything. The sound must have been coming from another part of the house. He ran across the street, down another alleyway and right again into another street.

The old woman was shutting her back gate; Cassandra was walking away much farther along the cobbled street, her pigtails swinging joyfully. She carried a basket and her shoulders were wrapped in a scarlet shawl. Little Red Riding Hood, thought Miti.

One blink and she was out of sight, lost in the maze that was the Old Town.

Attempt Three:

The Cocktail Umbrellas and the Singing Fountains

A day later he had followed her to the Singing Fountains in the centre of the main park, down paths that wound in and out of trees, which sometimes he had to hide behind, comically, half his body sticking out and completely conspicuous. She flitted past the stone sculptures hiding amongst the undergrowth like presenters in

a nature documentary and past the men gathered around the chess tables, the two players somewhere in the scrum chewing intently on matchsticks, blocking out all distractions.

Cassandra joined a group of six friends at the Fountains, all girls of her own age. They met on the grey concrete steps that surrounded the Fountains like an amphitheatre, embracing her as if she had been missing for a long, long time. They brought her back to where they had been sitting, perched on the edge of the steps. One of them played with her hair admiringly. Miti now noticed it had been pulled out of the pigtails he'd become accustomed to and was worn loosely and free. They joked and they giggled but Miti was too far away to hear what they laughed about.

He was also on the steps, but further up so that he could look down on them. Fortunately there were enough people about waiting for the Fountains to start up so that he could blend in naturally and hope that he wouldn't be seen.

His mother had taken him to the Singing Fountains before; she'd been fascinated by them when she'd first come to Plovdiv.

Just as the stars were beginning to peek through the twilight sky, the Fountains started up, rising out of the water like the spurts from a whale's breathing-hole, some higher than others. They rose up and down, up and down, and then lights joined in the dance – greens, yellows, purples, in an ever-changing shimmer off the water – before the music finally struck up. It was something dramatic – a Wagnerian opera? – powerful notes that soared with the water, stretching to touch the stars. The crowds didn't stop talking, they merely spoke louder to be heard over the music, but they all marvelled at it in their own way. A deeply social event, they'd all torn themselves away from their homes to come and be there with friends for this spectacle.

Cassandra and her group were very tactile, Miti noticed with a curious fascination, shifting their bodies and merging together whenever one of them held up a camera to take a photo; wide grins, smiling eyes, it was the summer and therefore worth celebrating because they were together and free.

Later on, when the Singing Fountains had finished and the water on the artificial lake had settled, save for the odd, lone person trailing their fingers through wistfully, Miti followed Cassandra and her friends to a little café nearby. They all ordered ice cream in various flavours and combinations except Cassandra, who ordered a sundae almost as tall as her forearm, and they cooed and 'ah'-ed as the waitress brought it to the table with a knowing smile.

Because the night was beautifully warm and clear they had settled themselves at a round table outside, one that was right next to the wall marking the cafe's boundaries. Had one of them had the inclination to look over the wall, they'd have seen Miti crouched there, listening to their earnest conversations about boys and what they were going to do with their long summer. There were intermittent diamond-shaped holes in the wall which Miti could peer through. He saw Cassandra there surrounded by her friends, tucking into her sundae with undisguised hunger. They paused only to take the cocktail umbrellas out of their ice creams and put them in one of the girl's hair like multicoloured crowns. He thought that maybe if he spoke to Cassandra in front of her friends it would mean she wouldn't have a chance to run away from him and it would be easier for him to pretend that he was just walking into the cafe and happened to meet her there – *what a coincidence! Fancy meeting you here!* He also told himself that there was no time like the present, that he had been trying for nearly three whole days now, and that if he didn't do it here and now he would never do it and she would carry on thinking bad thoughts about him.

He breathed in deeply, pumped out his chest, lifted his chin and entered the cafe by the front gates, walking straight up to Cassandra's table, forgetting completely his plan that he should be pretending he was coming in for an ice cream of his own.

Miti stood there, in front of Cassandra's friends, his mouth open but no words coming out. They all stopped devouring their ice creams and stared. Cassandra wasn't there, her place empty, whipped cream sliding slowly down the outside of her sundae glass.

"Cassandra..." he blurted out.

The girls remained staring until one of them said, "She's just gone to the toilet."

"Cassandra..." insisted Miti, not quite sure why he kept repeating her name but feeling strangely unable to stop.

The girl with the cocktail umbrellas in her hair laughed. "I think someone's in love!"

All the other girls giggled. Miti ran away and vowed never to return to the Fountains or the cafe, not ever again. Not even for an ice cream.

~

Discouraged by the three disastrous attempts, Miti realised he was never going to get the girl on her own and explain to her the real reasons for the binoculars without her thinking he was following her and without making everything even worse.

It was the end of the first full week of the holidays, a Friday; over seven days since he first saw her on the balcony with the glorious book. Uncharacteristically, the thought of the book didn't calm him down but rather it angered him. If he'd been allowed books in the first place, none of this would have happened. Why was his father still insisting the no-books rule? He didn't understand, he just didn't understand. His father was still withdrawn, holing himself up in the living room drowning the apartment in music.

Miti was traipsing through the centre of town, idly; he'd told his father he was off to get some food for the week but before he went to the market to load up on supplies, he went in search of a new cookbook Desislava had mentioned. Her birthday was coming up so he'd decided to buy it for her. He was approaching his favourite bookshop without his usual sense of urgency or excitement.

It was early, and quite a grey, overcast morning for June and the lights of the bookshop shone orange and welcoming. Just as he reached the door, someone laden with books exited the shop but they weren't looking where they were going and tripped on their undone shoelaces. Miti lurched forward to catch their fall but he wasn't strong enough and the pair of them collapsed in an undignified heap, books tumbling about their ears like hailstones.

Todor came rushing out of the shop. "Are you two all right?" he asked, helping them to their feet. Miti dusted off his trousers and shirt and the girl did the same, her pigtails ruffled and coming loose. They recognised each other at the same instant, she giving out a short yelp of surprise, he burning red and not knowing where to look. Todor made sure they were fine and then picked up all the books, dusting down their jackets. "I knew I should have made you take a carrier bag."

"It's all right," said Cassandra. "I can manage. It's Dimitar's fault, as usual." Miti looked visibly stunned. How on earth was it his fault?

Todor laughed. "I see you two know each other. I suppose that makes sense, being my two best customers."

Miti and Cassandra turned to each other, shocked. Todor lifted one final book from the floor, dusted it off, smiled, and put it on the top of the pile which he carefully handed over to the girl. Then Todor looked in the shop; a queue was forming behind his till. "I'd best get back in, are you sure you're ok?"

The two of them said yes and he disappeared leaving them, for the first time, alone.

Cassandra looked as if she was about to storm off immediately but she hesitated. “What did he mean you’re one of his best customers?” she spat. “Since when have you ever read a book in your entire whole life?”

Miti wasn’t sure how to respond. He looked at the titles of the six books she was carrying. “I’ve read all of these,” he said. “I used to have them at home before...” He pointed to one of them. “I’ve read those short stories through twice, at least.”

“You have?” She looked him up and down then turned swiftly and proceeded to walk off.

“Are you heading home? I’m going that way too,” he lied, having still to buy the groceries, but that could wait. “I can help you carry them.”

She stopped, he caught up with her and she planted all six books in his hands. She was older than him and he wasn’t as strong but he wouldn’t show it: he huffed and he puffed and thought of the fleeting image of the muscle he might have seen in his bathroom mirror earlier in the week.

They walked home, Miti trailing behind a little way and every so often having to trot briskly to keep up with her.

“You’re weird,” she said, her face screwed up.

“Thanks.” He didn’t know what else to say. The books were getting heavier and heavier in his arms. One of them almost slipped from his grasp.

“What with staring at me through the binoculars and everything like some kind of complete psycho. And my friends told me you came looking for me the other day. Are you stalking me?”

“No! I’ve been wanting to explain about the binoculars...I wasn’t looking at you...”

“Oh?”

“I was looking at your book, trying to read it. Not at you. I’d never look at you.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not allowed books in my house anymore. My father’s not letting me.” If he didn’t put them down soon, the books were going to rip his arms off.

“I heard about your fire.” And then she said, “Why weren’t you looking at me? Am I ugly?”

He nearly dropped the books there and then. “What?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said breezily and then she stopped and Miti almost bumped straight into her. “Look, those books have been dropped once already, I don’t want them dropped again. If you couldn’t carry

them in the first place, you shouldn't have offered." She grabbed the top two – which happened to be the two lightest ones – and carried on walking, leaving Miti still trailing behind her and wishing his arms weren't made of cement.

~

"So why won't your dad let you have books in your house anymore?" They were in the elevator and ascending to her floor.

"I'm not sure, I don't really understand why. It started off just Mother's books and now it's no new books. I suppose that I only ever used to read with Mother and now that she's gone for a while -"

"Yes, I heard about that. Sorry."

Miti wondered what she was apologising for but he didn't ask because at that point the elevator came to a stop and they alighted, proceeding slowly to her apartment whilst she searched her pocket for her keys. "My parents are at work for the rest of the day. Come in if you want."

They entered and the first thing Miti noticed was how the apartment was the same size and shape as his own but the space was more crowded, the furniture more grand and ornate. Although starkly different, it seemed more like how his apartment used to be because ever since the fire – and despite everyone's help – it still felt like a shell.

"So he won't let you read anything? Nothing at all?"

"Nothing."

She had her hand on the handle of her bedroom door. "Well you can read any of mine, I guess," she said, opening the door.

Inside, heavy wooden bookshelves along each wall were carved with leaves and insects and filled with books. Those that couldn't fit on the shelves were lined up in pillars that stretched upwards, almost to the ceiling, like trees.

He saw a rainforest of books through which glinted, like stars, the golden circles of Tiger's-Eyes.

Jewels amongst paper.

The Story of Mr Angelov

On the eve of proposing to his fiancée, Mr Angelov has many things to think about. He's come to believe that the answers to his many questions lie at the bottom of a glass of *rakia*. Or perhaps it's not answers he is looking for but courage. Don't they call it Dutch Courage, after all? He's heard the phrase somewhere before but can't think where.

He's in a late-night cafe on the edge of town, just off the big motorway. At a nearby table sits a prostitute who has a crocodile's grin. Occasionally she looks over, raises her own glass of *rakia*, and smiles. How she gets any clients with teeth like those, he has no idea. Lethal. He raises his glass back, realises it's empty and nods to the man at the bar for another. He wants a clear head for what he has to do tomorrow so this will be his last.

Four glasses later and he can barely keep his eyes open. The barman watches him carefully, it's all very well that he's buying lots of alcohol but a man of his size passed out under a table is no good for anybody. The prostitute has sidled over; she'd tried her luck earlier with two truckers who had stopped for coffee but hadn't got anything other than abuse.

"How you're still standing, I have no idea," she says, circling the rim of her glass with a slender finger.

Somewhere in his cloudy mind he wonders if it's the same glass she's been nursing all night. "I'm not standing, that's why," he says.

"How about you lie down then?" Crocodile grin.

"Good God, you don't waste any time, do you?" he slurs.

She's pleased; it wasn't a 'no'. She nods to the barman. "Can we get some water here, Yan?"

Mr Angelov tries his best not to slur his words. "Water? Who wants water? What good will water do? Water won't help anybody."

"What is it you need help with?"

"Courage. Proposing tomorrow. Fiancée...I need to...but can't until I tell her..."

"Tell her what?"

"Secrets."

"Now secrets are something I know a lot about," she says. Is her finger circling his own glass now?

The barman brings over some water. "Are you getting him out of here, Anka? The man's a state." She whispers something to him about a back room. The barman nods.

The next thing Mr Angelov knows is the prostitute's arm is linked within his and she's trying to make him stand. "How about we go and talk about those secrets, and maybe I can help."

"I told you, crocodile, I can't stand."

"Try, for me."

She's gone when he wakes up and so is his wallet. The barman doesn't know anything, tells Mr Angelov that he passed out in the back room all by himself. Luckily his watch, worth more than the contents of his wallet, is still on his wrist. It's 10.30 in the morning, the time he should be picking his fiancée up and taking her to the zoo; she'll be waiting for him.

By 11 he's knocking softly on her door.

"Valko? Where have you been?" She takes one look at him. "Have you been drinking?"

He takes one look at her. Had she always looked like a frog, with that wide wet mouth and bulbous bulging eyes? "I met an old friend and time slipped away."

"You're late."

"I know, can you forgive me?"

"You look like you slept in a gutter."

"Can you forgive me?"

"We'll see. Where are you taking me today? You said you had something important to tell me."

It is in the zoo that she finally forgives him. He had meant to propose on one knee but he is feeling nauseous and isn't sure he'd be able to get back up again if he tried. They are sitting on a bench opposite the lions.

"Of course I'll be your wife, Valko! I thought you'd never ask."

Evidently, the *rakia* hadn't been the source of the courage he'd been seeking the night before; he still hasn't told her his secret. He hasn't told her about his brother.

"When shall we get married?" she says, a little too loudly, so the lions stop pacing and look over. Mr Angelov's headache worsens. "Oh please tell me it'll be soon, as soon as possible. Why, let's get married today!"

"Today?! My darling, let's not be hasty."

"But what's stopping us?"

My brother, he thinks, but still can't say it out loud. He's done this the wrong way round. He'd meant to tell her about his brother before he proposes but it's all too late now, the deed is done. His parents won't be happy.

On the way out of the zoo they pass the crocodile pen and Mr Angelov is sick in the bushes nearby.

It is three in the afternoon and he has finally managed to get rid of her. She'll be on the phone to everybody telling them the happy news and it would only be a matter of time before his own parents find out. They won't be happy; his brother doesn't know about her yet and she doesn't know about him. He had to have his brother's blessing before they were married.

He's walking up to the large red-brick building; he'd never noticed the bars on the windows before but guesses they've always been there. It made sense really. At the reception desk he signs his name.

"That's a nice surprise," says the receptionist. "Ivan doesn't normally get many visitors, only his parents. Are you a relative, or...?"

"His brother."

"How wonderful!" she says. Mr Angelov is nearly sick again.

Ivan is sitting on the edge of his bed, cross-legged, hands in lap, looking up at the ceiling.

"I'll be waiting just outside if you need anything," says the orderly.

The room is blue – the walls, Ivan's bedspread, his hospital gown.

"Ivan? Ivan, it's me, Valko, your brother." There's no response so Mr Angelov continues to talk. "How have you been? It's been a while. Sorry I haven't come to visit, it's one thing after another at work, you know what it's like." Even the May sky through the barred windows is blue. "I'm working my way up the bank. I'll be manager in no time at all, you'll see." Silence. "Listen, Ivan, there's something I want to talk to you about. I've met someone. She's called Eva. She's lovely, you'd like her. She's pretty, well, she's...The thing is, I really want to marry her but the fact of the matter is Mother and Father have forbidden it until I get your blessing."

"If I went to Australia," begins Ivan, still staring at the ceiling, "would the moon be upside down?"

“The moon? Well, Ivan, I’m not sure. Perhaps one day we can go to Australia to find out.”

“Yes, yes, I’d like that.”

Mr Angelov has an idea. He fishes around in his pockets and brings out several photographs. “Here’s Eva. She’s studying near where we used to live, you remember the one. She’s turning nineteen next month, just like you. Here’s another picture of me and Eva together outside our parents’ house. They really like her, they do, but they really want your blessing before I can go ahead with the wedding. Could you do that for me, could you do that for your brother, Ivan?”

Ivan takes his focus away from the ceiling and looks at the photographs, carefully. Mr Angelov watches as his brother absorbs every detail. “They’re out,” he says, suddenly smiling and pointing to Eva in the photograph.

“They’re out? Who’s out, Ivan?”

“They’re out, let me show you.” Ivan stands up and walks towards the door. When his brother doesn’t follow, he gestures wildly. “Please, come.”

After double-checking with the orderly, Mr Angelov is allowed to take his brother out of the room. Ivan leads him down a long corridor and through a large door, out into the hospital grounds. “They’re out, you’ll see,” he says as they walk.

Suddenly, Mr Angelov finds his brother’s hand entwined in his. “Where are we going?” he asks.

“Ssh, they might bounce away. Jump away like shooting stars. The moon will be upside down when we go to Australia.”

At the far edges of the grounds, they suddenly come across a large pond surrounded by a willow tree and a neat gravel path. An orderly pushes another patient around in a wheelchair.

“Here, here’s what I want to show you,” says Ivan.

Ivan brings Mr Angelov slowly and carefully right to the edge of the pond. “Don’t make a sound,” he says. And there, amongst the lily pads are a hundred frogs. Ivan still holds the photographs of Eva.

He looks at the frogs, then points at Eva and smiles.

When Miti Found Out

There was never much talking.

Mr Angelov had mentioned something about Cassandra not having boys in her room alone so when he went to work at the bank, and when her mother went to run her jewellery shop, Miti would go down, slip through the door and enter her bedroom as quietly as a ghost.

“If you hear the front door open, hide under the bed as quickly as you can and don’t make a sound, do you hear me?”

Miti nodded, wide-eyed.

She would recline on her bed by the window and read, but she was slower than Miti, he noted, taking her time over every page, sometimes re-reading passages if they didn’t quite make sense the first time. As with Miti, Cassandra was intent on reading books that were meant for much older, more seasoned readers. No matter how many times he visited, he still couldn’t believe all the books she had been harbouring just a floor below, all this time: King Solomon’s mines, an Aladdin’s cave, a treasure island of books. If the books had been gold, Cassandra would have been the richest girl in the world.

“Don’t you just love it,” she said once, “that feeling when you get to the end of a book and it all makes sense and you just want to go back and read the whole thing again, knowing what’s going to happen.”

“Yes,” agreed Miti, “it’s the journey to the end that’s the best part.”

Miti would curl up on a beanbag in the far corner of the room and devour book after book, just as he used to do; only ever moving to turn a page. The books, and the power they held over him, were too great for him to continue feeling guilty about spending increasing amounts of time away from his father. Stoyan still spent all his time sleeping or listening to his music although he’d encouraged Miti to get out of the house more because there’s nothing worse than being cooped up on a hot day when the summer is burning around you, even though that was exactly what he was doing himself. Miti would say that he went to the park, or that he played computer games with The Three, but really he’d be in Cassandra’s world, tucked in the corner, quietly absorbing her life.

On one occasion, shortly after Miti started coming to her room every morning, Cassandra, raising herself from the bed with an effort, put her book on her side table with the ‘Hello Kitty’ alarm clock and went over to a pile of books that stretched almost to the ceiling. Searching down the spines she found the one she

wanted and slipped it deftly from the pile without toppling it over. Miti looked up. The book was oddly familiar but its corners were burnt, the covers smothered in a thin layer of soot. Cassandra pushed it closer to him. “Here, I almost forgot.”

Miti stared at the book. “What is it?”

“I think it’s one of yours. After the fire. I saved it from the skip they brought to clear your stuff away. It’s the only one that was still readable. I didn’t intend to steal it...I mean, is it even stealing if it’s been thrown away?”

Miti put down his own book and took the one Cassandra was offering. He turned it over carefully, as if it might disintegrate. He was a museum curator and these, the Dead Sea Scrolls. Miti looked at the cover although he already knew what he was holding; the cover picture, though scorched, was recognisable, the image of the author standing out on the back page like a ghost. Vazov’s *Under The Yoke*. His nemesis. His mother’s favourite Bulgarian book. It had survived. The book was brittle and the burnt pages felt as if they weren’t quite there. It felt like the memory of his mother. For so long he’d been losing sight of what she looked like. He could picture the parts of her that were bound to her reading this book. Her slender fingers with the long nails that she used to turn the pages; her smile as she read. As he held the book, he wanted to cry.

“You can have it back, of course. I hadn’t got around to reading it yet but it is yours. You can hide it in your room. I’m sure your father will never know.”

“Thank you,” said Miti, trying earnestly not to let his voice crack.

Cassandra’s face creased into dimples. She resumed her pose on the bed and continued reading whilst Miti never once let go of his old-new book. A few minutes later, Cassandra spoke. “It’s sad. What happened. I mean, I don’t know if I’d be able to cope. Not just the fire. That was an accident; bad timing and all that. But if my mother took off and just left us, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Miti looked up at Cassandra and blinked. He hadn’t told anybody that his father had been the one to start the fire. It had been lucky that the maintenance man had discovered some loose wiring in the living room and blamed it on that. Miti didn’t like lying to Cassandra but he’d promised his father that he wouldn’t say anything. Then Miti’s thoughts turned to what Cassandra had said about his mother taking off and leaving which didn’t sound right at all. “She’s got a new job in Sofia. She’ll be back soon.”

“Oh. Really? A new job? I didn’t know that. I’d heard...”

“You’d heard what?”

“Sorry, it’s just...people talk.” Cassandra waved a dismissive hand. “It’s silly, gossip around school, that’s all. If you say she’s got a new job then...” She waved her hand again and continued to read.

“What did they say at school?”

“Well you know your dad’s a teacher at my school, right? I’m sure it’s nothing. Stupid. They say she ran away and that no one knows where she’s gone.”

“She’s got a new job in Sofia. Father told me.”

“Then I’m sure it’s just silly gossip. Ignore it.”

“She’s got a new job and she’ll be back soon.”

“Have you spoken to her?”

“No, not yet. She must be very busy.”

“She must be.”

Miti held the Vazov book close like a newborn child and stood up. “I should get back to...”

“Are you ok?”

“...because Father might need me and...”

“I’m sorry, Miti, if I...”

“Yes, no, I’m fine,” he said, and left.

~

That night, Miti couldn’t sleep.

Horrible, twisted images worried his mind. What if what Cassandra had said was true? What if nobody knew where his mother was? She might have been in some horrific accident. He pictured the parts of her he could remember. Her mouth flecked with blood. Her slender fingers snapped back, the long nails ripped off. He couldn’t even cry because all his concentration was focussed on telling himself that none of this was true, that she had a job, that she was in Sofia. That his father hadn’t lied to him.

And then the truth hit him, angrily, so that he hated himself for having been so stupid at not having seen it before. He’d felt safe and secure at the thought of having his address sewn into his pyjamas but hadn’t made sure that Madame Zlatka had sewn into his mother’s own nightclothes.

His mother was lost in her dreams. He knew that now, certainly. But how to find someone who was lost?

Even though he didn't sleep a wink the answer never came to him.

And neither, he realised, would his mother.

~

"You sound tired," said Stoyan. He manoeuvred himself slowly around the kitchen table and into the chair; the legs wobbled and made him uncertain.

Miti cleared his throat but it was still cracked and dry from fatigue. "I didn't sleep."

"Me neither. Too hot?"

Miti pushed the cereal bowl closer to his father. "No. Where is Mother?"

Almost imperceptibly, Stoyan's face fell but immediately its former composure was expertly restored. "I told you, she has a job, in Sofia. I'm sure she'll be back when things have settled there and she gets a spare minute."

"Why didn't she come back as soon as she heard about the fire?"

"That's because I didn't tell her about the fire."

"You didn't tell her?"

"No. I didn't." Stoyan sighed and felt for the cereal box. The cardboard lid was already open, a hole made in the bag inside, so with the other hand he found his bowl and began pouring.

Miti thought that the sound of the flakes tumbling into the bowl sounded brash, uncomfortably loud; he wanted his father to stop making his breakfast and to talk. "But she hasn't got a new job. I know it. She's lost, isn't she?"

"Lost?"

"In her dreams. She didn't have her address sewn into her pyjamas so she must be lost."

Stoyan smiled a pained smile, slowly stood up and moved round the table to put his large hands around Miti's frame. "Oh, Dimitar. You're just like your mother. You've read too many books. It fills you with such stuff, bad things. That's why I don't want them in the house any more. Your mother's not lost, in her dreams or anywhere else."

“She is! And we have to find her!” Miti surprised himself by shrugging off his father’s arms and standing abruptly to his feet.

“Dimitar! I’ve never known you to be like this.”

“We need to find her! We need to find her!” Miti threw himself about the kitchen, not knowing what he was doing, the rage of the past few weeks scourging through him. He knocked over bowls and plates, smashed glasses, broke china.

But Stoyan couldn’t move, he just stood there, his arms outstretched and pleading. “Dimitar! What’s got into you? She’s not lost, she’s...Dimitar, please! Miti!”

Miti stopped, his heart beating horrifically, the adrenaline rush waning, he felt foolish, ridiculous. This wouldn’t help bring his mother back. Embarrassed, he stormed off and found himself on the balcony. He hung over the edge.

“Miti? Are you all right?”

He couldn’t tell where the voice had come from and then he looked down to the balcony below and saw Cassandra, in all her mermaid finery, looking up at him, shielding her eyes from the sun.

“I’m fine. Go away.”

“Don’t tell me to go away!” she said.

“I’m sorry, it’s just...Oh it doesn’t matter. Go away.”

“You’re just a stupid little boy.”

“And you’re just a stupid girl.”

“Fine!”

“Fine.”

“Dimitar, who are you talking to out here?”

Miti turned quickly towards the door. “No one.”

“Listen, Dimitar, I know you’re upset but - ”

“I want to look for her. She might need my help.”

“You’re scared and confused. I understand that. And maybe I haven’t told you everything but there are some things that should be kept between grown-ups, some things that you’re not ready to hear. Your mother...I would like to find her as well. I want to but I know I can’t. I don’t think she would want to see me.”

“Why not? What did you do to her?”

“Nothing, I...she just...”

“I want her back. Safe as houses,” said Miti.

“I know, I know,” said his father, unexpected tears on his cheeks. He crossed the balcony and found Miti by the railings. “I wish I knew more but she, she just left.”

“Then she could be anywhere by now.”

“If I knew where to look then I would. There are things I want to talk to her about, things I want to ask her. I would start looking tomorrow, right away, if I could. But I don’t know where she is or where to look.”

“I do.”

Neither of them had heard Desislava enter the apartment and stand in the doorway to the balcony. But there she stood, looking pale and harrowed, Miti thought, as if she, too, had lost a mother in her dreams.

~

“I found something, after the fire. Most of it is burnt but I rescued it, it nearly went in the skip with all the other rubbish but I thought it looked important. So I kept it.”

Stoyan and Miti waited whilst Desislava rooted through her cloth bag. She produced what looked like an envelope, scarred black by the flames.

“What is it?” asked Stoyan.

“A letter.”

“Don’t read it!”

Miti noticed the strangeness of Stoyan’s response. “A letter? From who?”

“It’s a letter from your mother,” said Stoyan. How did he know that? It could have been from anyone.

Desislava held the letter close and didn’t offer it to Miti to read. “I shan’t read it out. But it might help. If you want to go and find Grace, that is. I wondered if you noticed, Stoyan, there’s an address, on the back of the envelope.”

“No, I didn’t notice that when I read it,” said Stoyan.

“It’s a bit burnt now, and I can only make out the first line of the address...”

An address! thought Miti. Like the one he had sown in his pyjamas. “Then we *can* find her.”

“It’s not as easy as all that, Dimitar,” said his father.

“Yes it is,” said Madame Zlatka. She’d been sitting on her balcony the whole time, listening to everything. “You have an address, you can go and find her.”

“Thank you, Madame Zlatka,” said Stoyan, “but this is a private conversation.”

“Then you should be more quiet and more private. I was out here minding my own business, listening to the stories on the wind, when out you three trot and all hell breaks loose.”

“Madame Zlatka, I -”

“Nothing you are about to say is going to bring your wife back. You have an address, the boy wants to go, so go find her. I don’t see what all the fuss is about.”

Stoyan was beginning to anger. “If there’s only one line of the address, it could be anywhere.”

“Anywhere is somewhere,” cooed Madame Zlatka.

“Thank you, Madame Zlatka, very insightful, as always.”

“Number 12 Nicova Street,” said Desislava. “That’s all I can make out. No town, or code.”

“There’s a way of finding it, I’m sure!” said Miti.

“But how, Dimitar?”

“I have an idea!” Everyone looked around for the voice.

Only Miti knew where it had come from. He looked over the balcony. “Cassandra, you were listening too?”

“Yes,” she shouted up. She had never looked more like a mermaid, her aquamarine swimming costume shimmering in the sun.

Stoyan sighed. “Does anyone else want to join our private conversation? How about Mr Vasil on the first floor? Or the man on the moon?”

“I’m just trying to help,” shouted Cassandra.

“What’s your idea?” asked Miti.

“Come down and I’ll tell you, it’s hurting my voice shouting up like this.”

“Ok!”

“Dimitar, where are you going?”

“To see Cassandra.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea. Let’s sit down and talk about this sensibly up here. Mr Angelov was quite specific about you not going anywhere near his daughter.”

“Mr Angelov won’t know a thing, he’s at work and won’t be back until seven.”

Before Stoyan could say anything, the door to the apartment slammed shut.

“Young love!” cooed Madame Zlatka.

“You’re not helping,” said Stoyan, going indoors.

Desislava stifled a laugh.

The Story of the Mermaid

When his daughter was old enough, the man decided to tell her The Story of the Mermaid. He'd been waiting for the right moment because it was a special story, one dear to his heart, and he wanted to make sure she was old enough to understand it. On the night of her tenth birthday, he sat her up in bed and told her the story.

It went something like this:

A girl and a boy were sitting in a library. They were next door neighbours and the best of friends ever since they were old enough to walk. They sat in the library every day after school, waiting for their parents who didn't finish work until later in the afternoon. They didn't really read the books; they sometimes did homework or played on the computer in the corner. They'd spend much of their time coming up with all sorts of silent games they could play without the librarian telling them off for talking.

One day though, their silent game had left them in fits of giggles which meant the librarian gave them a stern talking to so they had to sit in silence, a table apart, reading a book. It was a day they'd never forget.

As the boy sat quietly reading a book about time-travel, the words in front of him began to swirl like water caught in a whirlpool and for a second he thought he'd fallen asleep and must be dreaming but he pinched himself and realised that he wasn't. He looked up and coughed to try and catch the girl's attention but she was too busy, absorbed in a book of her own. He looked back at the book to where something was emerging from the swirl of words. He soon realised it was a head, followed by shoulders and a body which emerged up to the waist. A tiny girl, she was about the size of a pencil. She waved at him. Her eyes were alternately blue and green, her hair long, flowing and sand-like.

"Hello," she said with a wide grin. The boy looked around again but no one was paying him any attention. "It's ok," she continued. "No one can see me unless I want them to. And no one will hear you if you talk with me. Don't be afraid."

The boy was wary. "Hello?"

"There, that wasn't so difficult now, was it?"

"Who...who are you?"

"I'm a mermaid. I look after the books."

"Which books? The ones in the library?"

“Every book! All books!” She giggled. “The pages are the ocean floor and the words are the sea that carries me. The tide comes in and the waves roll by with every turning of the page.” With that, the mermaid grinned and somersaulted out of the book and into the air, landing back into the book with a splash of words. The boy glimpsed her wonderful tail, a thousand different colours of the sea.

“This is magic,” said the boy.

“I forget,” said the mermaid brushing a word from her shoulder. “It might have been magic that put me here. I can’t remember, it’s been so long.”

“What do you do all day?”

“Like I said, I care for the books. Someone has to.”

“What do you mean you care for them?”

“I nurture them, look after them. I make sure their pages are being turned. And, sometimes, I guide readers to the books, invite them to dive in and take a swim. Look! Watch this!”

She took a deep breath and disappeared under the pages again. Just when the boy thought she had vanished for good and he leant in closer to see if he could spot her, she dived out of the pages again, somersaulting through the air and landing right in the middle of the book belonging to the girl on the other table. The girl almost leapt out of her chair. She looked around in amazement as the mermaid waved to her.

“It’s ok,” said the boy, “it’s only a mermaid. She looks after the books.”

The mermaid continued to show off, splashing around amongst the pages, swimming this way and that, bobbing under the girl’s book and then popping up in the boy’s a second later. The boy and the girl giggled but nobody could hear or see them. As far as the librarian was concerned, she had done a good job in laying down the law for the children and was pleased with her efforts because they were sitting there reading their books so still and so quietly it looked, almost, as if they had been put under a magic spell.

They saw the mermaid regularly, every day after school. They watched her swim amongst all the books in the library. They became fascinated with her and what she could do. She knew every word from every book ever written and could recall them at a moment’s notice. As she swam through the pages in front of them, she told them so many stories from all around the world that had been written down but long forgotten because the books had disappeared or been destroyed.

But after many months, the girl began to get jealous. The boy was spending more and more time in the books with the mermaid than he ever did in the real world. His parents were pleased that he'd started reading and didn't question it: any little boy who loses himself in a good book is better than one playing shoot'em-ups on the computer.

Eventually, the girl lost interest in the mermaid. "You should spend time in the real world," she said to the boy. "The mermaid's not alive; it's a silly figment of your imagination."

"You're just jealous because she enjoys spending time with me and not you," said the boy.

The girl poked her tongue out at the boy and told herself that the mermaid couldn't possibly be real. Increasingly, the girl spent longer waiting for her parents by herself, in a far corner of the library, near the computers. The mermaid wasn't able to swim through those, she soon realised.

As is the way with all stories about little boys and girls, they grew up and stopped going to the library. The girl refused to talk about the mermaid and denied ever playing along with his silly make-believe games in the library.

But the boy never forgot about the mermaid in the books.

He still sees her, from time to time, although she no longer has time to talk to him. There are so many books in the world now, she said, the last time he spoke with her, and they all need looking after. Without her, they'd just be nonsensical words on a page. Sometimes she'll wave at him through the pages on her way to find another book and another boy that needs taking care of, her aquamarine tail propelling her forwards, forever.

"Maybe one day you'll see the mermaid in the books yourself," says the man, turning to his daughter, but she is asleep on her bed, eyes closed.

She is dreaming her own dream.

When Miti Went Looking

“Where are we going?” asked Miti.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Cassandra was tapping her feet, waiting for the elevator.

“Not really, no.”

Cassandra sighed. “We’re going to find a computer.”

“A computer?”

“You have heard of a computer, right? I mean, I know I read a lot but at least I know what a computer is.”

“Of course I’ve heard of a computer.” The elevator pinged and they opened the door and went inside.

“What do we need one for?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Now came Miti’s turn to sigh. Nothing Cassandra said was obvious. Why did she always speak in riddles? She never said what she meant to say and when she did she did it in such a roundabout way that it was impossible to tell what she actually meant. “Come on, I’ll show you when we get there.”

“Get where?”

“There’s an internet cafe in town. We can use one of their computers.”

“But don’t you have one at home?”

“It’s broken.”

“Are you going to tell me why we need a computer?”

“I’ll show you when we get there.”

On the way out of the apartment block they passed the maintenance man.

“You should ask him to fix your computer,” said Miti.

“He called my dad something rude once and he no longer wants anything to do with him.”

“Oh.” They crossed a small communal park filled with children climbing over the apparatus and they were nearing the bus stop when Miti paused. “Wait. I have an idea. You just want a computer, right?”

“Where have you been for the last five minutes?”

He ignored her. “I know exactly where to find one.”

~

Miti was lucky because not one, not two, but three of The Three were there. Milen peered warily from behind his front door. "Miti? What do you want? And who's she?"

Cassandra huffed. "I still think my idea of the internet cafe was better."

"Trust me, please. Hi, Milen, is it ok if we come in for a bit? We need...I need...a favour."

"Sure, come in, I guess."

The Three were watching television on the old set in Milen's bedroom. Milen went over to join Nedko on the floor in front of his bed.

Stoichov was standing adjacent to the television set, holding up the aerial with a pained expression, his face creased in agony. "Miti!" he called. "Thank goodness you're here. It's your turn, take over!"

Nedko leapt up and grabbed Miti, steering him over to where Stoichov was. "Now hold this here and try not to move. Otherwise you'll ruin the whole programme." As Miti took hold of the aerial, Stoichov and Nedko ran gleefully back to the bed. On the screen was an old police drama; a dilapidated Lada was being chased down narrow roads, barely avoiding pedestrians and other traffic. Miti's hand twitched and for a moment the screen went hazy.

"Hold it steady!" shouted Nedko.

"Sorry," replied Miti.

From somewhere near the doorway Cassandra coughed. Nedko and Stoichov looked over, startled. "Who's she?" they said in unison.

"This is my friend, Cassandra."

The Three looked at Miti with renewed interest. Not only did he have access to the latest handheld gadgets from England, he had friends who were girls.

"Miti, can you please tell them why we're here. I haven't got all day to be watching trashy TV."

The Three scowled. Miti held up a placating hand. "In a minute, Cassandra, just wait a second." The screen fuzzed.

"STEADY!"

"Sorry."

The masked criminals had abandoned the car after they'd struck a bollard and were being chased by the police through a busy shopping centre. Miti's arm was beginning to ache. The criminals were bundling into

shoppers, sending them and their bags flying. Miti waited and waited and his arm became leaden and he thought to himself that he really did need to take up weightlifting soon. The policeman chased the criminals onto the roof of the shopping centre where they teetered on the edge like skittles. Miti thought he was going to drop the aerial.

“This is ridiculous; we don’t have time for this.” Cassandra stormed over and hit the button on the front of the set. Everything went black. Miti still held the aerial, eyes wide open awaiting the wrath of The Three. It never came. Cassandra was in full stride. “As much as this pains me to say it, we need your help and Miti here assures me that you are the right people for the job. We need access to a computer.”

Stoichov blinked. “A computer?”

“Not you as well. Please tell me you’ve heard of computers.” The Three nodded. “Good, that’s a start. Although looking at the state of your television set, I wouldn’t be surprised if you hadn’t made it into the computer age yet.”

“That machine’s a classic!” shouted Nedko.

“It was completely broken and we repaired it,” said Stoichov.

“We found it in a scrap yard,” explained Milen.

“Well that explains a lot. Now, can we use your computer or not?”

Miti, still holding the aerial, grimaced then attempted a grin. “Please?”

~

It didn’t look like any computer Miti had ever seen. It looked like something from the future.

“Welcome,” said Milen, “to my world.” He opened the doors to a wardrobe in his parents’ bedroom and the whole space was filled by a massive silver screen and a black tower with flashing lights. He pulled out a huge reclining back monster of a chair with a joystick built into the armrest. Miti glanced over at Cassandra who was still trying to look unimpressed. Milen flicked a switch on the tower and the beast came to life, whirring and whizzing, more lights flickered on and lit up the room. “So what do you need my computer for?”

“I need to ask your help,” he said. “I need your help to find my mother.”

“Your mother?” said Nedko. “But didn’t she - ”

Stoichov elbowed Nedko in the chest. “Why do you need a computer?”

“Miti,” ordered Cassandra, “show them the envelope.” Miti pulled the burnt envelope from his satchel, the first time since he’d taken it from Desislava that he’d looked at it properly; the familiar sight of his mother’s scrawl sent a leap of hope through his heart.

Stoichov took it and looked it over. “Is this where your mother is?”

“Yes. We think so. But it was burnt in the fire and we lost the last part of the address.”

“And that’s where you freaks come in,” said Cassandra. “We need you to look up this address on the internet.”

“Please,” added Miti, who wished he’d gone to the internet cafe in the first place.

Milen was already typing away at the keyboard. A search engine came up on the screen.

Stoichov tried to push him to one side. “No, no, go to this one, it’s better.”

Nedko jumped in from the other side. “You won’t get as many results with that one, use this one!”

The Three argued their points for a while. In the end Milen chose what he needed and a new screen popped up. “Hand me the address,” he said. Miti passed it to him. He typed it in and pressed Enter. “Ok,” he said slowly, “there are 441,000 results. Give or take.”

“You need to type in Bulgaria,” said Stoichov. “Type in Bulgaria.”

“Ok, that’s better but we still need to narrow it down.”

“I told you, you’re on the wrong bit,” said Stoichov. “You need the maps. Move aside.” This time he was successful in pushing Milen out of the seat. He clicked and typed something. “Here it is!”

“You’ve got it? You’ve found it?” asked Miti, his heart racing.

“Well, sort of...” said Stoichov.

Cassandra rolled her eyes. “What do you mean sort of?”

Stoichov pointed to the screen. “You see this here, it’s a map of Bulgaria and these arrows point to the address you gave us. But there are seven addresses. Look, there’s one here in Plovdiv, one in Sofia, Star Zagora, Kazanlak, Varna, Shipka and Velingrad.”

“Without the rest of the address,” explained Milen, “we can’t narrow it down any further. Sorry.”

Miti hadn’t even thought about the possibility that there could be more than one address. He shrugged. “It could be worse, it’s only seven addresses.”

“You’re going to visit each one?” asked Stoichov.

“Yes.”

“But how will you get there?” said Milen.

“I’ll find a way.”

The Three stared at Miti with bemused expressions but they saw something in his eyes that told them he was serious and that he would, indeed, find a way.

“You’ll need the map printed then, with all seven addresses,” suggested Stoichov. He turned and clicked some buttons. “The printer’s not working!”

“Allow me!” said Nedko springing down on all fours to fiddle with the connection leads at the back of the printer before any of the others could get there. He tinkered about, his hands moving so fast and with such skill that Miti couldn’t follow what he was doing. Then they all heard a loud whirring sound and less than a minute later, Nedko stood up again, the printed map and directions in his hand.

“Voilà!” he said, proudly, handing it over to Miti.

“It’s magic!” said Miti, who truly believed in such things.

Cassandra coughed politely.

~

Miti raced back home as fast as he could, the map in his hand. Cassandra had to go back to her apartment, her mother would be back soon and she’d promised to take her out shopping. Desislava was in the kitchen, still busy sweeping away the broken crockery, his father sitting at the table talking about history. Miti blushed, wishing he hadn’t smashed all the plates and bowls. They’d been a gift, some of them from Desislava herself. He would have to buy more and give her a present to say sorry. His father had left him in charge of money matters; he’d saved plenty.

“I have a map,” he announced proudly, as if it would solve all their troubles. A sudden quiet descended over the kitchen. “There are seven addresses that match the one on the back of the envelope.” Miti laid the map on the table and pushed it towards Desislava and explained for the benefit of his father. “It’s a map of Bulgaria. Seven addresses, from Sofia all the way to Varna. It’s where we’re going to look for her. But there’s good news. There’s one address in Plovdiv. We’ll start right here, it’s more than likely that’s where she is, don’t you think?”

“Wait, Dimitar, please. We can’t leave straight away, there are things to organise, things to sort out.”

“It’s just one place, for now,” said Miti. “We could be there and back again today. It’s where she is, I know it!”

“But Dimitar - ”

“You should go.” It had come from Desislava who was leaning heavily on the handle of the broomstick with both hands. Miti was surprised that she agreed with him. “You should go. Miti needs to see her, and he can’t go alone. I’ll come with you, to help.” She looked closely at the map. “Whereabouts is the Plovdiv address?” Miti pointed to it. “That’s not far. Half an hour’s walk, there and back.”

“Why do I get the feeling I don’t have a choice in the matter?” said Stoyan.

“Because you don’t,” said Miti simply, and he ran to his bedroom to see if he’d need anything.

From his room, he heard them whispering in the kitchen.

“I just...I just don’t think I’m ready...”

“Listen, Stoyan. I’m your friend. I don’t know what happened between you and Grace, that’s none of my business and I don’t want to know. But it’s eating him up, it really is. He needs to see her, regardless of whether you’re ready or not.”

Why would his father need to be ready to see his mother? Surely he wanted to see her, just as much as he did. Something his father had said was playing on his mind, something about the world of adults. Miti resolved never to become an adult. The rules were confusing.

Instead, he would be Peter Pan.

That way lay much more fun and adventure; none of this confusion and pain.

~

“Let’s go,” said Miti walking into the kitchen. He had found a present for his mother and put it in his satchel.

Desislava put her phone back in her pocket and sighed. “I can’t get hold of Goran. I was meant to be meeting him later. I’ll go pop round his office then I’ll come and meet you at the house, how does that sound?”

“You should spend the day with Goran, like you’d planned,” said Stoyan.

“Honestly, it’s fine, I’d rather help you out. I’ll meet you in the town centre and we can go from there together. I won’t be long.” She left and Miti wanted to follow her out of the door straight away but his father seemed curiously immobile, sitting at the kitchen table, palms laid flat on its surface.

“Before we go, I just want to say that if we find your mother things might be different. You have to be prepared for that. I don’t want you to get your hopes up. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Miti who, once again, didn’t. “Are you ready?”

His father sighed and his whole body seemed to sink into itself. Miti thought that he was going to have to drag him out of the house but Stoyan took another deep breath and started to move towards the door. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

~

The railway station was busy, as always; they’d have to make their way across it to get to the town centre. At the last platform they had to wait for a long freight train to pass before they could cross the tracks. Miti had to make absolutely certain nothing else was coming after the freight train had disappeared. This was the first time since leaving the hospital that Miti had taken his father outside. He was more sure of himself, more confident with his white stick, but Miti wanted to be careful.

As he scanned the station Miti noticed the shadow of a man sitting hunched up on the other side of the tracks. No more trains were coming so they crossed, slowly, Miti warning his father every time a hazard presented itself. They were finally over the other side when the shadow of a man stuck out an over-sized foot in their path. The foot was bandaged in swathes of dirty, mismatched fabrics. It blocked their way. They’d have to go around it. Just as Miti steered his father in the right direction to go around his swollen, fetid appendage, the shadow spoke.

“Have you seen my cat? My name is Bogomil and my cat’s name is Otto.” His voice was tired, a breeze through sawdust.

Miti stopped to look at Bogomil properly, Bogomil having latterly been nothing but a shadow at the edge of the tracks and more recently an ill-placed foot. Bogomil was perched on an upturned bucket, a woman’s faded-pink knitted shawl wrapped around his shoulders, obscuring the rest of his clothes. His hair was deathly

white and framed his pallid face like a layer of freshly fallen snow. The man was made of winter. And then there were his eyes, into which seemed to seep the whiteness. Glazed over, they were the empty mirrors of his father's.

"Dimitar, why have we stopped? Who's there?"

"There's a man called Bogomil," explained Miti. "He's asking if we've seen his cat. He's...also blind."

Bogomil cocked his head. "Ah! Yes, I understand fully!" He waved his fingers in front of his own eyes.

"Another like me. What are the odds?"

"Dimitar, can you see the man's cat?"

"No," answered Miti quickly.

"I'm sorry," said Stoyan. "We ought to get going; Desislava will be waiting for us. Have a nice day."

"He's all black. Like coal. His tail was run over by a train; you'd recognise him in an instant, I'm quite sure of that. I'd hate for you to miss him if you weren't looking hard enough. I hate to think of people not looking hard enough."

Miti felt himself blushing.

"Dimitar, have you had a good look around?"

Miti concentrated on the gravel directly in front of him and the shoots of grass trying to break through there. "Yes."

Bogomil sighed. "Can't think where he's got to. Always getting into scrapes. Was a near miss when he lost his tail. Been toying with the idea of keeping him on a leash these last few months and now, as if to prove a point, he's only gone and disappeared. I suppose he'll turn up again, sooner or later. Always does."

"How long has he been missing?" asked Stoyan.

"Oh. Well, you know. Time has a funny way of disappearing when you can't see the sky or a clock. Like the sun hiding behind a cloud. It could be a matter of days, I suppose, since he left. Maybe more. Maybe less. You are lucky, *gospodin*, to have a boy to tell you whether it is day or night or somewhere in between."

"The boy is my son and my eyes. Yes, I am very lucky."

"Indeed. I had a son once, too. But I lost him as well. Or he left, with my wife. Once. It seems so long ago now. I wonder if it would seem longer or shorter if I could see the years passing by instead of only hearing and feeling them. Don't go and do a silly thing like lose your son now, will you, *gospodin*."

"I won't. He's here with me, always."

Miti felt his father's hand tighten around his. "We lost my mother," he said.

“No!” breathed Bogomil. His face was fallen and sad. “How did you lose her?”

“She got lost when she was sleeping because she didn’t have her address sewn into her pyjamas and now she can’t find her way back.” Miti felt his father’s grip loosen momentarily.

Bogomil half stood. “No! That’s terrible! Absolutely awful! You must find her!”

“Come on, Dimitar. We’d best head off now.”

“We’re looking for her! Right now, today! We’re going to find her and bring her back!”

“Dimitar, come.”

“Good for you, Dimitar! Look everywhere. And take your time about it. Remember: the fast bitch makes blind dogs! Be thorough in your search, that’s my advice. You’ve taken the right road, made the right choice. It would be so easy to sit on an upturned bucket and do nothing and endlessly hope that she’ll come back to you. I think it’s best you leave right away, you’ve got a lot of searching to do, do you hear me?”

“We will, we will!”

“Dimitar, come on. Now.”

“Good luck, boy! I know you’ll find your mother!”

“Thank you! I know we will, too.”

“Dimitar...”

“Beware the upturned buckets!”

Miti could no longer ignore the pressure on his hand as his father tried to pull him away and he reluctantly led them around Bogomil’s outstretched foot and beyond the tracks. Bogomil’s words floated around his head as they walked, a sense of hope dancing with them. By then, Miti had half-forgotten the dead black cat lying in a crushed heap, not two feet away from the old man Bogomil who had latterly been an ill-placed foot and who was, now, a shadow at the edge of the tracks.

The Story of Bogomil

The first thing he noticed was a black dot in the corner of each eye. If he looked up into the sky the black dot would be there like the shadow of a bird; if he looked directly at the face of someone in front of him, the dot appeared as a mole on their skin.

"There's nothing there," colleagues at the office told him, when he asked them to take a close look at his eyes. "You're seeing things." Still, no matter how hard he washed and rubbed his eyes, the black dots remained.

Neither could his doctor see anything, when Bogomil explained to her what was bothering him. "There's nothing there," she said, "as far as I can see."

But Bogomil was adamant. Two black dots like full stops. His doctor referred him to an eye specialist at the hospital where he underwent several tests to determine what was wrong. Bogomil returned home and two days later the results came through. All clear. Just as his colleagues had said. Just as the doctor had said. Maybe he was seeing things after all.

After a while, he grew accustomed to the dots and barely noticed them anymore. They were small enough not to interfere with his work at the office and because he was so busy, it was easy to forget about them.

Until more dots arrived.

Bogomil woke up one morning and there were three small dots in his right eye and four in his left. He knew for certain that something was wrong now so he took the day off from work and made an emergency visit to the eye specialist.

Two days later and the second set of results came through. All clear. Bogomil couldn't understand it. What was happening to him? And why weren't the dots showing up on any tests?

After a sleepless night, Bogomil was both restless and desperate.

"I'm going to see Petka," he announced the next morning at breakfast. His son was running around the dining table with a toy car, in his own little world.

A cloud of anger descended upon the face of his wife, Dana. "You know how I feel about Petka," she said. "I told you I never wanted you to see her."

"I know, my love. But Mother always swore by her. Did I tell you how she cured my mother of her flickering heart?"

"Yes, you told me."

“Petka looked Mother in the eye and she said a few nonsensical words and she gave her a short dram of something or other to drink. Mother had diarrhoea for a week but after that, she never had any more heart troubles, rest her soul.”

“Yes, yes, I remember but what will this Petka find that the eye doctors couldn’t? I mean, they are experts in the field after all and she’s...well, she’s a...”

The conversation finished with Bogomil promising not to see Petka but the following day he took more time off work and he found himself on a bus trundling out of the city, heading towards the Rhodope Mountains. If he timed it just right, and if he was quick enough, he could be back home that night before Dana wondered where he was.

The bus broke down on the way and it took five of them to work out how to fit the tyre; they argued amongst themselves and were all experts in their own way. In the end the wheel was replaced successfully and the bus continued on its journey.

He’d not been to his village for many years. Not since his mother had finally passed. There had been nothing there for him anymore and even when he had lived there, his heart had always been locked on the city with the dreams and the money promised there. No one young stayed in the village. There were never marriages anymore, only funerals.

As he stepped down from the bus he could tell immediately that little had changed there since his last visit. The place was quiet, save a cock crowing in a nearby garden, and the dusty main street was empty. Smoke plumed from the chimneys of nearby houses. The bus roared off into the distance.

On his way to Baba Petka’s house, he passed an old man who looked vaguely familiar. They nodded to each other, warily, and Bogomil carried on his way, the eyes of the old man following him with a look that could have been jealousy or fear.

It wasn’t difficult to find Baba Petka; her house was where it had always been. A tiny place, about the size of his bathroom back home, its one room had a sloping corrugated iron roof and a wooden door barely attached to its rotting hinges. He knocked. “Baba Petka, are you there? It’s me, Bogomil Starr, come home to see you again.” No answer. He knocked and called again. Still no answer. He thought that perhaps the witch was deaf in her old age so he opened the door and stepped inside the house.

Inside was a bed in the far corner and a stove against one wall next to the chimney and open fireplace. And there were the cats. Bogomil counted at least seven at first glance, all of varying colours and states of health. They all turned to the strange man at the open door and hissed or ran to hide under the bed.

“Pay them no mind; they’re not used to strangers.” He hadn’t heard Petka coming up behind him. In one hand she held the plucked carcasses of two chickens. He moved aside and let her enter the room.

“Baba Petka, it’s me, Bogomil -”

“Yes, yes, I know who you are.”

“You remember me, then.”

“Of course I remember you. You were a naughty little boy. Never did as you were told. Take a seat on the bed; I’ll be with you in a moment.”

Bogomil did as he was told. He watched her lay the chickens on the floor and behead them with an incredibly sharp knife that had been resting by the fireplace. Before much blood was spilled she placed them in the pot of boiling water on the stove.

“Right,” she said, shuffling towards him, “let’s take a look at your eyes.”

“How did you know I’d come to see you about my eyes?” he asked.

“I know a great many things, none of which are your concern. Now be quiet and hold still.” She lit a candle and held it up to his face. Up close he realised how ancient she must be; her leather skin all wrinkled and furrowed. Her nose was a bulbous entity unto itself. She studied his eyes as closely as he studied her face. “You’ve been cursed.” She said it without any emotion, without any hint of surprise.

“Cursed?”

“Yes, by someone very powerful. I’ve seen this before. I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. My work is all about balances; like everything in life it is a balancing act, Bogomil. You must have done something very bad, very bad indeed to have been cursed like this. Your life has somehow lost its balance. Within a week you will have lost the use of one eye. Within two weeks, both. I’m sorry, Bogomil, I’m not lying when I say there is nothing I can do.”

Bogomil tried to absorb Baba Petka’s words as she left him sitting there on the bed to go and attend to the boiling chickens but they seemed unreal and altogether like something from a fairy tale. A blindness curse? He couldn’t believe it – he refused to. Nobody can go blind in the space of a month for no apparent medical reason. His wife had been right, he shouldn’t have come here, it was all lies and mindless superstition. He stood up to leave.

“Of course, there is the act itself,” she said, not even turning from her cooking.

He sat down. “What do you mean?”

“If it’s all a balancing act then the act of your cursing must itself be balanced out, naturally.”

“Are you suggesting...?”

“You may call it revenge but I call it nature. Words are far too inefficient to discuss the ways of nature.”

“But how?”

“Find the one responsible and then you leave that to me. Now go, you must get back home. Spend time with your family. You’ll miss them when you can no longer see them, even if they’re standing right in front of you.”

Back in Plovdiv, he came clean to Dana about the visit to Baba Petka and all the time he’d taken off work. He told her about the curse and about his eyesight. He said he wanted to spend every waking moment with them both until it was too late. Dana didn’t believe Baba Petka at all, but she enjoyed the change in Bogomil and the attention he lavished on her and their son.

And so, week by week, he went gradually blind, just as Baba Petka had foretold – first one eye and then the other – his family slowly disappearing from his vision as if some dark and treacherous mist had come to claim them.

Unable to see, his work in the office was jeopardised. He couldn’t do his job without his eyes and the extended period of leave he took from work became months and then months became a year and he was never asked to return.

When Dana’s friend told her that a man named Otto had taken over her husband’s position in the office, the news made Bogomil boil with rage. “Otto? Otto Todorov? That man is lazy and unorganised. How can he possibly have my job?”

“He’s young, Bogomil,” said Dana, frustrated. She looked in the fridge and found no food there. “Young and ambitious. It’s only natural for him to be working his way towards the top.”

No sooner had Dana finished her sentence than it dawned on Bogomil. Otto was the one responsible. He had placed the curse on him. Otto always did have his beady eyes on his job, had kept asking Bogomil when he was thinking of retiring, always following him around like a puppy. It made perfect sense now.

He went back to Petka.

“It’s a man named Otto – he’s the one who has done this to me.”

“Otto? Yes, yes, it’s Otto.” Petka was busy skinning a rabbit. She scratched her wrinkled forehead with the sharp end of the knife. “Leave it to me; we can balance out what has been done here. Nature will find a way.”

When he returned home, Dana was furious. “Where have you been? You’ve been to see her again, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but she’s going to make Otto wish he’d never thought of cursing me.”

“It’s too late, Bogomil, whatever happens to Otto. You can’t see, and you don’t have a job and there’s no money coming in.”

Bogomil could hear the despair in her voice.

A day later and she was gone, taking their boy with her. She left no address or contact details.

For a year afterwards, instead of trying to find a job he could do, Bogomil sat on an upturned bucket outside his former offices, calling Otto’s name like a wolf howling to the moon. After he received a restraining order, he moved his bucket to the centre of town, bitterly asking anybody who happened to walk past if they’d heard or seen of Otto. Some recognised him from the firm and took pity on him, reporting that Otto was doing well and was in line for another promotion. He cursed Otto’s name and then he cursed Baba Petka’s. He couldn’t afford the money to go and see her again and ask her why nature wasn’t balancing out. He’d lost the house, all his savings; no one came to visit anymore. He fed off waste from restaurant bins whilst Otto worked his way up to the top of the company.

He set up his bucket near the railway tracks where there was always noise, always something to listen to. Silence was his greatest fear now. One day, he heard the mewling of a cat nearby. He called it over, clicking his fingers, and it came up and circled around his legs. “What brings you here, little one? I suppose you’re hungry, aren’t you?” Bogomil shared the food he’d scavenged that day with the cat. It stayed with him day after day. When Bogomil woke up on the hard cold floor near the railway station, the cat came running and nestled into the folds of his cardigan. Bogomil talked to it, petted it and fed it scraps of leftover food. “You’re Otto, aren’t you?” he said one morning.

The cat mewed, stretched, and gently licked Bogomil’s closed eyes.

When They Visited The First Address

They joined Desislava and walked through the city centre heading for the house they were looking for, somewhere along the Maritsa river. The centre was busy with shoppers and tourists. A man and a woman in army uniforms hung around outside a shop, texting on their mobiles; old women in fluorescent tabards trailed along the pavements sweeping leaves and rubbish into neat piles; young girls walked hand in hand down the street laughing. It was an effort to keep Stoyan from bumping into people who weren't looking where they were going, even with his stick outstretched. Stoyan started to slow down and came to an abrupt stop. "Do you hear that?" he asked.

Desislava and Miti shook their heads. "No," they said in unison but almost as soon as they said the word, a frail strand of music teased their ears.

"It's coming from further on," said Stoyan, and he led the way with his ears. Finally the music reached them fully: the mournful strains of a violin on the verge of needing tuning.

"It's a gypsy man," explained Desislava to Stoyan.

"Yes, I remember him. Haven't you both seen him before?" He didn't wait for an answer. "He's been here for years, plays in the same spot every day. Tell me, Dimitar, who is he playing to?"

Miti shrugged. "Nobody really. People are just walking by and not paying any attention."

"But where is he looking?"

Confused by the question, Miti considered the gypsy man more intently. He wore a long blue coat, even in the heat of the summer. Then Miti noticed that the violinist could not take his eyes off something directly in front of him. Miti followed his gaze. There, propped up against the wall opposite was a life-size bronze statue of a man with a cheeky smile, half a leg resting on the wall. One hand was in his pocket, the other was proffering his cavernous ear forward, like someone listening to a conversation behind a closed door. Or like someone listening to a gypsy man playing an almost out-of-tune violin.

"Is he playing to the statue?" asked Miti.

"He is. Every day, without fail."

"But it's just a statue, it won't hear him play."

"Won't it?"

“No, it’s just a statue.”

“But that’s faith, Dimitar. He plays because the statue will always be willing to listen; he has faith that someone will always hear him. Have you seen the statue before, Dimitar?”

“I guess I never really noticed it.”

“There’s another one, up in the Old Town, made by the same sculptor. Have you seen that one?”

“I don’t think so.”

“That one’s of a painter in a beret sitting on a stone. In one hand he holds a paintbrush, in the other a large empty frame. That’s like life, Dimitar. I can see it clearly now. If you look over his shoulder and through the frame, it captures a new painting every day. Maybe newly fallen leaves, another crack in the pavement, a pair of shoes as someone walks past. Everything changes, Dimitar, quicker than we ever plan it to. Which is why we need the faith of the violinist to get us through. Do you understand now?”

Miti shook his head. “No, I still don’t understand.” Because the frame would still be empty, he wanted to say. But didn’t.

~

This was Nicova Street.

The house stood before them, half-demolished and unmissable, a site of rubble and debris. Either side of the demolished house were old buildings, square and angular, flat-roofed. The sides of these houses were dirty and ragged as if someone had done a poor job of removing the house in between; tearing down the walls messily.

“We’re here,” said Miti, for his father’s benefit.

“What does it look like?” asked Stoyan.

Miti chose to ignore the demolished house in the middle and focus on the two houses either side. He could see that to the left was Number Eleven Nicova Street and that the house to the right had been split into several flats that began at 12A. This is what he chose to concentrate on. “It’s a large house, split into apartments,” he began. “It’s grey brick and plain. Many of the windows are boarded up and the large front door is almost falling off its hinges.”

Desislava was looking back at the detritus in the middle. “Are you sure this is the right address?”

Miti sauntered over to the sign on the door which listed, amongst notable gaps, some of the names of the tenants. The first apartment was 12A. Miti had checked and double-checked the name of the street as they headed down it with a growing sense of excitement. “Yes, this is the right house.” Once again he ignored the debris in the middle.

His mother might be inside.

Messy and dirty and half falling apart, or so it seemed, it didn’t look like the kind of building she should live in. Miti remembered the last book he’d read with his mother in the armchair. The little Victorian girl in the story, Sara Crewe, had gone up to Miss Minchin’s house where she was going to stay whilst her father was working in India and she had said that all houses looked like their owners and that Miss Minchin’s house was dark and unwelcoming. Miti imagined that the building in front of him must be a place full of giants, otherwise why would the front door need to be so large and why would the windows need to be so tall? The people who lived in this house might even be bigger than his father. What worried him was that his mother wasn’t a giant and so she would stick out like an unbroken spine on a shelf full of tatty books. At least she would be easy to find, he comforted himself, though he was still troubled by the thought that this wasn’t a place for her. How many terrifying Miss Minchins were inside, clattering about viciously?

Walking over to his father, Miti took his hand. It was all he could do to stop himself from running in. He wanted to hurry everything along, to streak through every floor and apartment of the building until they found her. She might be lost in a land of giants, with no way of finding her way home. He wanted to rap on every door and demand to search every inch of every room until she was there in front of him.

But his father was now so slow. And Desislava looked at the building as if she didn’t want to ever go inside.

“I could go in by myself,” suggested Miti, “if that’s quicker and easier.”

“Don’t be silly, Dimitar,” said Stoyan. “You’re not going in a strange place all by yourself. You’re only nine.”

Nearly ten, thought Miti, which made all the difference.

He heard his father sigh heavily. “Come on then, if we’re going to do this. But Dimitar, do you remember what I said about not getting your hopes up?”

“Yes,” said Miti, tugging on his father’s hand, though he was so eager to enter the building that he hadn’t heard one word.

He couldn’t streak down the corridors, he couldn’t storm around knocking on every door. His father was just too slow. As they carefully clambered up the stairs, Desislava on one side, Miti on the other, he wished that Stoyan would hurry up, though he knew that that was neither fair nor of any use. His father was going as fast as he could. It wasn’t like in their own apartment block; there was no elevator to speed things up. It would all have to be done the long, old-fashioned way.

The apartments in the building ascended alphabetically, two on each floor. Miti wondered how many rooms there were but his enthusiasm was not dimmed; he would travel the length of the alphabet and back again to find his mother.

There was, as expected, a giant in flat 12A; a man so tall that he loomed over the three of them. Even Stoyan only came up to the man’s nose. Miti felt small and very much like an ant at a giant’s picnic. Filling the doorway, the giant had to stoop below the lintel and lean on the jamb as if he didn’t quite fit into the world of humans. He was a gruff man; they had woken him up, he told them; he worked the night shift as a security guard, he said; and he didn’t like being disturbed, he grunted. A likely story, thought Miti, who knew the man had just been transported from the world of giants only moments before. There would be no searching his flat for Miti’s mother but the man reluctantly said he hadn’t seen anybody about that matched the description Stoyan provided.

There was no one in 12B.

No one in 12C.

Strange noises came from 12D as they knocked and waited.

Desislava said they should go and search the others and Stoyan agreed all too quickly.

“But what if Mother’s in there?”

As Stoyan shuffled away, Miti heard him say, almost to no one in particular, “I don’t want to know if it is her.”

Miti was left alone with the noises. He didn’t knock again, instead choosing to trail after his father and Desislava who was now leading the way.

On the third and last floor, in Flat 12E, the truth was finally revealed.

A woman, rosy-cheeked and welcoming, who was most definitely not a giant, being short and squat - a dwarf? a gnome? - started asking questions about their journey. She hadn't seen his mother, so Miti wanted to move on to the last apartment but the woman didn't seem to want to stop talking.

"Why are you looking for her? She's your wife? Ah! Poor souls! Gone missing, has she? Dreadful, terrible shame! You poor, darling little boy. Lost his mummy. Horrible, horrible day! Well, where might she have gone? What makes you think she's here, in this old place? An address? I see. May I take a look? But surely this is for 12 Nicova Street and the apartments in this dreadful place start at 12A. Surely you want the building next door, the nice old place with the old wooden beams. But ah! I see, yes, I see. They knocked that dear old place down, just last week, didn't they? Well, I suppose you saw that as you came in. Such a shame but the government's doing it a lot these days. People coming from overseas and buying up all our lovely houses, it's all the rage these days. Not a thought for those of us who have to live next door to sad old empty old holiday homes eleven months of the year, if you don't mind my saying so. Well, I wish you all the best. I'd speak to one of the developers if I were you, they might know who used to live there. I never knew who owned that lovely place but I wish I did because it used to be such a nice place and now it's gone and I suppose we'll never be any the wiser. Good luck now, do you hear? Good luck. I hope you find her, I'm sure you will."

And the door closed and they went, painfully, back down the stairs and onto the street and out to stare at the empty hole that used to be 12 Nicova Street, once upon a last week. Though Stoyan, of course, couldn't stare at the empty space and asked Miti to describe it to him, which was the last thing Miti wanted to do. If houses were like their owners, as the book he remembered reading with his mother had taught him, then this would be his house: destroyed from the bottom up, the detritus of his hope laid bare and dusty.

The Story of the Violinist.

On summer days like these it is easiest to remember her.

She had come when the weather was fine, the skies swelled bright with the heat from the sun and the streets bustled with sweaty people. Sweaty smiling people.

Whilst he plays his ancient violin, he remembers and he lets the memories soar with the melody; a happy song, he plays it with vigour and excitement.

He had heard her own music first, that was how this whole thing had started.

Above the bustling crowds, above the strains of his violin, came the dulcet tones of a viola, deep and seductive. A slow melody at first, in the distance but getting closer. He recognised the tune – he prided himself on the fact that there was not a single song in the world he couldn't play within an instant of hearing it – an old folk song, if he'd still had his voice, he'd have stopped playing and would have sung along. Instead, he deserted his own melody and entwined it with hers and whilst he played he looked around him to ascertain from where the sound of the viola was coming.

It was a while before he saw her. She came to him. Through the crowd she walked, viola resting under her pointed chin, bow and arm moving like the neck of a swan. The crowds parted as she walked and it wasn't long before she was standing right in front of him.

He played and she played and the music was beautiful. Now everyone stopped and watched. They were as two professionals who had rehearsed together every day of their waking lives.

And he lost himself in the song and the only way he could ground himself again, to stop himself from flying away somewhere with the melodies, was if he looked her in the eyes.

Gold and amber by degrees, her eyes were never one colour for more than an instant. No one thought about dancing when they looked at her because her eyes danced for the world. A summer dress, she wore, with apricot swirls embroidered into purple cloth. No shoes, muddy feet. Hair loose, brown. As visions go, the violinist could think of no better.

They played together in the wild street for days. Maybe hours. Minutes, perhaps. He wanted to call her name but this was not a concert for the voice; he knew he could never talk to her.

Her hips were swaying in time with the dance of her eyes. She turned and bowed to the bronze statue of the silly man proffering a big, grotesque ear to oblivious passers-by.

And then she was off, down the street, her music following her like perfume. She was a dream on the tip of waking – in seconds he would forget her if he let her get away.

So he followed her to wherever she was willing to take him. Down the street. Through the crowd. A travelling show. He left his case with the money behind but didn't realise. How could he think of anything but her?

The streets blurred into one. She led him down some of them more than once, still playing, bound by the strings.

Then all of a sudden they were outside Plovdiv's National History museum. She disappeared through the heavy wooden doors and the music didn't even stop whilst she paid to get in. Her sound echoed in the entrance hall before slowly getting quieter and quieter as she entered the depths of the museum.

He had only one lev left: the price of admission. But there was nothing else for it and his music didn't stop either whilst he paid to enter.

Fox, stuffed. Fool's gold, golden sort-of. Herbs and leaves, steps, shells of turtles, a lobster's skeleton. It was all very much like a witch's cauldron, only stored behind polished glass. A fifteen-foot boa that watched on in deadly silence with dead eyes and jelly for innards.

Now, surprisingly, she was naked, the summer dress gone but she was still playing – no longer a folk song but something off-kilter and scatty. For the first time in his life, he couldn't follow a song; his melody clashed with hers and refused to fuse.

He came closer to her, and found himself removing his own clothes – the scabby blue coat and the shoes with the sole half-missing – and it was only when they were both naked that he found her song and played it.

But she hadn't noticed, or didn't care, for she was away again, up the opposite stairs. He followed her, after he re-clothed himself, immediately regretting the delay because when he left the museum she was not there and her song had ended; vanished.

And that's why he stands in front of the bronze statue of the man with the big ear, every day. He hopes she will come again and they will play together the music and other stuff of the heart.

Yes, perhaps one can call that faith, after all.

When He Tried To Tell Cassandra He Was Leaving

“If I didn’t know it before, Miti, then I know it now: you’re stupid.”

“Stupid?”

“Yes, stupid.”

He looked at Cassandra amongst her rainforest of books and realised that he would never understand her. “Why am I stupid?”

“The fact that you even have to ask that question goes to show just how stupid you are.”

“What have I done?”

“You’ve given up, Miti.”

“I haven’t.”

“You have.”

Miti sunk back into his beanbag and fought the urge to cry.

“You’ve only been to one of the addresses, there are six left. And you come home all moping and feeling sorry for yourself. Are you really telling me that you thought she was going to be at the first place you went looking?”

“Yes! Well, maybe. I don’t know.”

“That’s because you’re stupid. And all this nonsense about your mother being lost in her dreams is also stupid. Nobody gets lost in their dreams, I’ve never heard of anything so ridiculous. But it’s ok, it’s not the end of the world. There’s plenty of time for you to not be stupid anymore.”

“You could be a bit nicer to me...” he began but she didn’t let him finish.

“I’m nothing but nice to you. I let you read my books, don’t I?”

“Yes, but -”

“But nothing. I’m going to tell you exactly what you’re going to do. You’re going to go upstairs and tell your father that you’re going to go looking for your mother, with or without his help. He’ll never let you go alone so that will jump start him into action.”

“It will make him angry.”

“You have every right to make him angry. He’s being stubborn and he’s not helping you find your mother. My dad says that your dad doesn’t even want to find her.”

“That’s not true! Take that back! He does, he does want to find her.”

“Then make him prove it.”

“Ok! Fine! I will.” Miti wasn’t sure at what point he’d leapt to his feet but that’s where he found himself, Cassandra looking up at him from the bed with a proud smile. “Can you come with me?”

Cassandra’s smile descended into a frown.

~

Gingerly, Miti opened the door to his apartment. He was alone. Cassandra had opted to stay downstairs and read until it was all over but she had every faith in Miti, he just had to show how strong he was, and if he didn’t go and do it then he wouldn’t be allowed to come back and read her books ever again and it would prove how stupid he really was.

Miti wasn’t used to silence in the apartment, not recently, but as the door closed on the latch behind him it made a noise that echoed through the hallway.

“Dimitar, is that you?” His father was in the living room.

“Yeah, I just went to see Nedko about something.”

“Can you come in here please?”

Miti didn’t like the sound of his father’s voice. He didn’t want to go in the living room but he had no choice.

“Dimitar, are you coming?”

His father had been crying, Miti saw the redness around his eyes and he knew straight away.

“I found an old album,” said Stoyan. “One that I had forgotten about. Nicolai Ghiaurov, the opera singer. My brother, your Uncle Ventseslav, sent it to me from France many, many years ago, now. It’s a recording of one of the German operas; I never could understand a word of it. Brings back so many memories. Life’s too short, your Uncle Ventseslav taught me that. I’m sorry, Dimitar, if I haven’t been myself lately. I’m sorry if I haven’t been proactive in this search for your mother but I promise, all that’s going to change from now on.”

“It is?” Miti had prepared himself for a fight; Cassandra had told him exactly what to say. He’d never expected his father to agree with him. He looked at the fat man on the cover of the opera LP lying on the floor by the gramophone. Whatever had been on that LP had certainly caused a change in his father. Miti nodded to the fat opera man and thanked him under his breath.

“I realise now we do need to go looking for her, we can’t leave it or postpone it any longer. Desislava has helped me realise this. I’m sorry if it’s taken me this long to come to my senses. I guess I want to protect you from too much. I know you want to see her, Dimitar. And I do as well. I’d like to talk to her.”

“I’m going to come too.” Desislava had a strange way of creeping up unannounced; she was hovering in the doorway. “I know your father will probably try to stop me but I want to come and I think we should do it sooner rather than later.” Who were these people? She looked like Desislava, and he looked like his father, but the words coming from their mouths sounded not like something they’d say but exactly like what he wanted to hear. Perhaps he was dreaming. He’d wait to wake up before he fully trusted what they were saying. “You’ll need help with your father, Miti. I’m going to speak to Goran tonight. See if I can get away for a while. It’s a good job I’m also on holiday from school.”

“So we can go tomorrow?” In his mind, Miti was already halfway on the road to Sofia.

“No, Dimitar,” said Stoyan, “I’m afraid there are things we need to sort out first. We can’t just up and leave.”

“Like what things?”

“Have you stopped to think about where we’re going to stay?”

“There are plenty of places to stay.”

“Such as...?”

“Hotels.”

“And where do you think the money is going to come from?”

Miti hadn’t thought of that part and wasn’t entirely sure of how much a hotel room would cost.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Desislava. “It’s summer; the nights are very warm. Goran’s a keen camper. We could borrow a tent or two. I’m sure we could find places to set up. Maybe Miti could ask his friends again to search on the computer for places to camp.”

“It’s a possibility,” said Stoyan.

“So we can go tomorrow?”

“Dimitar, slow down! We’ll go on Monday. That gives us the weekend to figure things out. How are we going to get to all these places? It’s not like I can drive.”

“Desislava can drive.” His voice was full of hope.

“I’m afraid my car can only take two people, Miti.”

“Two people? Why? What kind of car do you have?”

Suddenly, Stoyan chuckled. Miti was confused. Was Desislava blushing?

“Just a small one.”

“What make is it? Can I see? Why is Father laughing?”

Miti watched Desislava cast his father a stern look. “It’s just a small car. I’ve only got it for a while. Until...well, until I can get rid of it.”

“Can you show me? I want to see what’s so funny.”

Desislava sighed, deeply. “Come on then.” She led Miti into his bedroom. She pointed out of the window, to the rows of cars parked far below. “There, that’s my car.”

“What’s that? Is that a Volvo? That’s not small, it’s huge. It’s fine! You *can* drive us!”

“No, Miti, not the Volvo. The one next to it.”

Miti strained to see out of the window. Then his face crumpled in confusion. “But that’s not a car.”

“I bought it from one of my nephews. He was having trouble paying his way at university. He needed the money.”

“But it’s not a car.”

“It used to be owned by the company. They drove it around. Promotion, that kind of thing,”

Miti squinted and rubbed his eyes. From what he could see, next to the Volvo there really wasn’t a car. Granted, the front bit looked like a car but the back bit didn’t. Resting on top was a huge can of Red Bull, enough to quench a giant’s thirst.

“You drive that?” Miti looked from the whatever-it-was-that-was-pretending-to-be-a-car back to Desislava. She was definitely blushing. Miti heard his father laugh again from the living room.

She led him away from his bedroom. “You see. That’s why I can’t drive us. Now, enough of all this talking, we can plan later. Let’s have some lunch.”

~

There had been three attempts to introduce himself to Cassandra and explain why he had been hanging over the balcony with binoculars but there were no fewer than ten attempts to pluck up the courage to tell her that on Monday he was leaving. Even though she had encouraged him to go, he still felt bad. Who would she read books with?

He hovered outside her door; he came out of the elevator and then went straight back in again; he knocked on her door and then ran away down the stairs as fast as he could.

It was Saturday morning and time was running out. The clock was, as they say, ticking. The turning of the hands on his watch were all he could hear as he waited outside her door, hand raised in front of him ready to knock. Breathing deeply, he told himself that this was it. Now or never.

Just then the door opened and Cassandra stood before him her face right where he was about to knock.

“Careful! You nearly punched me in the face! Where have you been, have you been avoiding me?”

“No...I...”

Miti was confused. Was the person standing in front of him even Cassandra? No longer a mermaid, she now looked, he couldn't help but feel, like an alien. She wore thick black sunglasses with diamonds that sparkled all the way behind her ears, and the letters D&G etched into the lenses. Her hair was slicked back into a tight ponytail which almost made her look as if she had no hair at all. Her black shirt with the large white collar was skin-tight and tucked into a huge grey belt with five silver buckles. She looked as if she'd been locked inside a spacesuit. She had silver shoes and, in one hand, a silver handbag. “...I...” He was still lost somewhere in a stutter.

“Well, we haven't got time for that now, follow me.”

With her free hand she grabbed his arm and dragged him, quickly, in the direction of the elevator.

It seemed an eternity before she let go.

They tumbled through Plovdiv at break-neck speed and if he was to let go of her hand he would spin off on another orbit and crash-land somewhere else. He tried talking to her but they were moving too fast.

Running along a wide avenue, Cassandra kept turning her head in Miti's direction. He smiled at her because she seemed to think this was fun but then he realised she wasn't looking back at him at all but at something over his left shoulder.

“Come on, we’ll miss it!” she shouted and she wasn’t even remotely out of breath and he wondered how she managed it.

He saw that they were running towards a group of people at the side of the road. Some of them started picking up shopping bags or foraging in their pockets for money or passes. He realised they must be running to catch a bus but he hadn’t brought any money and he didn’t have a pass so he gripped Cassandra’s hand tightly to try and tell her that something was wrong but she carried on pulling him. The small white bus beat them to the stop and they barely made it on board before it closed its doors and whisked them off.

Minutes passed before he caught his breath. “Where are we going?” he asked. “I don’t have any money.”

“It’s fine, you’ll see.”

The ticket-seller approached. A steely-eyed woman wearing a purple tabard, she held out her hand expectantly but before Miti could say he had no way of paying, Cassandra put money in the woman’s hand. She handed over two tickets in exchange and then was off, hand out ready to collect more money. Miti wanted to say thank you to Cassandra. Instead he blushed.

They wove their way through traffic as if the world depended on it and he was sure they were going too fast but no one seemed to be bothered and before he knew it Cassandra was tugging at him again and leading him towards the doors. They spilled out and watched the white bus zoom off into the distance.

There it was. The Mall. If Cassandra looked like an alien then the Mall looked like a huge grey spaceship. Miti was being abducted; Cassandra was dragging him inside.

When they entered through electric doors which hissed open he realised he’d been mistaken. This wasn’t a spaceship, but another planet entirely, with its snaking black escalators which sprouted up like trees and its glass fronted palaces and its Costa Coffee. Another planet indeed.

She was making him climb the escalators. He felt like Jack and the Giant Beanstalk and they were racing towards the top of the sky, surely.

“Here, look at this,” she said as they zoomed past restaurants in the sky.

“A bookshop!” he said as they reached the little shop tucked in the corner of the clouds. But this was no ordinary bookshop, he could tell because there were chairs and a cafe inside and people were reading and sipping, enjoying themselves.

“Here it is,” she said, leading him slowly now, as if they were naturalists walking through the undergrowth of a rainforest observing a rare form of wildlife. “The thing I wanted to show you. Close your eyes,” she said.

“What? Why?”

“Oh, come here!” He could feel her hands – warm from being clasped to his – around his eyes. “Can you see anything?”

“No!”

“Do you promise?”

“No, I can’t see anything. What’s this all about?”

“You’ll see,” she said, starting to shuffle him forward. “There, just one more step. Ok, now you can open them.”

It was odd, definitely alien-looking, not the sort of thing that a bookshop would sell. He read the multi-coloured display next to the object which was illuminated from above like an angel with a halo. His mind couldn’t quite accept the perfection of it all, and a part of him wanted to cry.

“It’s amazing,” he said.

“Isn’t it?” Cassandra’s smile was spread across her whole face. Maybe she was the angel.

“How much is it? Can I afford it?” Cassandra was silent, her smile gone. His excitement faded. “I can’t afford it, can I?”

“It’s expensive, very.”

“How much?” he asked again. Cassandra told him. Now he was smiling again. “I have it.”

“What? You have it? How can you possibly have that much money?”

“Father put me in charge of getting the food and the groceries and general stuff, you know. But he always gave me too much, even with all the new stuff Desislava and I have been cooking. So I always had some left over. I didn’t know what to do with it, so I put it under my bed in a small wooden box.”

Cassandra let out an alien shriek that made everyone in the vicinity stop and stare. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the forehead. Paralysed, he had no idea what to do with himself.

“So do you want it? Shall we go back and get your money? Shall we get it?”

“It’s perfect,” he said.

Was he blushing?

This was a present from heaven or space or from somewhere up above, descended down to him in a silver package no bigger than a sheet of paper, the portal to a previously unexplored world of books, a window to reading, a doorway to a virtual library. He turned it over and over in his hands and let Cassandra do the same. They'd discovered an online list of one hundred classic books which they didn't need to pay for; ready to download, they were like free sweets in a sweetshop. It was his mother's entire dresser full of classic books condensed into one little handheld device. They were holed away in her bedroom; the world no longer existed as far as they were concerned, the world was in their hands, at their fingertips.

"I don't get it. Why's it called an e-reader?" asked Miti.

Cassandra shrugged. "Beats me." She switched it on. "To begin we need to connect it to the internet and then..." She pressed several buttons and typed in a passcode to her wireless connection. "Voilà!"

"Is it on? Is it working?" Miti resisted snatching it out of Cassandra's hands.

She was smiling broadly. "There we go. I think all you have to do is select the books you want and it downloads straight away."

"Like magic!"

"Or modern technology. Take your pick."

"It's going to be amazing, Father will never know I'm reading a book. He'll think it's some computer game. What books shall I choose?" His mind raced, there were far too many to choose from.

"We don't know how long the search for your mother will last and we don't know if there'll be access to wireless internet again so you should download a few to begin with."

"About that..."

"About what?"

"About the search..." He tried to tell her but she was looking at him with wide eyes.

"Don't worry about that now. Any thoughts on the first book you want to download?"

Miti forgot about telling Cassandra, his thoughts turning to the e-reader. "I have an idea. It's the last one I read with my mother. I was thinking about it the other day. Can I see if it's on there?" Cassandra handed it over and showed him how to search for books. "There it is! Excellent!"

The next time he looked, he had no less than thirty-five books sitting ready and waiting for him to turn the virtual page. He felt thirty-five butterflies take off in his stomach and dance.

He still hadn't told her he'd be leaving.

The Story of the Ticket-Seller

This love story started with a slap.

She had sold him his ticket, turned around to head to the front of the bus, when it had lurched forward and sent him barrelling into her, his hand grazing her backside. Even if it had been an accident, she thought, he should still have kept his hands to himself. She slapped him raw across the cheeks and returned to collect money from the other passengers.

They met again the next day. She went to sell him his ticket but when she handed it over, he wouldn't let go. "My name's Paskal. I bumped into you yesterday by mistake. I just wanted to apologise again."

She smiled and said she'd forgotten all about him. "Can you let go of the ticket now, please?"

His face fell. "Can I make it up to you?"

"Let go of the ticket."

"Dinner, perhaps?"

She slapped him round the face again then moved off to do her job.

One more day. Same time, same place. If she wouldn't let him take her to dinner, he said, then he would bring dinner to her. In the crowded bus where he could barely lift his arms, Paskal produced a tray from his bag and on the tray he rested a paper plate with a chunk of bread with slices of ham and meats on top, a carton of juice, and a single rose.

"I'm vegetarian," she said but drank the juice and pocketed the rose.

She noticed him there every day, getting on at the same stop but he stopped trying to talk to her. Instead, he smiled at her when she sold him his ticket and looked at her with big brown eyes that seemed to sing to her.

"I'll go on one date with you," she said, one day. "If you pay for dinner and don't harass me again."

"It's a deal," he said.

She went to meet him at Happy Bar and Grill for their first date, straight from work, still in her purple tabard, armpits damp from a hot day's work on the bus. Busy, it was summer and the tourists especially liked the brash signage, the diner-style booths and the black and white photos of celebrities on the wall. As far as anybody knew, Marilyn Monroe had never been to Bulgaria but here she was, grinning down from the wall, as if she had

been a long-term patron of Happy Bar and Grill. Her smiling face was as welcoming for the tourists as their Western-style burgers and promise of fries.

"This wasn't my first choice of venue to take you," he said, "but it's been a slow month and I thought this was better than nothing."

"It's fine," she said, ordering two mains just for herself. She'd already finished a long milkshake, strawberry pink, and ordered another.

"Still," he said, "at least we're dining among the celebrities."

She looked up at the posters surrounding their booth. Frank Sinatra and The Rat Pack. They'd come to sing to them whilst they ate their burgers. "I like Sinatra," she said. "I like his voice. It's not true that sirens are only women."

"Oh, I didn't mean them." Paskal pointed over to another booth where a group of hangers-on were crowded round a table howling with laughter. In the midst of them was a man with slicked-back hair and a mustard-yellow suit. The man winked at the waitress as she passed. "I meant him."

"Who is he?"

Paskal told her that he was a minor celebrity, a TV personality from a Bulgarian chat show. Apparently he was very funny and told slightly racist jokes about Turks.

"Never heard of him," she said. "I don't have a television." The milkshake and some of the food arrived but the fries would take longer.

He ate slowly and she ate quickly. She finished and made her excuses before his dessert had even arrived.

On the bus early the next morning, during the quiet period before rush hour, she found herself thinking about music and about love. Her thoughts were interrupted by another love story, or maybe it was the end of one.

"Never, *ever* again," said the woman.

"I've told you, it's not my fault."

"It's always your fault, one way or another."

"I don't see how."

"That's part of the problem; you don't know how you come across to people."

"Neither do you."

"What's that meant to mean?"

"I don't know."

"Idiot."

She laughed and left them to it but then, turning, came face to face with Paskal. "I thought I told you not to harass me again," she said.

"I did, but I wanted another date. I realise that I shouldn't have taken you to that place last night. It's my fault. Please, let me make it up to you."

That night she met him at his stop.

"The restaurant is just a short walk from here," he told her.

To get to the restaurant you had to go through an ornate garden filled with rockeries, mountain plants and a small stream with a miniature bridge over it.

"The owner modelled this on his home town in the Rhodope Mountains."

"I like it," she said. She stopped on the bridge and watched the stream trickling silver beneath it.

Inside, there were outstretched furs hanging on the walls and a stuffed boar over the bar. All along one wall was a replica model of a Bulgarian village, made with real wood and burned terracotta roof tiles. Colourful woven fabrics were draped outside some of the windows. "Let me guess," she said. "That's where the owner used to live."

"You got it!" he said. "Everything is traditional here."

A skillet of grilled aubergines, tomatoes and courgettes arrived steaming to their table.

She forced herself to eat more slowly this time but she kept looking at the watch on the wall. In the middle of their meal, a man came right up to their table and began serenading them, singing a happy song about how Orpheus had saved his wife Eurydice from Hades and Persephone by pleasing them with his beautiful lyre music.

"He didn't sing the rest of the story," she said, ordering another drink. "Orpheus lost Eurydice again upon returning from the Underworld, lost her forever this time."

"I don't think he'd sing all that to us whilst we're eating, it's not very romantic."

"Legend has it that Orpheus walks the shores of Plovdiv's rivers only no human can hear his song."

"Legend has it that Santa Claus exists," he snorted.

She finished her food and then promptly left.

"Are you seeing someone else?" he asked her the next day, on the bus. "Are you married or something?"

"What makes you say that?"

“You always disappear as if you’re in such a rush to get some place else.”

“Haven’t you heard the fairy tale of Cinderella? At midnight she turns back into the peasant servant girl.”

Paskal laughed and told her that she was too beautiful to be a peasant servant girl.

The following weekend he took her for a late evening ice cream in one of the parlours in Plovdiv city centre. She had four scoops and a wafer. And then ordered a sundae.

“You eat a lot,” he said. “I’ve never seen someone eat so much.”

“I’m on my feet all day, every day,” she replied, ordering a hot chocolate with whipped cream on top. And a flake.

“You haven’t asked what I do for a living yet,” he said.

She looked up over the remnants of her sundae, long silver spoon drizzling chocolate sauce. “It doesn’t matter what you do for a living. Why would I be interested in that? You do realise that the whole time you are making a living, you are doing the exact opposite. Nobody who works, lives.”

“But you work, I’ve seen you.”

“I never said that I was alive.”

He apologised for offending her and changed the subject, commented on the weather, how it looked like it was going to be a hot summer.

She wouldn’t let him walk her home. They parted outside the parlour and she waited there until he was round the corner and out of sight. She crossed the small courtyard and entered the park, hoping to lose herself in the darkness amongst the trees; the night, deep purple, was her blanket, or shroud, she wasn’t sure which. She found her cart full of her everything in the bushes where she’d left it. Nothing had been disturbed; it was just as it had been. She suddenly felt tired. It made a nice change to face the prospect of sleeping with a full belly. Before she found somewhere to sleep, she’d take a wash in the Singing Fountains.

When she reached them they were quiet and still. “Who has stolen your voice?” she asked, trailing a finger through the calm waters. “And why do you no longer dance?” She rummaged through her cart and found, buried deep beneath torn clothing and cardboard sheets, her lyre, still golden after all these years. Perching on the concrete rim of the fountains, she began to play a slow, contemplative melody, her voice, eventually, joining in.

Come to me,
Oh, come to me
and find your place
by the side of me.

Come this way,
Oh, come this way
and I'll give chase
by looking your way

Come to see,
Oh, come to see,
and we'll share this space
by the rivers and sea

Come the day,
Oh, come the day
when I see your face
by the break of day.

Come to me,
Oh, come to me
and find your place
by the side of me.

She sang long into the night, until a man, grey-faced, appeared the other side of the fountains, lyre in hand but silent. Perhaps he was playing but no human could hear him.

A bird called from the canopy of a nearby tree in answer to her own song. The moon was not quite a circle.

Parenthesis II

Dimitar closes the book, lays it on the desk, and rests for a second; it had been getting heavy in his shaking hands. The Story of the Ticket-Seller has reminded him of that journey to the Mall, Cassandra dragging him all the way. It wasn't the first or last time he felt as if he was in the hands of a wilful and bored toddler. He remembers how difficult it had been to tell her that he was leaving to find his mother, even though she'd been the one encouraging him to go. If he didn't turn up to read with her during the days when her parents were out she would first become annoyed but then start saying that she liked having him in the room with her whilst she read, which was odd because he was a boy and as everyone knows, all boys are disgusting. Cassandra was a riddle that would take years to solve.

Outside, it's raining, just as he'd predicted; only a light drizzle but he worries that they might have to call the whole thing off. Silva at the agency had mentioned something about a marquee if the worst came to the worst.

"Have you decided which story you're going to read out later?" The boy, standing in the doorway, startles Dimitar.

"I didn't see you there."

"It started raining. Well? Have you decided?"

"No, not yet." In the past he's left it until the very last moment, once he's got a feel for the audience, the atmosphere. Sometimes you can read the audience, just like you can a book; can tell if they want to hear something that will make them laugh or something that will make them cry.

But there is something else, he remembers, that he would like to read from, something that Silva knows nothing about. He finds the book amongst all the papers in his briefcase. He pulls it out, this new book, turning it over in his shaking hands, trying to steady them. It's a thick moleskin notebook, bursting at the seams with additional sheets of paper, leaflets, postcards. On the front page, he recognises Desislava's handwriting.

A Sense of History:

A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria

Although Desislava has written them, the words aren't hers.

The words belong to his father.

He remembers his father and how, in his later life, before he became too infirm, Stoyan travelled around Bulgaria for one last time. He'd never had any interest in writing a memoir or life-story, no matter how hard Dimitar tried to persuade him. What he did end up writing was a fusion of the three: part history book, part travelogue, part memoir. An ode to Bulgaria.

The pages are as delicate as Dimitar's hands and they crinkle as he turns them. He won't read all of it now, as he waits for the book launch, just the extracts from the locations he is thinking about now his thoughts are returning to his journey for his mother. This notebook is what he wants to read from later, not his own collection of stories.

Before he begins reading he looks up. The boy is gone, back out reading in the courtyard. It has stopped raining but the clouds still linger like shadows in doorways.

A Sense of History: A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria

Foreword

The notes written here will probably never be read.

I have no argument with that realisation; I can foresee no reason why anyone would want to read the ramblings of an old man, least of all the ramblings of an old historian. Indeed, could there be anything more tiresome? Perhaps the ramblings of an old accountant but that's a matter of taste. Now in my seventieth year it has struck me that time is leaving me behind. Struck is the wrong word. The realisation hasn't struck me like lightning or a heart attack (heaven forbid), rather, it is something that has gradually come to me over the last few months, when getting out of bed has become increasingly hard and when one forgets one's own name from time to time. In a world already dark through blindness, there is little more disconcerting than not being able to remember who you are.

Inevitably, there comes, then, the question of why I am writing, if not to be read. I write these notes simply because I've learnt many things and met many interesting people on my travels and I want to record them before my mind fails me entirely. That way, someone will be able to read them to me and hopefully, then, I'll remember. It is Dimitar, my son, who is the writer in the family so if you are looking for elegant prose and a thrilling narrative, I urge you to pick up his latest novel, *Mine The Stars*, available now from all good online retailers and surviving bookshops. If, on the other hand, you are looking for an utterly unbiased and informative account of the multi-faceted history of Bulgaria, I suggest you give up, stop your search entirely, and stick to novels – all history textbooks are nothing but fiction anyway, for the most part, and there is no such thing as utterly unbiased. That is something you learn after a lifetime of studying them.

What you will find in these notes, however, is a deeply personal, highly biased view of Bulgaria from a man who has lost his sight. Worry not, I'm no longer saddened by my blindness and shan't spend these pages mourning the loss of my eyesight. The incident was entirely my fault and I've managed to accept the consequences, live with them and move on, just slightly slower and more awkwardly than before. I only mention it because the viewpoint might seem a little unorthodox upon first reading. (Would you look at that? I've gone from having no reader to assuming this is being read after all!) I am writing about Bulgaria's towns and cities through the lens (an unfortunate metaphor, I'll grant you) of my remaining senses: smell, touch, taste, and sound. Should this prove a little disorienting at first, I apologise. There is, however, little I can do about it.

So, dear reader - whoever you are, wherever you are, *whenever* you are - take these notes for what they are: the reflections of a blind old historian who has nothing better to do with what little time he has left.

That way, you surely won't be disappointed. I hope.

Stoyan Popov: Plovdiv, 3rd November, 2045

When The Coach Departed

The taxi juddered and vibrated over the cobbles; the radio was too loud for so early in the morning.

Desislava, in the front seat, turned to the driver. "Is there any chance you could go a little faster please?"

The coach leaves in five minutes and I don't think they'll wait for us."

The driver said nothing, winked at Desislava, and sped up.

"Can you tell us where we're going yet?" asked Stoyan from the back.

Desislava had arrived very early that morning, before either Miti or Stoyan were awake. She'd clapped her hands and pounded on doors and when they asked her what was wrong and where they were going, all she'd told them was that there had been a change of plan and that they weren't going to the address in Stara Zagora. Desislava turned round to face Stoyan. "Do you remember I was telling you about my cousin, Radka, who works at the orphanage?"

"Vaguely..."

"I was on the phone to her last night. She's taking some of the orphans on a trip to Sofia today. They've been given money to hire a coach."

Miti leaned forward. "Sofia? You mean we're going to the Sofia address today?"

Desislava turned to him and smiled. "Yes. We start with the capital."

"Perfect!" Miti had always thought that the Sofia address looked the most promising. If his mother hadn't stayed in Plovdiv then it was more than likely she was in Sofia. Sofia was a large city, the biggest in Bulgaria, and just the sort of place his mother should be - somewhere busy and happening, with lots of people around to look after her.

"Are you sure we'll be allowed on the coach?" asked Stoyan.

"Yes, I cleared it all with Radka last night. They hadn't filled all the seats anyway. She said it's silly us getting there under our own steam when they had empty seats just begging to be taken."

The driver winked again, this time at his own reflection in the mirror, and pushed the taxi as fast as it could go.

~

The orphanage was on the banks of the Maritsa River.

Miti saw the coach before anybody else. “Look! Look, there it is!” The other side of the coach, a group of excited teenagers gathered together in front of the orphanage’s cracked frontage to have their photo taken before they boarded. For some reason, Miti had expected younger children when Desislava had mentioned the orphanage but the youngest of them must have been thirteen or fourteen.

“Thank goodness we’re not late,” said Desislava, helping Stoyan out of the taxi. The driver winked twice before driving off.

“Desi! I’m so glad you could make it!” A woman with dyed-red hair ran up to Desislava and embraced her. Tall and thin, they could have been sisters rather than cousins, only Radka didn’t wear glasses.

“I’m not sure how many speed limits we broke to get here,” said Desislava.

The woman noticed Miti standing there with his satchel. “So this must be Dimitar. I’ve heard so much about you.” She knelt down and held out a hand for him to shake. “I’ve saved you a special seat, right at the front.”

After Desislava introduced Stoyan, Radka led them to the front of the queue where some adults were waiting to board. “These kind people made this trip possible.” Radka said it first in Bulgarian, then in English.

A large man with a thick tyre-like neck stepped forward and shook their hands. Miti noticed the gold rings on his fingers. “It’s nothing to do with us,” he said with a southern American drawl. He gave Radka’s shoulders a tight squeeze. “We’re just spreading God’s love.”

Radka translated. Stoyan stepped forward. “God?”

“We’re from Louisiana, a Baptist church near Kentwood.”

The coach door opened with a hiss and Radka ushered everyone on board. Miti went to help his father up the steps but The Fat Christian got there first. “Don’t trouble yourself, Little Man.” With the assistance of his friend, The Fat Christian helped his father up the steps. Little *Man*? Didn’t the Fat Christian know he was Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up?

Radka showed him his special seat at the front. His father was meant to sit next to him but he was keen to go and sit with the nice Christian man, as long as someone was able to translate for him.

“That’s fine,” said Miti who now had two special seats at the front.

With a judder, the coach sprang to life and set off for Sofia. Everyone on the left side had pulled across their orange pleated curtains to shut out the blazing sun. Every window was open but the movement of the coach only managed to swirl around the moistureless air, the dust motes and the discomfort.

Miti shifted and fidgeted and couldn't get himself settled; the air was just too hot. His t-shirt was already sticking to his back and he could feel damp patches blossoming under his arms. He tried to use his e-reader which he'd quickly stashed in his satchel that morning. He wanted to read again the story about Sara Crewe and Miss Minchin, who said that all houses were like their owners. He wanted to read how she behaved like a little princess even though she was now a pauper following her father's death. But he couldn't focus; Miti was beginning to realise that it wasn't the same, that it didn't feel like reading. You had to turn the page with a button, not at all like turning the pages of a real book. Still, it was the next best thing and it would have to do, but staring at the screen whilst the coach was moving made him feel nauseous. Reluctantly, he tucked the e-reader back in his satchel.

To make the journey more endurable, he tried to imagine he was on a ship instead of a coach. Perhaps a Tall Ship just like the one Sara Crewe must have taken on her long journey from India to England. Ships had always fascinated Miti because he hadn't been on one. He'd never even been to the sea. The orange curtains that rose and fell with the slight breeze from the open windows were the sails, pulling them across the waves. From his vantage point behind the helm, he could see the sea ahead, dark grey and flat; there could be no telling what lay beneath the surface, twenty-thousand leagues below.

Miti was sitting right in front of the helmsman who clasped the huge wheel with both hands, full concentration on the horizon. Then there was the Captain of the ship, Captain Radka. When she wasn't strolling up and down the aisles checking on her crew, she was in conversation with Desislava who sat with his father towards the stern, translating for the Christians. Miti felt like a stowaway, he would shrink into his seat and pretend to close his eyes whenever the Captain walked past. The resemblance to Desislava was striking, though the Captain smiled much more readily and she had a carefree manner which affected her whole demeanour so that when she stopped to speak to a crewmember her body faced them, open, arms gesticulating, face smiling. She threw her whole body into the conversations; something Desislava with her folded arms never quite managed to do.

Miti found himself thinking about attempting to read on the e-reader again and thought about Cassandra. He hadn't had time to tell her he was going but Desislava had said they'd be back later that evening.

Thinking about Cassandra made a funny feeling rise in his stomach which he wasn't at all familiar, or entirely comfortable, with. He dismissed it as sea-sickness and diverted his thoughts back to the ship. The wind must have been growing in strength for the ship was picking up speed. The Captain was at the bow, one arm on the back of the helmsman's chair, the other pointing out over the dark waves, plotting their course not by the stars but by the signs that sprouted from the sea as if out of nowhere.

"Hello." The unfamiliar voice had come from somewhere behind him. Tentatively, Miti turned round to find two pairs of eyes watching him. One pair, with irises so dark that each eye looked like one big pupil, was peeping from the small crack between his two special seats. The other pair was coming from above the seats and belonged to a boy with a large forehead and tousled hazelnut hair.

"Hello," said the mouth belonging to one of the pairs of eyes, Miti couldn't tell which.

"Hello," replied Miti nervously.

The eyes that were peering over the chair suddenly grew a nose, a mouth, a chin. Everything about the boy looked oddly stretched as if someone was pulling him in two different directions at once. Suddenly, amphibian-like fingers crept around the headrest and pulled him up further. He must have been kneeling on his chair. He wore a burgundy T-Shirt; there were smudges of mud down his long arms. Then he was joined by the owner of the dark eyes.

She looked young, younger than the boy, her body small and frail, delicate fingers clasping the headrest upon which her chin now perched. Her eyes filled her face like dark lakes on an otherwise monotonous landscape, her black hair was straight and wispy. She looked caught between perpetual youth and eternal old age, between happiness and sadness, somewhere not quite in the middle but in a constant shifting between the two. One moment her eyes, wide, were sad and her mouth was playful, then it would swap and her eyes would light up at the same time that her mouth curved downwards. Miti studied her closely. Could it be that she was...? No, Miti dismissed the thought from his mind and concentrated on what the boy was saying.

"She's the oldest one here," he said, nodding towards the girl. "Weird, isn't it? She's the oldest one out of the lot of us." The girl smiled and frowned but said nothing as if this was a usual way of being introduced to people. "She's twenty-two, I think. Are you twenty-two?"

"Yes," said the girl who wasn't a girl.

"She's twenty-two but I'm fourteen. There's something wrong with her, everyone says. She looks younger than I am, don't you think?"

Miti regarded her again but didn't know what to say. His first thought flooded back to him. Could it be...? Yes! Yes, it could. Sitting behind him all this time had been Sara Crewe who, the book told him, often seemed older than her age, so wise were her words and her face.

"Are you with them?" The boy nodded to the stern of the ship where The Fat Christian sat with his father. Before Miti could answer the boy spoke again. "You can't be with them, you're Bulgarian. What was that you were playing with earlier?"

"What do you mean?" asked Miti who wanted the boy to be quiet for a moment so that he could talk to Sara.

"The silver thing," said the boy. "I saw you playing with it. My name's Valentin. She's called Snezhana." *Snezhana? He must be mistaken, she's called Sara.* "What's your name?"

"Dimitar Popov."

"What was that you were playing with earlier, Dimitar Popov?"

"Just a game," said Miti, checking his father was still at the back of the ship and couldn't hear.

"Let's play with it, let's have a go!"

"It's not really that much fun."

"Let's have a look anyway, we're bored."

Sara spoke this time. "Please can we have a look? We'll be really careful?" This really was the ship that Sara had travelled on to get to England because here she was, not exactly how she would have looked, but exactly how her spirit might have been – constantly hovering somewhere between adulthood and childhood. Had Sara herself not said in the story that she felt she had lived a long, long time?

Reluctantly, though still in awe of Sara, Miti reached inside his satchel for the e-reader. He hesitated for a moment before handing it over to Sara rather than Valentin.

"Here, let me have a look!" cried Valentin and he snatched it from her hands. Miti wanted to tell him to give it back to Sara but he stopped himself. Valentin had clearly never seen an e-reader before because he had no idea how to switch it on. "How does it start? What do I do?"

"Let Dimitar show you," said Sara.

Not ready to relinquish complete control of his new toy, Valentin held it out, over the headrest and closer to Miti. "Show me what to do to turn it on, Dimitar Popov." Miti pointed silently to the correct button.

Valentin pressed it. An icon appeared and asked if the user wished to continue from where they had left off.

“What’s this? American?” cried Valentin, scandalised.

“It’s English, actually.”

“I can’t read English!” He pushed a button at random. The screen changed, text appeared like memories released from some hidden store.

“This can’t be a game!” said Valentin, his voice laced with disappointment. “It’s just writing. It’s not a game, it’s a -”

Miti snatched the e-reader from Valentin before he could go any further.

“Hey!” shouted Valentin. With a petulant look upon his face he twisted back into his seat, disappearing below the headrest.

Sara watched it all, blinking. “May I have a look?” she asked, her delicate fingers outstretched.

“Only because it’s you, Sara,” Miti said, handing it to her gently.

“You’re a funny thing,” laughed Sara, her face a mixture of bemusement and mirth. She took the e-reader a lot more carefully than Valentin, held it like some object that demanded reverence. She read the page on the screen slowly, her face full of concentration. “I like it,” she said, eventually. “I didn’t understand all the words. I find English very hard to read. I like the way the boy climbs through the roof and changes her room to give her all the food and things to make her warm. What happens when she wakes up?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t read that far yet.”

“Well I like it.” She handed the e-reader back to him. “Did you come here with your father?”

“Yes.”

“What’s his name?”

“Stoyan.”

“A good name. I liked your story. Why is the girl in the attic?”

“Because she lost her father and all her riches got taken away.”

“Where’s her mother?”

“She doesn’t have one. And neither do I. Not at the moment, anyway.”

Sara smiled, her eyes looked sad. “Neither do I. It is sad, isn’t it?” She looked thoughtful for a moment, then she asked: “Where are you going? Are you coming to the capital with us?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been before?”

“No, have you?”

“Never. Why are you going now, with us?”

“We’re looking for my mother.”

A look of knowing swept across Sara’s face momentarily. “I see. So you do have a mother?”

“Yes, but we can’t find her. She’s gone somewhere and we don’t know where.”

“That is also sad. It is difficult.”

“What is?”

“Losing a mother.”

“I’ve only lost her for a while. My father lost his bank card once but he found it three days later down the back of the armchair.”

“What if you don’t find her?”

Miti didn’t have an answer to that question.

“I’m sorry, Dimitar, I didn’t mean to - ”

“It’s ok.” Then Miti had a thought. The book he was reading was one his mother was familiar with, she’d know Sara too. “Have you seen her?”

Sara sighed. “No I don’t think I have.”

“Ok.”

A long, drawn-out silence then Sara shifted in her seat. “So you’re not with those American people?”

“No, what are they doing here?”

Sara shrugged. “Some foreign people visit the orphanage, from time to time. They take us places, bring us things. When they arrived yesterday they brought with them a suitcase full of posters and pens and paper. Now they’re taking us to the capital. I don’t know why but it’s nice. I’ve always wanted to see Sofia.”

At that moment, a girl with long straight blonde hair and golden hoop earrings burst in upon them, her mouth, full of teeth, gaping with laughter.

“Listen to this!” she hissed, proffering to Sara an Mp3 player turned up to full volume so the music, tinny and somehow absent, blared from the white headphones.

“...My neck, my back...Lick my pussy and my crack...”

And then she was gone, swirling and stumbling down the aisle of the ship to the stern with The Christians, the music floating after her like a perfume, joining in with the laughter and cat-calls of some of her shipmates.

Miti stared at Sara and Sara, blushing, stared back. "I'm sorry you had to hear that," she said before disappearing from his sight. Valentin had blocked the gap in between the seats with a sweater. It left Miti wondering about the meaning of what he had heard on the Mp3 player. Perhaps The Christians, when they heard it, would make of it more than he had.

The ship maintained its steady course. Miti thought he would try again to read the story of Sara Crewe. It couldn't be much longer before they were docked at their destination, ready to leave the ship behind and search for his mother.

He would have a wonderful story to tell when he found her, and maybe Sara, who was always making up adventures, would join him in the telling of it.

The Story of the Orphan

Unlike some of the other orphans, she wasn't dumped on a doorstep, or taken away from her parents. Her parents weren't dead or missing. Unlike some of the others, she can remember the exact moment she became an orphan.

I can hear movement outside my bedroom. Someone, light-footed, is outside. In the strip of light underneath the door I can see shadows moving. My parents came in this afternoon and said they wouldn't be in to see me tonight. They are off out somewhere, a charity benefit or something. Mother wore her finest pearls and a pretty dress I'd never seen before.

Her room was small but it was all she knew. Inside her room was a desk, a full bookcase, her small bed and a chest for her clothes and teddy bears. A small circular window was in the sloped ceiling which she couldn't look out of, even if she stood on her bed. She was born small, too small, and, in this room, didn't have much space to grow. She knew that outside her room was a long corridor with a door at the end. She saw it when her mother and father came into the room but beyond that, she didn't know anything else. She'd never been down the corridor, never been through that door. She tried to leave her room once. The door was locked.

I've read in my books about monsters. And I've seen them on television. Monsters can live in shadows. Sometimes, the shadows are the monsters. I watch the shadows moving across the crack under the door. I am so still I can hear breathing coming from the other side. I wrap myself up in my duvet covers and hope the monster will go away. There's a noise. A monster is turning the handle.

The little boy who opened the door could only have been seven or eight years old. He wore velvet pyjamas, deep purple. When he opened the door and saw the girl there, wrapped up in her duvet covers, his eyes widened in shock and fear. He stood for a second, not moving a muscle, and then he turned on his heels and ran back down the long, carpeted corridor, leaving the door open.

I shout after the little boy. "Come back! Don't go." The little boy stops in his tracks. Nervously, he turns back to me. I hold out my hand to show him I don't mean any harm. "I won't hurt you." He starts walking, slowly, back down the corridor towards me.

“What are you doing in the cupboard?” asked the boy. He could hardly see her now, the lights weren’t on in the room. He kept walking towards her, until he was in the doorway again.

“This isn’t a cupboard,” said the girl in the duvet. He noticed her hand was outstretched towards him. “This is my bedroom.”

“I thought it was a cupboard. It’s always locked. I’ve never been up here before.”

“Up where?”

“Up here.”

I don’t really know what he is talking about but I can see he is still afraid.

“My name’s Snezhana,” I say. I unwrap myself from the duvet covers, now that I know he isn’t a monster.

“My name’s Zlatan,” he says.

“How did you get in my house?” I wonder if he knows my mother and father; if perhaps he is the child of a friend of ours. I have never met another child. Not to talk to, anyway. I see them sometimes on television.

The boy looked at the girl and didn’t understand. “This is my house,” he said and part of him was cross that she should think otherwise.

“That’s funny, because I thought this was my house.” She took away her hand.

Zlatan crossed his arms. “This is my house and I don’t think you’re meant to be here in the cupboard. Just wait till I tell my mother and father about this. I know they told me that I was forbidden to come up into the attic but they’ll be happy I did when I tell them that there’s an imposter in the house.”

“The attic? I’m not an imposter.”

“You are! When Mother and Father get back from their charity function tonight, I’ll tell them straight away and then you’ll be sorry!”

I have a thought. “What are your mother and father’s names?”

He looks confused for a second. “Mother and father,” he says.

“No, I mean their first names.”

“Samuil and Rosa,” said Zlatan, warily. The girl, whoever she was, was asking very strange questions.

“Those are the names of my parents,” she said with a smile.

“Really?”

“Yes! Mother wears the prettiest dresses and today she wore her best pearls and father always looks smart in his suits and dinner jackets.”

“My name’s Zlatan Enev.”

“And my name’s Snezhana Eneva.”

“But that means...I’m your brother.”

“And I’m your sister!” The words sound strange and alien in my mouth. I’ve longed for a sibling, ever since I can remember. In all the books the brothers and sisters spent time together and played together. I’m pleased to see that Zlatan doesn’t look afraid or upset anymore, so I jump out of bed, run towards him, and give him a big hug. He hugs me back, just like a brother would.

“You’re very small,” he says for a while and I suppose that I am. Standing next to him, I only come up to his shoulders. “How old are you?” he asks.

“I’m ten,” I say. “How old are you?”

“I’m seven and a bit,” said Zlatan. “How come I’m taller than you?”

“Maybe because you’re a boy?” suggested Snezhana.

They spent a while studying each other closely. They imitated each other’s movements, as if looking in a mirror. When Snezhana held up her hand, Zlatan did the same. When Zlatan pulled a funny face, Snezhana copied and tried not to giggle.

“Where do you live?” asked Snezhana.

“Downstairs,” said the boy. “I’m not meant to be up here. Would you like me to show you?”

“I’d love to go and have a look.” My mind and heart are racing as my new brother takes my hand and leads me downstairs. The feel of the carpet under my feet is strange and I walk slowly, not sure what to expect. He shows me the whole house – the living room with its gold mirrors and huge fireplace, the dining room with chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. It becomes clear to me that I really have been living in the attic. Why would mother and father keep me up there locked away from my baby brother? There’s not enough time to think about that because the next stop on our tour is the kitchen. I have never seen anything like this before. I’ve read about places like this but the house is

beyond my wildest imagination. Pots and pans hanging from hooks above an island in the centre of the room. Dark marble surfaces polished so that I can see my reflection in them. A pantry full of food, bigger than my own room in the attic. My bedroom is a cupboard after all.

"I have the best idea in the world," he said, his eyes lighting up.

"What's that?"

"Let's bake them a cake. They'll be so happy we found each other. It'll be such a surprise for when they come home."

"I love the idea," I say. "Although I've never baked a cake before."

"That's fine. I'll show you how. I used to cook cakes with my nanny." It makes me sad to think that Zlatan bakes cakes with a nanny and I don't. I wonder why I don't have a nanny as well but then I begin to think maybe I do. My food is left outside my room twice a day on a little bronze tray. I used to think it was Mother or Father but now I'm thinking that maybe it was someone else.

As we cook we giggle and play fight. We make such a mess of the beautiful kitchen. There's flour and butter everywhere. We can no longer see our reflections in the surfaces.

Suddenly we hear a noise from somewhere in the house.

When they walked into the kitchen, they were stunned into silence. Years later, when Rosa tries not to think about what happened that night, she can't remember what she noticed first: the state of the kitchen itself or Snezhana standing in the kitchen with her brother.

Father is very angry. I can see it on his face. Mother is in tears. I don't like to see her crying; I've never seen her crying, especially not whilst she's wearing her best pearls.

The next day, they took her to the orphanage.

On the way there, she sat next to her mother in the car, looking out at Sofia passing them by through the tinted windows. She thought she was on a journey, her very first time in a car.

I can't believe how fast it's going. I want to open the window and hang my head out but mother won't let me. She looks cross, as if I've done something wrong. Yesterday father led my

brother out of the kitchen, still covered in flour and butter, and mother grabbed me and took me straight back to my bedroom without saying a word. She didn't seem to care that I'd found Zlatan.

Now she's holding her hand to her mouth and looking out of the other window, her body shifted away from mine. I scuttle over and try to hold her hand but she won't let me.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"We're just going somewhere," said Rosa, not turning to face her daughter.

"Where? Are we going to the park?"

"No, not the park."

"Then where?"

Mother turns to me then, dropping her gloved hand to her lap. "You ask too many questions," she says, "it'll be better for you if you don't ask questions."

But there's one more that I need to ask because today, for the first time, I'm not sure of the answer.

I put my hand on hers. "Do you love me?"

The mother took her hand away, looked at her daughter. Through red, tired eyes, she said: "I tried." And that was the last thing she said to her daughter.

Outside a plain office, Snezhana overheard the conversation between the orphanage director and her mother.

"You must have noticed how different she is."

"Of course, but -"

"It's the circles we move in, that's the problem. They aren't as tolerant as you or I. They don't like 'different'. They'd take one look at her and ask questions. They might think there was something wrong with me, or her father, and we can't afford for that to happen at the moment. We've made up our minds. Where do I sign her over?"

That is the moment I became an orphan. Every year for my birthday, I'm allowed in the orphanage kitchens to bake myself a cake. In the icing I carve my brother's initials with my finger.

A Sense of History: A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria

Sofia

Allow me to say that the sounds of Sofia are, by degrees, shuffling feet or silence, car alarms or bells. The smell of Sofia is McDonald's. Needless to say there are other sounds and smells – some more pleasant than others I hasten to add – but these are the ones that stir memories for me in the way a twig pushed into a riverbed loosens the silt into otherwise clear water. I have returned, an old man of seventy, to the capital where I grew up, being led by my son who jots down the notes as I speak them. We are in a hotel room, I forget its name, and I am tired after an hour's walk through the city. Earlier today, Dimitar led me to the central boulevard lined with shops. He allowed me to pause and to listen to the sound of feet shuffling past, although now everybody seems more urgent than they used to be, in a hurry to get somewhere.

As a boy, I used to queue for hours, sometimes days, outside the local store, shuffling forward slowly. Even though you had written your name down on a list, there was never a guarantee you'd be able to purchase the item you were after. When she queued, Mother used to take my brother, Ventseslav, and me along because, even aged ten, we dwarfed most people. We must have looked somewhat intimidating as we lined up next to her, as if she'd brought along two heavyweight bodyguards from her own private Politburo. Sometimes I'd even scowl at our neighbours in the queue and try to look menacing (although Ventseslav said I looked constipated and Mother told me off). Back then, everything seemed slower because we were either part of the long queues or the slow-moving protest marches that littered my early life. Swathes of people like my mother resisted the communist state regime and would descend on Sofia to make their voices heard.

There was a lot of waiting in Sofia and silence was the full stop to the noise of the shuffling feet of the queues and the marches. I remember one march and the crowds were ten thousand strong; everywhere you looked were bodies pressing against each other in solidarity. We watched the politburo comrades standing on the steps of the Palace of Justice, their faces hidden by black umbrellas and high-collared raincoats. Once noisy with righteous indignation the crowds fell silent, waiting for something to happen, some announcement, some recognition that change was on the way. In all the excitement, Ventseslav accidentally dropped his placard on my little toe which, I'm rather ashamed to admit, made me cry out in pain, destroying the silence. My cry was mistaken by those around me as a cry of defiance to communism and ten thousand voices erupted in an echo to my own. Either that, or ten thousand placards were simultaneously dropped on ten thousand toes. The marches were important as they symbolised the growing discontent with the communist regime which finally

ended in 1990. My father never joined us at these rallies. In fact, it became the main factor in the swift and unceremonious breakdown of my parents' marriage when I was fourteen.

Earlier this afternoon, Dimitar guided me, slowly, to Battenberg Square, the largest in Sofia and, until 1999, the site of Georgi Dimitrov's mausoleum. 1999 was the same year that I left Sofia to move to Plovdiv and settle down with Grace; we were newly married and still young and excitable. We left shortly after the democratic government tried to destroy Dimitrov's mausoleum. Four times. It had been built to withstand a direct nuclear attack so over the course of a week the military moved in and, becoming increasingly embarrassed when the choking mist of dust and smoke cleared to reveal the mausoleum still standing, attempted to raze to the ground the final resting place of the old communist leader. Many of us lined up outside the blast zone to watch and take pictures - more shuffling feet. After every blast came the sound of protesting car alarms. These modern alarms complained against the ringing of the old church bells like children rebelling against their parents, louder and more insistent. Dimitrov's mausoleum stood next to the magnificent Alexander Nevsky Cathedral where the bells weigh one hundred tonnes. Sofianites hated this mausoleum, a symbol of the communist regime. During my early childhood, every state holiday was celebrated with a compulsory march past the tomb, the leaders of the communist party watching on from a balcony, waving their flags.

The sound of the Sofian bells remind me that years earlier, in 1990, after the fall of communism, I went with my college to an open air plaza called The Bells on the outskirts of Sofia which still stands today. The Bells had been constructed under the auspices of Lyudmila Zhivkova whose goal was to gather children from around the world as ambassadors and promoters of peace. There were other colleges and schools visiting when I went, children and teenagers from around Bulgaria. My brother's French Lycée was there too - I spied him amongst the others in his class, towering over them, with that shy look about him as if he was always trying to hide behind the body that made him stand out so much. The Bells is so named because it contains 98 national bells from countries all around the world. Bulgaria's weighs 1300kg because the Bulgarian state has existed for 1300 years. It's a monument more successful than the 1300 Years Monument built in 1981 in a nearby park which began falling down a matter of days after its construction; a hideous monstrosity of twisted metal that is affectionately known as The Fallen Messerschmitt because it looks like a crash-landed aircraft.

McDonald's arrived in 1994 and heralded capitalism. We had heard of it, we had seen the golden rainbow in adverts, television and cinema from the West - like a fabled symbol of hope - but at the end of this rainbow was not a pot of gold but a hamburger. More shuffling feet as my brother and I queued up to get inside for our first taste, a sign that the old regime was finally over and done with. My father had been one of the lucky few sent abroad as part of his manufacturing business during the

socialist 50s and 60s although, as he was continually reminding us, he certainly didn't regard himself as 'lucky'. To travel abroad during those times was a duty not a right; as far as he was concerned it was an excursion into enemy territory where his mind was at risk of coercion from a pervasive foreign ideology. The capitalist countries had it all wrong, he'd say. I remember him saying that the queues we had in Bulgaria were a sign of plenty, a sign that the people were getting access to all the goods that Bulgaria had to offer. He told me that when he'd been abroad, to Germany if I remember rightly, there were department stores filled with goods but completely empty of customers because there was no one there who could afford to buy them. My brother and I queued for hours at McDonald's, we were in our late teens and had new girlfriends by our sides (it would be several years until I met Grace) but in the end they ran clean out of hamburgers and we didn't get what we'd come for. Perhaps our father had been right; capitalism wasn't so different from communism after all, we thought, as the four of us left McDonald's in search of food.

Dimitar informed me today that Sofia celebrated the tenth anniversary of McDonald's in Bulgaria with music and fireworks at the Hilton Hotel. He led me to one of the newer McDonald's restaurants built in the city centre and the memories that the smell evoked, of my brother and father and queuing for hamburgers, were shocking in their vibrancy. Though there were bustling queues we moved forward quickly; this was, after all, fast food and they weren't like the old queues. There are hundreds of McDonald's just like this one all over Bulgaria now, at least one in every city so I'm told, and there will never be a shortage of hamburgers.

When The Ship Docked In The Capital

Sofia was the busiest place Miti had ever been.

The swift tide of people sweeping past the ship as it docked alongside the pavement threatened to whisk away everyone alighting. Miti helped lead Stoyan down the steps and on to the pavement, Desislava following close behind.

The Captain was trying to form her crew into some semblance of order, lining them up alongside the ship; The Christians, excited, were at the front looking around - pilgrims on the new frontier.

Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Miti turned to see Desislava standing there. "Radka says we're to meet back here at One," she said. "That gives us three hours to find the house."

"It's plenty of time. We know the name of the street. All we need is a map," said Miti. He looked around. The Captain, her crew, and the excited bunch of pilgrims were heading in the direction of a large white building a short way off. Miti watched them go, noticing Sara and Valentin, towards the back of the line, their eyes, awe-struck.

"Maybe we could ask someone who lives here," suggested Stoyan.

Miti looked at the passers-by. Two men in white linen suits walked side by side, briskly, but uttered no word, swans in silent communion. A woman with a shock of bright orange hair shouted into her phone as she moved, her tan leather handbag clutched tightly under her arm. Another man in a dark suit used an umbrella as a walking stick. Miti looked up; no sign of rain.

Desislava was busy rearranging his father's collar and he knew that it was up to him to ask someone if they had heard of the road where his mother was now living. Bravely, he stepped forward, into the sea of people. A young man and a woman, holding hands, headed straight for him, barely noticing him until the last second when they separated, hands joining back together on the other side of him. A shoal of teenagers was approaching but Miti didn't want to ask them because their wide grins were those of piranhas so he side-stepped out of their way as they cackled and chatted. Then someone knocked into the back of him: a woman with auburn hair. She wore a slick business suit and didn't even turn to apologise, choosing instead to carry on as if

nothing had happened. Miti knew for certain that if she had turned, he would have come face to face with his mother.

It had to be her, he knew it. In this sea of people he had found her; a drop in the ocean, a pearl in the clutching shell of an oyster.

“Mother!” he shouted but his voice was lost above the noise of the city.

“Dimitar?” Stoyan’s voice reached out now, casting its net, and searching desperately for a response.

Miti had streaked off after his mother who was moving against the tide of people. “Mother! Wait, please, it’s me, you must wait!” Miti followed but he wasn’t quick enough. He bumped into passers-by who shot him angry looks, and for seconds at a time he lost sight of his mother. But then she bobbed into sight again, her powerful legs propelling her forward until – BANG! – she ploughed straight into someone who had run out of nowhere, a manatee of a man with a big nose and big clumsy hands. The man lolloped off oblivious but Miti’s mother had lost her handbag, it had fallen to the floor, spilling its contents across the seabed. Notebook, lipstick, phone, pen. Miti was there, on his knees, his hands reaching out and clasping for the notebook the lipstick the phone the...his mother’s hand was on the pen and so was his. They touched. He looked up and his mother was now so much unlike his mother that his hand recoiled. Haggard, she was much older, wrinkles crumpled her face and her hair looked too young on her head as if she had snatched it from his mother and was trying to claim it for her own; the stolen shell of a hermit crab. He hated her; he hated this imposter, this stupid Miss Minchin of a woman. Then came another hand on his shoulder, Desislava’s, pulling him up, up away from the impostor-mother and away from the seaweed-like legs all around him, away to the side of the pavement where his father waited useless and worried. In that moment Miti hated him as well.

“Don’t run away like that,” said Stoyan. “We need to find your mother together.”

Miti said nothing, tears prickled at the back of his eyes but he steeled himself and wouldn’t let them escape.

Eventually they found a map at a circular kiosk nearby. It took a while for Desislava to locate exactly where they were. She had to ask the kiosk owner and the two hovered over the map together. Whilst they talked and whilst Stoyan stood idly by, Miti went for a short walk. He wanted to take a closer look at the peculiar-looking structure he’d noticed when they’d arrived, peeking above the trees of a nearby park.

It was a large and messy structure, as if a petulant giant-child had tired of creating a huge metallic tower, screwed it up and moved on to other, more exciting, games. The base was sectioned off with fences covered in multi-coloured graffiti. Hovering over a bench nearby was a woman searching through some plastic bags and talking to herself. Miti was close enough to hear what she was saying.

“It must be here somewhere, it must be here somewhere.” The same words, over and over again.

“Have you lost something?” ventured Miti who was intrigued by this woman. She had dark skin, the colour of the patches on his father’s favourite jacket. Her head was covered by an old hat and her jacket and skirt must once have looked smart. Now they were covered in a thick layer of dirt. Every so often she’d stop searching through the bags and scratch the back of her hands.

“It must be here somewhere. What? Did you say something to me?” The woman spoke without even looking up at Miti.

“I asked if you’d lost something.”

“Yes, yes, Stanka has. It was here yesterday when the sign nearly fell down and Stanka is sure it’s going to fall today and Stanka will have to put it back before anybody notices.”

“What sign?”

“Ah, good, you haven’t noticed. There is hope yet. It must be here somewhere.” With a sudden great effort, the woman emptied the contents of her plastic bags over the bench. “Now where could it be?” She continued rifling through all manner of objects on the bench: crisp packets, odd socks, a photo frame with no glass, needles, a silver spoon. Then she seemed to remember Miti’s question. “The word.” She pointed up at the structure. “It’s the only one left. They all started falling down, like dead birds. BANG!” Miti jumped as the woman struck the bench with a fist. “They hit the floor – BANG BANG BANG – and now this is the last one left and Stanka has to be here to pick it up before anybody notices that it’s fallen off.”

“What does it say?”

“It’s just a word. One word. The only one left. Of course, Stanka is not my real name.”

Miti was confused. “It’s not?”

“Of course it’s not! Had to have it changed, all of us, we did. The Turks. Many of us left this country – we didn’t have to leave but we were told to. They changed our names. Stanka has forgotten what her real name is but she’ll remember it one day. She writes them down in a book, all the names she can remember before they were changed to Bulgarian names but none of them fit.”

“I don’t understand,” admitted Miti.

“No, no, I don’t suppose it is about understanding. We had to move. Carried what we could over the border. Made friends along the way. Had to because there were enough enemies for everybody anyway. Sold my house for one lev but don’t think I’m not rich. Stanka’s as rich as a prince’s slave. And now I’ve come back here, to Bulgaria, finally. If only I could find what I was looking for.”

“What is it?”

“Aha! Here it is! Stanka knew it would be here somewhere.” She was holding an almost empty tube of glue rolled up like a chameleon’s tongue. “The word that’s left. It’s from the song, the old song, have you heard it? *Go, reborn people, go towards the bright future.* It gives hope, it’s good to give hope. Now, tell Stanka, is it still there? Her back’s not as good as it used to be. She can’t always look up to see if it’s still there.”

“What?”

“The word, is it still up there, on the monument?”

Miti looked up, it really was an ugly construction, he wouldn’t have called it a monument at all. But there, on the side, hanging precariously, was the word Stanka had mentioned.

“Good. Now you watch over it for Stanka whilst she goes to find a ladder and a toilet.”

Miti didn’t have time to protest. Stanka hobbled off, hunch-backed, and disappeared remarkably quickly around the other side of the monument. Miti wished he hadn’t been so nosey. He peered up at the word which looked just about ready to fall down. He wondered if it did give hope. And who was there for it to give hope to? Nobody walking past paid it the slightest bit of notice.

He did not wait for long; Desislava came to find him and told him his father was waiting for him back by the kiosk. Stanka hadn’t yet returned but he knew he couldn’t keep his father waiting. He left the monument, without looking back. Stanka would be back soon, he was sure, to look after that one word – ‘reborn’ – and wait for it to fall.

~

A while later, they were lost again.

“I have no idea where we are.” Desislava was holding up the map one way, then suddenly she’d flip it around and study it from a completely different angle but her head was shaking and her brow furrowed. “Why are none of these named?”

Very few of the smaller streets had signs, so it was hard to pinpoint where they were, least of all where they wanted to go. Sofia didn’t care though, it bustled around them and got annoyed with them standing on the corner of a busy junction underneath an elevated booth containing a policewoman.

“Have we passed any famous landmarks that we can find on the map?” asked Stoyan.

Miti detected a note of frustration in his father’s voice. “We were near Stanka’s monument,” said Miti. “What was that called?”

“What do you mean, Stanka’s monument?”

“Where you found me. In the park.”

“I’m not sure what that one’s called,” replied Desislava. “The man in the kiosk mentioned something about a falling Messerschmitt.”

“Ah,” said Stoyan. “That sounds like the 1300 Years of Bulgaria Monument. There were many complications in its construction; it wasn’t even finished when they came to unveil it, despite their best efforts. They call it many names, the Fallen Messerschmitt being one of them. It’s not exactly pretty.”

Desislava was still looking at the map. “Whatever it was, we’ve been walking for at least fifteen minutes now.” She studied again, hard. “Look, I think we’re here and if we take this road and then this one we might end up here.”

“Where’s ‘here’?” asked Stoyan.

Desislava pushed her glasses up her nose. “I’m sorry. I think we’ll find ourselves at the memorial church. But I might be wrong. Sorry.”

Stoyan smiled. “You don’t have to keep apologising. Come on; let’s see if we can find what we’re looking for.”

~

Quite clearly, it wasn’t the house where his mother was living. The sinking feeling he’d had when he’d clashed with the impostor-mother earlier that day returned to the pit of his stomach. He had an overwhelming

urge to sit cross-armed and cross-legged on the floor right where he was, in the middle of the pavement opposite Number 12 Nicova Street, and not move until his mother found him or until he died or whichever came the soonest. Quite clearly it wasn't his mother's house because it wasn't a house at all. Number 12 Nicova Street was a shop, a shoe shop, with a flat roof that held no space for an apartment above. The shoes were lined up in the window in a rainbow of colours that started with white trainers and ended up with red stilettos and even from where Miti was standing he could see that they were none of them very special. As if supporting this conclusion, the shop was in the midst of a huge clearance sale; the proprietor obviously didn't think much of the collection either and was trying to get rid of the lot.

Desislava had to explain to Stoyan why they had suddenly stopped because Miti wasn't in the mood for talking.

"Maybe she's working there?" suggested Stoyan after a moment's thought.

Of course! thought Miti, *of course!* That was the only explanation. The address she'd given was not her new home address but her new place of work; she'd moved to Sofia to start a new job after all. It all made sense, why hadn't he thought of that himself?

Without looking for any traffic he lurched forward into the road, narrowly missed by a cyclist. Desislava gasped as the cyclist swerved and cursed.

"What? What's happened?" asked Stoyan but before Desislava could answer Miti had disappeared inside the shop.

He approached one of the shop assistants behind the till and asked if she'd seen his mother. When the assistant shrugged her shoulders and nodded the Bulgarian 'no', Miti asked the same question again, just to make sure, but the assistant's response was the same. Another worker came over, through some doors at the back of the shop and Miti spoke to her. This one smiled but then after Miti had finished speaking she mirrored the actions of her colleague. Her shoulders shrugged. Her head nodded with regret. But it was a regret that could never measure up to how heavy his own heart was feeling.

Miti said nothing else. Instead, he went berserk. He snatched the nearest pair of shoes from a customer who was sitting on a chair waiting for the assistant to help her and threw them across the shop. Then he charged for the window and kicked and lashed out at all the racks on the display so that the rainbow of colours was now polluted and disordered, scattered across the shop. He jumped up and down in the window, his face red and angry, and nobody – the assistants, the customers – nobody stopped him or tried to calm him down. After

kicking over the remaining rack, Miti jumped down from the window display, left the shop and – again without looking – crossed the road to the pavement where his father and Desislava stood.

“Let’s go,” he croaked, his throat dry.

~

Sara Crewe was at the back of the snaking line waiting to board the coach. For once, Valentin wasn’t with her. The Captain was by the door, counting everybody on board. Sara turned and saw them approaching. “Did you find your mother?” she asked. Miti said nothing. “It’ll be fine,” she said. “In the end.”

Miti thought of the ends of books and wondered how long it would be until the end of all this; whether the end meant when he found his mother or some other ending that hadn’t been written for him yet. “Did you have fun?” he asked, wanting to change the subject.

“Yes, we did. We saw the Russian church, the shops, the parks and the Houses of Parliament. We weren’t allowed in though because there were too many of us.”

“Where are we going now? Back to Plovdiv?”

“No, we’re having lunch in the mountains, then we’re going for a walk.”

“So not back home then?”

“Not just yet. This is the first time most of us have left Plovdiv. It would be a shame not to see the mountains whilst we’re so close. It’s an adventure, don’t you think?”

Miti shrugged. “What will we see there? Giants and trolls? Castles, and princesses trapped in dungeons?”

Sara laughed. “I doubt it!” she said. “I doubt it very much. Hopefully there’ll be somewhere good to eat, that’s all I’m hoping for. There’s no such thing as giants and trolls.”

On the winding journey to the mountains, Miti forced himself to finish reading his story. More than anybody he knew, maybe even more than Cassandra or his mother, the real Sara would have enjoyed hearing tales of castles and princesses trapped in dungeons; might even have helped him make up the stories herself.

Perhaps this girl wasn’t Sara Crewe after all, he decided, disappointed.

The Story of Sidika

Sidika's home was a hub of activity, a centre of socialising. It was a humble property but, for everyone who used it, it felt like home. There were two entrances, a front and a back door, and the community were always walking in and out of both, letting themselves in, traipsing through bringing with them gossip and news. Some would stop for a bite of Sidika's legendary moussaka or just to chat with her as she dusted or mopped, cleaned or cooked. Rarely would you find Sidika sitting still; she was constantly on the go but she'd always take time to chat with you as if you were the most important thing in her life at that moment. Her home was her pride and joy, everybody knew this and when they came they dropped off gifts of ornaments, or candles, or rugs - anything they thought Sidika might like and, although she'd protest and say they didn't have to give her anything, they insisted, and so every time she'd find the perfect place to put it so that the home grew upwards and outwards like a pregnant belly, full of love and everything else.

In the evening the men would come and gather round the kitchen table sharing homemade *rakia* and discussing the rumours they'd been hearing. Soon, one of them said, it wouldn't be legal for Turks to gather in one place. Soon, their very meetings in Sidika's home would be seen as criminal activity. Most laughed at the thought and made the man drink more *rakia* but Sidika watched on from the kitchen as she prepared the moussaka and worried that the rumours might come true.

And they did.

"Have you heard it?" said one of the women from the village who had brought Sidika fruit.

"Heard what?"

"The prime minister, Zhikov. He's said that anyone who doesn't consider themselves Bulgarian should leave."

"Come on!" said a disbeliever, a man with a bunched-up face who sat at the table eating palmfuls of sunflower seeds. "This is 1984, surely we're passed such bigotry now. Surely this kind of thing can't be happening."

"This is 1984," said Sidika from the doorway. "They're celebrating 1300 years of the Bulgarian state. Everyone's looking back, to the past. They don't have to look back too far to believe that we were the cause of much of their suffering."

There were protests, students and professionals gathered to counter the State's decision but they were met with force, sometimes deadly. The reports filtered back to Sidika

but where people used to linger in her kitchen to stop and chat, they hurried on, bustling through one door and straight out the other, peppering her with rumours that sounded as unreal as the unfounded gossip they used to spread. Stories of mosques being shut down. The outlawing of speaking Turkish in public places. Of Turkish names being erased from tombstones and replaced with Bulgarian names.

One day her old friend Hasan slunk in through the back door.

“Hasan, it’s been an age!” said Sidika, greeting him with a hug that wasn’t returned.

“My name’s not Hasan anymore. You’re meant to call me Asen now.”

To avoid trouble, the meetings in Sidika’s home stopped. Everyone was too afraid to be seen in the company of other Turks. People had been shot for less. Sidika’s house became an empty shell.

Then came the Great Excursion. It was the summer of 1989, hot and unforgiving. 350,000 Turks headed for the borders to the refugee camps being set up on the other side, taking whatever they could with them. Some planned on returning when all this died down but some knew they might never come back so gathered whatever they could carry and made their escape.

Homes were abandoned, sold for the price of a handful of vegetables to Bulgarians who moved in by the end of the day to a house still full with furniture. Then came the day that Sidika had dreaded. She had to move, had to follow the exodus. Hardly any of her friends remained in the town, they’d all departed days, weeks, ago but she couldn’t bear to leave her beloved home.

So she didn’t.

She took it with her. Every piece of plaster, every joint, every brick, every tile. Sidika rolled up her sleeves, bent at the knees and with a preternatural strength lifted her home clean out of the ground. Manoeuvring the house onto her broad shoulders, she set off to join her friends and family at the borders, carrying the home on her back. Inside, the plates rattled on the shelves and the cutlery jangled in the drawers and the dog didn’t know what on earth was going on but nothing broke and nothing was harmed. Looking back at the hole where her home had been, Sidika said goodbye and promised to return, someday.

The queues to the borders were miles long; some had abandoned their cars in the road, and their belongings, and were trying to make it on foot. On her journey, Sidika passed friends and family who recognised the home on her back and were filled with joy and hope at the sight of it. Many were poor and hungry.

“Could I just take back the candle I brought you?” asked one. “That way we won’t freeze to death tonight.”

“Could I just take back that rug? We’ll be able to wrap our baby up into it.”

Glad that she could help, Sidika gave out what she could.

Sometimes Bulgarian soldiers would come, order the house off her back and stamp through one door and out the other, taking whatever they wanted. Apparently, it was illegal to take certain things across the border.

And so the house shrunk, piece by piece, article by article. Someone made a fire out of the wood from a chair; someone else made a nice meal out of the dog, enough to feed a family of ten. The house became a skeleton, then a skeleton without a roof, then a sack of bricks, and then nothing but a handful of scraps. By the time she reached the border, Sidika had nothing left, except her identification papers. She handed them to the soldier.

“Age?” he asked, not looking up.

“23.”

“Occupation?”

“Homemaker.”

“Name?”

“Sidika.”

The soldier looked up from his documentation. “Name?”

“Sidika.”

With a perturbed sigh, he scribbled over her identification papers. “Your name is not Sidika. It’s Stanka. You will forget that you were ever called Sidika, do you understand?”

“No, I don’t understand.”

“That’s not my problem. It’s not about understanding. Move along, Stanka, back to where you came from.”

And so, pushed along by a soldier with a gun, she crossed the border into a country she’d never been, with nothing to call her own, not even her name.

She hobbled forwards, her back bent over with the weight of emptiness.

When Miti Climbed The Mountains

Lunch was in a log cabin restaurant at the base of the Vitosha Mountains surrounding Sofia. The car park was barely big enough for the coach, which positioned itself across all the bays and this time, instead of heading off once all the children had been deposited, it stayed; the driver stood outside and had a cigarette whilst everyone else filed into the restaurant.

Miti walked in slowly, e-reader in hand, concentrating on the last few words of Sara's story. As much as he'd enjoyed the book, it unnerved him. For two years Sara had been living next door to the very man who had been looking for her. What if his mother, all this time, was just the other side of the wall? He made a conscious note to check Madame Zlatka's apartment from top to bottom when he returned home, just in case. Realising he was last to go inside, he packed away the e-reader and followed the others. The restaurant had been prepared for their large group, the tables pushed together to make four long rows. Radka made the waitress aware that they were to expect three extra people. Desislava said she would stay with Stoyan who told Miti to go off and make friends.

The waitress squashed Miti between one of The Christians and one of the orphans, a teenager of about sixteen with eager, hungry eyes, who introduced himself as Hristo. He kept straining his neck to look past Miti to The Christian - an older, balding man in his fifties with a raucous laugh and crowned teeth. He was so busy laughing and talking with his other companions that he didn't have time to notice either Miti or Hristo.

"Shall we swap seats?" asked Hristo, without making eye contact with Miti.

Miti was about to stand up and swap but the waitress manoeuvred around a trolley laden with Oranginas and, leaning on Miti's shoulder, placed one of the drinks by his plate. She had wild brown hair and smiled as she asked everyone whether they would like cold or hot food. Miti asked for hot, as did Hristo. The waitress didn't write down any of the orders, just blinked whenever anyone said hot or cold as if she was recording the answers mentally and storing them somewhere behind her eyelids. Now, Miti felt rooted to the spot even though the waitress was off, leaning on the shoulders of others.

Hristo asked again if he could swap.

"Why do you want to move?" asked Miti, afraid now that the waitress might get confused with the ordering should he change seats.

“I just want to ask that man something.” Hristo nodded towards The Christian, never taking his eyes off him.

“Can’t you ask him from where you’re sitting?”

Hristo huffed and leaned his whole upper body on the wooden table, his elbows resting on the ends of his knife and fork so their tips rose up. Miti sat back in his chair as far as possible.

“What’s America like?” asked Hristo in English with a thick Bulgarian accent; he spoke more nervously than he had done with Miti. There was no response from The Christian. Hristo cleared his throat and tried again. “What’s it like in America? Which part are you from?” Still, no response. Hristo turned to Miti. “Tug on his sleeve.”

“No.”

“Go on, tug on his sleeve, get his attention.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“He’s talking.”

“So?”

“I don’t want to interrupt him. It’s rude.”

Hristo leaned forward even more so that his chest was touching the plate. “What’s America like, is it like the UK?” His question was louder and had caught the attention of two children opposite who ignored him and carried on talking amongst themselves but The Christian still hadn’t heard.

“I don’t think it’s like the UK,” said Miti, so quietly it might as well have been to himself.

“How do you know? Valentin said you weren’t with that lot.”

“I’m not, I’m here with my father and...” *What was she?* “...his friend.”

“Then how do you know what America’s like?” Hristo’s eyes then widened. “Have you been there?”

“No, I haven’t. I just don’t think it’s like England, that’s all. My mother has been to both and I remember her saying that it’s very different. There was this boy once, called Huck and he was American and he lived in the hot part with alligators and reeds but you don’t get that in England because it’s a bit more grey and London is always busy. Even Margate, which has a beach, is not always sunny and hot. And I don’t think you get alligators in Margate.”

“How do you know all this?”

“From my mother. She’s English. And through stuff I’ve read. Do you read?”

“Your mother is English?” Hristo’s eyes widened. They took in the whole of Miti now, intently; The Christian was forgotten. “I’m going to England, one day. Maybe London, I don’t know. Probably London. London is so great, did you know this? So much to do there, so much to see. I have a map, on my wall back at the orphanage. Some people are coming over from England and brought it with them one day. Everyone else wanted posters but I wanted the map, but I also wanted a poster of Madonna because I am liking her the best so I took that also.”

“You’re speaking English to me,” said Miti, doing the same.

For a moment, Hristo was surprised and then he smiled. “You speak English too? Of course you do, your mother’s English. Maybe she can help me; she can tell me where to go maybe. I want to go to London and get into a university maybe but first I will be having to do language training but my English is very good even. But then I will be at university in England and that is what I am wanting to do. Have you ever been there, have you ever been to London?”

“No.”

“You haven’t? Why not? You should have gone if your mother was living there. I would go if mine was.”

“She’s not there anymore. Maybe I will go one day.”

“Come and see me when I am in university being student!” He held out his hand. He had seen adults shake hands before. He clasped Miti’s and it was unusually strong. “Remember my name: Hristo.”

Hristo continued to talk whilst they waited for lunch. He talked about his dreams of going to England and coming back, once he had qualified and had got some money. Of course it was easier now that Bulgaria had joined the E.U. He just had to wait until he was eighteen. Two more years and he would do it. He couldn’t see anything else happening to his life after those two years were up; it was what he was going to do and nothing else.

Lunch arrived in the form of a large curled sausage which had been hot at one point but which was now cold; the waitress brought it out on the same trolley from which she had served the drinks. Those who had chosen the cold lunch were given some bread and smoked cheeses and some slices of cold meat, which had been out of the fridge so long they were now warm. The waitress disappeared and a while later she brought out some baskets of lukewarm chips and placed them in the centre of the tables for everyone to share.

“When we get back to Plovdiv,” said Hristo, now in Bulgarian, “can I meet your mother? She might be able to help me.”

“Yes,” said Miti, without hesitation. “She went to university in England and will be able to help.”

“Great! There are other places I want to go as well. There’s a big place beginning with B but I can’t remember the name. And Manchester. And Liverpool. The Beatles came from there. From Liverpool, in the north. Do you like The Beatles?”

Miti recalled his father’s collection of records. “My father likes them.”

“Maybe I could talk to your father too. I like The Beatles and other English bands. Is your father English?”

“No, he’s Bulgarian.”

“I’m sorry about that. Never mind, at least he likes The Beatles.”

“Do you like to read?” asked Miti.

“No, no I don’t. Not really. I like music though. And I will read when I go to university. I think you have to. I’m a good reader; I just don’t do it much.”

Miti turned his attention to his half-eaten sausage. He no longer felt hungry. “Would you like this?”

“Thanks!” said Hristo, scooping it from Miti’s plate hungrily.

The girl the other side of Hristo started engaging him in conversation and The Christian still hadn’t noticed Miti’s presence so he found his e-reader and started to read a new story, one about a powerful dog called Buck on the trail of gold in the Alaskan wilderness and already, though he hadn’t got far, Miti liked the cold and the isolation and the forests. Inside the restaurant the air was stifling, and the only thing cold was the food.

~

It was the wrong day to go for such an arduous walk. Heat fuzzed in the air and on the skin and off the ground, as if a little bit of the sun had fallen down from the sky and settled there to burn. Everyone tired quickly; the walking became languorous and forced. A happy chatter had risen when they’d left the restaurant and headed up the mountain path, but after a while the heat became too much and the revelry died down along with their enthusiasm.

No one was talking to Miti. He walked by himself at the back of the line worming its way up the mountain. Stoyan and Desislava had chosen to wait by the restaurant; Radka had pointed out that where they were going the ground was uneven and probably wouldn't be good for Stoyan. Miti took out his e-reader and read about Buck the dog as he tottered along slowly. Buck had just been taught a lesson by his kidnappers about the strength of humans and the club. Miti knew that if he ever had a pet dog, he would treat it differently, with respect.

They were looking for gold, Buck's kidnappers, in the treacherous snow-covered mountains of Alaska, and as Buck's journey continued, he was taken deeper and deeper into the harsh and unforgiving wilderness.

Suddenly, Miti tripped over a root protruding from the path and he nearly dropped the e-reader. He looked around him. The sun was making everything vivid, the forest path effervesced with colour. Miti closed his eyes and imagined what it would be like where Buck was. All whites and greys – the colour sucked out of everything by a deathly cold.

"Dimitar, are you all right?" Captain Radka. Miti opened his eyes and once again the world was all sunshine and nothing else, not a white or a grey in sight. He nodded and carried on walking, trying to absorb himself into the world of a book that seemed so close – as he walked, the trees and mountains around him were like nothing he'd ever seen before, and exactly like what Buck would be tramping through – yet also half a world away because they were bathed in snow and ice. The path in front of Miti was orange and dusty and surrounded on both sides by an avenue of beach and poplar trees with branches verdant and cloying. In the story, they would have shed their greenness and would be as bare as tall skeletons clothed only by snow.

As he continued to read, Miti tried to force the chilliness of the book to take over him. He tried to imagine snow, tried to picture his breath made visible in front of him. But the heat was too imposing. Just as the shadow of a shiver ran down his spine, a bead of sweat trickled down his neck and he was reminded of the sun.

It wasn't long before it became too difficult for him not to pay his full concentration to walking. The stones along the path became larger, more roots broke through the surface and threatened to trip anyone not paying much attention. Reluctantly, Miti tucked his e-reader away and started to watch where he was walking.

He looked up.

A green leaf was falling from one of the tall poplar trees, tumbling up and over itself, buoyed by the light warm breeze. As it fell, and as Miti watched, he saw that it began changing. No longer green, the leaf was

beginning to turn shades of blue and then grey and finally white. As the leaf fell, the breeze cooled and took on the chill of icy breath, blowing the leaf to the ground. But, no longer a leaf, it was a snowflake – perfect in its intricacies – and the rocks on the ground weren't soaked in heat but covered in a million other snowflakes – each one as perfect as the newly formed flake that had just fallen from the sky.

A surge of life rippled through the group; shouts and cries of surprise and joy rang out. Had they seen it too? Had they witnessed the change and joined him in the Alaskan wilderness? Looking ahead, Miti could see that those at the front of the line were rushing to the edges of the path, wading their way excitedly through the snow and disappearing through a gap they had found there. Intrigued, Miti quickened his pace.

Hristo was waiting for him.

“Do you believe in giants?” he asked with a curious smile and, like a circus ringleader, bowed and invited Miti to step forward.

The trees, drooping with heavy snow, made a white curtain through which Miti stepped and, on the other side, he walked into a different world. He could see why Hristo had mentioned giants. Grey boulders the size of small cars were piled one on top of the other, stretching down in a line as far as Miti's eyes could see, like a mighty grey river that came down from the heavens and cast a valley through the mountainside splitting it in half. A giant could pick up one of these boulders and it would only be a pebble to him and he could skim it across the surface of the grey, tumbling water.

The children were like ants inspecting a feast. They crawled all over the boulders, heaving each other onto the taller ones, jumping down between the cracks, swallowed up by the caves and crevices that had formed when the rocks had settled.

Miti felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and turned to see Hristo's smiling face. “Who'd have guessed this was here? Come on!”

At first, Miti was reluctant to follow Hristo. What if the boulders cracked and gave way, like the frozen lake in the story had swallowed the three clueless Southlanders? No one would survive, they wouldn't stand a chance.

Something was calling him, and it wasn't Hristo, who had disappeared from sight, but something else, almost like a howl, that may or may not have been brought to his ears by the bitter wind. It impelled him on, told him that it was safe to cross the giant's river. He cast out a foot. It met the first boulder. Miti teased it with

his weight but it didn't crack. He cast out the other foot. The boulder remained. Miti leapt from boulder to boulder, pushed onwards by the howling of the wild wind which was now all around him, awesome in its power.

And then, in a flash, Miti became just like Buck.

Hunched on all fours, he discovered underground tunnels and, when they suddenly ended, he crawled back up and looked for another. He felt powerful; he felt no longer a boy, because he wasn't. Hair had sprouted all across his body, teeth as sharp as razors filled his muzzle, his eyes – sharp black discs – could see everything in the dark tunnels and missed nothing. There might be other animals lurking down here, in the still darkness; food. He might be able to catch the scent of something that could keep him going for another day. Every sense was heightened whilst he hunted: his eyes, his ears, his nose. The calling wind told him that he had nothing to worry about, that he should let himself go and run free, like his ancestors, and their ancestors before that.

And he would have done, he would have run free and wild, but, in one of the crevices beneath the boulders, he came face to face with one of the orphans. Sara Crewe. She cowered in the corner of one of the tunnels, lost, staring at Miti, uncertain whether he was friend or foe. Miti could sense the hard thumping of her heart, could smell the sweat under her armpits.

"I couldn't get myself back up onto the stone, Dimitar," she said, weakly.

Miti could feel a hunger inside him; he could taste her fear on the tip of his tongue. Sara continued to stare at him – at Miti and not the dogwolf he had become. "Dimitar, are you ok?"

What was she doing here anyway? Surely Sara lived in another world, not this cold wilderness. She lives in the attic of the seminary, or in the big Victorian house next door. She shouldn't be here. This was all wrong. Sara looked Miti the boy right in the eyes and the illusion was finally broken under her gaze.

"Here," he said. "Give me your hand." Now he was no longer the dogwolf, he wasn't sure if he was actually strong enough to help her out but he would give it a try. And where was the song of the wild? That, too, had vanished, replaced by the searing heat.

When they both rose to the boulder's surface, the others were gathered in a group, jostling with each other to have photos taken by The Christians. Miti helped Sara over but stayed out of the way. He didn't want to be stuck between the pages of someone's photograph album.

That wasn't the type of book he felt he belonged in.

~

The coach was now just a coach. They were heading back to Plovdiv; everyone had tired themselves out on the mountain and though it still wasn't beginning to get dark the time had come, Radka felt, to call it a day.

Desislava was sitting next to his father and Miti had his special seat at the front to himself. He wondered, fleetingly, at their spending so much time together, about where her fiancé was and whether he would have minded. Then he switched on his e-reader and began to read again about wolves and snow and the wild calling that had led Buck on his journey.

The Story of the Waitress

At exactly the same time that Yordana (with the wild brown hair) serves lukewarm coffee to the moustachioed man in the window of her restaurant, her twin sister, Marena, is being murdered in the city of Sliven.

In the instant of her death, Marena realises that it's true what people say. Her life flashes before her eyes. Some instances last longer than others. Like the time she fights her sister Yordana for a doll with long pink hair and smooth pin-like legs. They are on the floor of their shared bedroom. Yordana has discarded her only doll - the one with blue hair and a bikini - and has taken an interest in Marena's, grabbing it and not letting go until their mother comes in and screams at them and confiscates both dolls. Or when they are sitting on the school steps sharing a chocolate bar, waiting for their mother who is already thirty minutes late to come and take them home. Marena asks Yordana if their mother is ill, if she's noticed the shaking hands and the withdrawn look but Yordana tells her she's imagining things and not to mention it again. When their mother finally turns up she is drunk and she has no money for the bus fare home so they have to walk. It's December and the temperature is below zero.

Other instances fly past so quickly that she barely registers them. Like the fish they'd kept in a glass bowl for three days before it floated upside-down to the top, misty-eyed and bloated. Or the time she stubbed her toe on the leg of the kitchen table one spring when her attention had been caught by a bee trapped inside the window.

All these moments have led to this: the day when the man in the long black coat has burst into her gallery in broad daylight, pointing his gun at her forehead and pulling the trigger.

Marena recalls a birthday party and everyone is there except their mother who is in her bedroom feeling unwell. There's a two-tiered chocolate cake and they fight playfully to blow out the twenty-one candles on top. Later that night their mother comes in drunk and swipes the cake off the kitchen counter. Yordana starts an argument with their mother who fights back until Yordana says she can't take it anymore and will leave for Sofia in the morning and will never come back. Marena spends the night comforting their mother who is curled up in the corner of the kitchen trying to rescue the cake with a spoon.

Now she's twenty-three and they've met in a park in Sofia for their birthday. Marena has bought Yordana a dress that will complement the colour of her hair. Yordana hands Marena a cheque. Marena tries to protest, saying that it's far too much but Yordana says her business in Sofia is going really well, much better than expected, and that it is nothing and that she'll be offended if Marena doesn't accept the cheque. Marena asks what her business is but Yordana changes the subject, back to the dress that will complement her hair.

On the day of their mother's funeral, Marena calls Yordana to ask where she is but there's no answer. It's a warm day and everyone is too hot to stay outside in the open for too long

with the sun beating down. For three days afterwards she keeps trying but there is no answer. Marena hangs by the phone, still in the black of her funeral attire. In her mother's bedside cabinet, whilst clearing out her belongings, Marena finds a photograph of Yordana with the wild brown hair.

By twenty-four she can afford her own space in a gallery with the money that her sister gave her and the small sum she's managed to save up. The gallery is busy, gets a lot of footfall from the shopping mall opposite. Marena makes her first ever sale to the handsome man in the beret who comes again the next day and hands her a business card with his number. She remembers the feeling of dread and excitement at their first date, that weekend. He takes her to a posh restaurant in town and they are just ordering their starter when Yordana phones her in a blind panic, sobbing uncontrollably down the phone. Marena has to cut the date short but all night Yordana won't tell her why she's so upset. She keeps saying over and over that she's in trouble but won't say why. Marena never sees the man in the beret again.

She'll never get the chance to go on a date again, that's one of the last thoughts she has and part of her thinks that this, out of all the possible thoughts in the world, is a strange one to dwell on. The man in the black cloak is walking through the gallery towards her, pushing past the people and he's raising his gun and aiming at her but before he pulls the trigger, she notices a photograph he's carrying in the other hand, a photograph of a girl with hair wild and brown. Marena's has always been as straight as a ruler. She realises, too late, that it's always been about her sister.

But Yordana knows none of this. She is serving coffee to a moustachioed man in the window of her restaurant; lukewarm.

When The Grizzled Man Came To Visit

They entered the apartment silently, overcome with fatigue from the long journey back from Sofia, all except Miti who had devoured the story about the dog and was already hungry for a new one. Once in his bedroom – teeth brushed – Miti scrolled through the index of the e-reader. There were still so many that he hadn't read and some he had read so long ago that it was difficult to recall anything save a random image or the name of a major character. Not being able to decide which to read next, he closed his eyes and scrolled up and down. Then he pressed the select button at random.

When Miti reopened his eyes, an image met him of a grizzled man hunched up in a thick black cloak walking down a street that looked as if it had jumped straight out of Plovdiv's Old Town. Snow piled up around the man's feet yet he had a bed hat on his head and underneath the cloak he wore pyjamas. Who would be walking through snow in pyjamas? Beneath the image was the book's title, written in a curling, ornate script and it took Miti by surprise. Christmas? It was June; it would be very odd reading another book set in winter, he thought, but he stood by his method of choice and pressed the button to view the first page. He vaguely remembered his mother reading this to him as a child but as he absorbed the words they triggered nothing more than a hazy recollection of the main character. More than anything he recalled the way his mother had pronounced the name, as if it contained all the malice in the world. Ebenezer Scrooge. It had made Miti giggle. He practised it now as he read under the duvet covers.

Should anyone walk in and see him they might worry about him and the state of his mind.

Sometime in the night Miti awoke to hear voices in the hallway outside his room.

"...can't take much more disappointment." His father's voice was subdued.

"And how much more disappointment will there be? You're not telling anyone what was in that letter. You know something the rest of us don't. I'm quite happy for you not to tell me but if it's something important then I want you to consider telling Dimitar."

There was a long pause.

"He can't know yet. I'm not ready to tell him."

"So we're going to continue on his journey then. Until what? What will he find at the end of it? Will he find Grace?"

Another pause. “Let’s just continue on this journey.”

Miti fell asleep shortly after. The voices had the fuzzy consistency of a dream and by the time he awoke again in the morning, the conversation in the hallway seemed like something that may or may not have taken place.

~

“What have you got planned for today?” asked Stoyan as Miti wandered into the kitchen yawning. His father was already seated at the round table.

Miti regarded him curiously. “We’re going to find Mother.”

“Not today,” said Stoyan. An empty cereal bowl was in front of him. Sun streamed in through the window and cast a spotlight on the table, making everything on it seem orange and luminescent. By contrast, his father, just out of the penumbra of the light, seemed to take on the grey hue of the rest of the kitchen; sallow and pale.

“Why not today?” Miti wanted there to be some curtains that he could pull across the window but they had never been replaced after the fire.

“We need a day of rest, we had a busy day yesterday.”

“But we need to find her.”

“Oh, Dimitar.” Stoyan sighed heavily but said nothing else in response.

Miti stared closely at his father. Who was this man, pale and stubborn? Not his father. There was something about the way his mouth turned down at the edges today, a crook in the nose Miti had never noticed before. Involuntarily, he stepped back, hand raised over his mouth in shock. He remembered the way he had practised saying the name over and over again last night, and the way his mother had said it, face screwed up. This was the man in front of him now, he realised with a skip of his heart. Ebenezer Scrooge

Miti didn’t feel like breakfast anymore even though his stomach rumbled and growled. Perhaps it was the ghost of Jacob Marley in his belly, angry and petulant. Having breakfast meant sitting down with this man and he didn’t want to do that, not today.

“What are you having for breakfast?” asked Ebenezer. Had his voice always been so raspy and cold?

Miti managed a reply. “Nothing.”

“Always so stubborn, just like your mother. Don’t get in a bad mood please, Dimitar. I said we’d go on your journey but all in good time.”

“I’m not in a bad mood.” (You’re the one in a bad mood, he added mentally.) “I’m just not hungry.”

“Well there won’t be anything until lunch so make your choice now and live with it.”

Quietly, Miti walked from the kitchen and back to his room where he would read more of the story and hope that when he finished, the man would have gone away and his father would have returned.

An hour or so later, Miti re-emerged. The door to the living room was shut and he heard music playing quietly on the player - dramatic, angry music he hadn’t heard before. It certainly wasn’t The Beatles or Pink Floyd. Perhaps Ebenezer hadn’t left. He would leave it a while before he risked checking. He thought of something he needed to do first.

Miti felt too hot on the balcony; he really couldn’t have stayed out there for long. The inhabitants of the apartment block seemed all to have had the same idea. It was a world of washing lines and socks and undergarments although there was barely a breeze.

The balcony below was occupied, someone obviously didn’t mind the heat. But it wasn’t Cassandra, whom he’d expected and wanted to see. Her mother, tight-lipped and shrivelled – how long had she been drying out in the sun like the socks and undergarments? – was reading something on the same reclining chair that Cassandra liked to use. She wore just a towel, bilgewater brown, which covered her body from under her arms down to her thick knees. Her meaty toes, painted pale green, were separated by spongy pads which made her feet look webbed. Her daughter had been a mermaid. The mother was a frog, crispy and shrivelled, who had been out of water for far too long.

But what was she reading? Perhaps this was the reason she’d been out in the sun longer than was both wise or healthy; for that, Miti could forgive her. Seizing on a half-thought out idea, Miti rushed inside.

The binoculars were by his father’s bed where he expected them to be. Back out on the balcony, he leant over the railings as quietly as he could and lifted the binoculars to his eyes. He’d forgotten how heavy they were but they did their job and through them he could see exactly what she was reading: a magazine of some sort, nothing that Miti would have read before or, indeed, ever wanted to read. The kind of thing his mother never read or had in the house, the garish sentences that graced the magazine may have been made up of words but it was a different kind of literature that he was accustomed to.

Cassandra's mother licked her finger with her long tongue and looked at a double-page spread about a singer who'd been involved in some scandal. There were salacious photographs and attention-grabbing headlines. But for all its attempts its magic was lost on Miti who couldn't have been less interested.

Just as he went to take away the binoculars from his eyes, Cassandra's mother looked up. Perhaps she had been distracted by some light refracted from the lenses, perhaps she had just felt a pair of eyes on her whilst she read. Whatever had given Miti away, he regretted instantly ever thinking about the binoculars again. He should have learned his lesson the last time.

"You!" she cried. "Again! Peeping Tom! I heard about you, the last time. How dare you do it again after the hiding my husband gave you?"

Miti couldn't remember any such hiding but didn't have time to ruminate on the thought because he quickly ducked back behind the railings clutching the binoculars tightly to his chest. "I'm sorry...I wasn't..." Was this what he had said before? "I was just..."

"Just what? We all know very well what you were up to! I can't believe that someone would do it once let alone twice. Just you wait until my husband gets home from his important meeting, then you'll be sorry. Filthy Peeping Tom."

"I was just trying to read your magazine..."

"Rubbish! Rubbish!" She was beginning to sound more like a frog every minute. "You're nothing but a Peeping Tom!"

Miti listened as Cassandra's mother gathered her things together and disappeared through the squeaky balcony doors. A moment and then another set of balcony doors opened.

"Tom!" An unmistakably gravelly voice replaced the panicked croaks of Cassandra's mother. "Oh, Tom, where are you?"

"My name's not Tom, Madame Zlatka." An edge of irritation grated Miti's voice; he wondered what Cassandra's mother was going to do. He was waiting for a telephone call or, worse still, a crazed thumping on the front door. What would Cassandra think of him? He'd only gone out there to see if she was reading on the balcony. He realised, with a rising sense of dread, he might never see her again.

"Ah, so shall we call you Peeping then?" Miti gave no response. "Just Peeping it is. I thought you and your father were away, on some kind of journey." He didn't move, even when she spoke to him. He just let her voice float over to him as his heart rate beat out of control. "Never mind about the magazines or the books, I

hope you're taking note of the stories on the wind? They'll come when you least expect them and catch you unawares. The trick is to catch them back so that they can't ever leave again."

No ring of the telephone, no knock on the door. His father hadn't come out of the living room either. Maybe he hadn't heard.

Madame Zlatka continued. "Well I shall leave you to it, Peeping, and I hope you catch your mother on this journey of yours."

"I'm not trying to catch anything," he said, more forcefully than he'd meant to.

"No, no, I'm sure you're not. But remember what I said, about the stories. I can't catch them all myself"

After a while, Miti knew that she had gone. All he could hear was his father's heavy rock music crashing through the apartment. Gathering himself together, Miti prepared to move indoors vowing never to return to the balcony for as long as he lived.

Almost as soon as he stepped inside, there came the knock at the door that he'd been dreading. His father hadn't heard it, the music was still blaring out of the living room so it fell to Miti to open it. With dread, he pictured the horrible frog-woman from downstairs come to tell him off. He held back, afraid to turn the handle. Another knock. He had no choice.

It was Desislava.

"Thanks, Miti. Sorry, I can't find my keys. I think I left them in the car, I'll pop down and get them in a minute." She stepped aside to reveal what seemed like the entire contents of a small camping shop behind her. "Can you help me inside with all of this?" There were tents and large backpacks, flasks and plastic cutlery. Miti had no idea how she'd managed to get everything up there; it didn't look as though all the equipment would all fit in the elevator. "Here, this is for you," she said when everything was in the hallway and the front door was closed. She presented him with a large green backpack which, when put up next to him, came almost to his chin.

"For me?"

"I didn't think your satchel would cope with all the things we're going to have to take on our journey. It's an old one, the zip doesn't work terribly well but it should do the trick."

"Thank you!" said Miti.

The music in the living room stopped and moments later, his father appeared in the doorway.

"Desislava's here and she's brought all our camping stuff. It means we can go today!"

"I told you, Dimitar, tomorrow."

“Scrooge,” whispered Miti under his breath.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“I hope so.”

Another knock at the door. Before Miti could stop her, Desislava opened it.

Facing them was the frog woman. “There you are, you filthy little boy, I want a word with you!”

“Who’s that?” asked Stoyan.

“Never mind who’s that. You ought to be keeping your son in check, Mr Popov. I don’t care if you can’t see, it’s not hard to keep control of your own son.”

“Control? Dimitar, Mrs Angelova, will someone please explain to me what is going on?”

“He was looking at me. This morning, over the balcony. Not content to spy on my daughter he has started spying on me.”

“Why would I do that? You look like a frog!” Miti said it before he could stop the words coming out of his mouth. Mrs Angelova stood there, wide mouth wide open. Nobody said a word.

Until Cassandra arrived.

“I’ve just got back from the store. I heard shouting. What’s going on?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” said Stoyan, arms crossed.

“This boy...” began Mrs Angelova. “He...binoculars...frog!”

Cassandra took one look at her mother and then at Miti and seemed to know what had happened. “It’s all a mistake,” she said.

“But he called me a frog!”

“It’s a sign of affection.”

“A frog!”

“Miti likes frogs, don’t you Miti.”

Miti shook his head.

“See, all a misunderstanding. Now why don’t you go downstairs and we can talk this over in a minute?”

“A frog!”

“Yes, Mother, I heard you. Trust me, it’s a good thing. Frogs are very...pretty.” She turned her mother round and half-pushed her out of the front door. “I’ll be down in a minute.” She shut the door after her.

Now came Miti's turn to stutter. "I didn't..."

"Save it. My mother doesn't look like a frog."

"I know but..."

"I said save it. Now what's all this?" She gestured to the piles of camping equipment filling the hallway.

"Desislava brought it round. It's for the journey, we're..."

"Going without me?" Cassandra couldn't hide the break in her voice.

"No, we're...well..."

"After all I've done for you?"

"I...we..." Miti wanted the frog woman to come back.

"I'm coming with you," declared Cassandra.

"But what about your parents?" said Desislava. "You haven't asked them yet."

"They'll let me."

"They will?"

"Yes," said Cassandra with a nod and that was all that was said of the matter.

"Ok," said Miti.

Stoyan cleared his throat. "Would somebody please tell me what on earth is going on!"

~

Something must have changed in his father overnight because the next morning he was waiting in the hallway next to Desislava with two full backpacks and two tents by their feet.

"Morning, Sleepyhead," said Desislava as Miti tottered from his room still full of sleep.

"We wondered when you'd make an appearance," added his father.

Miti rubbed his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Late morning."

Panic swept through Miti. How could he have slept so long when they had to go and find his mother? He hated himself for sleeping in. "We've got to go," he said, racing back into his bedroom where his backpack, packed full of everything he'd need, was waiting at the foot of his mattress.

"Have some breakfast and then we'll head off," said his father.

“There’s no time for breakfast! We’ve got to go!”

“There’s always time for breakfast,” said Desislava. “Come on, let’s fetch you something.”

Miti wolfed down his cereal.

Just as he was finishing, Cassandra came in dressed in dark jeans and a plain white top with a tiger’s eye brooch attached.

“And you’re sure your parents are all right with this?” asked Stoyan for the fifth time and Cassandra nodded, telling him it was fine.

When Stoyan and Desislava left to double-check they had everything, Miti leaned in to Cassandra, who was helping herself to iced tea at the kitchen table. “You didn’t ask them, did you?”

Cassandra tried to hide a smile. “They think I’m going camping with my girlfriends.”

“What if they find out?”

“Let’s hope they don’t. Come on, let’s go.”

He could feel the seven addresses written on the paper burning a hole in his pyjama pocket. He changed quickly into his purple T-Shirt and shorts with every flag of the world on them and he carefully folded his pyjamas and placed them in the backpack. The backpack was so full it was nearly bursting. As well as spare clothes and the binoculars which he thought might come in handy, he’d put in a present for his mother to give to her when he found her. Pride of place on top was the new purchase from the bookshop. The e-reader shone silver like an illicit piece of a spaceship.

The backpack was far too big but that didn’t bother him. As far as he was concerned, he wouldn’t be carrying it for long.

~

Kindly, and without a fuss, Desislava paid for the train tickets to Stara Zagora and they boarded, found a cabin, and Miti settled down happily knowing that they were on the way to the end of his story. It would, like most fairy tales, end with a happily ever after.

There was hope for his father yet, thought Miti as he neared the end of the story he was reading. Scrooge was obviously going to turn into a reformed character when the three ghosts were finished with him, that much Miti could remember.

Stoyan had been scolding Miti throughout the train journey. He had reprimanded Miti for playing with his new computer game so much; he said that he'd get square eyes. When Miti ignored him Stoyan forbade him to use it and made Desislava keep it shut up in her backpack until the evening. When he got hungry and bored with staring at the cabin and filling the silence with daydreams, Miti went for a walk through the train with Cassandra. They hung out of the window of the end carriage, watching the rest of the train curve back behind them.

"I'm sorry about my father. He's a bit like Scrooge, don't you think?"

Cassandra smirked. "You haven't seen my dad on a bad day. Actually you have. It's not a pretty sight, is it?"

Miti laughed. "They both need the three ghosts to come and teach them a lesson."

The train went through a short tunnel and from one of the nearby cabins came squeals of childish laughter. When they were out of the tunnel, Cassandra turned to him. "Do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Talk about the characters in books as if they're real."

"They are."

"Are they?"

"Oh please, I've seen your bedroom, Cassandra. You like books as much as I do!"

"Of course I do. I *love* books. But I don't *live* them."

He thought about her words on the way back to their cabin. He'll prove her wrong, he thought. By the end of the day, we will have met the three ghosts. He said it to himself as a promise.

Someone else was in the cabin with Stoyan and Desislava. At first glance, Miti thought the imposter, with his wide face, heavy beard and large nose, was Father Christmas from the hospital who had molested the nurse and smelt of urine, but this man was shorter, there seemed to be much less of him, and the beard was rather more yellow than white. He was just as amiable, even though there weren't any nurses to try and steal a kiss from.

“I hope you don’t mind my intrusion. Of course you don’t, you seem pleasant enough people! A rarity these days if you don’t mind my saying so. I’ve just had to leave a cabin because there were three children in there howling and yelling away at each other as if the world was coming to an end and they had their music up so loud I couldn’t even hear myself think. I hope you don’t mind my wading on in here, there’s plenty of room for us all at any rate.”

“Of course not, it’s fine,” said Stoyan. The four of them managed to squeeze into one side of the cabin whilst the man enjoyed the freedom of the whole of the opposite side. He wore an old brown suit and smelt of cigarettes and soap.

“What a lovely family you are, if you don’t mind me saying, what a lovely family.” Miti and Cassandra turned to each other, wide-eyed, and tried not to laugh. “A good, solid family. I’m pleased to see it. When you get to my age it’s the little things that warm the heart.” He stopped talking to take out a cigarette and light it. “It’s also the forbidden things!” He winked at Desislava. “You don’t mind me smoking do you? Well the window’s open and the smoke’ll just go straight out but if you’d like me to stop I can. Where are you going, may I ask? On a family holiday?” He nodded at the backpacks filling the overhead racks.

“Stara Zagora.” The four of them had spoken in unison.

The man laughed. “So in tune! Stara Zagora, yes, I’ve been there. I’ll be with you up until Mihaylovo so we won’t have forever together, you’ll be pleased to know. My wife, old Diyana my love, she says I could talk until the Lord comes but I don’t suppose you’ve noticed, have you?” He howled with laughter. “And you, little boy, you’re awfully patient, aren’t you? If I were your age I’d be tearing up and down the train pretending to shoot the fascists or the Americans or a bloody mixture of the both.”

Miti started to say that he wanted to leave the cabin but realised that he wasn’t allowed when Stoyan coughed pointedly. His sentence went unfinished.

“Oh, I see. Father wants you by his side, does he? Well I suppose that’s all in order. I never left my father’s side when I was a child. He ran a commune, near to Stara Zagora, before the capitalists came and we lost our land but that’s another story and who hasn’t heard that one already?” Miti didn’t know what the strange old man was talking about. He’d never read that story before. “Before the Capitalists came we had free *kebabche*, free meatballs, free everything. Then, when they got rid of the Communists, nothing, nothing at all. Anyway, I used to follow my father round when he fetched the hay and I was with him when he took his shotgun to keep away the eagles during lambing season even though they were kept inside. The roof had holes in it you see, big

enough for a plucky eagle to take advantage of; clever bloody things they are, could have easily got in if they'd had a mind to. No, I was by his side until I was about ten and then he hurt his back and I had to grow up quickly, do the things he used to do round the farm. He was still there to dish out advice, to tell me how to do things, but all the manual side of it was down to me, the hard labour. It was a good thing, don't get me wrong, I learnt a lot and I had to grow up quickly, like I've said." The man paused for a drag. "But you ought to let him out, *gospodin*, sorry I didn't catch your name, or his, or any of yours for that matter. I do go on. My name's Theodore or Comrade Theo if you like, it's up to you. Anyway, as I was saying you ought to let him out of the cabin. Look at him sitting there – a bundle of energy raring to go! – he needs to build up some muscle if you ask my opinion. There's nothing of him!" Miti tried to puff out his chest but there was no room on the cramped seat so he just sat there and thought about the muscles eluded him. "A good few laps up and down the train won't do him any harm; in fact it would do him the world of good. I don't mind the children doing that it's just when the slightly older ones think we want to listen to their music and have no manners. Now, that does annoy me. And it annoys me when children don't know their history, their heritage."

Stoyan shifted in the seat which made everyone else move too. "I couldn't agree more. In actual fact, I'm a history teacher and - "

"There you have it, a man after my own heart! How wonderful. You'll appreciate this story then, *gospodin*. Do you know, and this is a true story, I heard once about a boy who was trying to get into a good school – this was after the fall of communism, you'll understand, a sad, sad time for us all. He'd got every question right until one of the panel member's held up a picture of Comrade Lenin and asked him who it was and do you know what he said? He said: 'I'm sorry, I do not know this Uncle! Can you believe that?' Miti thought he heard his father stifle a laugh but Comrade Theo's outrage was serious. "Yes, it's that kind of thing that does get on my nerves but then I don't have many nerves left, shot to pieces in the war they were. The things I've seen..." He left his sentence hanging with a shake of his head.

Theodore left them three stops later at Mihaylovo, a tiny station where he was the only one to alight. He left with a wave and the veiled warning to Stoyan that he should let his son enjoy the moments he has on this planet because it could, so easily, be taken away at the snap of the fingers. "Live for the moment," was the last thing he said before the train picked up speed and left the small station.

The Story of Comrade Theo

“More and more of them,” he mumbled as he made his way home from the train station. He tut-tutted at the state of the place and at the gypsy boys loitering on a nearby bench, who seemed to be encroaching on the town like moss. More and more of them each year. Disgusting.

Heavy clouds hung over his walk home, which didn't help the bad mood he felt rising within him. There would never have been gypsies if his party had stayed in power. Democracy, that was what was to blame. Gypsy-loving democracy. *I don't know what's worse*, he thought, *Europe or gypsies*.

Getting home meant a tiresome walk through the town and out the other side to some apartment blocks, the windows of which glowed orange in the morning and refracted blue at night. It never ceased to amaze him, his home. He had been one of the lucky ones; they hadn't been on the waiting list long before this beautiful new apartment was presented to him with a nod and a handshake from the moustachioed Comrade who held the golden key. For him, the apartment was the same as the day they first moved in with their packed boxes and their hope. He didn't notice the broken elevator, made no complaint as he climbed up the seven floors. He didn't notice the graffiti on the walls or the crumbling plaster work. It was home and it was his.

The rusting key was stiff in the lock but, no worries, a quick jiggle and it'll clunk-click into place. “I've returned, Comrade,” he said as he entered the apartment. A sharp wall of cold air; only slightly warmer indoors than out in the stairwell.

“Comrade, welcome,” came the faint reply from somewhere within the apartment. No lights were on so Theo flicked the switch. The lights in the hallway fizzed and hummed, blinking spasmodically.

Theo was carrying a thin blue plastic bag and took it straight through the kitchen and into the living room, switching on more lights as he went. The glow provided the illusion of warmth, with which he was happy. In the bag were two potatoes and an onion which he emptied onto the chipped Formica surface. An old saucepan full of water stood ready to go on the stove. “Well done, Comrade. This will do the trick.” He peeled and chopped up the potatoes. He saved the onion till last; they always made him cry. He would fry it when the potatoes were done and mashed.

His wife called from another room. “Theo, how was your day?”

“Fine, just fine. The train was full of children with no respect for their elders. Would you believe it, they now have portable music boxes. They take them everywhere and play it loudly so that everyone in the whole carriage can hear them. Even if you ask them politely to turn it down they just look at you as if you’re stark raving mad.”

“Music boxes?”

“I forget, you won’t have seen them. Little boxes – silver, black – playing all their music. I can’t understand half the stuff they play nowadays, I defy anyone to find any meaning at all in them. It’s certainly not what I would call music. American, probably.” He shook his head and tsk-tsked through onion tears.

“Yes, yes, music is good.” Her voice floated into the kitchen as thin as the wispy vapours coming from the saucepan.

He had an idea whilst he chopped. “Should I put some real music on?” No answer came so he took that as no objection. Wiping his hands on the threadbare flannel by the sink he went over to the record player on the table opposite the sofa, and the box of vinyl records next to it. “What shall we have today?” He flicked through the collection. “Yes, yes, this one will do the trick.”

The music erupted into the apartment. It might have been loud but it made him smile. Here was his favourite bit, with the trumpets and drums. He sang along to the national anthem as he returned to tend to the cooking. The potatoes were just about done and ready for mashing. “You’re quiet tonight, Diyana. Are you tired?”

“Theo, I am tired.”

He set to mashing the potatoes after he’d drained them – steaming – into the sink. “How was your day? Were many of the bulletins delivered to the suppliers? I’m sure you were right, you know. Comrade Vishkov’s article on Marxism will make this month’s issue very popular, I have no doubt.”

“Yes, yes, bad day, I’m afraid. Not many of the bulletins were delivered.”

“They weren’t?” He stopped pounding the potatoes with the bottom end of the soup ladle.

“I’m sorry, Theo.”

He went to the door frame of the kitchen and living room, looking out into the hallway and its flickering light. “Where are you? In the bedroom?”

“Theo, I’m in the study.”

He found her there, lying in front of the desk amongst the bulletins tied up with frayed pieces of red string. She was prone and grey-looking under the blue moonlight coming in through the window. "What happened, Diyana, my love?"

"I fell."

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"I'm neither, Theo. I don't think I can get up again."

"Don't say that." He took her hand which was clammy and limp. "I'll send for an ambulance."

"No. Too late for that. Just sit here and talk with me for a while."

He let her words reach him although he couldn't quite fathom what they might mean. He cried tears nothing to do with onions. The music in the other room got stuck in a groove and repeated the same wailing trumpet note over and over again.

"I wish..." he began but could not finish.

"Go on," she said to him.

"I wish I'd been talking about important things this evening. I wish I hadn't talked about trains and children and music boxes. I wish I'd come and found you before I started making supper."

"It's good," she said. "I wanted to hear about your day. I want to hear about good days. That is important. That is what I want to hear." She closed her eyes. He hummed a tune, quietly. Not one from his vinyl collection but a half-remembered melody from the silver music box on the train. "So, tell me Comrade Theo, what are you going to do tomorrow without me?"

A Sense of History: A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria:

Stara Zagora

In 2007, Bulgaria abolished its forced conscription for military service. Previously, all men between eighteen and twenty-seven years of age were called up for service, with the duration lasting between six and nine months, depending on your level of education. I began my own service ten years before its abolition, in 1997. Time might have worn down my body (I now have to urinate into a colostomy bag) but it has healed other areas and built me up to be stronger and more resilient; there isn't much that life throws at me now that phases me (not even the colostomy bag because that gets changed three times a day by a delightful young nurse called Emy). I might not be able to see but I still possess the benefits of hindsight. Back then, in 1997, I lacked direction, focus; a coloured ball in a game of pool, colliding with other balls or the cushions or both. I was quite happy squandering my time moping around Sofia without a clue as to what I wanted to do or where I wanted to go. Some days now I wake up in the middle of the night on my hospital bed and find it hard to breathe without the aid of the machinery as if my lungs have been punctured but, back then, it is not an exaggeration to say that breathing was even harder. It seemed like a wholly conscious effort of my mind and body not to just lie down wherever I happened to be, close my eyes and give up. My twin brother, Ventseslav, had been killed six months previously. Ventseslav was my gentle best friend. He was a young man capable of acute shyness that belied his giant frame and a generosity of spirit that rivalled it. He lives with me now, a passport-size photograph in my wallet; he is my eyes and he guides me, watching me. His death made no sense, it confused me and, despite my parents getting back together briefly in order to help us through this dark time, I lost my way and gave up on the teaching career I'd always had in mind.

I had thought about abdicating my responsibilities, leaving the country but my father must have got wind of my plans and forced me to go. My barracks were in the mountainous valley that surrounds Stara Zagora, low buildings with corrugated iron roofs. It was in these barracks, one afternoon after drills were over, cooking in the heat under the roofs, when I began to regain my former focus. I'd been listening to a sparrow high up in one of the larch trees, calling for its mate, and it sounded like one of the French melodies my brother always hummed, something by Edith Piaf. I left the oven of the barrack dorm and looked for the bird. I couldn't see it, it was too high up and surrounded by branches and leaves. It finished its tune and then was gone but I knew it had been there, like the ghost of my brother, guiding me, coaxing me on, telling me that everything would be all right. After that, I soon became determined to finish my service and try and become a teacher again, if it wasn't too late.

It was also whilst I was in service that I met my future wife, Grace. She was only seventeen, and I was twenty-two. During service we weren't confined to barracks; on rare opportunities we could head into Stara Zagora and take a look around the real world for brief periods of time. Grace was young and naive back then, I suppose we both were. She had effectively run away from home in England, although she'd told her parents she was on a travelling holiday before she was to settle down at university somewhere back home. She found it difficult to recall how she'd ended up in Bulgaria; she'd been heading east and through a series of lucky breaks and near misses had found her way to Stara Zagora. She had some vague notion of travelling to Thailand or India but had already fallen in love with Bulgaria, having spent several months in Sofia after her money had run out. She planned on staying in the country a while longer before she moved on again.

We met outside a small cafe in the centre of Stara Zagora, began talking and then, when the time came for me to head back to the barracks, found ourselves lingering and wishing we had longer together. Over the course of six months, Grace came to visit me at the barracks and slowly this was another factor in me finding myself again. I now had a reason to get out of the service as quickly as possible, pursue a career and start living again.

Not long ago, I revisited my former barracks, now about to be demolished in order to make way for a hotel and conference centre. In the grounds I met a guard, Vasil, who was initially suspicious of me and my entourage of guides and scribe. I asked him if he was here when I was serving but he said he wasn't. He used to be a factory worker in Kazanlak, working with ammunitions, but he wasn't cut out for that life because his hands are too big. Taking me by surprise, he put his hands in mine. "See," he said, "giant hands. So I went into being a bodyguard instead, for someone in parliament. I can't say who, even though they're long dead now."

"Perhaps you weren't cut out to be a bodyguard either," I suggested.

Vasil laughed, still clasping my hands. "He's not dead because of a failure on my part, I'll have you know. After that, I ended up here. Did you stay in the military?"

"No," I replied. "I'm a teacher. Well, I used to be."

"A teacher? You surprise me," he said with a grunt. "Those aren't teacher's hands."

Everything was quiet as he led us round. "Don't tell anyone I let you in," he said and I promised not to, forgetting I was about to record this whole encounter.

I noticed the sound of birds singing high up in the pine and linden trees. Aside from that lone sparrow, I don't remember birds being there; it always used to be the sound of marching boots or the drill sergeant barking orders.

Or, it was the sound of Grace's voice. I fell in love with her as she read to me Ivan Vazov's *Under the Yoke*. It was 90s Bulgaria, and though the days of communist queues were over, some things were still expensive or hard to come by. Grace, however, had been travelling from 90s England and she had brought with her a walkman, a big black brick of a thing the size of the guard's

giant hands. She had recorded herself reading the novel onto cassettes that, during those six months, I used to wear down through listening to them over and over again. She read in Bulgarian, which she had been picking up ever since Sofia; she had a startling flair for languages though her English accent was like an undercurrent, barely noticeable after a while but somehow always there. I was touched that she seemed so in love with my country. When the six months were up and I left the barracks for good, she said that she wanted to stay in Bulgaria to teach English and start a new life out here. I promised to show her the whole of my country when we met again.

We never did that; I broke my promise. Life and everything else got in the way. Now I am touring the country without her, going to places we would have once been to together.

As Vasil led me around the barracks, a pine cone crunched under my foot. The smell of the pine trees carried by the mountain air was refreshing and at once brought back many memories. Nights of listening to Grace's voice on the walkman, window open, longing to be with her.

The song of the birds was interrupted by a choking fit from Vasil whose lungs sounded like two *stotinki* rattling around in an old copper kettle. "Cancer," he said, and then he showed me around the rest of those old, haunted buildings.

When Tiny Tim Came To Miti

It was nearly lunch time when they arrived in Stara Zagora but Miti had forgotten all about any hunger he might have felt. He was first off the train, eyes searching around him and surveying the lay of the land. Next to the coat of arms with a lioness and her baby was a plaque on one of the station walls. ‘Welcome,’ it said, ‘to the City of Straight Streets’.

And it was.

The streets branched out, all of them straight like old Roman roads, lined with houses, shops and lush, green linden trees. This would be a suitable place for his mother to live, thought Miti. As if the trees had come to line the streets to welcome them in some kind of special serenade. His mother had sent them out on duty. Sentinels, they bowed and shifted in the light wind coming down from the mountains.

They looked in phone booths but invariably the street index had been torn out so they asked in shops but no one seemed to have heard of the street they were looking for. One of the proprietors suggested using an internet cafe to search for an online map and he gave directions to one nearby.

“I’m not so great with computers,” admitted Miti.

Cassandra volunteered. “I’ll be back before you know it!”

“You shouldn’t go alone - ” began Desislava but it was too late; Cassandra had already sprinted off round the corner.

“Desi,” said Stoyan. “Can you see a cafe nearby? One with a bronze statue outside?”

“Yes, not too far away, why? How did you know it was there?”

“Can you take me to it?”

Desislava led Stoyan by the arm over to the statue and, instead of going with them, Miti watched. His father just stood there, not talking, hand outstretched, touching the smooth surfaces of the statue.

After a while, Cassandra came running up to him. “We’re miles away,” she reported, brandishing some printouts. “The street we’re looking for isn’t near the city centre at all, it’s much further out, higher up in the hills. We’ll need to take a taxi to get there. I printed off street maps for the other addresses too. It saves us asking around so much.”

Miti grinned, pleased that Cassandra had come along on the journey.

~

More like a minibus, the taxi carried the four of them as well as an elderly woman with a string bag full of shopping who kept herself to herself and never smiled or spoke to anybody. Turkish music filled the air and the driver sang along out of tune in between long drags on his thin roll-up. Stoyan leaned in to the others. “And you said *my* singing was bad!”

The taxi pulled up next to an old bungalow set back from the side of the dusty road with a garden full of overgrown weeds. The woman, expertly, heaved open the sliding door at the side of the taxi with one hand and, with the shopping in the other, jumped out and set off towards the bungalow. She’d agreed the fare with the driver before she’d hopped on and paid him then and there. She was nearly at the bungalow by the time the taxi pulled away again.

“Now I don’t know which number is which because it’s a big road and I’ve got somebody to pick up but I can drop you at the start and then you’ll find it soon, I’m sure.”

“Can’t you just take us to the right number? It won’t take too long.”

“But my client is waiting.” He turned up the music and changed gear; the taxi was struggling with the steep incline.

He dropped them off shortly after turning onto a dusty gravel track, surrounded on both sides by thick hedges and woodland. They made sure they had everything with them as the taxi drove on a short way, did a U-Turn and, wheels spinning up a cloud of orange dust, drove back past them and off out of sight.

“I’ve had a thought,” said Stoyan. “We’ve got no way of getting back to the city centre, we should have taken the phone number for the taxi company.”

Of course, the thought hadn’t even entered Miti’s mind. He strolled off down the track, his overly large backpack like the shell of a tortoise. Knowing exactly which house number he was looking for, Miti walked with a confidence that neither Stoyan, Desislava, nor Cassandra felt. There wasn’t even a sign on the side of the road to say that this was the right one to be going down.

In keeping with the setting of the book he was reading, Miti remembered the carol his grandmother used to sing to him over the phone from England, the one about the twelve days of Christmas. As they walked

along the dusty path, he hummed what he could remember of the melody and on each day they were presented with a different house – forget the maids a-milking and the lords a-leaping, this was the serious business of real estate.

On the first day of Christmas, the house was small; not quite a bungalow, it had one window upstairs above the front door. The curtains were closed and there was no number on the post that held the letter box. It didn't have a garden, just a dusty driveway leading to the house. They assumed it wasn't Number 12 because it was the first house they'd come across. They would come back, perhaps, if they never found house Number 12.

On the second day of Christmas they were presented with a bungalow right up close to the road, arched windows looking right over the track. It melted into a long wall surrounding a garden that was surprisingly well-maintained. Roses were starting to bloom against the other side of the wall. The plaque above one of the arched windows told them it wasn't Number 12.

The walk to the third house was a long one. A farm house set far back from the road, an old tractor lay rusting and immobile in front of it. A cock chased a hen comically round and round the tractor but she was fast and wasn't having any of it. Beyond the house they could see dilapidated barns with iron roofs.

Houses four, five and six were next to each other, a short distance from the farm. A thin washing line traversed the gardens of all three from high wooden poles, the washing from the three houses mingling and flapping together in the breeze.

And so it went on until the twelfth house and the twelfth day of Christmas.

No drummers drumming. Not even so much as a partridge in a pear tree because the trees, along with the house, had all been burnt down to a black smudge that made Miti's heart sink. In that moment he recalled his father's words, from that night when he was half awake and half sleeping, "How much more disappointment can he take?"

Stoyan must have smelt the remnants of the fire because this was the first house they'd come across where he didn't request a commentary on what they were seeing. "Is it gone?" he said, his nose lifted high.

"It's gone like Christmas," said Miti.

Desislava said, "But Christmas will come again."

"Not with my mother it won't."

No rainbow of shoes for Miti to destroy this time, nothing he could demolish because the fire had wiped out everything that had been there before. Nothing left.

Without ceremony, Miti crouched down. He swung his backpack from his shoulders and threw it across the track. He kicked out his legs and, ignoring the effect the dusty road might have on his trousers, he sat down. His hands and arms were limp in his lap. He stayed in this position for a while until gradually his back sank down to the ground where he lay outstretched and still.

Cassandra looked to Desislava who shrugged. She went up to him. "Miti, are you all right?" Miti didn't reply. Something must have told Cassandra that she wasn't ever going to get a reply from him so she did the only thing that felt right under the current circumstances. She lay down on the ground next to him.

"What's going on?" asked Stoyan. "Is Miti ok?" Desislava told him what Miti and Cassandra were doing. "Whereabouts?" he asked. Desislava led him over. "Right here?"

"Right here," she said and before she knew what was happening, Stoyan had dropped his backpack and had found his way to the ground where he, too, lay down. Not sure what to do, Desislava looked around for signs of any traffic on the road; she didn't think it was a very good idea at all, lying in the road like that, what if a car was to come along? Still, there seemed like nothing else to do, it was clear they weren't going to move any time soon. Hesitantly, she joined the others on the ground. They looked like discarded dolls at bedtime. Miti looked up in time to see Desislava lie down. He was beginning to realise that she had no will of her own around his father. The blind leading the blind. Miti didn't say anything; he would let them lie for as long as they wanted to lie, or as long as they needed to lie. He turned his mind to the ruins of the house and, as if the flames were still licking the building, he warmed himself with thoughts of his mother.

Light and somehow playful, the sound of footsteps. Then the echoes of a song carried across the wind. Miti looked up from where he was lying on the ground. He was surprised to see that it was getting dark. How long had they been lying there? His neck and body ached. Emerging through the darkening shadows was a young woman, barely in her twenties. She wore a brown patterned dress over a white blouse with an apron secured around her neck. It had deep pockets in the front that swelled with flowers. If Miti hadn't seen the flowers he would have thought that she was pregnant.

She stopped when she saw them lying on the ground. She squinted, mistrustful of her own eyes, then took a step forward, her embroidered shoes crunching on the gravel track. Desislava sprang up suddenly and the girl let out a short yelp of surprise, as did Cassandra who sat bolt upright. Stoyan continued to lie there unperturbed.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you...” said Desislava over and over.

But the woman was now laughing quietly to herself whilst picking up the flowers that had escaped from her apron when she’d jumped back. “It’s fine, it’s fine,” she said. “I didn’t know what to think when I saw you lying there like that, that’s all.” Then her laughter stopped and concern flooded her face. “Is everything ok, I mean, you’re all right, aren’t you?”

“We’re fine,” said Desislava and she bent to help the girl recapture the flowers. “We needed a rest, that’s all. We saw the house and it got a bit much. We were expecting to find someone there.”

“Oh, I see. Who was that?”

Desislava didn’t answer, she handed the flowers back to the woman. They were the buds of roses – pink, white and red. As the woman nodded her thanks, Desislava seemed to notice the encroaching dark. “We need to get back to the city,” she said. “Or find somewhere to stay in the area. We lost all track of time.”

“I’m afraid you won’t find a way of getting back to the city now, taxis don’t normally come round these parts unless you book them first. I could give you the number of one in the city if you want to call one and see if they’ll come out. I would offer you a lift but I can’t drive.”

“Thank you, that’s kind. Or if you know of somewhere we can camp for the night in the area, I’d be grateful.”

“I know just the place,” said the woman. “Follow me.”

Her house was the one they’d come across earlier, with the immaculate garden. They had plenty of space to set up their tents amongst the rose bushes and other flowers. As he helped Cassandra and Desislava with the tents, Miti overheard the conversation between the woman, whose name was Elisabeta, and his father. Somehow they’d moved onto the topic of tattoos.

“Do you have any?” asked Elisabeta. They were sitting on a small bench by the garden wall.

“No, no, can’t say they ever appealed to me,” said Stoyan.

“That’s fair enough, they’re not for everyone. I have one on my wrist.” Elisabeta took Stoyan’s finger and traced the outline of her tattoo. “It’s called a Sankofa. It’s an old symbol. I like what it stands for.”

“And what’s that?”

“It means that in order to move forward with the present, you have to look back and take what is good from your past.”

Miti turned to Cassandra and whispered under his breath. “See, I told you we’d meet the Ghost of Christmas Present today. Or maybe she’s the Ghost of Christmas Past.”

“She could be the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come,” suggested Cassandra which made Miti smile.

~

Miti was having trouble seeing in the dark. He wanted to turn back to Elisabeta’s garden but Cassandra was adamant he had to follow her.

“Now, do we turn left here?” Cassandra slowed to a stop at an intersection. “Or is it right?”

Miti shrugged. “How am I meant to know, you were the one who found this place, not me.”

“I suppose it wasn’t far so we’ll know before long if we pick the wrong way.” She led him left.

This road was wider than the track; less dusty, it was grey concrete rather than orange gravel even if it did have large potholes intermittently breaking the surface. The forest was starting to thin out in this area; the trees, farther apart from each other, looked in this light somehow lonely. Tired, Miti had been preparing for bed whilst Desislava and Stoyan had moved indoors to continue their conversation with Elisabeta. He thought that Cassandra was also in bed but just when he was beginning to nod off, she’d come up to his tent and practically pulled him out saying she had something to show him. Miti had worried that his father would go into the garden and find his tent empty. They couldn’t be long.

He started walking faster.

Up ahead there were lights and music.

“This is it, we’re going the right way, come on!”

Miti followed Cassandra just as he had been, silently. This was all a distraction. He knew that it meant another night wasted when they should be continuing on the road to find his mother. They had the next address, they should be making their way there straight away. It didn’t matter about daylight or food or sleep.

There were signs to some baths which sprang out of the darkness as they walked and pointed in many different directions, none of which they were following. They were drawn to the lights and the music – which was a strange mixture of brazen bubblegum pop and the repetitive up and down all-over-the-place melodies of an old-fashioned accordion.

Suddenly the forest thinned out completely into a large, circular clearing. Miti wondered if he was dreaming. Lorry trailers were scattered around the perimeter of the clearing. In the middle was a red and white striped tent straight out of a circus. Not quite large enough to be a Big Top, this one was smaller and faded. The sides of the trailers were all opened out like boxes cut in half lengthways and they revealed stalls and coconut shies and shooting ranges and toy prizes all reaching out to Miti as he approached, like someone holding out a sweet for him to take. Surrounding each trailer and the tent were a thousand fairy lights that flashed and promised more magic.

Miti ran up to the nearest trailer, the coconut shy, and watched a boy of a similar age try and knock all seven down. Five had disappeared but he got cocky and missed the sixth and seventh though he still won a replica gun. It wasn't quite the cuddly lion twice the size of him that he'd been hoping for, but it would do. He ran to the next trailer tugging his mother along. She couldn't help but smile.

The man who ran the coconut shy was completely bald. He wore a garish multi-coloured shirt with a yellow tie and a gold hoop in one ear. He looked at Miti. "Come on kid, what're you waiting for? You saw the other boy fail; now it's your turn to show him who's boss! Just fifty *stotinki* for seven throws. You'll never know if you don't try..."

Miti fished out some money from his pocket and handed it over to the man who exchanged the *stotinki* for a soft ball. Miti gazed longingly at the stuffed lion surrounded by fairy lights of its own, perched on a pedestal at the back of the trailer. He had never wanted a stuffed lion before, had never even contemplated having one. He even thought that maybe he was too old for one, but right at that moment he wanted it with an ardour and passion that made his heart throb.

"Take your time," warned Cassandra from somewhere behind him. He lined up each shot, never took his eye off the coconut. They were staggered, at different heights and distances, but if he just took his time he might be able to get them. He put his whole weight into each shot. The first coconut fell. And the second, the third, fourth, fifth and sixth. Then came the final shot. He lined it up carefully and threw. The ball only just glanced off the coconut which teetered on the edge teasingly. Finally, and surprisingly, it fell.

The man's cheers and whoops were far louder than Miti's silent staring and blinking. Part of him thought that maybe it was a joke or that maybe there was some catch. Perhaps the lion wasn't the prize for knocking down all seven coconuts; perhaps it was just there for show and to lure in eager young children like

himself. The lion was about the same size as Miti. Miti thanked the man as he unwrapped it from its fairy light blanket.

“Don’t thank me, kid, you’re the one with the great right arm – have you ever thought of playing baseball?”

“I’m not very good at sports,” confessed Miti. “I haven’t got much co-ordination.”

“Well you could have fooled me! Guess I’m going to have to find a new mascot! Here you are. Take good care of him for me, won’t you?”

“I will, I will!” Miti smiled uncontrollably as he was passed the lion. Despite its size it weighed almost nothing though it was awkward and cumbersome to hold.

“What are you going to call it, kid?”

Miti didn’t have to think, he’d already come up with a name before he’d even thrown the first ball.

“Tiny Tim!”

“He’s not so tiny...” laughed the man.

“Neither was Tiny Tim’s heart in the story,” said Miti. He could think of no other conceivable name for him.

“What are we going to do with that?” asked Cassandra standing there watching Miti struggle to work out the best way to carry the lion; his arms could barely fit around its neck.

“He’ll come with us, of course,” said Miti as if there was no other option and the question was a silly one. Then he noticed the tent in the middle again. “I wonder what’s inside there!” Miti wanted to run over to it but carrying Tiny Tim got in the way and he had to walk awkwardly.

Outside the tent a man was playing the accordion, the tune they’d heard before. Miti was all set to rush inside but the man stopped playing and stuck his foot in the way to block the entrance. “What’s the hurry? Are you sure you want to go in there?”

Miti half-hid behind Tiny Tim. “What is it? What’s in there?”

“Someone will tell your future, just by looking at the palm of your hand. They can tell you what you become when you’re older, what will happen to you years from now.”

“This is it,” said Miti turning to Cassandra, “The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come.”

“It’s not real, Miti.”

“I want to see,” said Miti turning back to the tent, ready to race in again.

“But are you sure you’re ready?” asked the man, leaning in closer. “It’s not always what you want to see that matters, you can’t change the future, it’s already written.”

“I know,” said Miti. This was a chance to finally find out how his story was going to end. The palm reader was about to tell him that he’d find his mother, he knew that part, but he didn’t know how or where. Maybe it would put him on the right path. “I’m definitely ready.”

“Good!” said the man. He struck up a few chords on his accordion and then held out his hand. “That’ll be two *leva*, if you don’t mind.”

He had plenty of money in his pocket. “Are you coming in Cassandra?”

She hung back, shaking her head. “No.”

“Suit yourself.” Miti shrugged, paid the money and disappeared into the tent, squeezing Tiny Tim through the entranceway.

A minute or so later he emerged.

“So, what did the fortune-teller say?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Miti and he stormed forward, practically bowling Cassandra over with Tiny Tim. “I want to go back to Elisabeta’s house now.”

“What’s wrong? Can’t handle what the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come had to say?”

“It’s not real,” spat Miti. “None of it’s real.” He disappeared into the darkness beyond the forest clearing and Cassandra had to sprint to catch up with him.

The Story of the Rose-Picker

No way was it what she'd been expecting.

Elisabeta took the bus from Stara Zagora to Plovdiv, thinking all the way about the man she'd met two days ago. Had he not promised excitement and new possibilities? Had he not promised the world or, if not the world, at the very least, the world's attention? He was an imposing man. He had towered above her and he only wore black – black leather coat, black jeans, shiny black boots. He unfurled a hand for her to shake from beneath the coat, like an insect's proboscis. A large round nose announced itself on his face and drew attention as if a gourd had been plastered there. His lips had been stained brown by countless cigarettes.

It didn't matter what he looked like because he had said she was beautiful. She had listened; it was impossible not to listen to his words because they seemed so genuine and so nice as he spoke to her while she carried on in the fields, picking the roses and putting them in the pouch of her delicately embroidered apron.

Casting shadows over the roses, he had cut a strange figure amongst the bushes, out of place in a field of such pink beauty. Some of the other pickers stopped their labours and watched the man follow the girl, shaking their heads, each with their own opinion as to who he was and what he wanted. In the background, rising above them all, a billboard advertised the latest computer.

Still early, she had taken the first bus and the spring mists hadn't quite lifted making everything grey and dull. She was used to early starts though, the best roses were the roses plucked with the fresh morning dew still clinging to the petals like stowaways.

He was there, of course, but he was busy and distracted, and barely recognised her when she came up to him and said hello with an awkward smile. He was standing in the doorway of a big warehouse, the steel gates closed shut, barking at someone on the other end of his mobile. He waved her away until he finished his call.

"Come here," he said gruffly and gestured for her to follow him. "Thank you for coming," he added; an afterthought.

She followed him through a fire exit next to the steel shutters. Inside, the warehouse was brighter than it had been outside. There were lots of people rushing about. Some

nodded to the man, others bowed their heads and avoided eye contact as they sped past to wherever it was they were heading.

The main part of the warehouse was set up for a photo shoot. Cameras were trained on a white cloth background, lighting rigs pouring down brilliant white light from on high. In the centre was a brand new sports car – jet black – its steel rims dancing under the glare from the lights.

Then the man pointed to another set of doors. “Go through there, get changed. They’ve picked out a wardrobe for you.” She was about to do as she was told when he ordered her to wait. He clicked his fingers and called for someone named Boyana. A woman came over holding a clipboard and a state-of-the-art mobile phone. She wore a brown cardigan and had carefully-crafted messy hair. “Boyana this is Elisabeta, the girl I told you about. Show her to the changing rooms.”

Boyana scrutinised Elisabeta before leading her through the doors. “This way,” she said. The corridor was full of young men fussing over cables, arguing about where the leads were going and what they were connected to. The changing rooms were at the end of the corridor.

Three girls looked up when Boyana and Elisabeta entered. “Aren’t you changed yet?” snapped Boyana. “Hurry up. Show Elisabeta what to wear first. Then bring her round to get her hair done.” Boyana left and the heavy door banged shut.

Two of the girls finished getting changed. One came over to Elisabeta. She smiled sheepishly. “Here are the clothes for the first shoot. When that’s over we’ll come back here and change into this. And then finally this.”

“Where’s the rest of it?” she asked. “I mean this is only underwear.”

“It’s swimwear,” snorted one of the other girls. She was naked from the waist up. Elisabeta blushed. “There is no ‘rest of it’.”

“I think there’s been some mistake...” attempted Elisabeta.

The girl with the sheepish smile said, in a whisper, “The mistake was when any of us said yes to that man.”

Back outside in the corridor, the young men jeered and wolf-whistled as the three girls walked passed on their way to the main warehouse. Elisabeta clung on to her clothes for as long as she could but there came a time when she had to drop her coat. Boyana, who had swapped her clipboard and phone for a camera with a huge lens, arranged the girls about the car. The man watched on from a distance. He seemed happy with everything. At one point he shouted over the noise of Boyana’s instructions. “Make love to the camera!”

The cameras started flashing like a lightning storm and Elisabeta couldn't help but feel that this was not what she had expected at all. She imagined being back in the fields, picking roses fresh with morning dew.

When it was over, the man came over and handed her some money in a brown envelope, not once looking in her eyes. On the coach home, the fields outside alternating between sunflowers and roses, she counted the money. Pitiful. Had she taken a rose and plucked each leaf and put them in a brown envelope, they would have been worth more. She vowed to stick to the life she knew, amongst the roses. She hoped the other pickers, or their husbands, didn't read magazines.

Three days later the billboard advert of the computer was taken down and replaced with an image of Elisabeta and the other girls draped over the car. The rose pickers shook their heads and knew they had been right about this girl all along.

A Sense of History: A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria

Kazanlak

Come to Kazanlak at any time of year and it is impossible to escape the scent of roses. Rose oil production is, and has been for a long time, the chief money-making industry in this growing city which is the only place on earth where a certain breed of rose can be grown, the area providing the perfect mix of fertile soil, humid air, and steady temperature. Famous in perfumeries the world over, the Kazanlak rose is a national treasure and a symbol of pride for Bulgarians.

I would recommend paying a visit in June to attend the Festival of the Roses, an annual event since 1903. People come from all over Bulgaria and, indeed, the world to see the festivities which can last anything up to a week. Every day there is a different attraction - parties, music, parades - culminating with the coronation of the Queen of the Roses. During the festival, it is as if your entire being has been consumed by the roses that are just beginning to open. The scent punctures everything – pores, clothes, hair – so that the delicate fragrance lingers long after you have left the area.

I made a return visit two years ago, when my legs were much stronger, this time with Desislava as my guide and scribe. A short drive from the city centre is the small but fascinating Rose Museum that details the history of rose oil production in the area. The lovely women there were gracious enough to lead me by the elbow and tell me all about the exhibits, and how, once enough roses had been picked, production had started out with hand-held machines and elbow-grease and how now the oil is produced in factories the size of small villages. What hasn't changed, they assured me, are the rose-pickers. No machine could replace them and do their work. The women showed me round and described the rose garden in the grounds of the museum. Part of me wished I could see it but the scent alone was enough.

It was a familiar scent. Before she'd even been to Bulgaria, Grace, my wife, smelt of rose oil. It was possible to buy over in England; her favourite perfume. I used to buy her a bottle, every birthday. She stopped wearing it, towards the end, said she wanted a change. Perhaps I should have realised what was coming. Don't get me wrong, I'm not being overly-sentimental. I've just realised how much of a waste of money that was. Do you have any idea how expensive it is? Over 3.5 tons of rose petals go into making one kilogram of rose oil. One kilogram of pure Bulgarian rose oil has been known to fetch in excess of four thousand Euros. Now you can see why it's such a flourishing business.

Interestingly, the second highest-earning industry in the area is the manufacture of military equipment – from small firearms to heavy machine guns and anti-aircraft missiles. My father used to work for a company based in Kazanlak. He said it had nothing to do with military equipment but I find it hard to believe he was involved with the rose oil industry. He used to be sent abroad but he rarely came back with stories of where he went or who he'd seen. He never really talked about it until

years later, when he was an old man – as old as I am now – when he used to ramble on and on for hours about things long forgotten, he'd tell me how he'd been given strict lessons on how to act when abroad. He was told to walk as if he was carrying the Bulgarian flag: tall, upright and proud. He'd also been warned about what to look out for on foreign soil - thieves and blackmailers who would try to get money out of you by implicating you with a prostitute and threatening to phone the authorities. His trips abroad were a matter of necessity, as the West possessed the technology and resources Bulgaria needed to manufacture industries – cars, household appliances, computing, military equipment. He said that wherever you went, Britain, France, America, there were people wanting to harm you. Unlike at home, he'd say, at home he felt safe. I inherited a lot of my preconceived views about the West from my father; the way he was so guarded about his visits abroad encouraged a certain mistrust of these countries in my impressionable mind. He only met Grace once; he took an instant dislike to her and told me to never trust her. He said that she would corrupt me because that's what people from Britain specialised in. When I came back home and found the letter from Grace, explaining how she needed to leave, the first thing I thought about was the conversation I had with my father as I drove him back to his apartment after meeting Grace.

“They have ways,” he said, “subtle ways of corruption. She'll bring with her all kinds of propaganda, try to take you away from Bulgaria.” I tried protesting, saying that she wasn't like that but he wasn't listening. “I'm sorry you have fallen in love with her,” he said and remained silent for the remainder of the journey. Grace never saw him again. With that conversation in mind as I read Grace's letter for the first time, I found myself believing what my father had told me. I grabbed everything that reminded me of her and burnt it so that it couldn't corrupt me or my son any longer; as far as I could see in that heat-fuelled moment, her books were the propaganda my father had spoken of. Mother was more open to Grace and the influence of other countries on Bulgaria but she was so wrapped up in campaigning for change in her home country itself that she rarely had anything to say about the West.

When I returned to Kazanlak and asked to walk around one of the many factories there, my request was declined so I am left wondering: do the firearms and the machine guns and the missiles produced there smell, like everything else, of roses?

When Miti Was Showered With Roses

Miti heard the movement outside but pretended to be asleep. Desislava was up early and tinkering about in the garden, unpacking some of the food they'd brought from home but not eaten. She laid out tissues on a nearby tree stump and spread out a selection of dry but filling bread, sweet baklava and coffee cake, all homemade.

Stoyan, who had been sitting on a camping stool nearby whilst Desislava worked, came back into the tent and shook Miti, lightly, on his shoulders. "Dimitar, it's time to wake up. Elisabeta said she would order a taxi for nine o'clock. It's half past eight, we need to eat and get our strength back for the journey home."

Miti stirred and rubbed his eyes which felt red and dry. He'd been up half the night thinking about what the fortune-teller had told him. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't think of anything else. He'd resorted to finishing off his story and savouring the happy ending where Scrooge learnt all his lessons and became a different man.

Miti was glad he'd packed a jumper because of the cool morning. Tiny Tim, too big to fit inside the tent, had had to spend the night outside and he was covered in a fine layer of dew which Miti soon hugged out of him. They'd told Stoyan the night before that they'd found him at the side of the road. Whether he believed them or not, he didn't say but upon holding Tiny Tim he'd thought it best to put the animal back on the side of the road.

"He'll be no trouble at all," Miti had protested.

"We'll look after him," said Cassandra who could see how much Miti wanted to keep him.

"He's your responsibility then. You'll have to look after him and make sure he doesn't get in the way."

"He won't," they'd chorused.

Sleepy-eyed, Cassandra joined them from her own tent to eat.

"This is Desi's very own famous coffee cake," announced Stoyan.

"Oh, it's nothing really." Desislava blushed as she sat down on her own stool.

"It's good," said Cassandra, mouth full and surrounded by crumbs. "You could sell this; I mean seriously, it's good."

"Nonsense, nobody would want to buy my cakes."

“I would,” countered Miti who’d already devoured everything he’d been given. “Can I have it as my birthday cake please?”

“Wait a minute,” said Stoyan. “What day is it?”

Desislava suddenly stood up from her camping stool. “Never mind that, look at all the mess you children have been making.”

“Desi, is it your birthday today?”

“Come on, sweep up the crumbs and we can give it to the birds.” Desislava started placing the remaining slices of cake into a Tupperware container.

“Desi, is it today? Have I forgotten it? You didn’t say anything last night.” Stoyan had stopped eating his cake.

“It’s fine. I don’t think I ever told you it was today, I just said that it was coming up, you weren’t to know. I never like making a fuss of birthdays; they’re just another day of the year.” She gathered the box and the plastic plates Miti and Cassandra had been using and took them back into the tent.

Stoyan still kept a hold of his plate, half-eaten cake left on it.

“What should we do?” whispered Miti, looking to his father for help.

“Should we sing?” said Cassandra. “We should sing.”

“I don’t think we should make a fuss,” said Stoyan. “We’ll think of something.”

Elisabeta wasn’t there to say goodbye when the taxi arrived, she was off before dawn to pick the roses, but Miti noticed a small petal on the back seat as if she had been there; a parting gift.

~

The bus station at Stara Zagora was busy with tourists clutching phrase books and commuters clutching suitcases; Desislava had to queue to get the tickets whilst the others waited near the entrance.

“When we get back home,” said Stoyan, “the first thing I’m going to do is have a shower.”

“But we’re not going back home yet,” said Miti. “We still have another four houses to visit.”

“All in good time,” replied Stoyan.

Cassandra looked like she was about to say something but she bit her lip.

Brandishing the tickets, Desislava returned without making eye-contact.

“Which Sector do we get the bus from?” asked Stoyan.

Miti looked at his ticket. “Sector 6.” Then he paused; had to look at his ticket again. “But this is to Kazanlak. Not Plovdiv.” He looked to Desislava for an explanation. She still wasn’t making eye-contact.

“It’s only 45 minutes to Kazanlak from here. Then we can go on to Shipka from there which is the next village along. It makes more sense than going all the way home and then coming all the way back. We’ve got everything we need in our bags.”

Miti’s heart surged with affection for Desislava but then he noticed the look on his father’s face.

“Desi, I thought I said we were to go back to Plovdiv. That way we can sort ourselves out and - ”

“I’m really sorry but sometimes I don’t understand the decisions you make, Stoyan.” Desislava said it slowly and calmly as if she’d been rehearsing what she was going to say to him. Her voice quivered slightly.

To reassure her that she had done the right thing, and to show his thanks, Miti smiled at her widely and manoeuvred Tiny Tim’s paw into her hand so that she could shake it and feel how soft his fur was.

~

They entered Kazanlak on the first of July, the Day of the Rose, and the bus station was teeming with people, forming crowds heading for the festival taking place in the town centre.

“Stay close,” said Stoyan though Miti didn’t have much of a choice; his hand was being gripped so tightly it would be impossible to let go.

They waited in the entrance whilst Desislava consulted the map Cassandra had printed off at Stara Zagora. “I can see where we need to be,” she said. “It looks like we’ll have to follow this crowd for the most part, then we can break off and head for Nicova Street.”

Number 12 Nicova Street was a slammed door.

Outraged, Cassandra turned to Miti. “Why did she do that? She can’t do that!” She pounded on the glass front of the door, just as Miti had done before. “Hey! Lady! Come back!”

But Miti knew it was no use. The gruff woman who had come to the door wearing a brown leather jacket and an invisible wreath of tobacco smoke had taken one look at Miti and Cassandra standing there asking to see Grace Popova and slammed the door shut in their faces.

The street and the house had been easy to find, once they'd pushed their way through the crowds of revellers in the city centre. The house was on a dusty street that skirted round the base of a large hill leading up to the Ethnographical Complex which contained a Thracian tomb and an archaeological museum, as well as picnic tables and souvenir traders in the car parks.

Number 12, thought Miti, was beautiful. A modern construction, it had a thick heavy gate and garage doors made from the same deep brown wood. A bronze bell hung from above the gate and when Miti had pulled the chain, the bell's ceremonious ringing was like a herald to another world. When there had been no answer, he'd rung the bell again. Still nothing.

"This is ridiculous," Cassandra had said and she'd turned the large iron door handle on the gate and disappeared inside.

"Cassandra! Wait, you can't just run in like that..."

But it was too late and Miti had followed. Behind the gate the building was all white, brand new. It looked like an unused shoe-box. Thick white steps led to the front door with its frosted glass.

Now, Miti watched his shadowy reflection in the glass of the door which wouldn't open again, not for him, anyway. The smell of tobacco was gone now, pushed aside by the scent of the rose oil that hung over Kazanlak during the Rose Festival like a cloud. Miti remembered curling up to his mother in the armchair as she read her stories. She smelt of rose oil, too.

Cassandra was still shouting away but Desislava came up behind them, placed her hands on their shoulders, and guided them back to the gate and the road where Stoyan was waiting.

Stoyan reached out to see if he could find his son. He found his shoulders and patted them. "It's ok, Dimitar."

And that was that.

No mother, only the scent of her. As if she'd just been in the room and then left before he got there.

~

They made their way back to the Festival in the town centre, led by the sound of laughter and animated chatter.

All along the streets were stalls upon stalls of soaps, scented candles, dried roses and women in traditional dress who handed out handfuls of petals to children and passers-by. Grandchildren were fawned over by grandmothers whilst their husbands, from the bistros that lined the main street, watched the pretty girls walking past in short skirts and roses in their hair.

“Why have we stopped?” asked Stoyan.

“We can’t go any further at the moment,” said Desislava trying to see over the crowd. “I think people are waiting for some kind of procession.”

The procession had started in another part of town and the sound of drums was getting nearer. The crowd waited eagerly. Groups of local youngsters had met in one of the big restaurants along the route and strolled down – as they did every year – to see what was going on. Other, more eager tourists, who had come from different parts of Bulgaria, craned their necks down the street in the direction of the drumming raising their cameras in anticipation.

“I wonder how long all this goes on for.”

“All day,” said Desislava. “And it’ll go on maybe three, four days. Goran and I came here last year. There are street celebrations and then the women go into the fields to collect the roses and some of the tourists follow. In the evening there are dances and other festivities. Or at least there used to be. It might have changed since I last came.”

Miti clutched on to his father’s hand and Tiny Tim’s neck as more people pressed in behind them. The drummers neared, a light march. Behind it Miti could hear horns in the distance and maybe a violin. Over it all, the unmistakable sound of bagpipes. People clapped in time with the beat and cheered as the drummers passed them. Miti couldn’t see much through the arms and the legs of those in front and when Stoyan asked him to explain what was happening, it was up to Desislava who could just about see over shoulders and heads but her voice was quiet and drowned out by the drumming and the cheering so that in the end he had to imagine it all for himself.

Following the many musicians were rows of women, all wearing the brightly coloured and patterned traditional dress, carrying baskets of luscious pink petals and buds which they spread amongst the crowd as if they were sowing seeds. Then came a horse and cart decorated with roses. A woman sat atop the cart and waved

at the onlookers; Miti wondered who she was. Following her were a legion of Roman centurions in gold breastplates and impressive, feathered helmets. One of the centurions looked over at Cassandra and winked. Miti laughed and she elbowed him in the ribs. Then more women passed with deep baskets, the rims and handles of which were all layered with roses. They smiled and emptied their baskets over the crowd, petal by petal.

When the procession was over, people gathered around a huge stage that had been erected in the main square in front of the Hotel Kazanlak. On one side, the musicians who had paraded down the street were setting up; opposite them was a choir maybe twenty strong. The backdrop to the stage were large screens – three huge close-ups of roses.

There came a loud cheer and Miti didn't know what was happening until someone on stage started speaking into a microphone. He was welcoming everyone to the very special Festival and asked if they were ready to see the contenders for the Queen of the Roses title who would be crowned at the end of the festivities. To another tremendous cheer, twelve women walked elegantly on stage and took up position in a line; all lipstick-red smiles and poised limbs.

“What's going on?” asked Stoyan.

“Girls,” said Miti as if that explained everything.

Cassandra elbowed him in the ribs again. Stoyan laughed. From somewhere behind Miti's left shoulder Desislava coughed. “Perhaps we should make a move to the next address at Shipka, whilst everyone's in the square watching this,” she suggested.

“...Only the most beautiful of Kazanlak high-school leavers can be crowned the Queen of the Rose...” continued the compère.

“Girls...” said Miti, again.

“Yes, I think that's a good idea,” said Cassandra.

Miti almost lost his grip on Tiny Tim as he was led through the crowd, towards the green park, away from the square and the would-be Queens.

For the rest of the morning, it seemed, it rained roses.

The Story of the Centurion

All the girls giggled as they helped the boy dress up as the Roman Centurion. He was new in town; his parents had just moved from Veliko Turnovo; he'd just started at the Cyril and Methodius High School. The rumours passed between them like sweets. The boy relished their attention and tried not to let it show; pretended he hadn't even noticed them there, tying up his sandals, straightening his bronze breastplate. The whole school building was awash with people running about preparing for the Festival. Teachers, even though it was their day off, barked orders and the children rushed around to carry them out. Make sure the baskets are filled with roses. Keep an eye on the time. Don't forget to hide bottles of water in your costume, it's scorching out there.

But then the boy noticed one girl in particular. She was helping his friend get into costume over the other side of the room. She looked over as she worked on his friend's red cloak and for the most fleeting of moments flashed a smile his way. Her straight hair was jet black and her coal-fire eyes burned through him.

"Who's that girl?" he asked, turning to another friend, Bogdan, one of the other centurions.

Bogdan laughed. "Which one?"

He wanted to go up to her and ask her name but there were too many people around, getting in his way, watching his every move. She flitted around the centurions like a hummingbird, hovering to adjust part of their costumes or to sew on a loose button but she never came close enough to him. He was the only one she was avoiding. But why? What had he done? He thought he'd get a chance once these giggling girls were out of the way but as soon as they were finished faffing around, a teacher rushed into the room.

"The procession is about to leave any second," she said, "with or without you."

In more fits of excited giggles, the girl disappeared with all the others and he didn't see her again all morning. As he marched in formation through the crowds heading towards the square he tried looking for her but she was nowhere to be seen. The procession seemed to go on for days, years. Blisters formed on the side of his feet from walking in the gladiator sandals and underneath his costume he was sweating, his head was itchy beneath the plumed hat. Bogdan was walking next to him, smiling and waving at the cheering crowds, winking at girls who reached out their hands to touch him as if he was a celebrity. He wished he could relinquish himself to the moment like that, but he couldn't shake off the image of the hummingbird girl with the burning eyes. As the day wore on and the

procession coursed through the streets of Kazanlak, he consoled himself with the thought that she may have been a figment of his imagination.

Yet later, he saw her again, fleetingly, on one of the large screens erected on the central stage in the main square. He had to do a double-take, to make sure it was her but it definitely was – who else had those eyes? The procession had ended and all the participants had filtered off into the crowds surrounding the stage.

He realised with a stab of jealousy that her beauty had been noticed. A man on the stage next to her was fawning over her and the crowds were in a frenzy. “Only the most beautiful of Kazanlak girls is crowned the Queen,” announced the compère as he placed a golden crown wreathed in roses on her head. The girl surrendered herself to the cheering. She waved and blew kisses to the crowd. The centurion tried to get her attention, waving back to her but there were dozens – hundreds – of other hands in the air and she wouldn’t recognise him with the stupid centurion’s helmet masking his face. He took it off and tried to battle his way through the crowd, calling out to her but he didn’t know her name. The crowd pressed against him. It was like trying to run under water and he couldn’t get any closer, a mesh of arms and bodies blocked his path. He called out again but his voice blended into a chorus with the others as she took her place, centre-stage, on a golden throne. He realised, in that moment, that he would only ever be one of the hundreds of others watching her rose-like beauty from a distance.

He remained there, staring at the stage, long after the festivities were over and life in Kazanlak returned to normal. He stayed there so long that he started to turn to bronze under the heat of the burning sun.

Some come now to stare at the statue of the Centurion and no one remembers how he got there but everyone is sure he is a symbol of the proud Bulgarian heritage.

A woman passes, surrounded by her friends, and happens to glance at the statue. The boy, she thinks, looks vaguely familiar. A boy she’d met once who’d had burning eyes. She’d remember those eyes anywhere.

Shipka

When he was very young, Dimitar used to count lions. Wherever he went, he would look for them or their representations. On each of the four faces of the Shipka monument there is a giant bronze lion. Years later, when he took me back to visit, he told me that these were his favourites. He said they were the bravest lions, the most fearless.

“Why the fascination with lions?” I asked. He said he'd always been interested in them. His mother had told him a story once about a lion she'd seen at the old zoo in Plovdiv, long gone now. The lion was pacing backwards and forwards in its cramped cage, a look of hunger and sadness on its gaunt face. Dimitar said that lions always reminded him of his mother. I think he meant because she had told him that story but Grace was like that lion in another way; restless and hungry for more.

The Shipka monument was erected in 1934 in remembrance of the Battle of Shipka Pass, part of the Russo-Turkish war (1877 – 1878). The famous battle was fought along the vast Shipka plains and marked the end of the Ottoman yoke which sought to quash Bulgarian national identity for five hundred years. It is a scene that has been immortalised in song, poetry and literature: a vastly overwhelmed Bulgarian army defeated, against all odds, the Turks who numbered in their tens of thousands. On the wind that, from May to July, can carry the faint scent of the Kazanlak roses from sixteen kilometres away to the Shipka plains, one can almost hear the cries of the battling soldiers. Eventually running out of ammunition, the Bulgarians were forced to use the bodies of their dead comrades as artillery, rolling them down the hills towards their aggressors.

On top of this monument, I learnt something I didn't know before. It was 2001, Grace was pregnant. My father and I still communicated by letters, even though he refused to come to Plovdiv to see us. I think he knew he didn't have long left and that he wouldn't get a chance to meet Dimitar before he was born so he sent me a letter saying that he wanted to visit the Shipka monument with me, one last time. I was to go alone. The years had taken their toll on him, I barely recognised him as he was helped off the bus at Shipka village. He looked how I imagine I must look now, faded and bent like a crumpled napkin. He told me how he'd grown up near Shipka, had seen the monument being built. He'd returned to the area immediately after his separation from my mother.

“As the monument was being built, so I was trying to rebuild my life,” he said. My mother was long-dead and he rarely mentioned her except on that day. I helped him up the torturous stairs, slowly, there were times when I thought we'd never make it but he was the same determined and stubborn man he'd always been, despite appearances. “This is where your mother and I met,” he said, when we finally reached the top. “She was dancing and singing over by the canons. I'd never seen or

heard anything so beautiful. She used to be a singer, did you know that? She gave it up after we were married. I never could work out whether that was her choice or because of something I said. In the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter anyway." As we stood watching a bird circle the warm currents over the plains, I remember thinking that must be where Ventseslav got his musical nature from.

My father continued. "You mark my words," he said, "when you get to my age it makes you wonder about the bigger questions in life. About what happens next, after we're gone." My father had never been religious; Mother was the one who went to the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral every Sunday and lit a single candle for our family. It felt strange to hear him talk like this.

I've long since stopped believing in any kind of God. I think that after the fire I was searching for something – for any kind of meaning. I was vulnerable, I latched on to the idea of God and found some comfort there but it didn't last. Eventually, I found strength and answers in other things. "Does it matter what happens after we're gone?" I asked.

"No, I suppose not," said my father and that was that.

I visited the monument with Dimitar on his journey to find Grace and then once again, more recently. Beyond the monument itself my hand came into contact with the iron of the canons where my parents had first met. They watch out over the Shipka Pass like sentinels of memory. The canons are cold to the touch, surprisingly imperfect, but immovable. They will be here long after I am gone and, although I can't see what my father saw all those years ago, I can feel why he was drawn to wonder about some of the bigger questions in life and beyond it.

On the same wind that carries the scent of the roses I thought I could hear the slow chiming of bells, most probably from the Russian Memorial Church in the village of Shipka. It might just be a trick of the wind or my mind hearing things I want to hear. The church was built by the Russians as a memorial to the soldiers that lost their lives and their names are inscribed in the walls there. The biggest of the bells hanging in the impressive towers is a massive twelve tons. It is cast from the metal cartridges that were collected after the battles in the Shipka Pass; the chimes of the bells replacing the noise of the canons from which they once came.

When Miti was Late, So Very Late

Fighting through the crowds that were still bustling around the main square, they made it back to the station and took the No 6 bus to Shipka Village. On the bus, Miti started reading a new book. Cassandra, sitting next to him, chose one for him. A very famous story, his mother had read it to him countless times before; about a girl who fell down a hole and ended up in a very different world altogether. She met all sorts of strange creatures and Miti was just getting to the part where she was about to take a swig of a drink from a bottle that said 'Drink Me' (and Miti thought she jolly well shouldn't drink it because she had no idea what was in it) when Cassandra reached over, took the e-reader and turned it off.

"What are you doing?" asked Miti, astounded.

"Look outside."

With a sigh, Miti did as he was told. He hadn't stopped to appreciate the view from the bus windows: fields and fields of pink roses which bloomed like a carpet that went on forever. He thought of Elisabeta back in Stara Zagora. He fought an initial urge to return to the e-reader but as the bus continued on its journey it soon became clear to him what Cassandra was trying to tell him. The magic of the book seemed not to compare to the magic outside the window. The surreal pink fields blushed in a mesmeric blur. He soon forgot about Alice and the drink she shouldn't have drunk.

Shipka wasn't far from Kazanlak so the bus drive didn't take long. Before the village, the bus stopped to pick up a large group of children who'd been to watch the Festival so it became crowded and noisy. They took a shine to Tiny Tim and all wanted to hold and stroke him. When the bus pulled into the dusty village square in Shipka, Miti found himself caught up with the children as they erupted out of the doors, none of them realising that he wasn't a part of their group. They danced and played around him and one girl with roses behind her ears even put her arm through Miti's and, smiling, led him along with the other children.

Just as Miti finally wrenched himself free, he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Father!" said Miti with a sigh of relief but the hand was heavy and was pulling him in a direction away from the bus. Miti tried to turn but the hand was on his neck now and driving him forward. "Father?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, boy! There's no father here."

"Who are you?" Panic entered Miti's voice.

“What do you mean, who am I? What a silly question. I am me, of course.”

Then Miti heard his father’s voice from somewhere behind him. “Don’t rush ahead, Miti!” And then, “Desislava, can you see him?”

“No. There are too many people. Dimitar, wait where you are until we find you.”

Miti started shouting. “I can’t!”

“What do you mean you can’t, boy?”

“Dimitar? Miti!”

“Father! Help!”

“Keep your voice down, boy, or I’ll clip you round the ear.”

“Dimitar!”

No use. His father’s voice was getting further and further away and Miti was suddenly being pushed down a wide gravel road, away from the square. All the houses seemed to be made from the same yellowing brick with red slate roofs. So tight was the man’s grip that Miti felt he had no way to struggle free. He tightened his own hold on Tiny Tim and hoped that he would soon find a means for escape.

“Come on, boy, we’re late! Always late!”

Then the hand was off his neck and before Miti could even think of running back to his father, the man’s hand – all gnarled with wiry hairs on the fingers – had a clasp of his wrist. They sped up.

His neck now free, Miti turned to take a look at his captor. Old, very old, the man’s back was hunched, his legs slightly bowed but he moved with a speed and agility that belied his age. He wore some kind of beret, dark brown tweed jacket and trousers which were too short at the ankles, revealing beige threadbare socks and incredibly large white shoes that looked out of proportion to the rest of his body. His face under the beret was gnarled and white whiskers curled dramatically under his nose which twitched from time to time. “Always late!” he cried, gruffly.

Miti was pulled left down another lane. The gravel crunched under his feet and his wrist was beginning to hurt from where the man was holding it so tightly. Every so often he could hear someone call his name. He wanted to shout back but this man was unpredictable.

They neared a house surrounded by tall wire fencing. The house was ancient, perhaps older than the man, and peeked out from the lush garden with overgrown grass and a rotting pergola where the beams sagged from heavy vines and the sporadic bulbous collection of grapes. Towards its centre, the slate roof of the house

was caving in but the chimney rose strong and smoke billowed from it. As they passed through the wire gate Miti saw something else hidden in the wild garden: a rusting Trabant with no wheels and smashed-in windows lying on bricks like an empty shell on a beach. They reached the front door. The man threw it open and pushed him inside.

“Good, good, she’s not down yet, have a seat quickly before she gets here. I thought you were late again but it appears we’re just in time.” The man removed his coat and beret and hung them on a peg by the front door which he slammed shut. He then shuffled Miti over to some wooden chairs and made him sit.

They had entered another world for which even Miti was too big. On the inside, the house was surely even smaller than on the outside; the walls leaned in at odd angles to surround the room which was at one and the same time living room, dining room, and kitchen. Miti felt claustrophobic. Dominating the room was a rickety upward-curving staircase which seemed impossible to exist because the house was so tiny. Squashed together in the room were a table, set up for tea, and four mismatched chairs, an old threadbare sofa, a sink, a fireplace crackling with fire, and some cupboards. Miti thought that if he were to lie down on the table in the centre of the room and stretch out, then one leg would go out the front door, another leg would go out the back door hidden behind the staircase, and both arms would smash through the windows on the opposite walls. If he stood up, he would be wearing the tiny house like a coat.

A noise shattered his daydreams; footsteps on the creaking stairs, heavy and laboured.

“Quick, she’s coming!” The man started straightening his whiskers. What did he mean? Was *she* his mother? Miti’s heart danced. His mother was on the stairs; finally he had found her. “How many times, boy, on your feet and show some respect.”

Nearly hitting his head on the low ceiling, Miti couldn’t jump to his feet quick enough as the sound of the footsteps on the stairs came closer and closer. He placed Tiny Tim on one of the chairs around the table like a guest at a tea party; he looked forward to introducing the lion to his mother. More creaks, the house groaned and moaned with displeasure as his mother grunted and huffed down the stairs.

And there she was, in front of him.

The figure which appeared was so entirely the opposite of his mother. This woman swarmed herself upon his consciousness so that he noticed nothing save the burgeoning body, the heavy ankles, the stench of sweat, the fact that she had just about as many whiskers on her face as her husband. Her hair was wiry, set in

tight curls and dyed orange. Layers of fat hung from her arms like melting candlewax. She wore a brown dress that may once have been a different colour.

Taking one look at Miti, she asked, "Who on earth is this?" *I was about to ask you the same thing,* thought Miti.

"Why, it's the boy, my love, who else could it be?"

"You're as blind as a bat!" she cried and stormed forward with such speed to clip the man round the ear. "I've never seen him before in my life!"

Loud bangs at the door. Cassandra's voice, panicked. "He's in here. I saw the man take him in here!"

"Dimitar? Dimitar are you in there? Let me in!" Miti never knew he could find his father's voice so welcome.

The small house immediately erupted into a state of panic. "Fascists!" cried the man and woman in unison. They squeezed themselves past the old sofa and ran behind the table.

"Flip it over, flip it over!" ordered the woman. "We need a barricade. Is the door locked?"

"No!"

"Idiot! I always said you'd be my downfall!" Heaving together, they managed to tip over the table, scattering its contents everywhere. Tea spilled from the pot and poured all over Tiny Tim. Miti cried out.

At that moment Stoyan burst through the door and into the room, the house stretching and creaking to make way for his giant frame. He was followed by Cassandra and Desislava hovered uncertainly behind them both, face flushed. A teaspoon was thrown across the room at Stoyan but it missed and fell limply to the floor after hitting the man's coat hanging up on the peg.

"Take what you want but leave us in peace."

"Dimitar, are you here?"

Squeezing past the furniture in the way, Miti made it to his father and grabbed him by the waist to let him know he was alive and well. A fork flew past his ear with such force that it lodged in the wooden sideboard.

"They think we're fascists," said Miti, trying to push his father back out the door.

"Fascists?"

"Idiot! They're not fascists!" The woman was standing up now, behind the table. Her husband peered over the edge. "I told you, blind as a bat. It's just the boy's family."

"You took my child..." began Stoyan and the house expanded some more to make room for his wrath.

“What’s a fascist?” asked Miti.

“A case of mistaken identity.” The woman hoofed her husband in the back of the shins. He lost balance and toppled over. “We were after a different boy, the one who comes to clean the house and prepare the vegetables.”

“But you took Dimitar...”

“As I said, my husband is as blind as a bat. You can’t trust him to do anything these days. Now, since you’re here, how about staying for some tea?”

“But...”

“It’s no trouble at all. My name is Ivanka.” She rounded on her husband. “Pick up the table and make a new pot of tea at once before I slap you silly!”

With great effort the man managed to right the dining table and the chairs. He didn’t pick up any of the fallen crockery; instead he made his way to the kitchen to find a new teapot and cups from one of the ramshackle cupboards.

Ivanka, now, was all smiles. “Please, have a seat.”

Stoyan paused and Desislava still hovered. Cassandra inspected the fork lodged in the sideboard.

“I think it’s best we...” began Stoyan but he was cut off.

“Nonsense, I shan’t hear of it! Have a seat.”

Stoyan smiled, cautiously. Miti led him over to the table where Ivanka was now sitting and the house moaned and groaned in displeasure. All four went to sit down. Cassandra gasped when she saw Tiny Tim, his golden fur now damp and brown.

“What is it?” asked Stoyan.

Cassandra cleared her throat. “Nothing, it’s just Tiny Tim...” She didn’t finish her sentence.

Ivanka looked up. “It will be fine. Boris will put it out on the back step to dry off in the sun; it’s a warm afternoon.” Her husband came from the kitchen and lifted Tiny Tim by a damp ear. Miti watched helplessly as he was taken, still dripping, and deposited out of the back door. “And what brings you to Shipka on this fine warm day?”

“We’re looking for someone,” said Stoyan.

“We’re here to look for my mother.”

“Your mother?”

“She went...missing.”

“Missing?” Ivanka pointed to Desislava who blushed at the sudden attention. “If this woman isn’t your mother, then who is she?”

“I’m a friend,” said Desislava when both Miti and Stoyan remained silent.

Ivanka nodded curtly but whether she was satisfied with the answer was anybody’s guess. “And what leads you to Shipka looking for her?”

“We have an address,” said Miti. “Maybe you could help us find it.”

Stoyan leaned forward and spoke gently. “I’m sure they have better things to do than show us around, Dimitar. It’s only a small village, the street shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“Nonsense, it’s no trouble at all. My husband will show you. Where is it you say you’re looking for?”

“Number 12, Nicova Street.”

The woman nodded. “I don’t know it but my husband might.” She shouted towards the kitchen, deafening them all. “Oi! Do you know where Nicova Street is?”

“Yes. I think I do.”

“You *think* you know or you *do* know? Make up your mind! Which is it?”

“Yes, yes, I do know.”

“Good. Then you can show the boy and his father there.”

Boris brought over a fresh pot of tea in a cracked yellow pot which had no lid. “Yes, of course, that’s no problem at all.”

“Good! Now, first things first: who’s for tea?”

Cassandra’s hand shot straight up. Hesitantly Stoyan raised a finger, Desislava politely declined saying she didn’t want to put anyone out. Miti said he wasn’t thirsty. The man poured tea for all of them anyway in mismatching cups.

“And have you been to Shipka before?” Ivanka was addressing Miti.

“No, never.”

“You’ll love it,” said Boris. “It’s the town of liberty and dreams.”

“Don’t forget the Thracians, idiot! It’s the town of *Thracians*, liberty and dreams.”

“Yes, of course, sorry.”

“So I take it you’ve not visited the monument either, up at Shipka Pass?”

“No, I haven’t. My father has though.”

“Ah, I see. And where are you from?”

“Plovdiv,” said Stoyan.

“Not so far away,” she said but Miti felt in that moment that it was a long way away indeed. “This won’t do. We can’t sit around gossiping like geese all day. Boris will take you to find your mother. I’m sure she’ll be there waiting for you.”

Boris went to unhook his jacket from the peg, despite the warmth outside, and waited by the door whilst Miti helped Stoyan to his feet. Desislava also stood but Ivanka reached across the table and touched her arm gently.

“Not you, dear. You and the girl shall stay with me. There’s plenty to show you here.” There was a sternness to her voice even though she said it with a smile.

“But...”

Stoyan was smiling, albeit uncertainly. “It’s ok, Desi. We won’t be long.” Slowly, Desislava sat down and watched the others go.

As Boris opened the door a little boy was standing there, hand raised, ready to knock. He was tiny. About the size of a dormouse. Boris bore down on him. “Ah! There you are boy! You’re late, as usual. Come in and clear away this mess before I lose my temper.”

The boy, white as a sheet, shuffled past and went straight to the kitchen to find a cloth to clean away the crockery littering the floor.

“We won’t be long, Desi,” said Stoyan.

“Ok,” she said and then they were gone.

~

Aside from piles of concrete slabs and scaffolding poles, Number 12 Nicova Street was empty - a large modern house mid-construction. A man and woman stood outside arguing over some blueprints laid out over the bonnet of a four-by-four with blacked out windows. The car and the house looked incongruous in that street where all the other houses had red slate roofs that had been burnt umber by the sun and prone to crack with age.

“Are you sure this is the right street?” asked Miti because he wasn’t convinced that Boris could see all that well.

“Dimitar, don’t be rude,” said Stoyan but Boris said nothing and turned away, gesturing for them to follow him. After a short walk it became clear to Miti that they weren’t heading back to Boris’ house as they were walking in entirely the opposite direction. He now had a hold of Stoyan and Miti’s hands, walking slowly in between them.

“I want to show you something,” he said.

Miti looked around as they walked. All he could see were more houses, and every so often a *necrolog*, the posters mourning the dead stuck to lampposts and trees. They passed a small cafe with a vending machine where two bronzed men loitered and smoked. Next to them, on the cafe wall, someone had painted a wide, white-toothed cat’s grin with no face.

“Where are we going?” The dust from the gravel road was beginning to get to his eyes and make them itchy.

“Look up,” was all that Boris said.

Miti saw a steep incline that veered off to some dense woodland to the right. High walnut trees stretched up to the sky, straight and unwavering. And then he saw them peeking through the canopy of the trees, golden domes glistening in the late evening sun like jewels.

Boris led them up the many steps, through the trees until, finally, the church came into full view before them. A tremendous building with a tall bell tower, arched entranceways and onion-shaped golden domes. Every centimetre lovingly crafted, not an inch of it had been designed without care. The whole building was a magnificent canvas for icons and paintings that covered every wall and alcove.

“We won’t go inside, it’ll be closing shortly. For visitors anyway.”

“What is it?” asked Stoyan. “Where are we?”

“It’s the Russian memorial church,” replied Boris. “A temple to remember those lost in the battle of Shipka Pass.”

As they approached a bench in front of the church, Miti noticed a group of tourists filing on to a waiting coach in the car park, which was lined with souvenir stands. Boris led them to sit down on the bench. A warm breeze rustled the leaves of the trees. Just outside, sweeping the steps of the church, was an old woman in a brown tabard. Her pure voice as she hummed filled the air and rose on its currents like an eagle.

The sound reached Stoyan and he smiled. “See? This is what faith is. Do you understand now?”

“No,” said Miti, beginning to be fed up with the question or at least annoyed with his own not understanding. He’d had the sense to take his backpack and he pulled out the e-reader and carried on reading whilst Boris and Stoyan sat in silence and listened to the old woman’s humming. They stayed until the sun set and the onion-shaped domes burnt orange.

“Right! I need the toilet before we head home,” said Boris hopping up quickly. “Do either of you have twenty *stotinki*? I’m about to piss in my trousers.”

~

When they returned, Ivanka didn’t stop talking. They sat around the table whilst she regaled them with stories about her failing health and recipes for desserts made from local jams and which were, she said, famous from Burgas to Vidin. Miti pictured trays upon trays of jam tarts, fit for a Queen.

When it became very late, Stoyan sent Miti and Cassandra to bed. Desislava and Boris helped set up the tents in a small space in the garden next to the rotting, hollow Trabant. A warm night, Miti found he couldn’t sleep in his tent, so he went to read about Alice on the back step, beside the still-damp Tiny Tim. It really was a strange story and Miti wasn’t sure he understood all of it but he liked the way that all the creatures were talking to each other. That would be a fun way to live, thought Miti, to be able to talk to animals. He sighed, and realised it could never happen. Nobody talked to animals, not in real life.

“Oh, but they do.” The voice, small and humble, had come from somewhere next to him. Startled, Miti looked around. There was no one there except Tiny Tim. The voice came again. “The man speaks to the ass every day when he wants the fields to be ploughed. The woman talks to the dog and tells it to stop barking. The boy plays with the cat and tells her she is his best friend.”

In his astonishment, Miti nearly dropped the e-reader. “Tiny Tim, is that you? Can you talk?”

“Can I talk? It depends. If talking is what I am doing then I can. If it’s not, then I can’t.”

“It *is* you!”

Tiny Tim sighed. His voice was full of melancholy. “I suppose it is me. Normally, I don’t suppose I like to suppose. It can only lead to trouble.”

“It can?”

“I suppose so.”

“Your voice isn’t how I imagined it would be,” said Miti.

“Isn’t it? Surely it is exactly how you are imagining it would be.”

“You’re a strange old thing, Tiny Tim.”

“If that’s what you want me to be then that’s what I am.”

“I want you to be my friend and I want you to be clean and not all tea-spilled anymore.”

“Then that is what I shall be.”

Miti waited for Tiny Tim’s fur to become all golden and shining again, like a real lion. Only nothing happened. “Is this a dream? Am I dreaming?”

“What do you think?”

Miti sighed. “I don’t know any more. I think I might be. Before, when mother was here, I knew it was real. Because she would be sitting here talking to you as well, just like I am. But now I don’t know. I don’t want it to be a dream...”

“You don’t want what to be a dream, boy?” The voice wasn’t Tiny Tim’s. Boris was standing in the doorway, bearing over Miti whose cheeks suddenly flushed.

“Nothing, I was just thinking.”

“You were talking to yourself, rabbitting on about goodness-knows-what, that’s what you were doing.”

“Sorry...” said Miti who actually wanted to say Boris was the rabbitty one.

“You don’t have to apologise. I did it myself when I was young.”

“You did?”

“Yes, but I grew out of it by the time I was your age. How old are you, seven? Eight?”

“I’m nine and three quarters!”

“Then you definitely shouldn’t be talking to yourself. I’d get to bed if I were you. We’re taking your father to the Pass and the monument tomorrow. There’s a lot of climbing involved. It’s late. Get some rest. And stop daydreaming. Trust me, it won’t get you anywhere.” Boris disappeared indoors, closing the door lightly.

Miti was left with Tiny Tim who was now silent. Seven? Eight? How could anyone think he was so young? Miti picked up his e-reader, went to the tent, and slung it inside without any care. The story was to

blame for making him talk to himself; the story was always to blame. Miti fell asleep telling himself that children of nearly ten don't make up stories and talk to animals. That night, he didn't dream.

When Miti Flew Up The Steps And Lingered On The Way Down

When they all shuffled, sleepily, inside for breakfast – they would pack up the tents after a nice cup of tea – Ivanka and Boris were already around the table, as if they hadn't moved, a steaming pot of tea in front of them in the cracked lidless teapot.

“Ah! Boris and I wondered where you'd got to. We thought you'd been taken away by fascists in the night. If you're going to the monument you'll want something to eat to help you get up all those steps.”

“Steps?” Miti took a seat, rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“Yes, yes, many steps,” said Boris. “You'll see when you get there. Now, come and have some breakfast.”

A pause whilst everyone stared at the table, empty aside from the tea. Ivanka rounded on her husband with the speed of a cobra. “Well fetch the *mylako* then! Breakfast won't serve itself, will it?”

Sighing pointedly, Boris rose to his feet and headed for the kitchen where he found a tray already prepared. He brought it over to the table, dumping it lazily in the centre.

Ivanka was eyeing the *mylako* with barely concealed glee. “Have you ever had it before?”

Miti looked at the tray. On it sat a small bowl full of some kind of white liquid and a plate with small fingers of bread arranged in a fan. He shook his head. “No, I haven't. I don't think I have.”

“It's delicious. Rich and buttery. Goes well with bread. Just what you need to visit the monument.” Ivanka reached forward and began to stir the creamy mixture viciously with a slice of bread. She scooped some of the substance onto the bread and handed it to Miti.

“I'm not hungry, thank you,” he mustered but he could tell by the way Ivanka was looking at him that it was beside the point. He bit off the top of the bread and felt the *mylako* slide onto his tongue, a thick kind of yoghurt. Too warm, it was anybody's guess as to how long it had been sitting in the bowl on the tray. Neither was it complemented by the chewy bread that took an age to swallow. “It's nice,” he said, sounding unconvincing, even to himself.

The group spent the next ten minutes in silence whilst they ate the *mylako*, taking it in turns to dip in the bread. It was the longest Miti had seen Ivanka remain quiet.

When everyone had had enough to be polite, Stoyan started shifting in his chair, reaching for his backpack by the table leg. “I think we ought to be going. We need to pack the tents away and then after the monument we’ve got to get all the way back to Plovdiv. Thank you for the food. And for having us last night.”

“Nonsense,” said Ivanka with a smile. “You’re not going anywhere. Not until after we’ve had some music. Hurry up with that music, Boris, can’t you see they have lots to do today and they can’t be waiting around for idiots like you.”

Not missing a beat, Boris leapt up and started rummaging around in the sideboard by the door. Moments later he produced a battered old harmonica. Still standing, he proceeded to play a folk tune that Miti had never heard before, the melody slow and mournful.

Ivanka clapped along with enthusiasm at the table. Then she stopped and a solemn look fell upon her face. She stood. “It’s time,” she said. Boris cleared his throat and started to play the Bulgarian national anthem, or at least a version of it, with several notes missing and others strained and barely recognisable. “Interesting,” said Ivanka with tangible disappointment in her voice when Boris had finished playing. “Most men stand when they hear their anthem played and remove their hats.”

Miti turned to his father who looked suddenly awkward.

“Yes, I suppose most men do...maybe we should have...”

“Boris, play it again.”

He waited for Miti and Stoyan to stand up before he began, playing even more dubiously than before whilst Desislava hovered somewhere between standing and sitting, unsure of what women ought to do when they hear their national anthem. Cassandra was trying not to laugh. This time Ivanka clapped when it was over and she sat down to sip some more tea.

“I think we should get going now,” ventured Stoyan, remaining standing.

“Of course! I’m surprised you’re still here. You can catch a bus to the monument from the square where you arrived. Boris will show you the way if you’ve forgotten. Stop off here on the way back and collect your tents and that creature outside. You won’t have time now if you want to catch that bus. There’ll be more *mylako* waiting for you when you get back. Go on now, before you miss the bus. Boris, don’t stand around like a big fat old watermelon; make yourself useful and show them to the bus stop before it’s too late.”

~

They followed the old railroad through the Sredna Gora mountain pass. Miti thought about stealing a few minutes to read the next part of the story but was content this time to look out of the bus window. The conversations that went on between some of the animals didn't really make sense and Miti thought that the story was all very silly. And then, just as the girl called Alice had tumbled down the rabbit hole at the beginning of the story, so did the bus disappear into a tunnel that turned everything dark. On the other side they could see the Shipka monument in the distance, small now but with the promise of getting bigger with each passing second.

Down the rabbit hole and into Wonderland, through the tunnel and into another land.

He counted the steps up with a hop on each one - seventeen, eighteen, nineteen - and thought about Ivanka and Boris at Shipka and laughed. They were funny characters in a funny episode of his life. But he worried about Tiny Tim drying off on the back step and whether he'd be safe there. He found solace in the fact that the garden was really a jungle and that was as good a place as any for a prowling lion.

Seventy-five, seventy-six, seventy-seven, seventy-eight – still hopping! – his energy soared as they climbed higher and higher.

“Don't run ahead, you know what happened last time,” warned his father from somewhere below.

“I won't,” answered Miti.

He wasn't running. He was flying.

Four tourists were coming down the steps. Why were they coming down? Miti flew past them as they descended, their cameras still clutched in their hands. Surely, when you reached the top of the world, you'd want to stay there forever. Three hundred and forty-nine, three hundred and fifty, three hundred and fifty-one.

She, with her tiara-like sun visor and *I Heart NY* T-Shirt, could be the Queen of Hearts. But no jam tarts here, just the taste of bitter *mylako* on his tongue. Miti bowed as he passed the queen and then jumped, legs together, up the next three steps. Cassandra had long since tired of keeping up with him; she'd held back to

wait for his father and Desislava and help them up. Six-hundred and eighty-two, six hundred and eighty-three, six hundred and eighty-four.

Nearly there, not far to go. He would climb up, he would climb down. Then two more houses. Inside one of them would be his mother, sitting there waiting for him. Red blanket, the armchair and story time. Eight hundred and fifty-five, eight hundred and fifty-six, eight hundred and fifty-seven.

There. The top. Eight hundred and ninety-four steps and he had hopped or jumped each one and never tired. And at the top the monument, so much bigger now up close, loomed above him, a stone pillar like the turret of a castle standing alone, a sentinel watching. And now if he turns he will see –

“Oh.”

The size of it.

The country undulated, rose and fell, in front of him – the whole country it seemed, all mountains, hills and pockets of towns, trees and sky (a whole lot of sky). Instead of filling him with a sense of awe and wonder it made his heart sink because somewhere in this vast, vast place was his mother and what if she wasn't in one of the remaining two houses just as she hadn't been in the past five Number 12 houses? What if she was lost to him forever? He was just a dot on a mountain which was a dot in the country and she, though his mother and forever joined to him, was another dot just like him; small and entirely missable. All it would take was a turn of his head in the wrong direction, the moment she walked past. Miti remembered the words of his teacher, Mr Malchek. Had he not said that we need to search hard for the answers and that reading was the ultimate journey? All this search had given him was emptiness, not his mother, and all the reading had given him were lies and distractions.

“There he is,” said Desislava, leading Stoyan over.

“Dimitar, can you describe it to me, the monument, what do you see?”

“It's just a tower without its castle.”

He sidled off to where a man was selling wooden candle holders with images of Jesus and the Blessed Virgin burnt into the wood.

~

“Look, Miti, over there.” Desislava pointed to where a group of children were climbing and fighting over a cannon melded to a heavy stone plinth but Miti wasn’t interested in cannons. Desislava led Stoyan over so that he could touch it.

Miti felt a presence behind him. Cassandra. “What’s wrong with you?”

He couldn’t read her voice. Was she angry? Concerned? “Nothing.”

“You’ve been miserable since we got up here.”

“Haven’t.”

“Have!” She punched him on the shoulder.

“What was that for?”

“How am I meant to help if you don’t tell me what’s wrong? That’s the problem with boys.”

“That’s the problem with girls. They’re too nose-y. It’s none of your business.”

“Fine!”

“Fine.”

She stormed off, over to Stoyan and the cannon.

~

The lions were growling, that much was clear and it would be a deep growl, a roar even. These lions, gracing the four sides of the monument, were on the prowl. They were carved into the stone but as Miti stopped and craned his neck up to study one of them closely, he thought that it might be moving. Another punch on the shoulder forced him out of his daydreams.

“Would you stop doing that?”

“I’ll stop hitting you if you tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing, nothing’s wrong.”

She hit him again. “Ouch! Stop it!”

“Tell me what’s up.”

“No! Ouch! Ok, ok, dots.”

“Dots?”

“Dots. Everyone is a dot. Ouch! Why did you hit me again? I told you what’s wrong.”

“I’ll stop hitting you when you start making sense.”

Scowling, Miti rubbed his shoulder. “You’re going to be a thug when you’re older.”

“I look forward to it, now are you going to tell me or not?”

Miti sighed, turned, and leaned against the monument with his back. Once again, Bulgaria opened up before him like the pages of a pop-up book. “My mother’s a dot and I’m a dot and I don’t think I’ll ever find her.”

Cassandra joined him with her back against the monument. “You will, we will. We’ve got the address. She’s bound to be in one of the next two houses.”

“I’ve forgotten what she looks like. I don’t think I’d recognise her if I saw her again.”

“You will.”

“I can’t remember her hair, or her eyes or her mouth, or what she sounded like reading me the books. I can only remember her in shadow, with the light behind her, holding that book you saved from the fire. I can only see her outline. Everything else about her is dark.”

“Trust me, Miti, you’ll know her when you see her. She’s your mother.”

“I hope so.”

“You will.”

“I guess. Ouch! What was that for?”

“I said trust me.”

“Ok, I do.”

“Good.”

“It’s time to go down now and see if we can find something to drink,” shouted Stoyan, teetering on the edge of the steps with Desislava. Cassandra ran the other side of him and looped her arm in his.

“I’m coming,” said Miti without moving.

“I’ll race you down...” offered Cassandra.

“You go ahead, I’ll follow.”

Eight-hundred and fifty-seven, eight hundred and fifty-six, eight hundred and fifty-five. It was a long journey down. He lingered on each step looking out to the vastness of Bulgaria. He had never seen anything so big in all his life.

Five. Four. Three. Two...but there wasn't another step to go. Somewhere along the way something had gone wrong. There were eight hundred and ninety-four on the way up and eight hundred and ninety-three on the way down. Who stole the last step? He slouched off to the small restaurant nearby where someone had trapped four wasps under an upturned pint glass and where the Coke was flat.

~

When they went to collect the tents and Tiny Tim they managed to escape more tea because, inexplicably, neither Ivanka nor Boris were anywhere to be found. They waited for the bus on the backless bench in the town square in front of the quietly trickling stream. It would be an hour before the next bus which would take them back to Kazanlak and then on home to Plovdiv.

“Can't we carry on? We're already on the way to Varna, sort of, why don't we go there next?”

“We can't,” said Stoyan.

Miti was about to protest when Desislava spoke up. “I've had a phone call.”

“From who?”

“Goran. He wants me back tonight. He says it's important. But I promise, Miti, we'll carry on the journey as soon as I've sorted this out.”

The whole time they waited, Miti wouldn't let himself look at Tiny Tim or the big brown stain all over his once golden fur. Instead, he stared at the huge sign across the road that greeted anyone visiting the town. *‘Welcome to Shipka: The Town of Thracians, Liberty and Dreams’*.

The Story of Boris

His bandy legs were just about strong enough to take him up the steep steps to the memorial church nestled amongst the walnut trees. Almost every day he'd make his pilgrimage.

"Where are you going?" barked his wife, Ivanka, whenever she caught him leaving by the crooked front door.

He would answer the same each time: "To get us food and go to church."

"Superstition. Stuff and nonsense." Her mutterings followed him out the door, quiet like under-breath curses.

Boris's friend in the village, Markov, had an allotment so grand it afforded him more vegetables and fruit than he knew what to do with. So, for a good profit, he supplied the shop in Shipka village and sometimes took his surplus food to sell in Kazanlak. Not everything was sold and if he was around when Boris popped over, there might be potatoes for him, the odd onion perhaps, apples if it was the right season. Any prunes that were leftover went into the *rakia* that Markov distilled in an impressive home-made contraption hidden in the back room of his house which coughed and spluttered before finally producing the potent liquid as colourless as glass. Markov didn't have a wife, not any more. He'd married once but where she was and what she was doing, Markov never said. After two glasses of *rakia* Boris would joke that he'd much rather have a coughing and spluttering *rakia* machine than his own wife. The machine made less noise.

But Boris wouldn't visit Markov until after he'd been to the church with the golden domes. The church had long ceased to be impressive to him. His failing eyesight meant that the intricate murals and paintings on all the walls blended into one. The golden domes were the only thing that held their colour and shape in an increasingly blurring world.

It wasn't the church he'd come to see anyway.

He made his way through the tall walnut trees and found the winding path down to the small building that housed the public toilets.

No one was outside today, luckily. The small chair that sat next to the table with the white dish was empty. In the dish was about a *lev's* worth of *stotinki*, a tiny lake of coins. Sometimes Dubravka was dozing in the chair, sometimes she was inside cleaning or

sweeping. Today she was nowhere to be seen. For a while he listened and when he heard nothing he deposited twenty *stotinki* in the dish and went inside.

In the men's section, a urinal and two cubicles. A small sink in the corner with pink soap in a pump-action dispenser. Dubravka did a good job of keeping the place clean. He went in to one of the cubicles and sat down on the closed lid of the toilet, locking the door.

Today happened to be a long wait. Sometimes it was, sometimes it wasn't; there was no telling. Often, Boris found himself longing for it to be a long wait; the time spent in the cubicle was time less spent at home.

To fill the waiting, he remembered the first time it had happened, long ago. He'd started coming to the church to see what it could offer him, to ask questions about Ivanka, about himself. But the church had been too cold inside, and it hadn't felt right, and he realised that it wasn't the church or its God that he was seeking. He'd decided he wouldn't go there again but before he left he'd take another leak in the toilets – so much cleaner than the one at home and worth the twenty *stotinki* he managed to keep hidden from Ivanka. That was the day someone had shuffled into the cubicle next door.

In less than a minute, a voice had floated over the partition between the two cubicles. "Is anybody there?"

Boris paused, wondering whether to answer. "Yes, someone's here."

"Do you have any toilet roll?"

Boris had looked around him and found a spare roll on the floor in the corner. He'd pushed it with his foot under the partition.

"Thanks," the voice had said, before adding something strange. "The Lord will repay you in kind."

"But I don't need toilet roll," said Boris.

The person on the other side laughed. "I meant when you need a friend, you will find one."

"Oh. Oh, I see. Are you with the church?"

A Pause. "With the church? I am the church, in a way. But the church is me, too. Forgive me, it's been a long day, I don't mean to be so cryptic. Yes, I'm with the church. What brings you here today?"

And so they had started to talk. It might have been for hours. Nobody else had needed the toilet and they weren't interrupted by Dubravka. From their separate cubicles, they talked about the church, about why Boris came. Sometimes they talked about

daydreaming and how easy it would be to escape this life and live inside a wish and a daydream. Many times, Ivanka's name was mentioned.

The man on the other side had sympathised. "I can't share the stories of others but let's just say, you're not alone."

They talked for a while longer but then the man said, "I have to attend to my ministry, Boris. May I call you Boris?"

"Of course."

"Will you be around tomorrow?"

"I could be, maybe."

"Then, maybe, I'll see you tomorrow."

They met many times after that, in the same place, and chatted, never once meeting in the flesh.

Now, finally, the familiar shuffling in to the cubicle that had become so familiar.

"Is there anybody there?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any toilet roll?"

Like secret service agents meeting on a park bench behind newspapers, it became their clandestine greeting to know that it was safe to talk.

"How are you today, Boris?"

"Tired. Very tired."

"I know, I know."

"I just wish..." His voice petered out. Somewhere in the trees outside a thrush sang. "I just want...it's hard to know the words for it."

"Try."

"I'm not sure how to begin."

A long silence, punctuated by the thrush's call. The other man broke it. "Did the boy ever find his mother?"

"I don't know. We never saw or heard from him again. So long ago now."

"Then we shall pretend he has."

"Why?"

"Because sometimes pretending is the only thing we can do. Sometimes it's the best thing."

“But sometimes it isn’t. You taught me that yourself.”

Boris heard a shuffling coming from the other cubicle. He thought maybe the other man was getting up to leave. “Don’t go,” he said.

“I’m not going,” came the reply, followed by a hand, reaching over the partition. A single hand, the nails were cut neatly but the knuckles were wrinkled with deep creases. It was Boris’ first glimpse of the other man, and it was beautiful; the tiny lines etched into the skin like the veins of leaves.

After a while, Boris summoned up all the courage and pain within him and he reached up and took the hand. He clung on tightly, brought his lips to the other man’s palm, and hung there sobbing in silence.

A Sense of History: A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria

Velingrad

The hot springs of Velingrad have long drawn in heavy crowds of tourists with their promise of healing properties and relaxation. There are over ninety mineral water springs as well as the incredible natural phenomenon of the Kleptuza, the biggest Karst spring in Bulgaria which discharges an average of 1200 litres of ice-cold water every second, so I am reliably informed.

Desislava took me several years ago to visit the excellent History Museum in Velingrad which was established in 1952 and offers a fascinating snapshot of the local area. We were guided round by a young man, Petar, who was doing a PhD in the archaeology of the area and who wanted to take me to some of the many digs that are going on, out in the surrounding mountains.

"It's exciting times," he said. "We're discovering new things almost every day. I could show you some of the digs."

"I'm afraid I'm far too old and senile to be gallivanting around the hills but once upon a time I'd have readily taken you up on the offer. I'd probably wander straight into a ten-foot hole in the ground."

Much of the museum is given over to an exhibition detailing the history of local heroine Vela Peeva, a partisan who was a member of the resistance against the pro-fascist leanings of the government during World War Two.

"I shouldn't let you but you can touch the exhibits, if you like," said Petar. He guided my hand across the leftovers of Vela's life. Her typewriter, the shelves, bed and table in her meticulously recreated bedroom. "It's as if she's left the room and it's just waiting for her to come back." He took me over to another wall. "There's a large painting of her here."

"What does she look like?" I asked.

I thought maybe Petar was an artist as well as an archaeologist. He took his time to describe the painting in great detail – its large ornate golden frame, the thickness of the oils which lent a depth to the picture, the dark of the forest as Vela runs through it, pursued by Nazi soldiers. Her cloak, scarlet, like Little Red Riding Hood. Small circular glasses. She carries a gun.

As Petar spoke I was drawn by some music coming from another part of the museum; the deep bass of an opera singer whose voice tugged at my memory. I paused and tried to reach for the music whilst Petar related Vela's story.

"Is that Ghiaurov?" I asked, when he'd finished.

"Yes, how could you tell?"

"I'd recognise that voice anywhere. Where's it playing?"

Petar led me through several more rooms to one where, when the door was opened, Nicolai Ghiaurov's voice rang out as if he was standing not two metres away from me. Petar explained that

the room contained an array of personal artefacts belonging to Ghiaurov himself – from original costumes from some of his productions, to gramophone records of his performances, and from music scores to a coin die, minted in Austria, that depicts Ghiaurov’s face. Before his untimely death, my brother used to send over music LPs of Western artists because they were impossible to get hold of over here in the Socialist Block. He’d only just moved to France, having studied at the French Lycée in Sofia, and wrote to me saying how astounded he was by all the music out there that he’d never heard before. He used to send me albums every other month so I ended up with a vast collection: Dire Straits, The Scorpions, Edith Piaf, The Beatles, David Bowie. The only music the State let us listen to on the radio was recordings of Nicolai Ghiaurov. He was approved by the State because he was Bulgaria’s golden boy. Born in 1929, he swiftly rose to international acclaim, performing all around the world at a time when the Socialist State became obsessed with the idea of successful Bulgarians abroad. Eventually, perhaps to spite them, he married an Italian woman, a fellow opera singer, and lived in her home town of Modena until his death of a heart attack in 2004.

The singer’s rich voice came straight out of my past and I’m not ashamed to say that I listened with tears in my eyes. I thought of my brother who was as strong as Ghiaurov’s voice. It always felt strange that he died after being run over by a car when he was the size of a small car himself. When the music and the memories became too unbearable, I left Ghiaurov’s room and went back through to the other exhibits.

One of them was a room dedicated entirely to Easter eggs, painted, I was assured, using colourful pen and wax, an important Eastertime tradition in these parts. Again, I wondered if my guide was an artist.

“It’s like a sea of colours,” he said. “No two are the same.”

Leading on from this room was a collection of artefacts from the traditional past of the local Christian, Muslim and Arman communities. Thick fabrics and authentic costumes lined the walls, sharp wooden objects were scattered about the floor and Petar explained the history and function of each one as I went around and touched them.

Then we found ourselves back in front of the painting of Vela.

“She knew the end was coming,” said Petar.

In 1944, Vela prevented her inevitable capture by committing suicide, taking with her the one thing that the fascists wanted from her: her life. She was only twenty-two years old.

However, her legacy of hope against oppression lives on - Velingrad: Vela’s Town.

When Miti Felt Hot, Cold, And Just Right

Another early start, this time to get the coach to Velingrad. Miti was painfully tired after a sleepless night. Desislava had stayed over. She'd slept in the living room, despite Stoyan's insistence that he should be the one sleeping there. After the long day visiting the Shipka monument, Miti had managed to get to sleep quickly but he was woken by a voice; Desislava was awake and on the phone to someone, her fiancé, Goran, Miti worked out. He couldn't hear all of what she was saying but sometimes she was pleading for him to calm down, other times she seemed close to tears. Then he heard his father go into the living room and Desislava ended the phone call. On the trip to Velingrad, Miti was in and out of sleep, his head drooping forwards and then snapping awake so that all he saw of the journey was a patchwork of images.

Over his shoulder, through the window, a red morning blazing behind the hills of Plovdiv as they depart.

Tree-lined avenues heading south; the coach overtaking slow petrol tankers.

Lipstick marks on the white cloth hanging over the headrest in front of him.

Every so often an ornate gravestone at the side of the road with flowers in various states of decay.

Later, a winding road through the mountain gorge – too fast round corners; Desislava's knuckles are white and clenched.

A sometimes fierce river down below, churning over glinting slippery rocks. The road running parallel with the train track from time to time, greeting like old friends but not afraid to part, knowing they would meet again; the same destination awaiting them.

On the outskirts of town, a man bellowing at his horse for it to pull his cart faster; red in the face he is puffing wildly.

And then,

“Dimitar, wake up. We’ve arrived.”

The bus station was old and shabby but was electrified by the buzz of visitors who were pouring in for the hot springs.

“It’s this way,” said Desislava, “I studied the map on the coach.”

Twelve Nicova Street was one of the new apartment blocks springing up in the town, one that had only barely been ready for the summer. Scaffolding still clung to one wall and a skip stood outside. A woman in a patterned blue headscarf held up her son so he could forage inside.

“Which flat number shall we try?” asked Miti, staring at the shiny new call box by the entrance. None of the names were filled in yet.

“It could be any of them,” said Desislava.

At that moment a young woman carrying two yellow carrier bags filled with groceries approached them. She tried balancing them in one arm whilst she searched her pockets for her keys.

“Here, let me help,” jumped in Cassandra, taking the shopping.

The woman looked grateful. A thin line of sweat moistened her hairline. “Thank you so much. It nearly ended in disaster!” When she’d found her keys she noticed Miti staring at the call box in deep concentration. “Can I help you, I mean, are you waiting for someone or...?”

“We’re looking for my mother,” said Miti. How many times had he said the same thing?

“Oh, I see, does she live here?”

“We think so.”

The woman looked slightly confused but didn’t question it further. “What’s her name?”

“Grace, Grace Popova,” said Stoyan.

“I’m afraid I don’t know many of the people who live here yet, only the ones on my floor really. I’ve been here less than a month. What does she look like?”

Miti looked to Cassandra. Only she knew why he was silent. The picture of his mother was becoming more faded every day.

Stoyan spoke up. “Quite tall, auburn hair. She’s English...”

“English? There was a woman I ran into the other day in the elevator. She’s renting one of the apartments in the floor below. I heard her talking on the phone in English. She was tall, about my height. I don’t know about her hair though, she wore a summer hat.”

If Miti’s heart was a balloon it would be straining at the string ready to take off. “She’s here! Do you know which number apartment?”

“I don’t I’m afraid, I’m sorry. But if she was below me it’ll be on the third floor so I’d try 3a first if I were you.”

“You’ve been a great help, thank you,” said Stoyan.

The woman smiled and unlocked the door. “Not at all, any time. I hope you find her.”

Miti rushed to hold the door open as Cassandra returned the woman’s shopping.

“What lovely children,” she cooed. “Thank you.” They watched her head towards the lift.

“Can I press it? Can I press it?” Miti let the door slam shut and ran back to the call box.

Stoyan smiled. “If you have to...”

Miti pushed the button for 3a. It buzzed loudly. A pause, some kind of crackling. “Hello?”

“Mother?”

“Who is this?”

“It’s me! Miti!”

“Who?”

Stoyan put his hands on his son’s shoulders and leaned in to the call box. “I’m sorry, we’re looking for a Mrs Grace...”

“Wrong number.” More crackles and then silence.

There was no answer to apartment 3b. A man answered 3c. His voice sounded bright and chirpy.

“Elena? You’re early, come on up...”

“It’s not Elena,” said Stoyan.

“Oh, sorry, who’s this?”

“I’m looking for someone called Grace Popova.”

“Sorry, I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“She’s English,” said Miti.

“English? I don’t know if it’s who you’re looking for but there’s an English person who’s moved in next to me. Try 3b.”

“We didn’t get an answer from 3b.”

“She must be out. Listen, I’m expecting someone and I need to finish getting ready, is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, thank you. You’ve been most helpful.”

“Ok, bye.” Crackle. Silence.

“We’ve found her!” said Miti.

~

They decided to go for a walk. Miti wanted to stay outside the apartment until his mother came home but Stoyan refused and said that whilst they were there they might as well make the most of being someplace new. They would come back later and try again.

The long road they were walking down seemed, to Miti at least, boring. Just houses, the odd spa hotel, a smattering of grocery shops with crates of produce spilling out onto the pavement. Nothing of interest here, or so he thought. Neither was Tiny Tim helping matters. He was becoming heavier and heavier and Miti was now having to drag him behind in the dust, holding only one paw as they walked. He would get dirty but Miti reasoned that when they all made it back home he would give him a good wash.

Eventually, they found a bench in a park and watched children playing noisily together in the sun.

“You should go and join them,” said Stoyan. “They sound like they’re having fun.”

“It’s ok,” said Miti, “I’m just playing my game.”

“You and your games,” said Stoyan, tutting.

The new story Miti had selected was strange. It was about a chimney sweep called Tom. He was being chased by rich people who thought he’d done a crime he hadn’t committed and he found himself on the edge of a lake. One moment he was a human boy and the next moment he was under the lake, a water baby.

He started to tune into the conversation between his father and Desislava. “I’m sorry about Goran,” she said.

“You don’t have to apologise.”

“I do. He wasn’t fair on you last night. Some of the things he said on the phone to you...He didn’t mean them, I promise.”

Miti’s attention was drawn even further away from the story. He remembered Desi’s heated phone call the night before and then his father going in.

“Like I say, you don’t need to apologise.”

“It’ll be fine, I promise. Goran just doesn’t like me being away from home; I suppose it’s quite sweet really. I guess he misses me, that’s all. But it’ll be fine once we’re all home and settled again. Everything will be ok.”

“Yes, but will you be ok?”

“Of course, why wouldn’t I be?”

Miti looked at Cassandra. She had stopped texting on her phone to listen.

Desi’s question hung there and no one answered it.

~

It was a long walk in the heat back to the apartment. They buzzed again but still no one answered.

Miti was now beginning to despair. “What shall we do?” It felt like running through water to try and save someone, but the waves push against your legs, slowing you down. If he was Tom the water baby, he’d have no trouble at all.

“What time is it?” asked Stoyan.

Desislava looked at her watch. “Just coming up for half twelve.”

“We could get some lunch, then come back here before we have to leave. The bus doesn’t go back to Plovdiv until four.”

“But what if we miss her whilst we’re having lunch?” asked Miti.

“Miti, I...” Everyone looked at Desislava as she hesitated but then she pushed her glasses up her nose. “It’s nothing.”

“We could leave a message, post it through the door,” suggested Stoyan. “Did anybody bring a pen and paper?”

“Here,” said Cassandra, who had one in her handbag. She handed it to Stoyan and then realised. She blushed. “I’ll write the message. What shall I say?”

“Say that we’ve come to talk things over. We’ll be back in less than an hour.”

Miti thought about those words and how much more needed to be said. It didn’t say anything, not really. It didn’t say that we want you home. It didn’t say that we love you.

Cassandra scribbled the note and stuffed it through the letter box. “I hope she sees it,” she said. Then she saw the look of concern on Miti’s face and added, “I’m sure she will. She can’t miss it really.”

“Where shall we go for lunch? Did you see anywhere on the way?”

“I noticed a large hotel on the corner, opposite some kind of park,” said Desislava. “I’m sure they’ll have a restaurant inside.”

Stoyan smiled and found Miti’s hand to hold. “I hope you’re hungry,” he said with a grin. “Because I’m starving.”

~

The restaurant in the Hotel Rich was fully booked so they had to squeeze onto a small table on the veranda just outside the lobby bar. Miti was in awe; the hotel was certainly as opulent as its name. The walls inside had deep mahogany panelling, and there were dark tables and chairs with lions carved into their legs (Miti counted eighteen), huge gilt framed mirrors, low chandeliers which, even at midday, glowed orange and sparkled. On their way to the table they passed a huge open fire which looked as if it hadn’t been used for a long time, its chimney like the cylindrical engine of a space shuttle. Whilst Stoyan ordered toast with yellow cheese and ice cold chocolate milkshake for everyone, Miti was entranced by a fish tank that looked like a small chunk of the sea had been lifted up and carried into the bar. It faced a mirror, so that when Miti and Cassandra looked through the water they could see their faces reflected there, out of shape and distorted, as if they were a part of this underwater scene; water babies. They made faces, blew bubbles and scared off the clownfish who scooted away to hide amongst their anemones.

Miti was first to finish his toast. He wolfed it down and inhaled the milkshake as if it had been made of air.

“Can we go back to the apartment now, can we?” he asked but Stoyan and Desislava had barely finished their first slice of toast.

“Patience, Dimitar. We’re eating. We left a note so if your mother sees it, she’ll know to wait for us.”

Even though she hadn’t finished, Desislava stopped eating and rested her knife and fork on her plate. “Miti, there’s something I have to tell you. Something I saw.”

“What?”

“Just inside the door of the apartment I saw a large box. It had the address for 3b on it. The name at the top wasn’t your mother’s.”

Miti spent some time absorbing this news. If his heart was a balloon now, it would have broken free of its string, floating off into the distance. He tried to grab it and stop it from disappearing. “It’s ok, there might be someone else living there too.”

Cassandra and Desislava exchanged glances but Miti chose to ignore them. His only hope was that Desislava was wrong. He shuffled in his chair and willed them to eat faster but, if anything, they ate more slowly. He tried reading again but the book frustrated him, how much easier it would have been to be a water baby with not a care in the world aside from otters. He tossed the e-reader aside and stared at his surroundings.

Even out on the veranda the air was stifling; with not much of a breeze the flags that ran alongside the railings could barely muster any movement, lethargic lions after eating. Miti looked up at the blue sky and thought that it was so blue it could have been the sea (not that he’d ever seen the sea before but it was exactly how he imagined the sea would look) and he wanted to go for a long cool swim in its cerulean depths.

Still fidgeting, Miti looked beyond the flags and noticed the park over which the hotel looked. He could see some kind of restaurant there but that, too, was busy with people, spilling outside onto the tables underneath wide red umbrellas emblazoned with the Coca Cola logo. In the corner was a tall yellow and blue water slide which looked fun. In between the slide and the restaurant was something that made Miti’s heart beat faster. There were three swimming pools, one small, one medium and one large, surrounded by tiered seating painted white, green, red and blue. Any water baby would love to go swimming in those pools, Miti thought to himself.

He nudged Cassandra and pointed them out.

She smiled. “Let’s go!”

“Let’s go where?” asked Stoyan.

“To the swimming pools!” said Miti.

“But you haven’t brought your swimming trunks, Dimitar.”

Miti hadn’t thought about that point. “I just want to go and look,” he said, realising that he would rather be over there with the other water babies than here waiting for slow land adults to eat toast.

~

They rolled up their trousers, kicked off their shoes, and went to investigate the three swimming pools. When he dangled his toes into each one, Miti realised that they were different temperatures: one hot, one cold and one just right. If you wiggled your toes in the cold pool straight after the hot one, it felt as if they were going to fall off but if you wiggled them in the hot pool after the cold one then it felt like finding an open fire after a cold blizzard. Or like finding your mother after a long journey. He could have stayed there forever and melted away like warm chocolate.

If he had been an invisible water baby, like Tom in the story, he could have taken his clothes off and dived in the cold pool, swimming round, looping and turning, never needing to come up for air. And then, when it became too cold, he would leap out, breaching the pool, and without touching ground, he’d be in the hot pool, feeling wonderful and renewed and at home.

Being neither water baby nor dressed for the occasion, Miti could only use his toes or sit on the side and dip his arms in up to the elbows. Cassandra sat next to him and did the same. Then he had an idea. Who needed to wait until they got home to wash Tiny Tim when there was a warm bath right here for him? Tiny Tim entered the water with a loud splash.

“I’ll have it,” said a voice, timid, somewhere to Miti’s left. He looked round. A girl was standing behind him, staring intently at Tiny Tim bobbing up and down in the water. The girl copied Miti and Cassandra, dangling her legs in the pool. “I’ll have the lion. If you don’t want him anymore.”

“Of course I want him!” said Miti wondering where this crazy girl had come from. She had shoulder-length blonde hair and she wore a coral pink swimming costume.

She looked away from Tiny Tim. “Sorry, I thought because you pushed him in that you didn’t want him anymore.”

“He needed a bath, that’s all.”

“I see.”

Miti noticed both her hands were put in plaster casts which made her look like a lobster with big claws outstretched.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not allowed to go in the water, not all the way anyway. In case I get these wet."

"What happened?"

"It's a long story," smiled the girl sheepishly.

"I like long stories," began Miti but he would never hear the long story because at that moment a big dog ran in between the pair of them and dived into the pool with a huge splash. The girl's body rocked with laughter.

"Silly Bobo! He's not allowed in here! I hope no one sees."

Too late, someone already had. An elderly woman who'd been swimming lengths of the pool popped her head out of the water. She had a hooked nose and stern eyes that seemed to bore into the very heart of you. Miti wondered if she was one of the fairies from the book, perhaps Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby. "This is a public swimming pool," she croaked, "not a zoo." Her voice was deep and gravelly like a seabed. She disappeared under the water and swam off. Definitely one of the fairies, thought Miti.

Whilst Bobo splashed around noisily like a sea-dog and the girl watched with glee, Tiny Tim was becoming heavy, absorbing the water like a sponge, and Miti and Cassandra had to use both their hands to pull him out before he sank to the bottom to a watery grave.

"I know you need to get clean," Miti said. "But I'd hate for you to drown." Miti placed him on the side of the pool, hoping he would dry off in the sun before they had to leave.

A gruff man suddenly came along and started shouting at the sea-dog. The girl did her best to coax Bobo out of the pool but without much luck.

"I think we need to get back to your dad," said Cassandra. She was looking back over to Hotel Rich where Desislava was waving and gesturing to them from the veranda. Miti bade the lobster and the sea-dog farewell and dragged the still-dripping Tiny Tim away from the poolside.

~

When the English woman from 3b answered and came down to meet them, Miti didn't give her a chance to not be his mother. He took in her auburn hair as she emerged from the apartment block and ran up to her. Before she knew what was happening he had a tight grip around her waist, burying his face in her stomach. But she didn't wrap her arms around him; she didn't pick him up and sway him, telling him that everything would be all right.

Instead, she yelped.

She dropped the handbag she was carrying and held her hands up in the air as if someone was pointing a gun to her forehead. She looked to Stoyan and Desislava for an explanation but they stood there powerless as the boy said something over and over, through choking tears, something that sounded a lot like 'Mother'.

At that point, some kind of instinct kicked in. She wrapped her arms around the boy, stroked his hair and whispered "There, there." She managed to untangle the boy's arms from around her waist. She bent down to his level and held his head in her hands but he couldn't really see her because of the tears. "You've lost your mummy, haven't you, sweetheart?"

Miti managed a nod. "But I've found you." He said it in English to give the statement the reverence it deserved. Only the two of them could understand.

She brought him close again, surprised at his use of English, and deftly removed her sunglasses with one hand. "No, no, sweetheart, I'm not your mother."

Maybe he was crying because secretly he knew it hadn't been his mother when he first saw her, and the disappointment was just too much. Maybe he was crying because he hadn't properly cried for the loss of his mother since the day she left and now that he had started he couldn't stop. Whatever the reason, he cried and cried, at first in this woman's arms, and then later in his father's lap on a bench in the park; he cried long after Tiny Tim had dried off in the afternoon sun.

So many tears. As if he was a child made of water.

The Story of the Englishwoman

There is something in the spare room that you need.

There is something in the spare room that you need but can't pluck up the courage to go in and get. Instead, you pretend that everything is all right and ignore the thing in the spare room.

When he asks you, twenty times a day, if you are ok, you nod and say, "I'm fine, David." Or sometimes you'll just smile at him. You wonder how much he knows. You wonder if he is going through the same thing. Pain is relative to love. The more you love someone, the more it hurts when they disappoint you, or lie to you. Or when they go away and never come back. It's no consolation that you loved him more than anyone on the planet. In fact, that realisation makes it worse. You curl up into a ball on your bed. There's no hope for you. There's nothing left for you to do. You're so numb that you can't even sleep.

Your friends are there for you but they don't know what to say, how could they? When you broke up with past boyfriends, they said they were there for you, they'd been through the same thing, all you need is time and a whole lot of chocolate and you'll get over him, you'll see. Now, it's different. At least one of them comes round every day. One of them brought you flowers and fussed over them in the kitchen, made a big show of setting them in the vase perfectly. She didn't once mention his name. Another of them takes a different approach. She talks about him, tells you that at least you have all the fond memories, that you shared part of your lives together and that is what you should be holding on to. You barely talk to either of them. You watch the clock above the television. Your mother-in-law gave it to you on your first wedding anniversary. You've never liked it.

The mother-in-law hasn't been round since. She said in a letter that she finds it too difficult. She says she's heartbroken. You picture a heart like a plate, smashed and broken on the kitchen floor. Or a heart like a baby's toy, stepped on and crushed by mistake.

You have another call from work. They say there's no hurry to get back, just come back when you're ready. Take your time. Time. The clock on the television. You tell them too

that you're ok and, relieved they don't have to hear you sobbing down the phone, they tell you to concentrate on getting healthy again.

One day, you wake up and tell yourself that today is going to be different; force yourself to believe it. He's forgotten to buy milk so you spend an hour getting ready to go to the corner shop but by the time you reach the front door you're tired. You say to yourself that you're going to have a little rest, so you sit in the living room and watch television. You watch the lunchtime news. The first headline is about escalating hostilities in the Middle East. The next headline is about a famous celebrity couple who are going through the same thing as you are. They've released a statement thanking everyone for their support and prayers but requesting privacy at this difficult time. Today is not different. Today is the same as every other day. You go back to bed, still in your clothes, curled up in a ball and wait. You don't know what you're waiting for but that doesn't matter.

Your friends have ganged up. They call it an intervention. The one who had brought you flowers still doesn't talk about what happened. It had been the other friend's idea, this intervention. Five of them, on your doorstep. They'd been your bridesmaids and maid-of-honour; your best friends since school. They bring you chocolate, a selection of magazines, a voucher for a massage and pamper day. And the promise that time will heal. You need to get out of the house, they say, you need to start living your life again. They fuss, and bother, and run around you. You love them and you know they are trying to protect you, as if your heart isn't already broken. Cracked plate on the kitchen floor.

The chocolate and the magazines are where they left them. You persuaded them to take the voucher back. The quiet one who brought you flowers took it eventually because she could see in your eyes that you didn't want it and the other friend, who kept saying his name over and over again, was blind to it all.

That night you wake from a nightmare to find David crying, sobbing in the bathroom. It's your turn to ask him if he's all right and he says he's ok and smiles at you. The light isn't on and you leave him in the dark.

The next day his mother comes round and she is a source of strength you weren't expecting. She holds you and says nothing about time or healing. The two of you curl up on the bed

together and don't ask each other if you are all right. You're not, neither of you are. You both know this and it is enough.

Your friend who brought you the flowers is around again two days later. She's carrying something in her hands and for a second you think it's a pile of more magazines but when she spreads them out on the dining table you notice they are a selection of travel brochures. Bulgaria, she says. Her friend has just got back, said how brilliant the trip was. She'd gone with her mother who was ill. There's a place full of springs. The water has healing properties, she says. Is her mother still ill? you ask and the friend who brought you the flowers looks away and says yes.

You stare at your reflection in the shop window. You can't remember getting ready, can't remember leaving the house. But here you are, in the town centre, looking at yourself. Your face holds the same look as your husband's, gaunt and hollow-eyed. He's too far away to reach now. You don't think you'll ever get him back. Then you realise that the shop you're staring at is a travel agent. There's a photo of the sun. And a family smiling. Their teeth are so white and unnatural. All the way home you're thinking about the brochures lying on your dining table.

There's something you need in the spare room and for a day now you haven't plucked up the courage to go in and get it. When had you started calling it the spare room again? You hover outside and then, finally, enter. The suitcase you need is under the empty bed. To get to it, you have to cross Dylan's room. You take in everything: the chest of drawers with all his clothes inside, his action figures displayed on top, the crate of toys in the corner with his name on it, the cuddly animals propped up by his pillow. You hesitate by his bed but eventually you retrieve the suitcase.

You cross Dylan's room again and close the door behind you.

A Sense of History: A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria

Varna

Everywhere you go in Varna you feel, with all the senses, the sea and the sky.

I first visited the seaside resort as a teenager and remember vividly seeing the wide plaza, constructed in 1939 by the architect Georgi Popov (no relation), like a gateway to the ocean; the Black Sea stretching into the distance between tall white pillars that point upwards towards the sky. The sea and the sky: the inescapable lyrics to Varna's melody.

Now, returning since I lost my sight all those years ago, new music rises in counterpoint to this melody. The beachfront is lined with bars and clubs and restaurants that pump out a heady mix of hip-hop, jazz, rock, and *chalga* beats, drawing the tourists like bees to honey who buzz and dance all night and then languish in the sticky daytime.

I returned at the time of the annual jazz festival; musicians and fanatics had gathered from all over the world for a long weekend of indulgence. I was led away from the main gathering of musicians to the tranquillity of the sea gardens; ahead through the plaza with its skyward pillars and seaward view and then left.

Until the mid-nineteenth century this area was a barren field outside the city walls. Now it is one of the biggest and proudest landscaped public gardens in the Balkans. I could see none of it but I could sense it. Its calmness radiated like the slow lapping of the shore which, if you really stop to listen, you can hear on the sea breeze.

I knew that somewhere in these gardens which stretch a staggering 50,000 square metres, nestled amongst long boulevards of tall trees, were the Varna Aquarium (built from 1906 to 1911) and the Dolphinarium (built in 1984). Not content with its toes dipping into the sea, it is as if Varna has gone fishing and displayed its proud quarry for all to see.

There used to be an open-air theatre here but that has been built over. Embarrassed by destroying a view to the sky, Varna compromised by building an observatory and planetarium in 1968 so that the stars could be mapped instead.

Just as they brought in the sea to the gardens by building the Aquarium and Dolphinarium, they captured a little bit of the stars and brought it down to earth. On 26th May 1961, the first cosmonaut, Russia's Uri Gagarin, planted the first tree in what has become known as the Alley of the Cosmonauts – a silver fir, by now taller than me.

I sat down on one of the many benches that line the boulevards, in the shelter of the trees. I listened to a family of Germans next to me who were talking about their picnic and deciding where to go next. They decided on the aquarium and left excitedly.

This left me with a stray jazz musician who had broken away from the main gathering of performers nearer the city centre. His soaring violin played a jaunty tune. When he reached a break in his music, I asked him what he was playing. It was a sea shanty, an ode to St Nicholas of Varna who was the saint of seamen, a Poseidon-like figure claimed by the Christians. He started up again, a song about a fisherman who cannot catch any fish because the holes in his net are too big, and his melody joined with the rest of the music in Varna which hangs on the air so that maybe, just maybe, it all comes back to the sea and the sky after all.

When The Sands Turned Golden

People who misplace their keys are inevitably asked: “And where did you last see them?” Then, after hours of searching and the offending articles turn up, they tut loudly and roll their eyes and say: “Why is it that they’re always in the last place you look?”

They were heading there now, the four of them, to the last place they would look.

Stoyan was snoring. Desislava was also asleep; her head lolling from side to side like a tethered balloon in a breeze. Cassandra was watching the scenery pass by the train window.

This, the new book on the e-reader’s screen, was the most exciting of them all, a real adventure. There were treasures and pirates, mutiny and murder. Yet for Miti it held no magic. Once upon a time he might have imagined the scrape-walk-scrape of the one-legged Long John Silver every time someone approached their cabin in the train carriage or that the rolling green hills they passed were waves, waves that would take them to their treasure. But not now. He found himself staring at the words on the screen but not taking them in. His mind bothered itself with thoughts about yesterday when the English woman hadn’t been his mother and how much more it hurt than it normally did. Even though the woman had been so kind and had cuddled him, they both knew it wasn’t right, something was wrong. Miti didn’t like to think about all the people who had seen him crying. He tried thinking about the beach they were heading towards. He’d heard from his friend Stoichov that the sands were golden in Varna.

As Miti half-read, of treasure maps and shipwrecks, dead men’s chests and bottles of rum, his eyelids were getting heavier – he hadn’t slept much – and the e-reader was slipping from his fingers. He said to himself that the story could wait. It was only a story, after all.

For now, he must sleep, if only for a while.

Land! Land ahoy!

A sharp rapping on the window, a stern glare from a thorny looking man on the platform outside. Was that a patch over his eye? A scrabbling and reaching, whistles blowing, the platform was nearly clear already, the train was about to leave again. A rushing and tumbling, a backpack was left behind, rushing to fetch it. Tiny Tim – come on! – we don’t have time for you to be heavy or awkward or cumbersome. Engines started,

carriages crunching together, a slow snaking from the station, getting faster. Desislava was out the door helping Stoyan. The e-reader on the seat – Cassandra shouts for Miti to go back and get it but Miti is already halfway out of the door which the man is shutting behind him. A slamming, a thud. Tugging. Miti landed on the platform, pain shooting through his legs but Tiny Tim was lighter now. His eyes stared up at Miti from a face surrounded by his golden mane like a halo.

The rest of his body was on the fast train out of Varna on a journey to goodness-knows-where, stuffing spewing from a gaping hole where his head should be. White fluffy blood.

~

Nicova Street was a short walk from the centre of town and very easy to find using the map, just off a long boulevard, near the central bus station and the new Grand Mall.

“I can’t believe you left it behind!” spat Cassandra. She crossed her arms and pouted as they walked.

“It’s not my fault, I thought you had it.”

“We spoke to the guard,” said Stoyan, “they might be able to keep hold of it if they find it or if someone turns it in.”

“What about Tiny Tim’s body?” asked Miti but no one had an answer for that. Miti cradled the lion’s head in his arms and thought that Tiny Tim’s eyes were just a little bit sadder today.

There wasn’t a house waiting for Miti at Number 12. Instead, there was a hotel: The Lion Hotel. Above the revolving doors at the entrance flew two Bulgarian flags and between them a blue flag with a golden lion in the centre. The hotel was three stories high, fairly small compared to other buildings on the street, crammed in between two blocks of flats, one of which still had the scaffolding up outside. The hotel’s facade was painted terracotta and it lacked any sort of charm. Next to the nameplate there were two stars.

They stood watching the hotel from across the street. It was busy with traffic trying to squeeze past cars that were packed high up on the pavements. The skip belonging to the apartment block next door wasn’t helping matters either. A minibus crammed full of people stopped right in front, blocked by someone doing an inconsiderate and messy U-Turn further down the street. Some of the passengers, bored, looked out of the window, others squashed inside could do nothing but wait. Miti thought that maybe the hotel had been an

illusion, a mirage like the one sailors used to get on the open sea. He worried that maybe when the bus pulled away and went on with its journey the hotel would have disappeared, a figment of his imagination although, he was beginning to realise, illusions only happened in books.

Although the road was still busy with traffic, they attempted to cross. They were standing in a patch of sun and the air was arid. Desislava made several hesitant starts but she never quite summoned the confidence to cross. Further down the street the minibus was having more trouble, this time attempting to pass a parked car so the traffic slowed and backed up. Desislava saw her chance and led the four of them between bumpers and taillights.

She helped Stoyan with the revolving doors. Miti and Tiny Tim's head had to go in a compartment by themselves, Cassandra followed.

The shiny white tiles on the floor inside were cool and welcoming. Sparsely furnished, there was a brown leather sofa to the left of the revolving doors and opposite a small reception desk behind which a man and a woman in blue uniforms conversed. They didn't look up until Desislava brought her hand up to the desk's polished surface.

"Good afternoon," said the man. The woman busied herself with paperwork.

"We're looking for a Mrs Grace Popova," said Stoyan, "I was wondering if you could tell us if she's staying here."

"I'm afraid we're not at liberty to divulge the names of our clientele," said the man.

The woman looked up and gestured for her colleague to move in closer. She whispered something in his ear and he nodded. She handed him a note before carrying on with her paperwork. The man regarded Stoyan and attempted a smile. "My apologies. Are you Dragan?"

"Yes," Stoyan lied, without missing a beat.

The man held out the note. "It appears a message has been left for you."

"Thank you, you've been more than helpful," said Stoyan.

Miti took the note. Silently, they went over to the leather sofa. Miti wanted to open the message straight away but Stoyan thought perhaps Desislava had best be the one to do it. She opened it, read it, then read it again.

"What does it say?" asked Miti.

Stoyan understood Desislava's hesitation. "Dimitar, why don't you and Cassandra wait for us by the entrance?" he said.

"But..."

"Please, Dimitar."

From another set of sofas, Miti and Cassandra watched people coming in and out of the revolving doors. His father and Desislava were in deep discussion. As much as he tried to listen, he couldn't hear their words. The revolving doors distracted him with a continuous swish swish like the sound of a cutlass. Cassandra still had her arms crossed.

"Are you still mad at me?" asked Miti.

"It was very expensive."

"It was *my* money!" Cassandra didn't have a comeback so she flicked her hair and turned to watch the revolving door. Part of Miti wanted to let her stew but another part of him was concerned. He stood up and went to sit next to Cassandra. "We can buy a new one," he said, "when we get back to Plovdiv."

"I'll have my own books when we get back to Plovdiv."

"I guess."

Cassandra uncrossed her arms, began playing with the ends of her plaits. "What's going to happen when we get back?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you still going to come and read with me? What if your mum comes back and your dad lets books back in the house. You won't need to see me again."

Miti concentrated on the revolving doors to try and stop himself from blushing. "Of course I'll see you again."

"Good."

Stoyan and Desislava stood up, returned the note to the receptionist and came over. "Dimitar, where are you?"

Miti reached out to hold his father's hands. They were hot.

Stoyan kneeled so that he was level with his son. "Now, Dimitar. We think we know where your mother is. We think we've found her. Do you remember what I said back at home, before we started out on this

journey? Things might be different and she might not come home with us. We want you to understand that before we find her, to make it clear.”

Miti nodded and squeezed his father’s hands. He stood up and they left the hotel through the revolving doors which whispered after them.

~

The long walk into town seemed to take forever for Miti. They were heading for the sea. There was a slowness to his father, a reluctance, as Miti pulled him by the hand. Had Ebenezer Scrooge returned to take possession of his father? It was as if he didn’t want to find her, or as if he wasn’t in any rush to. Miti pulled harder, if he hadn’t been holding Tiny Tim’s poor head he would have used both hands.

Wait a minute! Is that...? No! It can’t be!

Miti suddenly stopped dead. Coming towards him was the pirate with the wooden leg from his story. Long John Silver had found him. He wore a long coat, even in this heat, and he hobbled along, clutching on to the person next to him, another pirate no doubt. But it can’t be Long John Silver. Miti rubbed his eyes and saw an old man, not a pirate, who was having trouble walking, but he had two legs and one of them wasn’t wooden and the woman he clutched onto was also not a pirate but a beautiful woman with layers of make-up like a Russian doll. They passed the man and woman and Miti wondered what had made him think they had been pirates. It was all make believe. Nothing more.

They carried on walking down the long boulevard, passing a wedding spilling out from a church, the bridesmaids in hot-pink dresses that mocked the old reverent stone of the church steps. A man let off a loud clapper and a million pieces of curled multicoloured paper twirled on the air and down the street.

“I’d forgotten,” said Desislava, looking at the wedding party and their smiles. “How could I forget?” But the answer was in the question.

A young girl was standing outside, watching the wedding with clasped hands. She wore a pretty white dress with lace gloves and a rose in her hair. Miti thought at first it might have been Sara Crewe but the little

girl had blond hair so he thought maybe it was Alice but when her mother came along and scooped her up and called her Ana he knew she couldn't have been something as silly as a character from a book.

A painfully beautiful day, the sun bathed everything and made jewels and treasures of normal things.

The wine glasses that collected on the outside tables at the restaurants sparkled, and the silver knives and forks shone and winked back but Miti didn't notice. A young girl stopped to look at the jewellery in a shop window because it glinted and caught her attention. Reflections from the metal of the clothes racks jutting out into the pavement from numerous boutiques were like flash bulbs from the catwalk and made celebrities of the dresses.

A small dog, tied to a lamppost whilst its owner discovered a new shop, worshipped the sun; it lay on its back, legs in the air, tongue lolling out playfully. Nearby, a young man with slicked-back hair which shone in the daylight brought out a silver CD player to position it outside his shop, cord leading back through the open door. It radiated both light and sound.

Palaver outside a nearby restaurant drew Cassandra's attention. A crowd of young men and women were congregating outside but they were held back by bouncers on the door who wore long black cloaks. Excited whispers fizzed in the air: the Bulgarian national football team were inside, apparently. Phones were held high to take pictures, but all they caught were flashes of blurred light instead of glimpses of the team.

But Miti didn't notice any of it.

Then Desislava stopped, just outside the McDonald's on the corner, the queue for which snaked out into the street. She consulted her map again and now Miti looked around him. In the little wind that blew his way, Miti could taste the salt. Gulls flew and fought playfully for discarded scraps. A street performer was pulling a live rabbit from his top hat to applause from gathered children. Two women laughed as they walked; this was a place where people smiled. He knew why his mother would want to come here.

"If we turn right here, then we'll come to the sea. According to the note, she'll be at the first pier."

As soon as he heard her words, something snapped within Miti and he could no longer contain the urge to run. He sprinted forward, the way Desislava was pointing. He heard her shouts after him, mingled with his

father's but there was no way he could stop now. He thought he heard Cassandra's voice, small and fragile, "Let him go."

The sea wind was pushing him forward. Maybe this is what Madame Zlatka meant about the stories on the wind because, as he rushed forward, it felt to him as if he was rushing towards the end of his book, because he could feel that there weren't many more pages left, that the immortal words happily ever after were in his grasp.

He ran as fast as his little feet could carry him but it never felt quick enough and he hated himself for not being able to run any faster. And then the shops and restaurants came to a sudden end, the white concrete spreading forth between two tall pillars towards a park and beyond it, peeking between trees: the sea.

But it still seemed such a long way off and he wasn't going fast enough but what was this? A child whizzing around on a miniature police buggy, his parents clapping and cheering him on from one of the pillars, and Miti found himself aiming straight for the boy who was now crying on the floor and Miti felt the hot steering wheel in his hands as he mounted the police buggy and headed for the sea which wasn't black like its name but blue, just as it should be.

Swerving through the legs of passers-by, sirens blaring and lights flashing wildly, Miti felt the true force of the wind and nothing could stop him now except, what's this? Are they stairs? Stairs! Miti skidded and leapt off the buggy which carried on whizzing off in its own doomed trajectory whilst Miti jumped down stairs that arched round like a grand marble staircase in a manor house.

At the bottom of the stairs he crossed a broad road and went straight through an archway which led to the sands, so golden, just like he'd been promised. Bodies littered the beach and didn't notice this frantic little boy struggling to run through the sand towards the sea. It was only when he reached the edge where the sea met the sand that he stopped. Had he been a water baby he might have jumped straight in the sea and rolled away across the ocean but he wasn't, he was Miti, a boy, and a boy without his mother. He searched the sea for a message in a bottle and then for the first pier.

The bay curved round in both directions fronted by multicoloured shacks of restaurants and band stands. A short distance away, jutting out from the beach was a Y-shaped pier, shored up by large rocks. Seconds later and Miti was running back the way he had come, through the archway and then right, along the back road filled with strolling families in swimwear gorging on ice cream. He was chased by stray dogs barking after him. For a

fleeting second he thought one of them was Buck – powerful, powerful Buck from Alaska – but it couldn't be because Buck was in a book and not real, he finally understood that.

And now he's coming towards the pier.

It's not the grandest pier he could imagine though couples walk up and down its length, slowly, and look out towards the sea and the tankers dotting the horizon like far away pirate ships. Fishermen at the pier's two furthest points worriedly watch their fishing lines and the ocean.

He reaches the base of the pier and finally comes to a stop, removing his sandals because he wants to feel the sand beneath his feet for the very first time. It crunches as he walks which surprises him. He had imagined walking on the back of a young lion cub. He pauses and searches for his mother.

One couple. Two couples. This is like the steps at the Shipka monument but he won't miscount this time. Three couples. One man. Seven seagulls. Two girls. Four dogs. Three families.

One mother.

Parenthesis III

For the last time, he closes his father's notebook and lays it on the desk, side by side with his own.

He is glad they used the photograph he sent Silva instead of that ridiculous image of a tacky brass wind-chime that they were planning on using. It's a photograph he took himself of the original Stories on the Wind, Madame Zlatka's stories, collected and displayed on that huge piece of cloth; her tapestry of found objects.

He pictures the tapestry hanging up in the hallway at his Sofia home; always a talking point when new visitors arrive. They ask him what it means, why there were patches with empty crisp packets on them, or small bits of piping, rusted with age. And he has to answer them truthfully: he has no idea. The stories aren't the objects themselves, he has come to realise, but the journeys these objects took to get there. After her death, Madame Zlatka's son came back from Sofia to see to affairs and clear out her apartment. He kept the boxes full of unused cordless telephones but said he had no use for her tapestry which he'd referred to as junk. By that point she'd been working on it for years and it looked quite magnificent; each patch a myriad of objects.

There was, however, one patch sewn on that was as yet empty; Madame Zlatka hadn't had a chance to collect her final story before she passed away. When he was a bit older, he completed the bare patch as best he could. One day, shortly after her death he was returning to the apartment when he saw Madame Zlatka's face in the middle of the pavement. Literally. It was her necrologue, the memorial photograph and dedication that her son had pasted on trees and lampposts near the apartment. One of them must have fallen off and was blowing towards him, carried on the wind. He saved it and attached it to the patchwork along with the burnt envelope with the partial address on it.

Remembering this, the old man realises it's not the only thing he has kept from those days. His mind turns to the head of Tiny Tim which hangs above his mantelpiece like some kind of prize trophy from a strange African safari. Poor Tiny Tim never really stood a chance, realises the old man. He was the outcome of a spur of the moment, of sheer luck and an uncharacteristic greed. He wasn't unwanted, far from it, but he wasn't planned either.

"You haven't decided yet which story you're going to read, have you?" asks the boy who is hovering in the doorway again, somewhere between coming and going.

"I have narrowed it down to two," says the old man. "I'll decide nearer the time."

But there is one left, one story that he hasn't written down yet and one that, quite possibly, he never will:

The story of his mother.

When The Sands Turned Golden, Again

She is sitting about halfway down, on the edge of the pier, unmistakable. Her legs are dangling over the side though she can't reach the water. She has, in her hands, a book.

But is it really her? He has learnt not to trust his first thoughts. Many times the crewmen on the *Hispaniola* thought they had seen land through their spyglasses when it was a trick of light or hunger or thirst. He contains himself and takes a deep breath. Gently, he places what is left of Tiny Tim on the sand and kneels down. He swings his backpack round in front of him and begins to unpack it slowly, laying all the items on the golden sand. He doesn't have to rush; his mother is reading and isn't going anywhere. First come out his pyjamas with the address sewn in the collar. His toothbrush and toothpaste. His silver electronic dictionary. The present he has brought along to give to his mother, carefully wrapped in a string bag. The last thing in his backpack is a spyglass of his very own.

He walks forward, leaving the assortment of objects behind, to where the water comes up to his knees. He hasn't taken off his trousers, doesn't mind if they get wet. Bringing the spyglass to his eyes, he squints and adjusts the lens, has to re-focus two, three times but in the end she is safe, completely captured within his circle of vision. How could he have ever forgotten what she looks like?

His treasured island.

He takes his time to read, through binoculars, how she turns the pages of her book hungrily, just as she had always done. He reads the way she tucks her hair behind her ears to stop it blowing in the light breeze and the way she wiggles her toes; she is happy. He'd forgotten the dimples when she smiles, her big hazel eyes the same colour as her hair, her delicate nose. She's tall and slender, wearing a gossamer-thin sarong over a light blue swimming costume; pale skin browning in the sun. Now he reads the way a man stalks up behind her and covers her eyes with great big hands and he reads the way in which she laughs, throwing down her book to one side and swinging her legs onto the pier to face the man; she is more than happy. And finally he reads how she kisses and touches the man's cheeks and how she surrenders herself to him in a strong embrace.

She is with the man now, Miti knows this and he knows it with no anger or malice or even sadness. Perhaps all these things will come, in time. For now, he celebrates the only thing that is important: he has found

her. It's just that she wasn't looking for him in return; as Cassandra had said, his mother wasn't lost in her dreams at all. His mistake.

Finally, he understands what faith is. Faith is nothing more than hope. He can't understand why his father was using the word faith, when hope would do in its place. The statue back in Plovdiv of the man proffering his ear is doing so in the hope that someone will listen, not out of faith. The cleaner humming to her God at the memorial church in Shipka is not faithful. She is, merely, hopeful. His father didn't pray to the lord because he had faith, but because he hoped there was someone out there who could help him.

Miti lowers his binoculars and considers the sea. Part of it is calling to him. He isn't sure if it is the seabed itself, its dark depths, or if there is something beneath the waves, something alive, calling his name. Or maybe it is something on the wind, some story on the breeze that he should try and capture. Perhaps, one day, he'd try and write down the wind's stories before they drove him as mad as Madame Zlatka.

One day.

For now, all that can wait. He returns to his backpack. He notices his father, Desislava and Cassandra have followed him to the beach. They are standing a short way off, watching him, keeping their distance. He would join them later and they would go home.

He finds his mother's present and unwraps it from the string bag. "Give me a good book any day of the week, and I'll be a happy woman." It is his mother's favourite saying, she used to say it all the time. He smooths down the burnt covers of *Under The Yoke*, her favourite book. He won't be giving it to her now, as he'd been planning all this time, because she is already happy. Happier than he's ever seen her, perhaps. He opens the book somewhere towards the end but it is so brittle that the pages come loose from the spine and, like snowflakes made of ash, begin to disintegrate and float off on the wind. He lets them go.

The realisation of his mother's happiness is a moment of understanding, a solemn knowing, as if he has read to the end of a book, found out everything that happened, read the last dialogue of the characters and reached those final, final words. Not, after all, happily ever after but instead, simply: The End.

A Sense of History: A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria

Plovdiv

The musty smell of books and the charcoal smell of burning them.

In 1857, Hristo Danov inaugurated a bindery in Plovdiv which would expand and become Bulgaria's first publishing house. Some-time politician (between 1897 and 1899 Danov was Mayor of Plovdiv) and some-time criminal (he was arrested by the Turks in 1876 and imprisoned for three months for concealing Bulgarian translations of books and attempting to smuggle them across borders), Danov's legacy as a national hero is secure. As a publisher, he contributed to the development of the Bulgarian National Revival through the printing of textbooks and maps that formed part of the school curriculum, as well as creating and disseminating *Maritsa*, the first all-Bulgarian newspaper. Danov's infamous printing press is preserved in a building near to the reception of what is now known as Danov House, situated in Plovdiv's Old Town. There is a courtyard, filled with fig trees, and two buildings. One houses the Press and reception and the other is where Danov used to live. It contains his library and a collection of his seminal works as well as his office, preserved with desk and chair. I can't hear the Press, I can't see the Press, I can't touch the Press - it is kept behind a barrier. And I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that I certainly can't taste the Press.

So I must be making a return here for some other reason.

My son.

This place never fails to remind me of him; the sound of him guzzling down juicy figs, the sound of him turning the pages of his books. When we returned from Varna, Dimitar used to come here every day to read, even after I'd come to my senses and allowed books back in the apartment. Sometimes I came with him and just sat in the courtyard, listening to him. Sometimes, he'd read to me, sometimes not. Then I noticed that he began reading less and less and instead he filled his time with writing. Cassandra told me once, about a year after his mother had left us, that Dimitar had written five whole exercise books' worth of stories. I asked if he could read them to me but he said he wasn't ready to share them yet. I asked him what made him write and he'd always give me the same reason: he loved writing as much as he loved reading and I had no reason not to believe him.

Once though, not too long ago, he told me the real reason. I'd been very unwell. He was by my side in hospital. I asked him the same question. "I write," he said, "because that way I can control the stories instead of them controlling me. Instead of being a slave to my imagination I tamed it and controlled it by writing."

Grace sent him books for his birthday and for Christmas, every year until he was eighteen. That was her way of eventually getting in touch. Classics mostly, rare, hard to find editions. Beautiful leather binding; often priceless. She must have gone to great lengths to find them. Dimitar and I burnt them in the kitchen sink; it became something of a ritual every year. Some people have

cake and blow out candles. We lit the candles and then lit the books. It wasn't a political statement. Quite the contrary, it was purely cathartic and purely personal. It was Dimitar's idea. Desi, as always, waited in the wings, holding a fire extinguisher which she had insisted we kept in the apartment.

Once, after visiting Danov House, we passed a tree full of screeching starlings. There must have been thousands of them, tens of thousands. "Perfect," said Desi as we stopped to listen.

"What is?" I asked.

"There's a statue," she said. "Of a family, they're all together, looking upwards and smiling. The birds flit from the tree above and fly around their heads. It's beautiful."

Goran was with us, next door was a wedding dressmaker's where there was a dress he had already picked out for her. "Nonsense," he said and dragged Desi inside the shop, leaving me with the sound of a thousand starlings.

We went back, a few years later, the starlings were still there, as was the statue. It could have been the same day, all over again. Only this time, Goran wasn't with us. She bought her wedding dress from the shop. I wished I could have seen her walking down the aisle in her dress but in retrospect that didn't matter.

I was the one she was walking to meet at the altar.

Parenthesis IV

Dimitar has finally decided he won't even ask Silva if he can read a passage or two from his father's notebook, he'll just go straight out there and do it. His father always used to ask him why he wrote and once, he asked him the same question in return. He asked him what he was looking for, so to speak, on these journeys, so late in life. 'Nothing,' replied his father, 'and everything.'

Dimitar can't help but think that to some his father's answer wouldn't make sense but, for him, he understood perfectly.

Nothing and everything: it was the search for his mother.

He looks around for the boy but he is gone. Instead, there is a woman standing in the doorway so thin and frail he isn't sure if she's there or not.

"Where's the boy?" he asks.

"What boy?" She's holding out a hand for him to take. The old man shrugs and, with great effort, heaves himself up from behind the desk, walking over to the woman and taking her hand.

"I'm glad you're here," he says.

"I'm always here."

"I know. I know." They leave Danov's House and enter the courtyard. The clouds are gone, revealing dazzling sunshine. "I didn't think you'd make it."

"I told you I'd try, didn't I?"

"Yes, yes you did."

The old woman smiles at the man and with what little strength she has, she squeezes his hand. She wears a faint pink cardigan wrapped around her shoulders. On it is a brooch. A single Tiger's Eye. It is bright enough to be the sun.

She is his jewel amongst paper.

**CRITICAL COMMENTARY:
A STORY ABOUT STORIES**

Introduction:
From Sofia to Southampton

Sofia, Bulgaria.

October 2010

It is dark and quiet inside the exhibition rooms of the Ivan Vazov Museum.

Aside from the custodian I am the only one here and the thick nineteenth-century walls keep out the sound of the busy road outside. In the first room the lights are dimmed and dusky yellow, the heavy display cabinets are of an imposing, dark wood. The exhibits are framed by spotlights built into the top of the cabinets. Explaining each exhibit are small cards, written in Bulgarian, of which I can read little and understand even less. The custodian only speaks Bulgarian so my sole guide is an A4 sheet of English which serves to describe the entire museum.

Yet what becomes clear as I move around this first room is that I do not need to understand Bulgarian in order to appreciate the reverence with which the objects here are displayed. This is Bulgaria's first literature museum, in the centre of the country's capital, Sofia, a short distance from the National Theatre which also bears the name of writer and Bulgarian hero, Ivan Vazov. It is housed in the building where Vazov lived and wrote for twenty-five years until his death on September 22nd 1921. Presented in these cabinets, amongst other things, are first edition books of Vazov's seminal works, his dip pens and ink wells, thin wire reading glasses in a little leather case, a well-worn satchel bursting with handwritten manuscripts. The rest of the house contains recreations of the rooms exactly as Vazov left them upon his death and all of these exhibits work together to create a picture, an impression, of Ivan Vazov; they are like living postcards of a man who has been described as 'the unchallenged patriarch of modern Bulgarian literature'¹ and whose influence on the Bulgarian national canon cannot be overestimated.

*As a writer working on a novel set in Bulgaria, I was keen to visit this museum to deepen my knowledge of the country's literary heritage. Poet, novelist, playwright – Vazov's work has been translated into over thirty languages and his most famous work, *Under the Yoke* (1893), is a long-standing key text on national school curricula both as a piece of creative writing and a nationalist*

¹ Maria Todorova, *Bones of Contention: the Living Archive of Vasil Levski and the Making of Bulgaria's National Hero* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), p.208

fiction. Yoke tells the story of the peasant disenchantment with, and eventual uprising against, the five-hundred years of Turkish rule. Inside one of the cabinets is a first edition English translation of Yoke, proudly displayed next to the Order of Cyril and Methodius, Bulgaria's highest civilian decoration in the fields of science, education, and the arts. As I view this immaculate book, I have a renewed (though not yet fully articulated) sense that I want the novel I am crafting to be both one story and many stories, and that Ivan Vazov would feature somehow in that writing.

Southampton, England.

April 2013

Having been to Bulgaria many times before as a tourist and volunteer worker, my return in the autumn of 2010 was a research trip to reacquaint myself with the locations that featured heavily in my novel-in-progress, *Reading Through Binoculars*; to encounter Bulgaria as a writer. It was upon visiting the museum, and following further research of Vazov's historical position in Bulgarian society, that the concept of nation and national identity became richer in significance for my novel - or so it seems now when the third and final draft is nearly complete. When I stood there in the museum, two and a half years ago, I had no such distance from my work and did not fully realise the cultural significance of Vazov's *Yoke* and the other artefacts on display, or the effect that they would have on both my research and my novel. I had already done some library research, but this was related to texts and textual networks, rather than individual and group identities.

Binoculars tells the story of nine year-old Miti Popov as he travels across Bulgaria in search of his mother, Grace. On his journey, Miti reads several books that begin to have a profound effect on the way he views life, his country, and his childhood. *Binoculars* thus becomes a comment on the ways in which readers, writers, books and stories relate to, and interact with, one another. Alongside the main narrative of Miti's journey, the novel contains a collection of Miti's own short stories, *The Stories on the Wind*, (written later, when he was an adult), as well as excerpts from his father's notebook, *A Sense of History: A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria* – part historical travelogue, part memoir. My novel is a multi-layered textual tissue.

This critical commentary reflects on my trajectory, as both writer and researcher, in constructing *Binoculars*, and it consists of three main sections. I begin by engaging with definitions and applications of the notion of 'intertextuality' with reference to my novel, which did in the end become the story about stories that I had envisioned. I reflect on some of the ways in which *Binoculars* explores and exploits the textual cross-references and networks at work in a self-consciously intertextual novel. In the section that follows, I then go on to explore further the concept of the nation (symbolised in my work in part by the Vazov/father figure) with particular reference to the

construction of Bulgarian national identities and the role of literature and memory as cultural tools in these constructions. Finally, I move from nationalism to a discussion of how theories of cosmopolitan politics and philosophies have a bearing on Miti's identity and the writing of my novel.

This commentary is an attempt to think about multi-stranded processes: the complex process of identity construction (individual, national, transnational), the logistics of intertextual cross-connectedness, and the process of writing – not just in writing my novel but in how my awareness of the cultural elements and themes named above affected me as a creative writer. *Binoculars* was written in three main waves of drafting and revision which took place, roughly, in summer 2009, spring 2011 and winter 2012. The process of writing this critical commentary began on completion of the second draft, although I did substantial theory-related research well before the first draft was completed. My work on *Binoculars* thus proceeded through a cycle of interconnected activities: writing, reading, researching and remembering; a cycle that I continued to re-trace throughout working on the novel and the critical commentary. Reading theory at the same time as writing the novel rationalised my own thinking and fed back into the writing and the process of remembering my visits to Bulgaria.

Over two years ago at the time of writing, I walked around the Ivan Vazov museum with little understanding or awareness of its cultural significance. This commentary will return to that museum as an anchoring point of my work on this project as I near its completion and my thoughts, inevitably, return to how it all began.

**‘Between The Lines Of Every Story There Is Another Story’:
Intertextuality, Miti’s World, and Writing the Bulgaria of *Reading Through Binoculars*²**

Directly opposite the winding, creaking staircase is Ivan Vazov’s large study. Although tall windows framed by heavy scarlet curtains line the far wall (through them, one can see the impressive red brick of the Ivan Vazov National Theatre), this room is dark. The main feature of the room is the desk near the doorway from where I stand. It is a huge desk – a writer’s desk – with a green leather surface, an open book, and a dip-pen poised in a pot of ink. His sister, Vula, reported that he worked best from two to three in the morning and that she often heard him shuffling from his bedroom to the study in the early hours to scribble down ideas in the notebook he always kept handy. Looking up at the ghost of the man behind the desk is his faithful dog, Bobby, stuffed after being run over in the street outside the house. Dominating a corner of the room, right by the entrance, is a heavy, glass-fronted bookcase, each shelf filled with volumes of all shapes and sizes. Through the image of these piled-up novels and literary works, combined with the writer’s desk, I begin to visualise Vazov the writer, and think about what the process of writing fiction entails.

It was an image that stayed with me. This was the room where Vazov came to read and write; to lose himself in the worlds of books and to create worlds in books of his own. This room is, to borrow a phrase from *Binoculars*, ‘a menagerie of books[...]*A hullabaloo of stories*’ (*Binoculars*, p.75). The textual interactions at work in this room, with Vazov as both reader and writer, are mirrored in the processes of writing *Binoculars* and, indeed, in the novel itself. This chapter will explore the textual and theoretical implications of creating an image of Bulgaria as a landscape and as Miti’s immediate world.

The origins of *Binoculars* can be traced back to two separate images: a boy reading a book, through binoculars, on the balcony below, and a car journey through part of Bulgaria’s mountainous landscape. From these images, the story of an avid reader searching for his missing mother across Bulgaria evolved. I had always wanted to set a novel in Bulgaria after visiting the country on several occasions between 2001 and 2008, as a tourist and a volunteer in an orphanage for young teenagers. My initial visits brought to my first draft three key elements: the Bulgarian landscape (as viewed by an external visitor), the underlying notion of loss and pain (which seeped in through my work at the orphanage, although I was not consciously aware of this until I began to work on the final draft), and the notion of books (I was a readerly tourist). Bulgaria is a country that offers visiting travellers a multitude of

² Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p.ii

(often contradictory) physical landscapes, both human and natural: concrete apartment blocks in communist-era cityscapes and tiled shacks in rural villages; snow-capped skiing pistes and golden beaches facing the Black Sea; flat fields of pink roses and jagged mountain gorges and valleys. In the summer of 2009, the initial draft of the novel was inspired by, and centred around, my own memories and experiences of visiting Bulgaria. This draft introduced the seven key locations of Miti's journey (Plovdiv, Sofia, Stara Zagora, Kazanlak, Shipka, Velingrad, and Varna) as well as five short stories (the stories of Boris, Otto, Theo, the Violinist, and Elisabeta). These were formally separated, as *The Stories on the Wind* (hereafter referred to as *SOTW*), in a single section near the end of the novel.

The seven locations were places I had visited and their depictions in the early draft were based solely on my memory of them, with many inaccuracies and mis-rememberances. For example, my memories of Kazanlak and Velingrad had merged into one so that landmarks and sites of interest in each town became blurred and blended together; I had remembered the journey between Plovdiv and Varna as a relatively short trip when in actual fact it is a laborious seven-hour trek by public transport. Aided by photographs and postcards, I had tried to recreate these locations from having only visited many of the places once. The Bulgaria of Miti's world in this early draft was, therefore, the Bulgaria of my faulty memory and perception.

As a readerly tourist in Bulgaria (perhaps unconsciously cognisant of the limitations of my own vision of the country), I strove to add complexity to the novel's depiction of the country at this early stage through Miti's relationship with books. In setting out to write *Binoculars*, it was always my intention to create a character obsessed with reading. I wanted Miti to read a series of books on his journey and to chart how these books enter into, and start to interact with and destabilise, his imaginative and literal world(s) – and the Bulgaria of my creation. From the start of his journey (and the beginning of my writing), the books that Miti reads were *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1905), *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London (1903), *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (1843), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865), *The Water-Babies* by Charles Kingsley (1863), and *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson (1883). These are some of the books I had read and enjoyed as a child and their presence in the novel became justified by making Miti into a Bulgarian boy with an English mother, which, in turn, explained the unusualness of his perspective on the country of his birth.

For reasons to do with plot verisimilitude, I did not want Miti to have to carry around all these books with him on his journey and so I had to think creatively about how this could be done. Originally, Miti was going to read the books on his Nintendo DS which included a programme allowing him to view one hundred English-language classics of children's literature. From this list of classics, I selected the six texts above. The role and functioning of these texts in the novel changed considerably

in subsequent drafts, along with his method of reading them, as I undertook research on digital technologies and reading habits and felt the e-reader was a much more contemporaneous and viable option for his access to the books. I began to realise that the books could be made to speak to the landscape of Bulgaria that I found so memorable. I began reading the six texts in light of my memories of the country and looked for textual and physical locations where the boundaries between the worlds of these texts and Miti's world could be blurred as a result of Miti's linear way of reading.

I wanted to write a novel that was a comment on the relationship between fiction and 'truth' – and that problematised the latter notion in its relationship to 'fact'. From the first draft onwards, Miti was, and has remained, a character who had trouble distinguishing fact from fiction, so that his journey was not only a search for his mother but, also, a search for the realisation that fiction is not the literal truth; that when we read, we are reading the world(s) of someone else's imagination however convincingly they are portrayed or described as 'real'. Author and critic Vladimir Nabokov has made much comment on the artistry of writing, stating that 'To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth'.³ We cannot turn to literature as a source of 'truth', as Miti initially does through his reading, for the simple fact that 'Literature is invention. Fiction is fiction'.⁴ It was only while I was working on the final draft of *Binoculars* that I realised all the books Miti reads are either stories freighted by heavy didacticism, or adventure stories revolving around the linear idea of progression towards a goal; that is to say, stories which encourage a linear reading, arguably a childish way of reading, that moves inexorably towards a 'happy ending'. In his search for his mother, Miti discovers that he has to abandon this literalist, childlike way of relating to fictional worlds. The stories he has read have helped him to find his mother, but they cannot bring her back. My novel now has a more complex kind of 'happy ending' than the one Miti longs for, which will be discussed in the third chapter of this commentary.

Re-reading these texts in conjunction with writing *Binoculars* was an exciting process because they shaped, influenced and inspired different aspects of my novel. When reading *A Little Princess*, I was struck by Burnett's introduction to the book and her exposition of, and insight into, the writing, thinking, and editing processes that I was also undergoing at the time. *A Little Princess*, in the form published in 1905, is a reworking of a serialised novel Burnett wrote almost twenty years previously, entitled *Sara Crewe: Or What Happened at Miss Minchin's Boarding School*. In the introduction to the new novel, Burnett writes that 'I do not know whether many people realise how much more than is ever written there really is in a story - how many parts of it are never told - how much more really happened than there is in the book one holds in one's hand', referring to the fact that she felt

³ Vladimir Nabokov, 'Good Readers and Good Writers' in *Lectures On Literature* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p.5

⁴ *Ibid*, p.5

characters and storylines were not fully explored in the original novel, so much so that it was the job of the characters to ‘come out of the story shadowland and say; “Here I am – tell about me”’.⁵ Burnett recognises that ‘[b]etween the lines of every story there is another story’⁶, which is an idea that became analogous to the nature of the book I was setting out to write.

Miti’s story evolved, then, from between the lines of these English-language stories. From some of the texts I borrowed characters (Sara Crewe, Ebenezer Scrooge, the White Rabbit), so that Miti imposes these characters upon some of the people he travels with along his journey (Snezhana, his father, Boris). From others, I inherited certain themes or styles of writing (nonsense from Lewis Carroll, which filtered into my novel in the scenes with Ivanka and Boris in Shipka, and the conversation between Miti and Tiny Tim in the same chapter; and a tone of adventure and excitement from Robert Louis Stevenson, which echoed in the scenes in Varna where they leave the train and where Miti is rushing to the pier to find his mother). The very words ‘borrowed’ and ‘inherited’ become loaded terms when viewed in the light of theories of intertextuality I was inspired by in writing the first draft of *Binoculars* as before I began writing the novel, I undertook research into the central tenets and practitioners of the theory.

Resembling Miti’s transnational status is the Bulgarian émigré Julia Kristeva, who coined the term ‘intertextuality’ in the 1960s amongst the French intellectual scene of *Tel Quel*, an avant-garde literary magazine published between 1960 and 1982. Kristeva was responsible for bringing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to the attention of French literary circles. Kristeva recognises that Bakhtin saw ‘the text as an absorption of and a reply to another text’⁷ and that ‘literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to another structure’.⁸ In merging Ferdinand de Saussure’s theories of semiotics with Bakhtin’s study of the multiple meanings to be found in texts, and expanding on Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic where ‘the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way’⁹, Kristeva brings in the term intertextuality to explain that ‘poetic language is read as at least double’¹⁰; the very nature of language is that it is multi-dimensional, utterances that always point to other utterances.

⁵ Burnett, p.ii

⁶ Burnett, p.ii

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, c1981), p.69

⁸ Ibid, p.64

⁹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’ in *Dialogic Imaginations* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.279

¹⁰ Kristeva, p.69

Since the term's coinage, intertextuality has been debated and altered by, and through, various literary-critical gazes (as well as cultural, psychological and philosophical gazes, amongst others)¹¹, but, broadly speaking, it is concerned with the way in which a text does not remain a separate entity but enters into dialogue with other texts, thus becoming connected to a wider discourse or network of texts. The dialogue that I created between Miti's story and the books he is reading on his journey is a fictional reflection on this relationship. The term 'intertextuality', at its most basic level, recognises that the word (that is to say, an utterance or a text) enters into a web of other words in various ways: for example when one author refers to another in their works through allusion, reference or quotation, or in the way that parody and pastiche presuppose and make comment upon their prior works.

Kristeva writes that the 'dimensions or coordinates of dialogue are writing subject, addressee, and exterior texts. The word's status is thus defined *horizontally* (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as *vertically* (the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus'.¹² Graham Allen explains this further by noting how '[t]he communication between author and reader is always partnered by a communication or intertextual relation between poetic words and their prior existence in past poetic texts'.¹³ Within my novel I embedded a web of references to 'anterior texts' that link and communicate with each other through the character of Miti, who is their reader. These anterior texts are all English, all except Vazov, whom Miti's parents have also read, and whom Miti is fighting. Their position as English-language, non-Bulgarian anterior texts will be discussed in further chapters.

A second web is created by Miti, through his writing of the *SOTW* as an adult. What was important for my project, from the outset, is Kristeva's introduction of an addressee - or reader - as an integral part in the intertextual process, something that was adopted and expanded by Roland Barthes. Mary Orr recognises Barthes, a contemporary and colleague of Kristeva's, as an 'impresario' who 'may rechoreograph the lines of Kristevan script'¹⁴ where, for Kristeva, 'persons contribute to the process, but as unimportant mediators of the text's alterior trans-formations and translations into writing'¹⁵ and where, for Barthes, 'the reader is not the absent mediator-translator as in Kristeva, but body of mediation or medium for the text's effect or, more important for Barthes, affect to come into play'.¹⁶

¹¹ Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003)
Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000)

¹² Kristeva, p.69

¹³ Allen, p.39

¹⁴ Orr, pp.33-4

¹⁵ Ibid, p.30

¹⁶ Ibid, p.34

The position of the reader, as Orr's emotional 'reagent'¹⁷ of the text, became influential in my writing of a novel that is polyphonic in the Bakhtinian sense in its design. The site of the intertext is not within the word on the page but, rather, within the mind of the reader - a 'spider' in the intertextual web that realises and facilitates textual connections, a suggestion influenced by John Frow who writes that '[t]he intertext is not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading'.¹⁸ Reader-response theorists adapted Barthes' notions to further highlight the act of reading and stress that it is this reader who brings meaning to a text. Wolfgang Iser, one of the main proponents of a reader-centred approach to literature, suggests that 'the reader is not simply called upon to "internalize" the positions given in the text, but he is induced to make them act upon and so transform each other'.¹⁹ This is one of the roles I gave Miti in my novel. The very basis of intertextuality, the act of intertextualising, means situating texts with relation to one another. For Miti, the key to such textual relationships is his absent mother Grace, and her English-language books.

Also moving away from the text as possessing any kind of inherent and 'true' meaning, Jonathan Culler suggests that '[t]he work has structure and meaning because it is read in a particular way, because these potential properties, latent in the object itself, are actualized by the theory of discourse applied in the act of reading'.²⁰ In the first draft of *Binoculars*, I engage with these theories by suggesting that the English-language texts have no intrinsic meaning in and of themselves, rather, their meaning (or at least one possible meaning) is created through the context(s) of Miti's reading them as he travels across Bulgaria where, by degrees, they illuminate and inform his perceptions and outlook, highlighting the discursive nature of texts and problematising the notion of a singular 'truth' to be found in them.

One episode within the novel that has remained largely untouched since the first draft is the moment where Miti is reading Jack London's 1903 novel *The Call of the Wild* as he walks through the magnificent (as I remember them) Vitosha Mountains on the outskirts of Sofia.²¹ Here, Miti, as reader and reagent, is encountering a text and entering it into a communication with his surroundings so that what we have are literal landscapes and literary transformations. Recounting the story of Buck, a much-loved Saint Bernard shepherd dog who is kidnapped and thrown into the savageries and dangers of the Alaskan goldrush, *Wild* is a novel about home, the power of nature, and survival.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.35

¹⁸ John Frow, 'Intertextuality and Ontology' in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* ed. by Judith Still, and Michael Warton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p.46

¹⁹ Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), p.40

²⁰ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1980), p.113

²¹ Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1992)

Along Buck's treacherous journey, he makes friends and enemies; people come and go as swiftly as the changing seasons that are the primary force of the novel – the descriptions of the weather and the changing landscapes are never far from the forefront of the narrative. Nature and the landscapes force themselves upon Buck; they provide and destroy, they are friend and foe – perhaps the most important character in the story, in a similar way that, increasingly throughout the drafting process, the Bulgarian landscape becomes important for Miti. Bulgaria acts as a character throughout *Binoculars*, at first shaped by how I have constructed Miti's experience of it and latterly *re-shaped*, and de-familiarised, through the lens of the locations within the books he is reading, in this case, Alaska.

Inspired by London's wonderful descriptions of the Alaskan wilderness, I was initially intrigued to explore through writing how the character of Miti, with the extraordinary 'readerly' imagination I wanted him to possess, might react to absorbing the story whilst he is in a landscape so different from the one in the text. How can one's own environment be affected by textual landscapes? For Miti, the question is an important and unsettling one. At first, Miti's imagination is resistant to the wintry textual landscape of *Wild*, so different from his surroundings, but it is not long before it has fully imposed itself upon his reality, destabilising Miti's own landscape and narrative so that he imagines himself as Buck from Alaska. What I wanted to achieve in this draft is a dramatic reinvention of landscape on both literal and textual levels: half Bulgaria, half Alaska, this is the confused world of Miti's imagination, a direct textual collision and communication between Bulgaria and an English-language text, instigated through the act of Miti's reading. It both motivates him to continue, and deepens his illusion: it is thus both enriching and misguided.

I now realise that the 'act of reading' is not only a central theme of *Binoculars* but that it was also an important process in the construction of the novel itself. Not only had I read critical theories on intertextuality that were important in the writing of the first draft, I also turned to other literary works prior to beginning, having been inspired by authors who recognise and foreshadow the dialogic nature of texts within their own work. Daniel Stern's *Twice Upon A Time* is a fascinating collection of short stories, a 'new fictional experiment'²², that directly and explicitly engages with other texts as diverse as the short stories of Franz Kafka and Nathaniel Hawthorne, the poetry of Wallace Stevens, and *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Stern's goal was to situate 'a text by a previous writer at the heart of a piece of short fiction' in the belief that his 'story would have a mirror-image behind it and the entire world of the imagination before it'.²³ His desire is that stories 'may become the soil from which fresh stories of the future may grow, enriched by the ideas, passions, and poetics of the past'.²⁴ This was influential in the way that I centred the English-language texts Miti

²² Daniel Stern, *Twice Upon a Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 1992), p.11

²³ *Ibid*, p.9

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.14

reads within the narrative of *Binoculars* in the early draft. To borrow Stern's terminology, these texts became 'the soil' out of which the stories of Miti's narrative grew, just as, later in life, the people he met on his journey across Bulgaria became the soil out of which his own *SOTW* grew. Similarly, I was inspired by aspects of other novels, such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* which weaves together the story of a translator and an original novel by the fictional author of the main narrative; Patricia Duncker's *Hallucinating Foucault* which explores how an obsessive reader creates an image of the writer through their writing; and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* which balances a poem, foreword, and critical commentary to create what Mary McCarthy calls a 'novel on several layers...and these 'levels' are not the customary 'levels of meaning' of modernist criticism but planes in a fictive space'.²⁵ Also influential was Dubravka Ugrešić's *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* which is a novel built of disparate features (two separate stories followed by a third section that acts as critical commentary on the first two stories). The playful nature with which Ugrešić weaves stories and the mythology of the famous Baba Yaga fairy tale became important because it posited a reader capable of traversing different forms and narrative voices in order to apply possible meanings to the novel as a whole.

Through these literary works and other initial research, I was, as a writer, becoming increasingly aware of the reading subject(s). I found particularly interesting what Susan R. Suleiman refers to as 'the mental processes that occur as a reader advances through a text and derives from it – or imposes on it – a pattern'.²⁶ Furthermore, Suleiman quotes Walter Slatoff who 'conceives of reading as a process that unfolds in time and in the space of a text, and of the literary work as something that takes shape "only in minds"'.²⁷ After researching neuroscience and the way the brain works, it became clear that the mind, throughout a human's life, is implicitly involved in imposing and deriving patterns.²⁸ I began to understand that the reader is no longer solely a reader – they become, in the act of reading and in the creation of intertextual networks, authors, a dynamic I explored in *Binoculars* through having Miti as reading subject who becomes author.

The first two drafts of the novel contained intentionally mysterious conversations between two voices that commented upon Miti's journey across Bulgaria which, by the end, were revealed to be conversations between Miti's older and younger selves: 'Dimitar' and 'Miti' respectively. In her essay on the ways in which literature can be said to represent memory, Birgit Neumann writes that

²⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p.v

²⁶ Susan R. Suleiman, 'Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism', in *The Reader In The Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.24

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.25

²⁸ Susan Greenfield, *The Human Brain: A Guided Tour* (London: Phoenix, 1998)

- *The Human Mind Explained: The Control Centre of the Living Machine* (London: Cassel, 1996)

- *id: The Quest for Meaning in the 21st Century* (London: Sceptre, 2009)

- *Journeys to the Centre of the Mind: Towards a Science of Consciousness* (New York: W. H. Freeman, c1995)

‘the interplay between individual memory and identity is staged through the tension...between the experiencing or remembered I and narrating or remembering I.’²⁹ Dimitar corresponds to Neumann’s narrating or remembering I and Miti - the boy within the story - to the experiencing or remembered I. In the first and second drafts, the cryptic conversation between Miti and Dimitar would appear at select moments throughout the novel, most notably at the beginning and the end, where Miti was listening to Dimitar tell his own life story with Miti interjecting and shaping the direction and style of Dimitar’s narrative. This was my first engagement with Miti as primarily reading subject who becomes author and although their conversations were altered and the dynamic between them evolved throughout the redrafting process, Dimitar’s position as author of new texts and Miti’s position as reader and reagent of other texts remained largely the same.

However, Miti does not occupy the situation of reader as a rootless, de-contextualised reagent. He was always, right from the very first drafts, my authorial interpretation of how readers are, as Gerald Prince argues, bound by their ‘physiological, psychological, and sociological conditioning’ and their ‘predispositions, feelings, and needs’ which will directly affect ‘the kinds of connections he is particularly interested in making, the questions he chooses to ask [of the text(s)], and the answers he brings to them’.³⁰ Bakhtin writes that ‘In the novel of travel, this sense of a native country in itself – that is, as an internal organizing center for seeing and depicting that is located “at home” – radically changes the entire picture of a foreign world’.³¹ In *Binoculars* there are pictures of ‘foreign worlds’, through the English-language novels Miti chooses to read, imposing and shaping the way he views his own, native country, Bulgaria. As I began to work on the second draft of *Binoculars*, I became increasingly aware that, in making use of Vazov and having Miti travel all over the country of his birth in the company of his Bulgarian father, Stoyan, I was touching upon the politics of place associated with the notion of a Bulgarian nation – an imagined political community whose role and function in my novel I explore in the following chapter.

²⁹ Birgit Neumann, ‘The Literary Representation of Memory’, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), p. 336

³⁰ Gerald Prince, ‘Notes on the Text as Reader’ in *The Reader In The Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.229

³¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’ in *The Dialogic Imagination*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp.103-4

‘The Old Political Warhorse’:

Reading Through Binoculars and Bulgaria’s National Identities³²

Taking centre stage in the large room adjacent to Vazov’s study is a long oval table around which are placed six chairs with scarlet upholstery. This is Vazov’s meeting room. Bulgarian writers, scientists, politicians, public figures – they all gathered here; one can imagine them sitting around the table in deep discussion about topical national issues, or at odds with each other about a pressing matter concerning Sofian society. The image here is of a man, not alone, but in the company of others – a local elite of men, forging a cultural community.

During the completion of the second draft, concepts of the community and of the nation became increasingly important in my thinking about my novel. Upon my return from the research trip in late 2010, I entered into a series of academic conversations with my supervisor and other colleagues, which helped me to understand something I had not realised before: that I was not writing only about Bulgaria as a tourist destination and physical country but also about Bulgaria as an imagined cultural (i.e. national) community. The stories accompanying Miti on his journey frame his travels and problematise his view of his immediate world, created from my own memories and experiences of the country. *Binoculars*, then, became not just a novel about stories; it is also a novel about how stories are significant in the construction of group identities.

In his influential book, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as ‘an imagined political community’, albeit a limited one. The nation is *imagined* because the individuals who make up that nation ‘will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’.³³ It is imagined as a community because the ‘nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship’. It is a *political* community because it places its members within a field, or fields, of political power meaning that the rhetoric of national knowledge and history, as disseminated through texts, history books, and mass media, is among the cultural tools of nation-building, as will be discussed later, in connection with my novel. Finally, entering the realm of the imagination as the formative power in the nation’s construction might seem to remove it from geographical concerns until Anderson clarifies that the nation is imagined as limited, because each

³² R.J. Crampton, *A Short History of Modern Bulgaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.208

³³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.6

nation has ‘finite, if elastic, boundaries’.³⁴ This chapter will explore the ways in which the idea of Bulgarian nationhood is related to characters brought to the forefront of subsequent drafts of *Binoculars*, especially Miti’s father, Stoyan.

In contemporary Bulgaria there are differing notions as to what ‘Bulgaria’ and being Bulgarian may mean; certainly there are differences of opinions as to what Bulgaria *should* be and how it has been seen in the past. Beginning with the second draft of my novel, as I researched the concept of the nation, these differences entered *Binoculars* through the tensions between the characters and the narratives of Miti and Stoyan. The Bulgarian author Kapka Kassabova writes that, ‘[i]n the Western mind, Bulgaria is a country without a face’³⁵, rarely seen and rarely heard and therefore, in the Western imagination, subject to various forms of othering. As Elitza Ranova notes, this is nothing new: ‘Many scholars have examined the worry over ‘backwardness’ in Southern and Eastern European states, and have demonstrated that Eastern Europe and the Balkans have been discursively constructed by Western European travellers and writers as Europe’s Other’.³⁶

During my return visit in 2010, I noticed with interest that a Western-European traveller need only visit any of Bulgaria’s cities or large towns to come across a historical or ethnographical museum proudly charting the formation of Bulgaria. I learned that the First Bulgarian Empire of the seventh-century saw the beginnings of a unified Bulgarian ethnicity which spread over most of the Balkans during the middle ages. By 1396, the downfall of the Second Bulgarian Empire heralded the five hundred-year takeover by the Ottomans. The period between 1762 and 1878 is known as the Bulgarian National Revival, a period of unification of the Bulgarian people as the Ottoman Empire began to fade. This renewed sense of national awareness led to many uprisings and clashes, most notably in April 1876 where many Bulgarians revolted against the ruling class. Although the uprising was a failure (largely attributed to poor organisation, communication, and treason from within) it led to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 which finally brought about the end of Turkish rule. The National Revival, which also ended after Bulgaria’s liberation, is so called because the country experienced, amongst other things, a reawakening of arts and crafts, literature, and architecture which had all long been oppressed. In its latter stages, the National Revival was orchestrated by intellectuals who were, as Augusta Dimou suggests, ‘the principal links connecting the Balkan lands with the

³⁴ Ibid, p.7

³⁵ Kapka Kassabova, *Street Without A Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* (London: Portobello, 2008), p.4

³⁶ Elitza Ranova, ‘Mirroring Gazes: Europe, Nationalism and Change in the Field of Bulgarian Art and Culture’ in *Bulgaria and Europe: Shifting Identities* ed. by Stefanos Katsikas (London: Anthem Press, 2010), p.163

broader currents of European thought'.³⁷ Emancipated after five hundred years, Bulgaria's intellectuals were looking outwards towards Western models of nation states.

Anderson cites the rise of the novel and the newspaper as the two forms that 'provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation'.³⁸ It feeds into the idea that, though most people will never see fellow members of their own nation, through the written word, a wider comradeship of readers could be imagined: 'print-capitalism... made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways'.³⁹ A parallel arises between the ways in which books relate to one another on various intertextual planes and how these texts influence the ways in which people themselves relate to each other; as books move into an intertextual web or network of connections, so do individuals move into a societal network or national community. This is a notion which the renaissance in literature and a rise of a newspaper culture at the time of the National Revival in Bulgaria supports and further illustrates, and something I wanted to bring into the second draft of the novel to explore, through writing Miti's relation to the canon.

In the area of literature, intellectuals such as Vazov formed a new elite which gradually established a Bulgarian literary canon. If, as we have seen, a nation can imagine itself through writing and literature, the concept of the canon has an important relationship to issues of cultural memory and national identity. In *Binoculars*, Miti engages, through acts of reading and handling books and texts, with two different canons - Bulgarian and non-Bulgarian. The canon may be understood as what Aleida Assman calls the 'active dimension of cultural memory', in that a society will have its 'normative and formative texts, places, persons, artefacts, and myths which are meant to be actively circulated and communicated in ever-new presentations and performances,' and the selection of which is an intense process 'which secure for certain artefacts a lasting place in the cultural working memory of a society. This process is called canonization'.⁴⁰ The 'artefacts' with which we are concerned here are texts, a canon of literature that represents, to a certain extent, the nation's imagination of itself. Personal identity is, according to Dietrich Harth, framed 'through the orientating symbols of identity of their social world, symbols which are embodied in the objectified forms of a commonly shared cultural tradition'.⁴¹ By extension, national identity is framed through the individuals moving about

³⁷ Augusta Dimou *Entangled Paths Towards Modernity: Contextualizing Socialism and Nationalism in the Balkans* (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2009), p.17

³⁸ Anderson, p.25

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.36

⁴⁰ Aleida Assman, 'Canon and Archive' in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), p.100

⁴¹ Dietrich Harth, 'The Invention of Cultural Memory' in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), p.86

this social world and shared cultural tradition - a tradition which the canon embodies. I realised that, in fighting Vazov and endorsing English-language texts, Miti was performing actions with deep cultural and national implications.

In Bulgaria, the intelligentsia ‘became the driving motor of the Bulgarian liberation struggle in the 1860s and 1870s’.⁴² Dimou stresses that ‘[i]n Bulgaria it had been the men of letters who took up arms’.⁴³ One of these celebrated men of letters, and patriarch of Bulgaria’s literary canon, was Ivan Vazov, much of whose writing was concerned with the Revival, and whose name and legacy began to feature in my novel with the second wave of revisions. Joining Vazov as part of the country’s literary elite are the poets Hristo Botev (1848 - 1876) and Pencho Slaveykov (1866 - 1912), along with the writers Elin Pelin (1877 - 1849) and Aleko Konstantinov (1863 - 1897). Maria Todorova notes that Vazov’s poetry heralded ‘Bulgaria’s urge for national liberty’⁴⁴, whilst Roumen Daskalov refers to Vazov as ‘the emblematic “people’s writer”’.⁴⁵

This is the figure who becomes the hero’s nemesis in my story. The first draft of *Binoculars* had had Miti doing battle with Mikhail Bakhtin in a somewhat self-indulgent nod to my own struggles with tackling the theorist’s body of work prior to writing. As soon as I set foot inside the Ivan Vazov Museum in 2010, I sensed there was a much more culturally interesting and meaningful struggle to portray. During the revisions for the second draft, Vazov replaces Bakhtin so that Miti struggles with reading *Under The Yoke*. At the beginning of my novel we see Miti in a showdown with Vazov, like something out of a spaghetti western and later on, Vazov’s novel appears during a conversation between Miti and his literature teacher, Mr Malchek, where Miti stated that Vazov’s nostalgia and patriotism had been lost on him and that he struggled to finish the book because it did not reflect the view of Bulgaria to which he could relate. Although, by the final draft, this would change, I wanted to begin to use Miti’s reading of Vazov as a way of problematising notions of literature’s role in the creation of national identities, of which I was slowly becoming aware.

Vazov’s *Yoke* (which I have read in translation by Marguirite Alexieva in an edited edition bought in Bulgaria) follows the story of Boycho Ognyanov who escapes from prison and returns to his hometown of Byala Cherkva. The people of the village are secretly preparing for an uprising and the story explains the characters’ motives in taking part or standing against the rebellion. Its rhetoric conveys a highly romanticised view of the Bulgarian people and their struggle against Ottoman rule.

⁴² Augusta Dimou, *Entangled Paths Towards Modernity: Contextualizing Socialism and Nationalism in the Balkans* (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2009), p. 44

⁴³ Ibid. p.44

⁴⁴ Todorova, Maria, *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (London: Hurst, 2004), p. 54

⁴⁵ Roumen Daskalov, *The Making of a Nation in the Balkans: Historiography of the Bulgarian Revival* (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2004), p. 198

The Turkish characters are almost always unsympathetic and the reader is left in no doubt as to where Vazov's sympathies lie. The novel ends with a rendering of the failed April uprising, leaving the reader with a sense of the unjustness of Turkish oppression, juxtaposed with the knowledge that in the end everything is to be made better, with the Russo-Turkish war and the withdrawal of the Turks from Bulgaria just around the corner. This act of exempting Bulgaria from the East is also an act of representing Bulgaria as *modern*; it is the historical point of liberation, where the independent nation state is created and the image of heroic Bulgarian men standing up to oppression is allowed to be transposed onto the authors and poets who created them.

Daskalov asserts that Vazov 'selected a glorious, heroic image of the past and projected it onto the collective consciousness in such a powerful way that it came to be accepted as the "sacred truth" by future generations'.⁴⁶ *Yoke* is steeped with local and historical detail; the town of Byala Cherkva (now Sopot) is, according to Vazov himself, a literal source of much fictional detail: 'Most of the characters are real personalities from Sopot, with other or altered names'.⁴⁷ In writing the novel, Vazov was concerned to counter what he saw as 'the ignorance of Bulgarians not only of their history but also of their geography'.⁴⁸ A hub of activity, Byala Cherkva is often described in relation to its inhabitants: the opening image of a convivial family meal outdoors in a garden; how visitors flock to the convent where the pious women shared 'town tattle and morello jam'; how Ganko's café was 'the meeting place of old and young alike, where public matters were discussed and the Eastern Question too, as well as all the domestic and foreign policy of Europe'.⁴⁹

All these images point towards a vivid imagined community connected not only by the town's limits but by an idea of a binding Bulgarian nationhood, evidence of how literature contemporary to the country's emancipation was reinforcing notions of specifically Bulgarian national identities. Vazov was speaking out against 'a nation which is proverbially apathetic and ignoring itself'⁵⁰ but he did not give the country a chance to ignore itself any longer, holding a mirror up to real places and real people, albeit with altered names, and forcing them to view themselves and stand up for their nation. Becoming part of the new Bulgarian literary elite was no accident; his was a conscious decision to stir up nationalist sentiment through his writing. In fighting Vazov, Miti (who is arguably also ignorant of his own country's history and geography) is resisting a conventional nationalist cultural and political position, without being conscious of it.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.5

⁴⁷ Ivan Vazov, *Under The Yoke* (Sofia: Borina Publishing House, 2004), p.9

⁴⁸ Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, p. 211

⁴⁹ Vazov, p.87

⁵⁰ Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, p. 211

For years, Vazov's position in Bulgaria's canonical literary culture remained unchallenged, while the Revival period was adopted and adapted by a wide-ranging variety of social groups. For some years after the nationalist Revival, Bulgaria was a major player in the Balkan wars as it fought over territory. By the time of the Second World War, fascism had entered Bulgaria and the country sided with Germany. The fascist government used the literature of the Revival to stimulate far-right nationalist sentiments by highlighting the prevalent patriotic ideology of the canonical novels and poems. In the post-war period, Bulgaria became a communist country and the far-left organised public readings of Vazov's poetry, appropriating its 'revolutionary-democratic ideas and deeds'.⁵¹ Twentieth-century Bulgaria has seen fascism, communism and now capitalism stake its claims on national identity, where the Revival, whilst always seen as a pivotal moment in Bulgarian history, has been used and presented by conflicting agendas. This is the cultural landscape that Miti traverses, armed by a longing to find his mother and a small but growing archive of English-language childhood texts he associates with her.

As the political landscape of modern Bulgaria changed, so, too, were historical narratives revised in line with contemporary political ideologies. In the mid-1980s, R.J. Crampton noted that, in Bulgaria, '[s]ince 1974 the school curriculum has included the subject 'knowledge of the Fatherland'⁵² and that certain historical events have been rewritten to promote the shifting centres of nationalist discourse. One such case was the recording of the Balkan wars which, although 'previously regarded by Bulgaria's communist historians as an example of bourgeois expansion, are now seen as a just pursuit of national aims in which the army played an honourable role'.⁵³ The textbooks hold a record of history exactly how the historians choose for it to be told and this is the same for other forms of media. Ekaterina Balabanova writes that, during communist times, 'the media were creating an illusionary or assumed, and therefore ideal, reality'.⁵⁴ Following the Bulgarian Communist Party's decision to abandon Marxist-Leninist policies, The Bulgarian Socialist Party was founded in 1990, forming a government in 1995. Films and documentaries that promoted the socialist agenda at this time were shown across Bulgaria conveying images to the masses of 'party forums, national holidays and anniversaries, construction sites, and so on' and newspapers were central in this promotion of the agenda because the 'function of journalists was to explain, to educate and to help by their reporting to win support for the construction of the new socialist world'.⁵⁵ Anna Krasteva notes that during this period every sphere of Bulgarian life 'used its specific resources to beam the message about the

⁵¹ Daskalov, p.245

⁵² Crampton, p.208

⁵³ Ibid, p.209

⁵⁴ Ekaterina Balabanova, *Media Wars and Politics: Comparing the Incomparable in Western and Eastern Europe* (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), p.57

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.57

achievements of Bulgarian culture and the role of small peoples in world civilization'.⁵⁶ By the 1990s, Anna Mantarova writes that 'Bulgarian writers are almost entirely ignored',⁵⁷ as the climate at the time had a period of looking outwards to the West after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

These different layers of historical time entered into *Binoculars* through rewrites of the original five *SOTW* (including Theo's communist nostalgia), and the addition of four new stories (including Madame Zlatka and Sidika's stories). During the 1980s, a film version of Vazov's *Yoke* was being broadcast to every Bulgarian home as a contemporary form of anti-Turkish propaganda, something addressed in my novel through the character of Sidika. In researching Bulgarian histories I was struck by the horror of the 'Process of Rebirth' or 'Revival Process' that took place in the 1980s (not to be confused with the Bulgarian National Revival period), a form of politically-sanctioned ethnic cleansing that sought to either 'Bulgarianise' ethnic Turks or encourage them to leave the country.⁵⁸ Inspired by my research, the second wave of revisions centralised this historical moment in Sidika's story and foregrounded its brutality.

Dimitar's *SOTW*, in this second draft, were interspersed alongside Miti's narrative, as opposed to being grouped together towards the end. Their positioning and tone seeks to endow my novel with historical depth and lyrical poignancy which was in turn highlighted by the role of Stoyan (Miti's father) as writer of his own, partially, historical narrative, and historian and consumer of historical textbooks.

Assman writes: 'Nation-states produce narrative versions of their past which are...taught via history textbooks, which have been appropriately termed "weapons of mass instruction"',⁵⁹ in that such textbooks contain pre-determined nationalist rhetoric, feeding into an agenda that the institutions want to promote. In earlier drafts of *Binoculars*, the voice of Stoyan was curiously absent, briefly heard in short first-person passages that sporadically punctuated Miti's narrative. With a new understanding of the revisionism at work in the recording of Bulgaria's history, I expanded Stoyan's role in the second and third waves of revision as a conduit for exploring the historical aspect of Bulgarian cultural heritage.

As Todorova suggests, textbooks 'provide the documentary evidence not only for the content of national ideas inculcated in the population but are the best illustration of the mechanism employed by

⁵⁶ Anna Krasteva, 'National Identity' in *Recent Social Trends in Bulgaria: 1960 - 1995* ed. by Nikolai Genov and Anna Krasteva (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), p.489

⁵⁷ Anna Mantarova, 'Cultural Activities and Practices' in *Recent Social Trends in Bulgaria: 1960 - 1995* ed. by Nikolai Genov and Anna Krasteva (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), p.419

⁵⁸ Dimana Trankova, 'The Summer of Their Discontent' in *Vagabond* <<http://www.vagabond.bg>> [accessed May 2013]

⁵⁹ Assman, p.101

the effort to produce a relatively homogeneous population sharing in a common body of knowledge and values - the nation'.⁶⁰ It becomes clear then that literature has its canon, history has its textbooks and the imagined nation is influenced by both. Whilst completing a second draft of the novel, I consciously turned Stoyan from a geography teacher to a history teacher who writes his own version of Bulgaria's past in extracts from his book, *A Sense of History: A Blind Man's View of Bulgaria*, which acts as a cross between memoir, travelogue, and historical guidebook, and was written some time after the events of Miti's childhood journey. Blinded after a fire that he caused, Stoyan uses his remaining senses to record an account of some of the people and places he encounters on his many travels, showcasing a life preoccupied with Bulgarian history, and the recording of it, whilst also providing a crucial insight into his own life story, his beliefs, and his motivations, all of which were absent in earlier drafts. Despite being a strict father at times, Stoyan is *not* a hard-core nationalist. This is what makes the accommodation between himself and Miti possible in the end.

Whilst it has never been my intention to write an allegorical novel, through positioning Miti's *English* mother Grace as narratively opposed to his *Bulgarian* father Stoyan, I wanted to relate the theme of reading to the theme of cultural identity. Thus, as the re-writing progressed, the character of Stoyan became increasingly associated with Bulgaria and Bulgarian national and nationalist identities, as my awareness of these contexts became more nuanced. Through having Stoyan write his own history book, I created a character who is celebratory of Bulgaria's past and promotes certain nationalist ideas and ideals. After encountering how revisionist historians have rewritten Bulgaria's past through textbooks, the second draft of *Binoculars* began to make moves towards drawing attention to such historical inconsistencies and to the constructed nature of history through its numerous and playful textual dialogues and through Stoyan's memoir which became a fictional comment upon how we view our history, how we remember, and how we create and/or re-write our past by deepening the idea that there is not one grand historical narrative but rather a multitude of voices employed in the remembering and recording of it.

In the early drafts of *Binoculars*, Stoyan made no distinction between the books he burned and, following this, refused to allow any books whatsoever back in the apartment, an idea stemming from a too-broadly conceived act of 'reading' (as opposed to 'not reading') that I had initially wanted to write about. Yet it soon became clear that this opposition was simplistic and divorced from notions of history which had already found their way into my manuscript including via the presence of Vazov. Literary representations of book-burning, in works including Elias Canetti's *Auto-da-Fé* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, became influential in the writing process of Stoyan's motivations for burning the books in light of the historical connotations of such an act as politically motivated,

⁶⁰ Todorova, *Bones of Contention*, p.221

demonstrative, and antagonistic in nature. Matthew Fishburn suggests that it is during ‘the Second World War book burning became one of the taboos of the twentieth century’⁶¹, the period where ‘the indelible connection between fascism and book burning was drawn’.⁶² Whilst recognising this, Fishburn also suggests that literary figurations of book burning can take on different resonances. In a novel which seeks to ‘dramatize the madness of being immured within, and consumed by, text’⁶³, the final act of Canetti’s *Auto-da-Fé* shows the protagonist, Peter Kien, burning his library, and himself, in a metaphorical staging of his having become so consumed by the books - emotionally, mentally, physically - that there can be no other escape. In Bradbury’s novel, the regime that has been militantly burning books is shown to be ultimately powerless when, in the end, the readers of the books actually *become* the books through committing every word to memory. The protagonist, Guy Montag, escapes the regime and encounters a society who, in their act of memorising the texts, ‘are not simply influenced by books, but written, even overwritten, by them’.⁶⁴ In returning to Stoyan in the second draft, whilst recognising the image of book burning as a potent political act in the popular imagination, I wanted to distance myself from overtly political statements, evidenced through allowing Stoyan to explain his motivations in his *History*, where he elucidates that, after the burning, it is an opportunity for them to start again and that he has been reborn in the Lord, however fleeting and illusory that rebirth is, showing that the burning is not a site of destruction but rather a purging: ‘the language of destruction is so thinly separated from the language of renewal, that there is something emotionally rich in the prospect of a great purging bonfire’.⁶⁵

Moreover, despite introducing this sense of renewal, a complete absence of books after the fire did not seem consistent with a character who is a teacher. Beginning with the second draft, I gradually introduced changes in this aspect of Stoyan’s motivations and actions, so that initially, he only bans English-language books from the apartment, because he associates them with the absent Grace. Stoyan’s choice of using the analogy of *The Peach Thief* in his somewhat cryptic explanation to Miti of why he has banned Grace’s books is telling.⁶⁶ When I began to think about concepts of the nation, I realised what textual work this episode could be made to perform: Stoyan has chosen a text by a well-known Bulgarian author, in order to make the point that his wife’s English-language books are in some way responsible for her disappearance because they ‘corrupt’ [*Binoculars*, p.47]. I wanted to show Stoyan-the-patriarch drawing, from a specifically canonical Bulgarian text, the analogy between

⁶¹ Matthew Fishburn, *Burning Books* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.161

⁶² *Ibid*, p.74

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.75

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.163

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.xv

⁶⁶ Emilian Stanev, ‘The Peach Thief’ in *The Peach Thief and Other Stories* (London: Cassel & Company Ltd, 1968)

the peaches that lure the soldier of the story into committing theft and adultery, and his wife's books and her sudden departure.

Eventually however, Stoyan initiates a ban on all books in a statement that is not wholly politically motivated. It is, rather, more emotionally motivated; this second ban comes about due to his frustration with Miti's insistence on breaking the English-language book ban. And yet, aside from the book burning and the refusal to allow books in the home, Stoyan's is not a militaristic, violent nationalism, as the playfulness of his fragmented travelogue seeks to suggest. In the end, as his beloved son takes him on a journey, he develops a sentiment that is no more than a nostalgia for the past, a longing for what has happened and is now gone, for the good old days, and a sense of loss when contemplating the state of Bulgaria today and the passing of his youth, as evidenced through redrafts of Stoyan's *History*. Stoyan would have grown up during a similar period to the author Kapka Kassabova, and my elucidation in the second draft of his early life is partially inspired by my reading of Kassabova's memoirs and the relation of her childhood growing up in communist Bulgaria. Much like Kassabova, Stoyan is anti-communist, his view is a view further into the past, before the communists, to a time when the Bulgarian nationhood was in its infancy, after its liberation from Turkish rule in 1878. During the second wave of revisions I wanted to create a character that has teetered on the verge of strong and paradox-inducing feelings all his life - the hatred of the communist era in which he grew up but also the romantic nostalgia for Bulgaria's liberation. The disappearance of his wife was the moment where Stoyan gave himself over to his feelings, forgetting rationality by blaming Western fiction (non-Bulgarian cultural products, imported into his family by a wife initially enchanted by the country) for his wife's betrayal and desertion. He turns away from Europe and the West, only to look inwards towards Bulgaria and, crucially, backwards towards its past. Nevertheless, he does not prevent Miti from going on his own journey.

Bulgaria's own period of looking outwards after the fall of the Berlin Wall did not last. The academic R.J. Crampton writes that 'in the Balkans it is the old political warhorse of nationalism which seems set to ride again'⁶⁷, an uncannily prophetic vision of Bulgaria's present if we are to believe the current trend towards nationalist ideas that scholars are recording, with the warhorse of nationalism not so much forgotten in the intervening communist, and early post-communist, periods but rather in the background waiting for a chance to bolt from the stable straight into the cultural and political imagination once again. Moving to more current times, over recent years, the Bulgarian nationalist party *Ataka* has gained support and a steady following amongst the Bulgarian people and is a symptom of rising nationalist sentiments. As of 2009, *Ataka* won two seats in the European Parliament and they define Bulgaria as 'a one-nation state and assert the supremacy of the state and

⁶⁷ Crampton, p.208

the ‘Bulgarian nation’ above ethnic and religious diversity’.⁶⁸ This latest nationalist outburst, with which neither Stoyan nor Miti can be identified, caused me to reflect on the notion of cosmopolitanism – a group/individual identity often used to evoke a cultural and political antidote to the nationalist position. In looking for his mother and travelling across his country of birth, Miti nevertheless looks *beyond* the nation, aided in part by the books he is reading.

In the third and final drafts of *Binoculars* and in the final section of this critical commentary, I reflect (in different ways) on how the notion of transcending the nation is embodied in the construction of Miti/Dimitar’s character in my novel.

⁶⁸ <<http://www.ataka.bg>> [accessed May 2013]

**‘Always In Process’:
Cosmopolitanism and *Reading Through Binoculars*⁶⁹**

Immediately to the left of the staircase is Vazov’s bedroom. The walls are a light mint green against which almost everything in the room is pushed: a large wooden bed, an intricate tapestry, a marble statue of Vazov and Bobby the dog. In this calming, uncluttered bedroom, Vazov slept. It is the room where it is easiest to construct an image of Vazov as an individual; here he is not surrounded by texts or novels, or the shadow of the local Bulgarian elite (as in the previous rooms), but rather his own personal belongings. However, what grabs the attention most in this room is the large glass cabinet directly opposite the door which dominates this small space. Inside hang Vazov’s clothes over a headless mannequin: smart black shoes, black suit and heavy overcoat; they look at once imposing and yet, oddly, empty. The father of Bulgaria’s National Revival here appears devoid of substance: both present and absent, as both a bodily outline and a ghost.

The memory of this image of a headless mannequin became, in light of the final wave of my research and manuscript revision, something of a metaphor pointing towards the constructed nature of national identities. Members of nation-states often imagine themselves as belonging to, and identifying with, a primordial, *a priori* community, identifications that are influenced and constructed through many of the cultural tools discussed in the previous chapter: literature and literary canon, shared memory and memory-recording (history textbooks). In a discussion of cosmopolitan diversity, Thomas McCarthy recognises that ‘nations were not found but created...in response to historical contingencies and for political purposes’ and furthermore that the ‘constructed character of national identity makes it notoriously susceptible to being instrumentalized for political purposes, good and bad’⁷⁰, as we have seen with Bulgaria’s revisionist histories. My research prior to writing the final draft, then, seemed to evolve naturally from a look at national identities to the notion of cosmopolitanism, which some use to highlight and resist the limitations and dangers of nationalism. This chapter will examine the ways in which cosmopolitan theories may resonate with contemporary Bulgarian contexts, and thus also to my novel and my thinking in the last stages of its completion.

⁶⁹ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: a Reader* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1994), p.222

⁷⁰ Thomas McCarthy, ‘On Reconciling Cosmopolitan Unity and National Diversity’, in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001) p.200

Based on the Kantian etymology of the word, ‘law of nature (*cosmos*) and ideal society (*polis*)’⁷¹, cosmopolitanism can be linked to the idea of nations and national communities in that it is itself an imagined community, only on a global rather than a national scale: ‘Like nations, worlds too are “imagined.”’⁷². Cosmopolitan theorists recognise and situate the world as ‘an interconnected and interdependent community’⁷³ because it is, as Garrett Wallace Brown and David Held suggest, ‘a philosophy for the age of human interconnectedness’⁷⁴ where we are all connected as ‘citizens of the world’.⁷⁵

The notion of cosmopolitanism has at its core a fundamental awareness of the individual in the ethical sense, in that ‘the primary units of moral concern are individual human beings, not states or other forms of communitarian or political association’.⁷⁶ It is the rights of the individual that should be of highest importance because, unlike a nationalist, a cosmopolitan subject traverses the local and global communities in terms of identification and responsibility. A cosmopolitan has moral obligations to others ‘based solely on our humanity alone, without reference to race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, culture, religion, political affiliation, state citizenship, or other communal particularities’.⁷⁷ Despite these differences of experience and identity, the ‘moral worth of individuals everywhere...’ is equally applied because it is ‘universal in scope’.⁷⁸ As I worked on the final series of revisions of my novel, I began to think of Miti/Dimitar as someone who becomes increasingly aware of difference. In searching for his mother, he is also accepting responsibility for someone who is not Bulgarian and is, in that sense, unlike himself and his father. In its current state, *Binoculars* tackles notions of difference and what this means for cosmopolitanism in two ways discussed below: through the transnational character of Miti/Dimitar and his relationship with his mother and father, and through the use of a polyphonic mode of storytelling, using the form and structure of the novel to mirror the statements regarding ‘difference’ that the text itself is making.

At the end of my novel in its current version, Miti comes to see Grace as someone who has a life (and therefore ‘rights’) separate from his own. The agency given to Grace in the first and second drafts of the novel was intentionally removed in the process of making the final revisions. In the first draft, the opening chapters were equally focalised from both Grace and Miti’s viewpoints in close third-person

⁷¹ Walter D. Mignolo, ‘The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism’, in *Cosmopolitanism*, ed. by Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p.169

⁷² Bruce Robbins, ‘Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism’, in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond The Nation*, ed. by Peng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.2

⁷³ Garrett Brown, *Grounding Cosmopolitanism: From Kant to the Idea of a Cosmopolitan Constitution*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.2

⁷⁴ Garrett Wallace Brown and David Held (ed.), *The Cosmopolitan Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p.13

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p.2

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p.1

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p.1

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.2

narration and in the second draft, Grace's viewpoint was moved to be included as a stand-alone chapter, one of Dimitar's *SOTW*, which revealed her thought processes and motivations for leaving. By the final draft, I wanted her to be absent from *Binoculars* in order to make Miti's search for her more poignant because having her voice appear in the narrative at the beginning and end lessened, I felt, the impact of her disappearance. Not hearing Grace in any real sense in the novel makes her irrevocably different from Miti. It prevents readers from identifying with Grace or understanding her in any way. From the moment he embarks on his quest, Miti is looking for this mother because he misses her and he wants her to come back, but also because he feels a responsibility for her well-being. Vazov's fire-damaged *Yoke* (a remnant of a past life in which Miti's parents were a couple) becomes a tangible object that helps him in the act of remembering Grace. It reappears at the end of the novel, on the shores of the Black Sea at Varna and the endpoint of his journey where we learn that he has been carrying it all this time as a gift for his mother who, he remembers, was always happiest with a good book. It is this responsibility for her happiness that he has to let go of by the latest, redrafted ending where he does not return Vazov's *Yoke* to her. He sees that she is happy without him and, consequently, he lets her live her own life, allowing the pages of *Yoke* to disintegrate on the air. He learns to understand, and love, the mother who left him, who has, in effect, stopped being his mother, for reasons that are beyond reach. This is an ethical act, which links to cosmopolitan theories of moral responsibility for those who are different.

Moving from Grace to Stoyan, in the previous section of this critical commentary, I have aligned Stoyan with the notion of Bulgarian nationalism which, through its historical revisionism, sought to subdue notions and narratives of those who were different. In the contemporary moment, those older forms of nationalist thinking are currently being challenged. In direct response to the recent trend towards nationalist ideals within Bulgaria introduced in the previous chapter, Elitza Ranova speaks of an elite-to-be, a group of young creatives (writers, poets, actors, journalists, artists) who are the next generation of Bulgarian cultural talent.⁷⁹ They are producing work directly and intentionally against the already established creative elite, believing that, in the contemporary moment, nationalism is no longer progressive or emancipatory, rather, that the nationalist fervour foreshadowed by the increase in support for parties such as *Ataka* is based on exaggerations of historical events, a misconstrued celebration of archaeological and ethnographical achievements, and putting writers such as Vazov on a pedestal without sufficient critical distance. They are fighting against the constructs of identity that pro-nationalist agencies (the government, media) are advocating and utilising. To a large extent, then, the question of Bulgarian national identity is one of viewpoint. The established elite are, as they have always done, imagining the nation by looking towards Bulgaria: its history, its ethnographical and cultural heritage, its liberation and formation of an independent nation state, whereas the elite-in-the-

⁷⁹ Elitza Ranova, 'Mirroring Gazes: Europe, Nationalism and Change in the Field of Bulgarian Art and Culture' in *Bulgaria and Europe: Shifting Identities* ed. by Stefanos Katsikas (London: Anthem Press, 2010)

making are, somewhat ironically, looking outwards, towards Europe and the West - ironic because in their pursuit of a change in how their national identities are imagined they are looking back to the negative rhetoric the West has always spouted about the Balkans, and about Bulgaria specifically, since the popular travel writing in the periods up until the National Revival.

From as early as the seventeenth-century, travel journalists were exoticising the space of today's Bulgaria and allying it with its nearest neighbours, Turkey. The exoticisations were often political in that ““what they described was what was generally accepted as true””⁸⁰ and for ‘a tradition boasting about its empiricism, the English of the period were surprisingly prone to facile generalizations’.⁸¹ The rhetoric others the Turks as exotic: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu contrasts the ‘[sic] shineingly bright’ skin of the Turkish women in the Sofian baths with the ‘not ugly but...tawny complexion’⁸² of the Bulgarian peasant women outside the baths, and further others the native Bulgarians as “brutish, obstinate, idle, superstitious, dirty, *sans foi ni loi*”⁸³, as described by Captain Stanislas St. Clair and Charles Brophy invoked as a counter-argument that denied any Turkish misrule. This was in line with contemporary Western political attitudes towards the Turks which looked favourably on the Ottoman rule, although it is safe to say that these attitudes faltered and changed throughout the nineteenth-century once details of Bulgarian persecution under the Turks were made increasingly public.

The current creative elite-to-be have found an outlet through the magazine *Edno*, whose website, accessed in May 2013, declares its mission to be ‘a lab for brave new ideas. A playground for artists of various genres, nationalities and generations. A corner where the spirited, open-minded and hip urban dwellers meet to have fun’.⁸⁴ This appeal to a multiplicity of identities of all kinds (including the textual) may be read as cosmopolitan in direction. In her fascinating essay on the changing identities of Bulgarian art and culture, Ranova explains that she was able to sit in on the production meetings for a special issue of *Edno* that attempted to deal with the nationalist question. In this issue (entitled ‘Narcissisms’), the editorial team called for outsiders' perspectives on Bulgaria, hoping for an ‘objective, no-holds-barred account’ of how the country is viewed, with Maria, an editor saying: ‘We are headed for Europe, and we want to see what we look like in other people’s mirrors. We [Bulgarians] think we are great, but they [Europeans] think we are exotic.’ But *Edno* go further in saying that ‘[t]here is a potential conflict in this, and we want to analyze it’.⁸⁵ In looking towards Europe, whilst at the same time looking inwards towards Bulgaria, they are highlighting the cosmopolitan notion of the constructed nature of nations by drawing attention to viewpoints other

⁸⁰ Maria Todorova, *Imagining The Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.95

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.121

⁸² *Ibid*, p.92

⁸³ *Ibid*, p.102

⁸⁴ <www.edno.bg> [accessed May 2013]

⁸⁵ Ranova, p.165

than the national, and by accepting the risk of seeing established cultural positions as unfamiliar and strange.

While I was working on the final drafts of my novel, it occurred to me that Miti's use of English-language texts and the way they infiltrate his perceptions of Bulgaria around him are doing something comparable to what the editors of *Edno* were seeking to do in their special nationalism issue: using an outsider's perspective in order to shed light or comment upon a modern Bulgarian nation-state - as opposed to Vazov who has always been used to represent a romanticised, heroic, comment upon the early Bulgarian state. And yet ultimately, I feel that Miti is too young to do this consciously. The texts are not wielded as mirrors held up in order to look at Bulgaria in a different way. Rather, I wanted them to work in my novel as tools in Miti's journey to discover the 'truth' - the truth behind his mother's disappearance and the realisation that fiction, through which he largely sees the world, is not fact; his literalist, childish way of reading has been compromised through this realisation.

As the novel nears completion, it is also becoming increasingly clear that the relationship between Miti and Dimitar has evolved from earlier drafts. As mentioned above, I had originally crafted a slightly mysterious, ethereal communication between the two, where they would be engaged in sporadic, cryptic conversations with each other. By the final draft, in the chapters of *Binoculars* that focus on Dimitar the writer (the four Parenthesis chapters), there is a boy who may or may not be the memory of Miti - his childhood self. I left this deliberately vague, as something for the reader to make up their own mind about. Dimitar watches the boy leap up the stairway, just as he would have done in his youth and he watches him read under the fig trees in the courtyard at Danov's House. The split self - between past and present, between Miti and Dimitar - is not solely a possible symptom of the transnational self, further discussed below, but also a fictional comment on the constructed and reconstructed nature of identities that I encountered through my research, and a gesture towards acknowledging that the strange self, whose rights a cosmopolitan reader acknowledges, may well be our own future or past self. In complicating the relationship between the present and past he is, by extension, further complicating an East/West binary potentially created by his status as transnational subject, a binary which cosmopolitanism would challenge, and an expression of how intertextual communications between the composite aspects of one's identity can cause tension and pain.

I was reminded of intertextual notions of the 'cultural (or social) text' where 'the text is not an individual, isolated object but, rather, a compilation of cultural textuality'.⁸⁶ In returning to the intertextual origins of *Binoculars* and, in light of my readings of cosmopolitan identity politics, I also turned back to the construction of Miti/Dimitar, and his role as a transnational subject. Born of a

⁸⁶ Allen, pp.35-6

Bulgarian father and an English mother, Miti is fluently bi-lingual and his identity is informed not by a single, isolated national identity, but rather through a traversing and intersecting of several. In writing Miti I did not want a character pinned down as *either* English *or* straightforwardly Bulgarian because my latest wave of reading, writing, and thinking, helped me to realise that Miti/Dimitar, as a character, in fact problematises simple notions of discrete locations capable of being named ‘East’ and ‘West’, through his fluid movement and his being. He is not reducible to the cultural associations linked in the text to either his mother or father. As soon as Grace disappears, Miti allies himself with his mother’s memory through his use of the English language (while reading) that his father cannot understand. Grace’s Englishness becomes, for Miti, a defining feature of his memory of her, something that, by turns, he can wield against his Bulgarian-speaking father, and something that can keep her close to him. In the end, working on the final set of revisions, I wanted to render Miti’s relationship with Bulgaria and his Bulgarian heritage nuanced and problematic. If Vazov represents the old-style nationalist identity, the romantic, heroic identity of the Revivalists, then the suggestion at the end where Vazov’s *Yoke* falls to pieces is that the old nationalism is dying - although it is also important to note that the e-reader which contains Miti’s sole access to the English-language texts he has been reading throughout his journey is also gone - left, along with Tiny Tim’s body, on the train heading away from Varna, never to be recovered. For Miti, the search for ‘truth’ has engendered much renunciation and much pain; I wanted this to be a part of my book in addition to playfulness and humour. Not only does the power and the ‘magic’ of the Bulgarian landscape through which he is travelling encroach upon and destabilise his reading of the English-language texts (as seen on the bus to Shipka where he chooses to look out the window at the passing scenery rather than read), but this journey across his homeland was the inspiration for Dimitar’s short story collection, all of which, save for ‘The Story of the Englishwoman’, are set in Bulgaria. Linked to this is Dimitar’s reading and acceptance of his father’s own nationalist and Bulgaria-centred writing and his choice to read a segment from *History* alongside the launch of his own collection. Furthermore, I wanted to make it clear in the final draft that Dimitar has retained links with Bulgaria; that, as an old man, he still has a home there, even though the commentator suggests his novels have all been set in the world. All these work towards representing my understanding of the experiences of transnational identities in the contemporary global moment.

In his study of narratives that are ‘written from the affective experience of social marginality, from a disjunctive, fragmented, displaced agency, and from the perspective of the edge’⁸⁷, a perspective from which Miti, as transnational subject, is also situated, Roger Bromley suggests that ‘belonging is always problematic, a never-ending dialogue of same with other’.⁸⁸ Dimitar’s writing of the *SOTW*

⁸⁷ Roger Bromley, *Narratives for a New Belonging: Diasporic Cultural Fictions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.1

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.5

can be seen as the stage on which this dialogue is performed, an engagement with difference that is cosmopolitan in its outlook. The cosmopolitan world is, as established above, one of interconnectedness. In thinking of the ‘question of identity and identity formation’, Noah Stobe writes that ‘cosmopolitanism concerns self-definition in relation to - and in relationship with - the world beyond one’s immediate local conditions’.⁸⁹ The words ‘in relation to’ and ‘with’ bring me back to the intertextual research I have been undertaking from the beginning of this project. If texts are dialogic in their very nature, if they are situated in relation to and with other texts, then books, novels, and stories all mirror the notion of a cosmopolitan world of individuals with equal rights; their interconnectedness is a feature of their being. Human plurality mirrors textual plurality, something which the *SOTW* and their multiple faces and voices highlight. The implications of what I wanted to do when I envisaged ‘a story about stories’ have now taken on a wider dimension.

The final redraft of my novel saw further expansion of the *SOTW* to its current count of twenty-two stories. In continuing their position as woven throughout *Binoculars* and centralising their role in the narrative, I am now consciously engaging with concepts of a modern cosmopolitan novel as described and advocated by the critic Berthold Shoene who states that, in light of the notion of a cosmopolitan connected world and in linking this with narrative technique, ‘the novel may already have begun to adapt and renew itself by imagining the world instead of the nation’.⁹⁰ In a comprehensive exegesis of the cosmopolitan novel, particularly in relation to contemporary British literature, he suggests that it can be identified as a novel of compositeness:

Episodic yet cohesive, compositeness forges narrative assemblage out of a seemingly desultory dispersion of plot and characterisation. Cosmopolitan representation resorts to the montage techniques of contemporary cinema, effecting rapid shifts in focus and perspective with the aim of cramming as many story lines and clashing imageries as possible into one and the same *mise en scène*.⁹¹

In writing and extending Dimitar’s short story collection, *Binoculars* embodies then something of this composite nature through exploring the ways in which ‘[c]osmopolitan narration assembles as many as possible of the countless segments of our being-in-common’.⁹² On his journey, Miti meets strangers from all walks of life and all areas of Bulgarian society who then take centre stage in

⁸⁹ Stobe, Noah W., ‘Provincializing the Worldly Citizen: Yugoslav Student and Teacher Travel and Slavic Cosmopolitanism in the Interwar Era’, in *Travel Writing Across the Disciplines: Theory and Pedagogy, Volume 13* (New York, NY, USA: Peter Lang, 2008), p1.

⁹⁰ Berthold Shoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.12

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.14

⁹² *Ibid*, p.27

Dimitar's narratives. Many of the characters I chose to have Dimitar write about occupy points of difference from him in some way - Ivan Angelov's mental illness; the physical difference of Snezhana the orphan; the transvestite Emil; the alcoholic Dyado Koleda. Symptomatic of the awareness of this difference is the polyphonic and composite way in which I constructed these stories so that formally and structurally my novel is staging a multiplicity of different identities. They switch between first, second, and third person narrative voices; some offer structural differences (Desislava's postcards, the short sentences of the Violinist's story, the song in the Ticket-Seller's story, the use of chorus in the Troll-King's story); many also act as a metafictional comment upon the nature of story-telling (the mermaid who can swim through books, the pastiche of fairy tales in the Bookseller's story). Bromley recognises that '[f]orm is a crucial issue' because the texts he studies 'are often working against authorised and authorising paradigms. They are multi-lingual, polyvocal and varifocal, inter-textual and multi-accented; the relationship between dominant and subaltern is destabilised'.⁹³ *Binoculars* encounters difference, then, not only in its subject matter but in terms of its polyphonic outlook that destabilises the notion of an accepted national narrative and, by extension, a singular national identity devoid of difference.

The choice of expanding the number of short stories rather than other aspects of Miti's journey was carefully thought-through. Perhaps far more than novels, short stories have remained a popular outlet for Bulgarian writers, descending from a powerful tradition of oral story-telling in the form of folk and fairy tales. Aspects of fairy tales had always been present in *Binoculars*, from the beginning drafts that showed Miti berating Dimitar for telling his own journey in a manner that was too whimsical and like a fairy tale, to the original opening and closing sentences which formulated subversions of 'Once upon a time' and 'Happily ever after'. As the novel progressed, and as I encountered Bulgarian fairy tales written by Ran Bossilek whose 'fairytale world...survives in every Bulgarian home'⁹⁴, fairy tale elements filtered more into Dimitar's *SOTW*, with magical realism and other fairy tale traits foregrounded in many of the stories, including the characters of the mermaid, the ticket-seller, the centurion, and Bogomil and his cat Otto. In keeping with my understanding that the prominence of the short story within Bulgarian literature as being a direct result of strong oral story-telling traditions, in writing the *SOTW* I turned to Bulgarian short story writers in translation, including Elin Pelin, Emilian Stanev and Pavel Vezhinov, although particularly influential were modern short story writers. Deyan Enev's *Circus Bulgaria* and Miroslav Penkov's *East of the West* introduced me to contemporary (and in the case of Penkov, young) Bulgarian voices viewing and writing their country and both dealt with a preoccupation with notions of East meeting West on the playing field of a modern Bulgaria.

⁹³ Bromley, p.4

⁹⁴ Filipina Filipova, *Fairy Tales*, (Sofia: A&T Publishing, 2009), p.322

Dark themes began to enter to reflect a sense of loss and violence that, I can see now, link back to my initial visits to the country, working with an orphanage. Many of these dark themes had moral undertones. Dimitar writes about forced dispossession and homelessness (Sidika, the Ticket-Seller), war and the Holocaust (Madame Zlatka), murder (Dyado Koleda, Yordana the waitress), death and loss (the Englishwoman). It became important for me to realise in these final stages that it was not just the fact that cosmopolitans envisage the world as interconnected but that this interconnection is one based on the grounds of equal moral and cultural rights and responsibilities of the individual.

In a direct mirror to the ways in which the situatedness of readers (in terms of the multitude of experiential contexts they bring with them to the text, which I encountered in my initial research on intertextuality, discussed in the first chapter of this commentary), the situatedness of an individual cosmopolitan subject (their national, international, and transnational contexts and positionings) is important as a cultural anchoring point. In the final draft, Miti has become an outward sign of what cosmopolitan theorists mean when they say that ‘all individuals are made up of multifarious cultural identities and influences and that human beings already identify with a multiplicity of cultural obligations’.⁹⁵ Returning to Miti/Dimitar as transnational subject, he is not ‘psychologically anchored to only one cultural identity or obligation’ instead he embodies the idea that ‘it is possible...human beings, as well as various cultures, can accommodate a cosmopolitan identity beyond their immediate cultural border without also abandoning the important features of their cultural belonging’.⁹⁶ Furthermore, Brown and Held write that ‘humans occupy two worlds and thus have duties and responsibilities to both; that is, to a local culture given to you by birth and to a human culture that is “truly great and truly common”’.⁹⁷ My own situatedness as English author writing about Bulgaria cannot here be ignored. In writing *Binoculars*, I consulted the works of other authors who write about countries other than their own, including Rana Dasgupta who has written about Bulgaria in his novel, *Solo*, and Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* which takes place in Hungary. A greater awareness of my own positioning as author in relation to writing about other countries, and the problematics of this writing, largely began after the return trip to Bulgaria in October 2010 and the research on the nation that I began to undertake upon my return home. With regards to a doubled cultural belonging, Kwame Anthony Appiah posits the possibility of cosmopolitan patriotism whereby ‘everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people’.⁹⁸ Appiah’s formulation here collapses the opposition between cosmopolitans and nationalists. In the final revisions of the novel I chose to suggest that Dimitar has to take a little something from all

⁹⁵ Garrett Wallace Brown and David Held (ed.), *The Cosmopolitan Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p.13

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.10

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.11

⁹⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah, ‘Cosmopolitan Patriots’ in *Cosmopolitics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.91

aspects of his family heritage. Perhaps that's the job analogous to the one that is still awaiting Bulgaria's new creative elite-in-the-making: to take elements of the past and a forward-looking outlook and fuse them together in works that hold a mirror up to Bulgaria's present. In this respect Miti/Dimitar is written, whether he identifies himself as such or not, as a cosmopolitan patriot.

In their final form, Miti's journey across Bulgaria and Dimitar's engagement with his father's writing suggest a movement beyond nationalism, rather than an outright rejection of it. I wanted to return to the instinct I had for the creation of *Binoculars* as a story about stories and dramatise how the notion of identity that this web of text implies is a fractured, transnational, trans-historical one that occupies two worlds and is in motion, an identity that is, to borrow from Stuart Hall, not 'an already accomplished fact' but rather as something 'never complete, always in process'.⁹⁹ As Monica Judith Sanchez-Flores writes, 'human identity and sense of belonging are not necessarily definite and clear, but an ongoing process of negotiation and self-actualization that considers all the diversified human groups to which people may belong at any one time'.¹⁰⁰ Miti's is an identity that can be viewed as neither distinctly whole (definite and clear), nor as wholly distinct or removable from the other fractured, transnational, trans-historical identities all around him, and which I represented in part through his journey and in the *Stories on the Wind*.

⁹⁹ Hall, p.222

¹⁰⁰ Monica Judith Sanchez-Flores, *Cosmopolitan Liberalism: Expanding the Boundaries of the Individual*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.8

Conclusion: New Journeys

Heading back downstairs I come to the final room before I leave. It is the small dining room at the back of the house. Primarily bright, the walls are painted white and the lace curtains hide little of the outside world through the two large windows. In one corner is a small sink, in the other a tall dresser housing mismatching china plates and cups. In the centre of the room is a square table surrounded by six chairs, one of which has a faded red ribbon tied around its back. The table is laid with plates and cutlery; it is as if someone has set the table ready for supper and will be back in a moment to dish up. I make moves to leave when the custodian, who has been following me around the museum with curiosity, speaks to me in Bulgarian and enthusiastically points to the dining room, specifically at the chair with the ribbon. I turn back to my sheet of English as a guide and learn that, during supper on September 22nd 1921, it was in this seat that Vazov died. I take a moment, thank the custodian, and find the exit to the museum. This is the last day of my research trip; I need to make my way to the airport to catch the flight home. I know, when I arrive back, my novel will be waiting for me.

Southampton, England

April 2013

At the point of his death, Ivan Vazov's position as patriarch of Bulgarian literature was already secured. As early as 1896, the Bulgarian Ministry of Education published recommended reading lists of which Vazov headed with twenty-three works, *Under The Yoke* being the most famous.¹⁰¹ By the third and final draft of *Binoculars*, *Yoke* features as something of a talisman throughout, conjuring up the ghost of Bulgarian literature's nationalist father and foreshadowing a deeper engagement with both national and transnational identities which had a profound inspiration upon my research and writing.

With the writing of *Binoculars*' final draft, the process of reading, researching, thinking, and writing, has come full circle. I can see, as I undertake the final copy-editing, that my research has shifted the novel from a comparatively simple story about a journey into a more complex narrative which hopes to draw attention to the ways in which texts communicate with each other; the performative aspect of Kristeva's 'historical and social text'.¹⁰²

And this shift is reflective of a key concept behind the novel: the concept of change. I have outlined how Bulgaria's history has shifted from the need to remove itself from under the yoke of a declining empire, towards contemporary questions about the country's positioning within Europe. My hero,

¹⁰¹ R.J. Crampton, *Bulgaria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p.447

¹⁰² Kristeva, p37

Miti, also changes through the course of the novel from reader to writer (Dimitar), as a result of going on a journey where he encounters and comes to question his childlike ways of reading fiction. I myself also underwent changes in the process of this project: I moved from being a tourist to being a writer.

Intertextuality, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism are theoretical notions that seek to encapsulate aspects of a text that has become a postmodernist version of a *Bildungsroman*: a novel about growing up, and leaving childhood behind. Inspired by my research, I have attempted to create a novel of intersecting formative journeys, of disparate yet interweaving narratives; a novel that, by degrees, highlights, makes comment upon and problematises the *inter-*, and enters into a dialogue with the *-text*, in ‘intertext’. Like Miti, I too have acquired knowledge: about the craft of writing, the skills of research, and the complexities of trying to know distant places through both.

It is time for me to stop researching and stop writing, thereby marking a return to reading. But when it comes to *Binoculars*, it is no longer me who will be doing that reading. It is time for the story of, and stories within, my novel to be read by others. My job as author is done, it is the job of the reader now - the reagent in the text, the spider in the web I have made - to make of *Binoculars* what they will: to turn the page and, through their reading, take the stories onto whole new journeys of their own.

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