

POWER AND RESISTANCE

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History repeats itself; the first time as tragedy, the second as farce, and the third as tragedy and farce together.

Milcho Minkov, part-time philosopher and amateur executioner from Panagyurishte

A tale of 1999

A man who cheated on his wife was once regarded as morally degenerate. An evil man, an evil little man. If he was a Party member, he was said to have made a mistake. Rash, but these things happen. If a bigwig seduced a working man's daughter, his comrades would pat him on the shoulder. *You rogue, you!* And if someone high up in the party collected flings like medals, people would marvel at his seduction skills. That was then. Now morals are pegged to the dollar.

An age of splendour is hurtling to its end, and sliced watermelons lie by the side of the road, glistening deliciously. All hail to the vendors' ingenuity: inject the melon with a couple of drops of urine, and it ripens into a blazing red – a dream of a melon. What an elegant solution, a demonstration of modern efficiency rather than the time-consuming grafting of yesteryear. Our ancestors painstakingly bred pigs with millipedes to boost the production of knuckle of pork. Michurin, hero of roundtables, how on earth did you come to invent a rustproof tractor? Simple, but sophisticated: you crossed it with a potato . . .

Trumpets and fanfares are passé, honking one's horn and flicking the bird are all the vogue, one wheel either side of the centre line, superfluous details in the rear-view mirror, an oil-stained headscarf in the ditch, hunks of home-baked bread, a rotten plum and a Passat, built in 1977, bought on the industrial estate of a small West German town by a political economy student who survived on a bagful of tinned food from home while abroad; a green model, which had stood its owner in good stead until an hour ago, a relic of times of scarcity. The bags are lined up beside the open boot; the wait goes on. It's a real shame that this century is drawing to a close. Is there still time for a rerun, for one last chance to clear the snot from your nose?

No sentimentality, please. The forecasts for the next hundred years are brilliant, there's no reason for us to hang our heads; all batteries are fully charged. In Sevlievo district an old woman creeps out of her house with a cassette recorder. Just as every night for the last ten years. Trembling, she clutches the device to her chest; she presses the record button; she is careful not to make a sound, not a sigh, not a groan, so as not to disturb the voices, the inaudible ones. They came for her brother in the grey hours

of dawn, and he hasn't returned. He's speaking to her - of that the woman is sure. He was sociable, her disappeared elder brother, he was never without friends; companions would cluster around him, and they too would go unheard if his sister didn't stand out in the yard every night holding the cassette recorder, keeping as still as she possibly can so as not to chase away the voices that have remained silent for so long. Once a month her son pulls up in front of the creaking house and climbs the steps with a plastic bag full of empty cassettes in his left hand. He doesn't stay for long; he doesn't have time to taste the strudel she has baked for him. She wraps a large slice in a tea towel for him for the drive home; he gobbles it up when he stops for fuel. When the woman plays the nocturnal recordings in the daytime in her kitchen, the only room she heats in winter, her feet in thick, hand-knitted socks, she hears no voices. She used to keep the cassettes in a cupboard that she could lock. The cupboard is long since full. She closes her tired eyes and waits for the coming night.

Some of the speeding drivers are tense behind the wheel, others steer their vehicle with their thumbs and smoker's cough. Only those who look through tinted windows can clear the obstacles from their path. There are frozen faces; there are faces that look as though they've been washed at too high a temperature - the prison director's face, for instance, who zealously devotes himself to the task of receiving journalists, the kind of concession democracy exacts. A bruise under his right eye, a twitch in his left.

One of the journalists asks, "Did you serve here in the old days?"

"No."

"How long have you worked here?"

"Only since 1980."

"But that was the old days."

"No, they were earlier."

"Earlier?"

"Yes, in the fifties."

Aren't these human creatures delightful? Schnapps all round, a generous shot, and shuffle the cards well: someone will mark them soon enough.

"Now, tell me the truth, just between the two of us, what did you ... with the corpses back then?"

“Buried them somewhere, not on the premises – what an idea! No way – behind the prison, no files, I wasn’t here then, we don’t know anything, they’ll come across some skulls when they’re digging.”

The journalists travel on to Pravez to an international conference on puns and power, keeping costs down, killing two rabbits with one bullet. They’re in a good mood, the slush of winter is gone, they’ve got a decent slice of life ahead of them, the sandglass is equally full top and bottom. They didn’t make a fuss before, so now they can chip in, cautiously, of course, and stealthily. The memory of the inauguration of a semi-conductor plant fizzes opportunely to mind, in that self-same village of Pravez, which they had all exaggeratedly called a town, at the beginning of their sloppily articulated careers. General Secretary Zivkov – lately carried, statesmanlike, to his grave; the journalists were present and wrote a balanced obituary – paid the village of his birth the following tribute:

“It is with extraordinary delight that I open this important, this exceedingly important plant on this day and in this place. And I promise you, comrades: today we have semi-conductors, but tomorrow we shall produce full conductors.”

The journalists laughed as they recalled this daring wisecrack with the window down; anyone who overtakes them without laughing has either heard the joke a thousand times before or didn’t get it.

“No, no. This one’s better. Zivkov gives an anniversary speech: ‘Today one fifth of the world is socialist, but I swear on the heads of Marx, Engels and Khan Krum that it will soon be one tenth.’”

The truck ahead of them splutters.

“That’s the equaliser, my friend. A deserved draw. It’s really tough to choose between them.”

Absolutely agonising.

In a flat on the fourteenth floor of a dormitory town in a satellite state. The price? Used to be a ten-year wait, now ten thousand euros. View of countless prefabricated tower blocks. To the north the foothills of the Plana mountains, to the south the capital’s peak, and on its slopes a villa, a digital fortress, a percent for security. Here the chrysanthemums are watered with cunning. A cramped apartment, a spacious villa.

Two old men who've hoarded life's receipts, saved them in their minds, filed them away in their records. The stars in the sky a distortion, a slipped mask in the mirror.

The century melts away; a strip of bitter sweets is stuck under your tongue, dear fatherland, a ladder with no rungs, you heaven on earth, under the fenugreek corpses await fresh air, there are no limits to your splendour, a pile of urine-injected melons and people sweating with despair on the side of the road. But we hurtle onwards. Whatever you do, don't stop.

KONSTANTIN

Treachery, what is your name? Your address, your collar size? Do you draw a pension? Will you ever retire? Are you writing your memoirs? How many deformed oafs have you cast into the world? Did you teach them to betray everything and everyone?

Some days there isn't enough water pressure for the fourteenth floor. It trickles out of the tap. The plastic buckets are filled in anticipation; the fridge is packed with water bottles. I can go without a shower for the time being. Circumstances barely ever match my frame of mind. From my kitchen window I can see the newspaper kiosk, the bus stop next to it, and opposite it the small bridge over the canal to the market. As soon as the kiosk's shutter goes up in the morning I pull my trousers and jacket over my pyjamas, go down, out, choose my reading material, slightly different every morning. I can afford two newspapers per day. If I buy a third I have to cut back on dinner. I don't find that hard: privation is a matter of practice. A bowl of yoghurt, a slice of bread, and I'm fine. I usually choose 24 HOURS and STANDARD, occasionally WORK + POLITICS, more rarely WORD + DEMOKRAZIJA. Or KAPITAL. No lack of choice, more newspapers than information.

"You don't need to buy the newspaper for a single article, Bai Konstantin, it's a waste."

The owner of the kiosk glances at the open newspaper in my hands and points to the seat at the bus stop. His invitation is a small gesture of magnanimity: I'm unpleasantly touched. From early morning to late in the day he sits in his tidy kiosk, encircled by news that is nothing to him other than the means to earn a crust. The area under his eyes has darkened recently. I gratefully decline; that would feel to me like exploitation; he too needs to count every *lev*.

I drink a cup of herbal tea – left to infuse for seven minutes (my brother's last gift to me was a timer) – and leaf through the papers, each morning with distaste. Politics has always revolted me, even though I've had to engage with it all my life. Anyone who has worked his way through *Das Kapital* in his cell seven times with a leaky biro

dreams of a day when there'll be no need for such books anymore. I had no choice in prison but to study the "classics", like the devil does the Gospel. The diabolical thing about that? The unmasking of their saints!

It doesn't take long to read the papers. I know what I'm looking for and I block out everything else. This is commonly called reading between the lines by people who write between the lines. Measuring the shadow cast by polemics and propaganda makes it possible to draw inferences about the position of the sun. Someone who has mastered this technique can inform himself better in jail than someone who is free, who has the headlines fanned towards him like a pleasant breeze. Over breakfast (a piece of sheep's cheese, a few thick slices of white bread, in summer some watermelon, a couple of plums or apricots, on Sundays a boiled egg) I listen to the eight o'clock news on the radio, then a review of the papers, followed by the main news feature. If there's a more important parliamentary debate I turn on the television. Actually, nothing in this country is important, unless you happen to think (as I do, out of habit, out of obstinacy) that every bit, however incidental, reflects something essential.

In this orderly way time passes. I don't know how other people fill their days. When we meet, once a week on Wednesday morning, my task is to analyse the latest developments. Not everyone can find his way through the hall of mirrors that is politics. The others generally contest matters from a position of ignorance and contradict me with ill-considered arguments. They try to prove that they have a mind of their own, without using it. A widespread malaise. We share a bottle of home-distilled rakia that someone has brought along. Some of us (not many) order a small coffee from the landlord. He serves it with two sugar lumps wrapped in thin paper. There used to be a sugar caster on the table. By the end of our garrulous mornings the sugar caster would be empty. The landlord wouldn't tolerate us here if we hadn't once rubbed his father warm on a leaky boat afloat on ice-cold waters. The men who stirred too much sugar into their coffee held his father's life in their warming hands and prevented him from sustaining frostbite (another man had his leg amputated). All of us sitting at this plain table drinking tap water, a shot of moonshine or a coffee every week, who'd spent our youth in jail or in a camp, were a blot on our relatives' memory for decades. The stain just wouldn't go away, no matter how often the tablecloth of family history was sent for cleaning. As if that wasn't enough for the landlord to curse

his father, the pigheaded man who had spoiled his prospects of a more comfortable, more successful life. Each of us at this table had been through similar things. If you wanted your family to be proud of you, you had to strive to be inconspicuous.

However much we digress, we keep returning to the topic that brings us together. Once a week we talk ourselves into a rage, loudly, and getting louder, until the landlord asks us to tone it down; he says that patrons at a neighbouring table had complained.

“Because of the volume or the content?” I ask.

“You don’t have to straighten out this warped world in my pub!”

He sounds pleading rather than confrontational.

I gaze at the bootlickers at the other tables, and they quickly look away. It’s easy to guess what they think of us . . . Let bygones be bygones (i.e. accept defeat), let the dust settle (meaning, on the graves), why open up old sores (instead of tending new ones). Even at our own table, packed with roughly two centuries of jail time, someone will occasionally talk down our past.

“We were unlucky,” one guy complains. “Our generation has had such terrible luck. We were born into bad times, we never stood a chance.”

“What was so bad about our times?” I interject. “We fought for something we believed in. We were willing to sacrifice ourselves for something higher than our own lives. That was a gift of fate. I wouldn’t want to have lived at any other time.”

“Are you completely sure about that?” asks Toma, one of only a few I would count as a friend.

“I’d prefer to live far in the future.”

“when . . .” Toma adds, as though we’d rehearsed this exchange.

“when there will be no police, no prisons, no ministries and no more bad rakia!”

“Oh Kosjo, you’ll never change.”

“Is that flattery?”

The others shake their heads: typical Konstantin, contrary as ever, as a matter of principle, as a prank. Always has to challenge everything. I know I’m taxing. I let the others have their say now; I button my lip. When the first lunch guests straggle in we’re encouraged to leave. We stand around outside the door, and it takes a while for

us to disperse. A charlatan who spent barely a year in a camp tries to foist some sedatives on me by way of farewell.

“Take things a little easier, mate.”

He pats me on the chest.

“You’ve made enough sacrifices. You’ve done more than anyone else.”

“How right you are,” I reply. “Anyone who made bigger sacrifices is in his grave.”

The lift often breaks down. The building does have a second one, but its ceiling light hasn’t worked for ages. The neighbours’ children are scared of the cramped darkness. Since they found out that I spent weeks and months in a room no bigger than this lift .

..

(How long were you locked up for, Uncle?

How old are you?

Five.

As long as you’ll have lived when you’re twice as old as you are now.

I don’t understand),

. . . they ring my doorbell: “Uncle, can you take us down?” They like my ornate walking stick and my white beard. They play outside among the weeds and rubble until they spot my familiar figure coming back from shopping, a strenuous walk I have to force myself to undertake each time. I press the button between the two lifts with the tip of my stick. It used to light up red. I check my post. The key gets stuck; the box is empty.

Thus time passes. In compulsive alertness. By night I stare at the silhouette of Vitosha. Hammer in some more nails for memories I hung long ago, climb wistfully into a smoker’s taxi, my addiction like a discarded cigarette butt after many years of abstinence. Collecting butt after butt, crumbling the residual tobacco into my palm, stuffing it into the longest of the gathered butts, lighting it, getting out, scaling the never-lit peak of sleeplessness. Vitosha: too easy for mountaineers, too hard for dreamers with canes.

The woman at the end of the corridor – a nurse of an age at which even discreet lipstick looks as though it’s been caked on – worries about me because of my solitary lifestyle. When I ask her why I would need a companion, Dora reels off a list of

conventions, concluding with the maxim that man should share his food with his neighbour. I retort that I share my food with a stray dog, which has to toil its way up fourteen floors because most residents kick it out of the lift. It stays alive despite its crippled front leg, it sleeps outside the nurse's front door, it's fed outside my door, and that's what binds the three of us together. From time to time I peer through the peephole at it, a tenacious beast.

You've got to understand, my fellow travellers used to whisper insistently to me, that we're not as strong as you. It sounded like a reproach, as though being upright were a blemish, as though I were in the wrong because I won't compromise, because I cannot give in. When we got into an argument, which was seldom enough because even arguing with me might arouse suspicion, they accused me of lacking consideration.

Being alone is a chance to get to know an interesting person. I'd flippantly said without thinking and attributed to Montaigne. Dora corrected me a few days later. *It is more tolerable always to be alone than never to be so.* That was Michel de Montaigne. I could perhaps find common cause with La Bruyère's dictum: *Such a great misfortune, not to be able to be alone.* When I objected, she countered that I did indeed wish for the company of men, but only of ones who didn't exist. However, as the only person familiar with my aphorism, I could safely pass it off as my own wisdom. Sleep has deserted Dora, as it has me; she roams around the Internet by night, constructs the ideal hospital between two games of bridge (*Hospital Bridge*, a popular website, especially among people who have to do night shifts) – a model one that deserves the title of City Hospital. She finds out all she can before arranging the intravenous bottle holders she lacks in real life, new runners for bed rails, pillows, back rests, movement bars. She selects all of this down to the smallest detail for the "Hospital of Healthy Intentions" as she has christened it, with a little help from her neighbour at the other end of the corridor. She fills shopping baskets for hours without ever placing an order. She feels like tearing her hair out, with everything being so readily available, she tells me during one of our joint shopping trips, a regular fixture ever since she spotted some rotten tomatoes in my jute bag. She doesn't trust the market traders and has little confidence in my ability to avoid being ripped off.

“Nobody’s ever cheated me out of anything essential.”

She smiles at me like at some pipsqueak bragging above his weight.

“Yes, of course, Mr Sheitanov. Grand words, rotten tomatoes.”

She has a gift for pithy one-liners.

“Three clicks,” she reports with a searching glance at the vegetables. “Three paltry clicks is all it takes and we’d have an electronically adjustable dialysis chair, mobile and stable, all for no more than a thousand dollars. It’s a snip. You should be ashamed of yourselves, selling tomatoes like those.”

“Not everyone has such lofty standards as you, milady.”

“Yes,” I answered, “it’s a snip. An unaffordable snip.”

We could say goodbye in the corridor, but how am I to turn my back on a sad person? Since I found out the kind of biscuits she prefers I always keep a few packets in stock in my cupboard next to the bottle of whiskey I haven’t touched for years, a gift from an emigrant on a trip home.

I’m still halfway healthy, despite my many ailments. Age is as remorseless an enemy as the security police. I’ve been fighting on two fronts for years. The physician is astonished by my deferral of death. I am physical proof, he announces with a heretic’s pride, that mind is stronger than matter. He shouldn’t set the bar so high, I object. The explanation is more prosaic: I still have a score to settle with betrayal. Until that’s done, I’ll take the dozen pills that keep me alive when I’m supposed to, and wait for another opportunity.

An old man, I stand upright beside the heavy door early in the morning.

METODI

Aman, pisanalo mi e: spring is tickling their bollocks; they snag my Sunday with their manicured nails. These parasites settle in and tap my blood, damn leeches. How I hate Sundays. On Wednesday they politely ask the secretary whether you can spare a few minutes for them, as is proper, then on Sunday they terrorise you with their prattle. To top it all off, my wife is whingeing: what a mess, gnawed bones under the chairs, Albena's sick and tired of it each time, even though they're her nephews, her pampered little brats. I've no right to complain: a man who can't provide an heir has to make do with his wife's brood. It's a bane having lots of nephews and no sons. I suggested banning them from the house once. She nearly had a hysterical fit: "In that case I'm gone," screamed Albena. What a ridiculous threat. Since then I've written off Sundays: one day a week is the price I pay. Let other people whine for a change, I tell her, are you the only person on earth with a reason to whine? But no, she carries on whining, grease stains on her beloved Benz couch, whining my ears off, splashes on the velvet. I'm itching to smack her one. We all have our flaws, and some are damn hard to put up with sometimes. Why do the nephews have to drag their whores along with them on Sunday. They used to leave them at home, but now they sit munching at our table, jabbering away at their leisure. Last Sunday one of them gave me a sermon about international politics, over roast lamb. Apparently China's nothing to fear! How come, my little tart? The men are small there, and small men don't get things done. How do you know? From history, Bai Metodi. When big, strong warriors came to us from the north we became a mighty empire, and half the world trembled before us. It was when the midgets slipped in among us from the east that things started to go downhill. The way she was wittering on, as complacent as an *akademik*, the only thing lacking was for her to illustrate her theory with the peas on her plate. She doesn't like peas. I don't butt in: I've had to listen to a lot of rubbish in my time. Ages ago, *akademik* Potok lectured the officer corps for hours that political events depend on whether a country's leader is looking to the future or to the past, and our leaders are looking to the future,

none more so than Comrade General Secretary. He plans the future beyond the future, while people like us wet our finger and turn the calendar to the next page. What a talk. We got a headache, and the *akademik* got a villa in Pomorie. Potok was a dwarf with an unfettered laugh, two heads smaller than these lecturing shop-window mannequins at our table, whose aubergines are popping out of their necklines. I probably paid for those things: who knows what the nephews do with the money I slip them. There's enough there to have the fat sucked out of those arses they lounge about on.

The nieces had more about them, but they've cleared off; their own country isn't good enough for them. How we laboured to turn these backward fields into a modern country, toiled twelve hours a day until our heads lolled on our chests. And how much we achieved. Who appreciates that now? All these smart-alecks waving their flags with the benefit of hindsight. Compare '44 with '89 and you have to acknowledge that we pulled it off. Try replicating that. The son of swineherds produced top-quality forklifts, and they sold worldwide like hot *banitza*. We weren't brilliant at everything - that takes time - but our achievements are impressive nonetheless. That's not enough for those ungrateful brats. One's spreading her legs in Washington, writing reports for a think-tank there. She's regarded as an expert on the Balkans - she really fooled them. Only someone born into a mess can explain that mess to others. Pretty crafty. I was almost proud of her, even though she's not my own kin, but well, I was her role model; she secretly admired me, though she'll never admit it of course, and she'll never ask me directly for advice. The other's based in London and jets from one party in Moscow to another in Nice, but it's too far for her to come and see us - other than for her own wedding. Ugly as a fortune-teller, but still managed to hook a strapping lad, the economic attaché at our embassy there, from a good family. Her mother is good at matchmaking, if nothing else. Everyone insisted I say something. I wished the newlyweds a good tug-o'-war together - both in the same direction, of course - and I got the laughs on my side. That speech impressed people. I've got nothing against the niece in London, except when she tries to have me believe that, with the three phones and four screens in front of her pointy nose, she wields more influence than I ever did in life. Absurd. Bloomberg draws together all the important news, she claims. Simpleton. She shoves a few million back and forth, and thinks she's got power. Dumb as you like. You've only got power when people are afraid of you, girl. The rest is

confetti. And fear is bred in the archives. We're in control of those, even if other people talk big. She'll never realise that. After the next crisis she'll be sitting in the street with her cardboard box and remember that inheritance she's due from us. Then I'll rub it in under her pointy nose. You owe your inheritance purely and simply to one thing: that the past belongs to us. That's the only bank worth its salt. We established it long ago, long before your banks in the air. The present is interest, the future is interest on interest. Maybe then she'll understand . . .

The intercom buzzes, then buzzes a second time. Ah, Sunday, bloody Sunday. I have to take care of everything myself.

"What's up?"

"Come down to the gate," says chubby Sergei.

"Why the gate?"

"There's someone here wants to talk to you."

"At this time of day?"

"Come on."

"Who?"

"A woman I don't know."

"Send her away."

"She won't be sent away."

"What?"

"She says she absolutely has to speak to you."

There we have it. Some woman comes along and knocks at the gate and turns all stubborn, and they start pestering me. Chase her away, you good-for-nothing. Why did I listen to my wife. On Sunday she wants her peace and quiet, no strangers on our property, the men have to keep guard from Monday to Saturday, but one day a week it's meant to be just the two of us. The two of us? When is it ever just the two of us on a Sunday?

"I'm coming."

Got to button up my shirt first. Comb my hair properly. Such an abundance, such a blessing. Baldies really are poor beggars, walking around like people in socks with holes in them.

"What do you want?"

“To have a quick word with you.”

“I haven’t got time right now.”

“It’s important.”

“Not for me, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it’s important for you too.”

I now understand why Sergei couldn’t shake her off. There’s something dogged about her. She grabs your trouser leg and tugs at it, barking all the while. I know these stubborn bitches; it’s a hard slog to bend them to your will. She looks a bit haggard on the screen. Pretty enough, mind. Could take a fancy to her. The screen is misleading despite the high resolution and all the latest mod cons. It’s like looking through the peephole: you’ve got a view, but no overview, and you can easily overlook what really matters. I’ve never trusted the view through a peephole, right from the very start; it’s better to have them open the cell door and have a good look.

“Listen here, girl. I don’t what brought you to me. I’ve got an office and a secretary, and you should get in touch with them, okay? You know where, right?”

“I tried that. First by telephone, and then I even went in person. Each time I was turned away.”

“There’ll be good reasons for that.”

“I was told not to bother them again. The woman was rude.”

“That can happen. If everybody . . .”

“I’m not everybody.”

“Don’t make a scene outside my house. If you’re not gone in five seconds, I’ll press the red button and three minutes later you’ll have a gang of guys to deal with and they’ll remove you and not gently, believe you me.”

“No you won’t!”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Yes, I’m threatening you.”

“Who do you think . . .”

“I’m threatening you, Metodski!”

Metodski? Now I’m not easy to upset, but hearing this name from a stranger’s lips, this nickname only used by fellow officers, almost forgotten, never used elsewhere, one I hated; a name that my comrades had left me stuck with. Metodi is dignified, it has a

ring of backbone and three stars to it; Metodski sounds like an accident-prone helicopter. Where did she hear that name? When one of my comrades talks about me now, after all these years, what does he call me? Does he say: Metodski was a good bloke, or does he say: We could always rely on Major Metodi Popov? She must have come on behalf of someone. Who sent her? With her worn-out clothes she doesn't look like an officer's daughter, and then there's the way she behaves, uncertain on the one hand, dogged on the other; something's not quite right. A joke perhaps; it can only be a joke. A comrade's sitting in his car around the corner, waiting to see the baffled look on my face. I hate surprises. But who might it be? Of the usual pranksters one is lying in the military hospital - an out-in-patient, he's there so often; another is watering his vegetables in Vraza, while others still are nibbling the radishes from below. The ones I deal with don't do this kind of thing. Ribald jokes aren't their style. Has she come to pass on a message? Maybe, but not this conspicuously, turning up on the doorstep on a Sunday afternoon? Why all the lousy secretiveness?

The gate drones as it opens. Electronic and slow. It took a while for the idiot watchman to understand that he wasn't to push it shut. He stands about all day and yet he's always in a rush. Sergei glances at me in astonishment. I don't usually let anyone in. Deliverymen unload in front of the garage.

"That's my nephew Sergy, and you obviously know who I am too. So the only question is who you are."

"Nezabravka Michailova."

"We don't know each other, right?"

"Not first-hand."

"Well, come on in. You've got a message for me, right? In private, I take it."

The gate closes behind us, and Sergei takes himself off. I assume he's in a hurry to get back to the kickabout he's staked even his stack heels on, the Premier League generally. When he hears Manchester he only ever thinks of United or City, which is hardly surprising, given kids' education nowadays. I get a list of his bets every week from the man in the betting parlour, whom I once helped get started in business. Debts are no laughing matter. He won't escape their chokehold so easily, especially if I don't give him a helping hand. He's a blockhead - even a pneumatic drill wouldn't get through to him.

“Come inside.”

“Where may I sit?”

“Wherever you like, girl. It’s all very humble in our house, a bit like in a mountain hut. We like to leave the city behind us at the weekend, all the junk you don’t need. Anyway, you must know what I mean.”

“No, I’ve no idea.”

“You should be glad. You’ve spared yourself some terrible headaches.”

“The headaches . . . others . . . from the . . .”

“What did you say? I hear pretty well for my age, but you’re make it difficult, mumbling like that.”

“It’s quiet here. I didn’t know it could be so quiet up here.”

“Ideal for thinking. Better than anywhere else.”

“What do you need to think about?”

“Oh you know, the normal stuff. Assignments, duties, all the things I need to take care of.”

“Haven’t you already taken care of enough?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Don’t try and fool me. I’ve done my research. I know who you are and what you did.”

“What’s on the rumour mill? I’m conscientious – I hope you’ve heard that – and always have been, and I’ll serve for as long as I’m needed.”

“How commendable of you.”

“It goes without saying. I can’t help it. But enough about me, I should save something for my memoirs. What brings you here?”

“Something you did. It’s a long time ago, and you weren’t nearly as important as you are now. I don’t know what exactly you were. This is hard for me . . .”

“Come on, put your cards on the table. There’ll be a trump in there somewhere.”

“No. It was a mistake to have come here. Forget it.”

“Why now, when you’re here anyway?”

“There’s no point.”

“Spit it out, girl, whatever it might be. A tremendous weight off the conscience.”

“You know that from personal experience?”

“You could say that. I’ve experienced it often enough.”

“I had to gather all my courage just to come here. Struggled with myself for weeks. I knew I could only go on if I came to see you, if I cleared everything up with you. And now I can’t.”

“First of all, relax – I’m not going to eat you. You shouldn’t believe everything you hear about people. We’re just having a chat, okay? Maybe you should tell me your father’s name?”

“It’s about him.”

“Is he dead?”

“He was never part of my life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I only had my mother. Her name was Anna-Maria Michailova.”

“Let me have a think. Pour yourself a glass of water, the jug’s there behind you. Anna-Maria Michailova? Anna-Maria – pretty name.”

“She was very slim. She had long black hair.”

“There was an Anna-Maria who drove everyone in the department wild. No, it can’t be her: she didn’t have children, she was a bit skittish, if you know what I mean. Anna-Maria? No, don’t know any.”

“Are you sure?”

“My memory for names is a bank, girl. Notorious up and down the country. Files away anyone who catches my eye, never forgets anyone who walks into my sights. There are no mistakes, still less with comrades and their wives. It’s a matter of respect.”

“I don’t think you valued my mother.”

“Nonsense. Respect is a principle, even when there’s little love lost. Did she use to have a different name?”

“No, that was always her name.”

“Never married?”

“No one wanted her.”

“I can’t believe that. You’re such a pretty thing, so your mum can surely have been no dog.”

“She pushed away any man who tried to get close to her.”

“Temperamental type, eh? It’s unlucky, but what can you do? We’ll never all be equal before fate. Fortune and misfortune aren’t handed out like vouchers.”

“Shut up!”

What? What a cheek! No one has ever dared to do that, no one of lower rank, no civilian. Who is she? What does she have up her sleeve? Who’s protecting her? Who sent her? Careful, Metodi, the utmost caution from now on.

“She died. Last week.”

“Oh. My condolences. So that’s why you’re so upset. That’s some excuse at least. Take a sip of water. I was in the field when my father died; I got home too late. An honest worker, my father. Life wasn’t kind to him. Nasty when they die like that - however little they meant to you, you suddenly feel so alone.”

“I cared for her until the end.”

“That’s to your credit, girl. Your family must have been proud of you.”

“I don’t have anyone else. When she came back everyone turned their backs on her. Everyone avoided her, as if she were infectious.”

“Infectious? What are you talking about? What has this got to do with me? You’ve got to tell me now.”

“She lay in the hospital for days before she died. I didn’t see her much. I had to run around all day scraping together the money for the doctor. I heard a woman screaming like a banshee in the corridor and a man shouting, ‘Give her an injection, give her an injection now.’ It wasn’t my mother’s voice, it was the woman in the bed next to hers and her husband . . .”

“Hospitals! Nasty places. It really isn’t advisable to stay in one.”

“The woman kept screaming, and I sat down beside my mother and held her hand. She pulled it away all of a sudden, turned to me and said she’d feared this moment; it couldn’t be put off any longer. I interrupted her with a lie about the doctor being optimistic. *Mamo*, I’ll take you home soon. She turned to face me. Her eyes reached out for me. It’s not death I’m scared of. I had to bend my head down close to catch what she was saying. The woman in the next bed carried on screaming, her husband hammered on the bedstead and cursed the doctors and nurses and my mother. My mother told me that my father was still alive, a powerful, famous man, a man by the name of Metodi . . .”

“What, what, what. Hold on, your father, how come? Didn’t you have a father?”

“A soldier. Allegedly died in an artillery exercise. Wrong target coordinates, a massive screw-up. Invented, the whole lot. Your real father, Mother said before she died, is often in the papers and gives the occasional interview. You’ll find him easily. You can confront him. That’s what I should have done. I didn’t have the courage.”

Al siktir, and I was stupid enough to let her into the house. This is no joke, this is bad news. Blackmail? Revenge? Who’s trying to harm me?

“Who sent you?”

“Nobody sent me.”

“So you got the idea into your head, all by yourself, that I was the man your mother, who supposedly died last week, supposedly told you about? Me of all people, out of all the men in this country called Metodi. What are you implying? What a load of crap. No one will believe you.”

“You don’t have to believe me. Do the maths. How old do you think I am?”

“That doesn’t interest me.”

“Thirty-seven. October birthday.”

“Which is supposed to prove what?”

“Think it over, Metodi Popov. Think about it: where were you thirty-eight years ago? Where were you that winter? It was a hell of a winter for my mother. I know that now, but she kept it a secret all her life. She was ashamed. How about you, Metodi? Where did you warm yourself that winter? You should know that my mother told me more about you than just your full name.”