

# *Lifelong Noose*

A Novel

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(Translated from Macedonian to English and  
edited by Risto Stefov)

# Lifelong Noose

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A Novel

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*I dedicate this book to my brother Dimche Najcheski, to my husband Dragan Buzalkov, to my sister's husband, Pavle Popovski, who from an early age was instilled with the communist idea of an equal, just and humane society and went through horrible mental and physical suffering in the Goli Otok golgotha and endured with dignity. I also dedicate this book to members of my family who tirelessly struggled for the ideal of realizing a worthy life for humanity.*

*I would like to thank my parents Viktorija Najcheska and Metodija Najcheski who instilled in us, their children, the ideal that we should struggle for a better life for people, and, with their stoicism, helped us persevere and endure, even in the most difficult days of temptation that we faced.*

*With love,  
The Author*

*It was the day of my engagement to Milan... I was going crazy with joy. Several times in the afternoon I tried on my new dress, specially made for me for the evening when I was going to meet our guests. Who would have held out until then? Every time I passed by the mirror I changed my hairstyle. I wanted to be the most beautiful for Milan that night, more beautiful than any other day. For him. For my beloved. I also tried on my new shoes several times. I looked at them from all sides in front of the mirror which hung, elongated, on the wall next to the door.*

*For a while Milan and I thought that an engagement was unnecessary. We felt we should go straight to our wedding. But my mother insisted on it. Have an engagement she kept saying. We decided to have it and let the old lady rejoice. She deserved it. She had dedicated her whole life to us. All of us at home agreed that only members of our closest family should be invited. Twenty people at most.*

*In the evening of the event my Uncle Slobodan, Aunt Emilia, cousin Lily and cousin Iko arrived first followed by my brother's and sister's friends and my friends. After that my distant Aunt Violeta, my father's cousins, with her husband Sreten and their two older children Miodrag and Predrag arrived. Pavle, my mother's cousin, came with his wife Milena but without their children.*

*I was so excited I was oblivious to who was there. They were probably smiling at me. I could hear their voices from the distance congratulating me as I entered the reception room.*

*Our guests sat down around the various tables where snacks had already been offered.*

*The event started with offerings of chocolate candies, rakia and salads.*

*We were all excited waiting for Milan to arrive. We were expecting him to arrive at any moment. A few days before Milan and I had bought our new clothes together, a new shirt and new shoes. I didn't want to miss the moment when he arrived. I was constantly at the front door. I wanted to be the first to see him when he arrived.*

*Almost half an hour had passed after the time that we had expected him to arrive. To me it seemed like an eternity! Milan was always on time. I won't forgive him for his little tardiness, I thought to myself... But, after waiting an hour I began to feel something squeezing at my chest. I became nervous... I started having doubts... I was hoping he hadn't changed his mind at the last moment! He hadn't gotten cold feet... He'd spent most of his life alone and I figured his connection to me would be a big turning point for him. Was there hesitation? Why didn't I feel it? How could he hide it from me so successfully? Why did I blame him so unjustly? If he was going to be late why didn't he call...?*

*I couldn't believe a second hour had passed and Milan still hadn't arrived...*

*I didn't want to look and see if any of the others were upset. We all anxiously stared at the front door. One time I saw my mother sneaking into the other room. Not the one where the guests were. I figured she was looking out the window, the one that allowed her to look down to the end of the street. She patiently waited with a fixed gaze. She must have done this many times before.*

*Where are you Milan...? What is happening with you?*

*Up to that day we had had a storybook relationship. From the moment we first met we couldn't be separated. Not even for a day. He came to see me almost every day when I finished work, even though the city I lived in was far from him. He didn't mind traveling.*

*It was even stranger how many things connected us. As if we had grown up together. We listened to the same songs. We watched the same movies. We liked to read similar books, sometimes even the same books. We had similar tastes in food, in dress... We were close in almost everything.*

*The one thing that we differed in was getting married. I didn't seem to be ready. I felt it was too soon. I was the youngest of three children in my family. Milan was impatient. Persistent. He insisted*

*we talk about it. He talked about it with my brother, with my mother...*

*In recent weeks Milan had been trying to get us engaged as soon as possible. And have a wedding too. Even the little time that we were living apart seemed a lot to him.*

*Everything for the engagement had been ready since yesterday. The tables were arranged and the food to be served was planned. A few hours ago we all got dressed in our new dresses and suits, specially tailored for this festive event.*

*But, Milan wasn't there...*

*...I could no longer control my emotions. I looked anxiously at my brother... at my sister... I was scared. God, had something happened to him?! Whatever it was, he could have called from somewhere... There was no telephone in his apartment... They didn't know how to contact him or inquire about him...*

*It seemed like tension was high in the reception room where the guests were, with some unexpressed discomfort. As for me, I didn't want to hear anyone say anything about Milan not being there.*

*We all seemed to be afraid of our eyes meeting. They avoided mine and I theirs. We didn't want to find something out through our eyes that we wouldn't like. At one point my mother, my brother, my sister and I agreed to go to the other room, the one with no guests, and figure out what to do.*

*"Why don't you let your brother Rade go by car with your uncle to his house... To Milan's house..." suggested my mother in a trembling voice.*

*I felt flushed and all the blood went to my brain.*

*"No! No way! No! Such humiliation! Whatever stopped him from coming... He could have told someone! No way. Not on this earth! He embarrassed us in front of the whole family! We're not going to beg him! We're not going on our knees..." I said out loud and then*

*whispered from the side of my mouth, “We’re lucky my father isn’t alive, the earth would have swallowed him...” I was feverishly angry. Completely insane! I didn’t know in what hole to crawl to get away. I didn’t want to go back and face the guests.*

*“Then we have nothing left to do but wait...”, said my brother. “You decide!”*

*In the confusion I didn’t realize that some of my closest relatives were trying to comfort me. They speculated about what could have happened to Milan. If I could, I would have shut their mouths. I wanted to do that but I didn’t want them to know how humiliated I felt. If I could have disappeared, I would have.*

*My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it wanted to jump out of my chest.*

*I felt sorry for my sister and brother...*

*My poor mother... Her face was so pale. Completely white. I thought that she would faint any moment now, here in front of everyone and never regain consciousness.*

*...More than two hours passed.*

*From time to time my mother and sister offered the remaining guests snacks and drinks but most didn’t want anything. Only some of the men had a drink of rakia or some other drink. Slowly and silently they left the house. The apartment was getting quieter and quieter until it became completely silent.*

*We were left alone; my brother, sister, mother and me.*

*This was the first time I’d heard my brother swear. My mother kept repeating: “He must have been detained...something very bad must have happened to him!” I was annoyed with her attempts at comforting me. I didn’t want to hear anything from my mother. Once again, I insisted that they not talk about Milan or about that evening. Not now, not ever!*

*“Let him come and explain himself! Otherwise, I don’t want to hear his name any more. Neither in this nor in any other world!...”*

*Everyone went to bed and in the late hours of the night, in their own minds, had to relive this torturous, difficult and awful experience. I tried not to let anyone hear me cry... I was sobbing... I muffled my cries with a pillow on my face. I had thoughts of pushing the pillow against my face and holding it there! To end my misery forever...*

*I felt someone pulling the sleeve of my pyjamas. It was my mother. I opened my eyes a little bit. I thought to myself why am I here? I rarely ever stay and sleep here at my mother’s and brother’s place! Even when I was late, I always went home to sleep.*

*“Get up, let’s drink a cup of coffee. We had slept through the entire day. Those damn pills we took last night made us all very sleepy...” my mother said and stopped pulling on my sleeve.*

*Pills! All! All who?! Why pills?! That means it wasn’t a dream. It was a nightmare. It’s all true... I was slowly becoming aware of the horror, which in the first moments after waking up I had hoped was a dream...It had really happened... I got out of bed. My mother gave me a big hug... So it is true... How could I have slept knowing the truth?! My new dress was lying on the chair. I crumpled it. I couldn’t stand to look at it. I quickly found some other clothes. I got dressed and ran to the street. My mother tried in vain to stop me. I had to overcome this on my own...*

*What had happened, happened. I had to live with it.  
The days went by one after another. The same as always.*

*Almost every day the moment I closed my eyes Milan’s face appeared... I remembered everything good that connected us. Our love that made my life meaningful... Was that a dream? Our time between seeing one another was very long for me... My heart beat with excitement the moment he knocked on my door. The moment I heard his masculine voice. The moment I met his light green eyes, hidden under his long eyelashes. Looking at his eyes made me happy. I couldn’t wait to put my fingers through his light locks of silky hair and hug him immediately after that with a warm and firm*

*embrace. It was fate that he chose me and gave me exactly what I wanted!*

*We had all kinds of conversations. We were coming closer. Our love was growing... Every time we met he had a surprise for me. A small gift, a flower, a candy. There was no force that could separate us... Life had united us to share joy, happiness.*

*Then suddenly, maybe suddenly, something in him broke. Did his unwillingness to live with obligations overcome him?! Were they stronger than love? He should have told me. He should have opened up to me. I wouldn't have been angry with him. I would have understood. I would have found the strength to justify it. I would have tried to encourage and support him. But this way? It's unforgivable.*

*Time passed. Days. Weeks. A whole month. Even if he came to beg me, fell on his knees, no matter what he said or explained... It was over. He had closed the door on me, on my soul. I would have to insist, no matter how much it hurt me. I would have to insist that he was out of my life! I had to do it no matter how impossible it seemed to me.*

*I had almost no contact with any of Milan's colleagues in the school where he worked. Even from before. I didn't know any of the neighbours who lived near the school. This, in a way, made me avoid inquiring about him. Not talk about him... I suppressed everything that tied me to him deep inside me. It was hellishly difficult and I struggled, superhumanly, to endure...*

*Some days I experienced moments of extreme weakness. But also revolt. Something inside me was rebelling terribly. What happened? Why this way Milan? Why did you show no mercy towards me? To your beloved, as you called me? I pushed those feelings aside but they still followed me persistently. They caused me pain. To exhaustion. They scared me. In moments like those I was ready to get on the first bus and go to the city where he lived. Go straight to the school where he taught and lived. If he wasn't there, I was prepared to go through all the streets in the city. I was going to do everything I could to find him. To face him, face to face! To look*

*into his eyes. To read the expression in them! To see if there was a trace of love somewhere in them? ...But... I didn't do that. I didn't go. I didn't look for him. Nor did I ask anyone about him. The hurt I felt in my soul, the shame and humiliation he had inflicted on me, didn't allow me to do that.*

*What was also strange, almost unbelievable, was that I hadn't seen him in the streets. On the buses. In the stores. Maybe he no longer came to B?. He was probably afraid of meeting me, or my relatives, or my friends...*

*My mother, my sister and my brother accepted the idea that talking about Milan, even saying a single word, was a forbidden subject. It seemed like they had taken an oath not to mention him at all... Even more so about the engagement. As much as possible they all tried to help me overcome my problem. They suffered along with me. And the days kept passing.*

*I suffered great pain and torment in my heart for my beloved Milan... I was losing my strength. I was getting weaker and weaker.*

*My co-workers avoided asking me about the engagement. Nor did they mention Milan. It seemed like they had agreed to be silent, down to the last one. They must have understood what my family and I had experienced. They didn't want to mention anything to me.*

*There was a need to be silent.*

\* \* \*

Soon after the fascist occupation was over, one by one my older sister Vera and our brother Rade left our village, where Rade, Vera and I, Dushitsa, were born and where our whole family had lived, and went to the city B. Rade soon got a job and didn't stay long with Uncle Slobodan. Our uncle had studied and graduated from the Faculty of Law in the capital, just before the war, and lived there permanently. He offered his nieces and nephews a place to live with his family at his house. He made it possible for them to attend school or learn a craft if they wanted to. He wanted them to earn as much money as they could from their livelihood, if they wanted to.

And if they wanted to, he offered them the option of staying with him. Living with his family.

Everyone knew that he was doing this out of gratitude to our father and mother. They had helped him through his studies and through his first years of marriage. He couldn't have survived without the money and food our parents had sent him from the village. They did this even though they themselves had three children and didn't have much income to spare. When our father saw how well his younger brother was doing in school he decided to help him. He helped him graduate from law school. He was very proud of him. By doing this he realized some of his own unfulfilled wishes. He himself had spent his life working as a forester.

\* \* \*

Father accompanied Vera and Rade to our uncle's house. According to Vera, our father was very happy to leave Rade and her in the big city, in the care of his younger, educated brother, who was now employed in a high position in the people's government. Vera and Rade were welcomed by our uncle's family. Not only because it was expected of them but because they wanted to.

That didn't change in the long term.

Everyone liked Rade and Vera. They felt that they brought a freshness and cheerful spirit to their home. It was like they had brought something clean from the village, more primitive than anything they were used to. They brought something that was full of serenity and liveliness.

Soon everyone fell in love with Vera. It seemed like they couldn't bear to be without her, even on rare weekends when she went home to visit her parents.

Our aunt, a respected and talented artist whose paintings sold at numerous exhibitions, wasn't happy with her life, with her artistic paintings, with her reviews, with her two children who kept her busy... Her life with a politician was also boring.

Our uncle, being engaged at the top, narrowest political circles in the country, was very busy and very often away from home.

\* \* \*

*From the day Vera and Rade left home and went to live with our uncle, I missed them a lot. It was as if I had lost part of myself. Every day I ran after the mailman to see if he'd brought me a letter. The letter Vera promised to write me. "Write me immediately," I begged her when she was leaving. "I will write to you as soon as I can," she promised.*

*A month later the mailman finally delivered the long-awaited letter.*

*After arriving at our aunt and uncle's place Vera figured she would be living a completely new life, a different life. Completely different with different people who had different habits.*

*None of the family members in our uncle's house felt that they needed to do anything, just like our father had once told us. But, whether she wanted to or not, Vera felt she had to help out with the housework. Without anyone asking she washed the dishes, the clothes, tidied up the kitchen and went to the market. She set the dining table and lifted the dishes. Vera wrote me about all these things in her first and subsequent letters that she sent me from the big city, the huge city where you were afraid to go out in the street. She wrote me of how sorry she was for us living in the village. She told me she had gotten used to living with our relatives.*

*In the beginning, Vera wrote, in the letters she sent me, that everything in our aunt and uncle's house was wonderful. It seemed to her like she was living in a magical castle. She couldn't get enough of looking at the beautiful rooms, beds, bedspreads, bedding, decorations, flowers... Everyone in the house wore very different clothes from the ones Vera and the people in our village used to wear.*

*Nobody cooked anything in our uncle's house, sometimes for several days in a row. When members of the family were hungry, if they hadn't eaten a sandwich on their way home, they opened the fridge*

*and ate any food they could find. Vera soon realized that no one was going to feed her, so, even though she didn't have much experience, she started cooking. And that became her daily obligation. She told our uncle that she wanted to go to music school to study music, so he enrolled her. But soon she realized she wasn't going to pass because she didn't have the time and necessary experience. The students she studied with had a lot more free time and had been practicing from an early age. So she soon gave up.*

*One evening, when she was alone with her uncle in the dining room and her cousins were in their rooms, in a quiet voice she said:*

*“My friend from our village, who also came to the city to live with her relatives, completed an evening course in typography... If possible I would like to do that too.”*

*“Of course, that's an easy course,” he said even though he wanted more for her.*

*Vera soon learned how to type and received her diploma in six months.*

\* \* \*

When Vera graduated from the typography course no one thought that this meant she had gained her independence. Everyone congratulated her of course but with restraint. Vera was pleased.

Almost a year had passed since Vera had moved in with her uncle's family. One late evening she approached him in the kitchen and in a quiet voice asked:

“Uncle, would you be angry with me if I asked you to find me a job? I don't want you to misunderstand me. There's no better place than here but I want to earn some money with my own labour. I'm already an adult.”

“Are you saying that you'll be leaving us and getting your own apartment?!” her uncle asked in a loud voice.

His tone startled her. She said:

“No, I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t say it but you mean it. Is that what you want? Tell me truthfully. I won’t be angry. I know that you’ve been burdened much here... Of course you have the right to leave. It’s been hard living here. Nobody helps out. They don’t want me to hire a housekeeper to help out and they don’t want to do the work themselves. Before you came we constantly argued about that. I can assure you that I won’t be angry with you if you leave. But I know the others in the family will be disappointed. But you have to admit that they all love you. You have become a real member of this family.

Vera began to cry. Her uncle gave her a hug.

“I don’t know what your mother and father will say about you leaving. They’ll think that we kicked you out,” said her uncle.

Vera raised her hand pretending to hit him. He laughed and said:

“I’m joking...”

\* \* \*

*It was unbearably difficult for me, after Milan disappeared from my life. I often thought about my carefree life in the village. I wondered what it would be like if I had stayed there permanently... Why had I come to this place? This was now a cursed city for me. This is what my mother and father had decided for me...*

*...I remember sitting by the window thinking about things when my mother said to me:*

*“Your father and I have decided to send you to the city to be with your aunt and uncle and your cousins.”*

*I remember being afraid. What if I couldn’t manage over there?! What if I embarrassed myself with something. And what if they sent me back to the village? Where would I hide from my shame?*

*My mother calmed me down. She said “It will be like Dushitsa your sister and your brother, they get along and are fine. You will too. They both have jobs and earn their own piece of bread. They have good jobs and hardly ever complain. And more. They didn’t stay with your aunt and uncle long. They left by their own decision and your uncle wasn’t upset with them. Think about this very carefully. What will you be doing here, in the village? Do you want to be a peasant all your life?!”*

*And here I am in the city. My mother sewed me a cheap multi-coloured dress and said, “Let this be your new dress.” The matter was closed. Others had decided for me. After that I nervously waited for the day when I would leave.*

*I got on a train for the first time.*

*I was very excited when we arrived at the train station. I had never seen a train close up until then, I had seen trains but only from the distance, from the village. I said goodbye to my mother at the station and we both secretly cried. My father accompanied me to the city. It was his decision. Our separation was so painful for me that I didn’t want to get off the train, but I did because I didn’t want to anger my father. What was done was done and now it was too late to turn back. I figured I would stay by myself and avoid strangers. I would be comforted by my sister and brother. With them around I figured I wouldn’t be alone.*

*We got off the train when we arrived at the train station in the city. My father informed me that we had arrived. I immediately saw my uncle among the many people who were greeting their friends, acquaintances and loved ones.*

*The moment we got off the train my father and uncle hugged first. Then my uncle gave me a hug. He was so tall that he had to lift me up to give me a kiss. A large black limousine and its driver were waiting for us near the station. I was afraid. Would I know how to get into the limousine?! But everything was easy with my uncle there. The moment we got close to the limousine he opened one of the rear doors. He didn’t wait for the driver to do it. Before I knew it*

*I found myself sitting in the back seat. My father sat next to me. My uncle sat next to the driver. My uncle looked very happy, like he was taking his own daughter home.*

*I was amazed at the size of the city, the huge houses and the wide streets. And because the car was traveling fast everything looked like a miraculous dream. As we climbed uphill I noticed all around there were new, smaller but beautiful houses. We stopped in front of one of them. My uncle led us through the yard to the entrance. A girl opened the front door. She looked about my age. Then, after some time, I saw my cousin Lily. We greeted each other but we didn't hug. Right behind her stood a tall, thin woman with a pale face and a strong smile. She had a strange absence in her eyes. She extended her hand and shook my father's in a friendly way. She gave me a restrained hug. That was my aunt.*

*We entered a large room. Lots of tall, green flowers were everywhere. There was a beautiful table and chairs. We were served various things. Some I was seeing for the first time. Everything had already been placed on the table. I was afraid to eat. Everyone insisted that I have something but, as much as I wanted to, I didn't.*

*Soon afterwards Lily dragged me into another room. I felt more at ease there. I was more comfortable with her probably because we were close in age. Lily seemed ordinary. While we were alone she asked me many questions about many things. I could barely answer her. She told me in confidence that she didn't like learning in school much. But she had to, I figured, where else would she learn...*

*I talked about the school in our village with regret because it went up to grade eight. After that it was impossible for me to travel to a nearby city every day.*

*"Does that mean you want to continue your education here?" yelled Lily with a strange laugh.*

*Why was she laughing? What was so funny? Why was she wondering about me wanting to continue my education? Or was it something else? I didn't say anything to her. Lily continued:*

*“You know that my mother is an artist, right? She spends all day painting. Can’t wait for someone to replace her in the kitchen. But if you want to learn, no problem. My father is the man for that. Learning is everything to him. He was very upset with your sister Vera because she didn’t stay with us longer... First she was forced to study music... On top of that, because she was thin and tall, my mother advised her to study ballet... They kept pushing her to try things and, at the same time, left her with all the domestic responsibilities. It was good, at least, that she managed to finish typing school. Eventually she’d had enough and left.” Lily told me all this in a single breath.*

*Then, suddenly, the door was loudly flung wide open and a boy came into the room. Was he younger than Lily?*

*“I’m your cousin Zoran...” he introduced himself and shook my hand. I hadn’t seen him since he was very young, since before the war.*

*Before I could process what was happening he gave me a big hug. I barely recognized him. After that he moved away a little. He kept looking at me from the distance. Then he joined us in our conversation.*

*Again with the question of education. I sensed that they were interested in knowing more about my interest in education primarily because they thought they could replace Vera with me, helping in the kitchen. Cooking food. Washing, cleaning...*

*I made sure they understood that I was really interested in getting my education!*

*Then I saw the surprise on their faces... I shouldn’t have rushed into assumptions. Eventually I would understand things. I would quickly learn what was expected of me...*

*It was about noon when they took me to my room. This was the first time that I had my own room. This was the first time I would be alone without my mother and father... It wasn’t going to be easy.*

*After a while we all had lunch together.*

*I said goodbye to my father and he left. I felt a tightness in my chest.*

*Fortunately, a little later, my sister Vera came over. She gave me a big hug. She greeted everyone warmly which I interpreted as a good thing. In other words she'd had a good relationship while she stayed here. Knowing this made it easy for me.*

*Vera looked at me like she couldn't believe I was there. Someone rang the front door bell. One of them opened the door and they all yelled:*

*"Rade! Rade is here!"*

*"Where have you been, young man? How long has it been since you were here last?! We should be angry with you. Do you think that because you work as an investigator, you're too important to come and see us?" my uncle scolded him.*

*"What are you talking about... important?! I didn't want to bother you..." Rade justified himself.*

*"Did you hear that Dushitsa? He was going to bother us! We haven't seen him for a long time because he thinks he's going to bother us..." said my uncle with an annoyed tone of voice.*

*We hugged. He patted me on the shoulder.*

*That evening I went to bed alone for the first time. In my own room.*

*Vera said it had been hers before she left. I had to get used to it. She told me many times I would be fine. She said this house has everything your soul desires.*

*I started my new life with four new people, not very familiar to me but close relatives.*

*The next day I woke up feeling anxious when I heard my cousins talking. Why aren't they in school? I heard their voices again. Then I remembered the summer holidays had started. I felt a little better.*

*There were some things on the breakfast table which were unfamiliar to me. I only ate the food that was familiar to me.*

*My cousins tired me with the many questions they kept asking. First about whether I had a cat and a dog, horses, donkeys... When I told them we had piglets, they laughed. They were amazed. How could anything about piglets be funny...?*

\* \* \*

*I couldn't believe how fast my days passed. Would I always have so many responsibilities?! I didn't even know what day it was or the date. I managed to do a lot in a short time. My mother would be surprised.*

*Summer was over. My sister Vera and I didn't see each other as often as I would have liked. She always had some excuse for not seeing me. She often said she was tired from working. I saw Rade even less. I had to manage on my own.*

*Like Vera before me, I soon realized that no one in this house except for me cared about anything. Cleaning, cooking, washing dishes. Everything was my job. Now I was Vera.*

*They were grateful for my help. I was constantly praised. They rewarded me with money and gifts. They often took me out on the town, to the cinema and to the bakery shops and treated me to sweets.*

*Every day it was the same thing. There was a certain routine that was followed. My aunt would lock herself in her room or in her studio. She would paint or create figures from various materials. My uncle would come home late from some long meeting. He often traveled to places with various delegations. His main concern was the three of us, me and his two children. My aunt ate very little. You*

*can't believe how little she ate, literally enough to stay alive. She seemed to have an aversion to food...*

*The time for eating and sleeping was different for each member of the family. They got out of bed when they felt like it and ate whenever they wanted. When they weren't out of the house they stayed in their rooms. They only came out when they were needed. I, on the other hand, spent most of my time working in the house. I also read some books.*

*We usually gathered on Sundays to eat together but not always and not all. We talked about various things. I was mostly silent during these conversations. I spoke the least. My aunt, for some strange reason, talked about everything and about those who referred to themselves as her children. At times I thought maybe she wasn't their real mother. My uncle tried to cover it up by talking loud and joking a lot.*

*One Sunday during one of those lunches, my uncle said:*

*"If you still want to go to school Dushitsa and continue your education, it would be best if you go to evening school."*

*I was surprised by his comment and didn't know why in the evening. I didn't dare ask either. My uncle explained that there are schools where classes are held in the evenings. They are professional. "Of course," he said, "you'll have to choose what you'd like to study."*

*I then shyly asked: "What kind of courses are offered?" My uncle listed a few.*

*"You don't have to decide right away," he said, "you have plenty of time for that."*

*I felt a little better. In the evening I talked with Lily, I had no one else to talk with, and she was very helpful in explaining the various schools and what they taught. Of all the subjects they taught I was most interested in studying teaching. I used to dream of being a teacher.*

*The next day when I saw my uncle, I told him that I wanted to study teaching. I wanted him to know that before he enrolled me in something else.*

\* \* \*

*The school year was approaching. My uncle told me that I was enrolled in the school for teachers. I was overjoyed. Then I got worried – how was I going to go to school. I wasn't familiar with the city. But my uncle took care of that too. I couldn't believe it when he told me that he was going to have his driver pick me up from home and take me to school. I assumed that he was going to do this for a while. I told Lily about it. I said, "I'm going to be embarrassed when the other students see me..."*

*"It will take some time to get used to it," she reassured me.*

*A short while later we came up with an idea. When I found out where the school was I'd ask the driver to let me off somewhere nearby.*

*Less than two months later, I began to manage my transportation on my own. I took trams, buses, trolleybuses... I told my uncle that there was no need for the driver to take me anymore. I started to feel more confident about traveling. Now I felt more like other students. I studied with great interest. Now that I had a goal in mind - to be a teacher, things became somewhat easier for me.*

*It wasn't simple or easy to do housework all day and, at the same time, prepare and go to school in the evening. I studied until late at night. My cousins started to help me out with some of the housework. I felt like they had a soft spot for me. I felt like they wanted me to succeed in school. They might have realized that they had impeded Vera and must have felt guilty about it.*

*Being alone with my aunt wasn't easy. She was constantly in a bad mood. Outside of painting she must have had some other reason for being constantly sad and in a bad mood. I also understood that her relatives rarely came to visit her. To this day, I don't know how this*

*came about but after I escorted one of her visitors, a cousin of hers, to the outer gate of the house, she said:*

*“I’m very sorry for my cousin. It’s not easy living completely alone in this world. All of her family, mother, father and brother were killed in one of the fascist camps.”*

*I was shocked when I heard that.*

*“That’s why she...”, she said but didn’t finish her sentence...*

*My aunt’s cousin then nodded and left. From that day on I paid more attention to her.*

*I was happy to live in such a wonderful home. They had everything they needed to work and live well. They were good people. And most of all, they allowed me to study.*

*\* \* \**

*I couldn’t believe I was holding my high school diploma in my hands. I was the happiest of all students. None of them could understand what this diploma meant to me. I knew that if I had stayed in the village, I would never have had this opportunity.*

*When I came home my cousins had a cake and other good things to celebrate with. Everyone was happy for me. After the congratulations were over the first question my cousins asked was, would I leave them, would I leave their house?*

*“We won’t let her go,” said my uncle.*

*I was embarrassed to say anything. I was afraid of being dishonest. Deep inside me, deep in my soul, I felt that I, like my sister Vera, would like to get a job. Earn my own money. Have my own place, rent an apartment where I could be alone when I wanted to be.*

*“There’s time for all that, let her think about it for a while,” said my uncle and then added, “now let’s celebrate. Later we’ll send a telegram to your parents so that they can rejoice too.”*

*After that he took out a small, nicely wrapped box from his briefcase. He handed it to me. I opened it with trembling hands. There was a beautiful watch in it. Everyone clapped their hands. My aunt also came out to congratulate me. Lily helped me put the watch on.*

*“My God, is this really happening to me?! Am I dreaming?!” It was all true. I was a teacher. With a diploma.*

*I soon received a letter from my mother and father. They congratulated me on my graduation. They were very happy too. Especially my father.*

\* \* \*

*The days passed. The weeks. The months. My uncle didn't mention anything about a job for me. It seemed like he never thought about me working. I didn't dare mention anything to him because I wasn't sure that I would be able to work as a teacher here in the city. Also, I was afraid that my colleagues would be more educated than me.*

*I started reading more books during the evening. Lily kept giving them to me. After that we would discuss what I had read.*

\* \* \*

*When we were all there having lunch together one Sunday my uncle said:*

*“There's a job opening in a kindergarten as a caregiver, where I know the director. It's a nice place. I think it will suit you for a start.”*

*Even though I had no idea what the job would be like, I immediately agreed to take it.*

*“Then get ready because tomorrow, at eight o'clock in the morning, I will take you there. I have already spoke to the director,” said my uncle.*

*I didn't look at any of others sitting at the table but I could feel that they were upset. They all went silent. But I was determined to gain my independence.*

*My heart was pounding when we entered the kindergarten yard. I was afraid people might notice. A tall, young sympathetic looking woman came out to meet us in the hallway. She had black hair and dark eyes. We greeted each other and followed her into a room.*

*"I believe you will like it here. The collective is complex, we don't have too many children and the kindergarten is well-organized," said the woman who spoke fast.*

*I was so intimidated by the experience that I don't remember if I said anything. I remember we walked through all the rooms. I remember seeing many happy, cheerful children and met most of the instructors... I remember having some juice.*

*I was hired as a caregiver. I felt that from that moment on, my whole life was going to change. And it really did starting with my clothes, my lifestyle and the time I spent in the kitchen.*

*I quickly learned the names of my co-workers and other employees. For a short time I relied on the older and more experienced staff to help me out as much as possible. Then I learned how to deal with the children on my own. I learned to understand their needs when they were separated from their parents, for hours on end, but it wasn't an easy task. There were many different children with different characteristics. Especially the hypersensitive ones... They would only accept and love you if you gained their confidence.*

*After working there a few weeks, I felt I was gradually finding my place in the small group. In no time at all I felt like I had worked and lived with them for a long time.*

*I can't explain my excitement when I received my first paycheque. It wasn't just a matter of satisfaction but of being self-assured that I could earn my own living.*

*Independence. Joy.*

*I bought a lot of food and drinks and organized a little celebration. Everyone was happy for me, mostly my uncle. I hadn't seen him in such a good mood for a long time. Even my aunt happily participated.*

\* \* \*

It wasn't long before Dushitsa started thinking about getting her own apartment. It was very difficult for her to leave the family she was living with. She knew it wasn't going to be easy for them without her and her without them. She remembered her mother mentioning things about Vera when she was going through this. But the desire to be independent was stronger than her ties to being with the family.

For a long time she hesitated asking her sister Vera if she wanted to live together. When she finally asked, Vera reacted with restraint. At the time they were sitting in a small restaurant. Dushitsa said that she thought it would be a good idea if they shared the single room apartment where Vera was now staying. Vera's answer was:

“That would be good except the room is quite small. If we add another bed and all the other things that would be needed, we would be quite cramped. Also it would be very expensive at this time to look for a two-bedroom apartment. Keep working for a while longer and we'll see.”

“Our mom and dad will be disappointed if we aren't together. They will think we are fighting. Rade also won't understand...” said Dushitsa justifiably.

Dushitsa herself wasn't sure if she preferred to live alone or with her sister. She added:

“Well, even our uncle, I believe, will be more concerned if I live alone.”

“Like I said, let’s try living this way for now and see what happens later... I’m sure we will manage something...” Vera insisted.

Soon after that Dushitsa rented a very small room on the ground floor of a house with a yard. Vera helped her set it up. Dushitsa was satisfied and happy with every little thing she had.

Soon afterwards her brother Rade came to visit her.

“The three of us in three corners,” Rade remarked about the small size of the room, feeling a bit nervous.

“It could have been bigger,” Dushitsa said without blaming Vera.

“The old folks (parents) will be surprised... If you want you can move in with me,” said Rade in a tone of voice that betrayed him because he didn’t believe Dushitsa would accept. He then quickly added:

“Open your eyes, this is a big city, there are all kinds of people here!”

“I understand, don’t worry,” replied Dushitsa and added “you can pass by here and check on me more often.”

“That’s what you say now until you find a boyfriend, I’ll be a bother after that,” Rade said jokingly.

“It won’t be like that. And I can always prepare something for you to eat. By the way, what do you like to eat? And only God knows, where you do eat...!” replied Dushitsa convincingly.

“We have a canteen at work. The food isn’t that bad. I manage...” said Rade.

Her brother and sister said goodbye to her and left. Dushitsa felt something didn’t seem right with her brother. He didn’t seem to be in the right mood. His job with the Militia probably wasn’t a good fit for him! But he was like that, he would endure.

Dushitsa was luckier. Working as a kindergarten caregiver seemed to be the right fit for her. She loved her job very much. She quickly became friends with almost all her colleagues. The children, no matter how burdensome or mischievous at times, were a real joy.

She saw Vera often and sometimes they went to lunch together. Vera spoke very openly about her personal life, about her relationships with men and other things. She entertained her sister every time they met. Dushitsa on the other hand, had no relationships with boys and, in general, her life was reduced to going to work and coming home. Their brother Rade was very busy with his responsibilities. He didn't want his sisters to be in his company when he went out with his friends.

As time passed Dushitsa slowly furnished her little apartment. When she told her cousins that she was going to leave them, they were very disappointed. But after she moved out, they came to visit her and brought her presents. They even seemed to envy her for being independent.

\* \* \*

Dushitsa's parents Jovan and Stefka also moved to the city. Vera, Rade and Dushitsa were happy about that but also worried about where and how they were going to live. The two sisters were living apart in separate apartments and had no place for them. But luckily, with help from his uncle Slobodan, the state gave Rade an apartment so he took them to live with him. After they moved in with Rade they tried to persuade Dushitsa to move in with them also but she insisted she didn't want to. They continued asking her but she kept refusing. Eventually they got the message that she already had a life of her own.

After they got jobs, all three, Rade, Vera and Dushitsa rarely visited their uncle. They did go however when he invited them. They continued to visit their cousins but not at home. They met outside at various places throughout the city.

Uncle Slobodan often went to see his brother Jovan and sister-in-law Stefka to make sure they were okay. He felt obligated for the help he

had received from them in the past, especially with his education in B. By being educated many doors opened up for Slobodan. He was given the opportunity to meet all kinds of important people, even before and during the war. At that time he became involved in the anti-fascist struggle and the revolution. As a volunteer fighter and lawyer, he soon rose to prominence.

\* \* \*

*Everyday private life for Dushitsa at that time was monotonous, even boring. In the kindergartens and schools, Friday was one of her happiest days of the week. This was true for the children, the caregivers and the parents who looked forward to spending the weekend with their children.*

*All the children were taken home by their parents on Fridays, except for this one Friday. One of the boys from the largest group was left behind. The poor boy was lonely and feeling anxious. I kept trying to calm him down.*

*“I know your mom or dad is coming. I’m sure they’ll come and get you any moment now. Maybe both will come. They must have got stuck in traffic on the road. There’s always a lot of traffic on Fridays.” I kept reassuring him quietly, in a calm voice and stroking his hair.*

*The window of time during which parents or guardians were expected to pick up their children was about to close. Then I noticed a stranger, a tall young man, appear at the front door. He looked a bit confused, but in a warm and pleasant voice he said:*

*“I came for Gorancho.”*

*The boy immediately called out “Uncle Milan” and ran to him. The boy was very happy to break away from the awkward wait. It was very unpleasant being the last one picked up from kindergarten.*

*“According to the description Gorancho’s parents gave me, I guess you must be Dushitsa, the caregiver. They’re both on their way here from the city where their parents live. They asked me to pick up*

*Gorancho. Their bus left late and they weren't going to make it on time so they asked me to come and get him. His parents and I are friends. Gorancho and I are also good friends. By the way, I'm a teacher too but I teach in a school in another city.*

*It all sounded convincing. Gorancho's reaction was also in favour of that but I was undecided so I decided to stay with them until Gorancho's parents arrived. Without justifying myself to the tall young man, who said his name was Milan, I put my coat on and followed them.*

*"Maybe I should be offended for you not believing me," said Milan, after he realized that I was following them. Then he quickly added, "That would have been true had I not enjoyed your company."*

*"Does that mean you're comfortable with me being here?" I asked and laughed out loud.*

*"From the first moment I saw you," said Milan, making me blush.*

*"Then we have no problem," I said and again laughed out loud.*

*I noticed Gorancho looking at us curiously, wondering if we had known each other from before and if we were old friends.*

*I learned more about Milan along the way. Something unusual happened to me from the moment we met and the hundred or so steps we took together. I felt something I had never felt before. I felt excited and wanted to be with that person for as long as possible. It was as if suddenly our souls opened up. We wanted to tell each other a lot of things. I wanted to tell him many things about me and he wanted to tell me many things about himself. Let's say we wanted to tell each other a lot of things. Was this love?*

Milan and Dushitsa met the next day and felt the need to meet again and again. They needed each other's assurance and trust. Day by day the feeling of wanting to be together became stronger. Seeing each other became a necessity. None of her family members, friends and people at work could understand how Dushitsa had suddenly changed. She was transformed. She became a completely different

person. She began to open up and became more talkative, cheerful and funny. The joy she carried in her was passed on to everyone around her...

The daily meetings she had with Milan seemed like they weren't enough. They began to meet twice a day. They could barely separate from one another during the evenings. Some of those separations lasted for hours...

They were months into their relationship...

\* \* \*

*I ran over to my sister Vera's work. I began to hug her from the moment I saw her at the door and I almost cried with joy.*

*"Milan and I are getting married. Soon. We want to get engaged any day now!" I said.*

*Vera gave me another hug and said:*

*"God, you should see what your face looks like at this moment! Your eyes are wide open. Your pupils are glowing with joy. Your cheeks have turned red from smiling! Your lips are quivering with every word you say. You can't even calm your hands."*

*After she said all that, Vera pulled me away from her to look at me once again, as she said, to look at my beautiful face. She again pulled me in and hugged me tightly. She didn't have the words to tell me how happy she was for me. How immensely she rejoiced in my news. Holding hands the two of us left the office. We immediately went to the stores to see what kind of formal dresses they sold in this city... It was as if we couldn't wait.*

\* \* \*

Even though Vera was older than Dushitsa, from her reaction one would think that she didn't mind her younger sister getting married before her. She just wanted to be happy for her. It wasn't difficult for Vera to find a boyfriend or even get married. Many boys were

courting her at the same time but she couldn't to decide who to choose. She didn't want to establish a serious relationship with any of them. She felt she hadn't met the one.

Vera wanted to be a government official at all costs. At least a graduate engineer, doctor, or something similar and be financially secure.

After Dushitsa fell in love with Milan, a modest teacher, he became very dear to Vera. Milan had a sad life history. He had no parents. They had both died in the war as fighters against the occupier. Milan had lived with his grandmother, his mother's mother. After coming to study at B, immediately after the war, he had barely finished teacher's school. He tried to find a job so he could live here in this city but was unable to. That's why he got a job as a teacher in a school in another city, not far from B. He settled there in a small apartment in the school building.

In the meantime his grandmother died.

Milan became close with Dushitsa's family. Almost every other day Dushitsa and Milan went to see Dushitsa's parents and her brother Rade. Her father spent a lot of time talking to him... He saw him as a smart and well-rooted young man. He could talk to him about a lot of things. Milan seemed to know a lot about a many things. He seemed more knowledgeable than Rade and other young people. The fact that his parents were well-known fighters against fascism and had died for social justice to improve the people's lives, also meant a great deal to Jovan. He believed they hadn't died in vain. That a better and more humane world would be built on earth because of their sacrifices. "The whole Eastern bloc is with us - children, Russia, the Soviet Union is a strong force. You saw what was done to the fascists - all the way to Berlin. They crushed them into the ground. Capitalism must give way. Its hooves are broken!" said Jovan after which he took a slug of warm rakia from his flask as if wanting to make a toast. Unfortunately they didn't agree on drinking because Milan wasn't a drinker of rakia. He didn't drink at all, not even a drop.

Jovan had told the same stories to his own children many times but they hardly listened. But he seemed to be on the same page with Milan, who had suffered from the loss of his parents, from the feeling that he was alone in this world. It seemed to Milan as if he was listening to his own father...

\* \* \*

Jovan had his first heart attack after he learned about the quarrel between the Yugoslav Communist Party and the USSR Communist Party leaderships. A few days later he had the heart attack. He never told anyone how horribly he felt when he first heard the news on the radio. He didn't even say anything to his own wife and children. The Inform Bureau resolution was a shock to him. He concluded that this quarrel would surely undermine the unity of the socialist front. Western countries could barely wait to see them attack one another. One day when his brother Slobodan came to visit, Stefka heard loud voices in the next room where Jovan and Slobodan were visiting. She figured they were arguing about the latest developments. About the dispute with the Russians. She realized that they didn't share the same opinion. So she decided to stay out of it.

She figured this was a conversation between the two brothers and no one else.

After that Slobodan left the house barely saying goodbye to her.

Stefka didn't tell Jovan or Slobodan that she knew about their argument. That wasn't a thing for her to talk about. But deep down she knew that neither Jovan nor Slobodan would back down, so the brothers went their separate ways.

Jovan died after his second heart attack. During his funeral Stefka noticed Slobodan feeling a bit guilty. Or perhaps it was Stefka's imagination. But one thing she noticed for sure was that Slobodan took his brother's death very hard. He was unable to shake the pain for many days, even months. He visited Jovan's family almost every day and took even more care of them.

All three of Jovan's children, as well as Milan, were devastated by their loss even though they were all adults.

\* \* \*

*The engagement was decided only a few months later! Had we not decided on that damned engagement maybe we would still be happy together and our love would have lasted. Only God knows how many times I went over in my mind the meetings and conversations we had... From the bottom of our hearts we both wanted to live together. That was our common wish... But that's not how it turned out in the end! Something terrible happened...*

*What was even scarier for me in all the days that followed was Milan never tried to contact me and explain or justify what had happened, not even by letter... Not even in my dreams would I have thought that he was so weak. He was probably ashamed! Or he had no regret for his incomprehensible and inhumane act.*

*I realized that more and more was lost with each passing day. The situation was hopeless. I didn't know how I was going to live without him, without those wonderful feelings I had? They were now taken from me. My wonderful love was taken from me. Had someone persuaded him to leave me at the last moment? Had he changed his mind? If that was the case then I didn't know him as well as I thought! He didn't love me as much as I thought.*

*It's time for me to stop thinking these thoughts once and for all. But what comes next? How do I proceed from here?! If I fell for his lies who would I trust...?*

*It would be endless misery for me...*

\* \* \*

*The second month of my agony was ending. I was at work. I was almost unconsciously expecting one of Gorancho's parents to come and fetch him. The moment I saw his mother, I went to her and, in a trembling voice, asked her:*

*“Have you seen Milan? Did something happen to him? Is he okay healthwise? He hasn’t called me and I haven’t seen him for a long time!”*

*Gorancho’s mother seemed to want to leave and get away from me as soon as possible. She looked startled when I asked her about Milan. She quietly said that she hadn’t heard from him or about him and that he hadn’t come to their place for a long time. Then she took Gorancho and left hurriedly.*

*I was confused by her answer. Was she hiding something from me? Something bad obviously! Was Milan already married? Is that why he was hiding? Did he have another fiancée? Another girlfriend perhaps? These were some of the more outrageous thoughts that crossed my mind at that moment!*

*I was determined to find out anything I could about him. So, a few days later, I wrote him a brief letter. I sent it to the school where he worked with his name on the front of the envelope. On the back of the envelope after my name I wrote the address of the kindergarten where I worked. I didn’t want my family to know about this in case the letter came back. Several days passed and nothing... the letter wasn’t answered.*

*The uncertainty of what had happened to him had become a nightmare for me. There was no way the letter hadn’t gotten there; I had no doubt about that. If he wasn’t there his colleagues, even the director or the secretary would have answered my letter.*

*One day I decided to go to the city where he lived. I dressed up as nicely as I could. It was a Sunday. I decided on a Sunday because there would be no students in the school and he wouldn’t be in class.*

*In any case, I didn’t tell anyone here about this.*

*I figured I would be able to easily find the school where he lived.*

*When I got there I asked a passer-by where the school was. The school building wasn’t large. Two children were playing in the schoolyard next to the school building. I had a hard time coming up*

*with what questions to ask. I went and asked the children but they gave me a curious look. They raised their arms indicating that they didn't know. I asked them what grade they were in and if they were taught by a teacher name Milan. The children looked at me with an anxious look. After some silence one of them spoke up and quietly and barely audibly said:*

*"He did teach us but not now..."*

*"And now, he isn't teaching anymore? Where did he go? Is he sick? Did he move to another school?"*

*The children ran away. I heard one of them say something that sounded like: "My father said some people took him..."*

*"Oh God, did he really say that?" I thought to myself several times. The children were gone so I didn't get the chance to ask who took him. I began to wonder who would take him. What kind of people would take him? Where did they take him? To the hospital? To jail?*

*I was frustrated and spent the night thinking about it.*

*The next day I decided not to go to work. I went to the neighbouring town again. This time I went straight to the principal's office. I introduced myself as Milan's friend. I said that I had lost contact with him for some time and wanted to find him. The principle was confused. He stood motionless for a while without looking at me. As if he didn't know what to tell me.*

*"Milan hasn't been here for some time. He doesn't live in the school residence and he doesn't teach here anymore..." he replied with great effort.*

*"Why, what happened to him?" I asked.*

*"I can't tell you anything more, I'm sorry. I have to go to class now", he said, took his journal from his desk and left the office.*

*"Please Sir..." I begged and followed him.*

*“There is nothing more I can tell you, that’s all I know. I told you everything I know,” he replied rudely.*

*I stood in the hallway not knowing what to do. I thought I should ask some of his colleagues but I figured they wouldn’t tell me anything more so I left. Things became even more unclear.*

*If he was sick, why would his colleagues hide it from me? I wondered.*

*I refused to believe that he had been detained by the authorities and sent to prison. What crime had he committed? But at the same time I thought of all sorts of other things. I had heard that in those days people were imprisoned because they spoke against the government and against Tito... Because they had voiced their opinions about the disagreements between our party leadership and that of the Soviet Union. But I knew that Milan wasn’t involved in any politics.*

*I figured I could ask my brother to ask around. Perhaps Milan had been sent to prison by mistake? But then he would say “now that you’re no longer angry you’re prepared to forgive him...” No, I’m not going to ask him... I’ll keep my mouth shut. I will wait. Maybe he’ll call me from somewhere.*

\* \* \*

As for Vera, changing boyfriends was like changing socks. When she stopped being interested in one boy she would quickly forget about him and soon find another. And, as much as it was unexpected of her, one day she hastily got married.

One day she went to her brother’s apartment with a stranger and before they sat down she said the following to her mother and father:

“You can congratulate us, Velimir and I are married.”

The young man shook everyone’s hand and introduced himself.

Rade and her mother almost fell over. They were speechless. Her mother then quietly said:

“Welcome, you are now our son-in-law.”

Rade flushed and began to sweat. He looked at his mother surprised. She held out her hand and again quietly said “congratulations” to the stranger.

Rade too said “congratulations” to them.

“Velimir is a lawyer, he works in a bank. He recently moved to the city. His parents live in another city. I still haven’t met them. Something attracted us at first sight so we decided to be together and here we are,” said Vera.

The telephone rang and Dushitsa picked it up. It was her mother.

“Come over to our house immediately, Vera is here with a young man!”

“Why immediately, what’s so urgent? Just because Vera brought over a boy,” Dushitsa said quite loudly on the phone.

Luckily her mother had called from another room.

“I’m calling you to tell you she got married,” whispered her mother.

Dushitsa didn’t believe her.

“Put Vera on the telephone!” she said anxiously.

Vera got on the telephone and in an excited tone of voice said:

“Come over Dushitsa, we’re waiting for you. Come as soon as possible. It’s true, I got married. I decided and I did it. Come and see him and tell me what you think of him. He seems like a nice man. He’s good looking too. Come and see him.”

Dushitsa still couldn't believe it, but from the tone of her voice Dushitsa knew that Vera wasn't joking.

Dushitsa did her best to get to her brother's house as soon as possible. She was quite impressed with her sister's husband. He had light green eyes, curly brown hair and a bright face. He looked much older than his age. His smile, however, lacked enthusiasm.

Her mother quickly prepared some snacks and Rade bought some drinks.

"Velimir only drinks juice," explained Vera.

Velimir confirmed this by nodding his head.

It wasn't long before everyone was feeling good.

"I must say you surprised us all. But that's good... good luck to you. Now let's toast the occasion", said Rade and congratulated them again. But his tone of voice displayed some uncertainty. Rade figured things would work themselves out and it was best not to say anything at this point in time.

Everyone raised their glasses and toasted the occasion.

Dushitsa too stood up and said "Good luck!" to the couple.

After that everyone stood up.

God bring a bit of joy into this house, thought Vera's mother while looking at Dushitsa, wondering about her own sadness and fearing she might start crying. But Dushitsa looked happy too... Maybe more so than everyone else.

\* \* \*

Rade had his office door slightly open. Not only because it was very hot, but something wasn't right with the air. It was hot, dense, sticky and heavy to breathe. Rade had no desire to bring prisoners in for questioning, nor could he review their files... This wasn't his first

night of insomnia. His nights of insomnia lined up one after another... They were many... And this heat, which was already unbearable, made things harder even at night.

Gazing, bored, through the open door, Rade at one point saw a familiar figure pass by... The guards were escorting a prisoner... They had probably brought him there from one of the regional prisons... But, like a shadow, the face of the person being escorted was captured in his mind. He looked familiar to Rade but from where? He was sure he knew this person.

Suddenly he ran to the door to see where they were taking him... Was it really him... or did he just look like him? Maybe he had a familiar face. Rade listened for a while. The guards quickly took him to the second interrogation room. It was close to Rade's office. Right through one door.

Rade was suspiciously curious. He has a vague feeling mixed with surprise about who he might be... Many and various questions popped into his mind: As a police investigator why didn't he know that Milan might have been in prison for months? Right here. Next to him... And he was being interrogated... As a criminal! No, that's not possible, no..., he thought to himself. That's right! But on the other hand, there are very few people who resemble one another... If only he could see his face, he might be more certain.

He went back to his office. Good thing no one saw him. Who knows how surprised he would have looked... If someone saw him they might have asked where he was going looking like a thief, and he wouldn't know what to say... He became even more restless when he returned to his office... How could he find out who this man was? He had to come up with an idea. He figured he would go over to his colleague's office. That's right... He would pretend to be looking for someone. He would invent who... No, that would be unconvincing... Then he came up with another idea: he would ask his colleague for a newspaper... But, as he went towards the door, he felt something was pulling him back... Perhaps it would be better for him if he didn't know, he thought. Then what if he really was Milan? But then what? What if he was really a criminal? If he confronted him he would bring shame not only to Milan, who wouldn't be able to face

him, but also to himself... No, no! It's best to stay out of it. Let things be unclear... The hair on the back of Rade's neck began to rise as he thought about this; how many questions would it raise? How many wounds would it open? Just by mentioning his name. For him. For his sister. For his mother... and for the whole extended family... They had just begun to forget about him... The man had simply disappeared... He had disappeared... They hadn't heard anything about him for months. Not a word from him either...

It's best this way... It's best if Rade hadn't see him at all!

Rade seemed happy with his decision and calmed down a little... He was even thinking of shutting his door completely so as not to see him again. He preferred to think that it wasn't him. Rade had no idea when the police guards were going to pass by his office with him again... But he changed his mind; he decided not to shut the door. He desperately wanted to see him one more time when he was escorted past his office again.

He began to pace nervously in his office... What a coward Milan is! he thought. So what if he's a criminal. If he's a criminal he's a criminal! Rade soon realized that he wasn't going to get him out of his thoughts and therefore he had to get to the truth... He decided to go over to his colleague's office where Milan had been taken... Rade wasn't on best terms with this particular investigator but he ignored all that... He had gone to his office other times to get the official newspaper.

Rade knocked on the door quietly. He wasn't sure if anyone was going to open it. He then opened it himself and walked in... The investigator and the two detainees turned and looked at him... The two policemen standing by the door also looked at him. Rade was surprised. There was another, a second person, who undoubtedly was also a prisoner besides the one which the police had brought in earlier... Rade apologized for the intrusion. Then, the moment he picked up the newspaper, Milan's and his eyes met. Milan pretended he didn't know Rade. Rade felt his own face turn red. It was burning. He hoped his colleague didn't notice.

His mind was racing as he returned to his office. How and from whom could he find out more about Milan, he wondered? Of what had he been accused? The other prisoner sitting next to Milan was crouching. Maybe he was a witness... The way they sat near to one another looked like a confrontation... After returning to his office, Rade stared at the newspaper more than ten minutes but didn't read a single line. Various thoughts were going through his mind... Milan must have been accused of a serious crime, he thought, otherwise he wouldn't be interrogated here in his ward. It was obvious that his colleague was handling the case.

...If he was truly a criminal then Rade's entire family should be happy that he had been apprehended right then. During that night... It was a good thing too that no one knew that he was in prison.

Rade couldn't stop thinking of the trauma his sister had experienced that night... Not only Dushitsa but also Vera, his mother, himself... All dressed in their best clothes. Not to mention their closest friends and relatives who had been invited to celebrate his sister's engagement... Even now Rade broke into a sweat thinking about that shocking night...

Rade remembered the soul-wrenching experience like it was yesterday. He remembered the long hours that passed when the entire family anxiously waited for Milan's arrival. But he never arrived. Everyone was growing nervous because no one could even guess what had happened to him... All eyes were on the front door constantly... Rade himself couldn't believe that such a thing could happen to them. It wasn't a fling Milan was having with his sister... It wasn't superficial. He had almost become a member of the family. He was everyone's favourite person.

Even now he couldn't escape the horrible feeling... One by one every guest left that night as the family said goodbye with heads bowed down. It was embarrassing... He remembered his sister locking herself in her room and not allowing anyone to tell her anything or console her... Then, when someone suggested they go and look for him, to find out what might have happened to him, she categorically refused! "We will not be further humiliated," she said.

“Whatever his problem was he could have sent someone to let us know. But he didn’t give a damn!”

Everyone was left with the question “Where is he?” And here he was in prison! Here was, the kind of person who hid behind a kind face that was almost always smiling...

Who would now tell Rade what was better? To hide this information from his family or let everyone know? Should he hide this unpleasant truth from his sister? And from his mother? Perhaps it would be easier for Dushitsa if Rade didn’t tell her. Let her think of him the way she had always thought of him, the way she wanted him to be, even though their relationship had ended so sadly... It would be better for her to know him the way she did, than to know him as a criminal... Then, suddenly, Rade felt uncertain about all this. How could he be sure that Milan had committed a crime? He felt guilty for condemning him without knowing the truth. Maybe he had been falsely accused... Maybe someone had slandered him? But then why had he been kept in prison for months if he hadn’t done anything... If he wasn’t guilty!

Rade soon realized that he wouldn’t be able to hide this from his sister... seeing Milan... But if he told her, he was sure that it would devastate her even more. It would surely open her old wound from the night of the engagement that never happened... On the other hand, at least she would know what had happened to him... Would it be easier for her if she found out that he was a criminal? That she was lucky that fate had saved her from this dangerous man?

Maybe his colleagues, Rade thought, deliberately imprisoned him that night to prevent his engagement to Dushitsa. To save Rade’s honour and reputation. To save the family’s honour. And foremost, to save his sister... But if that were the case, they would have told him. They wouldn’t have hidden it from him... Or maybe they didn’t want to hurt his sister or him by telling him...

About an hour later Milan was escorted back down the hall. Towards the exit... Rade recognized him by his steps. Milan tried to look through the half-open door but couldn’t... It was Milan all right. He was the only one being escorted. The other person wasn’t with

him... Milan was accompanied by only one policeman. The other prisoner, it would appear, was also in custody here in this prison and the other policeman naturally escorted him to the basement.

Rade stood there immobile for a long time. He had no idea how much time had passed. He struggled hard to listen and determine when his colleague, Investigator Trajan, was going to come out of his office so that he could have a word with him. He didn't return his newspaper hoping he would come and look for it. Rade wanted to learn more about Milan. Finally he heard Trajan's door close. Trajan always closed his door the same way; silently. Rade could hear his footsteps approaching.

What if Trajan knew that Milan had been dating his younger sister and was planning to marry her? Surely then he knew that Rade was pretending not to know Milan. Rade stepped out of his office, locked his door and began to walk beside Trajan. Rade laughed, implying that it was only a coincidence that he had walked out of his office at the same time as Trajan. Trajan wasn't very friendly. He didn't seem to be in the mood for talking.

Rade couldn't stand the silence so he spoke up and, in a low and strangled voice, said:

"I think I know the young man who you interrogated today."

"You'd best not know him," replied Trajan after some silence. His tone of voice made it clear to Rade that he wasn't interested in continuing this conversation.

Rade was surprised by his response but wasn't about to give up. Now he was even more intrigued and excited to know more.

"Is he a dangerous criminal? And so young..." said Rade.

Trajan was silent. He didn't seem to want to talk. After some silence he said:

"He's in a worse situation. It has nothing to do with being a criminal."

“How so?” asked Rade.

“Someone brainwashed him. It seems he prefers Stalin over Tito.”

Rade couldn't believe what he'd heard. He was now completely confused.

“You mean to tell me he is in support of the Informburo?” he said without thinking.

“Exactly that,” replied Trajan.

So why did they give him to you? Don't you just work with criminals?” asked Rade.

“You ask a lot of questions... They only brought him here because of an altercation. The other guy who was with me, the old one, he's a criminal. They had an altercation.

“Him?” remarked Rade.

Rade figured they must have promised the old man a milder sentence, or pressured him to do it. It had been five months since Milan had been imprisoned, what altercation? Five months had passed since Milan disappeared.

Unfortunately now Rade was facing a new impasse. An even a harder one. More complicated. He mustn't let Trajan know that he really knew Milan. Because if Trajan found out that Milan was a close friend of his family it would bring difficulties for Rade. Trajan would surely slander him because, above all, he had hidden the fact that he knew Milan! He had hidden the fact that Milan was going to be part of Rade's family. Trajan could even make up whatever he wanted to slander Rade! And like Rade's mother used to say, “evil never comes alone... (It brings more evil.)”

Rade figured if he continued to walk side by side with Trajan and talk about Milan, Trajan might get suspicious so he decided to go another way... They parted company.

Rade was becoming even more anxious... Restless... At first he was relieved that Milan, who would have been his brother-in-law now, wasn't a criminal. Politics, however, are something else. Rade felt much better that Milan hadn't skipped the engagement on his own. They had detained him on the same day that the engagement was to take place. Rade recalled that the night before the engagement Milan was with them until late at night.

...Why had Milan gone through that nonsense telling people about his personal political beliefs...? Maybe he said something to that effect to someone or someone overheard him and reported him... Surely he had confided in someone... Perhaps he'd said something in front of his students, or in front of one of his colleagues? Had he spoken about it to a colleague surely they would have advised him to keep his mouth shut... But as far as Rade knew, Milan had never mentioned such a thing to anyone... Certainly not to Dushitsa. Didn't he realize how delicate this whole situation was...? How dangerous it was? Not only for himself but also for Dushitsa. She too would have been implicated. Rade wondered why she hadn't been summoned for questioning. Maybe for Rade's sake because he worked for the police, or because of his uncle... They suspected everyone... They didn't trust anyone. Rade was well-aware that he was a small fish in a huge police pond...

...Only with his uncle's help could Rade find out why his family hadn't come under attack after Milan was arrested... It wouldn't be a surprise to Rade if his uncle had actually consented to Milan's arrest just before the engagement... Rade was trying to remember if his had uncle looked surprised when Milan didn't arrive... But who could remember after so many months? If indeed his uncle had consented to Milan's arrest before the engagement, didn't he realize that he would ruin not only Milan's life but also Dushitsa's, for whom he seemed to care very much...? Didn't he realize that Milan was the love of Dushitsa's life? On the other hand, Rade didn't believe that his uncle, who was in one of the highest political positions in the country, couldn't prevent Milan's arrest... He could have unless, of course, Milan had openly spoken to a wide audience about the Inform Bureau Resolution, at one of the meetings he attended. He might not have discussed the entire subject but he

might have been asked who he favoured Tito or Stalin. People might have been asked individually whether they were for or against the resolution. If he had done that then neither his uncle nor God could have saved him! If Rade's uncle were to intervene in such a case he too would have been imprisoned along with him... If Milan publicly agreed with the Inform Bureau's criticisms against our Central Committee then, certainly, he would have been arrested and imprisoned. Maybe Rade's uncle decided to imprison Milan before he married Dushitsa to save the family... so that the family wouldn't have to suffer because of him if his relationship between him and Dushitsa became official.

The closer Rade came to his home, the slower he walked. He decided to stop at a nearby bar. He felt he couldn't go home with all the stuff boiling in his head. He sat at one of the farthest tables hoping no one would join him. After his second glass of rakia, several questions popped into his mind.

One of the most difficult questions he was facing was whether to tell his sister or not? If he told her, she might do something reckless. She might run to the police to look for Milan and argue with them about his arrest. She might put pressure on the police and on her uncle to release him... This would be very bad for the entire family. Mostly for her. She would put herself in danger... And Rade too might lose his job... Out of love and disappointment, Dushitsa might say something about the resolution, even worse, she might support it to prove her love for him, even though she knew very little about it. She might do that in hopes of being arrested so that she could be closer to him. By doing so she might feel she was expressing her love for him. But if they arrested her, Rade wouldn't be able to work with the police, not even a single day. Surely Rade would oppose her arrest and if he did, he too would be arrested and imprisoned... As a result, the entire family would suffer... We couldn't expect our uncle, who is a top official in this government, to intervene on our behalf in this kind of situation. He just couldn't and if he did there would surely be consequences, he was part of the top ten officials of the state! All that was happening regarding the resolution was a result of decisions made by the highest part of government in the country. People had been arrested and disappeared as a result of the decisions made right at the very top of our government.

Rade was certain that his sister Dushitsa wouldn't believe him if he told her that their uncle wasn't able to prevent Milan's imprisonment... What would Dushitsa think of her uncle, her father's brother, if he didn't intervene in her beloved's imprisonment? What had Milan done that was so wrong for him to be taken away from her just when she was the happiest? How could her uncle let her suffer like that with a broken heart? And of all the times he could have allowed Milan to be arrested why was it done at a crucial moment in her life, during her engagement. Why had he let her experience all that shame and humiliation in front of so many people... In front of the entire family! How could he have been so cruel and not care? Why hadn't he told her about the arrest all this time? Dushitsa unfortunately would care only about what was most important to her, Milan. She wouldn't understand the kind of shadow this would cast on her uncle's political reputation, and how this would endanger him personally...

Rade's head was hurting from all these conflicting thoughts running through it and felt like it was about to explode. Several times he regretted inquiring about the prisoner who had been escorted down the hall in front of the half-open door of his office and finding out that indeed it was Milan... He regretted asking Trajan about him... And now he had entangled himself in a situation from which he didn't know how to escape. He was also well-aware that he might have tipped off Trajan about his relationship with Milan and if Trajan investigated him and found out all the details, he might turn them against him. Trajan might use this information against Rade when he attempted to advance his career. He might even want to prove himself loyal to the government and turn Rade in. Even if Trajan had reported that Rade was interested in Milan but he pretended he didn't know him, especially if it was found out that he had almost married his sister, that would raise a lot of suspicion and surely would have consequences. And what if the authorities discovered that Rade and Milan were friends? So, go ahead and prove to them why you didn't tell all this to your colleague Trajan, if you weren't guilty of something? If you weren't hiding something! Maybe you and Milan were like-minded? Maybe you belonged to the same organization working to overthrow the state government? Only UDDBA's vigilance prevented you from taking further action.

You, Rade, because you're employed by the police, you figured you could use your power as a policeman to mask those illegal things that you and Milan were involved in...

...Guilty or not Rade, they would beat you to pulp. You would have nothing to admit and they would beat you more because they'd think you were hiding something or that you were lying. They would ask you questions like "So, who else is in the Organization with you? Who is in charge of it? What actions did you plan without Milan? Did Milan's arrest prevent you from carrying out those actions?" In a word, your life is over... Rade felt a tightness in his throat... The next glass of rakia didn't help him much...

If Rade was going to tell anyone he figured it was best to tell Vera, his older sister. She had a strong character and if she would agree not to talk it would be their secret. Or they would agree to act like nothing had happened. But then Rade decided he wasn't going to tell her either. Vera couldn't keep a secret. If Vera didn't tell Dushitsa surely she would tell their mother, and then their mother for sure would tell Dushitsa. Their mother would want to comfort her and tell her that Milan still loved her, but for some other reason he couldn't call her to explain what had happened to him.

Rade now figured that the best thing to do was tell no one. He decided to follow Milan's case on his own as much as possible and find out what would happen to Milan next... That seemed to him the safest way to go. The closer he got to his home, the closer he came to this decision. He knew that it wouldn't be easy to hide the truth but decided to hide it from his loved ones anyway...

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Around the same time, Rade, along with a top politician, was given a site to build a house. The houses needed to be almost next to one another. Rade was the only one who could deal with the construction but he needed to make changes to his job. He petitioned his supervisor to allow him to spend most of his time working the night shift. His boss immediately agreed because not many officers wanted to work at night; they found it difficult. They could hardly wait for Rade to relieve them; Rade going to work at night instead of

them. Rade was well-aware of the effort it would take on his part. Not to sleep at night but spend most of his nights interrogating serious criminals. During the day, no matter how much he worked, he was unable to do much. Things moved slowly because he had to purchase materials for the construction, wait for their delivery, hire workers and be by their side to supervise them.

This was exhausting work for Rade. His days were arduous with the construction and his nights gruelling with the criminals from the underworld. But, at the same time, he was somewhat able to put aside his problems with Milan and his sister Dushitsa. Or at least he tried. He also spent less time with Trajan. It seemed to Rade that if he didn't have deal with Trajan on a day to day basis, Trajan might forget about him and Milan.

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But that didn't change anything.

Even though his sister Dushitsa lived in another apartment, Rade went to see her often. During his visits he noticed that she was progressively looking paler and was getting physically weaker. Every time Rade went to visit her he would asked himself if he had the right to take her fate into his hands. What right did he have to interfere in her life? He even had nightmares that one day Milan would be released from prison and he would tell Dushitsa that Rade had known he was in prison and had seen him during one of his interrogations. How then, would Rade explain to his sister why he had hid this from her? She would rightly be very upset and blame him for having suffered senselessly. She might also think that Rade too might have been involved in Milan's arrest the evening before the engagement. And that all night he had pretended to be surprised when Milan didn't arrive. She might even think that Rade had offered to go to his house, to see what had happened to him and what had prevented him from coming to the engagement, knowing full well that he wouldn't be there!

Every night, without exception, every time Rade took a break between interrogations he thought of his sister's fate and that tormented him. Also, ever since he had seen Milan in the prison, he

hadn't found out anything new about him. He wouldn't dare ask Trajan. He was happy that Trajan never mentioned him again. It became increasingly dangerous to have a relative, a friend, or even just to know a person who was in favour of the Inform Bureau resolution. On top of that no one trusted anyone and everyone was afraid of everyone. There was complete distrust between people. There was distrust even among relatives. People literally locked themselves in their houses and had fewer and fewer visitors. They were afraid of each other. They were even afraid of saying anything in case they were or could be misunderstood. Or accidentally misinterpreted. Or intentionally misinterpreted. And this could be used against them.

Informants began to emerge, like sprouts from the ground, who the government counted on to slander people. Most of these informants belonged to the naïve category of citizens. There were also those who, almost overnight, became professional provocateurs. They attacked their chosen victims like hornets. They would talk to people, supposedly quite naively, about the Soviet Union, about Stalin, about the Inform Bureau and look for reactions. Most people were unable to cope with what was said and how it was said and didn't know how to respond, whether to deny what the other person was saying or remain silent. In any case, the provocateur, no matter what the person said or didn't say, would interpret their answer in a negative way. The provocateur would then write a statement against them. Silence in this kind of situation was interpreted as acceptance of the Inform Bureau resolution. Rade was happy that he wasn't allowed to interrogate political prisoners. He was happy not to have that responsibility!

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Dushitsa distanced herself from her entire family. She kept closing herself in and suffering alone. She wouldn't even go out with her friends. She even avoided her sister Vera. Her life became going to work and coming back home. She seemed very serious and modest. Immeasurably noble. No, few boys would be happy with her. She acted as if everything was over, like she had failed and everything was lost. Her conversations with her mother and sister didn't help

much. She was unable to snap back to life because of her great disappointment in her beloved Milan.

It was their late fathers' name day and, according to tradition, Vera and Dushitsa went to visit their mother. Rade was already at home with her. Their mother was making pita (Macedonian pastry).

Dushitsa dared to say:

“Rade, something has been bothering me these days. As I understand it, people who had nothing to do with politics are being sent to prison during these dark times, could that have happened to Milan? Could he have been slandered by someone? For doing absolutely nothing?”

Rade's face turned pale. He was afraid of two things. First, his sister finding out that he had seen Milan in prison. But how could she have known? He quickly dismissed that idea. Second, what Dushitsa had said, “that they could be imprisoned for nothing”, was a dangerous thing to say. She could be arrested and imprisoned for just saying that.

Rade snapped back at her rudely and in a loud voice said, “I hope you haven't said this to anyone before! You could be sent to prison for saying such a thing!” And then, in a serious tone of voice, added, “Have you forgotten what that man (Milan) did to you?” Rade said all this categorically fearing that he might reveal the truth, which he desperately wanted to hide even from himself.

When Dushitsa decided to talk about Milan there was no stopping her. She continued:

“How is it possible that no one knows where he is? Can a person suddenly disappear like that, without any trace?”

“So, you've been looking for him?” said her sister Vera.

“I can no longer live without knowing what happened to Milan. Is he alive?” asked Dushitsa in a half-crying voice.

“I understand how she feels and I think she’s right,” said her mother.

“In that case, why don’t you go look for him at the school where he worked,” said Vera in a gentle tone of voice.

“I did go there. No one seems to know anything or wants to say anything. He’s simply gone. Even the school principal said that to me and didn’t want to discuss the subject any further,” replied Dushitsa.

“Then he must be in prison for sure. That’s why they’re afraid to tell you!” said Vera and turned to Rade and said, “You, Rade, you ask around, if that’s what Dushitsa wants.” She then turned towards the others and said, “Maybe he had a fight with his principal and took off.”

In a loud voice Rade yelled:

“Prison is the last place where we should be looking for him! Do we want to blame him prematurely without knowing the facts? If we look for him in the prisons, then we assume that he’s either a criminal or a political prisoner... Leave it to me. I’ll find a way to look for him. It’s best you stay away from this mess because it could turn very ugly.”

The women were silent for a long time. They were surprised by the nervousness with which Rade spoke. To relieve the tension Stefka, their mother, changed the subject and began asking questions about everyday things. Rade left them and went to his room. He was feeling stressed out and didn’t know how he was going to get himself out of this situation. He thought the problem with Milan was in their past and forgotten, but here it was once again. He didn’t know what to do? How was he going to move ahead? Should he come clean? If he told Dushitsa, not that he had seen him but that he understood that he might be in prison as an Inform Bureau resolution supporter, he would be relieved. But then how would Dushitsa react? He figured he shouldn’t rush to tell her, give it some time. Maybe Dushitsa would forget about him. Or she would find another boyfriend.

One day, while working on his house with his construction workers, Rade saw Vera coming... She looked unusually odd like she had something on her mind. Rade became flustered and hundreds of thoughts rose up in his mind, mostly bad ones which caused him some stress. What reason would she have to leave her job and come here? he thought. When he saw the expression on her face, in her eyes, he suspected the reason for her sister's visit was about something bad. She looked around and visited the workers looking like she was in a hurry to leave. Rade climbed down to see her. Looking into her eyes, Rade sensed that she wanted to tell him something but was hesitant. He walked several steps towards her before Vera quietly said:

“I don't want to alarm you but I have to tell you something. Dushitsa and I were at the doctor's office, a heart specialist. She was referred to him by her general practitioner.”

Rade stood there frozen. He was expecting the worst...

“She's not well... she'll have to take medication... Regularly...” said Vera.

“I expected that. I didn't expect anything good... But it isn't as bad as I expected,” said Rade and grabbed Vera by the shoulders.

Vera could see that her brother was very upset. She tried to calm him down. She said:

“Maybe it's not as bad as it seems given that this was her first examination... She needs to be examined again to be sure. They gave her a lot of medication,” said Vera and couldn't avoid crying.

Rade was so flustered he didn't know what to do. He had no strength to say anything or look Vera in the eyes. When she noticed how upset he was she stopped crying. Unfortunately there was one overriding thought in Rade's mind: was he to blame for what was happening to his sister Dushitsa?

At least once a week Dushitsa reminded Rade to inquire about Milan, as promised, but she always got the same answer – as of yet there's no information. She decided to threaten him that if he didn't do it, she would do it herself. She would go to the prisons and hospitals on her own. But that was only a bluff. She was getting sicker and sicker and began to tire very easily. She had lost her appetite completely and the only thing she desired was to know what had happened to Milan. But that too seemed to dull her.

One day she decided to confide in one of her closest co-workers, who was also a sincere friend, about Milan's sudden disappearance. To reassure her, her friend told her that it was possible that Milan may have gone somewhere abroad to escape if he was in any real danger. It was understandable that he wouldn't trust anyone so that's why he didn't tell her where he went. Dushitsa accepted her explanation. It was possible that he may have fled abroad without telling anyone. But by now he should have informed someone. He'd been away for a long time.

*After having that conversation with my co-worker, it seemed possible to me that Milan had fled abroad without telling me. Or I just wanted to believe in something like that. In such a case he probably couldn't call or write to me. I needed to think that way. To have some hope. Several more uneventful months passed. Almost a year of uncertainty had gone by. Vera told me that she had also asked Uncle Slobodan if he had any news about Milan. But he too had nothing.*

*As much as I wasn't interested in politics, I couldn't avoid reading the news. It seemed there were a lot of people imprisoned because they were allegedly in favour of the Inform Bureau resolution. Some were war veterans and even communists. I couldn't even imagine that Milan would turn against Tito. All members of our family were with Tito. I didn't think too much about what was happening around me. I was too depressed from my own tragedy and was also in poor health. There was no room left in me for events from the outside world.*

*One day my mother said that she had heard that some of the prisoners who were jailed as a result of being accused of being Inform Bureau resolution supporters, whose whereabouts were unknown, had sent postcards to their homes with a few words written on them. Only now had they been given permission to write and only after serving a year or more in prison. After she told me that, my hopes were raised but I had no idea why I even had such hopes. Every day after that I waited for a postcard to arrive... Maybe the mailman would bring one for me too. Several days passed and nothing. No postcard. I started to think that maybe someone had liquidated him over something... and I kept getting angrier at him. I didn't want to know anything about him... Then I changed my mind again. Maybe it was my way to justify his giving up on me... To free him.*

\* \* \*

...It became clear to him and to her, in an instant, that their meeting was inevitable. Her sister's fiancé, who had disappeared more than two years ago, was standing in front of her! Face to face! It had been so long and they knew nothing about him, about his fate, from that night when he inexplicably disappeared. Without a word. Without a trace. He had just disappeared. Given the expression on his face, she immediately realized that he was more afraid of being discovered than happy to see her. Vera noticed the insecurity in his steps and wondered if he was going to run. He desperately wanted to run. Like a child caught stealing. To immediately get lost. To disappear. Nevertheless, he didn't run and met her face to face. They looked at each other eye to eye.

“Hello Milan... Where have you been all this time?” asked Vera sounding curious.

She shook Milan's hand.

Milan's face first turned red and then terribly pale. His face looked like it was made of wax. He couldn't speak. After mustering some strength he said:

“I'm still gone.”

Vera was confused. She didn't understand.

“Obviously you're not gone. Why don't you come back? Dushitsa still lives in the same apartment... She's alone,” said Vera quickly, as if being afraid that Milan might disappear in the next instant.

A dark curtain seemed to cover Milan's face. It looked to Vera like he was going to cry.

“Yes... yes... I will come,” he muttered in barely understandable words, and feeling that he might be afraid of being asked something more, quickly turned the corner and disappeared.

Milan was unable to get his act together for a long time so he didn't go out. But as it happened he did go out and had accidentally run into Vera, Dushitsa's sister. Now Vera was going to tell Dushitsa that she had seen him and would open up old wounds... After so long! Would Dushitsa want to see him? he wondered. Would she still want to see him after everything that had happened? And should Dushitsa still want to see him what explanation would he have for her? Was there even the slightest hope that she would want him? How would he approach her? What would he say to her? How would he explain things to her? Many things had happened since the day he'd disappeared. He had experienced much pain, frustration and humiliation in prison. In the few months after he was released from Goli Otok located on a desolate island in the Adriatic Sea. He was unable to muster the courage to go and see her. He was also seriously ill. And even now, he still didn't have the courage to face her.

Even after running into Vera he still had no idea how he was going to move forward.

He hesitated for a long time. He felt like something was broken inside of him... At the same time he felt the need, the necessity to go and see Dushitsa. At least one time, as soon as possible. Visit with her if only for a while! God, how much he loved her!

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The moment he turned the corner and began to walk on the street towards her house he felt like all the air around him had been sucked out. He seemed to sink into the abyss with every step he took. When he reached the threshold of her door he thought his heart had stopped... He wondered if his legs were going to give away and let him collapse. What if she didn't want to see him? What if she started yelling at him and kicked him out? Maybe she wouldn't open the door for him? What if Vera hadn't told her? He began to choke... He broke into a sweat. He stopped walking again. He began to question his decision to come and see her? Would she understand that, through no fault of his own, he had caused her shame and suffering...? Would she believe him that he only loved her? Now even more. And how would he prove it to her? How would he convince her of that truth?

\* \* \*

*I couldn't contain myself since the day Vera came over to tell me that she had met Milan. And that he might be coming to visit me one of these days. Vera couldn't tell me more. She didn't know where he was all that time, what had happened to him and when he was coming to visit me... After so much time had passed...*

*As I waited for him to appear at my doorstep I kept thinking of how I had managed to survive all the difficulties I had endured over the years. With a tireless, inexplicable fanaticism, as I tormented myself over the years, deep in my heart I believed that someday he would come back to me. I truly believed that he would repent for what he had done to me. He would beg me for forgiveness... But he would return to me. I needed to believe that in order to survive! Not to give up and die before my time!*

*During our relationship and even after he'd disappeared there were no other men for me. I didn't give myself to anyone who tried to approach me and court me, let alone allow them to enter my life.*

*I accepted everything that had happened between me and Milan as our destiny. I reconciled with it. His reappearance seemed like it*

*had happened in the afterlife... What could he tell me now? About himself. About me...*

Step by step Milan was getting closer to Dushitsa's house. It seemed like some strong force had brought him here. At one point he noticed her silhouette behind a thin curtain in the window. It seemed to attract him. With quick steps he automatically walked the rest of the way to the entrance. He knocked on the door. He wasn't sure if he was doing the knocking himself. He felt like his movements were mechanical. Like he wasn't human. Like he had no voice and no words.

Without hesitation Dushitsa immediately opened the door. She wasn't even aware that she had been standing and waiting at the door. She had waited at the door every day since she'd found out about him from Vera. She stood at the door in anticipation.

She was shocked at his sight. He looked lost and helpless. He looked like a convict who was about to face his executioner at any moment and there wasn't the slightest hope of being pardoned... He stood there with a bouquet of white roses in his hand.

Milan didn't remember how he crossed over the threshold. They went towards each other... But their long separation, the bitterness that had gathered in their young, wounded hearts, the sorrows they had endured made their embrace absurd. They shook hands... It wasn't a warm handshake... Not even a cordial one. For two people who had been separated as long as they had, it was a handshake of reconciliation but without any hope of reunion... They were both silent and unable to look into each other's eyes. Neither one knew what to say... Where to start... Who would start first...

Dushitsa didn't remember taking the white roses from his hand, putting them into a vase, or adding water to them.

In a voice that seemed to him like it belonged to someone else, someone who was buried underground Milan said:

“Well, a lot of time has passed... I wanted to before... I couldn’t... I didn’t come... Not because I didn’t want to. I couldn’t... I was in prison.

In the meantime Dushitsa invited him to sit down, in the same armchair in which he had sat countless other times. Nothing had changed in the room since his disappearance.

When he mentioned that he had been in prison Dushitsa looked surprised. When he saw the expression on her face he immediately added, “Not as a criminal but as a political prisoner...”

They both stopped talking. The silence was getting unbearable.

Milan decided to speak again. He said:

**“Do you remember that night when we were going to formally announce our engagement to our friends and relatives? I was already dressed in my new suit and very happy to come over to your house. Then, just a few minutes before I was going to leave my apartment, someone knocked on my door very lightly. This was the apartment in the school where I worked. I rushed to open it thinking it was my landlord, but two strangers rushed in and pushed me back into the apartment. They said they were from UDBA and ordered me to go with them. I wanted to know why they were taking me but they not only didn’t answer me, they told me to stop asking questions. That’s how I found myself behind bars. There wasn’t a living soul in the school at the time. No one saw or was told that I was being taken to prison. Even if there were people, I don’t believe the UDBA officers would have allowed me to send you a message. What upset me the most was that it was happening during our special night! I knew how long you had waited for this with all our closest friends and relatives and how excited you were to get engaged. I also knew how horrible it was for you and your family when I didn’t show up. But I couldn’t help it.**

**...You remember me telling you that my mother and father were killed in the war. My grandmother had also died in the meantime. I was aware that there was no one from my side of**

**the family to inquire about me. I also knew you wouldn't ask... to keep your relatives from getting into trouble..."**

There was silence again.

Milan spoke again. He said:

**"After seven months of relentless torture in prison, I was sent to a desert island in the Adriatic Sea. It's called Goli Otok. It's a camp specially prepared for Inform Bureau resolution supporters. I was accused of being an Inform Bureau resolution supporter..."**

**...Everything that happened to me there from the first day I arrived was horrible. It was worse than what Hitler's Germans did in the World War II camps, where the fascists destroyed people, from all over the world, who didn't belong to the "pure" Aryan race.**

**Now we were declared "Stalinists" as opposed to the "pure race" – "Titoists". They messed with our heads! With our minds! They did all that overnight! Are you for Tito or for Stalin? I had no idea who decided to divide us or why? Are you for our Communist Party - or for the Soviet Bolshevik Leninist party? Why was there this sudden opposition between them? Didn't we fight in that terrible war against fascism together? It's over now but didn't we lead it together and win it together? Are we not socialists committed to the USSR's example of socialism; the first country that led us to socialism? Are we not a society of people that are equal? No rich and poor, no unemployed, no hungry, no homeless? Was this "quarrel" between Stalin and Tito deliberately designed to liquidate hundreds of true communists? Who came up with the need to quarrel?**

**People were jailed in Goli Otok without being tried. They were arrested for just saying a single word, maybe even an ambiguous word... They were arrested for asking a question. Sometimes an unfinished question... addressed to their closest friend, colleague, neighbour, acquaintance...**

**You wouldn't believe how many people died there. Top personalities! Strong intellectuals! Scientists, writers, musicians, artists, non-communists, communists... Some had dedicated their lives to the struggle for a just society. But instead of being rewarded for their contributions, they were punished. They were accused of things of which they weren't guilty. They were condemned by people obsessed with power, people who feared they would lose what they had taken without earning it, such as jobs for which they didn't qualify, money, property, material goods and other things that didn't belong to them. They feared that someone would organize a revolt and overthrow them and take away their power that provided them all these privileges. I couldn't come to terms with that! Was that what the revolution and our struggle were all about? So that these corrupt people could gain advantage over the rest of us? Was that the ideal for which many people sacrificed their lives? Was that why we exchanged our existing way of life for a new way where we were all more or less equal...?"**

From the moment Milan walked into her apartment Dushitsa remained still and silent as if she didn't know the man, sitting opposite to her, talking non-stop. It once again seemed to her that all this was taking place in another life. Two metres underground. Why was Milan telling her all these things? Who needed to hear them? How would this change their past? All these things were gone... No one had returned from the afterlife... She wanted to interrupt him... Maybe if he stopped talking for a moment. She wanted him to be the way he was... to be here... to be near her... to be like he was before... The former Milan... Her Milan... But Milan continued to talk... This Milan... He talked non-stop...

**...There on that lifeless island, I quickly realized that everything that was being done, with all the physical and above all mental harassment, was done for a person to lose their human qualities. To dehumanize them. To turn them into an anti-human. That was the price of staying alive there, where we were surrounded by non-humans, by beasts... By tormentors without any human qualities... At some point you realized that, with all the monstrous methods of unprecedented, uninterrupted pressure**

**on you, there was a danger that nothing would remain of you, of your person, of the humanity in you and, because you were unable to kill the beasts around you, you would want to kill yourself. Or... from the horrible abuse you experienced you would go crazy! Many ended up going crazy... They simply went crazy... If they weren't killed first. Or... if they didn't die of starvation... or thirst! Thirst, terrible unbearable thirst! It was in that state that we were forced into superhuman physical torture. Simultaneously beaten with hands, feet, metal rods, wooden sticks, wet ropes tied in knots... Many were beaten to death for no reason... Sometimes they just beat someone to death because they had picked up a cigarette butt from the ground and put in their mouth... Sometimes someone was beaten to death for uttering a single word deemed inappropriate... Most often people were beaten to death for not confessing to have done something. Or for not saying something that allegedly had happened when in fact it had never happened!"**

All the time he spoke Milan never looked at Dushitsa. He didn't look to see if she was listening to him... As if all this wasn't addressed to her. As if he was telling someone else. Confessing to someone else... Telling them what had happened to him so they too would know...

The expression on Dushitsa's face was that of a mourner, mourning over someone who had left forever. Or maybe she was mourning over herself, knowing that she couldn't blame Milan for all that she had been through all these years. She was completely paralyzed from what she was finding out. She couldn't attack him now, not after what he'd been through. She couldn't even call him insulting names. Even the curses that came from her heart for betraying her love also became meaningless. She couldn't blame him for ruining her youth. He had left her without joy in the most beautiful years of her life... He had left her without a family, without children... It had damaged her health... She had to take medication every day... Her heart was damaged...

She waited for the right moment to tell him all that. To yell at him. To hurt him...

However, Dushitsa was now facing a new reality. Her beloved Milan was right there in front of her but he looked worn out... wasted! Her lost love was tormented! He had been tossed into the abyss forever for having done nothing. He was guilty without guilt! She felt very sorry for him. For herself. She felt like screaming. She wanted her lost years of happiness back. Her unborn children. Her pleasure of living together with a loved one. Her return of faith in life... But how was she going to do this? Who was going to do this for her? Who was to blame for all this? The beasts of whom Milan spoke since the moment he had returned to her? The ones who took her beloved in the most beautiful moment of her life and returned him to her after they had killed everything inside him? They had killed him. This person here was just someone who looked like Milan... She tried to look into his eyes to at least find a spark from the flame that used to burn in them. But it was in vain! Everything was extinguished. Even his face, the skin on his face was sagging and lifeless. Like all his movements. She became more and more aware that she wouldn't be able to take revenge on anyone. Not even the evil force that had ruthlessly changed their lives. That had destroyed them... Irreversibly...

Milan's voice became distant, like an echo of words spoken a long time ago... He continued:

**“...I spent almost two years in jail on the island. Finally we were given permission to write a letter to someone close to us. The first thing we were told to write was to express our gratitude to the people's socialist government and state, which mercifully gave us the opportunity to ‘correct ourselves.’ To return from the wrong to ‘the right path.’ We had to also thank the Party and our great leader Tito for everything they had done for us, ‘the traitors of the people and the Party’.**

**...After hearing this while standing in line, I was in the front of the line, a strong cramp gripped my entire body. This was yet another humiliation. Perfectly thought out! What cynicism? We had to say thank you? For what? For the atrocities they had committed against us every day? By saying this did they think that they had already managed to turn us all into idiots? They were lying to themselves if they thought that!**

**...I immediately thought; to whom should I write this letter? I thought of you! Even if I had hundreds of close relatives, and even if my mother and father were alive, I would still have written to you. To let you know how much I cried for you when no one was looking. All night long. How I suffered! One time I came close to writing you but I realized that none of you would be happy getting a letter from Goli Otok. That's why I didn't. I didn't want to cause you further torment. Both you and your family."**

Milan stopped talking for a while. The room went silent!

He began talking again but his voice seemed even more sorrowful and monotonous. He got up and started to pace from one end of the room to the other as if what he was about to say was even more painful to him.

**"...In that desolation we had no contact with the outside world. With life outside the camp. We were all innocent convicts, suffering at the hands of ruthless interrogators, brutal policemen and torturers of all kinds. They brutalized us and forced us to turn on each other. There was constant pressure to inform on loved ones, friends, neighbours, brothers, sisters, fathers, sons and so on. If you didn't want to be harassed and humiliated beyond the extent that a normal human mind could accept, then make a statement against anyone, even a false statement, yes, yes, a false statement. Become a lowly snitch at all costs, otherwise you will never leave that snake pit full of venomous snakes."**

Dushitsa got up and went to the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She couldn't stand it anymore. She was hoping that Milan would stop talking. If he didn't she was sure she was going to pass out. She was going to collapse... Everything he said was awful, painful and horrible... Her heart wasn't able to take any more...

When she came back Milan was still talking... Apparently he hadn't even noticed that she had left the room.

**“...I knew I couldn’t write to you. I knew your family was with Tito. Like it or not, we were on different sides. How could it be any other way? Your brother works for the police, your uncle is a top politician...”**

Suddenly there was silence again. A longer silence this time. Dushitsa figured he had finally stopped talking. But she was wrong. He began talking again:

**“...Do you know what was even more cynical? When I was imprisoned, I wasn’t an Inform Bureau resolution supporter. I wasn’t at all against Tito. I wasn’t even aware of the causes of the dispute between the Soviet Union and our government. I didn’t know what the Inform Bureau resolution was all about. I became an Inform Bureau resolution supporter in prison! There! In Goli Otok! When I experienced first hand who and what our ‘representatives of the people’s government’ were and the kind of methods they employed against us political prisoners. I know many of them were comrades in arms with those in the Inform Bureau, including some of the investigators and policemen, but that was until yesterday. I’m also sure that many had nothing to do with the struggle against Hitler’s forces, much less with the revolution. Many even cooperated with the occupier and openly fought on its side. Some, as I later found out, were filled with hatred against socialism and communism. Some were former Chetniks and Ustashas. Some of our torturers were convicts, criminals who had committed murder. They were recruited from prisons to be our torturers. They were in charge of torturing the prisoners with the heaviest sentences. Why? Because someone decided that’s how it was going to be, because we had been slandered by someone. We had been slandered by basically anyone, but most likely by a family who had a member of their own family already in prison and wanted them to have an easier time.**

**... One time I accidentally overheard our tormentors say:**

**‘Why should we kill him, he doesn’t have to die quickly. We’ll have some fun with him for a while!’**

**They wouldn't kill us outright. They liked to torment and humiliate us...**

**One time I 'expressed my opinion'. This is what they called it when we were taken to the barracks to speak to an interrogator in front of several prisoners and say 'I repent for the crime I committed in betraying the Party and the people and I will return to Tito's way'. Instead of saying what they wanted me to say I said I need some more time. I then heard several voices say 'gangster! Kill the bloody gangster!' Dozens of prisoners and some policemen came at me, pushed me to the ground and beat me. I fainted. They poured water on me. I don't know how I survived. I was badly beaten and of top of that I was placed inside the 'kibla' all night for punishment. The kibla was the name of the barrel in which dozens of prisoners in the barracks urinated. I stood in it with my head just above the urine."**

At this point Milan began to cry... He was crying loudly...

Suddenly it seemed too quiet... He realized that Dushitsa wasn't in the room. She wasn't in the other room either. Not in the kitchen. Not even in the bathroom. Had she left him alone in the apartment?

He went outside. She was sitting on the stairs. He sat down next to her and asked her to forgive him for talking so much. Why had he told her all those terrible things? Dushitsa was sitting motionless. She was in shock. Anxious... He felt terribly guilty. He remembered how fragile and tender she was. Who knows how hard it was for her to listen to all those horrible things... She had to get out to get away from him... The poor woman...

"Please Dushitsa, you'll get cold out here," said Milan gently. "Please go inside..." he insisted in a tender tone of voice, also letting her know that he wasn't going in with her.

Dushitsa was still sitting petrified. He saw tears streaming down her face. He wanted to hug her, to wipe her tears but was afraid she might push him away...

Milan took very slow steps towards the yard exit hoping that any moment he would hear her voice calling him back. He was outside now...

No voice came from the yard as he took to the street.

He blamed himself for the despair. Why had he come to her all of a sudden, after being away for so long? He had gotten the courage after he met her sister! Why did he have to tell her about his suffering, though it seemed like it had never ended. By doing so, he once again inflicted pain on his beloved. The only woman he loved.

He walked around the city for a long time, for as long as his legs could support him.

He didn't go back to the same school where he used to work. Instead they gave him an auxiliary room in one of the schools in B where he could enter from the back entrance. It wasn't much but enough for him to have a place to stay and sleep. He wasn't allowed to teach anymore. He worked from time to time as a salesman in a store. The owners knew him from before he was sent to prison. They were his friends when he was a teacher. They must have gotten permission from the UDBA to give him the job. They also gave him some money. Most people avoided him. They were afraid to say hello, let alone talk to him.

Milan kept walking frantically along the wide street without knowing where he was headed. He couldn't forgive himself for ruining his visit with Dushitsa. For disturbing her peace, which she had managed to find in these past years without him. Where had he gone wrong? It seemed to him that he had failed to reach her, to connect with her. The only thing he had managed to do was upset her even more. He shouldn't have told her anything about his past. Could that have meant anything to her now, after so much suffering? He felt she needed to know the reason why he was away and about the culprits that had done this to them, as well as the terrible torment he had gone through...

No! It seemed to him that nothing he said had touched her. It seemed to him that she had surrounded herself with an impenetrable

wall, which didn't allow any sound to go through. It seemed to him that he was talking to her from the other side of the wall. Now his last hope was lost. His hope of seeing her again. His hope for making contact with her. At least as friends... What friends? She might not want to see him even more. On top of everything else she might even see him as the man who had betrayed the Party, the State, the Leadership, the People, as the interrogators and torturers repeatedly told him thousands of times in the prisons and on the dry island concentration camps. She might see him like some "patriots" did in the psychiatric hospital where he was treated several times after he was released from Goli Otok.

He should have known that it would be impossible for her to understand him! He also feared that Dushitsa might think he was guilty of what happened to him. Therefore he was also guilty for their separation and her tragedy. For their bad health. Hers and his. No, she couldn't think that way... No, she mustn't believe in such a thing!

...He was huddled under a bridge, half-frozen when a policeman shone his flashlight on him. He was shaking. After he examined his documents, the policeman noticed that something was wrong with him. Without asking him the policeman escorted him to his police car. Milan didn't object. He didn't care where he was being taken. A while later he realized that he had been taken to a psychiatric hospital. In his semi-conscious state he tried to get away from the doctors and paramedics but failed. They told the policeman to leave Milan with them and go. They would take care of him. Milan was one of their patients.

Again no one, not even Dushitsa, knew where Milan was and what had happened to him. No one knew that he was in a psychiatric hospital.

*I didn't stop crying for a long time, even after I went inside my apartment. I was in a semi-conscious state lying on my bed... That's how I fell asleep. A few hours later I woke up all sweaty. I had a torturous nightmare. I didn't want to think about it but I couldn't help it. I remember Milan drowning in my nightmare... He was drowning in a dirty, muddy river... I was standing helpless on the*

*shore... I couldn't help him... I couldn't even try. The murky whirlpool pulled him down... The nightmare haunted me all day. And many days that followed. Wherever I went, whatever I did, the images from my nightmare were always with me.*

*I was constantly haunted by the question: what happened to my consciousness during the hours when Milan was with me? My brain was blocked! Some sort of numbness overwhelmed me. I was lifeless. I was in shock. I had no voice. I didn't console him, not a word of consolation. I didn't tell him how much I wanted him and had pain for him... I didn't tell him that I had waited for him... I became sick waiting for him... Now, after he came back... I didn't find the strength to listen to him to the end... I had destroyed him... I had robbed us of our last hope... His hope... My hope... Our hope.... I became frightened when I realized that I didn't know where he had gone... where to look for him. I didn't even know where he lived or whether he had a telephone or not. I'm afraid I'd lost him again. I was very worried about that! ...Maybe if we met again, something would change. He would come back to me. Deep down in me I now knew that he wasn't to blame for everything that had happened to us... He wasn't to blame for how things had turned out between us... It was that evil force that had destroyed our lives. The monster that had the shape of a man, of people... of more people. More monsters, which externally took on a human form.*

Dushitsa was hesitant to tell her sister that she had seen Milan. She had no idea how to explain to Vera what had happened between them. Nor why she had behaved the way she had towards him, towards the same man for whom she had cried all these years. She had no idea what had gone wrong inside her?

Why did Vera have to invite him to see Dushitsa this way? Did she know if Dushitsa was ready to see him? She acted completely recklessly! Her intention was good. But when Vera met Milan she should have gotten his address or phone number. Then she should have asked Dushitsa when she wanted to see him. And when that time came then Vera could have arranged a meeting. The way things happened, this meeting of theirs, it looked like a meeting of two people who had suffered a lot for each other. How could Dushitsa find him now when she didn't even know where he lived?

\* \* \*

Half asleep Rade walked down the wide street. This was the third night that he'd had very little sleep. The construction of his house was going slowly. The workers were undisciplined. They came to work whenever they wanted. The building material wasn't easy to find and wasn't of good quality. But that's how it was. Things would happen when they happened. The biggest problem for Rade right now was his lack of sleep. He figured that he could sleep, maybe a little, in the police station during the night but he was wrong. It wasn't easy to be an investigator in the criminal department. It kept him up all night. He had also hoped that he would get some sleep during the day while building the house, but that too didn't work out. With time the construction job became more and more of a burden for him. He had a feeling he wouldn't last long. He kept getting bad headaches. Also, it seemed to him like some shadows were following him. He even listened for their footsteps. Lately he had to deal with a row of hardened criminals. The trials were violent. They constantly threatened him with violence. They threatened to retaliate when they were released. Not only him but also his family, his sisters... Due to the constant insomnia, he might have become hypersensitive. All this was hanging over his head. Bad images swirled in front of his eyes. Some of the prisoners he interrogated were violent criminals. He felt that he wouldn't be able to stop them from their evil intentions towards him and his family. He himself was becoming evil. His work was becoming more and more unbearable.

More than once he thought of asking his uncle to move him to another job. To another institution... But he was embarrassed. He was sure his uncle would say, "I found him a job but he's not happy and is still looking... On top of that he has no education. He was never good at studying. Let him do this for a while and then we'll see..."

His sister Dushitsa was also a big concern. He knew that Milan had been free for a long time. Fortunately, Milan hadn't met with Dushitsa yet. If they had seen each other, what would Milan tell her about Rade seeing him in prison? If he said that Rade didn't

recognize him, she wouldn't believe him. But that no longer mattered. If Dushitsa found out that Rade had seen Milan in prison only several months after their unfulfilled engagement, it would be a tragedy.

Every time Vera came to see him, Rade went into panic mode thinking she was bringing more bad news about Dushitsa. Unfortunately the news wasn't always good. Dushitsa had more and more problems with her breathing and heart. Doctors warned her more and more not to get upset, not to let herself get tired, to eat more fruits and vegetables, and so on. They also advised her to go out for walks in the fresh air. But Dushitsa kept closing herself in both at home and inside herself. From home to work. From work to home. She didn't socialize with anyone. Rade felt a need to see her.

\* \* \*

*I wanted to meet with my brother Rade alone. I called him at work on the phone. I made an appointment to see him at the building site. I had to talk to him.*

*None of the workers had arrived when I got there. Rade was waiting for me.*

*"I saw Milan recently, he came over to my apartment. After so many years..." I suddenly told Rade. I was very excited.*

*It seemed to me that the moment he heard me, Rade stopped breathing. He didn't look at me.*

*"He was in prison... In Goli Otok!" I said.*

*Rade kept trying not to look at me.*

*"How could you not have known for so long? Didn't any of your colleagues tell you? Maybe you could have helped him. Got him out... He could have been saved... Something could have been salvaged... Our lives could have been saved from ruin..." I said.*

*It sounded to me like Rade's throat went completely dry. He had no saliva. He barely managed to speak. He said:*

*"When did they imprison him and why?"*

*It seemed to me like Rade was trying to lie to me convincingly, like he was surprised.*

*"You knew he was a communist!" I yelled.*

*"And? So what...?" replied Rade pretending to be naïve.*

*"Well, some of our communists were in support of the Inform Bureau resolution and attacked Tito, about some mistakes. For deviating from the path of socialism. Others sided with Tito. Milan was slandered by the school guard for being against Tito," I said.*

*I kept looking at Rade. He turned pale and started breathing hard, like he was short of breath.*

*After some silence, Rade barely uttered:*

*"That's not possible!"*

*"What's not possible? That he was in prison? He certainly didn't lie to me!" I replied nervously.*

*"Not that, but..." he uttered.*

*"I don't understand how none of us knew about it! Do you believe that our uncle didn't know? I don't... But it's a done deal now! It's too late to get upset!" I said with a disappointed tone of voice because I couldn't understand why my brother was behaving this way.*

*"Why don't you believe me when I tell you I didn't know?" uttered Rade with deep pain in his voice... Like he was drowning and was about to start crying at any moment.*

*“And you know who is most to blame? Me. My pride! My injured vanity. Do you remember what you said when Milan didn’t show up for the engagement? You suggested that you go look for him to see if something had happened to him. But I categorically refused. And in the following days I didn’t want to hear anything about him. I became deaf and blind to what was going on in his life, thinking that he had lied about loving me. That he had lied about wanting us to live together. I thought only of myself during those moments. That’s how I sealed his fate. And mine...”*

By now Rade’s mouth was completely dry. Not a drop of saliva. Something terrible was choking his throat. Should he tell his sister at that very moment that only a few months after Milan’s imprisonment, he had seen him in prison? He was sure she would suffer a heart attack on the spot. Or she would run away from him! She wouldn’t want to see him for the rest of her life.

No, he wasn’t going to tell her. Once he decided to hide this information from her, he would hide it until the end. But, at the same time, he wondered if Milan had told her that he had seen him. If he had, Dushitsa would surely have attacked him immediately. Maybe she was pretending, tempting him?

“How was I supposed to know? There are many prisons in this country. You know that I only work with criminals. Also, they might have just kept him here in my prison for a while and then immediately sent him to Goli Otok,” said Rade.

Rade made every effort to sound convincing. He didn’t look at his sister. He was afraid she would realize from the expression in his eyes that he was lying. Or perhaps the movement of some part of his face would tell her that he was lying to her.

“I don’t know why I’m talking about things from back then. But sometimes a person wants to know the truth. If I’d known the truth then, soon, maybe I could have helped him somehow. Through you and through our uncle. You know how much our uncle loves me,” said Dushitsa.

“You’d be better off not knowing. Better for you and me, and for our uncle, who did everything he could to help us like we were his own children. He doesn’t need this. Let’s not put him in a difficult political situation in which he could be compromised. If he is we will be too. Even before him,” replied Rade.

Rade felt that Dushitsa was getting upset.

She said, “How can you even think like that. You’re so cold towards Milan. What about the difficulties he went through? He’s your friend too you know, not to mention what he means to me. My love for him. The life we could have had together.”

Dushitsa stopped talking. After some silence she began to speak very quietly like she was talking to herself. She said:

“There is no one to help him. The poor man. No one knows the kind of hell he’s been through. He’s careful and doesn’t want to hurt anyone. He told me I was the only one he wanted to contact, outside of that hell he was in, because he loved me. He could have written me a letter but he didn’t because he didn’t want to hurt me and my family! He knew that sending me a letter would have put me and our family at risk with the authorities... He was also convinced that we stood on the other side, on Tito’s side and we might not understand. That’s why he continued to condemn himself to a terrible loneliness, enduring terrible torment on his own!

“Do you think that I could have helped him during those terrible years when our leadership was clashing with that of the Soviet Union? Do you think I could have done something for Milan? I would have been fired immediately and locked up. All I had to do was open my mouth in his defence and it would have been the end for me. They would have thought we were related in some way, that we had an organization, and even that he had deliberately wanted to marry you so that we could work more secretly against the state. In such a situation, our uncle would either have had to attack us with accusations even more severely than the others, or he too would have faced the same consequences as us!” replied Rade.

“Why would they do that when it wasn’t true, when you weren’t guilty of anything?” asked Dushitsa sharply.

“Not only would no one have answered your question, but no one would have been allowed to ask it. I think Milan did something stupid that’s why they put him behind bars. I don’t believe that it was anything serious. But whatever he did he sure paid a heavy price. Who knows how much he was tortured!” replied Rade.

“He tried to tell me that, now, when we saw each other after so long. He said that they had baptized him an ‘Inform Bureau resolution supporter’. But he wasn’t. He became one at Goli Otok. They contributed to him becoming one with extreme physical and mental torture,” said Dushitsa.

Rade was constantly looking to his left, to his right and behind. He was concerned about someone eavesdropping. The road to his house seemed infinitely long. Every word his sister said about Milan sunk deep into his head and overwhelmed him. He felt like he was drowning. Was it true that he couldn’t help Milan? Why had he been so afraid in those days? Maybe if he hadn’t hid the fact from his sister that he had seen Milan in the prison, he might have helped him! Maybe he would have looked for witnesses who knew him. He could have proven his innocence. He could have proven that he was misunderstood. By wanting to protect Dushitsa, Rade may have contributed to destroying Milan’s life. And hers too... He was really concerned that he hadn’t done the right thing. He was unable to look Dushitsa in the eye all that time. No... He couldn’t have helped him... he thought. The government would have destroyed all of them. His entire family, together with Milan... Unfortunately, this way too they were destroyed! Weren’t they?

“You didn’t tell me how your meeting ended?” said Rade, wanting to know more.

“It’s better that you don’t know. I acted like a big idiot. I’ll never be able to forgive myself,” replied Dushitsa.

“Don’t talk nonsense!” said Rade.

Dushitsa went silent for a moment as if gathering her strength to continue talking.

“Even now I can’t explain what happened to me from the moment Milan knocked on my door. From the moment I opened it. From the moment he came in. It seemed to me like he wasn’t the same man that I loved. Like he wasn’t the one I was ready to spend my life with. It seemed to me like he was someone else.

...I remember he talked a lot. He talked for a long time. He told me about everything he had endured in prison, here in B as well as on the way to Goli Otok. It was too much and too painful! God, he went through a lot of suffering! I began to choke. I thought I would faint at any moment. I couldn’t bear to hear any more. I couldn’t bear to hear any more of what had happened to him. To my Milan!”

I couldn’t even hear what he wanted to say to me, as the poor man was pouring his heart out confessing to me, his beloved woman. He told me about all his troubles...” replied Dushitsa.

“And what? You interrupted him and asked him to talk about something else?” asked Rade being somewhat certain that Milan hadn’t said anything else.

“How would he have felt if I had done that?” replied Dushitsa and went silent again.

“And you, what did you do?” asked Rade being persistent. He was trying to learn as much as he could.

“What did I do? Something miserable! I went out to the stairs and left him alone in the room!” she replied.

“Even now I can’t understand you! You ruined your whole life because of him... But you couldn’t accept him when he came back to you? said Rade surprised.

Dushitsa was still silent. Then, with a deep unusual, serious and worrisome tone of voice she continued:

“Maybe it’s for the best that it turned out this way... I think he also realized that... it’s too late. Why create empty illusions? He is completely destroyed... And so am I!”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” said Rade and squeezed her shoulder tightly.

“This isn’t nonsense... Soon you’ll be without your younger sister...” she replied.

Rade was shaken. He was startled by what Dushitsa said. He turned and looked at her. He wanted to look at her face more carefully. It seemed to him that she looked even paler than before. More frail than ever. He felt a tightness in his chest. He was afraid he was going to collapse, here in front of her. God, how will I be able to live with myself if such a tragedy were to really happen, he thought to himself. No, it mustn’t be that way, he tried to tell himself. They should consult other doctors. Talk to our uncle. See doctors in foreign countries if needed. Sell everything if money is needed. He didn’t need a house. He didn’t need anything. How could she wait until now to tell him that her health had been so seriously compromised? Why didn’t anyone tell him about the seriousness of this? He would go and see Vera early tomorrow. She shouldn’t have hidden this from him. She should have told him that Dushitsa’s life was in danger due to her weakened health. Well, his mother must also know. And his uncle too. He needed to take urgent action.

Dushitsa stood up and walked around the building site.

“Be careful,” Rade warned her, “there are a lot of nails on those boards. Watch you don’t step on any.”

“Big deal, who cares if I do...” replied Dushitsa.

“You really want to annoy me...” said Rade, “Watch what you say...”

“Okay, okay have it your way...” replied Dushitsa.

Rade looked around the building site without any joy. It seemed to him that Dushitsa felt the same way...

“Listen, sister. You should start looking for Milan... Today!” advised Rade.

“You’re kidding, right? Milan is dead... Your sister Dushitsa is dead... There is no hope...” she replied.

“If you were a little younger, I would have spanked you for saying that. I’m serious!” said Rade.

Dushitsa laughed out loud. He hadn’t heard her laugh like that for a long time.

“If you don’t want to look for him yourself, because you treated him badly, then ask Vera to look for him. Ask her to apologize on your behalf. Tell Vera to tell him that you weren’t mentally prepared when you saw him last... You do that and see what happens,” added Rade.

Dushitsa suddenly looked serious, even nervous.

“Let’s leave things with Milan alone. We have already exhausted that subject. We can’t force things to be what they can’t be,” she replied.

Rade realized that they needed to start a conversation about something else before they started fighting.

\* \* \*

The telephone kept ringing. Rade listened to it like it was in a dream. No, it sounds like someone is ringing the doorbell. Why are they ringing the doorbell so early? He got up but could barely move his legs. He felt like he was paralyzed. He opened the door slightly. There was no one there. He lay down again. I must have been hallucinating, he thought. Who would ring the doorbell this late at night? Unless it was the telephone and there’s an emergency at the police station.

“Rade, today your laziness has taken you over, you left your workers waiting for you for hours,” he heard his mother’s sharp voice yelling.

“What workers?” Rade yelled thinking he had just gone to bed.

“It sounds to me like you’re not awake yet?” he heard his mother’s sharp voice yell again.

“You again? Why are you waking me up so early in the morning?” Rade yelled in a rough voice.

“What early in the morning? Get out of bed! Its noon already!” she yelled and went silent for a moment.

“Has the entire world gone mad? I just went to bed. I’m not asleep yet and you want me to get up?” yelled Rade.

“Get out of bed before I come up there and pour a bucket of water on you. Get up and see for yourself when you went to bed and when you should have gotten up,” yelled his mother with a serious tone of voice. She sounded like she was coming up to his bedroom and was going to carry out her threat.

Moments later Stefka (his mother) opened the curtains in his room and the bright sun shone in his face. Rade closed his eyes tightly and quickly jumped up and sat on his bed.

He looked at his mother and said:

“Mother, you’re really ruthless. If you only knew what I went through with the two crazy people I had to interrogate last night you would have let me sleep a little longer. They threatened to kill me. They attacked me. Even the security guards had a hard time stopping them from hurting me. I’m not afraid but... Lately, some such gangsters have been threatening me: - this one will stab me with a knife, that one will empty an entire cartridge case in me... What can I tell you? I’m only saying this to you, I don’t want to tell anyone else. I would like to tell them not to deliberately give me the most difficult cases. Now, recently, our supervisor called us in and

ordered us to travel with a loaded pistol! Even at home, keep a fully loaded pistol under the pillow! And you wonder why I sleep so restlessly? Not to mention how little I sleep.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, son. But you need to finish the house. You should get married. Have some children I can look after...” said his mother in a calmer tone of voice... She felt sorry for him.

“That’s all I need, a wife and children. I don’t know where my head is... You should be more concerned about what to do with Dushitsa. She’s becoming a nightmare for me. She should find someone to marry,” replied Rade.

“What are you talking about, now that Milan and she have found each other?” said Stefka.

“What Milan are you talking about? There’s nothing between them. Everything is gone. There is no relationship, she told me so herself. Right now may be the best time for her to find someone else. Now that she has realized that she lost all those years for nothing...” replied Rade.

“We’ll see. I don’t believe your sister has completely given up on him. Even so, she hardly thinks about anyone else at this point. That’s why I’m so worried about her. Of all my children only Vera finally got married,” said Stefka.

“Well, that’s the way it is,” replied Rade while yawning several times.

“Everyone makes their own choices..., and what you were talking about a while ago, about your work, I know that it’s not easy for you... But I think you shouldn’t worry too much. Those who threaten you are in prison, they should be afraid of you, of all you interrogators, not you of them... Well, don’t be a coward!” said his mother trying to make a joke.

“Coward? I’ll show you coward. What kind of coward will I be if one day you find me stretched out in front of the door!” replied Rade.

“I sure feel sorry for the people, if people like you guard them from criminals.”

Rade felt offended but didn’t say anything. He wanted to tell his mother to call the workers and tell them to go home for the day but couldn’t make up his mind. He didn’t want to stay there and listen to her complain. She would be talking all day. She would be arguing with him over every little thing. If he stayed home he would have to put up with her all day.

“Make something to eat,” he said to his mother, with a displeased tone of voice and then quickly got ready, took the food and left the house.

Stefka watched Rade for a long time. She was worried about him and his involvement in all those things. She worried about him not sleeping... She tried to calm herself down... and started tidying up the house.

Rade became more and more nervous as he headed for the building site... He didn’t believe it was intentional but the job his uncle had found for him wasn’t a good fit. It was slowly killing him. How could one have a healthy mind if they were constantly arguing with irrational people who had abandoned normal life. All these people he dealt with had adopted a negative attitude towards everything and everyone, including themselves. They didn’t seem to care about anyone’s wellbeing. They had no respect for other people’s property and, most sacred of all, they had no respect for human life. Rade, on the other hand, was raised in a home with good and honest people. Now, in this job, he was constantly harassed by these outcasts of society. He had to deal with their transgressions. With their traumas and wounds. And, with their crimes... In the end all he got was threats to his life and health... He wasn’t sure how much longer he would be able to endure all that... And if he complained or looked for another job he would appear to be ungrateful... Dissatisfied with

what he had been given. Even more so now with the house he was building and the loans he was committed to...

In the evening, when he was going to work, to the police station, he kept looking behind him. It seemed like someone was following him with silent footsteps. Following him... At one point someone ran past him. Rade immediately grabbed his gun. The passer-by was just running across the street. He later saw the same person at the other end of the street.

Rade wondered what was wrong with him...

It took Rade a long time to tidy up his office. When the first prisoner was brought in for questioning, he asked the guard to remain in the office. The guard looked at him a little surprised but stayed. He stood by the door. The prisoner didn't seem to be aggressive but you never knew. You were never sure when one would explode and surprise you. Rade insisted that the guard stay in the office for all the prisoners he questioned that night. He needed help with only one...

Rade did the same the following nights. When he was alone in the office he kept his pistol beside him on the side table near the telephone. Unfortunately that didn't go unnoticed. When one of his colleagues came to see him he said ironically:

“Why do you need this nonsense!” and pointed to the pistol.

“It's none of your business!” Rade answered rudely.

At the end of the month Rade was asked to go and see the chief. Rade went to his office before leaving for his other job at the building site. Rade was upset wondering what the chief could possibly want with him... He had been informed to see the chief before the afternoon shift started.

When the time came Rade went into the chief's office. For a while the chief wasn't sure what to say to him. He was looking for words to start the conversation. Rade helped him. He said:

“Are you looking for me, Chief?”

“Yes but it’s nothing special. Well, we haven’t seen each other...” replied the chief.

“Are you specifically interested in any of my cases?” asked Rade.

But the very moment he said that, Rade became concerned. He figured Trajan might have said something to him about his interest in Milan.

“No, there’s nothing special. I thought I should talk to you about you having to work the night shift for a long time. I hope it’s not too stressful for you... None of us are made of steel you know, and it could affect our health,” replied the chief slowly and calmly.

“Well, Chief, I have no choice in the matter,” said Rade and sighed.

“I know your situation well and I think you should look for a different solution. You should have someone else replace you at the building site when you’re working here in the morning. Otherwise, if you continue like this, it will affect your health and you won’t be able to do your job, not only here but also at the construction site. You seem overly tired to me...”

Rade was concerned that one of his colleagues might have said something negative about him to the chief.

“Chief, do you have any concerns about my job?” asked Rade abruptly.

“No, I don’t. I just care about your health,” replied the chief calmly, but that didn’t sound convincing to Rade.

The chief stood up. This was the signal for Rade that the conversation was over. Rade said goodbye and left. Rade wasn’t sure whether someone had slandered him or if the chief had come to this conclusion on his own. Rade simply didn’t know. But somehow, based on the conversation he’d had with the chief, he felt that the chief was dissatisfied about something... He didn’t believe that the

chief was worried about his health. This whole thing made Rade feel uncomfortable. He wasn't worried about losing his job, not as long as his uncle was still around. But, at the same time, he didn't want anything negative going back to his uncle about his work. Before going into his own office, Rade ran into Trajan.

That's all I need now... Rade thought to himself. But as usual, Trajan barely noticed him and hurried into his own office.

Maybe Trajan had said something to the chief. Very few people genuinely cared about you, most either didn't care or wouldn't hesitate to do you harm. Who knew how much his colleagues envied Rade for building a new house and even more for where, in the affluent place, he was building it. That house was, unfortunately, making Rade's life miserable. He struggled with many things while building it. Annoyed, Rade left his office and rushed back to the chief's office. He flung the door open and abruptly went in before he was given permission to enter. He met face to face with the surprised chief. They approached each other on opposite sides of the chief's desk.

"Come on in Rade...", said the confused chief in a sharp voice with a slight tone of anger.

His tone of voice annoyed Rade even more.

"I'm not used to being talked to with closed cards!" snapped Rade.

After hearing him say that in that tone of voice and after seeing the expression on Rade's face, the chief realized that he had to talk to him calmly. Rade seemed to be so much out of control that anything was possible with him.

"I'm really sorry if you misunderstood me. Let's sit down and have a cup of coffee. You are my most valued officer here whom I can really rely on..." said the chief.

Rade didn't know what to say or do. Should he give up on his intention to argue with the chief? But before doing anything the chief came over, hugged him and almost forcibly sat him down on

the chair next to the table. He immediately asked his assistant to bring coffee. He then said:

“Come on, relax and brag about something. Do you have a girlfriend to share your new house with? Be careful... with a beautiful house like yours you’ll have to fend off all the girls...” said the chief jokingly.

“The house isn’t ready to move into, much time will pass before it will be ready to live in,” replied Rade.

“I’m sure it will be built in no time... It will take some more work and a little patience. If you need time off work, don’t hesitate to take it. You have my approval. We are colleagues. Let’s help each other,” said the chief.

“Anything that has to do with my house is my private business. There’s no reason to do that to the detriment of the service. I’ve always been against such things!” replied Rade sternly.

“Good, but you build a house only once in a lifetime. I think we all need to understand that...” said the chief.

“You may think so, but I don’t believe others do...” replied Rade.

After they had their coffee the chief escorted Rade to the door and patted him on the shoulder.

Rade returned to his own office a little calmer. However, he still wasn’t entirely convinced of the chief’s sincerity.

The next day when Rade came back from work his mother made him warm milk and fried eggs on toast for breakfast. Rade wasn’t happy with the food his mother had prepared so he didn’t eat any of it or drink the milk. Instead he went out and bought something to eat. When his mother came back home and went to check on him she found him lying in bed with his eyes wide open. She immediately noticed that he hadn’t eaten anything and everything had been left on the table.

“Aren’t you hungry,” she asked quietly.

Rade didn’t answer.

“You shouldn’t be hiding things from me. Are you in some kind of trouble?” she asked.

Rade turned away from her and faced the wall.

“Don’t turn your back on me. Tell me what’s wrong. If you don’t tell your mother who are you going to tell? Even if I can’t help you, maybe I can give you some good advice,” she said.

“I don’t need advisors!” mumbled Rade.

“If it’s that difficult for you with the construction, leave it, let it wait... We’re not on the street. Take a break for a while and then resume later,” she said

Rade was quiet. He pretended to be asleep. He didn’t want to continue this conversation. He wasn’t going to stop the construction. That would make some of his enemies happy.

Thinking he was asleep, his mother left him and went to the kitchen. She was worried. He was oversensitive, she thought. She hadn’t heard him talk about a girl. Time was passing fast. Come to think of it no one called him on the telephone anymore. He hadn’t brought a woman home for a long time. He hadn’t even brought a friend. Maybe he’s picky. It isn’t easy to find a girlfriend especially if you want her to be beautiful, of good character and to be a housewife. The young people nowadays have changed. It’s not like before...

His mother went out again but returned home quickly. She was surprised to see Rade had gotten up, dressed and left the house. He hadn’t slept at all. How was he going to work at the house with the workers all day and then work at the police station all night? What would happen to him? Maybe he should talk to Vera.

Stefka telephone Vera at work. Vera was surprised.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” asked Vera sounding startled.

“Nothing special, just come here when you get off work,” replied Stefka.

“Don’t tell me there is nothing! There is something, isn’t there? Tell me, what is it?” asked Vera nervously.

“You haven’t been here for a while so I decided to call you,” replied Stefka.

“Okay, I’ll come. I will come over today,” said Vera.

“Come today...” said Stefka and hung up the telephone. After that Stefka immediately thought of Dushitsa. There are a few things wrong with her... Now there is something wrong with Rade, which worried her. He’s in trouble, big trouble, I know it, but he won’t tell me what it is. How can it help him if he doesn’t tell me?

Rade could barely walk to the building site. He kept dragging his feet. Taking on this project was the stupidest thing he had ever done, he thought to himself. What devil made him do it. They had an apartment, they didn’t needed another house. His sister Vera had an apartment, which she had been given her from her work. In any case, Dushitsa wouldn’t want to live with him and his mother. While their father was alive, building the house made some sense. His father liked to brag about it. He bragged about it with the people he worked with and with his neighbours. But that’s that. Well, whatever it is, let it be. Rade would have to endure somehow.

Rade looked at the workers who had already started working. That somehow cheered him up. But the closer he got the more suspicious he became. Why had they come earlier than usual? Even if they came earlier, why hadn’t they waited for him? Why had they started working on their own? They must have had ulterior motives. To wreck something... To build something improperly... To steal something... His suspicions overwhelmed him. The moment he arrived at the building site he began to yell at them and insult them. The workers dropped their tools and stopped working. They were

offended. They had expected him to praise them, and here he was insulting them.

Rade quickly realized that he'd made a mistake so he changed his tune and started talking to them with a softer tone and kinder words and then asked them to continue working. The workers noticed that something wasn't right with Rade and decided to ignore his outburst. Seeing how Rade was managing his workers, they advised him to take some unpaid leave from his job at the police station while his house was being built, or at least postpone the building and rest for a while. He could resume the construction later. Unfortunately Rade didn't want to hear any of that.

On his way home Rade was in deep thought, even more than usual. What's with these people, they seemed to be in cahoots over something, he thought. Everyone was advising him the same thing. As if there was a conspiracy against him. They wanted to make him sick, incompetent. Maybe someone wanted to take his place. Or they wanted to stop him from building his house. It seemed to Rade that everyone was lying to him... He would prove them all wrong, he thought!

He was happy to see that no one was home when he arrived. He wasn't feeling good so he lay down. He instantly fell asleep. Sometime later he woke up in a sweat and listened to his mother and Vera talking but it was like in a dream.

“He must take unpaid vacation while there is time. I will help you with money. His health is very important. If he gets sick, we won't need a house... we won't need anything. It's still in the early stages. I'll talk to him. He needs to go to a doctor and take some medication...” said Vera.

Rade was still unsure if they were talking about him or someone else. His sister Dushitsa had been taking medication for a long time and going to doctors. He didn't tell them that he was awake. After that he felt awkward. He felt like he was spying on them. He coughed loudly and got up. Vera and his mother looked him straight in the eyes with an inquisitive look. Had he heard their conversation?

They had their coffee in silence. Rade knew they needed to tell him something that wasn't pleasant. But Rade wanted to avoid that conversation. He knew that if Vera started talking about his health, it would hit him hard. He wouldn't be able to control himself. It was going to be a rude yelling match. So he hurried to get dressed and go to work. But as soon as he stepped through the door, Vera told him she was going with him because she too was in a hurry. There was no escape for Rade.

"I haven't seen you for a long time. You seem to be very busy with work these days. I'm not angry with you. But I'd like to see you go visit Dushitsa more often. She needs someone... You're smart and you can cheer her up," said Vera.

"It seems to me that after I ran into Milan and after he went to visit her she's avoiding me. Maybe she's angry that I suggested Milan visit her," added Vera.

"Your intention was good. If anyone is to blame, it should be Dushitsa for being so cold to him. She should be looking for guilt in herself," replied Rade.

"To tell you the truth, I often ask myself that but I can't seem to explain why she treated him like that. Isn't he the same man without whom she couldn't live? Who can understand Dushitsa anyway!" said Vera.

Vera seemed to walk nervously. She said:

"Our mother is a fair person. When she found out that Milan had served time in Goli Otok as punishment, she forgave him for everything. It was justifiable. But Dushitsa, not her; she didn't do that..." said Vera.

Rade figured this conversation was about Dushitsa and Milan. But then Vera stopped unexpectedly, turned towards him and said:

"I came to tell you something else. Mom told me that you are very tired from working at the house during the day and at your job

during the night. I want to advise you to take a short break. From both jobs... There are small union resorts you can go to. You need to take some time off to rest.”

“Our mother is making things up. She’s afraid that something will happen to her only son...” replied Rade.

Vera noticed that Rade was mocking her but with a certain nervousness in his voice.

“Tell me what mother thinks poorly of her son or daughter?” asked Vera calmly. “I’ve been telling you right from the start of the construction that you can’t carry two watermelons under one arm.”

“You’re making a lot of noise for nothing. I don’t care about the construction... I’m worried about the criminals. Every night when I go to work or when I come back from work, someone follows me. It’s not my health, it’s my life that’s in danger,” replied Rade.

“All this time we’ve been walking on the road but we didn’t see anyone coming after us, did we?” said Vera and realized that what her mother had told her was true.

“Now, in the night, when they see that I’m not alone, they don’t show themselves. They are here, all around us, but they are hidden,” Rade whispered to his sister as he went closer to her.

“If that’s the case why not ask for an escort?” said Vera trying to convince him that this was an obsession.

“That’s all I need, to be labelled a coward! I won’t have any peace from those at work, not to mention the ones I’m investigating. Those at work will think I’m incapable of doing my job, and those I investigate will liquidate me even faster... How are you going to manage going back all alone? Be careful they don’t do something to you!” replied Rade.

With fear in his eyes Rade began to look in every direction and came very close to Vera as if to protect her from an assailant.

“Rade, what’s this with you! It’s still early in the day. I usually go home alone every night. Much later!” said Vera trying to calm him down.

“No, no, I mustn’t let you go alone! I’ll feel guilty my whole life if something happens to you! I’ll take you home,” replied Rade sounding apprehensive.

“Okay, okay, take me home,” said Vera and added, “only if you come in and have a drink with me. You haven’t been to my place in a long time. After that you can go to work. Have a cold drink with me; it will refresh you for the night.”

“Okay, I will...” replied Rade.

“Let’s take a taxi. We’ll hail one on the street,” said Vera, and as soon as she raised her arm a taxi stopped next to them.

After they entered Vera’s apartment, the moment Rade saw that Vera’s husband was home he began to relax. Vera got some juice out of the fridge and they each had a glass. Their next conversation was about their village and how good their life was there.

“To tell you the truth, who knows how many times I’ve wished to go back there, to that beautiful and peaceful life we used to enjoy. Is it possible for all of us to go back there again?” asked Vera.

Rade looked sad. It was a painful subject for him. He had been very unhappy from the moment he arrived in the big city.

Now more than ever it seemed to Vera that his eyes were all wet. She was completely focused on keeping him there as long as possible. To not let him go to work at all that night.

“Rade, what would happen if you didn’t go to work?” asked Vera with a smile.

“What could happen? You don’t seem to know who your brother is. Nothing will happen! Who will dare say anything to me?” replied Rade.

“Let’s do an experiment,” said Vera jokingly and picked up the telephone handset.

Rade looked at her surprised.

Vera dialed the number at Rade’s work and calmly said:

“This is Rade S’s sister. My brother is at my place. He’s doing something for me here and will be coming to work late. It will be late. And if he’s not finished he may not be able to come to work tonight. We apologize for not calling you earlier.”

The voice on the other end of the wire calmly replied:

“Okay. No problem...”

“What did they say to you?” asked Rade anxiously.

“They said it’s okay, no problem!” replied Vera.

Rade was completely perplexed.

“Why did you do that?” Rade yelled at his sister angrily. “You shouldn’t joke about work!”

“I just wanted to know how much you meant to them. How important you are at that institution. Like you said,” replied Vera.

“What did I say?” asked Rade.

His nervousness began to subside.

“Enough with the jokes, let me go to work,” said Rade calmly.

“I just called them and told them you would be late. What would they think if you showed up right away? Let’s play some music and relax for a while,” said Vera.

“You’re playing mind games with me, aren’t you?” said Rade. He didn’t trust his sister. Suddenly he became very serious. He was trying to figure out what kind of game she was playing with him, trying to stop him from going work. Did she think he was seriously ill? Then, suddenly he opened the door and bolted for the elevator. Vera ran after him. She tried to convince him to stop but nothing was helping. At one point he seemed to look at her with a hostile look. Immediately after that he stopped looking at her.

“What is it, what’s happened to you, what’s wrong with not going to work one night, the country isn’t going to fall apart...” yelled Vera angrily.

When the elevator arrived Vera wondered if she should to go with him. But she was convinced he wouldn’t want her. Rade seemed to know his sister’s intention so he rushed inside the elevator and left. Vera thought of calling them at work, to warn them about his condition but she was afraid of doing him more harm than good. She then decided to call her uncle.

“Good evening,” she heard his cheerful voice say, “what’s new? Thank God you still remember your uncle.”

“I want to see you now, if possible,” said Vera.

“Then please do come. Wait, wait, wait. It’s kind of late for you to be traveling at night. Is it something urgent?” asked her uncle.

“It’s not that late, I want to see you tonight,” said Vera.

“Then I’ll come over to your place. I still have my car outside. It hasn’t been taken to the garage. Put the coffee on. I like mine bitter, as you know, without any sugar,” replied her uncle.

As Vera took the coffee pot out she wondered if she was doing the right thing. Maybe there was nothing seriously wrong with Rade. It might just be fatigue. Whatever it was Rade would listen to their uncle more than he did to her. He would convince him to take a vacation and go somewhere. Based on his behaviour tonight he was in a crisis.

If their father was alive, he would have taken care of him. But unfortunately he died suddenly! To this day Rade hadn't accepted his death.

"How beautiful you look my dear Vera. Day by day you grow more and more beautiful..." her uncle complimented her the moment she opened the door for him.

"I'm sorry we haven't seen each other for so long. I'm guilty of that. Whatever I tell you is no justification for me not visiting you," replied Vera.

"It's good that you are modest. I was aiming to scold you for not visiting us. Your sister also hasn't come to visit us. You both have forgotten us," said her uncle.

"We could forget everyone else but never you. We always have you in our thoughts... Sometimes we don't want to bother you, other times we are busy with various things," said Vera convincingly.

"There is no excuse but let's leave it at that. Why did you want to see me so urgently?" Uncle Slobodan asked her with a tone of curiosity in his voice.

"I wanted to talk to you about my brother Rade. It seems to me he's too tired working on two jobs; building his house and working at the police station. It wouldn't be a bad idea if he took some time off to rest a little," said Vera with a tone of concern in her voice.

"Working on two jobs is a problem! Consider it tidied up!" replied her uncle.

"Unfortunately he won't listen to me or to our mother," complained Vera.

"If he doesn't want to stop working at both jobs it means that it hasn't been that difficult for him," replied her uncle.

“Unfortunately he doesn’t seem to be aware that he has a problem,” said Vera anxiously.

“You shouldn’t worry too much, it could be an exaggeration...” said Vera hesitantly and then cautiously added:

“It seems to me that it isn’t just about fatigue, but about a certain disorder...”

“Come on, don’t mince words with me! Tell me what you’ve actually seen. If he has a disorder then something should be done immediately. I have a friend who is a psychiatrist. We’ll figure something out somehow,” replied her uncle.

“He seems to be haunted by some kind of fear. He doesn’t separate himself from his gun even when he sleeps. He thinks someone is following him all the time and that someone wants to kill him. He believes that there is a conspiracy against him at work...” said Vera speaking fast.

Her uncle suddenly turned very serious. All the serenity on his face disappeared.

“Where is Rade now?” he asked anxiously.

“He just left for work. He’ll be at work until the morning,” replied Vera.

Slobodan immediately contacted Rade’s senior superior on the telephone.

“Release Rade, my nephew, from work tonight,” Vera heard her uncle say in a categorical tone of voice. “Tell him that his uncle is waiting for him at Vera’s place. I need him to help me with something. Tell him to take a taxi.”

Fifteen minutes later Rade arrived. He looked terrified.

“What is it Uncle, what happened? Were you threatened by someone?” asked Rade frantically.

“Come on Rade don’t talk nonsense. I haven’t wronged anyone. Who would want to hurt me? Anyway, that doesn’t matter now. I just came to see your sister and decided to scold her for not coming to visit us. But something went wrong. I had some difficulty breathing. That’s why I asked for you. To take me home so I wouldn’t have to drive alone. But now I feel much better, whatever it was it seems to have passed,” replied his uncle trying hard to sound convincing.

“Are you sure you’re okay now? Seriously, tell me... if not, let’s call a doctor,” said Rade looking and sounding upset.

“The crisis is over, at least for now. Don’t worry. I have as many doctors as you want. How far along are you with your house? I’ll pass by one of these days to see it,” said Slobodan trying to sound convincing.

“To tell you the truth, I’m tired of it all...” admitted Rade.

“Why are you rushing... what’s the hurry? Take a break for a while. Let’s go hunting one of these days soon, at our usual government hunting ground. Why don’t you let me take you with me,” said his uncle.

Rade couldn’t believe what his uncle was proposing.

There’s no place for me among the government higher-ups!” I don’t want to be a bother.

“Don’t talk nonsense. You’re my nephew!” said Slobodan and hugged him.

“I’ve heard that it can be dangerous on those hunting grounds. If someone wants to kill you all they have to do is fire a bullet and say it was an accident, or you were hit by a stray bullet...” said Rade.

“Now you’re beginning to worry me. Where, in God’s name, did ever hear of such a thing? Do you really believe such things could happen?” replied his uncle.

“It’s irrelevant whether I believe in such things or not, you, Uncle, need to be careful. How many days do you go hunting?” asked Rade nervously while moving his hands. It seemed like Rade didn’t know what to do with his hands.

“We hunt for a week, sometimes more,” replied his uncle.

“Sorry, there’s no way I can leave my house or my job for that length of time,” said Rade firmly.

“Don’t worry about your job at the service; I’ll take care of that. As for the house, if I were you I’d leave it for a while. Unless you plan to get married soon? Tell us Vera, is there something like that in the works?” asked their uncle.

“I don’t know anything about that. If he has a girlfriend he is keeping it a secret. He hasn’t said anything to me,” said Vera with restraint. She didn’t want to reveal anything about this meeting.

Their uncle looked away seeming like he was thinking of something else.

“Did you use up your vacation last year?” he asked Rade.

“No, not all of my vacation,” answered Rade quickly, trying to understand why his uncle would be asking such a question.

“Then let’s go to the village for a while. I haven’t been there for a long time. My breathing difficulty tonight hit me hard. I think I need some rest so it doesn’t come back. I need to leave the city for a while and get away from the dirty air,” said his uncle.

Rade was silent. He was aware that he couldn’t refuse his uncle.

“When would you want to go? asked Rade.

“Be back home early in the morning, don’t go to the building site. I’ll call you. My driver will take us there,” replied his uncle.

“What do I do with the workers?” asked Rade hesitatingly.

“I’ll send someone to tell them to take a few days off. Let’s go home now. I’ll drive you,” replied his uncle.

No, Uncle, since you’re not well... I’ll drive you to your home and then I’ll go home by taxi,” said Rade.

“Don’t worry about me; your uncle is an old wolf, seasoned in the mountains. Made of steel. And I really feel much better now,” replied his uncle.

Rade obediently left with his uncle. Vera wanted to glance at her uncle and show him how grateful she was for doing this but she didn’t dare. She didn’t want to tip Rade off about their plan.

Just as they walked out of the door Vera yelled, “Tell mom to call me, I need her recipe, I want to make a cake.”

“Who is the lucky person for whom you’re making a cake?” asked Slobodan jokingly.

“I promised my co-workers I would make them one and since then they’ve been asking for it, they won’t leave me alone. Say hello to everyone at home, Uncle. And please take care of your health,” replied Vera.

“Good night, Vera. I look forward to your visit soon,” yelled her uncle as they walked into the elevator.

Early the next morning a car horn was heard blowing under Rade’s window. He thought he was dreaming. Who is this fool blowing his car horn this early in the morning? he thought. But when he heard it a second time he jumped out of bed and looked outside. It was his uncle’s car. He couldn’t believe it was him. He got dressed fast and ran. His mother ran into him in the hallway and, with a surprised look and concern, asked him where he was running off to so early in the morning? Not only hadn’t he said anything to her about seeing his uncle the night before, but now he barely answered her.

“I’m going with my uncle,” he blurted out fast and bolted past her.

His mother looked through the window and watched Rade get into the car fast. Just as he got in it left. She recognized the car, it was Slobodan’s. But why did Rade have to hide this from her? Were they going somewhere together? she wondered. She had no idea what was going on so she immediately called Vera on the telephone.

“All I know is that last night they agreed to go for a walk. Maybe they’re going to the village...?” said Vera calmly.

“To the village? Why didn’t he tell me? I would have gone with them...” replied her mother loudly.

“Mom, the whole idea was for Rade to take a break from everything,” said Vera sounding annoyed.

“You mean to tell me that he wanted to take a break from me?” her mother reacted insultingly.

“Stop talking like that!” Vera scolded her.

“Okay then, okay, I’m never right... How long will they stay? A day, two? Or will they return this evening?” asked her mother Stefka.

“I don’t know, they didn’t tell me anything about it...” said Vera.

“You, how did you find out where they were going?” asked Stefka. She wanted to know everything.

“Last night I called Rade to come over to my place after work. I then called our uncle to come over without Rade’s knowledge. I mentioned to him that Rade was exhausted. Our uncle arrived before Rade. In fact, our uncle asked his superiors to send him to my place because our uncle needed something from him. When Rade arrived our uncle intended to tell him that he wasn’t feeling well and wanted to ask Rade to drive him home in his car. Fortunately, he’s better now,” said Vera giving her mother all the details.

Why did they decide to go to the village? It's worse in the village, especially if they find out that your brother has health problems?" said Stefka anxiously.

"You, again thinking of the worst. Do you think that our uncle will allow things to get worse? I was surprised last night when our uncle suggested this to Rade, but I didn't want to interfere. Our uncle told Rade that he needed to go to the village. Then he convinced Rade that he would feel better if Rade went with him. He told Rade he didn't want to be left alone in the village. Rade didn't seem to be happy about it but agreed to go with him. I didn't expect it would happen the next day. Who knows how many things our uncle had to leave unattended so that he could take Rade to the village right away for a well-deserved rest," replied Vera with great respect for her uncle.

"You shouldn't have said anything to your uncle about Rade's health, you shouldn't have emphasized how bad it was," said Stefka worriedly.

"Why not? His health isn't good, is it? The sooner action is taken, the better. For that kind of condition it's sometimes too late," answered Vera feeling a bit insulted.

Stefka was silent for a while. Vera figured that she was very worried about her children. First about Dushitsa and now about Rade who had also been threatened by a bad illness.

"Let's get off the telephone Mom, we've been on it for a long time, they will criticize me at work," said Vera reminding her mother that she was at work.

"Call me..." replied Stefka in a sad tone of voice.

Vera heard her hang up the handset. She knew how hard it was for her, but how could she help her?

\* \* \*

“Uncle, did we make a mistake and take the wrong road?” asked Rade when he noticed that they hadn’t taken the road leading out of city but had taken a road that circled around the suburbs.

His uncle laughed out loud.

“What do you think your uncle is, drunk? Come on admit it that’s what you thought. Or maybe you thought it’s too early for him to be drunk therefore he must be upset over something, right? Don’t worry I’m only going to a friend to get something to take with me,” replied his uncle.

Shortly afterwards, they stopped in front of a mid-sized house. One of the better houses of the pre-war buildings. His uncle got out of the car and rang the doorbell. A man about Slobodan’s age stuck his head out of a window upstairs. His uncle asked him to open the door so that they could go inside. After some time the door was opened and they went inside. Drinks, sweets, coffee and juices were immediately brought by a young girl and placed on the table.

“Who’s the young man?” asked the man of the house. “Did you bring a body guard with you?”

His uncle smiled and said, “Yes I did...” shortly afterwards he said, “This young man is my brother’s son. He works for the security services.”

“I’m fighting against serious criminals,” said Rade quickly like he was out of breath.

“Is there such a thing in socialism?” asked the man of the house jokingly. Rade had no idea who he was or what his function in society was.

“What socialism! If you were with us in the police services you would think that every second person was a thief, a murderer... There are many of them. Neither the prisons nor the correctional facilities can help them. There are many hardened criminals; they wouldn’t hesitate to put a bullet in you or to knife you. They would slaughter you like a lamb if they got their chance. They wouldn’t

blink an eye. There are all kinds in there. It's like they weren't born from mothers. Like they sprouted in the dumps," said Rade with ferocity. He was out of breath when he was done and his face flushed like embers. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his face, instinctively feeling like he was sweating.

"It's true that we who are far away from them aren't so aware of that," said the man of the house. "But don't you think you're exaggerating a little?" he added in a low tone of voice.

"You sound just like my mother. Am I exaggerating if I tell you that someone follows me every night? This person or people lurk behind me everywhere I go with aims at liquidating me? But I won't give up so easily. That's why I carry a fully loaded gun? If there aren't more than two, they won't succeed! I'm ready for them and if they attempt an ambush I'll shoot them without blinking an eye," replied Rade.

"Okay, enough of this nonsense!" interrupted his uncle. "I'm sure people like that run away from you like the devil from incense. It's clear to them that if they attack you they won't survive. They too don't want to die, don't worry. Let's get going."

They said goodbye to his uncle's friend and got up, ready to leave. Before leaving, the man of the house took a folder from the other room, where he had been for a while, handed it to Slobodan and they left.

"Why are you silent, Rade?" asked his uncle a while later. By then they were halfway to the village.

"Going back several years... There's something that bothers me a lot... I want to ask you about it but I don't want you to be angry with me," said Rade.

"Do you think that I could be angry with you? No, not if you don't overdo it!" replied Slobodan with a laugh.

"No. I hope not," said Rade in a loud voice.

“Then speak freely, let me hear what weighs on you,” replied his uncle trying to loosen him up.

Rade waited for a long time before he spoke, as if looking for the right words. Then he sighed and in a half-choked voice asked:

“Did you know that they were going to arrest and jail Milan? And that it was going to happen exactly on the night of the engagement?” asked Rade with great pain in his voice. Rade not only had difficulty uttering those words but at the same time he was afraid of what his uncle would say. What if he reacted negatively?

His uncle didn’t turn his head towards Rade at all. As if he’d been waiting for that question to be asked for a long time.

“Yes! I knew!” replied Slobodan rather quickly and coldly.

Rade couldn’t believe what he was hearing. How could his uncle, his father’s brother, be so cold.

“Why then did you allow us to invite all those guests? Why did you expose us to shame and humiliation, something that could have been avoided? Dushitsa didn’t have to experience that terrible shock...” said Rade excitedly.

“First, I shouldn’t even be telling you this, even if I was dead, regardless of the fact that we are so close to each other. Second, what would have happened if I had allowed Milan’s arrest to take place, even a few days later? Would that have been easier for your sister? Would it have been easier for her to experience this after they were already engaged or married? And third, the whole family would have had a noose around their necks for life. There would have been no house, no job for any of you and it wouldn’t have been good for me either. No matter how terrible the blow was for your sister, that her loved one suddenly left her, this other thing she would have had to face would have been worse,” said Slobodan speaking slowly and clearly and choosing every word carefully.

“So you too are to blame for this! You were the first to know about this!” said Rade in an almost whispering tone of voice. “You knew

about the arrest and everything and you hid it from all of us,” added Rade in a louder voice, for the first time daring to speak to his uncle in this tone of voice.

“Why did you say ‘you too’?” asked Slobodan inquisitively.

“Well, because I’m the second culprit who concealed the truth about Milan,” said Rade, with the voice of a defendant deciding to plead guilty... He then fell silent. He was silent, as if waiting for a second question from Slobodan. But that question wasn’t asked so he continued:

“I saw Milan in the hallway in front of my office at the police station... They were taking him for questioning. This was seven months after he had disappeared and no one seemed to know why or to where he had disappeared.”

“To the police station where you work? Why did they have to take him there where only criminals are investigated?” asked Slobodan surprised.

“At first I thought that he had been imprisoned as a criminal but Investigator Trajan told me that he had been brought in to face a criminal, so it was easier for them to bring Milan here,” explained Rade.

Slobodan seemed to be embarrassed by what Rade had told him. He seemed to be thinking about how to continue the conversation.

“The situation was tense in those days; it was boiling on all sides. Certainly some methods were used that shouldn’t have been used in other circumstances,” concluded Slobodan.

They kept driving in painful silence. Slobodan was the first to speak.

“Why didn’t Milan look at his situation, that he was left alone in the world and that he’d found a beautiful girl, from a wonderful family? He had everything good to live for. What the hell made him start looking for ways to destroy this country, the same country for which

his parents left their bones in the battlefields during the war,” said Slobodan angrily.

“I don’t believe he did anything so wrong to become an enemy of the country. One can say that he was a victim of his own naivety,” Rade subconsciously began to defend Milan.

“I don’t believe that he was so naïve. They don’t imprison anyone for no reason. He had to have expressed himself somewhere. In any case by doing so he also damaged your sister...” said Slobodan wanting to put the blame on Milan.

“If it were only my sister. We would all get sick because of her, because we see her failing. I can’t sleep day or night because of my guilty conscience. I have wondered hundreds of times - should I have told her that I had seen Milan in prison? Wasn’t it my fault that I’d kept silent about it? Maybe it would have been easier for her if I had told her. Perhaps she could have overcome her disappointment in him,” replied Rade.

“Enough. Why you are burdening yourself for nothing? It’s over and done with...” said his uncle rather nervously.

“No, it’s not over. Dushitsa is dying... little by little every day; her heart is getting worse and worse! It’s not over. I am her brother who loves her very much, who tried to spare her from the news that Milan was in prison. It’s like I took her life into my hands. I decided to keep the truth about Milan from her all those years. She found out about him only recently. Had I told her when I found out about him she could have fought for him. Or she would have accepted her situation much easier... No, I have to die before she does. I mustn’t outlive her. I wouldn’t be able to accept her death...” said Rade with a tone of despair in his voice.

“You’re exaggerating now. How can you be sure who will die when and from what? You seem to blame yourself a lot. By doing so you’re committing suicide, you’re destroying your health! Leave things to sort themselves on their own,” said Slobodan in an attempt to calm Rade.

“It appears like someone else is sorting our lives! You, Uncle, said... If the engagement took place... If Dushitsa married Milan... If he became a member of our family... Then they wouldn't have jailed only him but they would have placed a noose around all of our necks. But isn't what's happening to us also, a noose? Yes, this is a noose from which there is no salvation!” said Rade with a sad look, which seemed to his uncle that he was about to start crying.

And as Rade continued to speak he began to sound more and more hopeless.

“To tell you the truth, I don't see any meaning in my life. And the people, whoever you speak with will tell you they're unhappy. Wherever you turn, whoever you look at, all you see is disappointment, darkness and fear in their face...” said Rade.

“Rade, you're turning into a real pessimist. I took you with me to cheer me up, to keep me company. But instead, during this entire trip you've managed to find things that upset us both,” replied Slobodan in a rebellious tone of voice.

Rade seemed embarrassed. He began to apologize to his uncle but that didn't help their mood.

When they arrived at the village they went straight to the People's Board. Everyone in the office stood up and greeted them. Slobodan asked them if they had any problems and to update him on how the road construction was going. The road that passed through the village was being upgraded and electricity had been installed in the village. After they had their coffee the people gave them a bottle of homemade rakia wrapped in a newspaper. When they were done updating Slobodan on the construction status they shook hands and said their goodbyes. After that Slobodan and Rade went down the unfinished village road and headed for the city.

“You just came all the way to the village for this?” asked Rade cautiously.

“No politician should distance himself from the people if he wants to have authority, if he wants the people to respect him. People must

not feel forgotten, left to their own mercy. They all contributed as much as they could in the war against the fascists and occupiers. And now should we turn our backs on them? No. We let them do what they want,” replied Slobodan.

“Uncle, it would be great if every politician was like you! But, unfortunately, there are all kinds!” said Rade.

“If they want things to go well in the country they’ll have to change. But I want to ask you something else, and I want you to be sincere with me,” replied Rade’s uncle and went silent as if thinking how to ask the question.

“Do you want to change jobs? No problem, we’ll find something else for you to do...” said Slobodan.

Rade felt a tightness in his throat. He immediately thought that maybe some of his superiors weren’t satisfied with his work. Maybe they wanted to get rid of him. Rade began to blush and sweat ran down his forehead.

“My job isn’t easy. There are, of course, unpleasant moments but I’m used to it. I’ve been there for many years. I believe the chief has no objections with my performance,” said Rade.

“It has nothing to do with that... I thought you might be bored doing the same job...” replied Slobodan looking for a way to soften what he was proposing.

“No, there is no such job... But what is it that you don’t want to tell me? Did one of my superiors or colleagues complain to you about me?” asked Rade.

“Rade, who do you think I am? They are all small fish compared to me! Who would dare say a single bad word about my nephew? It’s impossible. I’m convinced they are very satisfied with you. I even think that you are very good at your job, but a person has to take care of their health. I didn’t bring you to the village here to make you sick. Do you understand me? You’ll have to learn to look after your health,” said Slobodan and patted him on the shoulder. “Your

work is secondary compared to your health and your life. You'll need to start a family. I'd love to have some nieces and nephews."

"There's plenty of time for that. It's difficult how things are going," replied Rade and became sentimental.

"Yes and no. Your mother is sad. She says you don't even have a girlfriend..." said Slobodan.

"What's the matter with my mother? That's all she thinks and talks about," replied Rade.

"She's right, you know! And another thing... Why do you distrust your construction workers? Where does that distrust come from? Why do you hang over their heads for so many hours every day? If they don't do things right they'll have to do the job again, as simple as that..." said Slobodan trying to change the subject.

"Uncle, you don't seem to understand what it's like to deal with these kinds of workers. If I'm gone for only half an hour the work stops," replied Rade.

"Is that what you think? Or are those the expectations you created. Why don't you let me draft a tight contract with them stipulating that they have to work every day a certain number of hours, and if they breach the contract you don't have to pay them," said Slobodan.

"That's how it works in principle but it's different in practice. They behave like they work for free," replied Rade.

"How many more months do you think it will take before you finish building the house?" asked Slobodan.

"To tell you the truth, I don't believe it will be soon. It won't be before the winter," replied Rade.

"In that case Rade, you need to immediately hire someone to manage the construction, otherwise you will lose your health. I'm telling you seriously, I'm not kidding," said Slobodan.

“I don’t have enough money to hire another person. Nothing will be completed if I run out of money,” replied Rade.

“It may look that way to you but what if you get sick? Then everything will go to hell. You should talk to your mother and sisters and find a person, or I can do that for you,” said Slobodan.

“I’ll see how it goes for a while and then I’ll decide,” replied. Rade and sighed.

“There’s nothing to see, you won’t be able to cope with the double burden for too much longer! I’m older than you and you should listen to me,” said Slobodan just as they arrived at his house. “I want to come in for a while and have a drink with your mother. I want to try out the rakia they gave us at the village and then I will go,” said Slobodan.

There was a knock on the door. Even before she opened it, Rade’s mother loudly said:

“So you went to the village without telling me, huh! I want you to know that I’m angry at you.”

“Yes we did because this was an official job. Please make some snacks and bring two rakia glasses. We brought some homemade rakia from the village. The real thing not these artificial ones we buy from the store,” said Slobodan.

“What two glasses, what about me? I’m not sick!” complained Rade.

“This rakia is not for young people. It’s not for women either but your mother is a peasant, she’s used to strong rakia,” replied Slobodan.

“Okay, we’ll give you some too, I’ll bring three glasses,” said Rade’s mother.

“This is really strong. And you know, they don’t just serve anyone this kind of beautiful rakia. This is reserved for us villagers,” said Rade’s mother after tasting it. “Unfortunately you can’t drink this stuff without a snack. I have some tomatoes and cheese. I will prepare them immediately,” she added.

“They’re waiting for me at home, I haven’t called them all day,” said Slobodan looking at his watch.

“They’re used to it!” said Stefka and laughed.

“You’re right, they are used to it,” agreed Slobodan.

After drinking his second glass, Slobodan got up, said goodbye and left.

“He’s a good man,” said Stefka about Slobodan after he left.

“You’re right. You should have seen how they welcomed him at the village! They were prepared to treat us to all kinds of food and drinks but he refused. We stopped and ate at a restaurant on the way. There were three hundred items on the menu. This place looked like one of those special restaurants, for important people, or as the people say, for politicians,” replied Rade.

“His children too are fed, thanks to the pre-prepared meals made in those special stores and restaurants. Especially after Vera and Dushitsa left his home. Slobodan wanted at least one of these girls to stay with them, to look after his children, but they didn’t want to. I think they were wrong. They would have enjoyed themselves there. Everything they needed would have been provided for them,” said Stefka.

“Everyone wants their independence, to have a life of their own. And they are right. Unfortunately Dushitsa is completely lost. Why don’t you call her more often? Don’t you see what’s become of her? She’s all skin and bones! If she doesn’t want to come here you go see her... more often,” insisted Rade.

“She doesn’t want to come here and she doesn’t want me to go there. She also stays away from her sister Vera. She’s not a child! I can’t take her by the hand and bring her here. She doesn’t want to go anywhere and she doesn’t want to see anyone. She is tormenting herself. Only God knows why. After so much waiting Milan is here now. She grieved for him for years but now she doesn’t even want to see him or consider him as an ordinary friend. Did he want to be imprisoned? No! It was fate. It had to be that way. Well, now at least they understand one another,” said Stefka in a tone of voice that showed that she didn’t believe what she, herself, was saying.

“Something that is so badly broken can’t be put back together. You should know these things better than me. Stop repeating the same thing over and over. I’ve heard this conversation a hundred times...” replied Rade rudely.

“One should be a little more caring and prepared to forgive. I don’t know who she takes after... But if we continue to do things this way, if we’re not prepared to overcome some things and make compromises, we will never be able to live with anyone. Dushitsa has shortened her years of life. If she’d come home to live with us I would have forced her to eat something. I would have cooked things she liked, maybe soup or something. Now we don’t know if she eats or not. I don’t understand how we became this way. Why did we separate from one another just after we’d gotten on our feet? Had you moved out I don’t know how I would have survived here alone. I would have gone back to the village,” said Stefka and adjusted and re-tied her head kerchief.

“Well, very nice for them to laugh at us villagers,” replied Rade.

“If your father had lived a little longer,” said Stefka, “it would have been different. But, he left us early...”

“Yes, he left us early. It would have been much easier for me had he been alive today. But that’s how things are. Let’s talk about something else, my head is starting to hurt,” replied Rade.

“You’re not going to work tonight, are you?” asked Stefka to change the subject.

“No. My uncle told the bosses to give me some time off for a few days. He has great authority everywhere. Not to say that they are afraid of him. No. They respect him a lot,” replied Rade.

As Rade’s mother began to collect the glasses, cups and saucers, Rade noticed that she was preoccupied.

“What’s the problem?” he asked her and gave her a hug over her shoulders.

“I’m concerned, son, I’m concerned. Do you know how many times I’ve regretted agreeing to let you leave home one by one? I don’t know what got into our heads to make your father and me leave our hearth. What were we missing there? Nothing! We had a happier time... happier. Maybe your father would have survived if we had stayed in the village. And your sister wouldn’t have met Milan and would have avoided all these problems. She would have had her health...” said Stefka and began to cry.

“Maybe you’re right to some extent. But in the village we would have been nobodies and nothings. Times have changed and people are looking to leave the villages,” replied Rade.

“I think we were fools. Life in the villages continues to be good for those who remained behind. But your uncle wanted to take you out of rural poverty...” said Stefka.

“It’s not so bad here in the city, mother...” replied Rade.

I’m not saying everything is bad here but bad things are happening to us here. You, at least should have settled down by now,” said Stefka.

“You are again telling me the same thing...” replied Rade and went to his room. His mother had upset him.

After he left Rade and his mother, his uncle decided to go and see Vera. He knew she was looking forward to seeing him. After he

rang the doorbell Vera opened the door. She was dressed like she was about to go out.

“Are you going somewhere?” asked Slobodan.

“No, I just got back from visiting Dushitsa,” replied Vera.

“How is she doing?” asked Slobodan.

“She’s not doing well. She has ruined her entire life over that one person. You know who I’m talking about,” replied Vera.

“I was under the impression that she had gotten over him a long time ago,” said Slobodan anxiously.

“That irritates me the most. I know that she still loves him and that she will always love him, but since he returned to her, some time ago, she has been even more distant. She simply can’t accept him,” replied Vera.

“Well, she shouldn’t. She’s done with him. They have no chance of getting together again. They have no life together. What will he be to her now? He should have been the one with the impaired health after everything that happened to him. Naturally she expected the same Milan she knew before he was sent to prison, but that obviously didn’t happen,” said Slobodan nervously as he paced around the room.

“You’re right! She is seriously ill. Her heart is in very bad condition. You probably haven’t seen her in a long time,” replied Vera.

“Do you know how many invitations I sent her to come over? To this day there is no call and no trace of her,” said Slobodan.

“This is what she has become. She runs away from everyone,” replied Vera in a sad tone of voice.

“Go convince her and the two of you come over to see us this weekend,” said Slobodan firmly.

“It will be hard, but please first tell me how it went with Rade?” asked Vera.

“On the way to the village we went to see an older doctor, a psychiatrist, who is my friend from school. We stayed there for a while and talked. He gave me a folder; there must be something about him in the folder. Let’s have a look...” replied Slobodan.

He opened the folder and read aloud several lines: Come to my clinic together without delay. Measures must be taken urgently. He needs to take medication...

“I knew that, Uncle,” said Vera and sighed. “Even though I’m a layman...”

“It is what it is? But how do we convince him to go to the clinic. We mustn’t tell him openly. But then again, we could make things worse. We could lose his trust. I don’t know what to do but we mustn’t delay. It’s very important to start talking, but who is going to start the conversation,” replied Slobodan.

“No one else could do it as good as you, Uncle. Maybe you should tell him that your friend the doctor wants to see him again. This time at his clinic,” said Vera.

“I don’t know if I will be able to but I’ll try. I have a bit of a problem with my conscience. I shouldn’t have allowed him to work with criminals. It turned out to be difficult for him. But who knew? He probably takes on more work than he can handle. I’ll have a talk with his superiors. To relieve him a little. I’m afraid the doctor may insist that he spend some time in the hospital,” replied Slobodan.

“Neither he nor my mother, I believe, would agree to such a thing. You know how people are about these kinds of hospitals. They have a bad reputation. But an illness is an illness,” said Vera with a tone of confidence in her voice.

“We’ll see. Let’s not say anything without knowing what the doctor will say. I have full confidence in him. I need to go now. They’ll beat me at home. I’ve been gone for days,” replied Slobodan.

“Thank you very much for everything. Say hello to everyone at home,” said Vera trying to smile but couldn’t.

Slobodan stopped walking for a moment, turned and asked:

“Will I ever see that husband of yours at home?”

“Not only you, but me too. I’m getting tired of looking for him in the pubs. He prefers the company of his friends above everything,” replied Vera.

Slobodan shrugged his shoulders and smiled. He walked away fast. The situation with Rade and Dushitsa was making life difficult for him. It was one of these rare difficulties one encounters in life. He felt helpless. Things seemed to be out of his control. He didn’t go straight home. He wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone. It would be best if they were all asleep when he got home. He was sure Emilia, his wife, wouldn’t be asleep. She usually painted at night and slept during the day. He never thought he would marry an artist. But he had found her to be special and very interesting. And as the old people used to say, “It was his destiny to marry her”. She didn’t anger him, she didn’t irritate him but she wasn’t interested in anything, even in her own family. The family for her didn’t seem to exist. What did the children eat... did they have anything to eat... what did they wear... did they study... She didn’t seem to care. All this, it seems, had been erased from her consciousness. She thought that because their father had money he could simply solve all their problems. The children from a very young age had learned to live like that; they demanded everything of him. And what could he do? He acted like he was the only parent, like they had no other parent. He took everything upon himself. You couldn’t even argue with her. You just had to accept her as she was, or run away from her. He was sure, from the first days of their life together, that he would be unable to leave her. Even less now...

Why had he taken on all those things that he was aware would remain the same as he had found them... He was comforted by the feeling that his Emilia could have been worse. There were many bad women, quarrelsome, primitive, superficial, even drunkards. At least

his Emilia was none of those. She was also productive and, as her critics said, she didn't paint so badly. The children were older now and seemed to manage on their own... And somehow life went on. But now the question was how would he solve this other thing with his nephew? It felt like a lump in his throat, from the moment he got the bad news from his psychiatrist friend who invited him and Rade to visit him at his work. And it must be done as soon as possible! That's exactly what he'd said.

Two days later Rade's telephone rang quite early in the morning. "Who can be so rude as to call at this hour in the morning," mumbled Rade and nervously picked up the handset.

"Listen, I'm sorry for talking quietly. I don't want my family to know about this. I want you to take me to the doctor immediately," said the voice on the other side of the telephone, which Rade recognized. It was his uncle. Rade quickly straightened up in bed and asked:

"What is it? Is it something serious? Let me call an ambulance!"

"About it being serious, it seems to be serious. But let's not make a lot of noise, take a taxi and come over. I'll wait for you outside. Not in front of the house, a little further down the street," replied Slobodan.

Rade got up immediately, got dressed, called a taxi and a few minutes later picked up his uncle at the agreed place. They went to the hospital. When they arrived in the courtyard Slobodan instructed the taxi driver to go to the entrance of the neuro-psychiatric clinic. Rade became very stiff. He looked at his uncle carefully, as if searching for an answer in his facial expression. Slobodan hadn't told Rade why they were going there.

After Slobodan saw the puzzled look on Rade's face he said, "My friend works there, the one we were with before we went to the village. I don't trust any of the other doctors like I trust him."

"Isn't he a psychiatrist?" asked Rade with some hesitation in his voice.

“It’s one thing what he specializes in, and another what he’s like as a doctor. Before that and after that. And to tell you the truth all of us need a psychiatrist in these crazy times. You think you don’t need one and you may think I don’t need one, but we both do. Especially now when you have so much stress both at work and with building your house, and even with your family, it’s not wrong to talk to a good specialist.

When the taxi stopped Rade got out of the car but refused to take a single step towards the clinic entrance. He remained still even after his uncle took a few steps towards the door.

“Come on Rade, what are you thinking about? Why do you think I called you... to accompany me, of course!” said Slobodan in a convincing tone of voice.

But Rade wasn’t sure about that and wanted to tell his uncle. He wanted to tell him that all this wasn’t about Slobodan. It wasn’t that kind of illness his uncle had. He was pretty sure this was an intervention for him. Rade believed that his uncle, like some of the people at his work and some in his family, thought that Rade needed a psychiatrist! Rade wanted to turn around and run away and get out of the hospital yard. But the respect he had for his uncle stopped him from doing that. Finally he decided to go with Slobodan and face the doctor.

The famous doctor welcomed them warmly. “It’s great to see you again,” he said to both of them.

“I didn’t want to tell you yesterday but I haven’t been able to sleep for a long time. I think I might have a serious case of insomnia and some inner nervousness,” said Slobodan, speaking rather quickly.

“It doesn’t surprise me. People of all ages suffer from insomnia these days and who doesn’t suffer from nervousness? It’s not easy building a country! And don’t think that I don’t take pills myself. Whoever tells you they don’t take tranquilizers is lying to you. Especially in these more difficult and sensitive professions. I don’t know what Rade thinks, but I have the right to say that I take care of

my health. I take one tablet in the evening and one in the morning and I'm calm all day. I sleep like a baby all night," replied the doctor.

"But don't you doctors say that those pills are harmful?" asked Rade nervously.

"Yes, of course, if you take an excessive amount and without a doctor's prescription," replied the doctor.

Rade looked at the doctor with a confused look and then he looked at his uncle.

"Rade, yesterday you said you found people at work annoying. You also said the workers who are building your house are annoying. All this is slowly weakening your health and you aren't even aware of it. And your uncle too, be it his children or his work. That causes nervousness and stress. Both of you think about what I've just said. In my opinion, you both need to take something," said the doctor.

"It's clear to us that when we're done here we aren't leaving without a prescription for some sort of medication. We thought we should consult you about it but now I'm glad we did. Admittedly, I'm convinced it was a good idea to get some good advice from a friend. Rade, I think you should also heed this well-meaning advice," said Slobodan.

But instead of writing a prescription, the doctor opened one of his cupboards and took out two bottles of pills. Without telling them anything, he handed them one bottle each.

Take one pill in the morning and one in the evening. And now let's have some coffee," said the doctor.

"Oh I'm sorry doctor, we have no time for coffee, we have things to do. Rade is building a house, it's not a joke," said Slobodan, extended his hand and shook hands with the doctor.

"Then let's all get back to work!" replied the doctor and stood up.

They said their goodbyes and left. Riding in the taxi Rade could hardly refrain from telling his uncle how angry he was with him, that he didn't feel he needed pills to calm himself down, and that he didn't believe he had a need to take pills. But he said nothing.

Rade reached his destination first. When he got out of the taxi Slobodan opened the window and yelled:

“You should trust my friend. From now on he'll be your friend too. See you soon...”

Right after he went inside his house Rade went to bed and lay down. His mother wasn't home. In her absence he had a chance to calm down a little and reflect on the things that had transpired in the last couple of days. They must have seen something unusual in me because all of a sudden everyone became concerned about my health - he thought. Not to be fooled... but something must have happened to me which I hadn't notice, but everyone else noticed – he thought. He opened the bottle of pills and took one.

Rade didn't remember ever taking a pill in his life. He was always healthy and now all of a sudden this... He thought of talking to Vera but what could she tell him? Would his uncle have taken him to the doctor and allowed him to take tranquilizers unnecessarily? Perhaps not. But he could be playing him. The reason that Slobodan took a bottle of pills for himself could be part of the same game.

“Come on out, lunch is ready,” he heard his mother's voice calling. “Where did you disappear so fast this morning?” she asked. Rade wondered how his mother had gotten into the house when she returned without him hearing her. Maybe he'd fallen asleep for a while.

“You know how my uncle is. He always finds things for me to do. It seems like he has run out of things to do at his own job so he took me to see his doctor friend again. You know the one I told you about who we went to see at his home on our way to the village. He got me out of bed early this morning so that we could go and see his doctor friend. He said he couldn't sleep all night last night. He was very nervous. And of course a doctor is a doctor. He patted us both

on the back, gave us a bottle of pills each and told us to take them,” replied Rade.

“If the doctor tells you to, son, then you must take them,” said Stefka and as much as she wanted to, she couldn’t hide her concern for him. Her voice betrayed her.

“You people are all strange! You seem to want to make me from healthy to sick by fear and by force. If you’re all so concerned about me then I’ll take those damn pills. But if I get sick from them, who will cure me then?” replied Rade.

“Well, now I’ve heard everything; someone getting sick from taking medication given by a doctor? And that doctor, like you said, is a very good friend of your uncle’s. And even more than that, he gave the same pills to your uncle. Enough nonsense let’s have some lunch. Maybe Vera will come later. She finishes work late, we can’t wait for her...” said Stefka.

“Why don’t you invite Dushitsa over?” asked Rade.

“I’ve called her many times!” said Stefka sounding bitter.

“When does she finish work? I’ll go and see her today!” replied Rade.

“Go and see her. I don’t know why that girl has become this way,” said Stefka.

“She only broke up with her boyfriend... No big deal. Married people with children nowadays break up every day,” replied Rade.

“That’s right. But she doesn’t want to surrender... When do you plan to continue with the house construction?” asked Stefka.

When his mother asked him about the house Rade raised his eyebrows and sighed. When she saw him do that she said:

“Okay, okay, don’t get upset now; take some rest for a while.”

“How much is a while? The building is waiting for me. The longer I delay the worse for me. The neighbours will steal my material. Half of it has already disappeared so far,” replied Rade.

“You’re the one that’s strange, son. Who has the guts to steal from you here?” said Stefka.

“Go out there during the night then you’ll see. I don’t want to go because if I catch someone stealing I’ll have to kill them. And I assure you that the workers themselves also steal. Everyone who has done a building project has told me that,” replied Rade.

“And you believe them?” asked his mother.

“And why shouldn’t I believe them? I’m not going to count bricks or iron bars every day. They take the building materials regardless if they’re doing work or not. The building material disappears,” said Rade nervously.

“Rade, since when did you become like this, I don’t know you any more. You seem to doubt everyone. You accuse people of things for which you have no evidence. What does that look like to you? Think about it and come to your senses,” replied Stefka speaking quietly.

“Oh, you think I’m making things up? These things just come to my mind? Do you think I’m crazy?” said Rade sarcastically.

“He then looked at his mother. When he noticed the painful look on her face he said:

“Okay then, you didn’t say exactly that but you did say something similar. Let me see now, soon you’ll be saying that the prisoners, criminals and murderers, that I keep in prison, are innocent. They’re lambs. Is that what you think, mother? That I don’t know what I’m doing? Okay then, if you think that way... Maybe I should quit everything here and go back to the village. I’ll become a shepherd or a civil guard. It won’t be so bad for me, right?”

They ate their lunch in silence. His mother didn’t know how to continue the conversation. Fortunately Vera came home early. The

atmosphere changed. But right after she got there Rade began to complain. He said:

“Why didn’t you go and get Dushitsa and bring her here with you?”

“Do you think it’s so easy to bring Dushitsa here? She has everything worked out except for leaving home,” replied Vera.

“Has she been to a doctor recently? Your uncle took me to a doctor today for a nervous disorder. Maybe it was your idea?” said Rade.

“What doctor, what are you talking about?” replied Vera making an effort to pretend that she knew nothing about it.

“Okay then, you know, maybe I really do need that kind of doctor! Wherever it is, I’ll lose my mind. Or... I’ll be rescued by one of my ‘dear prisoners’...” said Rade.

“Every time I see you lately, I leave with all kinds of fears. Please change the subject. Say something nice. For example, say that you met a beautiful new woman or something like that... You constantly focus on your work and because you work with broken people, you seem to feel that you’re broken,” replied Vera.

“Okay, okay, I will change. Then you’ll have a good brother and as the people say – everything will be milk and honey.... Something else weighs on me a lot more - Dushitsa. We’re all guilty for Dushitsa’s condition. I am the guiltiest of all!” said Rade.

Vera looked at him, this time with real fear on her face. He now seemed to want to find a new cause for his suffering.

“What now, that’s all we’re missing!” Vera yelled out loud, looked away and added, “now he’s guilty for Dushitsa’s fate! We would love to hear his explanation!”

“First, on the evening of her engagement I shouldn’t have listened to Dushitsa. I should have immediately gone to find out what had happened to Milan. I shouldn’t have listened to Dushitsa even though she forbade me to go. I didn’t do that the next day or the

following days. I blindly obeyed Dushitsa. Or maybe I was afraid I would find out something bad about Milan..." said Rade.

After saying that, Rade sighed loudly.

"And what if Milan left on his own? Besides, there was no one there who could have told you anything. And another thing - better that Dushitsa didn't know what happened to her lover. Who knows what kind of scandals she would have had herself involved in and she could have also disappeared a long time ago? Believe me that wouldn't have been good for anyone", replied Vera attempting to calm Rade down.

They were all silent. Rade seemed as if he wanted to say something but he hesitated. After a long pause Rade spoke.

"If, shortly afterwards, after the fateful night of the engagement, you accidentally found out that Milan was in prison, held as a political prisoner, an Inform Bureau resolution supporter, would you have told Dushitsa?" said Rade blushing with excitement in an effort to get everything out in the open.

Vera stood there silent for a while and then said:

"Maybe I wouldn't have told her for fear that she would do something reckless and that would have cost her dearly."

"Are you sure you would be able to hold out on your sister about such a thing? Are you sure you would be able to endure, no matter what happened to her? I don't believe you!" replied Rade in a raised voice.

"I think yes!" said Vera in a louder voice.

"You wouldn't feel guilty about that? Not me, I would feel guilty! A few months after Milan disappeared I saw him in prison. That was before he was sent to Goli Otok. As a result of seeing him I struggled for a long time deciding whether to tell any of you! I struggled but I realized that it would be disastrous if I told anyone. For Dushitsa and for all of us. That's why I didn't tell anyone..."

said Rade. After he said that he hid his face in his hands in an attempt to hide his shame. He looked at Vera.

Vera for a moment looked like she was furious. Rade noticed how quickly her face turned red and then pale. She apparently was able to overcome the shock fairly quickly. After a while, she whispered something.

“Don’t ever tell Dushitsa... not even in a dream. She will never forgive you. And you, Mom, you didn’t hear this!” replied Vera and a moment later added. “If you don’t want your family to break up.”

They both noticed that their mother seemed to be in shock. She had lost her voice. She looked numb. She had no eye movement, like she was completely blind... It seemed as if she couldn’t believe what she had heard. Many questions suddenly popped up in her mind. How was it possible for him, her own son, to keep such a secret from his own sister for so long, watching her health slowly deteriorate. Shrivelling away. How could he be so sure this was better for her? Of course he must have done it out of love for her. God what he had gone through to protect her? But did he protect her... or...? Look what has become of her... The least he could have done was tell someone... his mother or Vera.

Stefka suddenly began to yell loudly.

“Eh, son, son... How could you do such a thing?”

Vera, who had already recovered from the shock, looked at her mother with disapproval. But Stefka didn’t notice. Vera wanted to tell her - what now, you want to make him sick and lose him? Or do you want him to be healthy! When she saw that her mother didn’t notice her looking at her, Vera quickly went to her to stop her from further chastising Rade. She feared her mother would use even harsher words.

“Don’t rush to judge, mother! It would have certainly not turned out any better. How do you know what Rade did was bad? How do you know if he had told her it wouldn’t have been worse? Rade was certainly aware of the consequences and did his best to protect the

family. When he found out Milan was a political prisoner he decided it would be best for everyone if he remained silent,” Vera explained to her mother.

Vera went over to her mother and held her hand. Then she hugged Rade and said:

“Instead of waiting for Dushitsa to come over, why don’t we all go and visit her. If nothing else, she’ll serve us coffee.”

Rade felt like he had been pardoned by Vera’s court and began to relax, but at the same time he didn’t have the strength to get up, get dressed and go to visit Dushitsa. But he forced himself.

“Come on mother, you’re coming too,” said Vera because she felt she needed her support. But Stefka didn’t give it to her.

“The two of you go. You’ll make her happy. And tell her off. What is this... she has completely forgotten us. Tell her I’m very angry with her...” replied Stefka.

After they left Stefka went to the window and watched them turn the corner. Then, in a mumbling voice, she said: “Eh Rade, Rade, son, what a burden you have been carrying in your soul all this time. How could you not confide in me? But I think it was better you didn’t tell me. I couldn’t have kept your secret.

Stefka started pacing around the room in quick steps... A variety of thoughts ran through her mind. She was looking for someone to blame for all the suffering they had endured in peace time right after the evil war had ended. Hadn’t enough people died in the four years of war against the evil fascists? These were mostly young people. The smartest, the most honest and the purest of heart. They died to bring freedom to the people. To make a better life for all of us. And now we have brother fighting against brother. The cursed times are back. States quarrelling against states to a point of annihilation. What a cursed new era we have entered. We’ve gone from one evil to another...

...My dear children, I raised them from babies. They made me very happy. None of them and no one from my family was killed in the war against the Germans. We fought and drove them out. But when we thought they were gone a new evil came into our lives. Now we have best friends fighting against each other, spying and informing on one another... Suffering from your own people... How could Milan be against his own people, against his own country, when he had lost both of his parents in the struggle to liberate that country? The poor man has been coming here for a long time and has shed many tears for his parents. He would have given his heart and soul for the Party and for the country. But cursed by the one who took it to heart not to see it that way. Cursed by all those freaks who put him through terrible torment, humiliation and injustice. He was neither guilty nor obligated. My poor girl's soul is burning because of that. She is filled with grief for him.

Stefka went into the darkest part of the room and tried to clarify some things in her own mind. She remembered having a conversation with her late husband and thought to herself that he had died before his time. He died because he couldn't accept the fact that eastern block countries were breaking up over nothing. He simply couldn't understand why this was happening after so many sacrifices had been made. He would often would ask, and he asked this many times, "Why did everything turn upside down all of a sudden? Why did they betray us? Those at the top betrayed us... they were disguised. And they still wear masks. We were betrayed before the end of the war. They didn't even wait for the bodies of the dead fighters to cool down!" He said these things in the absence of his children. He didn't want to disappoint them. He said all these things and after that he was unable to raise his head. He even had a fight with his brother over this and after that things didn't go well between them. One time Stefka heard him say to his brother not to give Rade a job investigating political prisoners. Even in his last days before her husband died Slobodan and he couldn't face each other; they couldn't see eye to eye.

Stefka tried to take a nap but she couldn't. The telephone rang. It was Slobodan.

“How are you? How are you all doing? How is Rade? Are you alone?” he asked.

“We’re okay. I’m home alone. Vera and Rade went to Dushitsa’s a while ago,” she replied.

“It’s good that you’re alone. Rade must have told you about the medication he was given. Make sure he takes it. He must take it regularly. He shouldn’t be playing games with his health. As for the house construction, I told him to hire someone to do the work. He needs his rest. Not sleeping all night and all day will get him into trouble,” said Slobodan.

“I’ll tell him that, if he listens to me,” replied Stefka sounding doubtful.

“If he doesn’t listen to you, I’ll take him to the hospital,” replied Slobodan.

“God forbid! Is it that bad?” cried Stefka with fear in her voice.

“It isn’t yet but it will be. He needs to take the medication to avoid getting worse,” said Slobodan in a softer tone voice, after seeing how frightened Stefka had become.

“Only if he could change that damn job of his...” said Stefka.

“I told him to change it but he doesn’t want to. It seems to him that if he does that, then his colleagues will think he’s a coward. They’ll make fun of him,” replied Slobodan.

What’s more important his image or his health? At least he’s better than his father. You know how your brother was...” said Stefka, deliberately mentioning his brother. He needed to talk to someone about him at this point. But Slobodan seemed either in a hurry or didn’t want to think of his late brother right now, so he continued to talk about Rade.

“Try and convince him. He needs to take his medication every day. Don’t let him forget that. Make sure he takes it twice a day. Make him do it in front of you,” said Slobodan.

Okay, I will,” replied Stefka.

“Goodbye Stefka,” said Slobodan.

“Goodbye and say hello to everyone at home”, replied Stefka and hung up the telephone.

In the evening, when Rade came home from his sister’s place, Stefka told him that his uncle had called. She noticed him raising his eyebrows.

“What did he say?” asked Rade.

“What did he say? He said you need to take your medication regularly”, she replied.

“He’s a strange man and so is his friend the doctor. From the short conversation I had with him he pushed me to take medication. Tell me, what do you think is wrong with me, seriously?” said Rade to his mother.

“Son, I’m not a doctor, why are you asking me? And why is it so terrible to take a few pills?” replied Stefka.

“Okay, let’s say that I agree. Can you leave me alone now?” said Rade and opened the newspaper.

Stefka went to the kitchen and came back with a glass full of juice.

“I want to see you take a pill. Take one in front of me,” his mother persisted.

“If you do this to me, I won’t take any,” said Rade sounding upset.

“Okay, okay you’re not a small child,” said his mother calmly.

Rade drank the juice but didn't take a pill.

She saw that he hadn't but she wasn't going to argue with him anymore.

"You haven't told me anything about how it went with Dushitsa today? How is she?" asked Stefka.

"She didn't complain as much as other times. Maybe she's better from the medication she's been taking," replied Rade.

"In other words she believes that she's better because she's taking her medication," said Stefka with emphasis on the medication. Stefka said that, to once again remind Rade about his own medication.

"The difference between me and her is that she has a serious heart problem and I'm not even sick..." replied Rade.

"Nobody said you were sick but you need some therapy to prevent you from getting sick," persisted Stefka.

One of these days soon I'll go to the hospital alone and see the doctor. Maybe he thinks I have a serious illness and my uncle doesn't want to tell me about it," said Rade.

"First take the medication that he gave you, then you can go and have a conversation with him," replied Stefka.

"No, no, I want to make sure that I need the medication before I take it," said Rade.

"Do whatever you want I can't argue with you anymore," replied Stefka, got upset and went to the kitchen.

Rade lay down and covered his head, which meant the conversation was over.

\* \* \*

As soon as Rade told the guard his last name he immediately let him into the hospital. He then met an orderly who escorted him to the doctor's office. The doctor got up from behind his desk and shook Rade's hand. The doctor seemed to know in advance all the questions Rade was contemplating asking and had instant answers for him.

"I came to see you to talk to you without my uncle. I want to know if there is something seriously wrong with me. Will you please tell me?" Rade asked the doctor.

"You saw that I gave your uncle the same pills. And I can show you that I have the same pills in my bag too which I also take. We who are more sensitive and worry more about things need to be careful. We must take preventive measures to avoid things breaking down, especially if nothing else helps. Take my advice and you will be fine," replied the doctor and gave Rade a friendly hug.

After Rade promised to take the pills he said goodbye to the doctor and the same orderly took him to the exit of the hospital building. About the same time more than a dozen men were walking in the yard, to the left of the building. They were talking quite loudly. Some were laughing, others were singing and others were acting strangely. He slowed down to see what was going on and at that very moment one of them headed for Rade. Rade couldn't believe it, and as the man got closer he was more convinced that it was Milan. Impossible, he thought to himself. Will I run into him again in a bad place? he thought to himself. He hastened his pace to get away but heard Milan call him by his name. It would be cowardly of him to leave without answering Milan. The shame would be on Rade. But, fortunately, one of the orderlies who was looking after them while they were in the yard blocked Milan's way.

"You know you can't go there!" the orderly said rudely and led him to where the others were.

Rade struggled in deciding whether to respond to him or not. To let him know that he had seen him... But he decided not to. Surely it would be against the rules, he thought to himself. Then, from the distance, he heard a voice that sounded more like a cry yelling, "Say

hello to Dushitsa and tell her that I love her. Tell her I want her. Tell her I'm not sick... I'm not... I love her..."

After he heard what Milan said, Rade was convinced that Milan had been taken to this hospital against his will. On his way out he greeted the guard and left. There was a small park with benches near the hospital. Not caring if anyone was watching, Rade sat on one of those benches and cried loudly... Then he got up and walked through the crowds of people.

So this is where Milan is now, he thought to himself. This is his address, which Dushitsa doesn't know. She apparently wanted to look for him but had no idea where to look. This time Rade decided to tell her. He would tell her immediately, but not directly. He would do it through Vera, today. But at the same time he was certain there was no hope for Dushitsa or for Milan.

He continued to walk. It started raining. He walked in the rain without thinking about getting soaked. He began talking to himself. He spoke loudly. He accused himself of being one of those gravediggers. He said he had dug a tomb for his own sister. "Why didn't I tell her then?" he yelled at himself and continued. "I'll have to carry this on my conscience for the rest of my life. Should I go back and ask the doctor about Milan? What about Milan? Can I help him? Does he have money for his treatment? Or maybe they're keeping him there because he has nowhere to go. He has no apartment and no family. And what will I say when the doctor asks – what is your relationship to Milan? How do you know him? Did you know that he is an Inform Bureau resolution supporter? What will I tell him? How do I know Milan? I'll tell him he was a friend of my sister's, they were in love. And do you know that if you do that you will compromise yourself, and you will compromise your uncle too? Don't you care about your uncle? The doctor is his friend, surely he will care about him? I know what to do. I'll tell him that you should also know, dear doctor, that I am sick because I didn't help Milan when his life was on the line and his fate and my sister's were in jeopardy. I'll tell him I betrayed him. I pretended not to know him. Why did I do that? Because of all these consequences you are now pointing out to me. Out of fear for myself, for my family and even for my sister. Well, that's why I'm not well right

now. My sister also isn't well, she's dying and I'm hoping to die before she does. And you know, doctor, maybe Milan is better off now, being unaware of what happened to him... But nothing like that happened to me... And if it didn't then why should I take the medication?"

Rade went straight from the hospital to Vera's work. He knocked on the door and she opened it. When she saw him she was startled by his appearance.

"Dear God, Rade, where have you been, you're soaking. Take your coat off right now!" yelled Vera.

"Milan. I saw Milan!" replied Rade in a trembling voice.

"So what if you saw Milan!" said Vera calmly.

"Do you know where I saw him? At the psychiatric hospital, for the seriously ill," replied Rade and started crying loudly. He felt that he was to blame and acted like he was his brother.

"Okay, okay, it's a hospital for people. And there are doctors who treat them. What's so scary about that?" said Vera calmly.

"What's so scary about that, you say? I can't believe it!" said Rade shouting with his eyes wide open.

"It's certainly not nice but what can we do? Please don't tell Dushitsa! She doesn't need another shock!" replied Vera.

"Not me, I'm not telling her... you will tell her!" said Rade.

"But why, what's the need? You heard how cold she was to him when they met a few months ago," replied Vera.

"Do you think she doesn't care for him? asked Rade and continued:

"When we went to the construction site she blamed herself for being insensitive to him when they saw each other. She said that she was very sorry and that she had lost contact with him and didn't know

how to find him, because he didn't have an address or a telephone number and there was no one she could ask where he was.

"I don't know about that, it doesn't seem to me that she really wants to see him, and I don't believe that he would want to see her either. The question is whether he can make contact with her or anyone in his condition," replied Vera.

"I was terribly shaken. As soon as he recognized me he walked towards me. But when he was stopped by the orderly he started yelling loudly. He yelled at me to say hello to Dushitsa and tell her that he loves her, that he loves her very much!" said Rade.

Vera stiffened up and said, "God, what a difficult fate... his and our sister's... I don't know what to do. The last time I asked Milan to see her, with best intentions, you saw what happened. You saw how things went."

"No, I think I'll have to tell her this time. If you don't want to, I'll tell her. I'll do it tomorrow," replied Rade.

"All right then, let's prepare her first but don't tell Mom about it," said Vera.

"No I won't," replied Rade.

"By the way, what were you doing there, at the hospital? Weren't you there with our uncle the day before?" asked Vera.

"I wanted to talk to the doctor by myself without our uncle," replied Rade.

"And what did he tell you?" asked Vera.

"He said that I should take the pills he gave me, more as a preventive measure," replied Rade.

"So, do what he told you, take the pills and stop playing games!" advised Vera, "As for Milan, we'll do what we can. Knowing that

the chief doctor is our uncle's friend, we should be able to help Milan. Maybe he will get more attention and be treated better.”

“No Vera. My guess is that the doctor will advise us that it would be better if we don't take care of him. He might even suggest that we abstain from showing any interest in helping him. That's what I think...” said Rade.

“I think things are different now. Many years have passed. Things have changed a bit, Rade”, replied Vera.

“I don't believe that the doctor will think so. He's our uncle's friend,” said Rade.

“Okay, we'll see,” replied Vera.

“I also think Slobodan won't want us to interfere. And he may scold us. But this time I won't listen to anyone!” said Rade nervously.

“He'll advise us in what to do. Let's go home now!” replied Vera.

Rade didn't take his medication again in the evening. He resisted both the pills and the doctor who prescribed them. He himself didn't know why. He spent the entire evening thinking about Milan and how he'd seen him in the prison. And now he was feeling like a coward. Why didn't he stop the orderly who kept Milan from coming to him? Why didn't he tell him that he knew Milan and only wanted to say hello but instead he left the yard in a cowardly way. Why did he again pretend not to know him? Just like the last time many years ago in the prison. Milan's loud yell, calling him by name should have prompted him to go to him. To at least say a word or two of consolation. At no point did Rade feel any hostility towards him; he didn't consider him an enemy of the state. He only thought of him as a victim. Milan could never be an enemy of the people... not like the Inform Bureau resolution supporters they talked about on the radio and wrote about in the newspapers. Rade decided to call Slobodan. Immediately. Tonight. To tell him about Milan's whereabouts. He would tell him that he feels obliged to help him with something... Whatever Milan had done he had already served his sentence, but as a result of the horrible punishment he

received in prison he was now incapable of living a normal life. His health had deteriorated. He was unable to work. He had lost everything. He needed help. Who would help him? There was no one. What if it was too late? At night. He should call Slobodan immediately! He couldn't waste any more time. Not even a day...

Rade decided to telephone his uncle. He figured his aunt would answer, she should be awake, she paints all night.

"I'm sorry for calling so late," said Rade, "I'm looking for my uncle."

Rade then heard her quietly yell at her husband to come to the telephone.

"Hello, what's happening?" said Slobodan sounding half-sleep and concerned.

"I wanted to tell you about Milan. I saw him at the hospital with your doctor friend," said Rade.

"Well, so what if you saw him, I know he's there," replied his uncle sounding half-sleep, but a little nervous. "Is that why you woke me up at this time of night?"

"So you do know!" said Rade surprised.

"I want to sleep now, we'll talk about it tomorrow," replied his uncle.

"I want to help him. I want to help him tomorrow," said Rade loudly in a trebling voice.

"As long as he's there, in the hospital, he is being helped..." replied Slobodan sounding even more nervous.

"We should offer him more help," insisted Rade.

"I said we'll talk about it tomorrow, now go to bed," insisted his uncle.

“I can’t sleep!” replied Rade and didn’t want to hang up the telephone. He simply couldn’t.

“Then take another pill from the ones the doctor prescribed you. Good night!” said his uncle and hung up the telephone.

“Good night!” replied Rade to himself and hung up the telephone, disappointed. So he knew and had hid that information from us, Rade thought to himself. When I mentioned Milan in my conversation with him a few days ago, he didn’t tell me anything! Maybe he had put him in the hospital to stop Dushitsa from getting back together with him? Or had Milan gone there voluntarily, after his last meeting with her, feeling there was no hope for them to get back together? Had he gone there because of his great disappointment?

Another question immediately popped into Rade’s mind: “When Dushitsa finds out that Milan was placed in the psychiatric hospital right after they saw me, it would devastate her and her bad health would worsen?” Would she feel even guiltier this time? Rade’s heart tightened. He began to choke. He quickly got up and went to the kitchen looking for something to drink. He realized that he was getting entangled in many conflicting things, like in a big net, from which he couldn’t easily escape. Miraculously his mother didn’t hear him get up; otherwise he would have also had to explain things to her, and he wasn’t in the mood!

\* \* \*

Just before Vera finished her shift Dushitsa came to visit her at work. The moment she saw her Vera became very upset. She instantly thought that Rade had told her about him seeing Milan at the hospital, but from Dushitsa’s appearance and facial expression Vera quickly calmed down. She figured Dushitsa was there about something completely different.

“Hey, little one, what’s up?” said Vera trying to sound happy.

“I want to suggest to you that we go and visit our uncle, see our cousins. They invited us a long time ago and we haven’t gone, they’re probably angry at us by now,” replied Dushitsa trying to sound and look relaxed.

“Let’s go. But don’t you think it would be better if we go later? Shouldn’t we have our lunch first?” said Vera in an attempt to delay the visit.

“This is the only time we’ll be able to find those rascals at home,” replied Dushitsa. Vera already knew that.

“You’re right. In that case I should call a taxi. We’ll buy flowers and coffee somewhere along the way,” said Vera.

“Call one,” replied Dushitsa and went to the front door to wait for her.

While calling for a taxi on the telephone, Vera thought that it was strange that her sister suddenly wanted to see their uncle and his family. Maybe she felt a twinge of guilt for not showing enough appreciation for their uncle and his family, especially after everything they had done for both of them, and for their brother.

While riding in the taxi Vera tried to figure out if Dushitsa had a hidden agenda behind this visit but she couldn’t find anything.

“Oh my God, it’s a miracle!” yelled one of their cousins when they saw them coming. Their aunt also came out to greet them.

Lily and Zoran couldn’t stop talking. They wanted to tell their cousins everything. About girls about boys... After that they told them about a number of other things. Their uncle arrived a little later and he too was pleasantly surprised.

“Well now, what are we going to offer our honoured guests?” said Slobodan when he saw that there was nothing on the table. The moment he said that the hosts ran over to the refrigerator and brought out a lot of food and drinks. There was no empty space left on the table. They all ate a lot of food and drank various juices.

“My dear Dushitsa, why are you so thin. Listen, I’ll bring you here often, even by force if necessary. You’ll be able to eat better in good company. You’ll see, you’ll look much better in less than a month,” said Slobodan.

“I know I’m thin,” replied Dushitsa in her defence, “But being thin is now fashionable for girls...”

“Forget about that! I’m asking you seriously, do you have enough money to eat properly?” asked Slobodan.

Yes Uncle, I do. My job is fine. Why do you ask?”

“There’s never any shortage of food here. There’s always enough for all of us. And if you need money all you have to do is ask. Don’t be stingy when it comes to food,” replied Slobodan.

Some time later, with great regret, the two cousins left for school.

Dushitsa could hardly wait for the moment when she was left alone with her uncle. She said:

“I want to ask you something. I understand that Milan is currently in the psychiatric hospital in the city. Did you know about that?”

Vera felt her legs weakening. She also noticed that their uncle suddenly seemed confused. He stood motionless. Vera thought Rade must have told her. He had probably gone to see her at her job in the morning.

“Who told you that?” asked Slobodan after some silence.

“One of my colleagues at work. Her husband works there... At the hospital. But that doesn’t matter. I want you to tell me honestly, do you know any of the top doctors there? I want to see him!” said Dushitsa with some restrained nervousness. She didn’t believe her uncle would approve. The silence seemed to terrify everyone.

Dushitsa continued:

“But... if he can be treated at home... I want to take him home with me,” said Dushitsa quickly without looking at her uncle or Vera.

Vera felt Slobodan was hesitating, whether to tell Dushitsa or hide it from her that the chief doctor was his friend. If she could, Vera would have told Slobodan not to tell her anything and to say, “What kind of crazy idea is this? Take Milan home and take care of him when you can’t even take care of yourself!”

“I also recently found out that Milan is in the hospital,” said Slobodan slowly, as if looking for the right words. “As for a doctor, we will find one. No problem. But I wouldn’t advise looking after a sick person like Milan. I wouldn’t advise visiting him, let alone bringing him home. His illness is specific. I don’t know in what form and in what severity it is. But still I think that he can be helped best where he is,” replied Slobodan.

After that Vera heard Dushitsa say what she and her brother Rade were most afraid of:

“I’m to blame for the fact that Milan is now in a psychiatric hospital again... I killed his last hope. I threw him like a dog onto the street.

I trampled on his love, which had kept him alive in the torture chamber in which he had been for so long... And before that... When he disappeared... Did I look for him? Did I look for him persistently? Did I find him after he’d disappeared? No! All I did was drown in self-pity with the pain of an abandoned woman. Abandoned by my beloved. I also forbade my family from looking for him. From finding out something about him. I knew he had no family and no one else to look for him.”

“That was the best you could do under the circumstances. Who could have done anything in those days to help him?” said Slobodan trying to calm her down.

“Who? You could have done something. My brother could have done something too!” replied Dushitsa in a raised voice, so much so

that Vera was waiting for her aunt to appear at any moment and complain. But that didn't happen.

"If we did that during those terrible times, those dangerous times, it would have been a disaster for the entire family. Both your family and my family, and even beyond that," said Slobodan nervously.

"So that's what prevented you from helping him! You knew where he was and that he was suffering. You knew that he was innocent and that he had been sent to prison without being proven guilty, but you were too afraid to help him. Both you and my brother! Why didn't you at least tell me? I would have gone to help him. I would have sought salvation for him! I would have found other people who weren't afraid. I wouldn't have been afraid. I would have done anything to save him. Because... I loved him very much," replied Dushitsa in tears.

"Of course your brother and I could have done something but there would have been severe consequences. If we had intervened we would have sacrificed both of our families and still we wouldn't have been able to save him. We all would have gone what he went through. We could all have been liquidated, along with him. I and your brother would have been liquidated for sure because of our positions of authority! All of you and all of us would have been in a worse situation than we are now. Worst of all we wouldn't have been able to help him at all," explained Slobodan.

Everyone was silent for a long while.

"Now that it's over, why can't I take care of him? I want to ask you to accompany me to the doctor. The doctor should tell us if that's possible. If he isn't violent, if he isn't a danger to society... I will take him with me to my place. Everything he needs, all the medication he needs he can take there. I will give it to him. I will take him under my control and do what the doctor says, I will feed him and look after him under the doctor's advice. Surely he'll be better off with me than he is at the hospital, right?" said Dushitsa.

"But do you think you can handle all that responsibility?" asked Slobodan with a plea in his voice.

Unable to restrain herself, Vera jumped in and said:

“Do you know how great an obligation it is to nurture a person like that? It’s difficult even for those who are fit and in great condition.”

“I consider this my duty. Who does Milan have? No one! I have to help him at least now!” replied Dushitsa. It became clear to Slobodan and Vera that Dushitsa wasn’t going to change her mind.

“Perhaps we can do something different. I’ll find a private room for him in the hospital and you can go and visit him there for as long as you like. And I will make sure he gets better care, of course,” said Slobodan trying a different tactic.

Dushitsa was silent for a while as if she wasn’t sure what to say. A while later she said:

“No, I want to try it my way like I told you. If that doesn’t work then we’ll do as you suggested, Uncle,” and then she stood up.

Both Slobodan and Vera realized that they had been unable to convince her.

On the way out, Dushitsa asked her uncle when it would be convenient for him to accompany her to the hospital. Slobodan looked at Vera with a puzzled look. Vera said:

“It would be a good idea if you would think about it a little longer first.”

“I’ve thought about it for a long time,” replied Dushitsa then turned to her uncle, hugged him and said:

“Please make an appointment with the doctor tomorrow and call me.”

Slobodan pulled her hair gently but didn’t answer her.

They walked down the main street at a slow pace. Their uncle came out to see them off. After they put some distance from him Vera angrily yelled at Dushitsa. She said:

“When you came to see me and suggested that we visit our uncle, aunt and cousins, you should have told me what your real intention was for going there!”

“Why is that so important? I could have gone alone,” replied Dushitsa sharply.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you knew that Milan was in a psychiatric hospital?” asked Vera.

“Even if I told you, nothing would have changed,” persisted Dushitsa.

“I think you should be taking care of your own health first. He’s already in a hospital, there’s no reason for you to interfere in that matter,” said Vera sounding commanding like an older sister talking to her younger sister. After saying that Vera felt she was overdoing it a bit.

“You talk like you’ve never loved anyone before,” said Dushitsa in revolt. Her cheeks turned an angry red.

“I thought you had realized that your relationship with Milan, for reasons beyond your control, was already done... And please, what’s your deal with taking Milan out of the hospital?” replied Vera.

“After we met the day he came over to see me I thought there was nothing between us anymore. But when he left again something repressed woke up in me. That’s when I realized I wanted him back, regardless of the condition he was in. I realized that now he needs me more than ever. I can’t do without him and I don’t care how much longer I’ll live and whether I will live or not...” said Dushitsa.

“You’re talking nonsense! Everyone fights to live,” replied Vera calling her out.

“It’s my decision how I choose to fight for my life and for his! Not only does he need me, I need him too. He was the reason for me to live again,” said Dushitsa.

“Do as you wish but it won’t be easy,” replied Vera feeling that there was nothing she could say to change her sister’s mind.

“You have always understood things differently, especially things about love. If I want someone I want him with all my being, without reservation. As for you, reason plays a bigger role than feelings,” said Dushitsa.

“Do you think what you’re doing is smart? You broke your heart and destroyed your life because of love,” replied Vera.

“And I’m not sorry for it. I feel sorry for those who have never felt the power of love...” said Dushitsa with delight and pride in her voice.

“Doesn’t that also apply to me?” yelled Vera angrily.

“Maybe yes, maybe no,” said Dushitsa and looked at Vera. She was afraid of hurting her feelings. Vera, on the other hand, had turned away so that Dushitsa couldn’t see the expression on her face. She then raised her hand in the air and hailed a taxi that was just passing by. Vera obviously wanted to end that conversation and she did. They both boarded the taxi and sat beside each other in silence. They arrived at Dushitsa’s place first. When Dushitsa got out Vera yelled:

“Think about it...!”

Dushitsa just waved her hand and left.

\* \* \*

*Vera couldn’t believe how awful I (Dushitsa) had treated Milan right from the start, from the day he didn’t show up for the engagement. I was even more inhumane when he came to see me after being apart for so long, to tell me about his torment and*

*suffering. I didn't even hug him. I didn't say a single kind word to him. He had placed all his hope and reason for living in me. And what did I do? I closed myself, my heart and soul, and rejected him. I threw him out on the street. And now, my sister advised me to do the same. Not to take him back... To forget about him... Not to help him, even in the mental state he was in and the suffering he had endured. If only I could prove to him that I still loved him and convince him that I had never stopped loving him, only then could I bring him back to a normal state of living. Both for him and for me.*

*"From now on I will neither ask nor listen to anyone. Surely my mother and brother will be very upset when they find out that I'm planning to bring Milan to my place. But, over time, they will accept it. And if his health improves, everyone will be happy.*

*Surely I will take better care of him than those in the hospital! He doesn't need to see all those sick people around him. Tomorrow I will go and visit him and ask him what his condition is... I have to convince the doctors to give him to me...*

\* \* \*

...Milan couldn't believe that he was in Dushitsa's house. When he got a little better, and his mind had cleared, he just couldn't believe where he was. At first he thought he was dreaming. It was wonderful, a wonderful dream from which he didn't want to wake up. Sometime later something went wrong and he rebelled. He wanted to know whose decision it was for him to be with Dushitsa. He wanted to know how this had happened? Why wasn't he consulted? Why hadn't anyone asked him for his consent? It was horrible! It was a big burden for Dushitsa! He felt he should have been taking care of her. He should have been the one asking her for forgiveness. It's true that he at least wanted all these things to happen the way they did... Could he have done anything to change things? He, who would have given his life for that beautiful, gentle girl, suddenly, without wanting to, had become her tormentor. Not directly him... But indirectly the character he had become in prison.

Had he been released from prison earlier he might not have been so distant. He might not have been so damaged! But unfortunately he

wasn't released early like some others who betrayed their comrades. He wasn't ready to betray innocent people. To write false statements against them. To slander them. To expose them to beatings and torture. To humiliate them. He was unable to lie, pretend, to be a fool by force, to call something black when it really was white. To call something horrible that was good... To be depersonalized. To be dehumanized... To become disgusted with himself. That's why he stayed there longer and was tortured on that island of madmen...

...Well, in the end, they turned him into a madman. They had succeeded in their intentions. It seems he had annoyed them a lot because he refused to become like them. He managed to maintain his humanity because of her, in order to see her again, to be together with her. He was able to endure the physical torment, to stay alive because of her. All they wanted to do was dehumanize him but they couldn't. He refused to be dehumanized. He believed she couldn't accept him if he became dehumanized, let alone love him.

Now, why did that decent character, that pure of heart and beautiful soul torment his Dushitsa? What had caused him to do that? Brought there against his will, to be with her, to suffer looking at her, at her pale and weakened face... To burden his conscience... His... and not his tormentors and criminals!

He saw his medication on the table by the window. He touched it with his hand. It's true, he lived here. He saw some other things that belonged to him. As soon as Dushitsa came home he would tell her to take him back to the hospital, he thought. He should be there... in the hospital...

He heard footsteps... He began to tremble... He recognized the tiny steps. They were Dushitsa's... He could recognize them even while sleeping. She suddenly came in. She must have thought he was asleep.

"Someone must have just wakened up," she said with a smile on her face, addressing him like a small child. She immediately noticed his unhappy look but continued:

“Do you feel better being here with me? That we are finally together? That we’re no longer separated for a hundred years. Come on admit it, it’s very nice to be together. It’s good for both of us to be together,” said Dushitsa trying to cheer him up by being funny.

“I want you to tell me how I got here? And don’t tell me that you need me... That’s all you need now!” said Milan.

“Listen Milan, the where, how and why don’t matter. Be thankful that we’re together. We will help each other. Because we love each other... Don’t we? I hope you haven’t stopped loving me. If you don’t love me just say so. I deserve it if you don’t love me because of what I did to you the day you came to visit me, I know, but I hope you forgive me,” replied Dushitsa.

Milan was confused. Many things were mixed up in his head. But Dushitsa disarmed him with what she had said.

“I’ll ask you once again, how did I get here?” asked Milan.

“A friend told me where you were. She found out from someone. Then I found you. I talked to the doctor and told him that I wanted to take you home with me. To let me take care of you myself. I told him that you are my fiancé. My love. The doctor was understanding and let you go. We took a taxi and we came here,” replied Dushitsa.

“But I don’t remember any of that... I’m sick, I’m seriously ill... I can’t be here! I have to be in the hospital! That’s the reason why they kept me there!” said Milan nervously as if wanting to convince Dushitsa to take him back to the hospital immediately.

“I’m sicker than you but I’m working. You just need to regain your strength,” replied Dushitsa while stroking his hair gently. This was the first time since he’d come back from prison that she had showed any tenderness towards him. He got so excited that he started crying loudly. Dushitsa also cried but wanted it to end quickly. She was afraid she would upset him even more.

When Dushitsa mentioned work, that she was working, Milan’s face began to twitch. It had been many years since he’d worked, so many

that he'd almost forgotten. Worse than that was that he might never work again. But by then Dushitsa had gone to the kitchen and didn't see his twitching. She brought back a dish with food, which she had apparently prepared for this evening, and placed it on the table.

"Come over and sit at the table, I believe you will like what I have prepared, also be mindful that I'm not a good cook," said Dushitsa.

Milan looked like he was thinking of something, it seemed as if he was shy but at the same time he was hungry and the aroma of the food attracted him. He came over to the table, though in slow steps. He started eating like a man who hadn't eaten good food in a long time. Dushitsa felt sorry for him but at the same time was happy that he liked the food. It was good for him after all he'd been through. She gave him his medication after he finished eating. He looked at her shyly like a helpless child. Later, when he fell asleep, Dushitsa lay down on the divan in the kitchen. Her kitchen was almost the same size as her bedroom.

When Dushitsa telephoned her mother to tell her that Milan was with her at her apartment, Stefka went crazy. She stopped talking, like she had lost her voice. She didn't know what to say. A moment later she said:

"Okay then, this was your decision... How are you doing?"

"We are doing fine. We are both fine, thank you!" replied Dushitsa.

Dushitsa sounded happy.

"If you need anything Vera will bring it to you," said Stefka and gathered her strength to ask the next question.

"Thank you, we don't need anything at the moment. If she wants to come and visit she is welcome. Say hello to everyone from both of us..."replied Dushitsa.

When they were done talking Stefka almost dropped the telephone handset. How could they be okay? It seemed like nothing else mattered to her... she thought and immediately called Vera. She

asked Vera if she had known what Dushitsa had in mind, and from whom she had found out about Milan; that he was in the hospital.

...So my sister decided to destroy her life... thought Vera after hearing the news from her mother. She almost didn't know what to say to Stefka.

“Mother, you should know your own daughter by now. She doesn't listen to anyone. She decided all this on her own without asking anyone,” answered Vera nervously.

“And what now?” asked Stefka in a panic.

“And what now? What can we do, she'll do whatever she wants!” replied Vera.

“You go there as soon as possible and see how Milan is doing? Is he dangerous? God forbid, I pray he doesn't harm her,” said Stefka.

“I have a hard time believing all this. He wouldn't have been released from the hospital if he was that dangerous. Of course I will go. I will go today but I'm going to tell you, I'm very angry with her. But I can't give up on my sister! She's family...” replied Vera.

“Go and then call me right away. You'll call me right away, right?” asked Stefka with a trembling voice.

“Okay, I'll call you for sure,” replied Vera.

Vera was really upset, almost frightened, by what Dushitsa had done. Her mother's reaction added to it even more.

The same afternoon Vera set off for her sister's place. The closer she got to her house the more Vera felt a tightness in her heart. Her entire body felt tight like it was in a giant clamp. She began to wonder: How was she going to enter the house? What would they say to each other? What would she say to Milan? What would Milan's condition be like?

“Hello!” yelled Vera in front of the entrance, believing that the higher tone of her voice would help her hide her nervousness. She was so nervous she couldn’t hear if anyone answered.

The moment she entered the house she saw the two of them sitting together like they used to many years ago. They were sitting together as if they had just gotten up from an afternoon rest... Dushitsa got up first and greeted Vera, trying to keep a calm expression on her face, like everything was fine. Vera took out the chocolate candies she had brought for them and placed them in the box that always sat on the table. She then offered them some. Only then did Milan get up to greet her.

“Hello Milan,” said Vera and shook his hand, trying to avoid looking straight into his eyes. He looked very weak. His face had changed. He had aged a lot.

“As you can see, your sister decided to burden herself with difficult responsibilities. She’s trying to take us back many years. She doesn’t realize that this is impossible. I’m a former person. I was a man in the past. I’m trying to persuade her to take me back to where I was. I belong there. She deserves to live freely. She shouldn’t have to carry the burden of taking care of me,” said Milan.

Dushitsa went to him and, with her hand, forced his mouth closed.

“I can’t interfere in your affairs...” said Vera and shrugged her shoulders helplessly. What Milan said seemed perfectly reasonable to her.

“You can, you’re older. She always listens to you more than her mother...” replied Milan.

“It doesn’t matter whether she will listen to someone or not. It’s important that she is happy... here with you...” said Vera.

As Vera was saying this, Milan looked her straight in the eyes as if wanting to find out if what Vera was saying was true.

After a short silence, Milan looked at Vera again and said:

“Terrible things happened...”

“You no longer have to think about what happened. You are now a free man,” said Vera trying to sound convincing.

After he heard the word “free” Milan gave Vera an ironic smile and said, “Do you believe that? I will never be free!”

“Milan, as long as you are here with me, no one can do anything to you!” said Dushitsa.

He looked at Dushitsa with a great desire to believe that what she said was true. At the same moment loud footsteps were heard coming from the street outside. Milan quickly went to the window. He had fear in his eyes and was trembling.

“It’s just someone walking down the street. People do that all the time. What are you upset about?” asked Dushitsa.

“How do you know they’re not coming for me? They always follow me everywhere I go. How do you know that there’s no one out there lurking outside the house right now? I’m sure they are following me,” replied Milan.

“But why would they follow you?” asked Dushitsa sounding a little nervous.

“What do you mean why? First they can’t forgive me for surviving, even though they did everything they could to kill me...” replied Milan.

“But that’s a thing of the past...” said Dushitsa and put her hand on his shoulder. He didn’t react.

“For them nothing is over and it never will be,” said Milan in a quiet voice, which at any moment was in danger of being completely lost.

Dushitsa stroked his hair. The expression on his face became completely transformed. It seemed like his face glowed.

This is stronger therapy than all the drugs in the world, thought Vera and felt sorry for both of them. She became very sad but made an effort to hide it. She then heard Dushitsa say:

“What kind of coffee will we drink?”

Vera became aware that Dushitsa was attempting to change the subject. To distract Milan from looking out the window.

“Whatever kind you want to make...” said Vera jokingly.

While Dushitsa was making coffee in the kitchen, Milan couldn't take his eyes away from the window. Without turning towards Vera, he spoke as if he was talking to himself, as if he had completely forgotten that Vera was there. He said:

“Your brother is avoiding me. He has always avoided me. He avoided me in prison... And now he went the other way when he saw me at the hospital. Maybe he's right. And of course he should pretend that he doesn't know me. He's a policeman and I'm a criminal.”

Vera was happy that Dushitsa, who was still in the kitchen, hadn't heard what Milan said about Rade.

Just as Dushitsa was carrying the coffee, Milan again went to the window and, with a quick movement of his hands, pulled the thick curtains and closed them.

Who knows how many and what kinds of fears ran through Milan's mind. How would her sister stand all this, all this tension twenty-four hours a day? Would her health be able to withstand the stress? And how long would she last? What if something worse happened, something unpredictable...? At the very moment Vera was thinking of these things she noticed Milan staring at her face. As if trying to understand what she was thinking?

“You're very worried, aren't you? No one loves your sister as much as I do but I'm certain they will arrest me again and soon... And... Everything will fall into place,” he said.

“Don’t talk nonsense. There’s no reason for them to arrest you again,” replied Dushitsa trying not to show her nervousness. In the meantime Milan went closer to her and began to whisper in her ear. He said:

“There are reasons! I’m their enemy! An enemy of their state. And do you know what is an even bigger reason for them to imprison me? So that I can be theirs again! They want me to become their spy, their informant, to spy on people. They asked me to spy on people when I was released from prison. What do you think I told them? I told them, do I look like that kind of person? They seemed hesitant when they decided to let me go. But they let me go because they noticed that my health was deteriorating. Because at that point I was close to having a nervous breakdown...

Milan started to pace from one end of the room to the other. At one point he said, “Do you think they will let me be free? You pretend to believe it. I’m sure you’re pretending right now... But the moment my health improves I’m done. I will be theirs again...”

After they finished drinking their coffee Vera stood up and was ready to leave. Milan stood up too.

“Vera, if you notice anyone suspicious outside please come back and tell me. You promise you’ll tell me, right?” asked Milan.

“I promise. Now relax... You too Dushitsa...” said Vera and began to walk away.

“Say hello to Mom and Rade if you pass by there,” said Dushitsa and walked her to her front door. But no further.

When Vera walked down the street and out of sight she began to cry. This would be unbearable not only for both of them, but also for all of us, she thought. How would she leave him alone at home while she went work? I should ask the hospital to send someone to be with him in the morning... The question is whether he would agree to that or not. Maybe I should have a doctor see him. But then she remembered that Milan, being charged as an Inform Bureau

resolution supporter, had no such special privileges. And no one knew how much Dushitsa's doing would upset their uncle and brother.

Her mother greeted Vera at the door with impatience and fear in her eyes.

"What took you so long? Hundreds of thoughts went through my mind," said Stefka before Vera had a chance to speak.

"To tell you the truth I didn't plan to stay there for that long. But that's what happened. Some things have a tendency to hold you back. You want to find out as much as you can about what's going on with those two.

"Tell me, what was it like? First, were you able to talk with Milan? Have a normal conversation with him... How's your sister coping? Will she be able to endure this... with him there?" asked Stefka.

"Let her try it, it was her choice. When she finds out things aren't working she'll give him up," replied Vera.

"Then it will be harder for both of them," said Stefka and sighed.

"Harder or easier, now no one can interfere. Let's see if we can help her, not cause her problems," replied Vera and shrugged her shoulders.

"Not me, I don't intend to go and see them. Surely if Milan sees me he will be even more upset. He will also be upset if he sees your brother. He shouldn't go there either. Your brother shouldn't go for other reasons too," said Stefka.

"Milan briefly mentioned him. He said that Rade pretended not to know him twice. He said Rade didn't want to know the things that happened to him, and about Milan's current state of health. But then he also said very cleverly that Rade did the right thing pretending not to recognize him because of the kind of work Rade does," said Vera.

“That’s a good sign,” replied her mother in a hopeful tone of voice.

“My conversation with him was normal except that he has a lot of fears. His fears are ignited by every noise that comes from the street. He is disturbed by every step he hears outside. He’s afraid to look out the window... It won’t be easy but hopefully in time he’ll calm down,” said Vera.

“What else can we do but hope...” replied Stefka and shrugged her shoulders.

“Is Rade here?” asked Vera. She also wanted to let him know about her visit with Milan and Dushitsa.

“He’s in his room,” replied Stefka and yelled out loudly, “Rade, your sister Vera is here.”

A while later Rade showed up in the kitchen and said:

“Mother, will you make some coffee?”

“Not for me,” interjected Vera, “I had some at Dushitsa’s.”

“At Dushitsa’s? I hope you didn’t tell her about Milan, that I saw him in the psychiatric hospital?” asked Rade.

“What do you think she’ll do if we tell her?” replied Vera.

“That’s her business. She can do whatever she wants,” said Rade.

“She decided to bring him home to her house to stay with her,” said Vera. She wanted to gradually prepare her brother for the news she needed to tell him.

“I don’t believe that’s possible. In any case the doctors aren’t going to agree. Not in the condition he’s in with his health... But even more so because he’s an Inform Bureau resolution supporter... I think even if our uncle intervenes, it won’t happen...” said Rade.

“I thought so too, but...” replied Vera.

“But what?” asked Rade and looked at Vera with eyes wide open and then looked at his mother.

“I’ll tell you but please don’t get upset. Dushitsa found out from a friend that Milan was in the hospital, and in which hospital. She told our uncle and then told him that she had decided to take him with her, to stay with her in her apartment. She told him she would look after him and give him everything he was receiving in the hospital. Our uncle objected of course, but Dushitsa didn’t listen...” said Vera with a trembling voice.

“Am I to understand that she has taken him to her home already?” yelled Rade, stood up and began to nervously pace around the room... “Is she out of her mind...? As if she needed that... with her bad health, and all of us! You know what’s going to happen to us because of Dushitsa? We’ll face tragedy! Anyway, everything about him is a tragedy. That’s all we needed! It’s her life if she wants to sacrifice it but she has sacrificed us all!”

“Come on now, don’t be so upset, maybe something good will come out of all this. For both of them. Maybe their health will improve now that they are together,” said Stefka in an attempt to calm Rade down. She then went to the kitchen to make his coffee.

“It seems that there are things in life that are stronger than our will, than us. After her last visit with Milan, after she rejected him, your sister probably started blaming herself for his condition,” said Stefka.

“Or she may have come to the conclusion that Milan wasn’t to blame for everything that had happened to her, so she decided to take this step. It’s a done deal!” said Vera wanting to justify Dushitsa’s action for Rade as well as for herself.

“But Vera, how is it a done deal? Can you imagine how my colleagues at work will react to this? What do you think will happen when Trajan, the chief and every other employee finds out about this affair? They already look at me strangely... Expecting something bad will happen to me,” said Rade in a high tone of voice.

“You, Rade, are exaggerating about these things!” said his mother with fear in her eyes, fearing she was going to upset him even more.

“I’m not exaggerating about anything. I’m not even going to guess what this will do to Slobodan. Eventually he’ll give up on us. Even without our problems he often complains that his health is impaired,” replied Rade.

“My guess is that the doctor consulted our uncle before releasing Milan. The doctor wouldn’t have consented without his knowledge,” said Vera trying to calm Rade down.

“It’s not possible. Slobodan wouldn’t have approved!” replied Rade sharply.

“I think our uncle is especially sentimental towards Dushitsa,” persisted Vera.

“He must feel sorry for her but he must also care for his own family,” replied Rade nervously.

“Nobody can do anything to him now. The situation now isn’t the same as it was during and right after the Inform Bureau resolution years,” said Vera trying to be convincing.

“This is how you always think. You lie to yourself. Not much has changed. There are people lurking everywhere. For money or for a better career,” replied Rade refusing to end the discussion.

“Yes there are people lurking everywhere,” Stefka agreed with Rade, after which point everyone stopped talking for a while.

“And now, how is Dushitsa?” asked Rade with less stress in his voice.

Vera looked at her brother and saw that his lower jaw was shaking and his entire forehead was twitching.

“She seems to be better for now, a bit more tolerable,” replied Vera in a calm voice, trying to sound convincing.

“Yes, but we don’t know what will happen next! Mother was right when she said Dushitsa has never listened to anyone. That’s why she has suffered all her life,” said Rade.

“Ever since she told me about her plan I tried to convince her to give it up. I was there with her when she spoke about it to our uncle. I thought surely he would be able to influence her. He said a lot of things to reassure her but obviously nothing helped. After that she didn’t even tell me that she was going to immediately take Milan out of the hospital,” replied Vera in an attempt to justify her own actions.

“When and how did you find out about all this?” asked Rade sounding upset again.

“She called Mom and Mom told me on the telephone. She told me that Milan was already with Dushitsa. Here ask her,” replied Vera.

“How did she manage to do all this so quickly? How did she convince the doctor that our uncle had approved? And that he’d sent her to do this?” said Rade angrily.

“Maybe she did exactly what you said. But let’s talk about something else,” replied Vera in an attempt to change the subject, but it didn’t work.

“What else can we do but pray that things go well,” said Stefka.

“Go well? This has been happening since the day of the engagement. And here is where she has brought us. To ruin...,” replied Rade and opened the window, as if he was short of air.

“Don’t be so pessimistic!” said Vera and stood up and hugged him.

“You mean there’s room for optimism? I should send the construction workers home permanently. Who needs that house?”

Who will live in it anyway, the crows?” yelled Rade flushing with anger.

Their mother heard the last part of the conversation and, after leaving the coffee on the table, yelled at him:

I don't want to hear any more prophecies of doom. Young people shouldn't be so dark. Play some music...”

“That's all we need now, to play some music!” replied Rade.

“Why not? Music always helps a person forget their worries. Or go out with your sister, take a walk in the centre, see the world...” said Stefka.

Vera caught on to her mother's intention.

“Listen to our mother. She means well. Let's finish our coffee and take a walk. After that you can go to work,” suggested Vera.

“To tell you the truth I don't feel like going to work at all but I don't want to embarrass my uncle. I must go. This won't end quickly. These torments...” replied Rade.

“Everyone has troubles. Do you think other people don't have troubles? Only they know about their troubles,” said Stefka and handed him his clothes.

“Our problems are persistent and ongoing! There is no end to them,” replied Rade, sighed and went to get dressed.

After Rade got dressed he and Vera went out. Stefka was relieved.

\* \* \*

It was noon. The telephone rang in Rade's room. Stefka ran to get it before it woke him up. She immediately recognized the voice, it was Dushitsa. Stefka was trembling in fear at what Dushitsa might say.

“I’m calling you so that you don’t worry. I know Vera told you. I’m still at work. An elderly woman has agreed to take care of Milan while I’m at work. From the first day he met her Milan feels comfortable around her. He even takes his medication when she gives it to him. He has gained confidence in her quickly. Maybe he sees how much the woman loves me. The poor woman is all alone. She has no one. I will help her with whatever I can. She has very little means with which to survive,” said Dushitsa.

“It’s God’s will my dear, better days will come, better days... It was a good idea for you to find this woman. People like Milan shouldn’t be left all alone. Call us more often so that we don’t worry. At least for now. Goodbye,” replied Stefka.

When Stefka hung up, she saw Rade sitting in a chair next to her.

“I understand that was Dushitsa on the telephone. What did she want?” asked Rade.

“She said everything is great. She said she’s found an older woman, a neighbour, who is willing to look after Milan while she’s at work. When Dushitsa decides to do something she does it, I think she’ll be okay,” replied Stefka.

“Last night at work I found out from one of the guards that every one of the higher-ups knows about our situation...” said Rade.

“Well, at least he’s not a murderer, he didn’t kill anyone! So what if they know?” replied Stefka in a slightly higher tone of voice.

“It would have been easier if he had killed someone. He would have received a lighter sentence, served his time and it would have been over. But this, Milan’s sentence, is a life sentence. He will have to bear that cross for the rest of his life,” said Rade.

I don’t know what he did that was so terrible. It’s a mystery to me! He said something inappropriate and now he’s being tormented endlessly? Just because he made one wrong comment? Is he the only one who spoke against the government since this state was created? Let them punish him. Let him serve his sentence. He’s done that!

Why don't they leave him alone now? Let him start a family. Raise children. Leave him alone so that he can be a productive citizen and repay the state with his labour," replied Stefka.

"Those were different times, mother," said Rade with a sigh.

"Why were they different? People lived then and people live now," replied Stefka.

"I can't explain it to you now. Get me something to eat," said Rade wanting to end that conversation.

"Okay, I'll warm up something for you to eat. Are you going to work on the house?" asked Stefka.

"I want to go!" replied Rade.

His mother kept huddling around him. Rade realized that she wanted to say something but was hesitant. Eventually she spoke up and said:

"Don't go to Dushitsa's for a while. Stay away from Milan. Let him adjust to living with her."

"Are you kidding me? That's all I need, to go there. I won't! Good luck to your daughter's nonsense! I'm not going to pay any attention to them, at least not for a while!" replied Rade.

"Please I beg you, try not to be so angry. Don't frustrate yourself. You can see how fragile a man he is. What a great man Milan was. A healthy, young village man. And look how far he has fallen now!" said Stefka.

"It would be good if a person doesn't get upset but that's impractical if not impossible. I know my nerves aren't made of steel, but I'll endure as much as I can," replied Rade.

"Okay then, it's true, a person should try as much as they can with a little courage, as the old people used to say," said Stefka.

“My father did it best. He closed his eyes and solved all his problems,” replied Rade.

“Come on, don’t talk nonsense. It would have been great if your father was still alive! He would have taken care of us. Unfortunately he died and left me to worry about things! I’m getting old now. You should be supporting me, not pushing me to take care of you,” said Stefka.

“I want to do it but it seems that I’m not as strong as him. I’m far from it. He obviously wasn’t that strong either, he had his own problems, that’s why he left us so early,” replied Rade.

“No son, you shouldn’t be saying I’m not strong, you should be saying to yourself I will be strong. My sisters and my mother need me. With my strength I will achieve everything in life,” said Stefka.

“Everything is easy with words. And it’s true that people from your generation are much more resilient than us. I will confess to that,” replied Rade.

“You can also learn from us. Look, we gave birth to you and raised you. Do you think it was that easy for us? Do you think we didn’t experience hardship? We went through an entire war. We experienced the horrors of war. Four years of it. Then poverty, of which you know something. But we survived,” said Stefka.

“Enough talk. There is no end to it. I’m going out. I probably won’t be able to find any of my workers,” replied Rade.

“Rade, again I didn’t see you taking your medication. It will help you to overcome your difficulties easier,” said Stefka.

“Would you not mention that to me at least five times a day? Medication, medication, medication, that’s all you have in your mind,” replied Rade.

“My mind... whatever little I have left, I’m losing it because of you!” said Stefka.

“Do you ever get bored of complaining old lady? I’m leaving...” replied Rade.

“The old, the old are always to blame for everything. We left our golden village and came here to suffer!” said Stefka out loud, talking to herself after Rade had already left.

When he got close to the building site Rade couldn’t believe what he saw. The workers had progressed with the construction way beyond what he had expected. A stranger came over to meet him and introduced himself as the lead hand who was hired by his uncle.

That uncle of mine, how long will he carry us on his shoulders? he thought. But he was glad to have someone that he could count on because his patience was running out.

“You’ve made a lot of progress with the construction! I noticed from afar. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved. My uncle advised me a long time ago to hire someone to manage the job but I didn’t listen to him,” said Rade.

“This job isn’t easy,” said the middle-aged man, “even more so for you who has no experience in this kind of work.” Every job requires experience. The workers must be guided and shown what to do and how to do it. Come with me, I’ll show you what we plan to do today. We have material for two more days. After we use it we’ll get more, that way it’s not wasted or left sitting around.

Rade was happy to see the building process progressing well without him. A lot of weight came off his shoulders. He introduced himself to the workers, discussed a few things with the lead hand and left. Rade realized that it was his own stubbornness that had held him back. He wanted to do things his way but didn’t have the experience. Suddenly he was feeling better but at the same time he thought that his uncle had acted strangely hiring the lead hand without telling him. But then he thought it was a wise move. His guess was that this was a better way to deal with the whole situation. It’s best I don’t go home now, he thought to himself, because it will startle my mother seeing me coming home so early. Plus I’ve had enough of her boring remarks.

As much as he tried to avoid thinking about her, Rade's thoughts kept going back to Dushitsa. He was aware that he had no right to be angry with her. He should be the least angry with her given that Rade believed that he could have changed her entire situation and her destiny if he had told her when he first saw Milan in the prison. By not telling her he thought he had caused her more damage and at the same time drove himself crazy. Even now, when he found out that Dushitsa had taken Milan home, all he could think of was the consequences. He hardly thought of the benefits. Wasn't that dishonest of him?

...Is there any chance that Milan will recover? Even if he does what's next for him? None of the Inform Bureau resolution supporters who served in Goli Otok, and completed their prison sentences, are allowed to return to work. Even less in the field of education. If he's lucky enough to recover he'll have to manage somehow.

Many of the women whose husbands served prison terms, because they were accused of being Inform Bureau resolution supporters, were pressured to leave their husbands... divorce them... It appears it's the opposite for Dushitsa. Rade figured that some UDBA fanatics would be furious about this. But, ultimately, it will be what it wants to be. A person can't change skins!

Rade started working more regularly at his job. There was more time for him to sleep during the day. The construction continued to progress with less of his involvement. News about Dushitsa, according to Vera, wasn't bad. At least that's what Vera was telling them from her last visits with her. Milan seemed to be much calmer and more agreeable. He even helped Dushitsa with household chores.

Rade's colleagues at work, if they knew anything about Milan's relationship to him, didn't show it. They are afraid of my uncle, Rade thought and was filled with pleasure. Of course, Rade was no one important and they could have abused him if they wanted to.

As always, Stefka hoped that things would get better. Dushitsa started to look better and was in better moods. Rade, although he didn't take his medication, seemed to be more satisfied with things. He complained less about his job and the difficulties related to the construction of his house. Vera had found the kind of husband she was looking for, with a university degree and a good job. And he wasn't a bad man either.

In time Stefka felt that new hope was born in her heart because she figured the bad fate that hung over her children was finally over.

And then, just as everything was going so well, Rade received news that Milan had disappeared again! In a trembling voice Vera said to her mother:

“Mom, Dushitsa called me on the telephone and said that when she came home from work she didn't find Milan there. His clothes and other things were also gone. She told me that she thought he might have run away because of something important, otherwise he wouldn't have taken all his clothes and everything that belonged to him. She said she was sure that he didn't leave because of health reasons. And she herself feels worse about her own health. Mom, Dushitsa thinks that the people from UDBA have taken him again. She kept yelling ‘Why are they doing this to me?’ and crying. She was crying all the time we were on the telephone. She said “With everything they have done to us so far why did they have to do this again now?!”

Stefka was even more upset than the day she had found out that Dushitsa had taken Milan out of the hospital and moved him in with her.

“That's terrible news... I had hoped things would improve. The most important thing now is to keep an eye on Dushitsa and make sure she doesn't do something stupid! I still think that he went somewhere because of his illness... But who knows...” replied Stefka.

Vera heard her mother's voice tremble.

“We’ll see. We should be able to find something out... Another thing that Dushitsa said was that she was going to see Slobodan this afternoon,” said Vera wanting to reassure her mother that all wasn’t lost.

“Why didn’t you suggest that both of you go together to see him?” asked Stefka.

“I did ask her but she didn’t want me going with her,” replied Vera.

“The worst thing that could have happened to him is that he was imprisoned again,” said Stefka with fear in her voice.

“I don’t think so. I think most likely he’s in the psychiatric hospital. He went there on his own or someone took him by force,” replied Vera.

“Who would have taken him by force, other than the police? I don’t think your brother was involved in any way. I think your brother was happy that both of them seemed to be improving healthwise,” said Stefka.

In the evening, Dushitsa called Vera to tell her that their uncle promised her that he would inquire everywhere and as soon as he found something out he would tell her.

\* \* \*

*The days of great anticipation have begun for me... There is no news from anywhere. Milan seems to have disappeared. Like he was swallowed by the earth. If they took him back to Goli Otok he wouldn’t last long. Either they would kill him or he would take his own life. He won’t be able to endure that hellish circle again. I asked Rade several times to ask some of his colleagues in the police to find out if he was taken to any of the jails in the city, but I’m afraid he doesn’t have the courage to do it. I can’t imagine how afraid he must be. He must fear for his own life. I don’t believe he doesn’t love me, but because of me he is unable to overcome his fears.*

*One time Rade explained to me that there were cases where people who served their sentences in Goli Otok were brought back after they were released. If anyone or any of the other convicts informed on them they were re-arrested and brought back again. They were re-arrested and jailed if they were critical of how they had been treated in the prison or spoke of the injustices inflicted upon them. They were even re-arrested if they spoke against any of the politicians. If they made any criticisms, no matter how justified, they were sent back to prison, to that hellish island. They were severely punished if they told anyone about the suffering they had endured in the prisons, especially in Goli Otok. If he is in prison again, if such a thing has happened, I know that neither he nor I will be able to endure it. This will be the end... I am so exhausted, so weak... that I can't even cry...*

In moments when Rade was all alone he would try to justify to himself his hesitation to become involved. What kind of questions could he ask? If those he asked wouldn't tell his uncle, they certainly wouldn't tell him, especially if he was in prison. He would often ask Vera and Stefka if anyone had mentioned anything. And then he would start with his accusations.

“I was the first to say that nothing good was going to come out of all this. I was sure that it would end like this or something like this... But Dushitsa likes to make her own decisions, and when she faces the consequences, the bad consequences, she asks others to save her...” said Rade.

\* \* \*

About a month later Dushitsa was taken to the cardiology ward straight from work. Her health had deteriorated so much that she had to be under constant medical supervision. She persistently refused to take her medication. The only place they were sure she would take it was in her hospital room under watch. That way at least her already poor health wouldn't worsen.

Vera and Stefka visited her every day and frequently during the night. Each time they arrived they were greeted with the same question. With her wide-open, half-extinguished dark eyes looking

at them she would ask, “Is there any news about Milan?” They had no such news and they couldn’t make her happy. When she didn’t get a positive response she would close her eyes and not open them until almost the end of the visit. Even the slightest desire for life seemed to be lost in her during those moments.

“He will call, you’ll see, he will call from somewhere. He’s not going to give up on you...” her mother would say every time she visited her, in an attempt to comfort her.

But it was all in vain. It would have been great if only they could get the slightest bit of news about him. Stefka didn’t want to impose on Slobodan. She didn’t want to ask him to look for him in the prisons. And for her to go to the police to look for him would have been inappropriate given that her son was a policeman. She couldn’t go to her son’s work and ask about someone who wasn’t even her relative. That wouldn’t be good for Rade either. More and more hope was lost with each passing day. She was sure she would lose Dushitsa. The hope that Milan would appear from somewhere was also diminishing.

\* \* \*

*After Milan disappeared again I went to the psychiatric hospital to inquire about him. I went to see the same doctor. I begged him with tears in my eyes to tell me the truth. I pleaded with him to tell me if Milan had been brought back here again. To tell me what had happened to him. He assured me that Milan hadn’t come back and that no one had reported seeing him in the city. He then, there in front of me, picked up the telephone and called the police to find out if they had seen or detained such a person. He even asked them to immediately let him know if they had found him in the city, because he was a patient at this hospital. But unfortunately weeks passed and there was no news about him. Where should I look for him? Who can help me? How could he disappear without a trace...? Did he really disappear on his own? How could he not feel sorry for me? What could have made him do such a thing? I was convinced that he was well... That he was happy being with me. I no longer had doubts that he would completely recover...*

*...None of the neighbours had seen him when he left. The old woman who took care of him while I was at work was very upset but hadn't noticed anything unusual. She felt guilty. That day she had gone home to her house for about an hour. That's the only time she wasn't there, she swore... That's when he disappeared. He either left voluntarily or he was taken by force by the authorities. I don't know...*

Sitting in the hallway of the hospital, Stefka and Vera were getting desperate and didn't know what to do. They felt helpless. Vera said:

“Tomorrow I'll go and see Slobodan. I'll ask him about this. Let's see what he says. If Milan is in prison he should insist they let him out for few days so that she can see him before she's gone. Her tears are flowing non-stop.” Stefka started crying... One of the nurses came over and told them to keep it down, they were disturbing the patients.

They took to the streets. They felt a bit better, probably from the cool air and from the noises of people and cars passing by. They didn't know where to go. Just as they were about to cross the street, they noticed a car driving slowly, as if wanting to stop. Vera recognized it; it was her uncle's car. He stopped. Confused and afraid that Dushitsa might have already passed, Slobodan got out of the car and hugged them.

“I was coming to the hospital. I went to inquire about Milan. One of my acquaintances from the Ministry of the Interior seems to think that he's in the psychiatric hospital in N. He was found in a freight car by some railway workers. He was lying on the floor of one of the cars completely unconscious. He had no documents on him. Nobody knew anything about him. That's what one of the policemen who recognized him said. They still can't communicate with him. No one knows until when. That's all I know. It's better if you don't tell Dushitsa about this. Why tell her? Is there a benefit to that?” said Slobodan.

“No, I must tell her. She needs to know that he left because of his illness...” said Stefka without hesitation.

“Maybe you’re right... But I need to leave now... Let’s hope that the worst won’t come. It will pass us by,” replied Slobodan.

“That’s all we can do... The doctors did everything possible. They did as much as they could. But nothing seems to help. She has given up...”, said Vera with pain in her voice.

“I’ll go and see her tomorrow. I will try and see if she will listen to me,” replied Slobodan.

“She doesn’t listen to any of us, not to me... not to her sister, not to mention Rade. She greets him with her eyes closed when he comes and does the same when he leaves. He, on the other hand, can’t bear to see how sick she is. He constantly cries,” said Stefka trying hard to hold back her own tears.

“As much as you can, please try not to cry in front of Rade. The less he comes to the hospital the better. Let’s not make him sick too. His health is very fragile already. His bosses often mention this to me. They worry that soon he won’t be able to do his job. They also fear him because he carries a gun. They’re afraid he might do something reckless. They can’t seem to take it from him. I’ll have to move him to another job as soon as possible,” said Slobodan.

“How could a few village children turn into such hypersensitive adults...?” Did the city wear them out or were they not ready for city life?” said Stefka very quietly.

“It’s the bad times. Who could have imagined or predicted all this. The Russians leaving us in the lurch. Some people, like Milan, got it into their heads that they should overthrow the government. What were they thinking? Obviously they weren’t. Did they think the government wouldn’t be prepared for that? What government wouldn’t fight back against those who stand against it? And our little girl got involved with him, with a renegade. What did she expect from him? Even if he recovers, it’s over for him. What kind of life could he live with a noose always hanging around his neck... I pity her, I pity Dushitsa very much,” said Slobodan.

Slobodan went silent. They all went silent.

Stefka took her thoughts to several years back. She had the words at the tip of her tongue and wanted to tell Slobodan about a conversation she'd overheard between him and his brother during which Jovan said something to him before he died. Stefka remembered Jovan telling Slobodan not to trust Tito and those around him because they had betrayed the Soviet Union and the Bolshevik Party, as well as all the countries that were with him. That only we had turned out to be black sheep. She also remembered that the brothers always avoided talking about politics in front of her and kept quiet. It was inappropriate for her to talk about those things. Now her mind was on her daughter. What would happen to her?

“The biggest mistake she made was to take him home with her while he was still sick. She got even sicker,” Stefka heard Slobodan say. “After I found out that she used my name without my knowledge to get him out of the hospital, I didn’t do anything. I didn’t want to cause problems. I didn’t want her to hate me. I didn’t want her to think in the future that I had stood in the way of her bringing him closer, of taking care of his health as she believed she could. And now here are the results of that action. This is exactly what I predicted would happen. But I thought that when she saw him up close, she would feel that she had to give him up. If he hadn’t escaped on his own, she would have had to return him to the hospital.”

“She is tormented. She won’t allow anyone to get close to her. A great misfortune has befallen us. On her the most. It’s a good thing your brother died. He is spared from all this. He didn’t see any of it. He didn’t see many of the bad things that came to this country and to his house. It was my destiny to live through it all,” said Stefka.

“I need to go. My family will worry about me...” replied Slobodan.

“Be well and thank you,” said Stefka and Vera simultaneously.

“I have news about Milan but it’s not all good news,” said Vera in a quiet and calm voice when she entered Dushitsa’s room. Dushitsa straightened up in her bed as much as she could and opened her eyes wide.

“Did he die? Is he alive?” asked Dushitsa.

“He’s alive! He’s in the hospital... Why do you always have to think of the worst?” said Vera.

“Don’t lie to me?” yelled Dushitsa with a very weak voice.

“I swear on our mother’s life I’m not lying to you. If you don’t believe me you can ask our uncle. He gave us the news last night. Late last night. You were asleep. I didn’t want to wake you up,” replied Vera.

“Go to him, go to him immediately. See how he is. Make sure you see him with your own eyes and come back and tell me,” whispered Dushitsa like she had a bad fever.

“Our uncle said that we should wait for a while for his health to improve and then we can visit him,” replied Vera.

Vera embraced Dushitsa and tried to give her support.

“No, that’s what the doctors always say. I won’t be able to wait. Go right now straight from here! I don’t want you to say anything... Just go!” said Dushitsa.

Vera stroked her hair and promised she’d go. She then helped Dushitsa lie back down again and went to the door. Vera heard her sister whisper something.

Dushitsa said, “Tell him this time he needs to come to the hospital and take me home like I took him... I’ll be waiting for him... I’m not angry with him for leaving like that, without saying goodbye...”

Dushitsa almost lost her voice completely. Vera turned around and went back to her bed. Dushitsa seemed to have fallen asleep... With this little hope that she had given her she figured she would regain a bit of her strength so that she could endure a bit longer, but didn’t know how long that would be. Soon Vera ran out of the hospital and was suffocating from a strong cry.

\* \* \*

Vera was the first to arrive at the cemetery. It was a well-arranged beautiful cemetery. If anything at all could be so beautiful in this joyful end of the huge city, it was this cemetery. People began to arrive one by one...

Vera slowly approached Dushitsa's grave. She felt the same painful cramp in her chest as she had during the funeral when Dushitsa was buried. As if three years hadn't passed since then. Vera had made an agreement with her brother to come here and decorate the grave with flowers. Dushitsa had no one else, not a husband or children.

When Vera came close to the path she saw a shadow appear behind the branches of a leafy tree. She thought she'd made a mistake and had taken the wrong path... A tall monument of a woman made of white marble just appeared in front of her. She was wearing a white wedding gown, with a wedding wreath on her head... It appeared a bride had died and was buried next to Dushitsa... And while she was thinking about that she slowly approached her sister's grave and read what was written on the statue "She was killed by the evil in human hearts"! On the image of a human-sized tombstone, she instantly recognized the face and figure of her sister. I was Dushitsa! Dushitsa as if she was alive, with a hidden smile in her eyes, in her face. A smile through tears... Vera collapsed on her sister's grave. She then hugged her sister made of marble and yelled out loud:

...No one but Milan would have done this. Why now...? Why Milan...? It's late... It's too late... And in that loud cry she heard footsteps moving away quickly... She saw him... He was bent over ... Bent... Inhuman... She felt sorry for him... She wanted to call him... Something resisted in her... She was left with her mouth wide open, but no voice would come out. She was mute...

Shortly afterwards she heard her brother's footsteps. She wanted to go and meet him away from the grave... To spare him the shock that she had experienced... But she didn't have the strength. She couldn't find the words. She heard him suddenly stop. Not far from her. Just a few steps. He seemed to have realized what was going on. Surely

he must have seen her huddled under the monument. She watched him stand there like he wasn't there, like his mind was somewhere else, looking surprised. He approached slowly, very slowly. A strong rage was developing in his eyes and painful spasms on his face. At first, Vera thought he wouldn't go to the monument. He stayed where he had stopped for such a long time.

“Who did he ask...? Who gave him consent? He mustn't come here to her grave... let alone... He wants to free his conscience...” yelled Rade.

His anger suffocated him. Vera didn't say anything. What could she say? It would only make him angrier.

They left the flowers next to the white roses, which of course he had brought...

They said nothing in the car. All the way home. Vera didn't even dare to cry although everything inside her, in her soul, was crying.

They came home. Vera hesitated to tell her mother about the monument. Better not tell her now. Besides, Stefka had never gone alone to the cemetery. Unfortunately her mother sensed that something was wrong from the moment they entered the door... Especially when she looked at her son.

“Were there many people at the cemetery?” asked Stefka.

“Very few... Hardly anyone,” replied Vera slowly.

“I was thinking maybe we should have a gathering to remember her... We should invite people... We will serve them something... I didn't have the strength to go with you today... I keep lying to myself that she isn't there... That it's all in vain...” said Stefka.

Vera knew that her mother wanted to ask her something else... She knew by the look on her face what it was... Was he, was Milan there, or had he at least brought flowers. But she said nothing. Maybe there was a wish in that unspoken question - he, although Dushitsa wasn't alive, still didn't want to forget her. He still loved her... They

had heard that he had been released from the hospital and that he was working in the same store where he had worked before. Vera knew her mother didn't hate Milan. She felt sorry for him.

Stefka spoke the least about everything that had happened between Dushitsa and Milan. She always felt, and often said, that other people were to blame... The bad times were also to blame.

Because of that Vera was pretty sure Stefka would be happy with the monument. She wouldn't think that Milan shouldn't have done it. The poor man, how did he even raise that kind of money? Vera wondered. Maybe one of his fellow sculptors did it for free, feeling sorry for him... Or, it was done for him by one of his associates...

Stefka, with all her motherly burdens and pain, at no time wanted to blame the man who, due to a combination of circumstances beyond his control, had separated himself from her daughter.

...Who here was willing to go so deep into the unfortunate events in the country a few years ago? How could she understand whose fault this was? Who was the person responsible for sending Milan to prison in those fateful moments in his life and in Dushitsa's life...? Why did this have to happen to innocent people because of the quarrels between the highest leaders of our state and other socialist states? He was sent to prison just because he didn't seem to think the same way the Party leadership thought? This is how Stefka explained things to herself simply, in order to make it easier for her to cope.

While Vera was hesitant to tell her mother about the monument, Rade left the room and rudely said:

“The untried son-in-law even made a monument of your daughter! The likes of which isn't found in the entire cemetery! He made her happy in life, so now he's continuing to make her happy in the other world as well! He never told or asked anyone if he could do this!”

Stefka stood there in shock. At first she thought something was wrong with Rade. Vera realized that Stefka didn't know whether to believe him or not so she said:

“We were truly surprised... We felt strange about it! The monument is beautiful, but that’s how things are...”

“What are you talking about...? How could he do that? He has no money and his health is impaired... how did he raise the money...? The poor man...” whispered Stefka.

“The poor man! You still feel sorry for him? What about your poor daughter who is lying in the ground?” yelled Rade.

“Do you think this is good for him? May those who did this to him and your sister should be damned...” Vera yelled back.

All three went silent for a long time. Stefka decided to speak first.

“Son, if Milan did this in her memory he didn’t do it with bad intentions. He did it out of sadness. You, of all people, know how much they loved each other, said Stefka and began to cry loudly.

“Okay Vera, make some coffee,” said Rade to change the subject and ease his accusations.

After they had their coffee they dispersed.

If there was someone to take her, Stefka would have immediately gone to the cemetery to see the monument. But she didn’t tell her children that.

\* \* \*

Just days later, someone found Stefka dead, with her arms wrapped around her daughter’s marble body. Maybe it was Milan because people said they often saw him around Dushitsa’s grave... with white roses in his hands.

The End

Note: The following was added by Risto Stefov;

## **About the Inform Bureau Resolution**

By Dr. Michael Seraphinoff,  
March, 2017

[https://jsis.washington.edu/ellisoncenter/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2017/05/Seraphinoff\\_Michael\\_Documentation-of-Human-Rights-Violations.pdf](https://jsis.washington.edu/ellisoncenter/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2017/05/Seraphinoff_Michael_Documentation-of-Human-Rights-Violations.pdf)

Abstract:

After the break with the Soviet Union in 1949 the Yugoslav communist regime took special measures against its own party members who had questioned the new party line.

Tens of thousands of suspected supporters of the Cominform, in the dispute with the Soviet Bloc, were arrested and imprisoned. They were sentenced to years of imprisonment based on mostly hearsay evidence and without public or even secret trials where they might defend themselves against their accusers.

Prisoners were often subjected to cruel and unusual punishment and thousands are reported to have died. The state exercised arbitrary authority and used terror and intimidation in its struggle with political opponents.

This entire period of repressive measures was a taboo subject in communist Yugoslavia for half a century, and the repression of many of these prisoners continued long after their confinement through secret government surveillance and acts of intimidation.

With the break up of Yugoslavia secret police files became available to the former prisoners, and by the late 1980's and early 1990's a number of them had published accounts of their arrests and imprisonment. However, by that time the horrors of the new wars over the break up of Yugoslavia overshadowed these more historical accounts of state violence against the citizens of the former Yugoslavia.

Dr. Toma Batev, a former prisoner in the most notorious prison camp, the island camp of Goli Otok, wrote in the introduction to his 2006 book *Mislata i dushata vo obrach*: “Storm clouds had gathered over Yugoslavia back then [1949]. The state’s top officials took drastic measures against the political line of the InformBiro. A dictatorial approach was used to purge the Communist Party.

In those confused times the security apparatus of the party used various means to persecute those members of the party who, on the flimsiest of evidence, were deemed disloyal. Those who hesitated in the least in support of the sudden and confusing political policy changes were declared traitors, enemies of the people and the fatherland.

“In that abnormal time the state took extreme measures. Fear and confusion swept through the ranks of the party. There was widespread mistrust among the members. It was these terrible circumstances that led to so many being locked up in torture camps like Goli Otok, in the guise of socially useful labour camps.”

If you’re interested in reading the rest of Dr. Seraphinoff’s article please click to go to this link:

[https://jsis.washington.edu/ellisoncenter/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2017/05/Seraphinoff\\_Michael\\_Documentation-of-Human-Rights-Violations.pdf](https://jsis.washington.edu/ellisoncenter/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2017/05/Seraphinoff_Michael_Documentation-of-Human-Rights-Violations.pdf)