

## Houses Close To The River

By Zdravka Evtimova

Perhaps I behave so foolishly on account of my confused childhood and the endless July evenings when I was alone with my enormous mass.

The trucks loaded with scrap iron would roar at night, reeking of diesel, shaking the windows with the reverberating sound of their engines, and I could not sleep. I had the feeling that a line of two hundred trucks crept along my aorta and would burst into my heart-- I had always imagined it was a defective organ that would put its owner in jeopardy. The trucks were my father's; he was ruining himself to make a bright future for me, exporting pig iron from the metallurgy plant in the town, importing scrap iron - meaning heaps of rusty iron wires stolen every now and then from different places. In general, he was killing himself quite successfully. A few thugs had shot at him a couple of times. He was no lesser a thug than they were, but he had a convincing excuse: he loved his fat daughter very much. But why should he love me? I was a greasy bulldozer for whom the seamstresses had to sew special jeans into which a hippopotamus could comfortably crawl.

Bombs exploded twice in front of our house. On one of the occasions my mother's upper arm was wounded: a scratch. She then spent twenty-five days in the hospital. After that incident she left us and went to live with the doctor who had healed her wound. My mother was a very beautiful woman with green eyes that contained falling oak leaves in autumn and sprouting oak trees in spring. Actually, there was a whole calendar in her eyes, but it wasn't so much her eyes as her endless legs that compelled the doctor to fall head over heels for her. I have inherited her green eyes, but in my case they are almost always invisible under the hills of fat that surround them. I have inherited something from my father as well - he was enormous, with a broad back and a popping belly.

My mother left us before the trucks started rumbling at night. After she ran off with all her belongings and boxes and bottles of makeup, Daddy made up his mind to become the biggest, richest player in town so mother would drown in a lake of misery asking herself why she had cut the throat of the hen that would have laid golden eggs for her.

My father could read a little and was quite familiar with the multiplication table, which was just enough for his business. Perhaps it was the hardness of his skull that made him the proud proprietor of

two hundred completely different trucks with which he sold iron, cucumbers, potatoes, condoms, medicines, and the rest. Mother used to tell the story of how, before she married my father, other guys used to beat him up at least twice a week. Later, she seemed to take a certain twisted pleasure in this memory, seeing nothing in the man she married, that enormous semi-literate oaf, but a swamp of love and sympathy for me, with nothing left over for her. That must have made her furious. I was his only child and had heavy breasts under which the greasy pillow of my belly began; bellow it my gigantic thighs jutted out, jiggling like bowls of soup. Let me not speak of my behind whose volume probably put to shame that of the sand in the Sahara.

For quite a while my swollen body didn't get me into trouble; even when we were poor my father left rolls of one hundred dollar bills in the drawer of the kitchen table. He never counted them, saying the money was mine. Mother, whose name was Kalina (I guess her name hasn't changed yet), used to nod her head enviously remarking that the wad of bills in her drawer was smaller than the one in mine.

She had everything. The best massage expert in town, Maria by name, came to take care of her beautiful figure. The most distinguished beautician was responsible for her face--the most famous artist in Pernik, a bearded phony with a bald head and the manners of a well-trained pug, had already drawn seven pictures of my mother in different poses. Her flesh twinkled on the canvas, and my father would rush towards her, with his eyes first, then with his body, flowing hurriedly to her. She was a shrewd woman, my mother was.

She got a degree in law from the local university even before she left us and started integrating herself into the cultural elite of the town. Perhaps she is integrating herself perfectly in the house of her new husband; Doctor Xanov was one of the richest surgeons in the region, younger than she was and very tall. He worked in Pirogov hospital, had a staggeringly large number of private patients on his list, and, unlike my father, he never swore.

Doctor Xanov made great efforts to diminish the fat under my skin; he was unaware of the fact that my lard thawed whenever I looked at him. My father often fought with other guys when brandy turned his brains into soup. Even when his chauffeurs, time and again, brought him home bashed, thrashed, and very bloody, he looked at me as if I weren't a fat, female colossus but the most beautiful girl in the world. Sometimes, in the evenings, he used to put his enormous hand on my head. His palm was the size of a

small pillow and had an indefinite number of notches, scars, and wounds from his fights, but on my head it felt smoother than honey. My father didn't say anything, just looked at me, peacefully. I suppose he might have felt sorry for me, for he knew women well, and felt that a fat one like me had no chance whatsoever. He simply loved me as a dog loves his puppy even when it is ugly.

In happier days when the guys brought Dad home drunk and squashed after his regular sprees, Doc Xanov would come to our house to patch him up. Of course, he got juicy fees for his services. My mother helped and did her best handing him bandages, little squares of gauze, or disinfectant. It was perhaps at that time that they fell in love, however that was not the subject of my curiosity. It is curious for me that, after my father was shot, Doctor Xanov and my mother stood by my side at his funeral, looking so sad, as if they both suffered from a splitting toothache.

It was at that time that Doctor Xanov let his hand drop on my shoulder; compared to my father's paw it felt like a slimy hen's beak pecking at my hair. Doctor Xanov's eyes were brown, the color of frozen leaves fallen long ago from their autumn branches that had just begun to decompose in the first warm days of spring.

As doctor Xanov examined me, he stuck his forefinger into the lard of my belly showing my mother that the finger sunk in to the knuckle. His forefinger certainly did not sink into my mother's belly because her belly is flat and hard as brass. Her green eyes were of the same quality and that was why I avoided looking into them.

The police didn't find out who shot my father, and that was only natural. They almost never did unless you were some big shot whose widow would be willing to speak to the press about it. Mother was not at all willing to do that. Perhaps Father had thrashed and flogged many of his enemies, for before he died somebody set fire to the cafe he had built, and twice bombs exploded under his Mercedes. She might have been upset, but she didn't show it. Finally they killed him without dramatics; two bullets in the forehead and that was that.

Doctor Xanov thought I went off my hinges, but he didn't use those exact words when he diagnosed me. "A permanent shock" was how he put it. The truth was I was not scared of blood. At least once a week Father was brought home dripping and stained with blood. I suddenly was aware I would never again see his brown eyes that looked at me as if I were a perfectly normal seventeen- year- old girl. I would have

done anything to make him come back to life.

He loved me as the sparrow loves its little sparrows, not with his brains (for is it possible for a human brain to love the equivalent of twenty-five frying pans of bacon?); he loved me with his blood, which had spilled and splashed onto the pavement.

My mother and father used to sleep in a spacious bedroom situated very far from my own but on the same floor of the house. In the middle of the night, I often heard screeching sounds and moans, so it was evident they made love. I would feel my blood howling in my ears. I would take a shower to cool the flaming lard of my body, but instead of getting cooler I had the impression that the water evaporated at the touch of my skin. The bathroom had mirrors on all its walls--mother had wanted it to be that way so that every square inch could reflect the perfection of her pearl-like body.

Sometimes I stayed with her while the masseuse labored diligently over her thighs, feeling transfixed, enchanted by her beauty. She looked at me with green jungle eyes with liana vines that strangled my throat. I could not imagine how she looked in the spacious bedroom with the marble floor and pictures drawn by dubious painters who pawned their splotchy works of art off on my father at incredible prices. How would he know what a good painting looked like?

My grandfather owns seven nanny goats and one cow; my father's mother, big and strong like the motor of a BMW car, herded the cow non-stop, silent, severe and grim. One day she remarked to my father gloomily, "She will be the death of you," meaning, of course, my mother.

I could not imagine mother under the silver canopy of their matrimonial bed; but she might have been very good for she conquered the most prestigious catch, Xanov the surgeon, seven years her junior.

Doctors, artists, and teachers in the provincial high school I attended fawned before my father. The brilliant female teachers in the private college I chose to study at did exactly the same because he paid them well to teach me the latest dances--rock-and-roll and tangos -- me, under whose steps the parquet floor in the dance hall became unglued. My father couldn't spell the word "address" correctly, but he had all those rolls of one hundred dollar bills which were stronger than any doctor, policemen, or teacher, more powerful than the whole group labeled 'the elite'. He had money to burn. So did I.

I had never bought porno DVDs or porno magazines. I once found some Italian ones, which my mother kept at the bottom of her chest of drawers; I looked at them for no more than ten minutes. The next night I ran a temperature, felt giddy, and threw up. And that was not an insignificant event considering my imposing mass. It was that night that I made my decision: what I could not achieve by

myself, my father's money would secure for me. How could I invite a man to my room considering the fact that in all the four suburbs of the town everybody worked for my father. The drivers of the 200 trucks, the petty scrap iron traders, the owners of car services, my father watched everything closely, businesses thrived under his shadow, the city cops and the best lawyers worked for him. How would I find someone who didn't know my father—and how much would I have to pay him to keep it quiet?

My father had appointed a brawny man named Dancho for my personal chauffeur and he drove me in my jeep wherever I wanted to go. He was always with me, my shadow. Once my jeep was shot at because the attackers thought my father was inside. Bullets splintered Dancho's left shoulder destroying some nerves making his hand droop like a rag. He couldn't raise it to the steering wheel. He couldn't even make a fist. But he drove on, blood pouring from the wound, more concerned about what my father would do if he did not get me to safety than his own skin. Dancho was my body guard; he guarded it better than his own. It would not be easy escaping his shadow.

I would have to get out of our neighborhood of tall houses with courtyards and swimming pools. I could only find the man I needed where the eight-story flat buildings were; there lived the sacked workers from the steel combine that went bankrupt three years before. Most of the men were unemployed now. My father hired a few of the lucky ones and the rest stayed in the rooms of their small apartments in the daytime and got drunk in the evenings at "The Last Penny", a cheap pub run by my father where lousy alcohol was sold.

In those old blocks of flats I hoped to find my man. Although rumors about my father, and about me and my fat haunches, sprang up almost every day, and songs about Mother circulated—with the occasional pornographic lyric and inaccurate descriptions of her body parts—and flooded the town, the people from that area had never seen me in person.

I told Dancho that I was going to the town library, but I snuck my way to one of the dozens of little shops selling second-hand clothes. Most of the town's population bought their shirts and trousers from there, but who would ever think that the only daughter of Bloody Rayo would go shopping in the sleazy districts that smelled of sweat and urine? I dropped in at exactly eight neighborhoods like this and intentionally hung around in the sleaziest one; the cellar of one building was flooded. The water in it had turned into slime and pond scum, half of the first floor was abandoned, and in one of the remaining empty rooms there was a second-hand clothes shop. I guess it would be more accurate to say fifteenth-hand or twentieth-hand shop. It was evident that the shop assistant didn't recognize me.

She was very dark and there was dirt under her nails, her face was wrinkled and hidden below a layer of makeup some miles thick.

“What do you want?” she asked me, adding acidly, “You are very fat and I don’t know if there are any clothes that will fit you.”

“I’d like a skirt,” I explained to her.

“Um, uh you’d be lucky if I found any dress for you at all. I haven’t got a skirt that big. Try this dress on, but it is expensive, mind you. It’s the only one I have that large.” She wanted one lev for the dress. For the first time in my life I was told that something that cost one lev was expensive. I paid her without any hesitation; the woman gave me a dragon’s grin, causing the make-up to melt, and it flowed, mixed with sweat, down her cheeks towards her wrinkled neck. In a flash, she offered me two more dresses, as enormous as the previous one, but this time she said they cost ten levs apiece. She showed me a pair of shoes as well, so warped and torn that you could only use their heels to hit a stray dog on the head with or simply throw them in the trash.

“Wonderful merchandise,” she boasted. “You can walk with these shoes for six years. They’re already patched up so you won’t need to bring them to a cobbler.”

I did not buy the shoes. I chose a pair of slippers instead, which hardly clung to my heels, and gave her five levs for them. The woman grabbed at the money, stuck it right away in her bra and scratched her hand as if the bill had burned her skin. Then she jumped up, squeezed my arm, and dragged me to the upper floor; where she had “posh merchandise for big babes like you, love”. She showed me a bathrobe mended in seven or eight places, worn and frayed as if a combat tank had driven over it several times. Then she unlocked a chest of drawers that was full of blouses--yellow, green, pink, and faded as if all that posh merchandise had been soaked in sulfuric acid. “Five levs apiece,” the woman announced generously without letting go my hand.

Her palm was very warm; then she took hold of my shoulder with both her hands and offered me a pair of underpants the size of a tent. I bought them for ten levs which made the woman gape at me. For maybe a whole minute she stood dumbfounded, then she hugged me and kissed my cheek.

“God bless you”, she whispered, her mouth dripping with saliva. “God be with you every minute of your life!” At that very moment it dawned on me that I could ask if she knew of a guy for me.

“What’s your name?” I asked. Suspicion shone immediately in her eyes, black and slippery like a skating rink.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I want to come back to shop from you.”

“My name’s Natasha”, she answered. “But my true Gypsy name is Fatma.” I thought about the fact that I could buy all of her posh merchandise, the whole block of flats, the cellars of slime and mold with the smallest of the rolls of money my father had given me. The woman had sunk her black eyes into mine and refused to let go of my arm. “You want something else. I can tell that by looking at you.”

“Listen, Fatma. Can you find a man for me?”

She went on plunging her eyes deeper into my head.

“You want a man?” she repeated slowly.

“Yes” I answered. Her eyes left mine and crept along the hills of my breasts, balanced on the greasy pillow of my belly, and then descended to my thighs. After that her hands let go of my shoulder, patted my stomach and back and, without any decorum whatsoever, groped my ass as if it were a vast unexplored part of the globe.

“You are fat”, she clicked her tongue several times. “Very fat, I tell you. Tell me when you want to marry him and I’ll tell you how much it will cost.”

It was clear she had not understood. Her words made me shake as a result of which my belly and the cushions of lard above my waist wobbled like sacks stuffed with cabbage.

“You’re really fat,” she went on. “Are you sick, is it some illness that makes you so fat?”

“I’m healthy.”

“Then you eat too much. That’s good. It means you have a lot of food at home. Don’t you, eh? You bought so many things. I wish I were fat myself,” she sighed and groped me once again, this time on my belly. “Can you breed?” she asked. I didn’t answer. The whips of suspicion lashed me.

“Does your monthly blood flow regularly?” she added.

“Yes, it does.”

“What sort of a guy do you want, scrawny or a fat one like you?”

“I’d like a skinny one. But...”

“What?”

“I don’t want to marry him.”

“What!” she hiccupped heavily then surveyed me carefully, her face underneath the make-up so deep in thought that the wrinkles stretched and shone like parallels and meridians on the globe of her

cheeks. “Oh, yeah,” she patted my arm once again and winked at me. “Oh, yeah. I’ll bring a married man to you, and you’ll give him something for his kids. He’ll be pleased and you’ll be pleased. Kiro has five children. You’ll have to fetch two doughnuts for each kid. I know a bakery where they sell them cheap.”

“No. I don’t want a married man,” I thought about my father, about me, my mother, and suddenly I was out of sorts imagining the children and the doughnuts from the cheap bakery. “I want to get to know a guy well,” I lied to her.

“Oh, come on,” Fatma winked at me. “Do you want him now?”

I was not ready to make such a quick decision but I thought that I might not be able to free myself from Dancho the next day. Mother had invited a brilliant family of lawyers to dinner. She was in her second year of studying law and a number of bright constellations from the law universe were always visiting our home. Any barrister or notary was flattered to be her guest, of course.

She had not graduated yet but tributes were sung in her honor noting her particular legal talents. I still cannot explain why she forced me to attend these dinners; my father usually stayed with us for no more than eight minutes--that was the length of time he could endure without cursing--then somebody would call him on his mobile to sign an important business deal.

It was mother who always arranged this, carefully selecting the person who would telephone my father. She chose my attire for the dinners as well. “We’ll hide your thighs with this”, she would murmur, slipping a black skirt on me; her theory was that the black color concealed the extra fat. Alas, under the black skirt my legs were like mountains of the Himalayas. “And we’ll hide your belly with this. Can’t you suck your stomach in a little?” she would ask, very concerned; in those moments I hated her. “We must find a dancing partner for you.”

Now Fatma, who perhaps was my mother’s age but looked three times older with the plaster of make-up on her face and the parallels and meridians under it, repeated her question: “Do you want him now?”

I had to make up my mind.

“I want him now,” I answered, meditating no further. “But where will we get to know each other? I can’t bring him to my home.”

“Your parents will object, eh?” Fatma winked and patted me on the cheek. “Your folks have fed you well, that’s why they protect you so much. And they’re right. If you don’t mind using one of the dresses you bought to spread on the floor, you can get to know him within a minute.” Then she scrutinized me

from head to toe. "Honey, step out of my shop," her chin pointed at the old cardboard boxes full of rags. "You might steal my merchandise while I'm gone. Wait for me outside. I'll bring the guy in a minute."

"How much will it cost?" I asked her. My father always started any negotiation with the question "How much? US dollars, British pounds or Euros?"

"I want five levs. You can give him ... well that's something between him and you. Work it out for yourself."

Fatma took me out into the corridor. People must have been living there for there was a picture of a family on one of the boxes, a father, a mother and three kids, boys whose hair was cropped to the very bone of the skull. I figured they'd had lice. There was purple wallpaper on all the walls with some variation of a horrible flower pattern that had surely brought both parents and children to the edge of insanity. The strips of wallpaper were ripped off and stuck desperately to the floor; the cracked brick masonry covered by thick patches of mold was visible under them.

I thought about the wallpaper in my room, about the marble floor and my bed, which my father had bought for me from Austria. There was a button I could push that would lift it to a certain angle whenever I wanted to sit up; there was another button that made the bed sway like an ocean liner. I had a waterbed as well that mother had bought for me during one of her excursions to North America. I took out one of the dresses that I had acquired; it was dark red, faded and frayed at the hem. Mother wouldn't even have allowed me to throw it into our waste-bin for fear it was full of nits, tapeworm, ticks and other vermin. I could spread that dress on the floor, but where? Suddenly I was scared.

What was I doing?

It was summer. My father had made plans to go to Austria and import a new batch of used automobiles; he intended to import two tractors at a very advantageous price. He was a successful international businessman. What was I doing in this narrow walkway; the scorching heat outside had made the ground split the way men severed the bones of a slaughtered pig. Even the flagstones of the sidewalk had become unglued from the sweltering sun, but the slime in the cellar had not yet dried up. A suspicious stink reached my nose.

"Men are wicked and envious, love," Fatma had remarked when we entered the room I was to wait in. "They want to ruin my business, so they throw dead puppies in the flooded cellar. It's not dangerous. No one from this block of flats has died yet. Some guys coughed a little on account of the smell, but then they forgot about it."

After a short time of waiting I heard footsteps along the flight of stairs that reverberated like slaps in my face. After several seconds Fatma appeared, her make-up smiling greasily for it was evident she had plastered another layer of it and had erased the sweaty streams leading to her withered breasts.

“Here he comes”, she announced, leading by the arm a mere strip of a man whom she pushed towards me. “He’s very scrawny, it’s true”, she admitted. “But the guy is tough and strong, mind you. Every night he unloads marble slabs at the station in Pernik,” she looked at me closely, slapped my cheek and suddenly snapped, “Spread your dress here and don’t make the bloke wait. I won’t let you in the shop, you might pilfer anything, just anything,” then she turned around, the slaps of her steps echoed down the stairs of the flooded cellar.

The string--the thin streak of a man that unloaded marble slabs at the station-- and I were alone. He was much taller than me, lanky and narrow-shouldered like a shoe box, and his hips were as broad as my upper arm. He was wearing a dirty lilac T-shirt and a pair of jeans that were cut off above the knees, and from there a net of tousled threads hung loosely to the concrete floor. The maypole immediately took off his cut jeans.

His eyes were muddily green, almost yellow; then he took off his dirty T-shirt and flaunted his lusterless puny chest before me. I remembered the men in the pictures of my mother’s porno magazines which I had peeked at; their muscles had been taut, bulging like fighter aircraft, while the muscles of the maypole were practically invisible. It was impossible to miss the detail that the man wore nothing under his jeans, and it felt awkward staring at the part of his body that interested me most.

He came toward me and didn’t make any efforts to undress me. My blouse had pasted itself with sweat to my paunch. It turned out I was incapable of taking off my skirt, so I let him help me. His efforts were great and futile, which made me doubt that he could actually unload marble if he couldn’t manage somebody’s backside—even if it was my backside. I took hold of his shoulders, which felt brittle beneath my fingers.

“Say ‘I love you,’” I ordered.

“I love you,” the guy repeated obediently.

“Say ‘You are the only girl I love in the world,’” I commanded.

“You are the only... It’s too long,” the maypole complained and added, “I want ten levs.”

“Ok.”

“I want them now.”

“No. After.”

My father’s favorite saying was “Don’t pay beforehand if you want good service.”

I touched him, the place on a man’s body I had always dreamt of touching. My hand burned. He groaned. My father’s groans were the same: like when a bone gets stuck in a cat’s throat and the cat tries to spit it out. It was strange I didn’t feel the pain I had read about. It didn’t hurt at all; it didn’t feel so great either. I simply had to live through it and explore the sensation again. The man’s eyes had become purely yellow and shone like crystals of cracked mica on his dark face. He clung to me, a drowning rat clutching at the skin of a whale. It felt as if he were driving nails into a bag of down, rocking slowly, his eyes of mica hidden under shut eyelids.

His narrow shoulders could sink effortlessly into every part of my big body; I myself sank pleasantly downwards into the concrete floor, nurturing a vague idea that I’d bore a hole in it any minute.

Suddenly the man relaxed with his eyes still closed. Saliva ran from his mouth resembling the glitter of the mica I had noticed in his eyes. The guillotine of my buttocks pressed a little pool of blood to the concrete floor, which did not make any impression on me. Theoretically I had been prepared for it. I could already report that in practical terms no matter how fat I was I had become a woman. The sliver forgot to get down from me, yawned, and fell asleep in the comfortable nest of my blubber. Even though he was scrawny, I could feel his weight heavily on me, so I budged and his head hit the floor. The guy was startled, but only for a moment, then yawned again, revealing a lake of saliva shining in his mouth, his dark hands clinging to me, like pencils writing the enormous sentence of my body.

Suddenly the beanpole broke into a sweat and started slithering on to me, and then unexpectedly his lips grounded inaccurately upon mine. I don’t know if I could count this as my first kiss with a man; but since I hadn’t experienced an event like it before I decided I might as well accept it as such.

This happened when my father was still alive.

I felt overwhelmed with happiness and wanted to get out of there before the happiness melted like everything that came my way, so I shook the guy who slept quietly on top of me and whispered in his ear, “Say `I love you’”. The tone of my voice was the same as my mother’s when she talked to the notaries and lawyers, offering them her perfect profile or a glimpse of her pearly leg. I couldn’t explain how an intonation like that was born in my throat.

The beanpole did not obey. His yellow eyes hung over my face, his mouth pressing mine. I had some money in the pocket of my blouse. It was very hard to thrust my fingers in the silk pocket glued to my skin.

It took several minutes to extract a ten-lev banknote, which I left on the floor saying, "Take it."

"Wait a minute", the man said. His hand, rapid and scorching like lightening, grabbed the money, then he left me on the dress I had bought from Fatma. At that moment I felt the stink. Fatma was probably right; her neighbors had thrown dead puppies or worse in her cellar.

After five minutes the guy returned carrying two bottles of beer and a package containing the cheapest possible, suspiciously rosy-colored, sausage a man could buy in the cheap shops, squeezed in cellars and bungalows along the Struma river.

He opened one of the bottles, poured half of it down his throat, burped and gave it to me. I tasted a gulp of the liquid and was about to drop dead instantly; the beer smelled no better than the puppies ruining Fatma's business. The man ripped the sausage into two equal pieces, not bothering to peel its skin, tearing it with his teeth as if he hadn't eaten for four years. I felt nauseated watching the beanpole eat the sausage; I suspected I might have to drive him if not to the morgue, then at least to Pirogov Hospital.

"Eat", he said. "I bought the sausage for you."

"And spent all the money", I snapped angrily. He made no comment on my remark, just went on chewing with his mouth open and stuffed with pieces of the cheap sausage soaked in the nasty beer. Then his head dropped to the ridge formed by my breasts. He pushed aside the last piece of sausage and turned again to me.

It felt so good that for a moment I thought, "God bless you, Fatma!" Before I went home I remembered only the guy's scrawny ribs bulging like piano keys in his chest. My mother had had her heart set on making me play the piano and wasted heaps of money on tutors Dancho, my father's loyal chauffeur, would drive directly from the Academy of Classical Music in Sofia to my music room.

I reached almost to the man's dimpled, stubbly chin. He let his hand drop on my head; his fingers felt like my fathers, although some of the nails were crushed and warped. He ran them through my thick, toothbrush-bristles hair and mumbled, "Your hair's red like a bundle of carrots."

My hairstyle resembled a helmet, and mother criticized me severely on that account. How was it possible, she asked rightfully, that a young promising lady would get her hair cut like an infantryman? I was fat, and the hair baking my skull in its red-hot furnace made me feel hotter.

The lanky man's hair was black, dirty, tousled, and covered his shoulders. I didn't ask what his name was.

As I walked down the stairs to the cellar full of bilge water, slime, and pond scum, his steps behind

me did not sound like slaps in the face, they reminded me of the first drops of rain after a two-year drought.

“Hey”, he shouted. “When will I see you again?”

When? I wouldn't be able to get to this shabby suburb in the near future. All over the district the eight-story flat buildings jutted out from the sidewalks with drab balconies covered by necklaces of drying clothes and linen. Among the blocks, cars, trucks, even several buses were parked and between them stray dogs sauntered, lolling out their tongues, some sprawled like corpses under the buses parked on the asphalt, which melted in the heat.

I didn't think even for a moment that my father would ever allow me to come here. If mother learned that her daughter had been wasting her time in this lair of thugs (let alone the fact that she had visited the building with the flooded cellar and dead dogs!) she would convince my father to buy a house in one of the upscale districts of Sofia, the capital city. I wouldn't be able to see the lanky guy ever again.

“Listen”, I told him. “Come to the Snowdrop Cafe tomorrow evening at seven. Then I'll tell you where you can meet me.”

For there could be no doubt that I would be seeing this man again. There could be no doubt that it had been the most marvelous day of my life. In my chest of drawers I had a lot of money; if I bought a small flat, a flat with one single room and a bathroom - one rotten flat in this swamp of crumbling buildings--then everything would be all right. If I spread an old mattress on the concrete floor I could invite the beanpole and no one would know anything about it. Even Fatma wouldn't. Where could I buy the small one-room flat? It would be best to choose one in the center of town, near the library, for what sort of place could be honored by the visits of Bloody Rayo's daughter but the library?

My father would often remark, “Read, my girl, read. Science was out of my reach, but it will be within yours.” My mother paid the best teachers in English, in computers, modern and Latin dances, and good manners to train me. Most recently, she stumbled upon the idea to get a German teacher as well: a spinster with withered cheeks who always visited our home in smashingly expensive shoes. My mother adored her for that--she could adore only expensive things. That was the reason she had been so impressed by the young doctor Xanov who patched up my father after his drunken sprees.

Yes, the only place I was allowed to go was the library. I never visited any fitness clubs; I was too fat, so my father built a gym onto our house and hired a personal trainer to set my targets and measure my progress. But my father, no matter how generous he was, wouldn't be allowed to buy the public library

even though he had donated a dozen grand to repair the broken roof tiles. I doubt, however, he was interested in the books; he cared about one of the librarians, a puny woman with the unhappiest eyes that you could imagine, as if someone beat her non-stop around the clock. I wondered why my father liked small women with eyes as sad as death himself. The only exception to this rule was mother who was neither sad nor small, but she left him all the same.

Well, my point is that I had more than enough money to buy a rotten one room flat. If I did buy it myself, though, the news would spread through town like fire. I had no friends I could trust. The second most beloved saying my father used was “Money is the most loyal friend to man”. I could ask a lawyer to acquire the flat for me. If I added two or three rolls of bills to his fee everything could be arranged within 24 hours and any lawyer would willingly keep as quiet as the eel in Doctor Xanov’s aquarium, an animal my mother often admired.

“Don’t you want to do this again?” the lanky youth asked, pushing his dimpled chin into the bristle of my thick short hair.

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” I answered. “Seven o’clock at the Snowdrop Cafe. I’ll give you more money.”

“And we’ll buy beer and sausages”, he snorted happily.

All this happened before my father was shot, perhaps half a year before his funeral. Neither he nor mother had any inkling about my decision to take money from my drawer.

.....

The apartment was desperately small. An empty room in a block of old flats, with its window facing north, a roof made of worm-eaten logs, crumbling plaster on the ceiling, a small empty kitchen, and a bathroom so tiny that I had to enter with my shoulder first to relieve myself. There was electricity, but unfortunately there was neither hot water nor any heat whatsoever. I bought a mattress and a cheap blanket, then I invited the maypole whose name I still didn’t know.

The room was as narrow as a coffin; the lawyer was so curious about why I wanted it so badly that I had to lie to him. I told him that I intended to house my German tutor there. The lawyer smiled, which, according to the code of judicial behavior, meant, “Bloody Rayo’s fat cow has a screw loose, no doubt about it. Her father has stuffed so full of money that it’s interfering with her brain Well, I didn’t give a damn about his inferences.

I became the owner of the room with the mattress in less than twenty-four hours. This event once

again confirmed my father's thesis that money would do more for you than your best friend. I didn't have any friends.

Before the battered entrance door banged shut behind his back the beanpole had taken off his jeans and his dirty lilac T-shirt, the same one as before. And, like before, he did not have any underwear on.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Simo", he said.

"Don't you want to know what my name is?" It was evident he didn't and so he clung to me instead, a thin rope spiraling about the masts of my endless buttocks. "Aren't you interested in what my name is?" He didn't answer, and couldn't possibly do so because his mouth was full of saliva that shined in the light like mica. My mother had a diamond necklace that shined like that--and a diamond ring, and there was a diamond on the belt of her formal evening dress. My father had brought it to her from Austria. So I decided that the saliva in his mouth wasn't mica; it was diamond. "OK. My name is Moni. Did you hear me? Moni. Here's the money. Take it."

He didn't look at the money because his body had already started swinging over me. I pushed him aside, which wasn't difficult at all. He banged against the floor but his reaction surprised me.

"You're pretty", he said. "You are pretty."

It was at that moment that I understood how the other women felt; my mother, my classmates in the private school for girls, my tutors in English, German, modern dances, fitness and good manners. The other women whose boyfriends told them they were pretty, that they weren't fat bulldozers but simply pretty women.

"You are off your rocker", I objected, but he didn't hear me.

.... ..

On the fortieth day after my father's funeral mother paid for a solemn church service and invited all the intellectuals and financial elite of the town. Or, I should say, all the people that mother considered elite. The church service was an excellent opportunity for her to show off her mourning attire. On such occasions (and by "such occasions" I'm referring to opportunities for my mother to show off) she always hired the cook from "Casablanca," the most expensive and posh restaurant in Pernik.

All were enchanted by the menu she offered and by her fashion. I was already very familiar with the cook's menus because mother abided by her sacred law once a week, on Friday, to take me out to dinner

to “Casablanca”. I had the feeling that the waiter knew when we were about to arrive by the sound of my mother’s jeep. The same very tall and attractive man always met us at the door, taking my mother’s hat or cape and bowing gracefully, down to the last vertebra in his spinal cord, and whispering very sincerely, “You look just wonderful, ma’am”

The words would rattle like pebbles in his mouth, his eyes following my mother with such demonstrative admiration that I suspected he was ready to kiss the pavement beneath her shoes; it was hardly surprising when she would leave him fabulous tips.

Then the waiter would take my hat or coat and bring the menu, his eyes shining proudly for he had again anticipated what my mother would order. “Shall it be shark’s loin prepared in the Saragossa way, Madam?” My mother made it a special point for all her guests to be aware of the fact she ate shark’s loin in the Saragossa way.

She had grown up in a family of waiters. My grandmother and grandfather, her parents, experts in this trade, had nurtured several generations of drunkards at “The White Elephant” restaurant, and after the establishment went bankrupt they set up a pub in one of the most backwater suburbs of the town. My grandmother Shar (I suppose it was probably an abbreviation of “shark”) was slim and still had her sharp green eyes even though she was getting on in years. Compared to her my grandfather resembled an obituary notice. He made cheap cocktails behind the bar but more often drank quietly and sadly with his regular customers, not giving a damn about the rest of the world. His only daughter, my mother, had money to burn and therefore was happy. Grandfather was given to noble charity, ordering free drinks for his old friends, a bunch of poor pensioners with receding hair who poured the cheap cocktails into their brains, blessing him day and night.

Grandma Shar looked at them with disdain, burning them with the green flames of her eyes. In her rare fits of wrath she would throw my grandpa’s friends out of the establishment in a most ignominious manner, but this happened once in a blue moon so they waited for death peacefully, full to the brim with brandy my grandfather sold them dirt cheap. Although my grandfather was a drunkard with thinning hair he never swindled his old pals.

As my mother entertained her guests, barely remembering the reason for the occasion, I was wondering if it was a good idea to introduce Simo to my grandfather.

.....

Perhaps one of the lavish garden parties thrown by my mother marked the beginning of Gallantine's era of fame. He used to be and still is one of the exceptionally interesting types in our backwater town. When God created humankind He stuffed too many teeth in Gallantine; I had the feeling he looked at me with his teeth yet he never failed to notice the smallest details in people's behavior or clothing. My mother sighed and pined for him. After she had integrated herself into the city's elite, she developed a taste for refined gentlemen, and Gallantine was so refined that he couldn't recognize his own image in the mirror. Probably the bevy of young swallows (which was how the daughters of the elite families were referred to), would stone me dead if they read my description of Gallantine. He was the delicacy dish on the menu of my mother's parties. It was at one of those parties that a male individual courted me in the most refined way. Of course, I was sprawling in a custom made easy chair twice the size of a regular easy chair. I suppose my buttocks were overflowing in pessimistic waves toward the floor as my mother hurled the nets of her eyes to catch Gallantine. That gentleman was a lawyer or was on the verge of becoming one evidenced by the great pains he was going to in order to use as much judicial terminology he could. That remarkable legal functionary sat by my side, stuffed two hundred wise Latin sentences into my ear, then whispered, "Could I have the pleasure of dancing with you?"

Had I been a more sensitive soul I would have eaten the carpet under his boots and then jumped with happiness. But I imagined he would look like an exhausted exclamation mark at the end of the interminable sentence of my body. His smile consisted of honey and sugar syrup that streamed down my breasts. That sobered me up.

"Yes, you can dance with me, and I will be free in about twenty five minutes," I declared with the hesitant voice of a beauty everyone was dying to dance with.

"It will be my pleasure," Gallantine lied.

I went on studying the group of the intellectuals invited to my mother's party: two financiers plus wives smelling sweetly of French perfumes. My mother hung about them rustling the skirts of her dress in a very concerned manner indeed. It was Italian and cost 6000 US dollars that my father had bought for her before he died. I mention the precise price of the dress because my mother always appreciated the discussion of how much her garments cost. She rushed enthusiastically to Gallantine bathing him in the golden torrent of her voice, "Mr. Talev," she exclaimed. "I suspect you might be a little bored here. Could you possibly tell me what you think about..." and he ran to tell her what he thought but returned to me very quickly. After exactly twenty-five minutes he was holding me trying to make me dance. I should say I

squashed him under my mass, the eyes of everyone at the party glued to us. I supposed that the majority of the guests were expecting I'd trip over the carpet and spread Mr. Talev in a thin layer on the floor under me.

"Do you know you are a very charming young woman," was the young lawyer's first sentence, and it sounded quite promising. It was evident he made efforts to smile at me, intently watching Veronica in the meantime. She was a magnificent blonde who studied pedagogy; my father had sponsored her scientific research when he was still alive between his own pedagogical endeavors and my mother's attractions. I suspected that in spite of his immense loyalty for my mother he indulged in a little pedagogy every now and then. Apparently Gallantine was attracted by that science as well. It would be my pleasure to stick a pin in his juridical ass but the event that followed made me stare at my mother. It was the first time I had seen her so miserable--as if she had just been kicked out of the Institute of Social Sciences where she studied law.

"I've heard many people talk about your sharp wit," Gallantine continued spilling the cologne of his flatteries. "In fact, let me admit I am a little afraid to tell you about the thing I have on my heart."

"There are no reasons to panic," I encouraged him. Wild curiosity was eating at me; what sort of a would he ask of my mother? The compliment he bestowed upon me made me think the man had set a very high goal before him.

"Will you marry me?" he said.

It was only natural I stopped dancing. Perhaps I had stepped too heavily on his toes for his face blanched. "Didn't your mother prepare you for our conversation?" Mr. Talev asked.. "I asked her to." For some incomprehensible reason mother had failed to provide that precious information. My suitor's zest for life had obviously abandoned him. "Will you marry me?" the lawyer repeated. this time sounding more convincing than before.

"This is a topic of a serious conversation," I remarked. I had noticed that that my prospective husband still watched the blonde pedagogue, carrying all the passion and despair in the world in his eyes. "I would like to discuss things with you in greater detail."

His pale face grew almost as green as my eyes.

"You don't trust me," he concluded. After a second however he seemed to recollect something and added, "O Key. Now is as good as any other time." He touched my elbow tenderly, his palm sinking up to the wrist into my blubber, then dragged me towards the terrace. My father had bought marble from

Torino, Italy, for it delighted my mother to hear the elite talk about her terrace and marble from Torino. At such moments she felt like a full-fledged lady. "It's so wonderful here!" the lawyer sighed and stumbled over a little naked statue of Eros in the middle of the terrace, around which Torino marble vases jutted out.

"Gallantine," I grabbed him by the hand and lifted him from the roseate marble he had hit his head against. "I will marry you."

My quick consent to become Gallantine's wife made him very happy. He started coughing, sending droplets of saliva at a considerable speed in all directions around his head. When at last his jubilation abated he took a deep breath, looked into my eyes, and said, "It is all right, dear. Now I'd like to list some conditions you must bear in mind."

The denouement of the play approached: I was going to learn all crucial considerations on the part of the young semi-god who was making serious efforts to become my husband.

"I am listening to you," I reminded him.

.... ..

I'd like to tell you more about Gallantine. I knew he was waiting for me, proudly displaying his athletic body (male athletic bodies are priority number one with my mother) on the divan my father had imported from Italy. I supposed Gall would start spinning convincing arguments about how sharp my wit was, how God had blessed me with a rich and colorful imagination, and how well I spoke English. I assumed that that the attractive blond woman who seemed to hover around Gallantine and made it known far and wide that she studied pedagogy had written the script for Gallantine's performance of asking me to be his wedded wife. Her name was Veronica, the queen of pedagogic research.

Although I possessed the weight of a combat armored vehicle I was well capable of getting on the nerves of little fluffy kittens like Gallantine. I had made him wait for me on the divan forty-five minutes now and I hoped his syrupy physiognomy was warped like a doormat under the burden of his wounded pride. Who the hell would dare to subject him to jeers of this sort? Of course, no one but me! He had probably perspired profusely and the smell of his first-class sweat would ruin the aroma of the deodorant-liquid in which Gallantine swam every day. Sometimes I suspected that rather than a man I faced a deodorant spray.

I had made a firm decision to make men realize how precious I was so I intended to keep Gall on that

divan an hour more. That was a trick I had learned from my deceased father, “A bloke waiting in front of your door is a can of beef paste, my girl.” The thought of Gallantine in the form of paste breathed new life into me.

Somebody knocked at the door. Or I should say kicked the door, apparently trying to wrench it from its fixtures, and this, strictly speaking, was sheer arrogance. I would not allow anybody to ruin the property that my father bought at the price of his own blood. Before Gallantine knocked again at the door made of yew wood my father ordered from Belgium, mother rang me up and spoke to me in a very concerned manner, “Gall is coming to pop the question, dear,” she sighed on the telephone. “Please, be friendly with him. You know how much that man loves you.”

This man loved most of the heiresses in town; he was a lawyer whose clients drove cars that were more expensive than the financial resources of the municipality. Gallantine had chosen me. That fact apart from being a remarkable acknowledgment of my father’s money was a topic that gave rise to unsavory comments about me.

I switched on my computer, riveted my heavenly eyes on the monitor and called out, “Come in!”

“Good afternoon, my dear!” I was right, his mouth did look like a warped doormat. “You look swell today. Has your mother informed you what I intend to do now?”

“Yes, she has,” I assured him, waiting for additional information.

“You are very beautiful,” my prospective husband ventured, and the doormat of his mouth licked at my old sandals. It was obvious he wanted to charm to me.

“I suppose you should start telling me how intelligent I am,” I interrupted him deftly. “The intelligence of a person is not visual. You can use that and be on the safe side.”

“But you are really very beautiful,” my fiancé had evidently let his imagination run loose. “Your eyes are green like...” the comparison was too cumbersome to make and, all-too willing to eliminate the awkward pause in the conversation, Gallantine pushed his lips to my mouth. In other words he kissed me, as a proper loving husband should do. “You are an exceptionally intelligent woman and I really want you to be my wife.”

He had produced the same sentence several months earlier as he tangoed around the excessive curves of my body at my mother’s party. His offer did not surprise me at all. I was interested to know, however, what he wanted in return for his sacrifice.

“You are a person of rich and compassionate soul...”

“My soul is another good topic of discussion,” I encouraged him. “It too is not seen with the eyes.”

“I’m serious... and I enjoy your sense of humor, too.”

“Let’s drop the unnecessary pleasantries,” my voice sounded dry like the sands of the Sahara. “In spite of all your admiration for my soul, my sense of humor, my rich and colorful imagination, let us concentrate on my enormous weight.”

“You are so pretty,” my future husband repeated stubbornly. Gallantine lacked both inspiration and imagination, and attempted again, “You are so pretty...” I thought of the scrawny gypsy boy who had used similar words. Suddenly I wanted badly to be with that gypsy maypole. The poor soul, he frittered away all money I had paid him on those nasty sausages. I loved him. “Yes. Yes, you really are quite... how shall I put it... bosomy. Yes. You are fat. And fat is fat. Well, you know it’s important to get on with one’s marriage partner from the spiritual point of view. In order to understand one’s partner spiritually, one needs money.”

“Gallantine,” I said. “How much money do you need to understand me spiritually after you become my husband?”

“You are intelligent, I grant you that. And I appreciate the fact you speak to the point: no prejudice, no beating about the bush.”

“Yes, yes,” I whispered changing the subject abruptly. “You know what? I really thank you very much. You are such an attractive man and I am such a... fatty.” The clouds in the sky witnessed my humiliation. I preferred gulping down all the toads in all the swamps of Bulgaria to uttering those abject words. Well, my father used to say,

“Yes, you are fat,” Gallantine spoke most sincerely, the blue scales of his eyes measuring the tonnage of my buttocks. “Yes, you are. And you are surely familiar with the fact your mother approves of me.” Yes, I knew she approved of him on Tuesdays and Fridays in the afternoon after she had had her lunch and the beautician had refreshed her face with pineapple slices. Gallantine, however, decided to explain to me what that exactly meant. “She is great... You will become my wife: Mrs. Taleva. Can you imagine it? There will be only one Mrs. Taleva in the whole country. You will be that lady. But as you know very well everything in the world has a price,” he dropped the bait of his sentence and let it sink its sharp hook into my stomach.

I managed to keep my mouth shut and glue my eyes to the parquet floor. If I looked at him for even a second the scrambling hamster would burst into flames from the heat of my gaze. Even Gallantine would

understand I hated him enough to kill him.

“And, of course, the price is high,” the hamster produced the end of his statement. “Forty percent of your father’s property, my dear. In return you will become Mrs. Taleva. If you interpret this sentence from the diplomatic point of view, it means that you’ll be welcome in all the drawing rooms of the elite, though I find it hard to imagine what you’ll talk about with these people. Perhaps you’ll have to read some books on art or law... I have built my reputation painstakingly for many years now. You’ll be invited to all major receptions, you’ll have at your disposal...”

“Forty percent is too high a price,” then I swallowed my rage before it was too late and shut up.

“Apart from your sojourns to the elite households of the capital I will be in your bed once a month on a regular basis,” Gallantine assured me, fairly dejectedly. “Perhaps you’ll get pregnant, although I strongly doubt it...” If my father had been alive and had heard the young snail’s plans he would have readily crushed his shell.

“Thank you,” I whispered, carefully pulling open the drawer of my desk. “I suppose you’ll spend the rest of the month in my mother’s company... or with that blond lady you study pedagogy with.”

“Yes, you are quite right, dear. Man should not live in loneliness, don’t you agree? You and I can often talk on the telephone - for example Monday evenings. Let me sum this up: 40% and let’s make the date of our official wedding ceremony. If you conceive a child by me, dear, all doors of legal bodies and institutions will be open for him. I personally will introduce him to a number of eminent families. His photographs will be in all newspapers. As for you... you will always be his mother, anyway.”

“Perhaps all that deserves 50% of my father’s property,” I whispered quietly. Wild anger burned a tunnel in my brain but an obese young woman like me should never board the sledge of anger. “What would you say to 50%?” I purred, sticking my eyes into my belly button. I had no desire to look at him at all.

“You know what? You are very fat, but you’re cool,” the hamster smiled encouragingly at me. “50 is my favorite number.”

“I don’t need money,” I lied brazenly. “All I need is your love. If I make it 60% will you visit me twice a month?”

Gallantine’s face lit up, enraptured by the vision of the bright future.

“You’re great! Very cool indeed!” he breathed sincerely. “If you want we can do it here and now!”

I had already managed to open the desk drawer, so I thrust my fat hand into it and dragged out a

Makarov pistol. Makarov is a good gun and I hoped my father had made good use of it before those men sent him to the world beyond. I lifted the muzzle of the Makarov to Gallantine's mouth as the he planted his hand in the glen between my breasts.

"What about 70%?" I asked pressing the Makarov against his forehead. My future husband choked on the air beneath his nose.

"Get... th...this gun a...way!" he stammered, chopping the words with the red saw of his tongue.  
"G..g...get it away!"

I hit his nose with the handle of the pistol. "Would you like 70%?" I repeated my question pleasantly. The sweat was running off the lawyer's smooth forehead. "I am a very good shot," I lied to him. "And this piece of iron has got a silencer."

My future husband grabbed at his stomach with both hands ready to throw up any minute now: a big blond pile of legal knowledge stewing in his own juice. He had probably wetted his finest-quality pants.

"Tomorrow you will introduce me to the eminent families in the capital," I was quick to prepare his business agenda for the day. The man was pressing his stomach, the contents of which on the verge of erupting, to the parquet floor my father had ordered from Spain.

"D..d...don't sh..shoot!"

"The day after tomorrow, the 20th of December, you and I will pay a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Anev." The hamster groped for his heart. It seemed to me the air had congealed in his throat for he was trying hard to spit something out of his foaming mouth.

"Yes... y..yes, dear."

"Otherwise you'll acquire very special piece of my father's property, a nice leaden bullet in the medulla oblongata. I believe it makes up exactly 70% of my father's property, doesn't it?"

I was afraid that Gallantine was unable to calculate the exact percentage just now. The doormat of his face looked as if it had wiped the shoes of the entire town's population and now lay trembling.

"Dear," I croaked using up all my compassion. "If someone learns how you asked me to become your wife - a proposal, which I have already accepted - I will make sure you do not survive our next encounter. Is that clear?" I pressed my father's Makarov harder against my future husband's forehead and got no reply. That made me put part of the muzzle between Gallantine's crimson lips. "Well, will you love me loyally and with all your heart till death makes us part?"

It is difficult for a person to speak with a muzzle of a gun between his or her teeth but Gallantine

managed to cope with this impossible situation.

“Yes, I will love you,” his words did not sound sad even though I saw tears in his eyes.

.... ..

The rickety houses were very close to the river, just below the medieval Slavonic Krakra fortress, at the very end of the town. The neighborhood was known by the name Karama and was made up of shacks covered with odd pieces of sheet iron, puny narrow backyards with taut copper wire clothes-lines on which dozens of washed clothes hung—though they still looked dirty. Hens and dogs squeezed freely under the clothes-lines which served as fences between the shacks, scraggy pigs ran in the streets that during this early wet summer were potted by deep muddy puddles. Some more inventive people had put sandstone slabs or gravel in front of their homes, items they had pilfered from different construction sites, so that their wives and kids would not sink to their waists in the mud. Very rarely, there were white marble slabs in the mud, too: some of the Karama men worked at the Central Railway Station Pernik. They unloaded the wagons full of precious white marble from the village of Simit and stole some of the slabs if they could. A flock of children usually sat under the roofing iron of the dilapidated houses in the neighborhood. Sometimes when the kids were bored they threw stones at the International Express Train Sofia -Kulata - Athens, other times they fought or argued over green apples and feathers, or simply played “cops and robbers”. Even if it was raining pitchforks the children gathered together under the big sheet iron roof of the only cafe in Karama, Lena Cafe, where their fathers sold to Dan, the proprietor, the scrap iron and scrap non-ferrous metals they had stolen. Dan sold the scrap to a hunch-backed man, who in his turn sold it to a bloke called the Sponge. The Sponge was a genius. He sold the scrap ten times its worth to that lousy bitch ... what was her name? Bloody Rayo’s daughter. People said she had money to burn, Rayo was the guy who got shot last year and he well deserved it if you ask anyone from the neighborhood. So Bloody Rayo’s daughter had taken over her father’s business and wallowed in money. Well, that didn’t stop her from skinning all the guys in town. She gave a hell of a time to all honest blokes who stole scrap iron and all sorts of non-ferrous scrap just to eke out a living and buy bread for the kids who sat under that rusty roofing iron and the rain came down in torrents. It didn’t stop raining in June so one wouldn’t recognize if it were summer or autumn. Rain made scrap iron rusty very quickly and Dan the owner of Lena Cafe paid half price for it.

It was Thursday so the guys weren’t unloading marble from the wagons at the Pernik Railway Station.

That day Simo had invited them all - all the folks from Karama were gathered in front of his house. Well, the house didn't exactly belong to him, its owners were his two married sisters who had nine children between them: very beautiful children with black eyes, blacker than the nights in January, the best looking kids in this neighborhood. If these kids started playing football and you watched them it would be a sight to delight your heart if you loved and knew about the game. If some decent coach came here, to Karama, he could choose a dozen lads like the famous football player Stoichkov, and if the coach were clever enough to teach the children of Simo's sisters well, oh, my, they'd crown Bulgaria with glory! Everybody from Brazil to Germany, from Poland to Japan and the UK would speak about them! For they were no ordinary children, they didn't go without food as you might imagine or, if they did, this happened very rarely.

The roof of Simo's house was white marble! Simo had stolen it under the Chief of the Station's very nose at the risk of getting caught, beaten, and fired. But tell me who could nick Simo stealing white marble from Pernik Railway Station? Nobody could, of course. Fatma was one hundred percent convinced of that. Most people knew her Bulgarian name was Natasha; the Bulgarians sent for her saying, "Please, Aunt Natasha, come home to make a lucky charm for my boy. Whenever he sees a big truck he cries his lungs out and I think this should stop. His father's a driver, you know." So Natasha made lucky charms, told the lad's or lassie's future and saw many good things in it. She was a very decent lady and everybody recognized that. She introduced Simo to the snow-white beautiful girl whose eyes were as green as the mountain Vitosha, which towered over the town. The girl's eyes looked even greener than the mountain, you could take Natasha's word for it!

Simo had gathered the young and old in front of his house, the only building with marble roof in the neighborhood. He had bought twenty-five cases of beer because such a beautiful girl would arrive in Karama for the first time. Simo had spent all his monthly salary on twelve bottles of brandy; not the fake sleazy swill one bought from Dan's cafe "Lena", he provided some first class plum brandy. Well, he bought some swill too, of course, for what difference would it make what alcohol one would be boozing if he were already stone drunk? You wouldn't differentiate between the swill and the gorgeous plum brandy? He had bought Coca-Cola, Pepsi and Sprite for the kids; he had bought each lassie a hairpin but not the cheap trash, which cost 25 cents apiece. The hairpins Simo chose cost 1 lev 40 cents and you could only find them in the posh shops in the center of Pernik. Simo bought each lad a penknife and even the youngest toddler knew he'd bring his pretty girl to the only house with the most beautiful marble roof in town.

Simo said he'd arrive at 3 pm so everyone was waiting for him: his mother was chatting with Natasha, both of them smoking expensive cigarettes. So was Simo's father and his married sisters. They all usually smoked the cheapest possible gaspers, but that day they made an exception to the rule for it was Thursday. There was no marble from the village of Simit at the railway station and the space around it looked desolate, but everybody guessed it was perfectly all right, and even the babies in swaddling clothes were ready for the feast.

It was past three and Simo still hadn't shown up. The men waited and waited, then shyly and gradually made a decisive move. They started opening the bottles, not the ones with the gorgeous brandy; they'd crack them open the minute Simo brought his young bride. They opened the flasks of swill that they all had become accustomed to and it tasted delicious like any normal brandy in their mouths. The children, too, could not endure that long waiting; kids like Stoichkov, the football player, were a very impatient lot, so they opened their bottles of Coca-Cola, Pepsi and Sprite and looked very secretive indeed. Then they started arguing over one exceptionally beautiful piece of glass and, after that, about whose penknife was the sharpest.

"Where's that son of yours, Nadi? It's a shame, he's late." Fatma said. That day she had put so much rouge on her face that her cheeks shone like the sun itself even though it was drizzling.

"He'll show up any minute now," Nadi answered. She had borrowed three hundred levs from Dan and had bought pork chops on them. She had four daughters and only one son; a wonderful chap, her son Simo, slim and tall, with a handsome face, serene like the moon, and a very smart chap he was: the only guy capable of dragging off so much marble under the Station Chief's very nose!

At last the exhaust smoke of an ancient car mixed with the rain and a green Moskvich belonging to one of Simo's numerous cousins roared and spluttered, climbing the hill of Karama. It was surely bringing Simo's young bride! Then the men switched on simultaneously three old cassette-recorders, and "You are my everything", the Gypsy love hymn, rang out, blaring the music up to the Krakra fortress, to Vitosha Mountain and perhaps even to Athens in Greece. The women and the children knew that song very well too, so they all sang along at the top of their voices. That song always brought you happiness and if you sang it to a pretty girl, she was sure to give birth to strong sons and beautiful daughters with warm brown eyes and tall lithe figures.

The green Moskvich crawled along the only street in Karama that was covered with asphalt. The three cassette-recorders sang "You are my everything", the women and the kids joined in vigorously, and

everybody was itching to catch a glimpse of Simo's girl first although Natasha had described her to them in minute detail. A girl with green eyes like the hill over there overgrown with thick pine-trees, and you could take her word for that. The girl's skin was very white like an iceberg or whatever Fatma thought an iceberg looked like.

The Moskvich stopped in front of the house and everybody stood on tiptoes, bating their breath. The door opened and Simo showed up dressed in a brand-new T-shirt, the best one in the most fashionable sports store in the Main Street of Pernik. He had paid a juicy 20 lev bill for it. He had put on a pair of black corduroys as well; a wonderful chap and you could take Fatma's word for it.

No girl got out of the Moskvich.

"He's hiding her," the men laughed in their beards. "He's not ready to show us his bride."

"None of your tricks, boy," the women laughed as well. "We've been hidden in exactly the same manner, you know."

"Where's she? Where's she?" the children shouted craning their necks, on tiptoe, the girls with the expensive hairpins in their hairs, the boys squeezing tightly the penknives in their hands so no one could take them from their fingers in the hustle and bustle.

"Where is your bride, son?" Fatma asked. She looked so pretty with her new rouge that the young women would better take care! "Simo, don't hide her. Let us see her."

Simo looked down at the holes in the street unable to raise his head.

"What's wrong with you, son?" his father asked.

The air was clean and it was cold although it shouldn't have been at that time of the year. It was June, the wind blew and the drizzle was slowly turning into a steady rain. There were few trees in Karama but above the shacks the green woods started: not much of a forest anyway, bushes, prickly shrubs with thorns, but they all had a lot of green leaves. The forest was near the Krakra fortress and the people could easily bring their goats to graze to their heart's content.

"Where's the girl?" Simo's mother asked. Simo looked very handsome in his yellow expensive T-shirt on which he had squandered twenty levs in the sports store. His black corduroys were excellent, too, although they were spattered up to the belt with splashes of dry mud.

"She..." he muttered his eyes glued to the holes in the asphalt. "She won't come."

Everybody shut up. One could hear the clouds move in the sky and the stones wobble in the ancient walls of the fortress.

Not even the little kids said anything.

They surely thought there was no girl with green eyes. How could a girl in her right mind lie to Simo, how could she refuse to come over and live with him below the Krakra fortress? It was so beautiful there: one hour by the express train and you reached Sofia, three hours and you'd wake up in Greece! You could go to Portugal or Spain, you'd only have to catch some train and beat it. Why should you stay there if you didn't have a girl? It was not worth it.

"Why isn't she coming? Fatma asked. "I know her. She wouldn't lie to you."

Simo didn't say anything. He stood silent staring at the asphalt and it was a pity he was in such a yellow T-shirt so bright and ostentatious that everybody stared at him.

"Well, she will come next Thursday," the eldest sister's husband said. "Cheer up, guys. Let's drink bottoms up. For Simo!"

"Cheers" they all half-heartedly muttered and started crooking the elbow or sipping at the delicious brandy which had nothing to do with the swill, then the children ate the pork chops thinking they could guzzle them all at one gulp. Even the grown-ups were of the same opinion because the broiled pieces of tender meat tasted so good and virtually melted in your mouth.

"Don't get upset, man," his youngest sister's husband consoled him. "She'll come some other day."

Simo did not hear him. He stood silent, a tall, slim guy, who looked suddenly very thin and could not understand it was raining, and could not feel it was cold in June. The rain became heavier but he did not go under the roofing iron where all the rest had gathered together.

He stood alone, immobile in the rain, unable to think, unwilling to hide in his house, the only one with a marble roof in the whole neighborhood.