

## Köpenick, Berlin, the beginning of the new century

„This isn't you,” she said in a tremulous voice. „I don't recognize you like this.”

Regaining control, she repeated, „This isn't you.”

He flared up. „You, how do you know who I am? You think you know me so well? After a few months?”

„It's been almost a year,” she corrected him gently, but with a clear note of reproach.

„Eh, and so what? You're reading me like an open book, is that it? Come on, enlighten me then: who am I?”

„You are good,” she said with the faith of the newly converted. „What we have here is someone else.”

„Blah blah, the dinosaurs were good, that's why they died. But me, I'm still alive.”

„Let's not quarrel, please! You know I can't eat baguette.”

„Rubbish! Of course you can. You just don't try, that's all.”

„But why have I got to try! Is it so important?”

„It's important for me,” he insisted.

„But why? I don't understand. What's come over you? I hardly recognize you.”

„I simply want you to show you love me!”

She cast him a tearful look. She didn't expect to win so easily, but still this sometimes made him take a step back. But not this time.

„Ask something else,” she begged, looking at the floor. „Whatever you want.”

„I don't want anything else, just this! To bite off a little bit of baguette. This smallest one.”

She said nothing. She was well used to his pettiness, although he was seldom so explicit. He usually used more delicate methods, worked with hints and whims, sighs, dark looks, outbursts of wounded pride, stuff like that. She was happy to leave him with the impression that his laddish game had gone unnoticed. Sometimes she even found something sweet in all of

this, something immature, so defenceless, so childish... She conceded that the reason for this weakness was probably cloaked in her need to take care of somebody, in unfulfilled maternal instincts, in the blessed sense that she had managed to find a being, more in need of protection than herself — who, when all was said and done, was good and tender, even if he didn't know it. Exactly that, good, and nothing less! He would begin to trust her, sooner or later. She had sworn by everything holy that she would overcome his ox-like determination, she'd melt his armour with caresses, she would drive his true ego out into the open — the one which was deeply hidden, held captive, trodden over, whose existence no one suspected, him least of all. The seeming impossibility of this task stoked her ambition to greater heights, kindled a new flame within her that made her feel alive again, so alive.

She had dug her fingers into this task in desperation — no, with the strength of the proverbial drowning man reaching for a straw — and she had no intention to give up, whatever the cost. Not so much out of gratitude. Not because of his obvious need for protection — after so many years spent in the oldest profession, a man who could not be a man was for her something like a pleasant distraction, at least for a time. She didn't do it just out of love, although, yes, she really had fallen in love, childishly, desperately, as only an adolescent could fall in love, not a mature woman. No, no, no. She did it for her own sake, simply because all this added to her sense of self, something she thought otherwise had been lost a long time ago.

„Well, so, are we going to be gaping at each other the whole evening like this?”

Oh yes, of course. He never gives up easily.

„I can't,” she repeated tiredly. „Anything else, just not a baguette.”

He banged his fist on the table. The glasses rattled. „Stubborn as a donkey! Spoilt girl can't do it! And why? Because she can't. End, full stop. I could as well try to stand on my head — the result is always the same. And yet we talk the big talk.”

„I really do love you,” she said. „Please don't force me to prove it.”

„Well, me, I don't believe you. If you can't do one trivial thing like this—”

„This isn't trivial. Not for me.”

## Prespan, somewhere in Bulgaria in the 80s

„But why? Tell me why!”

She was silent. God forgive him, he knows not what he does.

„You see, it’s nothing but pig-headedness! Just pig-headedness, nothing else!”

She gathered all her strength to suppress the scream, which was straining to break out — not so much from her throat, as straight from her chest, and even from lower down, somewhere towards her kidneys, her loins. But she could not hold back her tears. She began to snuffle like a child, she shook. Her knees weakened, the room suddenly darkened. She only just managed to grab one of the chairs: she sat — or fell — in it. Coloured circles swirled in front of her eyes, her throat tightened and heaved, reluctant to let air pass.

No, no, no! This isn’t him. This isn’t him! Everything is just a test, the next test.

Here now, she thought, she would pull herself together, hold out, win through. He doesn’t even know what power there is inside me. He is just a sad, immature child. A child who plays games. A child who plays games. A child who plays games.

When she felt a little better, she opened her eyes. He was holding the piece of baguette in front of her mouth.

Her body reacted before her mind took in what was happening. The sight acted on her like a punch in the stomach. She didn’t even manage to moan before the contents of her stomach, the whole festive mixture of wickedly expensive food and wine — plus all the love and dedication which, no doubt, he had put into the dinner preparation — now covered his favourite trampled slippers.

Instinctively he went to lash out, but at the last second he managed to hold back his hand. „Don’t forget that I’ve never hit you! Never forget that!”

He turned and without another word he disappeared in the direction of the bathroom.

The heat filled her with disquiet, prompting her to strip off and roll like a donkey through the thistles, yelling herself hoarse. Her breasts, now fully formed, could hardly bear the touch of her thin blouse. Sweat mixed with dust covered her in thin smelly grease, which she wanted to scrape off, slowly and viciously — along with her skin, along with everything that made her feel like an alien from outer space. But there could be no question of a second bath. In any case, her mother was forever moaning that she wasted too much water with this continual washing.

From when she reached fifteen, everything around had begun to seem ugly, desolate, gloomy and wretched. So wretched. The little town lost all its charm: its carefree kindness suddenly disappeared like a mask wiped off an old clown, revealing a face she had never noticed until now — the rotten loose teeth of the tumbledown old houses, the malevolent eyes of the concrete blocks, the cracked earth turned grey from dust. The heat — at once the lover, the mother and the stepmother of this patch of land — had withered it to the point when all colour had deserted it and now it lay exhausted under the bright blue sky.

„Maria!” her mother shouted to her from the scorched-white summer kitchen which was filling the yard with the smell of roast peppers and garlic sauce. „Where have you hidden again, lazybones? Didn’t I tell you to wash the dishes! When your father gets home, I’ll tell him everything. I mean it!”

I don’t give a damn if you tell him, thought Maria. Anyway he doesn’t see anything beyond my tits, the old billy-goat. „He’s not my father!” she cut back as always when her mother used this word. Then she stood up and reluctantly traced her foot through the dust, preparing herself for the kitchen’s hellish heat. Inside it was at least fifty degrees. „The water’s stopped. What can I do?”

„It’ll stop, girl!” her mother scolded angrily. „When you’re taking three baths a day like some posh whore. Come on now, grab the demijohns and go down to the stream so at least we’ve got drinking water. Don’t look at me like that! Get going! By the time you doll yourself up, it’ll be dark.”

Maria was about to shoot back a tart reply but thought better of it. The old goose would have that to grind her with till the evening, if she got really mad. And then she wouldn't be allowed out to the party with the student brigadiers.

She grabbed the two wicker-covered demijohns and set off down towards the stream and the Salabash water tap. The sharp edge of the willow twig, broken right on top of the demijohn's handle, as always sank painfully into her palm. Later, when they were filled and heavy, the demijohns would make her hands bloody. Everyone else had now bought new plastic demijohns, but her skinflint mother still sent her out with the old ones. Just try to say something to her and she would reply, „When I was your age...” Like she'd ever been her age! She'd been born old. Old and spiteful. She'd been like this always, for sure.

The cool by the river, under the shade of the poplars, relieved her a little. She carefully set off over the slippery stones, bent down over the huge stone trough and began to splash her face but stopped in shock: the water in the trough had a strange pink colour, and stuck on its edges were clots of blood, from which long red threads ran out, gradually disappearing into the channel, flowing into the river.

Maria looked around in fright. She was ready to shout for help, but felt ashamed of her fear and realised that from down there her voice would scarcely be heard. Then her eyes made out a bloody shirt in the undergrowth and now she was really scared. She forgot the demijohns and rushed headlong up towards the street. The slippery stones didn't miss the chance to play her a dirty trick, she slipped just before reaching the bank and fell heavily.

In spite of the pain in her bruised knees she straightened up, gritted her teeth and limped upwards. Then she heard a voice that made her freeze. „Hang on there, yo! Why are you running off?”

The voice was male, but lacking in strength, a little childlike even, with comically whistling high notes amongst the deeper, mature modulations. This calmed her a little. She turned carefully and cautiously looked back.

Yuck, a Pikey, she thought with instinctive revulsion, turned to run off again, but remembered the forgotten demijohns, and halted on the spot, frowning at the gypsy lad lying on the ground.

The boy was clearly younger than her, maybe thirteen, fourteen at most, but as tall and fit as a young tree. What's more he was endowed with that natural feline grace which some folk possess from birth. She couldn't help looking at his bare stomach, on which the muscles, barely covered by the thin layer of skin, were outlined as in a textbook picture. She felt embarrassed and hurriedly averted her eyes — and then saw the enormous bloodstain on his left trouser leg. She gasped in shock, covering her mouth with both hands. The boy looked at her calmly, even somewhat mockingly. She felt embarrassed again and adjusted her dress which had risen high above her knees.

The boy giggled and bared a row of teeth, dazzling white in the sun.

„What are you staring at me for? Haven't you seen a girl before?” she snapped but then looked at the bloodstain again. She said more gently, „Who messed you up like this?”

„My brother, Purko,” he answered dismissively. „But he didn't get away with it.”

Maria gasped again. Purko, a big one-eyed gypsy who had stayed behind for years in the third class until eventually he reached school-leaving age and relieved the school of his presence was the scarecrow whom the town's mothers used to scare their children.

„He ain't going to be shaving soon,” the boy added and took out a shiny razor blade from his pocket. „I messed him up with his own razor.”

Maria looked desperately towards the demijohns, which were lying below by the water tap at an unreachable distance. How would she return home without them, without water? She looked towards the street, but the heat had driven away every living soul and help was out of the question.

The boy kept staring at her. Then, as though the wind blew him, he unexpectedly dropped his head and swayed to one side. Maria wrung her hands in terror and helplessness. She looked again at the empty street

then back at the bloody stain increasing before her eyes. So in the end, she conquered her fear and started down.

He lay without moving, smeared in blood and mud, as though dead. If he hadn't been talking to her just now, she would never have dared approach him. She managed her every step only with supreme effort, as if facing a whirlwind. At last she came close enough to cautiously touch him — at first with her foot, more precisely the tips of her bare toes. He didn't move.

This gave her courage and she crouched beside him, trying not to dirty even more her already soiled dress. The wound in his thigh gaped threateningly. Closing her eyes, she pulled down his trousers. He was wearing just the remains of an old tracksuit, faded and mended more than an old man's glove. She searched for something that she could use as a bandage and lit on the shirt. She twisted it round a few times and, panting from the effort, tightened it up round his thigh above the artery.

This had limited success: the blood continued to flow, although more slowly. Then she remembered what her mother had taught her, and snapped off one of the thicker branches from a willow close by. She pushed it under the shirt-ropes and started to turn it relentlessly as if it was a mangle. The lad moaned but she continued to tighten it until the wound stopped pulsing. Then she tied the branch securely so it wouldn't come loose and looked approvingly at her work. She knelt down by him, ready to wait for as long as necessary.

In the hospital with her mother she had seen naked men since she was a child, but this was different. Here for the first time she was alone with this male nakedness — intriguing, if not a little frightening. The boy's male organs, still not fully matured and yet of impressive size, attracted her gaze. She wanted to give herself a slap for staring at some gypsy like this. After a while she made up her mind to go — her mother was surely beginning to be worried — but then thought he could die if left alone.

In the pocket of his tracksuit she found a packet of cigarettes. She lit one, took a puff, choked and threw it away in fury. Rubbish, of course. What else would a gypsy smoke?

At long last the boy began to stir. He opened his eyes and looked her straight in her eye, still with a dose of mischief, as though nothing had happened.

„You're beautiful," he said, licking his cracked lips. „Like a peach."

„Quit babbling rubbish," Maria cut him off. „Look at this mess. Won't take much for the church bell to be ringing for you."

„The church bell don't ring for gypsies," he giggled. „We sort ourselves out gypsy-style."

Just look at you, pikey guttersnipe, Maria thought, suppressing the pleasant sensation his hungry eyes left on her skin. You are practically dying and it's still that on your mind. Gypsy stuff.

„Can you stand up?" she asked. „You have to drag yourself to the hospital. The wound needs cleaning and stitching. Otherwise you won't last long."

„Huh!" he grunted. „Hospitals are for sick people."

„Cut the crap!" she said firmly and stood up. The lad looked hungrily up her skirt but she made no attempt to move back. „Can you put your trousers on? Get up. Time's running."

„Time costs nothing," he replied sulkily but he bent double and managed to get into his torn tracksuit bottoms without moaning once. But then his face grew grey and glistened with tiny beads of sweat. „You, where did you learn doctoring?"

„My mum's a nurse. Can you walk on your own?"

„If you want I could carry you." This time his voice wasn't cocky, it was more emotionless, somehow resigned.

Why don't I like this? A cheeky bugger is easier to resist.

„If my brother hears you, he'll smash your bones," she lied to feel more confident. „Wait a bit so I can fill the demijohns."

His eyes hovered over her legs like spots of sunlight. The tickling sensation didn't leave off for a second. She got angry with herself and had half a mind to snap at him, but then she thought, Why not? Anyway, no one's looking. Up on the street was different, of course. Difficult or not, the pikey would have to drag himself to the hospital. Being seen together with him was the last thing she wanted.

„What’s your name?” she asked over her shoulder. The tap hardly flowed: the demijohns were filling with irritating slowness.

„Stamko,” he replied. „And you?”

„Maria. What did your brother cut you with like that?”

„An axe.”

She looked at him in shock, almost overturning the nearly full demijohn. „Why?”

„Because—” His eyes darted back and forth, he scratched his stomach, giggled again. „Because of a girl. One of ours. I was just fooling with her, nothing serious,” he added quickly, avoiding her look.

„And you’d fight because of?” she shot back, unexpectedly angry. „Come on, get going. What are you staring at?”

He hopped about behind her back like a sparrow. She allowed him a good dose of suffering, enjoying his helplessness, then waved contemptuously and began to search the undergrowth. With her usual efficiency, she found what she was looking for almost immediately — a strong branch he could use as a staff. „Here, hold on,” she said, holding the branch out from a distance, still hostile. „And pull yourself out quicker, look at the time.”

Stamko looked at her sadly and fluttered his eyelashes. Long eyelashes like a girl’s.

She caught herself staring, then turned her back on him. „Will you get going or do I call an ambulance?”

„Thank you,” he murmured. „But on these rocks—”

„Like you got in, you’ll get out,” was her harsh reply.

She grabbed the demijohns, moaned from pain — she’d forgotten about her wounded hand — and limped up over the stone steps. Pah, gypsy stuff.

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„It can’t be good, this business,” said Grandpa Boncho, looking at the tree covered in ladybirds. „God doesn’t make any creature in vain. Why so many ladybirds this summer, eh? It’s a sign, a sign from God, but who’s going to understand it?”

Nikola boy stretched out lazily, picked out a larger bug and began to turn it slowly round his fingers. He had no desire to squash it or even break its legs. If you squeezed them hard, they released a yellow liquid, smelly and unpleasant. Not so unpleasant as to save their lives but still unpleasant, especially if it’s the twentieth or thirtieth ladybird you’re forced to kill your time with.

He fumbled and took out of the back pocket of his shorts a handmade magnifying glass. Just a few more dots on the back and he could show it to his biology teacher. „Look, Comrade Vurbanova, I found a ladybird with thirteen spots.” Or fifteen. Or eighteen. Actually that might not be such a good idea. She looked on him with suspicion anyway whenever he tried to do something interesting. Two or three disembowelled frogs, big deal! What a hullabaloo she raised, as if it was people disembowelled. His father had to ring the crazy young teacher personally to calm her.

And the ladybird kicked and kicked. Let it kick, it’s her last time. The boy held her tighter, turned the shiny back upwards and began to burn new extra dots. The trick was of course to do them so they didn’t look different from the old real ones. Anyone can burn dots into a ladybird’s back, but not everyone can do it well...

Look at you, bloody ladybird. It simply would not die. It carried on kicking, even though on its back were scorched three, four, five extra dots. The boy was so engrossed in his task that he didn’t notice how the old man had sneaked up behind him and was watching him, gaping in shock. Only when the bony old fingers grabbed his ear and mercilessly pulled him up, did he realise, but too late.

„Nikola, what are you doing, you rascal!” the old man shrieked, shaking in fury. „Are you human? What are you? How can you be torturing a little creature, eh, donkey! What if I grabbed you and burnt holes with that glass? Then we’d see what you’d do!”

„Let me go, let me go!” the boy screamed, lifted up on his toes, trembling from fear and helpless rage. „I’ll tell Mum, Dad, I’ll tell everyone!”

„You can tell the priest’s wife if you want!” the old man shouted, red in the face and sweating, his cap pushed back. „I’ll pull off this ear so as to keep you warm, rascal of rascals!”

„Dad! What are you doing? Let go of the boy right now! How can you be hurting him like this?”

At last! His mother had appeared at the downstairs window, hair tousled, face puffed up from her afternoon nap, and he quickly screamed even louder, now certain of his imminent release. He tore himself from the old man’s weakening grip, escaped to a safe distance and began to gesture and make faces through bitter tears. His grandfather doddered after him, raising his stick angrily, but this was an empty threat. The youngster darted hither and thither, dancing in front of him like a devil on springs, now sure of his safety.

„Hooligan!” Grandpa Boncho gave up on chasing the boy and sat down on the bench, put his hand on his chest, gasping. „God protect us from hooligans!”

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Ranko Balkanski appeared quite noiselessly, as always. He’d learnt to do this while yet young, long before the term „forest guerrilla” turned into something more than a contemptuous label reserved for folk like him — vagrant, outcast who never fed their mothers, backwoodsman. Later, younger men began to award themselves the label like a garland, at some point everyone wanting to be a forest guerrilla — he had nothing to do with this but the police didn’t see the distinction overmuch so they locked him up too, along with every Tom, Dick and Harry, and they beat him until something in his head turned. From then on everyone called him „Crazy Ranko”. But his guerrilla capabilities had stuck with him, as his knowledge of the forest, where he still felt best, far from the spite of folk.

The gypsy stood helpless on one leg, supported by a tree branch, down below by the tap. Ranko instinctively started to turn back, but he was very thirsty, and anyway he’d never suffered a bad turn from a gypsy, so he conquered his worries and started down the steps. The boy was smoking a

cigarette and didn’t say anything even after he’d seen him. Ranko dipped his head into the stone trough and allowed the coolness of the water to penetrate him slowly, in sweet, intoxicatingly pleasant sips. Then he sat on the trough’s edge. The water wetted from below and that too was nice.

He was a dry and slight old man, a bag of bones, but otherwise strong and enduring, weathered by the winds and sun, with nothing spare on his body. Everything about him was brown — his face, hands, greasy cap, jacket and trousers, parts of an old suit, which maybe came down all the way from his father’s tailoring workshop, just like the shirt, whose half rotting cuffs showed themselves far beyond the hopelessly shortened jacket. Only the galoshes on his feet were of an unclear bluey-grey colour — and his eyes, forever restless, forever darting hither and thither.

Ranko splashed his grey bristly face all over and let the water run down his back and his chest under his clothes. He closed his eyes and sat. Here by the river the heat was bearable.

The lad offered him the packet of cigarettes, helpfully pushing one forward. Ranko nodded his head in refusal. The boy shrugged and put the packet back in his pocket. The two stayed for a while, each a prisoner of his own silence.

„Well, you’re not going to be able to get out of here on your own,” Ranko said eventually.

„Won’t be able,” the lad agreed.

„Because you smoke cigarettes, that’s why.” Ranko struck a reproachful note.

The lad shrugged again. Everyone in the town knew old Ranko.

„And now what’ll you do?” Ranko asked, after the next long pause.

„I’ll wait until my folks fetch me.”

„This blood, is it yours?”

„And Purko’s. But less of his,” the lad answered hesitantly.

„Where is he?”

„Ran off. Ages ago.”

„I’m sure he doesn’t smoke, eh?”

The lad snorted like a young stallion, banging his hand on his healthy thigh. Ranko took offence. „Why are you giggling, lad?”

„Because he started smoking through his arse too, when I clipped him.” He felt in his pocket and proudly showed the razor. Ranko started backwards and almost fell into the trough. „Put it away, put it away, so I don’t see that thing! Devilish stuff!”

„Why, don’t you shave?”

The old man mechanically stroked his chin but said nothing. The lad shrugged and put the razor back..

„Okay, I’ll be on my way,” Ranko said and rose. The bottom of his trousers was wet and pleasantly cool. „I’ve got work to do, not like you.”

„Stamko!” Over their heads a woman’s shrieking voice shocked both men. „Stamko, you good-for-nothing, may God kill you!”

There followed a volley of incomprehensible Gypsy words, full of much „krr” and „grr” sounds. Down the steps, an old woman came, quickly, quickly, in vivid loose shalwars, a waistcoat and a scarf covering her head. The boy lowered his head, like a stubborn bull calf. Old Ranko pulled back to a safe distance and watched silently while the mother gathered her prodigal son, here with blows, there with caresses, there with tears.

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Angel came home from work tipsy, uncommonly jolly, even adorned with a stock flower stuck carelessly behind his ear. He was a handsome, fit man with a dimple in the middle of his chin, with grey, usually unfriendly eyes that, under the influence of alcohol, had softened and now looked out on the world with a measure of mockery. Maria felt his gaze sweep over her like a hand trying to feel out in the dark the form and even colour of an unknown object. This feeling of being examined slowly and carefully, as if she was a bug under a microscope, unsettled her. Down by the water fountain it was different. Still quite tickly, but different.

„Angel, when are you finally going to fix the power outlet in the kitchen?” started her mother, biting at him the moment he appeared. „Today I got an electric shock, only just didn’t kill me.”

„Ah,” he said. „Aha.” As always his face gave nothing away. Cold, shrewd, a hunter’s look. „I’ll fix it when I have the time.”

Her mother continued to look reproachfully at him.

„You know I can’t at the moment. I’ve got this big a pile of investigations.”

„You’re quite dolled up for so much work,” was her sulky comment. „And once more you smell of perfume.”

„Once Sevda, always Sevda,” he replied jokingly, but with that undertone of finality that always made her mother shut up. „Depends on who I’m interrogating.”

„But aren’t we supposed to be working on perestroika? Aren’t you going to loosen the grip on these wretches? We changed their names. Now what — are we going to change their heads as well?”

„Shut your trap!” he interrupted her, suddenly sober, his professional voice cutting in. „You stupid goose, you’ll get me in trouble with your tongue when you don’t know how to use it!”

Sevda hunched up, but continued to wheeze provocatively. Maria turned and looked at her curiously. She didn’t recognise her mother like this.

„What are you staring at? Go straight to your bedroom!” Sevda yelled hysterically. „And wash your dress, do you hear! You messy hussy!”

„Don’t take it out on the girl!” Angel cut her off, quietly but powerfully. „I’ve told you a hundred times, if you don’t know what you’re talking about, keep your mouth shut! You’re not to say one more word about the Turks!”

„Hang on, I thought there were no Turks in Bulgaria.”

Angel froze on the spot. He slowly put his briefcase on the table. He turned his head towards Sevda, stiff as a wolf, then said without averting his gaze, „Maria, go to your room.”

She decided she had nothing to lose. „Can I go to the party?” she asked with an innocent look.

He just waved his hand. She flew out of the door, happy as a lark.

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Nine o’clock was approaching. His father was late as usual. In spite of the open doors and windows the heat continued to spill out, greasy and

stifling. Nikola sat bored at the table and squashed bread into balls to aim at the flies. His grandfather had long ago lain down, in the cool below. Only the cripple, his uncle Georgi, sat beside him, twisted into his pose of habitual passivity. His mother clattered plates angrily in the kitchen — either she still hadn't forgiven his Grandpa, or she'd found something else to poison herself with. The boy was also angry — and hungry. Always wait, wait, wait. And when his father got home, he would say again that he'd eaten at work, he'd sit a little with them, he'd ask distractedly about how school was going. Nikola would explain that he was on holiday. The father would give him that judgemental stare, as though his son was to blame for there being such a thing as a summer holiday. And then he'd go to work in his office. And that would be that. But come what may they had to wait. Wait for a letter from beyond the grave.

He changed the trajectory slightly and pinged his uncle's ear with one of the bread-balls. Georgi grunted angrily, shook the fist he was able to move, grimaced with the moving part of his face. Nikola lazily stuck out his tongue.

„What do you want now?“ came his mother's angry voice from the kitchen. „I told you already, you have to wait. There's order in this house. This isn't a bachelor pad.“

Her reddened face appeared by the door. Georgi grunted again, inarticulately, pointed at the boy, strained his throat to say something, he practically wept with the effort. Stefana looked suspiciously at her son. „Nikola, you haven't been up to some mischief?“

„No!“ he replied angrily. „For a whole half hour, I'm telling him we have to wait, but who listens?“

Stefana lifted her eyes to the heavens and swallowed like a martyr. Then she turned, fetched Georgi's food from the kitchen and bashed it on the table. „There, eat then! So you—“ She swallowed the end of her sentence, bent over and started sorting out her brother's bib. He grunted again and started to pull away from her. She pulled him back unceremoniously, scooped a little of the puree and pushed the spoon into his shaking hand.

„Just be careful how you eat, do you hear me? This carpet is getting frayed from all the washing.“

„But what about me?“ Nikola asked with an innocent air. „Do I also need to have a stroke in order to get some food?“

„You shut up, you scamp!“ she shrieked. „When I bash you, you'll have a stroke, you!“

Nikola tensed and gave her an evil look. Through the open window there was a racket — the neighbours were having a row as well. Stefana drew back a chair and sat down, hiding her face in her hands.

Nikola felt how his stomach clenched. Eww, it was starting...

Her shoulders hook and she started to sob, noiselessly at the start, then more uncontrollably, gulping painfully, weeping, hiccupping, struggling for breath after every extended „u-u-uh-u“, „u-u-uh-u“, „u-u-uh-u“, which the boy took each time like a blow to the diaphragm. Georgi began to groan too and turned in his chair, back and forth, almost overturning his plate. Stefana continued to weep until she had no more breath. Then she stood up and without another word, she fetched the food from the kitchen, filled the boy's plate and pushed it under his nose. „Eat!“

Nikola swallowed. His throat was dry. „No. I'm not hungry.“

„What?“ Her voice snapped threateningly.

Nikola could well imagine what would follow, but at the sight of the food he really did feel sick. „I'm not hungry,“ he repeated and tensed, ready for her blow.

She let him wait long enough, before she bashed him on the back of his neck. A punishment must be felt for real, for it to work.

Nikola gave a muffled scream, but didn't burst out crying. At thirteen no one cried at a slap.

„Eat!“ she repeated.

He lifted the spoon as though it was a yoke, stirred the soup, smelled it. „No. I can't. It doesn't smell good.“

Georgi mooed something. Stefana started up and exploded, „You keep out of what's not your business, do you hear! I've had it up to here with you. Up to here! You idiot!“

Georgi curled up in silence. Stefana turned to Nikola, grabbed him by the ear, and spoke slowly, without pulling or raising her voice. „Listen and

listen good. Today I've been cooking two hours and I've been working for both of you, lazybones and sloths. With a lot of love, with a lot of patience. This soup smells good, you hear me? The soup smells good, because it's been made with love. Come on now, repeat!"

„The soup... smells...“

The boy began to whimper and wriggle. Stefana tightened her grip a little. „How does the soup smell?“

„Good,” he cried.

„And why does it smell good?“

„Because it's made with love.”

„Good. Come on then, eat!”

Nikola dipped in with no enthusiasm, left half to drip back into the plate, brought his spoon to his mouth and began again to sniff it. Stefana tried to practise a little more patience, beginning to count in her head.

„It's hot,” he said, trying to follow her movements from the corner of his eye. „It has to cool down first.”

„It's not hot. And it's tasty. Eat!”

He puffed out and sipped a little liquid. He pushed it from one side of his mouth to the other, tried to put off the inevitable at least for a while, but under his mother's unflinching pressure, in the end he surrendered. The soup fell into his stomach like a stone.

Stefana relaxed a little. „Come on now, carry on. I want to see the plate empty.”

He closed his eyes, dipped in, and deposited another spoonful. Another stone in his stomach. And one more. And one more.

Stefana had already decided that the battle was won when the catastrophe occurred. The latest stone had just plopped down to join the others, with a soft, but sonorous rumbling, which the boy felt quite clearly. It seemed that everything was going normally. And at this precise moment his stomach suddenly imposed a will of its own, quite independent of his own. The soup turned into a typhoon that erupted upwards. The boy desperately clenched his jaws, but to no avail. The plate, by now almost empty, filled up again, this time with a liquid, different in colour and smell. The fountain spouting from

his mouth spilled over the lacquered table top, then onto the carpet and his mother's feet. The cripple Georgi, with an overflow of unexpected energy, managed to overturn his plate to the front. The yellowing puree generously mixed in and smothered the pastel brown stain Nikola had produced. A total and perfect silence fell over the room.

„You're not getting away with this!” Stefana's voice rapped out.

Nikola sat, not daring to move. His mother's voice provoked in him a paralysis. She knew it as well — and took her time in taking action. She needed to think up a suitable punishment for this outrage.

Her face, which up till now had been a little flushed, now grew white with concentrated energy. She remained motionless for a whole minute, completely forgetting everything around her. The other two sat immobile, like tin targets in the line of fire. Only the creak of Georgi's chair gave him away, but it was quiet and submissive, not at all irritating or grating.

„Okay,” said Stefana at last, in a voice that promised nothing good. „Supper's over. Wipe the table, collect everything up.”

Nikola looked at her incredulously. Life had taught him otherwise.

„But leave that plate,” she added, looking him straight in the eyes. „You still have to eat it up!”

„A-a-a-h,” Georgi moaned and almost overturned his chair.

„As for you, off to bed!” she ordered. „And bear in mind, if you shit yourself tonight, you'll be cleaning it up yourself tomorrow!”

When a few hours later the judge came home from work, he found his son asleep in the living room in front of a still full plate. Everyone else had gone to bed. He carefully lifted the boy in his arms, carried him to the bedroom, tucked him in without undressing him. Then he went to their bedroom. His wife lay as always with her back turned towards him and tried hard to breathe steadily, but he knew that she wasn't asleep. She never slept until he came home.

„You've outdone herself today,” he murmured while undressing. „Whatever you cooked, even the cats wouldn't eat.”

Stefana burrowed her head into the pillow and began to cry — quietly, almost soundlessly, as only she knew how, whenever she wanted.

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Bullhead sized up the company with a fatherly gaze. They were all strong good-old-boys, labourers — some from the quarry, some from the cement works, others from the collective farm's repair shop. He liked being surrounded by strong men, he felt confident in such company, among his own. And even among them he stood out like a rock amidst gravel. A monster of a man, six feet tall, with a mighty chest and enormous stomach, bearded and hairy, massive, put together for everything other than trivialities. The frame of the former world champion still could be seen from beneath the huge layers of fat he had gained since leaving off active sport. Here in his home village, he had nothing to prove — everyone knew him, everybody was proud of him, everyone accepted him without pointing a finger at his flaws. Better to be first in the village than second in Sofia. Bullhead knew his place.

In spite of the cool of the early morning his forehead was covered in sweat, his shirt undone to his waist. The empty beer bottles, exactly nineteen in number, were carefully lined up in front of him, separate from the rest. He stretched a hand backwards and took the last, twentieth bottle, which someone eagerly handed him.

„Stancho, give me the funnel!” he ordered sharply. „How much time have I still got?”

„Up to two minutes,” called out his constant companion, Stancho Abazata — dry, wrinkled and, as always, restless as a weasel.

The lads giggled their approval. Bullhead had once more thought up something to work them up with a new turn.

„I'll drink the last bottle through the funnel,” Bullhead announced, and stretched his neck back. „Just watch.”

He shoved the funnel into his mouth, took a deep breath and started pouring. With their eyes on stalks, the men stood up to see better. This was no trick — he emptied the contents of the bottle, non-stop, just as though he was pouring it into a barrel. He took the funnel out of his mouth, let out

a deafening burp, wiped his mouth with his sleeve and joined the empty bottle with the others. The lads roared their approval.

„Just a second!” Foxy Stoiko broke in, still hoping for a miracle. „We ain't finished. He's got to last out another fifteen minutes without taking a piss.”

Bullhead gave him an amused look, took out a cigarette, lit it. „Uncle Rachko,” he shouted. „Give us another crate. Foxy'll pay for both.”

„Still fifteen minutes to go. Still fifteen minutes,” Foxy tried protesting, but the band's guffaws beat him. He waved his hand and began to search his pockets for money. „Okay, okay, you win.”

„I was doing this all the way back to when you used to piss your pants, Foxy,” said Bullhead condescendingly. „Don't lose your rag. You're not the first to lose this bet. Tell him, Abaza.”

Abaza chuckled quietly but said nothing. Uncle Rachko brought in the beer crate, puffing, „Lads, all night I've been going along with whatever you come up with. Now come on and give me a break. This is the last one. No more.”

„Save it for your enemies, Uncle Rachko.” Bullhead gave him a leaden stare. „As long as we're paying, this pub is ours. Come on, serve it up. I've got a thirst on.”

The old man gave him a dirty look but held his tongue. He turned and limped back.

„And bring us a little salami. There ain't any snacks left,” Bullhead shouted after him. „No need to cut it, I've got my penknife.”

He took out the big hunting knife, which he always had with him and stabbed it into the table with a flourish. The bottles fell over, to the sound of smashing glass. Uncle Rachko looked over his shoulder, shook his head, and hurried to find salami.

The first rays of the sun began to light up the small but compact village square. Here and there from the yards mooing and bleating could be heard: early-rising villagers were getting ready to drive out their animals. The new Cultural Centre, a present from Comrade Dencho Paladinski, Bratoevo's greatest son, shone in the sunshine as though it had been polished. The day would be hot: they could feel it already.

„Hey, isn't that Vasko, the young cop?” shouted one of the company.  
„Look how he's rushing, making out he don't see us.”

Bullhead slowly turned, red eyes squinting in the pointed direction,  
„Aha. He's pretending, 'cos it don't suit him. Vasco, Vasco, you come here, mate! Come here! I'm talking to you! Don't you go all frozen to the spot, come here!”

Vasko, a stranger in the village, jumped at the commanding voice, adjusted his cap, looked around, then turned and hurried towards the pub yard. „Good morning,” he said meekly. „What's up, Bullhead?”

„What's up? Am I supposed to tell you what's up or you tell me? Eh? Come on, think about it!”

„Bullhead, I told you already.”

„What you told me, I wiped my arse with it,” Bullhead interrupted him and looked towards the knife fixed into the table. „But what I told you, do you remember it? In Bratoevo a Turk has never set foot, nor ever will! This here's a Bulgarian village. You reckon that now they've sent you from Prespan, you can give the orders, eh Vasko? Yesterday again you drove a bus of snipped ones here, just to get folk angry.”

„But Bullhead, the co-operative farm's dying, man. It needs workers.”

„If you need workers, you'll find Bulgarians, even if you need to ship them in from abroad!” Bullhead broke in. Some of the band started to laugh, but Bullhead cut them with his glare. „In this village, Turks have not set foot, and won't ever do. Have you got that?”

„Listen Bullhead, I'll go and I'll complain about you!”

„Who are you going to complain to, you toad!” Bullhead stretched out and grabbed Vasko by his tunic and began to shake him. Buttons scattered as the policeman's cap flew to one side. „Who are you going to complain to? I'm out hunting with Baj Dencho every second month, and I've drunk so much rakia with the judge, and with Bratoev from Prespan, put together it would drown you. And you're set to threaten me, you turd?”

He pushed him offhandedly and Vasco sat on his bottom. Bullhead reached out, took a beer from the crate, opened it with his teeth and gave it to the policeman. „Here, drink a beer for your good health. It might not

have been so easy. And next time, when I tell you something, keep your ears peeled so I don't have to clean them. Here's some snacks, so you don't say I'm stingy.”

Vasko stretched back his head and obediently began to drink the beer, still sitting on the floor. The lads around held their tongues out of respect. Bullhead was a great Bulgarian. A great one, indeed.