

Death in Solun



A Novel

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**(Translated from Macedonian to English and edited by
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PART I

1.

“The war is over, you should be happy now Evangelia Gasparova”, said Pondilaki cheerfully to the woman sitting across from him, wiping her tearful eyes with a colourful handkerchief.

“The war may be over for you Pondilaki but it not over for the rest of the world; especially for the unlucky... they killed Stavre Nakovski... They murdered many of them... those caring for us... Who will care for us now? The guards chased me away at the Edi Kule Prison gate, even though my eyes were sunk in tears... I lost my parents in the war and now... I am all alone and what do you suggest I do? Forget my parents and Stavre Nakovski and fall in love with someone else and have a family with them?”

Pondilaki tightened his loose jaws, focused his expressionless pale green eyes in the distance, gently tapped Evangelia Gasparova’s hair and, without attempting to comfort her, escorted her to the exit door of the café “Macedonia”. Evangelia Gasparova was silent and kept wiping her tearful eyes with her colourful handkerchief.

“Life is terrible Evangelia Gasparova. Toss that black head kerchief and black dress! If you need to fight then fight the wind. Call me and together we will start a new war... Don’t cry, tears are a bad sign, that’s what my mother used to say... Go home, I will come and see you later and we will finish our conversation... we will draw Stavre Nakovski out of prison, I don’t think they have killed him...” said Pondilaki and gently pushed her away towards her home.

Evangelia Gasparova pushed her hair inside her head kerchief and remained silent. Her eyes were swollen, her face was red and she looked worried and scared.

“See you later!” she said quietly and walked down the street.

Pondilaki returned to the café. He showed signs of concern on his smooth face. He sat at the table with four men dressed in dark brown, worsted suits. They all looked alike, like Siamese twins. They silently and respectfully allowed Pondilaki to join their

company. The owner of the café brought him a shot of rakia. Pondilaki took the glass, toasted the four men and drank it down in one gulp. He then got up from the table and put his hat on.

“I will see you later,” he said to the four and left the bar. He wandered around the city for two hours. He was tired when he returned to the café. He went close to the table where a large group of dock workers had gathered and were conversing noisily. It was not his kind of conversation so he did not engage them. The bar owner brought him a shot of rakia. Pondilaki toasted the dock workers and took a sip.

“You are wracking your brains for nothing. The politicians are unable to agree among themselves, that is why they transfer their intrigues to the streets. Don’t get mixed up in their dirty ways! Have some patience! Everything will come into place...” said Pondilaki lazily and sighed deeply, took the last sip of rakia and put the empty shot glass on the table.

“Their quarrels and intrigues cause uncertainty among the people. We are not a flock of sheep you know, where anyone can lead us where they want. We know what democracy is...” snapped back a rebellious younger boy who sat across from him.

Pondilaki looked inquisitively at the boy. He began to caress the shot glass with his finger. He looked nervous but had no desire to complement what the young man had said. He looked at the faces of the others sitting around the table. They all were expecting him to say something.

2.

The owner of the café “Macedonia” is a young man named Foti Steriov. People are saying that he is not so smart. He brought another shot of rakia and gave it to Pondilaki.

“This is a café people, not a meeting hall. If you want to discuss politics go find another place. I don’t want the police coming around. The times are not good for poor people... You will go, you will leave this place but others will come...”

“What are you afraid of Foti? We are in this bar every day,” said the young man who had spoken earlier and hit his fist on the table while his face blushed. He then stood up and yelled: “I am not afraid of anyone. And in the end, screw them all...” He was even redder in the face. “You all cower like rats in fear,” he then added.

Foti Steriov scratched his head. He was feeling uncomfortable. He wanted to get back behind his counter to avoid the dialogue with the boy. Outside of the dock workers there were no other guests in the café. The dock workers were all silent waiting for Foti to reply.

“I am not a coward, young man. When I was your age I said what I felt like and expressed my opinions just like you. Now I have commitments. Ever since the day this city fell into Greek hands and since then our rights as Macedonians are dependent on the Greeks, I have not slept a single night in peace. The Royalists and nationalists are our loudest opponents here... I fear for my café... I fear they will demolish it like they demolished Manoli Strezovski’s shop last week... They burned down his shop just because he said that Macedonia should be free. Now Manoli curses the day he opened his mouth and vomits at the idea of getting involved in politics... The same could happen to me...” said Foti and turned away heading for the counter.

“Don’t be afraid, Foti. All that you lose because of us will be compensated from our own pockets,” replied the boy, laughing out loud. He then sat down on his chair.

“Foti Steriov has his own pockets boy, just remember that. Also try and be decent,” replied Foti.

The boy blushed and was flowing with anger. He stood up and said: “Fuck you... You are the biggest coward in Solun!”

Foti Steriov felt offended. He had no desire to return to his counter. He looked at the boy’s face and said: “Watch what you say young man!”

The boy laughed a bizarre laugh. Saliva was flowing out of his mouth.

“Watch what you say young man!” said Foti Steriov angrily.

The boy continued to laugh, ignoring Foti.

Foti Steriov became very angry. The veins on his neck and forehead began to swell. He firmly grabbed the boy by the collar and raised him off his feet. The boy tried to escape, but when he couldn't he spit on Foti's face. Foti lowered his slim body and struck the boy's face with his head. He then let him fall to the floor. The boy dropped on the wooden floor and lay still. Foti wiped his forehead with his palm and looked at the dock workers. He noticed hostility in their eyes. He looked down at the boy and again at the dock workers.

“Forgive me,” he said quietly. “We have been friends for a long time and I did not mean to offend anyone. Splash some water on his face and take him out of my café,” Foti said to the others and went behind the counter. He washed his hands and then went into the kitchen. He stayed there a while. When he returned the dock workers were gone. Foti coughed. He lit the lamps in the bar and stood behind the counter.

“What a flea-bitten moron,” he mumbled to himself, “Foti Steriov is the boss here and he must be respected.”

3.

Foti stood behind the counter for two hours. He thought of the incident with the boy. He didn't blame himself for what happened. New customers came into his café. He served them rakia and again went behind the counter. A tall young man with a scar on his face entered the café. He wore black clothes. He had a silver chain around his neck on which hung some sort of a medallion. The boy walked up to the counter and leaned on his elbows.

“Ouzo,” he said lazily to Foti and made a face.

Foti Steriov coughed and grabbed the bottle of ouzo. He poured the liquid into a shot glass and slid it down the counter. The boy grabbed the glass with two fingers, raised it high and said:

“To your health, Slavo-Macedonian!” and took a few sips. He then said: “Again you’re wrong,” and cynically added, “I told you to chase the dock workers away from your café.”

Foti Steriov kept quiet.

“You didn’t reply to my toast...” the young man challenged Foti.

“My health has not improved since you entered my café... However, I thank you...” replied Foti.

The boy laughed loudly. Several guests turned to see what was happening at the counter.

“I will burn down your shop. You’re not the real boss here. You are but a common communist dog; or better known as communist rubbish,” said the young man.

Foti’s heart began to beat faster. Five unshaven boys appeared at the café’s door and cheerfully greeted the boy who was standing at the counter threatening Foti.

“Hello, Hash”, said the first boy. “Pour him some ouzo!” said Hash to Foti with a commanding tone of voice.

“A shot for all of us,” said another boy in a loud voice. All the boys stood at the counter leaning on their elbows.

Foti Steriov took four shot glasses from under the counter and put them on the counter. He then filled them with rakia and put the bottle back on the shelf.

“Leave the bottle here! We will pour our own drinks,” said Hash sternly. “And then we will burn your café down to the ground,” he threatened again.

Foti Steriov gave them no sign to show that he was concerned. He left the bottle on the counter and went into the kitchen.

4.

The café was filling with customers. People sat down and demanded to be served. Foti Steriov came out of the kitchen. He received the orders and began to fill the shot glasses with rakia. Once in a while he looked over at Hash and his friends. He thought about their threats and ways to avoid them. Hash and his friends finished the bottle. Hash looked at Foti and said:

“Your café will burn!” Moments later, quietly, all five left.

Foti Steriov nervously began to pace around the café. His eyes were blurred and he almost collided with Pondilaki.

“Are you concerned because of Philip?” asked Pondilaki.

Foti Steriov did not reply. He offered Pondilaki a table and he sat on one of the chairs himself.

“The Royalists will burn down my café,” he complained.

Pondilaki smiled.

“Bring some rakia over so we can have a drink!” said Pondilaki.

Foti reluctantly got up from his chair, went to the bar, took out two shot glasses, picked up a bottle of rakia, again sat on the same chair, poured rakia into the glasses and handed Pondilaki one.

“Help me get rid of the Royalists,” said Foti looking concerned.

“Don’t worry!” replied Pondilaki.

“They are not kidding. They will set fire to my café, man, I need your help!” said Foti.

“Do not worry!” repeated Pondilaki, gulped down his rakia and said: “I have to go now.” He then got up and walked out of the café. Foti remained at the table for a few moments holding his head in his hands.

“Give me two Ouzos!” yelled a man wearing a hat sitting at the table beside the window, “And hurry up!”

Foti lazily got up from his chair, picked up a bottle and two glasses and walked over to the man with the hat. He poured the ouzo into one shot glass, then into the other and walked back behind the counter.

5.

Foti Steriov closed his café earlier that evening. He left for home concerned. He did not undress and lay in his bed with all his clothes on. He waited until dawn awake. In the morning his eyes were swollen.

“Hash burned down Manoli’s shop. He will burn down my café,” he thought and decided to seek help from Urania Papaioannou, who had a brothel on Odos Irinis Street. Foti got out of bed angry and left his apartment. About a half hour later he found himself in one of the rooms on the ground floor. To the left was the hallway leading to the upper floor; to the rooms where Urania Papaioannou led customers to the iron beds where the girls were. The beds were covered with silk sheets. There he came across Urania sitting on a sofa.

“Come on in, I haven’t seen you for a long time,” said Urania with a smile.

Foti Steriov became confused. There, in front of him, stood a lavish beauty in her thirties with braided hair. She shyly walked into the room.

“Don’t be shy!” said Urania gently and tapped Fote’s lips with the thin finger of her right hand. Then, with her long fingernail, she placed some rose-coloured lipstick on her upper lip. She shivered and shook like a leaf in the forest during a strong wind. She had been asking Foti to come over for a long time. Now he had arrived uninvited. Many times she had asked him to come over but he wouldn’t. She thought he was here purely for motives of love. It never occurred to her that he may be there for other reasons and his refusal to go to bed with her was not because of his laziness.

“You’re mine now!” Urania Papaioannou thought to herself and with her widely open dress showed him her brilliance. She smiled at him appealingly.

Even though this was not Foti Steriov’s first encounter with Urania, what he saw took his breath away. He began to pace back and forth in the room, showing all the excitement that overcame him from having seen her thin translucent dress, her wholesome breasts with large nipples that seemed to want to break through the crimson translucent dress that glowed in the dim light and spread the aroma of chestnut. Foti tried hard to hide his emotions, brought on by the storm that sought to bring him under the silk covers on the iron bed and thought he might lose his head over it. He remembered meeting Urania several years ago. When he came to her place he took an advance of twenty drachmas but after sleeping with her he returned a few more times. It was not to saturate his passion but only to satisfy his occasional desire. He never paid her for her services. During the last three times he reimbursed her the twenty drachmas and gave her an extra ten. She did not want any money from him because only Foti could satisfy her restless and hungry soul that knew no cuddling and tenderness, love and dignity, and worked just for interest. Foti now stood in front of her and trembled. Urania looked at him, her eyes stroking him like he was a lamb. She was worried she might anger him and he would leave. She slowly lifted herself out of the bed and gently went towards him. She glued herself against his body and gently pushed his mouth shut with her long thin fingers and felt him flinch. His entire body became aroused as he was mustering his spirit to enter her spoiled soul.

“Help me, Urania! They want to destroy me...” he blurted out.

Urania Papaioannou laughed gently and parted his hair with her fingers.

“I will help because only you can hold me in the ghetto of the immoral,” she replied in a gentle but muffled whisper full of passion.

Foti Steriov sighed contentedly and relieved the tension in his tame and rather sleepy eyes.

“Thank you!” he mumbled slowly. He then gently lay down on the bed, covering his devilish body and his manhood.

“You are the only man that can satisfy my soul. I will help you,” she whispered in his ear and let out a breath of satisfaction.

They lay in bed for a long time. Someone’s strong hand knocked three times on the door, above which hung a red lantern. For a moment the door sounded like it was opening but did not open. Whoever was out there knocked several times, each time harder than the previous one. The two inside the room continued to hug each other, forgetting that outside the red lantern was cradled in the quiet breeze.

II

1.

Foti Steriov was standing behind his counter rubbing his hands with satisfaction. Urania Papaioannou had arrived at his café wearing a black satin dress long enough to barely cover her long, round tapered legs at the knees. Her rounded behind attracted the eyes of every customer in the café. She began to flirt with them twisting her body and highlighting her breasts under her dress, which demanded to be stopped by her bra or otherwise they would fly out into the hands of the male customers hungry for a female. Urania sat on one of the many high chairs, arranged herself beside the counter and kept winking flirtatiously at Foti. Then she turned toward the customers and sent a few of them compassionate looks and a gentle smile.

“Tonight we will have a lot of customers,” she said to Foti. “Be prepared to welcome them with a smile.”

Foti Steriov nodded affirmatively. Everything was possible. He was pleased by the presence of the woman he now desired with all his manhood.

2.

A number of half-dressed girls came inside the café. They were well-groomed and had nice and smooth hair with stitches on their long black silk stockings, filled with light and dark spots. They were buttoned to red bands that hung from their white -laced panties. Their chests were nearly bare with see through tops showing the redness of their nipples poking out from under the broadly rounded flimsy braziers. Their dresses made them very attractive to the customers who immediately shifted their eyes to them. The girls were all young. Each had a pipette in her mouth about ten centimetres long and they constantly smiled. They sat on chairs beside the counter and displayed they bare legs. On their bare thighs they wore a red rose pinned with thin pin to the red bands, which caused even more customers to turn their heads and stare at the girls. One of the girls got up, went to the table beside the window and joined the three middle-aged men sitting there. Urania Papaioannou smiled, looked sternly at the other girls, and took a sip of her rakia.

Foti Steriov was not idle. He constantly went in and out of the kitchen. A moment later he went behind the counter with two bottles of ouzo. He put them on the first shelf and then stared at them. The shelf was full of liquor.

“Hello Urania!” she heard someone say and turned around.

“How are you Foti?” the same man asked in a perfect tone of voice.

“I am fine, thank you for asking.” replied Foti and smiled. “How is your work going?” he then asked.

The man was dark-skinned and tall. His eyes were red from lack of sleep.

“I lost everything gambling,” the man said. “Now I can get drunk and jump into the sea!” he added and laughed.

“That’s impossible. You Turks are a very unusual people. I don’t believe you...” said Foti.

“What is there to believe? I lost everything... it shouldn’t surprise you,” added the man. “The only thing that remains for you to do

now is to admit your loss with dignity...” weighed in Urania Papaioannou and smiled at the man. “Have a drink Dzhemail, on the house,” said Foti. Urania offered him a chair.

Dzhemail smiled and sat down. Foti poured him a large glass of rakia.

“Cheers!” said Dzhemail.

“To your health!” returned Urania. “What will you do now?” she asked.

Dzhemail did not respond immediately. After sitting there silently he placed the glass in his other hand, smiled and said:

“I will go to Istanbul.”

“To do what? Seek your fortune?” Urania asked curiously.

“I have no other options. I must!” replied Dzhemail and sighed deeply. “I want to sell my apartment, maybe you can help me?”

Urania Papaioannou thought about it for a moment and then signaled Foti to come over. Foti came over and leaned on the counter.

“How much are you asking for your apartment?” she asked Dzhemail.

“Very little, as much as it will take me to travel to Istanbul,” he replied and took another long sigh.

“Agreed!” said Urania Papaioannou and smiled. “Pour him another brandy,” she ordered Foti and invited Dzhemail to sit at one of the empty tables in the bar.

“I don’t understand what you mean by ‘agreed’?...” asked Dzhemail in a loud voice and stood up.

Urania Papaioannou grabbed him under his arm and led him to an empty table in the corner of the bar. They sat down. Foti Steriov brought them two glasses half-filled with brandy.

“I said I will buy your apartment...” she said and raised a glass to toast.

“Seriously!?” he asked.

“I am serious,” said Urania and they both downed the brandy, at the same time.

“I will send you one my girls. Have fun and drink to unconsciousness. Everything is on the house for you today,” she said, threw him a gentle smile and then got up and went back to sit beside the counter.

“Aphrodite, the guest at the table in the corner is alone,” Urania said to the girl who sat next to her. She then poured herself some brandy into the glass from which she had been drinking a while ago. She took a sip and turned around to see if Aphrodite had done what she was asked to do. Urania smiled. Aphrodite was sitting next to Dzhemail caressing his forehead.

“Are you going to buy the apartment from Dzhemail?” asked Foti.

“Why not? His apartment is located right above us. We will turn it into lodging rooms and get a lot more money for it. We will be rich, Foti...” she said and smiled gently.

“There is no one in the city smarter than you, Urania. I am happy to have you as a partner,” said Foti and disappeared into the kitchen. Urania sat there a few more minutes and slowly, unnoticed by the customers, followed him.

III

1.

Foti Steriov got up somewhat earlier than usual this day and started working on the joke of the day, designed for every kind of customer.

He stood in front of his large mirror with a shallow walnut frame carved with embroidered flowers by an unknown wood carver and practiced. He only stopped when he was sure that he had captured the essence of the joke by reading the expression on his imaginary guest touching his hat, or simply raising his right hand at the height of his forehead as a sign of greeting. Sometimes he practiced for several days until the joke was perfectly expressed and his audience was fully satisfied. He then went down to the café. He smiled at the first customers who arrived at his door, showing them his white teeth. He then made a mental note of who sat where at the tables. There were four of Pondilaki's dock workers sitting at one table, not older than thirty, dressed in uniforms. He was seeing them for the first time and didn't know to which flag they belonged. He thought perhaps the government had issued new uniforms to its soldiers. It was not safe, however, to make assumptions so he returned to his room.

"There are some strange people in the bar," he said quietly in an agitated tone of voice.

Urania Papaioannou got out of bed startled.

"What strange people, man? What is happening?"

"Go downstairs Urania and have a look for yourself," he said sounding even more alarmed.

Urania got dressed quickly and went out of the bedroom. She then went downstairs to the café in her usual graceful way. She noticed the people in uniform sitting in the corner. She smiled at them.

"What are you, cross-eyed? They are English soldiers, or more specifically, officers of the Kingdom of England," she said to Foti who was walking beside her. Foti did not respond.

"Their pockets are full of money. Officers are the greatest enemy of money. They spend mercilessly, especially on pretty girls," said Urania, threw an artificial smile at Foti and then went to see the officers.

“Good morning, gentlemen! You have honoured us with your presence,” she said kindly and deployed a slight smile on her lips. “It would be an honour for me if you allow me to join you,” she added.

Like they were given a signal, all the officers stood up and offered her a chair bumping into one another in the process and causing excitement. Urania calmly sat down and gave them a seductive smile. Excited they all sat back in their original chairs. Their passion and desires for the pretty woman were on fire. They were excited deep down in their souls. They all wanted to touch her big round breasts, whose large and elongated nipples could be seen poking through the thin satin, dark green dress.

Peter MacDonald sat beside her and enthusiastically kept looking at her curved leg, which ended in her wide hip and protruded through the slit in her dress.

Urania Papaioannou began to laugh. She then looked at Foti and said:

“Bring some drinks for the officers...”

Foti acknowledged her by bowing slightly, went over to the bar and brought a bottle of brandy with five deep glasses.

“Please, gentlemen,” he said with a smile and put the glasses and bottle on the table and then went back behind the bar. He looked in the mirror, neatly plastered his slick black hair with olive oil, parted it above his left ear with a comb and opened his eyes wide, looking at himself and admiring what he had done.

“The Englishmen are sitting at the Democrat table. Lord, what do I do? They just arrived. They will get angry and will do something bad. Pondilaki is strict and strong. He saved my café from destruction...” Foti thought and turned red in the face. “What will happen when the Democrats arrive? They are all called dock workers here in Solun,” He looked at Urania and unnoticeably gave her a sign to momentarily come to the end of the counter. “It would

be good to move the English to another table,” he thought.

Peter MacDonald was a lieutenant in rank. He had blue eyes from which projected flashes of tenderness. He had dirty blond hair that looked like an unmown, ripe grain field roasted by the scorching sun. His hair partly covered his large light brown eyebrows and partly blocked his view. He had a straight nose, thin lips and a small mole on his face.

“You speak excellent Greek, Mr. MacDonald.” said Foti and showed everyone his white teeth.

“You are very observant,” replied Peter and smiled slightly. “I belong to the British intervention units. I spent a long time on these grounds and learned...”

“Good man...” remarked Urania through her seductive smile.

“Let us drink to your health, my beautiful Urania,” said MacDonald and lifted his glass high. “To your health and may you all live a hundred years!” said Urania.

“To your health and may you always be beautiful,” added the other three officers.

“To your health, gentlemen,” said Urania and clinked her glass against theirs.

2.

Urania laughed out loudly. Peter MacDonald touched her chest. Foti Steriov opened his eyes wide. The door of the café flung open and Pondilaki appeared. He was accompanied by five dock workers. They were heading straight for the bar. They approached Foti.

“Do not act timidly. Pull yourself together and be careful not to repeat the same picture. I will break your head,” Pondilaki said sternly. “Now prepare two tables and join them together with the table the Englishmen are sitting at.”

Foti Steriov could not pull himself together because he was afraid. He hastily prepared two tables and joined them together as requested.

“The same picture will not be repeated,” said Foti to Pondilaki, with a trembling tone of voice. He blamed himself but at the same time he wanted to go to the Englishmen and tell them that the table they were sitting at was reserved for other people, who were now there and lived in the boarding house. However, he did not do that. He did not have the courage. He brought the dock workers a bottle of ouzo and went back behind the counter.

3.

Two hours later, Hash entered the café. Fear overpowered Foti Steriov. Hash looked around taking in the ambience of the café. He smiled sarcastically. He then noticed Urania sitting with the Englishmen. He headed straight for the bar.

4.

Urania also saw Hash. She became suspicious of his sarcastic smile. She could not decipher the look on his good-looking face spoiled, by his crooked nose and wild look. She was afraid he would cause an incident, especially when he started hitting the counter hard. Hash frantically hit the bar counter with his bear paw, overgrown with hair and blemished with scars. Urania smiled at the Englishmen, rose from her chair, went over to Hash and touched his broad shoulders with her gentle hand. Hash turned around.

“Please be a bit more quiet...” she asked him kindly.

“Hash always respects beautiful women...” he replied. “Don’t worry, Urania.”

“I know you are a clever young man, so please you are welcome to sit with my friends,” she said in a gentle tone of voice and pulled him by the hand. She escorted him to one of the tables beside the window and pulled up a chair for him to sit on. Hash placed himself in the chair and signaled his friends to sit on the other chairs.

“I am sorry to leave you,” said Urania. “But I have guests with deep pockets,” and then returned to the table where the Englishmen sat.

5.

Foti Steriov took a deep breath. His heart was beating rapidly. He downed a shot of rakia to calm his soul.

6.

Leaning on the counter beside Foti was Stoios Panagopoulos. He was a cook in the café. He had always smiled before Urania appeared in the café. Now he hardly ever smiled. He was definitely afraid of her.

Hash came over and, without talking to Foti, said authoritatively:

“Bring six bowls of fish soup to my table,” and then left.

Stoios Panagopoulos laughed which enraged Foti Steriov even more, but neither moved from the counter. Urania rose from her table, kind of smiled at the Englishmen, went around a few tables, came over to the counter and said:

“Didn’t you hear what Hash asked you to do? Do it now! Serve him immediately!” she growled at them.

Stoios Panagopoulos looked petrified. Foti pushed his face closer to Urania’s and said:

“Serve him yourself!” and then turned away.

Urania lowered her big dark eyebrows and smiled at him gently. Foti stretched his lips and gave her a pretend smile. Urania pulled away from him and left without saying a word.

“Mr. Pampas Mavropoulos, what an honour it is to see you here,” she said in a mellow tone of voice. Then, without taking her gaze from his eyes, she nodded to his companions.

Pampas, who represented himself as the chief of police for the city, immediately removed his small brimmed hat, parted his wrinkled

chubby cheeks that hung under his yellowed eyes to give her a courtesy smile, accepted her hand, brought it close to his big lips and kissed it. Urania giggled flirtatiously. She welcomed him with a smile, took his hand and led him through the café to the best table in the house where the most important customers sat. Many people thought that he was some sort of great beast from the government, but no one knew for certain what he did. There was always a bottle of red wine placed on the table along with a bunch of sword lilies poking out of a dark clay vase. The table always had a “reserved” sign on it which was never taken down.

With a smile on her face, especially put on for Pampas, Urania escorted him to the special table like he was an expected guest for the night. She sat beside him almost paying no attention to his companions. She even let him caresses the smooth white skin on her arm. She then looked towards the bar and, with her hand, gestured at Foti to come over. Foti Steriov ran over, almost tiptoeing.

“Bring two English cognacs,” she said. “It is rare for us to be entertaining important guests such as these in our house,” she said looking at Pampas. “Cognac for Mr. Pampas and his guests,” she ordered.

Foti Steriov nodded his head and went back to the counter. He poured the English cognac into several glasses and placed them on a tray. He then turned to Stoios and said:

“Make the fish soup because we both will suffer. As you can see these people are crazy,” and gently tapped him on the back. He then picked up the tray and left. After he served Pampas and his guests, he came back to the counter. There he saw Stoios stirring a large pot and doing what he was asked to do. Foti seemed satisfied. The café was full of customers and they all drank excessively. He leaned on the counter and smiled to himself. Late at night after all the customers had left, he and Urania felt very tired. They climbed up the stairs to their flat and collapsed on their bed.

“Are you tired?” asked Urania.

“My legs can’t hold me up and my soul is already asleep,” declared Foti.

“Today we had a profitable day. We earned a lot. Let this be a new beginning...” said Urania and fell asleep.

IV

1.

The wedding. Urania Papaioannou and Foti Steriov stood before the old priest Iraklo in the Sveta Katerina (St. Catherine) Church. Foti and Urania did not look happy. They took an oath of eternal fideleity over the dark brown book that Iraklo held in his right hand and kissed, at Pampas’s insistence, and then they returned to their boarding house. Inside there was music and tables full of food and drinks.

“This is the richest wedding I have ever attended,” said Pampas to the man who sat next to him. He then looked at the man and asked: “What is your name?”

“My name is Dustin Brown but all the guys in the boarding house call me the ‘Americano’...” he replied in a gentle tone of voice.

Pampas lifted his glass and said: “Cheers.”

“To your health, Sir,” replied the American who was wearing an American military uniform.

“Are you an officer, Mr. Brown?” asked Pampas.

“Yes I am Mr. Pampas, an officer of the US Army,” said the American proudly.

Pampas pulled his view from the American and began to stare at the young beautiful drunk girl who climbed onto the long table in the expanded part of the boarding house and began to dance and undress to the rhythm of the bouzouki. All eyes were fixed on her. Sofia Geleva displayed her white chest, round breasts and red nipples for

everyone to see, to uncontrollably swallow her beauty, and to crawl deeper into her network of lust.

“Don’t frown! It is a great thing. I have seen something similar in Paris. This kind of program should be introduced in a boarding house and have acts like this every night. The girl has talent...” said the American to Urania.

V

1.

Nikos Zaikopoulos was a fine young man. His legs unfortunately were curved and twisted inwards. There was a resolute but amiable look about him. Honesty sprang from his friendly blue eyes. He had come to Solun from Athens with no destination in mind and roamed around the city streets for a long time. Some time later he decided to give up walking and find an inn. His attention was caught by the boarding house “Macedonia”. He went inside. The smoke irritated his eyes. The place was hot and had a bad smell of tobacco and ouzo, which filled his lungs. He wanted to leave but decided to stay. He took a stroll through the café and then suddenly, in a surprised tone of voice, yelled out:

“What luck, Pondilaki! Hello, my good friend, I am so happy to see you.”

“Hello, Nikos. Come and give me a hug,” replied Pondilaki and got up from his chair and shook hands with the young man. “Sit and get acquainted with my friends...” said Pondilaki offering him a chair. Nikos was glad to see him.

Nikos Zaikopoulos sat on the chair. His eyes danced merrily and a smile overpowered his lips.

“I walked around the city for hours looking for you,” said Nikos.

“We haven’t seen each other for a long time, Nikos. How did you happen to find me exactly in this café?” asked Pondilaki.

“Quite by accident, by chance... I got tired of walking around the city, but I never thought I would find you in the first inn I walked into. Never!” explained Nikos.

Pondilaki laughed.

“Oh, I almost forgot. This is my friend Nikos Zaikopoulos,” Pondilaki said to the dock workers who were sitting with him at the same table. “He is one of us from Athens,” he added.

“I am glad to see you so cheerful. Things must be going okay for you here?” asked Nikos.

“We are doing somewhat okay but every day we have problems with the government. What do you think? Will the government give in a little and begin making this country a democracy?” asked Pondilaki.

Everyone was looking at Nikos. He started to become uncomfortable. He was not used to giving his opinion about anything. He finally spoke and said:

“I don’t believe so... I don’t believe anything...”

Manoli Strezovski poured Nikos a shot of rakia and handed it to him.

“Thank you!” he said softly and continued: “I have been hiding from the police for several days now...” he added.

“What did you do?” asked Pondilaki in a surprised tone of voice, moving his shot glass from one hand to the other spilling some rakia on the table. He did not notice that he had spilled his rakia. The others too looked upset and were looking sternly at Nikos Zaikopoulos.

“Don’t worry, you are among your own people here,” said Pondilaki.

Nikos Zaikopoulos looked inquisitively at the others sitting with him and, with Pondilaki at the table, noticed that he was being watched with friendly eyes.

“In that case I will tell you everything,” said Nikos sighing, drank his rakia, moistened his cracked lips with his thin long tongue and continued: “We fought a great battle, a bitter battle against the British troops that landed in our country. The government does not want the democrats. Athens is in chaos. The first person in government was brought here from London and appointed by the English to be their servant. They also want to bring the Greek king back and liquidate all those who oppose his return. And you all know that the king too is favoured by the English. We were crushed in the streets. We tried to hide behind the barricades while fighting to the death with the British troops. We used megaphones to tell the people that Mr. Papandreou’s new government, the so-called national government of salvation, with its program for national unity, is serving the English. He encourages the national feelings of the peoples living in the country that support him and promotes national hatred against those who don’t. His program contains nothing to resolve the “Macedonian Question” and he insists on robbing the Macedonian people, who shed so much blood in the four-year war, of their rights. We informed the people that, instead of creating a new country as promised, this government is resorting to turning the clock back to the time before the war. Every day this government praises the allies as patrons of the Greek people. And who are they protecting the Greek people from, themselves? This is treason pure and simple... A lot of blood was spilled in the streets of Athens. We fought like lions but, in order for the city residents not to suffer from the English bombs, we withdrew. About ten days ago we retreated from the barricades early in the morning and went outside of Athens...” said Nikos pausing and drinking some more rakia.

“We heard that a senior English statesman stayed in Athens,” said Pondilaki. “What was he doing there?” he asked.

“He was the one who caused the whole mess and turned our country into ashes. Mr. Papandreou withdrew from the leading position in the government but they kept making promises. I don’t understand

why the government of national unity has not responded to Mr. Churchill and what made Mr. Papandreou quit the government. You ask what the Englishman was doing there. Well, he wanted the country for himself, for London England... He can go to hell. Think of all the years we spent in the mountains. We all ran to find a place to be safe. The cities became the best places for us to hide... I was afraid of being hung by a rope or by an electrical cord. But here I am, alive and in your company. I believe I will be safe here, with you,” said Nikos smiling, taking another sip of rakia, putting down the shot glass and wiping his lips with his big hand.

Pondilaki was silent. He was engrossed in his own thoughts.

“What filth...” he thought, “my entire struggle is falling apart. I have no reason not to trust Nikos. Many things have passed me by and now I have to adjust to what will happen next... I have to take care of Stavre Nakovski first. I hope that he is still alive and I will be able to draw out whatever little is left of him. But how can I do it?” Pondilaki thought to himself and from the corner of his eye noticed the piece of paper marked “reserved” that permanently sat on the special table, which was exclusively reserved for a person with noble eyes, thick brown hair, long sideburns, a proper nose and dark lips. The same stranger for whom the table was always reserved, a man who Pondilaki did not know.

“Who is this man,” Pondilaki thought to himself. “Why is it so mysterious,” he wondered. “Will we again take our guns and run to the mountains?” he wondered.

Everyone was silent. Nikos Zaikopoulos finished drinking his rakia. Pondilaki was excited and it looked like flames were about to shoot out of his eyes.

“Let’s all go home,” suggested Pondilaki, “I feel we will all be sinking into silence...”

The dock workers shook their heads in agreement and got up from their chairs. Pondilaki got up next and Nikos after him. The dock workers then left the boarding house. Nikos stood at the door. Pondilaki did not turn his head to see Sofia Geleva’s naked body

dancing to the rhythm of the bouzouki. He only noticed Foti Steriov's surprised look when he saw Pondilaki leaving, wishing he would not go. Foti looked scared like some sort of flood was about to hit the place. Nikos came out of the café. The air was cold outside. The cobblestones were wet. Each step was sluggish. His legs felt heavier than lead. He was surrounded by dock workers who silently gathered around him. Nikos swung his hand widely and created much excitement. They all thought that something unexpected was about to happen. This was expressed in their eyes. Pondilaki, who was not paying attention to their anxiety, stopped walking.

He then turned to the dock workers and quietly said: "Let us return to the boarding house. I have a hunch that we will be needed there...", and went back to the "Macedonia" boarding house.

2.

They entered the café and sat at the table in silence. They did not look at each other fearing that they may upset themselves. They instead discreetly watched the slender naked bodies of the girls, who were dangling on the podium illuminated by a spot light.

3.

Their unexpected return to the café upset Urania Papaioannou.

4.

Five new people entered the café. They were dressed in long leather coats with raised collars and hats on their heads. They were holding guns in their hands and warning everyone in the café to keep calm. The naked girls stopped their performance on the podium. One of the five men turned on the lights and the café brightened completely. Now everyone's faces could clearly be seen, even those of the people in the long coats. People began to obediently raise their hands up in the air, even though no one asked them to do so. It was as if the strong light brought great fear into their bones.

Foti Steriov stood behind the counter. His face looked pale. He too had raised his long, thin hairy arms up high in the air and waited to see what would happen next. From time to time he looked for Pondilaki. He noticed how the dock workers calmly followed the

movements of men with guns and they occasionally smiled at them. He saw Manoli Strezovski lower one of his arms and place his hand in his pocket while winking at him.

The men with the guns looked wildly into the faces of the others. Dustin Brown, the so-called “Americano”, sat quietly in his chair looking confused. Urania Papaioannou got up from her chair, approached the wild-eyed gunmen who were threatening her customers with their guns, and proudly and angrily said:

“What’s this all about, gentlemen?”

At the same time Urania Papaioannou instantly regretted not having used her perfect smile and charm. One of the gunmen pushed her aside and she fell into the arms of Peter MacDonald and knocked him in the face. Without apologizing to the Englishman, whose nose she had broken and from which blood was gushing, she got up again and approached the gunmen.

“Soon you will pay for this comedy!” she said with a quiet but menacing tone of voice. “I will report you to the police!” she added.

A gunman with a scar on his forehead grabbed her by the arm and pushed her. Urania barely avoided hitting her head on the counter. She fell on the floor and landed on all fours like a cat. The same gunman went near her and pointed his gun at her head.

“We are the bloody police,” he said. “If you have any complaints against my people you complain to me!” he added. He then laughed rudely and left her alone. He then went to the table where Pondilaki and the dock workers sat. With an easy step he approached Pondilaki. He gave him a stern look with a cold expression on his face. He then noticed the dock workers lowering their hands and placing them in their pay pockets.

“I did not know that communists ruled this boarding house,” he said to Pondilaki with a smile that showed his yellowed teeth.

“I don’t know you, sir. Perhaps you can introduce yourself?” Pondilaki calmly said to the gunman and, while looking at him, with

his right hand he firmly grabbed the pistol that he was packing in his jacket pocket. He turned the barrel toward the policeman and decided not to shoot, but to hold off as long as possible so as not to cause a hassle. He was hoping that the police were not there looking for him or his people. For a moment he suspected that the police were there looking for Nikos Zaikopoulos but he quickly dismissed that thought.

“We know each other from a long time ago, Mr. Pondilaki. If it was not for your gun that I smelled from miles away, we would have been talking differently. So let us leave our work until we meet the next time,” said the policeman, showing his decayed teeth covered with yellow tar.

“That is acceptable to me, Sir,” replied Pondilaki calmly, turning his eyes towards the glass that rested on the table.

The policemen left the table where the dock workers were sitting. Nikos Zaikopoulos was happy that no holes were put through his chest and no blood covered his black coat. He just sighed deeply and was happy to be alive.

5.

A loud noise was heard coming from one of the rooms. There was a long silence. The police officer sent one of his three companions to investigate who was in the boarding house and to see what was going on in the rooms. The skinny policeman ran up the stairs that led into the rooms. When he reached the top of the stairs he saw a man about forty years old who had been shot and blood was running from his right thigh and covering his expensive, dark brown pants. His face was distorted from the pain. He was unable to stand on his feet and rolled down the stairs. His hair was a mess. He stopped rolling when he hit Urania’s bare feet. Blood gushed from his good-looking face as he lay motionless on the floor. The policeman who shot him came over. Then the man suddenly rose up and grabbed the policeman by the legs. He tried to bring him down but did not succeed. The policeman freed himself from his arms and kicked the man in the face with his shoes, several times in succession. The policeman then pointed the gun at the injured man’s head.

“You communist bastard! You old Bulgarian dog! I will end your wretched life here!” growled the policeman angrily and pushed the pointy end of his gun barrel against the man’s messy hair.

The man raised his head slightly and, without looking at the gun barrel, stood up. He looked into the policeman’s eyes and smiled mockingly. He was proud even though his face was covered with blood. He looked around and gazed at the customers in the café. There was plea for help in his eyes but he refused to beg for mercy.

6.

Pondilaki recognized the man. He was the same man who always dressed beautifully and sat at the “reserved” table. Urania Papaioannou broke down and began to weep. Her tears dripped on the wounded man, washing the blood from his smooth face. The man tried to stand up but quickly fell on the floor. The policeman who stood beside him looked straight into his eyes and wondered why this man was not surrendering. Perhaps he was momentarily confused and did not know what to do, he thought. Urania Papaioannou suddenly screamed out loud, filling the hearts of her customers with terror. She grabbed the man by the shoulders before he hit the floor and hugged him gently. Everyone was in awe. They were all speechless by the sight that filled their eyes with admiration. Urania cried and repeatedly kissed the man. She patted his messy hair. They were all confused, the policemen too. They all stood there attentive and silent, doing nothing while waiting for the tense situation to unwind. Foti Steriov had not lowered his hands. He stood behind the counter with his hands still up. He wanted to help Urania but did not know how. He was surprised by the great pain she exhibited.

7.

“Hristo Papaioannou, Urania’s twin brother. Nobody expected that their life would end in the ‘Macedonia’ boarding house. You poor animal, I saw your picture in the police archives and brought my faithful friends with me to pay you a visit. I serve the king and I carry my beliefs and my hatred of the communists in my genes,” said Hash to himself with a sarcastic smile dancing around his face. He looked around with his snake eyes and secretly filled his soul with pride for the crime he had just committed. He was overjoyed

and wanted to stick his nose in Artemis's large chest, but he did not do that, for fear of revealing his part in this bloody game. That would have shortened the pleasure of enjoying the benefits offered to him by Urania. Instead he smugly continued to quietly and calmly observe the situation, especially Urania who was suffocating by this personal misfortune.

“When the bitch finds out that I betrayed her Hristo to the police, she will dig my eyes out. But I am a clever man and I will take delight in her tavern, with her girls and with her... Why not?” Hash pondered.

8.

“Take the dog away!” ordered the policeman who had earlier pushed Urania out of the way. His voice was stern, deep and hoarse. The policemen grabbed Urania and pulled her off Hristo. She screamed and cried out loud uncontrollably, tears flowing like raindrops from her beautiful eyes. She was in great pain.

“Leave my brother...” she begged them through her tears. “He is the only one I have in the entire world,” she sobbed. She went down on her knees and began to kiss the lead policeman's shoes, but to no avail.

“Take him!” he commanded again with a stern tone of voice and kicked Urania in the face. The other policemen grabbed Hristo and pushed him out of the boarding house.

Urania crawled on her knees to the door of the boarding house and through her tears begged them to let him go, but the policemen were not paying attention and went out. Urania rose from the floor and ran after them. One policeman shoved Hristo in a car and they all left. Urania stood at the door for a while and then returned to the boarding house. With her head bowed down she walked past the tables and, without speaking to anyone, climbed the stairs to her room where she lay in bed and wept in anguish.

9.

A murmur was heard in the boarding house. It was Pondilaki coughing. He looked puzzled.

“Who would have thought that Urania had a brother who was a communist?” said Manoli Strezovski breaking the silence.

“Is something troubling you Pondilaki?” asked Nikos.

“I am interested to know why the police are arresting communists. We fought together to liberate our country. What was this man guilty of? Helping liberate our country!?! We need to re-examine our own journey into the future in this blood-stained lump of land we call our country. May the devil take me away, am I going crazy?” said Pondilaki and took a sip of rakia.

“The Athens government supports and propagates the arrest of communists. I am sorry for the man. I should have laid them all on the floor right here...” said Nikos in an angry tone of voice.

“Nikos, now is not the time to rush, you will fulfill your desire when the time is more convenient,” replied Pondilaki.

“It is sad but you are right. We may have to go to the mountains again. Then we will aim better,” said Nikos.

“For sure, Nikos, this will be our fight then ...” said Pondilaki and got up from his chair.

“Are we going?” asked Nikos surprised.

“It’s time to go. My head is hurting from talking. We all need some rest,” replied Pondilaki.

“Let us go then,” said Nikos and got up from his chair. Manoli Strezovski got up next, followed by all the dock workers who drained their glasses and followed them. They all stepped outside and disappeared in the dark. They went home.

VI

1.

Urania Papaioannou got out of bed earlier than usual the next morning. She put on her prettiest dress and headed for the police station. Twenty minutes later she was in front of it. She went inside. All the officers who were in the office stood up and looked at her and kept looking at her as if they had fallen under her spell. She was a beautiful woman.

“Good day gentlemen,” she said in a timid tone of voice. She then nodded benevolently at a middle-aged, balding man who wore thick glasses hanging halfway down his thick nose, and went in front of his desk and sat down.

“Please, I am at your disposal,” said the little man and showed his white teeth. He was very happy to have this beauty in his presence, who had chosen him over all the others in the office.

“I am looking for Mr. Pampas,” she said in a sweet tone of voice.

The man pushed his thick glasses up over his nose, paused for a moment, sighed deeply and said:

“Mr. Pampas will be absent for several business days. Perhaps I can help you.”

Urania powdered her face and added some blush. She hesitated whether to try her luck with this man or wait. She smiled gently and said: “Thank you, sir,” and left the office.

She returned to the boarding house and went inside. She found Foti standing at the counter.

“Please take me to my room,” she asked him.

2.

Foti Steriov took her by the hand and helped her climb up the stairs. They passed through the narrow corridor and entered the room. Foti put her down on the wide iron bed and took off her high heeled boots. Then without saying a word he left her there. He then came down to the café and stood behind the counter.

“It is snowing outside. The roofs of the houses are white,” said Foti.

“It should be raining,” replied Stoios Panagopoulos. “Urania will have difficulty extracting her brother from the hands of the police,” he added.

The door of the café flung open and the American walked in, but instead of stopping and greeting them he walked past them and went upstairs into Urania’s room.

“The Americano will help you when the willow tree grows grapes,” said Stoios and laughed out loud.

“Don’t make fun of other people’s misfortunes. The poor woman is suffering,” interjected Foti and sat at one of the tables beside the window.

“Why are you avoiding me?!” asked Stoios.

“I am not avoiding you Stoios, I just want to be alone for a while,” said Foti.

Stoios Panagopoulos smiled and entered the kitchen. Then a pregnant woman appeared at the door of the boarding house. She was wrapped in a black shawl and brown scarf, embroidered with dark brown laces. She looked concerned. She sat at one of the tables in the new part of the boarding house.

Foti Steriov decided to approach her. He got out of his chair and went near her. The young woman looked up at him and showed her gentle face.

“Are you Foti Steriov?” she asked.

Confused, Foti Steriov remained silent. The young woman looked at him again and said:

“My name is Maria Stavridis. Your restaurant reminded me of the soul of my husband, Kosta Papadinovski. Do you know him?” asked the young woman.

“My name is Foti Steriov and I am glad to meet you. Kosta was my cousin. I am sorry for what happened...” replied Foti.

“I knew it was you Foti,” Maria said and smiled. “Please sit down,” she invited Foti to sit beside her.

“Thank you for the invitation. I want to ask you, are you hungry or maybe thirsty? Can I offer you something?” asked Foti.

“No thank you. I just came here to sit for a while, just for a moment, to relieve the loneliness of my sleepless nights, waiting for Kosta to come back,” she said with a smile on her face, humbly shaking her head in gratitude.

Even though Foti Steriov had acute hearing, in his excitement he did not understand what Maria was trying to tell him. He sat down beside her and, as if he was drawn by a magical force, he tightened his lips and remained silent. Maria looked out at the street through the window.

3.

Pondilaki entered the boarding house, accompanied by three dock workers. They sat in the old side of the boarding house. Pondilaki saw Foti sitting at the table in the new part of the boarding house. He wondered why Foti did not come over to greet them and offer them drinks.

“Perhaps because a woman was sitting with him...” thought Pondilaki.

Stoios Panagopoulos brought them their drinks.

“Hello, Pondilaki,” said Stoios putting the shot glasses on the table and placing the bottle of rakia on the colourful tablecloth. He then filled the glasses with rakia.

“For the love of people!” said Pondilaki and raised his glass of rakia up high. He then laughed and quietly drank it down. Stoios filled his

glass again. The dock workers laughed loudly, accepting his toast. Stoios smiled gently and went back behind the counter.

4.

Pondilaki began to wonder what was being said as he watched Maria Stavridis make gentle motions with her hand as she spoke with Foti. He knew her from somewhere but he could not remember from where. He sifted through his head looking for familiar faces, but never managed to find Maria's. He kept looking at her in hopes that he would remember something.

"Is there something troubling you?" asked Manoli Strezovski.

"The woman sitting with Foti," replied Pondilaki.

"Oh, her. She is old man Stavridis's daughter. You know, the Jew, who during the war we hid in his apartment. You remember him? We sealed his apartment with wax," replied Manoli.

Pondilaki did not answer. He laughed and turned towards Maria and watched her. He was wondering why she was not with them. He looked at Foti, gesturing to him to come over but he too ignored him.

"They are ignoring me as if I had disappeared from the face of the earth!" he said to himself and smiled indignantly. He turned away and grabbed his glass. He drank his rakia and sighed deeply.

5.

A strong figure of a man no more than 45 years old, entered the café and immediately after he sat down by the window, banged on the table with his fist. He had a great big blond moustache. His lower jaw was somewhat protruding forward which made his white face discordant. He looked nervous and kept looking towards the counter. He showed his healthy white teeth, smiling at the gypsies looking at him. The man then took off his fur hat showing his lush blond hair, looking like a ripe wheat field in contrast to his white face and covering his challenging gaze that made its way out from his transparent blue eyes. He again pounded the table and yelled out in a voice that sounded like it was coming out of a deep cave:

“Gentlemen, today is my birthday. I am treating everyone in the café. Drinks for everyone!” and then looked at the Gypsies and said: “Play! Take away the grief from my tortured Slavic soul. Play!”

The loud noise attracted everyone’s attention. Foti Steriov raised his head and calmly looked in the man’s direction. Stoios Panagopoulos came out of the kitchen to see who was pounding so hard on the table. Pondilaki smiled from time to time. The four English officers entered the café and sat three tables away from Pondilaki.

“Drinks for everyone! Today Mr. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin, Chief of the famous Cossacks of Don, a man from the great Ukraine, is paying... Give out the drinks!” he yelled at Stoios Panagopoulos standing behind the counter and then laughed out loud, sounding like thunder coming out of a cave. He again slammed his fist on the table and said:

“Sing and play... What are you afraid of?! You are my children and my children are not afraid of anyone because they are Cossacks!” he ordered the Gypsies.

“What is your name?” bellowed Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin.

“Call me Rahim Burhan...” replied the Gypsy softly and timidly.

“Play for us... Play and don’t stop!” ordered Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin.

6.

Esmeralda was Rahim’s older daughter. She picked up the tambourine with her left hand and began to follow the sad rhythm of her father’s small accordion. Standing next to her was her companion Emsal, who was about thirty years old. She had a nice, pure dark brown face. Emsal waited for a few bars to pass before she began to sing, filling the café with her hoarse voice and piercing the ears of all those present.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin was melting away in the beautiful music. Soon he bellowed in pain, covered his white face with big hands and then hit the table hard with his fists.

Emsal was startled. She jumped back and began to shake, her knees visibly vibrating. Her song stopped dead in her throat, hiding between her white healthy teeth and her thick juicy lips. Rahim too muted his accordion and the tambourine quietly withdrew its tone. There was silence. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin cried like a baby. He wiped the tears from his white face, took a few sips of rakia and then raised his head.

“Play Gypsies, play! Sing to me a song about the great Slavic lands! You will stop playing only when I tell you!” he ordered menacingly but in a calm tone of voice. He then ordered another round of drinks for everyone in the café.

Rahim Burhan pulled back the old accordion skins again. Esmeralda joined his rhythm. The sound of the tambourine filled the entire café. Emsal, confused, looked at Rahim. He nodded with his yellowed eyes and she began to sing. Her voice trembled. Her words merged with the quiet melancholy.

“The song will make me cry. The river will kill me. I will go to its bank. After that I may die...” yelled Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin with a sick tone of voice while swinging on his chair, which made his long blond hair shake. He moved his hair out of his eyes to clear his view, then sipped some rakia straight from the bottle and smiled.

“Sing and don’t stop singing! Let the song carry me to the Ukraine and take me to the wide Don! Let Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin’s soul melt away! My soul is great but it is also ill and is dying...” he said.

Rahim felt a shiver overcome his body. He came close to Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin, who at the time was finishing the last drops of rakia from the bottle he was holding, and played his accordion hard for him.

“Bring me another bottle of rakia! More rakia for everyone. Fill their glasses full...” Alexei yelled at Stoios.

Stoios Panagopoulos brought him another bottle. He opened it and filled Alexei's glass.

"I am always at your service," said Stoios.

"Now go and fill everyone's glasses!" commanded Alexei.

"At your command, Sir!" replied Stoios returning to the counter, grabbed another bottle and began to fill everyone's glasses with the white translucent liquid.

7.

Rahim suddenly stopped playing his accordion. There was silence in the café. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin rose to his feet and almost fell to the floor, unable to control his own great big body.

"Play, I tell you, play!" he yelled at Rahim.

Rahim, with his ruffled hair which had a lock sticking out, looked at him.

"Play, damn it!" echoed Alexei again with his deep voice.

Rahim did not budge.

"Who will pay for all these songs, Sir?" asked Rahim with a strange expression on his dark brown face.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin's white face twitched, his eyes gleamed with sparks as he savagely looked into the eyes of the Gypsy.

"I am paying for everything..." Alexei shouted nervously. "Now play!" he yelled out loud.

"We have been playing and singing for four hours. We are tired and hungry. We have traveled all over the Balkans. We are hungry..." replied Rahim.

"I am paying for everything!" repeated Alexei.

“Then pay us now, Sir!” replied Rahim timidly.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin did not know what to say and blushed. He then raised his voice and yelled:

“Play, you ugly man! There are always people who sing to people who pay. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin always pays,” he yelled out so loud that everyone in the café could hear. He then stood up with his enormous body standing straight, pulled out a large hunting knife and showed it to Rahim, threatening to slit his throat. He then slammed him into the table and said:

“If you stop singing I will kill you three like chickens,” and stared into their faces. “No one has insulted Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin’s dignity and remained unpunished!” he added and waved his knife giving Rahim the sign to start playing.

Rahim cursed in his own Gypsy language. He could not get away from Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin. He looked at the sharp blade with fearful eyes while Alexei placed it on top of the colourful tablecloth. Rahim took hold of his old accordion and began to play a song, which brought tears to his eyes that flowed down on his dark brown face. He looked down to the dirty floor and began to cry. He played while he lamented quietly.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin was drunk. Rahim smiled but did not expect any help from the customers in the café because they never helped the Gypsies because, according to the Gypsies, they were all evil. Rahim thought for a moment and, in his tiny head covered with a black dusty hat from under which protruded a lock of hair, he thought he would show off his baritone voice by singing a song himself. Unfortunately his Ukrainian sponsor was not conscious enough to hear the song.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin was drinking rakia from his third bottle and was stone drunk when he fell off his chair. People from a nearby table helped him up but even though Alexei was able to sit on the chair he could not hold his head up. His head fell on the table near his big knife.

Rahim Burhan kept on playing, stretching the old skin accordion back and forth massaging the tortured soul of his sponsor. He even wept over his misfortune.

“Only the song is my terrestrial friend. Through it I can earn a piece of bread, feed my soul and stay alive. Nobody wants to be my friend. A man is another man’s brother and not his slave. And if these people were decent they would not allow this man to turn me into a slave,” thought Rahim convinced that Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin was not able to harm him. And while playing and singing, Rahim was followed by his older daughter Esmeralda and her companion Emsal out of the café.

8.

The atmosphere in the café finally returned to normal. Urania Papaioannou appeared at the door. She was furious. All eyes in the café turned to her. She walked past the tables nervously and climbed upstairs into her room.

“She did not find Pampas. The man from the police station only wants her body...” muttered Stoios and leaned with his elbows on the counter. He smiled and looked at Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin who laid his great big head on the table, drooling on the colourful tablecloth while snoring loudly.

Pondilaki felt tired. He did not get his usual nap. He closed his eyelids and fell asleep on the table. Manoli Strezovski wanted to wake him up but changed his mind and let him sleep.

There was complete silence in the café. The day had almost passed. The low light was the signal for the naked girls to get off the stage. Pondilaki was dozing away. The café was empty. All that was left inside were the dock workers with Pondilaki and Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin snoring away.

Foti Steriov collected the empty glasses and bottles from the table and returned to the counter.

“Get ready for new customers...” said Sofia Geleva who climbed up the stairs, went into her room and went to bed.

“It was a busy day,” she thought to herself and fell asleep.

VII

1.

Pondilaki, ashamed of belonging to the people, who in their lives were forced to endure the trash in their own apartments, angrily left his house and headed for Evangelia Gasparova’s house. He changed direction after passing the three stores at Vortik Nikianos and departed for the old road where he spent two hours with Done Bindov in his building. After leaving Done, he took several gold coins from him and twenty minutes later arrived at Evangelia Gasparova’s place. They sat on the iron bed. Evangelia was silent. Pondilaki was daydreaming.

“I have pain in the stomach,” complained Evangelia.

“I will bring a doctor over to examine you and give you some medication,” said Pondilaki and sighed.

“Don’t worry about me, please help Stavre! Please do whatever you can to free him from prison. I fear that I will give birth to my child without a man to take care of us. Come up with a plan and free him!” she said.

“Slow down Evangelia. I will take him out of prison but first we have to take care of your health. Leave Stavre to me!” replied Pondilaki.

“Time is flying, I have no patience, I am afraid. About a month ago I sent a letter to the President of the Government, asking him to help me. I wrote the letter with chosen words. I expected him to understand my situation and offer assistance. I was hoping that he would accept my humility. Every day I waited for the mailman but the President of the government did not even reply. One by one the days are passing by and nothing is being done... Please Pondilaki, do something. Please Pondilaki bring back my unmarried man. Help

my child to be born with a man in the house... Every night I cry over our common destiny. The baby kicks me in the stomach. I often mourn our future. I constantly feel dizzy... Lord, what do I do? What have I done that is so wrong?" said Evangelia.

"Mr. Papandreou will not help you. Please don't be misled! He is no longer prime minister. On his arrival to Greece, while flying in the plane, he told the world that there are no Macedonians in Greece. But pay no attention to him and look after your own health! Please do whatever you can to give birth to a healthy child. I will find a way to extract Stavre from prison soon, believe me!" Pondilaki reassured Evangelia, knowing full well that everything was in vain.

"Please hurry, Pondilaki! My good health will never return. I am suffering immensely. Sometimes I think of committing suicide... If I only had the guts to do it! Nobody cares about me," replied Evangelia.

"Here are a few gold coins. Use them wisely... But now forgive me I have to go. I am expected elsewhere..." said Pondilaki and handed her the gold coins.

Evangelia Gasparova took the coins and put them on her shelf. She then began to cry. Her tears rolled down past her smooth dark face and fell on the floor. She shook Pondilaki's extended hand and said:

"Goodbye, Pondilaki. And thank you for your help!"

"Goodbye, Evangelia! Don't worry! I will get Stavre out," replied Pondilaki letting go of her hand, walked out of her apartment, down the stairs and outside.

2.

On the street he was met by a large moving crowd loudly demanding justice. Any other day Pondilaki would have joined such a demonstration but not today. He stood aside until everyone passed him by and then took to Ignatia Street all alone. He roamed the city for a long time. When he got tired he went inside Café "Macedonia". Manoli Strezovski and two dock workers sat at the

table they considered theirs. Pondilaki joined them and ordered some rakia.

“You are welcome, Pondilaki,” said Stoios Panagopoulos after he placed the shot glass on the table.

Pondilaki smiled, lifted the glass, took a sip of the liquid and put it back down.

“You have a guest. He wants to see you. But, as a personal favour to me, please help him,” said Stoios.

“Send him over,” replied Pondilaki and picked up his shot glass.

Satisfied, Stoios Panagopoulos returned back behind the counter. He put the shot glasses he had collected from the tables into the sink and went inside the kitchen. A few seconds later he was accompanied by a man not older than thirty. He had a medium build and looked very tired. They walked towards Pondilaki’s table.

“Sit,” Pondilaki said to the man. “You are among friends here,” and pointed to the chair beside him.

“His name is Stoian Dzhavalekov,” said Stoios. “He is one of us (Macedonian)...” he added, smiled widely and placed a shot of rakia in front of Stoian Dzhavalekov.

“Have a drink, you are with friends... Don’t worry,” said Stoios and then went back behind the counter.

Stoian Dzhavalekov swallowed the rakia and put down the shot glass. Pondilaki looked him straight in the eyes and said:

“You look like you have not slept for a long time.”

“A few days... I don’t have a place to stay and I have no money... so I am left out on the streets...” replied Stoian.

“Where are you from Stoian Dzhavalekov?” asked Pondilaki.

“I am from Skopje,” he replied.

Pondilaki thought about it for a moment, took another sip of rakia, nervously rotated his shot glass several times and looked at Stoian. In the meantime Manoli Strezovski banged on the table with his hand and said:

“Don’t scare me like that man. Are you really from Skopje?”

Stoian Dzhavalekov lowered his head, sighed deeply and said:

“Yes, I really am from Skopje. Is there something strange about that? Does it bother you that I am from Skopje?”

“Strange things have happened. People in Solun have talked about events taking place in Skopje which confuse Manoli...” explained Pondilaki in a low tone of voice.

Stoian Dzhavalekov became upset and his face turned red.

“I don’t know why there would be confusion about that?” replied Stoian with a bit of anger in his voice.

“In Solun they say that the Macedonians from the upper reaches of the great river have rebelled and want to move onwards. They want to conquer Solun. Strange things are happening...” explained Pondilaki.

“It is true, there was a rebellion in Skopje and many people were mistreated...” replied Stoian.

“Were you... Were you part of that confusion?” asked Manoli Strezovski with much interest and coughed. He then took a few sips of rakia and looked directly into Stoian’s eyes.

Stoian Dzhavalekov remained silent.

“Why are you silent? Is there something wrong?” asked Pondilaki.

“I am fine, just a little nervous... Well, if you want to know then I will tell you. I will tell you exactly what happened in Skopje...” Stoian said and exhaled.

“So, you were part of the confusion then...?” asked Manoli surprised.

“Yes I was but I fled. I was afraid they were going to shoot me. Now I am a deserter. One should have a sense of measure when they want to start something. But that was not for me. Perhaps I am wrong. Who knows?! Time will tell whether I made the right choice or not. Time is a real barometer of historical truth...” replied Stoian.

“Why would they want to shoot you? Many here in Solun rejoice at the idea of a united people... Did we not fight against the German army together?” asked Manoli Strezovski.

“I too fought... I fought for three years. I fought against the Germans, against the Bulgarian occupation and against the occupying armies and police. And not only against them, but I also fought against the Albanian fascists... I truly fought hard. But all that now counts for nothing. Now I am without a fatherland and completely alone. I feel terrible and I am miserable. How is that for confusion?” replied Stoian.

“How did you end up in the confusion? And don’t worry; you are among your own people (Macedonians) here.” Manoli Strezovski assured Stoian.

“It all happened very quickly. I was stationed with my unit in Kochani. There were rumours being spread that we were going to liberate Solun. There was great excitement during the day and we all went to sleep in the evening. A lot of shooting and machine gun fire woke us up around midnight. I opened my eyes and I could not believe what was happening. We were surrounded by our own soldiers. There was nowhere to go. We were captured and taken to Skopje. They imprisoned us in the large barracks. There were many of us there. The trials began. I could not sleep at night and shook like a leaf all day long from anxiety. Often I walked along the wire fence that kept us in and one day I decided to escape. I took shelter

in some bushes and in the dark of night I fled over the wire. I was afraid to stay in the city and decided to flee across the border. I followed the flow of the great river and crossed the border at Bogoroditsa. I met up with two acquaintances from Kostur and had dinner with them. They went to Kostur and I headed this way. I did not know the way so I followed along the river. Everywhere I went I ran into English soldiers who were ready to kill anything that went down in the lower reaches of the great river. I was very careful and finally reached the first houses in Solun. I started having problems with my heart. It refused to slow down and was causing me more anxiety. I did not know anyone in the city and I had no one to turn to. I wanted to go back but first I decided to take some rest in hopes of slowing down my heart. I sat next to the Sveta Katerina church and thought about it. I was hungry and tired. Then Stoios Panagopoulos found me and helped me snap out of my predicament. It relieved my anxiety. He also gave me food to eat which also relieved my hunger..." said Stoian and stopped talking. He then took another sip of rakia and moistened his lips with his tongue.

Manoli took advantage of the pause and rather indignantly said: "So you failed!"

"We had no chance of success. We were foolish even to attempt it..." replied Stoian and sighed deeply.

"All is well when it ends without bloodshed. Fratricidal wars are the worst. It's a slaughterhouse. Perhaps it is better that you failed..." concluded Pondilaki and got up from his chair. "Let's go Stoian, you need to rest. I will take you home to my house," he added and they left the café while being watched by Manoli Strezovski and Stoios Panagopoulos who smiled contentedly.

VIII

1.

Urania Papaioannou came down the stairs into the café and stood by the counter. She smiled at Foti.

"Please pour me a cognac!" she asked Stoios, who at the time was preparing the glasses for their first customers.

“Right away!” he said, turned away, grabbed the bottle from the shelf, opened it and skillfully poured the cognac into a clean glass. “Here you are...” he said and again went back to washing the glasses.

“How long are you planning to be weird with me...” said Foti calmly and took a sip of his rakia.

Urania Papaioannou sat on a barstool, took a sip of her cognac and set her glass down on the counter.

“Weird is for people who are uncomfortable, I understand that. But why did you marry me? Do you think it was for love? Did you imagine yourself being the prince in the Cinderella story? Our marriage was a marriage of convenience that serves our mutual interests. You need to accept that and act appropriately,” she replied.

“So our marriage is a sham, hah! Why didn’t you say that to me sooner so that I could sleep peacefully? Didn’t you notice how my friends looked at me with disgust when you were adventurous with the American? Or does that not concern you? Who is Foti Steriov compared to her Majesty Urania?! Ah screw it! Why can’t you sit on your ass and start behaving like a normal woman. Do you think your youth is eternal? One day you will lose your beauty and everything will be different. The American will not be asking for you then and you will be looking for someone else to take care of you. Did you ever think about that? Do you think I will always be here and I will take care of you?!” he asked.

“Stop your whining! What do you know about life? Open your eyes man, or I will permanently shut them for you. Which of these idiots here do you think are your friends? You are afraid of everyone! Because you know they will slaughter you given the slightest chance. And don’t put all your trust on a pleasant village marriage. I need money and I am here to earn it. I am never under the illusion that I can earn my living with my body for my entire lifetime...” she replied.

“Okay, okay! But I just want you to know that I don’t like it when you sleep with other men,” said Foti who took his glass, sat at one of the tables beside window and looked outside.

Urania Papaioannou smiled, drank her cognac and sank into her own thoughts.

2.

Two people wearing city suits, white shirts, ties and overcoats walked into the café. They each held a lambskin fur coat in their hands. They saw Foti as soon as they entered and went straight for his table. They momentarily stood above him and then sat down next to him. They were silent. Foti raised his head and looked at them. They had peaceful eyes.

“We want to trade with you...” one of them said.

“You are the Sheteriov brothers, am I right?” he said and before they had a chance to answer Foti said: “We can only trade food with you here... But you will have to trade with that woman over there,” and pointed at Urania sitting at the counter.

“I thought you were the boss...” they both said at the same time.

“Unfortunately I am not! Urania is the boss here and its best you deal directly with her. Leave me in peace now so I can finish my drink, I have work to do to prepare for our customers. Just be careful with her. She has good friends in the police station and Mr. Pampas the police chief is her lover,” he added.

“There is no need to threaten us...” said one of them.

“I am not threatening you, just a friendly warning for you to be careful with her...” he replied. “Now go and see her!” he added.

The two brothers left the table and went to see Urania, who at the time was finishing her drink. She was waiting for them.

“Please gentlemen, what can I do for you?” she said in a rough tone of voice.

“Take it easy Urania, we’re not here to cause trouble. We want to trade with you...” said the older of the two brothers who had a mole under his right eye.

“I don’t trade with black marketeers. Go away!” she said sternly.

“Take it easy Urania, hear us out, you may like our bargains...” said the younger brother.

“I said I don’t trade with black marketeers. Don’t waste my time. Leave my café now!” replied Urania and stepped down from barstool. “Get out you bastards and go to hell!” she yelled out loudly.

The older brother’s face went all red and his eyes flashed with anger. He grabbed his younger brother by the arm and dragged him towards the door.

And before leaving the café the older brother said, “You will regret this Urania, you worldly hoar! I will kill you before the day is over!”

Urania filled her glass with cognac. Foti Steriov giggled out loud. His tenor voice filled the room. Stoios Panagopoulos hid in the kitchen.

“Why are you giggling? Are you happy because these shit-heads threatened me with death?” she yelled out furiously.

“They will carry out their promise, I assure you. So my dear wife, please be careful and look out for yourself. Don’t be the most beautiful sacrifice!” replied Foti with an ironic tone of voice.

“Don’t worry about me. Worry about your own empty head. Maybe someone will cut it off and then you will have nothing to feel any more...” yelled Urania.

Foti stopped giggling. He returned to his drink, swallowed several gulps and leaned back in his chair.

3.

Two strangers, talking among themselves and smelling like withered valley flowers, came into the café. There were no other customers in the café at the time.

“Where is that Macedonian?!” one of them yelled out loud, his eyes darting wildly to all corners of the room. Their eyes focused on the grim smile that appeared on Stoios Panagopoulos’ face. They were caught by surprise. Stoios Panagopoulos began to laugh out loud. Surprised they both pulled out their guns. Stoios Panagopoulos stretched his arms out to receive them in an embrace and said:

“Hide those irons...What in God’s name are you doing?”

The two gunmen smiled, showing their yellow tobacco-stained teeth, went towards Stoios and each shook his hand.

“Please sit, sit down, we will have a drink,” he said and took them to the table near the window. The two men sat down. Stoios brought a bottle of rakia and three glasses. He sat in the chair next to them, poured rakia into the glasses, raised his glass and cheerfully said:

“To your health gentlemen, long live Crete and all the Cretans!”

The two toasted him back, drank some rakia and put the glasses down on top of the colourful tablecloth. One of them opened his eyes wide. He saw Urania Papaioannou coming down the stairs, accompanied by Dustin Brown. He stared at her sad face that had the colour of blooming lilacs. Urania calmly walked by them like she ruled the world by magic. Walking beside her with his head held up high, looking proud of himself like he had the most beautiful woman in Solun, was the American.

The two Cretans were upset at the sight of the American. They left their glasses and concentrated on Urania and the American. They stared with their wild eyes buried in their thick eyebrows and frowned at the sight.

“We must conclude our business here,” said one of the Cretans to Stoios. “We have been paid to assassinate her,” he added and they all pulled out their guns.

Stoios Panagopoulos suddenly jumped from his chair and stood in front of them.

“No!” he whispered loudly to the Cretans.

“Hide your guns and do it another time,” a loud voice was heard bellowing from behind them. It was Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin who then laughed so loud that he vibrated the glass in the windows.

Both Cretans turned around to see whose voice it was. They were surprised. Then they too burst out in laughter.

“It is the great chieftain of the Don, Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin!” they all yelled at the same time. “Greetings Alexei!” said Stoios and invited him to sit at the table with them. The Cretans put their guns away.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin stopped laughing and was greeted by the Cretans. He sat at their table. Stoios Panagopoulos breathed easier. Urania Papaioannou, who had apparently heard about her attempted assassination, almost fainted. Stoios grabbed her and led her by the arm beside Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin.

“This is Urania Papaioannou, the proprietor of this boarding house,” he said, introducing her.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin filled the room with wild laughter. His eyes danced merrily.

“Such a beauty is not for killing!” he yelled at the Cretans and kissed her hand with his rough and slimy lips. And even though she was grossed out by it, Urania did not flinch.

Stoios Panagopoulos brought her a chair.

“Sometimes you have to make friends even with this kind of people,” Stoios whispered in her ear while she sat down in the chair that he offered her. He was pleased to have the American distanced from their proximity. When he saw the American standing beside the bar with a sour face he left for the kitchen.

4.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin took another turn greasing Urania’s gentle hand with his saliva. His laughter did not stop filling the air of the entire café. He was very pleased to have Urania sit beside him and allow him to kiss her beautiful hand lovingly.

“This is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen from the quiet waters of the River Don to the salty waters of the White Sea!” he yelled out loud and laughed.

The Cretans listened to Alexei’s cavernous voice and occasionally smiled, showing him their yellowed teeth. Although dissatisfied with her new company, Urania Papaioannou took Stoios’s advice and sat with her new guests. She occasionally toasted to their health by wetting her lips with a little cognac. When she was sure she had Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin on her side, who she thought had full control over the Cretans, she allowed the Ukrainian to touch her smooth face with his slimy lips and roar with pleasure. Being sure she had the Cretans overpowered, she asked:

“Who sent you to assassinate me?”

Both Cretans looked confused. They both tried to avoid the question by giving the impression that they were more interested in her beauty and in getting between her legs than taking her life.

But Urania Papaioannou was relentless and again offered her face to Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin.

“Speak donkeys! Who sent you?!” Alexei bellowed angrily.

Both Cretans began to shake in fear. They again looked confused.

“Speak!” thundered Alexei and raised his arm high in a menacing way, ready to strike them.

“No, don’t hit us... It was the Shteriov brothers who sent us. They paid us in advance... They gave us an amount of drachmas and some gold...” pleaded the Cretans.

Urania Papaioannou went red in the face. Anger appeared in her magical eyes. She again let Alexei’s slimy lips touch the tender skin on her face.

“Maybe it’s the Shteriov brothers who need to lose their lives? I will trade you my love if you help me eliminate them...” she whispered to Alexei and gently rubbed his bear paw with her hand. She then kissed his rough, bearded face passionately, giving Alexei uncontrollable pleasure.

“Those mangy bastards... we will bury them in the White Sea before the end of the day,” said Alexei while menacingly staring at the frightened Cretans who agreed with him by shaking their heads.

Urania Papaioannou decided to take the final blow. She coughed and softly whispered in Alexei’s ear:

“I will wait for you in my room to bring me the news of their demise...” She then nibbled on his ear lightly with her pearly white teeth. After that she got up from her chair and slowly, bypassing the tables, climbed up the stairs and went into her room.

“We will give them a painless death!” he yelled out loud, finished his drink and left the café with the two Cretans. Alexei was very eager to get into bed with Urania Papaioannou and taste the sweet cake.

Dustin Brown saw them leaving. He stood by the bar for a moment and, unable to suppress his strong thirst for Urania, climbed up the stairs and entered her room. She was in bed hiding her snake face under the sheets. He was furious and his face was as red as a red pepper when he walked in.

“So you’re leaving me, huh?” he snapped angrily unable to contain his anger and frustration.

Urania Papaioannou pulled her head out from under her covers, smiled slightly and quietly said:

“I am not going anywhere. If you think it’s time for you to leave I am not going to stop you.”

Dustin Brown blushed even more showing his confusion and uncertainty.

“Here I buy and sell everything Mr. Americano! If you don’t like something about me you can complain to the Ukrainian...” she said, grabbed him by his hand and pulled him onto the bed. “You are my love Americano!” she added softly and seductively.

Still confused and insecure, Dustin Brown accepted her invitation and the redness in his began to dissipate. But still he was thinking of the Ukrainian as a thorn in his backside.

5.

The program in the boarding house started a little earlier this evening. Under the cover of low lights and initiated by the start of the music, Sofia and the other girls began their routines bare-naked. They managed so skillfully to turn every eye in their direction, which made Sofia think she alone could lead an army to war. She was so confident with her abilities that she often placed her sweating toes into the noses of her patrons and they smelled them like they were soaking up the aroma of a steaming hot apple pie. She often got angry at the dock workers who, even though they were present in the boarding house during her performances, did not follow her attractive routine, especially when she was undressing. She often danced on the podium and looked at Pondilaki trying to catch a glimpse of him looking at her with his tiny green eyes. She always wanted to devour his calm face.

“Pondilaki will not settle down with me despite my ability to lift my feet all the way to the ceiling. However I have to fight for him,” she thought. “One of these evenings I will fall into his arms in front of

everyone and I will express my obedience to him like a slave..." she thought. "Sometimes I hate myself for not having studied a craft and for not being like the other women. It makes me mad... But all I can do now is have regrets. The moment I unbutton my bra he goes away..."

6.

Sofia Geleva began to unbutton her bra. Pondilaki rose from his chair and slowly slipped through the tables full of customers unnoticed and went out into the street. Sofia Geleva slowed the rhythm of her performance and reddish spots began to appear on her face, making her even more attractive and desirable in the greedy eyes of her audience.

7.

Pondilaki walked quickly down the street. He passed many streets before reaching the Zeitinlik cemetery. He shook the hand of a man in black clothes with a long nose.

"Have you brought the gold coins?" asked the man calmly.

"We agreed on thirty gold coins, of which I will give you fifteen in advance and the others you will receive after the job is done," said Pondilaki sharply.

"The price has increased. You will pay me fifty gold coins... half in advance..." replied the man.

"No! No! A deal is a deal!" rebelled Pondilaki.

"It's others that dictate the price. The coins are not for me. I am only the messenger..." replied the man.

Pondilaki put his hand deep into the pocket of his long winter coat and pulled out a leather wallet. He then counted out 25 coins and gave them to the man in black. He then shut his wallet and put it back into his pocket.

"You will receive the rest at midnight. I will cut off your head if you betray me!" he said and waved his hand in a sign of farewell.

“At midnight you will have your man,” replied the man in black and walked up the hill.

8.

Pondilaki took the same path back to the café. Sofia Geleva was still performing under low light. It was her second performance and she was undressing to the rhythm of the bouzouki. Pondilaki sat with the dock workers and began to watch her.

“I better go home and relax for a while...” he thought to himself but did not get up. Some unknown force emanating from Sofia’s smooth body directed him to gaze towards her breasts dangling in the air. He stood there motionless and confused by Sofia’s beauty until her performance was over. He also noticed Sofia smiling at him contentedly. She purged her underwear. Pondilaki smiled.

“What a devil woman...” Pondilaki thought to himself and kept staring into her twinkling eyes.

“I finally got you...” murmured Sofia. She twisted her hips one more time and left the stage. There was strong applause resonating all through the café.

9.

Dustin Brown left Urania’s room and went down the stairs into the café. He drank a shot of brandy with the feeling that he had found something that he lost in the street. Stoios Panagopoulos smiled contentedly. Sofia Geleva appeared on the stage again. Members of her audience were jumping up and down, shaking, laughing and finally clapping. Suddenly there was silence. The sound of the bouzouki filled the café with soft slow music. Sofia took her steps following the rhythm of the bouzouki and stealthily looked for Pondilaki. She noticed him sitting at the table with dock workers happily smiling away. She began to dance more lively.

10.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin, accompanied by the two Cretans, entered the café. He was carrying a large leather bag in his hand. He laughed out loud. Sofia, disturbed by his presence and by his loud

cavernous laughter, shyly left the stage and went into her booth. The bouzouki stopped playing. Pondilaki sighed.

“The Ukrainian has a gift for Urania,” Manoli Strezovski whispered quietly.

“What kind of gift?” asked Pondilaki with a surprised tone of voice.

“The heads of the brothers Shteriov, I assume,” smiled Manoli.

Pondilaki did not respond, wondering what he was talking about.

“Let’s go. We have a lot of work to do tonight,” Pondilaki said to the dock workers, got up and headed towards the door. The dock workers followed him without having finished drinking their drinks.

When they were out in the streets the bouzouki started playing again and the customers began to laugh and clap. They were clapping loud calling for Sofia to return to the stage.

11.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin left the Cretans to finish drinking their rakia while he climbed up the stairs to Urania’s room. She was lying in bed wearing a transparent dress. The moment she saw him she began to cover her curves with the silk sheets, looking shy. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin licked his lips with his big tongue and dumped the two heads covered in blood in front of her bed. He laughed out loud, a slimy laugh as the heads rolled on the floor. He was proud of what he had done for Urania... his eyes sparkled with joy.

Urania Papaioannou looked at the cut off heads, closed her eyes, laughed an evil laugh and invited Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin to sit on her silk sheets.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin long pondered whether he should sit or not and then, in a harsh voice, said:

“Let’s go down and celebrate our friendship...”

“Wouldn’t it be better if we stay here?” asked Urania shyly.

“Whatever you like...” he said and sat on the bed next to her.

Urania put her hands around the back of Alexei’s neck and pulled herself out of bed. She had now captured the big man in her womanly net and turned him into an obedient kitten, ready to play with his mistress rolling on the floor. She pushed Alexei down on the bed with her beautiful body.

IX

1.

A number of black shadows gathered around a large gravestone in the Zeitinlik cemetery in the dark of night. They were soon joined by five more men who brought with them a wooden stretcher with someone, whose life had not yet ended, laying on it. The man who lay on the stretcher was wrapped in an old brown army blanket and showed no signs of life. His face was lined with wounds and his lips were all cracked and loaded with clotted blood. His eyes were covered with dried feces, his hair was grown to shoulder length and looked dirty and straggly. He smelled bad like rotten meat. His bearded face was overgrown with long, thick, dirty hairs loaded with filth.

Pondilaki went closer to him, examined his face and sighed deeply. He then angrily looked at the man in black and menacingly asked:

“What have you done to this man?” and then pulled out the wallet from his pocket, opened it and counted 25 gold coins. He then gave the money to the man in black.

“We did not make a deal for you to bring me a dead man!” said Pondilaki furiously. “The man on the stretcher shows no signs of life?” he added angrily.

The man in black coughed and said:

“He is alive. He has been in solitary confinement for six months. He passed the last thirty days without bread or water. If you think he is dead I will give you your gold back and I will take him back to the

cell for the flies to finish him off,” he said calmly and waited to see Pondilaki’s reaction. When there was no reaction the man in black collected his people and got lost in the darkness.

Pondilaki looked at the man’s face one more time and said to the dock workers who had accompanied him:

“Let’s go, and be careful walking in the snow.”

2.

Two of the dock workers grabbed the stretcher and walked behind Pondilaki over the marble slabs. Soon they came out of the cemetery. Then, after following a few dark alleys, they found themselves in front of Evangelia Gasparova’s house. They went inside. Evangelia welcomed them with excitement. They placed the man in the bed where Evangelia showed them and then they moved aside.

Evengelia went closer to the bed. She looked at the man’s face and fell unconscious. Pondilaki, who was closest to her, managed to grab her before she hit the floor and carefully laid her on the other bed. He sprinkled her face with water and Evangelia opened her eyes. She looked around the room and her eyes finally stopped at Pondilaki’s face.

“He is alive. Don’t worry!” said Pondilaki. “Where do you keep your onions?” he asked thoughtfully.

Evangelia pointed to the bottom of the cupboard. Pondilaki put her head down on the pillow and a moment later was clutching an onion in his hand. He cut it in half and placed it under the man’s nose. The sharp smell of onions perforated the entire room. The dock workers said goodbye and left. Evangelia’s lips began to twitch. The man began to show signs of life. Evangelia started to cry. Pondilaki smiled contentedly. Evangelia got out of bed and cried tears of joy.

“Thank you, Pondilaki, thank you!” she said in a painful tone of voice.

“Look after him! He needs care. Forgive me but I have to go, people are waiting for me,” he said, bid her goodbye and walked out of the door.

“That is a unique man...” Evangelina thought about Pondilaki and sat on the bed beside the man who had just been brought in. He suddenly opened his eyes and, with great pain emanating from his soul, smiled.

X

1.

The snow began to melt. The streets were wet. Water poured from the roofs and trickled downhill. Pondilaki left his house and quickly made his way to the café “Macedonia”. He sat at the same table with Manoli Strezovski where they always sat and ordered rakia.

“What’s new in town nowadays, Manoli?” he asked.

“Many things have happened in the last few days. Where have you been?” replied Manoli.

“I have many obligations. Tell me what happened. You know how I am, I have no patience. I want to know everything and now,” he said jokingly and thanked Stoios Panagopoulos for the drinks that he brought them.

Stoios Panagopoulos smiled and went back to his counter. Manoli Strezovski took a few sips of rakia and began to talk. He said:

“The Macedonian desire to move weapons to Solun, from the upper reaches of the great river, has died out. Many people in the city were outraged. They were taking their frustration into the streets.”

“But it’s best this way. Otherwise we would have had a fratricidal war.”

“Yesterday in the ‘Patera Hani’ boarding house the nationalists said that the Macedonians have raised their heads and want the Balkans for themselves. Word quickly spread to the police and many

unwarranted arrests were made. If this continues any longer all the camps and dry islands will be filled with Macedonians. I can tell you that people are afraid. The people locked themselves inside their homes... The city is sinking in terror. Some strange groups of people, armed with guns and knives, appeared on the streets this morning. They began to kill innocent people in full view. When the police arrived, the policemen greeted them like they were some sort of heroes instead of murderers..." concluded Manoli.

"I also have been told that the city does not have enough food to feed the population," added Manoli and continued:

"It appears that there has been a shortage of food in Solun for a long time but the black marketeers are doing well. Women, even housewives, are beginning to sell themselves to strangers for a crust of bread. This is what the government has done to our people. It has pushed us back to 1942, to the time when we were dying of hunger by the hundreds each day. Just like then, now too they are hiding the dead but they can't hide the houses that smell of death..." said Manoli.

"So are we returning to 1942?" asked Pondilaki with a surprised look on his face. "What happened to the peace and democracy we were promised?" he added.

"Not everyone is free. But we do have armed people walking around Solun and the surrounding area and they are waiting for a sign to be activated... That's all I know," replied Manoli.

"Is that everything you wanted to tell me?" asked Pondilaki.

"No!" he said. "I also want to tell you that more and more people are showing up in the boarding house and in the city that have escaped from other Balkan countries. They all look like Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin."

"How is the American holding out with Urania?" asked Pondilaki.

"The American got pushed out of favour by the Ukrainian who is now in bed with her," said Manoli and thought for a moment. "This

is to our detriment.” Everyone seems to pursue their own fancy, including Urania who is constantly flirting with her feelings. She is with everyone every day. The American, the Ukrainian, the Cretans, the English, Hash and his friends and with all kinds of people who seem to land in her lap. She also has so-called ‘friends’ from Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Skopje and who knows from where else...” concluded Manoli.

“So this is how it is now, eh. Supported by the strong, the democrats must be wiped out. Very cleverly done! I am hopeful that Urania is not strong enough to kick us out of the café,” said Pondilaki and scratched his head.

“Our future is written in the black cards, Pondilaki!” said Manoli Strezovski with a worried look on his face.

“Bring us one more rakia!” Pondilaki yelled at Stoios.

They were all quiet when Stoios brought them their rakia. They grabbed the glasses and swallowed the liquid.

“Did anyone return from prison? I saw some people on the street. They were circling around,” said Pondilaki.

“I don’t know anything about that but I am concerned about our guests from the neighbouring countries. The wolf has invited them to preserve their conscience before the people. We need to be careful. They cut heads off without asking to whom they belong. This is a bad time for such tactics... I almost forgot, Nika Maria is back. I know that you are friends with her. But she has changed a lot...” said Manoli.

“Where can I find her?” asked Pondilaki with much interest as he clenched his jaws and the veins in his neck swelled.

“In the same house, on Odos Vardaris street,” replied Manoli.

Pondilaki finished drinking his rakia and, with a blushing face full of rage, said:

“To hell with this! Thank you for the information Manoli, and be careful!” He then rose from his chair and, without shaking hands with Manoli Strezovski, stormed out of the café. In the street he joined a column of people who were rushing towards the city centre.

2.

Pondilaki found Nika Maria sitting on an iron bed, layered with dust and a cloud of dust flew off whenever someone touched it. The door on the ground floor was gaping open and anyone passing by felt a gust of wind blowing from the great salt water. It was kept wide open and it often slammed shut, breaking the silence that reigned in the house. It smelled like death inside and one got a bad feeling just passing by it.

“There is no salvation...” he thought.

Nika Maria did not recognize Pondilaki. She constantly waved her hands without making a sound even though her mouth was wide open. When Pondilaki got closer to her he noticed that her tongue was cut off. He wanted to help her but thought she would be better off dead. Nika Maria sat curled up like a ball. She was a pile of unwashed skin and bones, terrible looking with her long hair covering nearly her entire face. She did not look at all like the girl Pondilaki remembered with her soft smooth, shiny skin. It seemed like death had grabbed her and dragged her into his kingdom. Pondilaki went closer and pushed her long black hair back. A terrible stench emanated from her body that smelled like a long-dead cat. In place of eyes she had two rotting holes. She had no eyes. Pondilaki remembered her well. She had beautiful warm green eyes looking back at him each time he looked at her. He remembered the time fleeing from the police, before the war had started, and hiding in a house. It was this house. He startled the young woman. He remembers looking at her naked silhouette in the dark of night, wondering if he should flee and run for safety somewhere else or stay with this dark nude figure that jumped in front of him and awakened his soul. She had a nicely molded body, two long delicate hands with pointed nails, clear translucent green eyes from which sprang confidence, warmth and obedience and a startled heart that was beating rapidly. He spoke to her and managed to calm her down. Soon he became lost in her beauty, shape and the dark and

light spots on her body. He had passionate feelings for her like never before, the kind writers write about in romance novels. He was entering uncharted territory which he later admitted. He decided to stay. It was in this decrepit ground floor that he spent an entire week in the arms of the most beautiful naked woman he had ever seen, whose smooth skin had the aroma of blooming roses. In those days there was no red lantern hanging at Nika Maria's door. After they parted company they never met again even though he searched for her everywhere in Solun.

Now that he found her again he felt chills running down his spine. She looked like death and that frightened him. He wanted to run but decided to stay and repay her for the selfless kindness and sweetness she lovingly offered him. Even though Nika looked like Black Death he decided to bathe her, clean her room and put her to bed. Even though he was traumatized from the way she looked; the burns on her body, her gouged out eyes, her terribly poor shape, her stench... he still felt obligated and hastened to repay the debt he felt he owed her. He brought food from café "Macedonia" and fed her. Then he put her to sleep and left. He left the house bewildered and walked the streets in deep thought. When he arrived at café "Macedonia" he leaned against the wall. He was dizzy and did not want to fall.

"Where is Foti?" Pondilaki called out loud.

"Don't you know?! He has been gone for a few days now. We are all looking for him," replied Stoios Panagopoulos surprised that Pondilaki was looking for him in the boarding house. Stoios poured a shot of rakia and gave it to Pondilaki.

"Drink it," he said and asked him why he was leaning on the wall.

Pondilaki pushed the glass aside, turned and slowly went out of the boarding house.

3.

Outside his shoes got stuck in the snow. The wind began to blow wildly. The water dripping from the rooftops was blown in his face and neck. He pulled up his coat collar and hastened his pace. He

turned onto a side road then, after passing a few streets, he reached Nika Maria's house. He did not speak to her. He stood there looking at her in silence. Then suddenly, he turned around and without saying a word, not even goodbye, he left the room and went outside. He walked along the alley deliberately under the eaves trough to be dripped on. He suddenly stopped and turned left at the end of the alley. He started to run. His face turned red and he breathed heavily. He arrived at the church Sveta Katerina (St. Catherine), bypassed the large stone and headed straight for Done Bindov's house.

"God, I forgot about the meeting!" Pondilaki thought to himself. "They must have meetings! The entire peninsula is simmering and all they want is to hold meetings. All we wanted was some bread and now they are ready to cut off our heads. What stupidity! Our power flew out of our hands. All we have now are regrets because we acted like stupid children..." he thought to himself as he entered the building where Done Bindov lived. In front of his door stood a young girl with gentle eyes and a mole on her neck.

"They are expecting you in the guest room," she said and opened the door for him.

"You are Iana Chakalarova, right?!" asked Pondilaki.

"Iana Chakalarova, yes, that's my name," replied the girl.

"I know your boyfriend," said Pondilaki.

"Please come in, they are expecting you," said Iana and rushed him towards the guest room and entered after him. She smiled gently at Done Bindov and showed Pondilaki where to sit.

Pondilaki nodded at the attendees and sat on the chair that Iana offered him. The attendees each discretely nodded back, welcoming him. He smiled at Iana. After that he concentrated on the discussions.

"We can now start the meeting," said Done Bindov. "With Pondilaki we are all here."

“Let us start then. Yes, let’s start,” some of the attendees murmured.

“I propose that we put one item on the agenda and that is: The political and economic situation in this country and the role of the Macedonian organization in achieving political and economic life with a view at resolving the Macedonian Question, which our organization is targeting... do you agree?” asked Done Bindov and waited for responses.

The attendees nodded their heads affirmatively.

“Then let us go to the first part of the first item on the agenda. Please allow me the liberty to inform you about the political and economic situation in the country. Is anyone against my motion?” asked Done Bindov and waited for the attendees to respond.

When no one objected Done continued: “I must say that the people are sick and tired of what has been happening. There is uncertainty everywhere. The war took many lives and, even though we won, we have not solved our problems. Hunger has become our enemy number one. The government made no effort to help us or protect us. We all agreed to bring democracy in this country, to take action and to restore our national wealth. But instead of taking positive action the royalists have increasingly and insistently drifted towards the English, and with each passing day they have succeeded in this regard. But not only that! They have consistently attacked our democratically-minded citizens and destroyed their role as a force with which we agreed to form new policies in this country. So far things have gone from bad to worse. Our task is to prevent the destruction of the democratic forces in this city. We as a Macedonian organization need to remain separate from the whole political life of this country. We will stay in the fight and together with all the progressive people in the country; we will form a government that will solve our Macedonian National Question. We will lay down our lives if necessary but we will not give up...” said Done, coughed and opened the floor for others to speak.

“If I understand you correctly, war is imminent,” remarked Pondilaki with a serious look on his face. “The Macedonian Question cannot be solved without a struggle. What is even more

important is that we must win or otherwise we are done for. The gentlemen in Athens have begun an offensive against everything that is progressive in our country. I have received information which indicates that we have a need to form a joint democratically inclined defense system... I think we should be arming ourselves again,” added Pondilaki.

“The mountains are near and we have the guns. Let us pray to avoid bloodshed,” said Iana Chakalarova with a serious look on her face.

“We surrendered our guns when the Varkiza Agreement was signed. What are we going to shoot with now, sticks?!” yelled Pondilaki with a raised tone of voice. “If you don’t have any other pressing issues, I would like to excuse myself from this meeting. I have more urgent commitments. My objective is to fight against real problems and not to attend meetings where we talk, talk and talk. I will see you at the next meeting.”

“You can go, Pondilaki,” replied Done. “The organization needs people like you who are brave and uncompromising. Thank you for coming. Farewell and greetings to your dock workers,” added Done.

“Goodbye everyone and keep your heads up,” said Pondilaki and, accompanied by Iana Chakalarova, left the guest room.

“How is Stavre Nakovski?” asked Iana as they were walking through the kitchen.

“How do you know Stavre?” asked Pondilaki surprised.

“We are marrying him to Evangelia Gasparova tomorrow. I am her maid of honour,” she boasted.

“Ah, fantastic!” he replied. “Excuse me... I must go now,” he said and stepped outside.

4.

Pondilaki traveled hurriedly down the dark Solun streets, walked into café “Macedonia” and sat at the dock workers table. Nikos

Zaikopoulos was there, offered him a chair and ordered rakia for him.

Stoios Panagopoulos brought him the rakia, put it in front of him and said:

“Here is the bottle, you can pour your own rakia. My legs are sore from constantly running to your table.” He then smiled and put the bottle on the table.

Pondilaki grabbed the bottle and poured his own rakia.

“Pour your own rakia, gentlemen...” he declared, swallowed several gulps and put his shot glass on the colourful but dirty tablecloth. He then opened his eyes wide, and when he saw a young man coming over to his table he jokingly said:

“Have I gone mad?”

“It’s over!” yelled the young man. “Athens is burning!”

“Sit down, rest and tell us all about it!” replied Nikos and offered him a chair beside him.

“The capital is burning!” said the young man, sitting down.

“Not so loud, Lazaros, not so loud!” advised Pondilaki.

“I can’t help it! My soul is dancing! This government will also fall! Athens is burning! I spent the last few days there. It is burning! The people have risen against the government and against the English. They all came out into the streets. The gendarmes were not strong enough to stop them. Many people were shot and killed. It’s the same thing every day...” he declared.

“So its war!” echoed Nikos. “And so they will have war!” he added.

Pondilaki handed Lazaros a shot glass and filled it with rakia.

“Have a drink! Wash your throat! You are a good journalist. Done Bindov will love your stories. You will fight against the fascists with your pencil and slogans and we will pick up the guns. Have another drink!” said Pondilaki.

“Thank you Pondilaki, I am honoured. It’s a great honour for me to sit here with you and talk...” replied Lazaros.

“Have a drink and only worry about your pencil,” said Pondilaki while staring at the stage spotlighting a performer swallowing fire. He then looked back at the table and said:

“Forgive me gentlemen, I have to go.”

“What is the hurry?” asked Lazaros surprised.

“I have obligations, my good man...” replied Pondilaki and got up from his chair. Stoian Dzhavalekov followed.

“I am going too. I will see you tomorrow,” said Stoian and smiled gently.

Pondilaki too said his goodbyes and the two men left the café.

“Lazaros thinks it’s a big deal,” said Pondilaki.

“Do you think there will be war?” asked Stoian, worried.

“It is inevitable is my friend. We avoided one fratricidal war and now we are about to run into another one,” replied Pondilaki.

“Oh my dear Lord, will I ever see peace on this earth? What have we done that was so bad to deserve this? Perhaps there will be no war,” said Stoian.

“Yes, there will be war. It will be a fierce, bloody, fratricidal war. Whoever survives will suffer for a long time. He will live in the darkness and his soul will be filled with bitterness. It will be worse than the war in Spain. Worse than the plague!” replied Pondilaki.

After that both of them went quiet. They split up at the next corner. Pondilaki went left on Eptapirgon Street and Stoian headed straight for the market.

XI

1.

The priest Iraklo, whose real name no one knew nor to which nation he belonged, approached Evangelia and Stavre and wet their hair with water.

“Kiss each other!” he said.

Evangelia and Stavre kissed. Everyone clapped their hands. Evangelia blushed. Stavre smiled.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife to be together until death do you part...” he said and sprinkled them with water.

“You made a mistake, Father,” yelled Iana Chakalarova. “You should have proclaimed them married before they kissed. Now they are blasphemers.”

The priest laughed loudly.

“May they be healthy and alive. They may kiss as much as they want. The most important thing is that they don’t lose their love for each other,” replied the priest.

2.

Pondilaki, standing on the side, smiled. He was pleased that he had succeeded in fulfilling Evangelia and Stavre’s desire to bring them together. He then bumped Iana Chakalarova who stood beside him, causing her to leap forward.

“What are you afraid of?” he asked her.

“Are you kidding me?” she replied.

“No,” he said. “I am just happy to see them together. Evangelia and Stavre together again.” He then looked at Iana and said: “You need to find someone for yourself!”

“I can take care of myself and my son, by myself!” she said quietly but was unable to conceal the vibration in her voice.

“Your life and your happiness is yours and you can spend them any way you see fit,” replied Pondilaki.

“You are invited for lunch. Will you attend?” Iana suddenly asked him.

Pondilaki was confused. He did not know what to say. He coughed and said:

“You are a beautiful woman, truly beautiful! I will certainly attend!” He then leaned on the pillar beside her.

“Let’s go closer to the newlyweds,” Iana said and began to move away from the pillar. She then took Pondilaki’s sleeve and pulled him away towards the newlyweds. They stood beside each other in silence.

3.

Done Bindov approached Stavre Nakovski and in his baritone voice, pleasing to God and the saints painted on the walls in the church, pleasantly blessed the marriage and from the inside of his coat pocket removed his goat-skin wallet and smacked it into Stavre’s hand.

He said: “Do not count the coins because it will bring you bad luck,” and hugged him. He then kissed Evangelia, congratulated her and wished her a happy life. Then everyone present did the same thing.

4.

Stavre Nakovski was silent. Evangelia smiled happily. They led their guests to their home for appetizers and snacks. The party lasted only a short time. Pondilaki and Iana took them to the train station and bought them tickets. A few moments later they escorted them

onto the platform where the train noisily arrived promptly. Evangelia and Stavre went aboard and picked a booth for themselves. Stavre peeked out of the window and said:

“I know you want to stay in Solun. I remember you telling me a year and a half ago. Do you remember? You sent me a letter at the base.”

Pondilaki smiled, looked at Iana and gently parted her hair.

“Take care Stavre and be careful, there are all kinds of people in the Paiko villages. They always want to turn Macedonians into Greeks, so be careful! If you need me you know where to find me!” replied Pondilaki.

Stavre Nakovski did not answer him but did notice sadness in his face. He didn't know whether it was because they were leaving or because the Macedonian population in the villages was being Hellenized.

“I am ready to face life as it is being offered by the Athens government. But they will never make a Greek out of me,” Stavre finally said cheerfully and extended his hand.

They shook hands and the train left. Stavre kept waving until the train vanished behind the houses.

“It is never easy to leave your place of birth, something you always carry in your heart forever,” said Iana Chakalarova who took off the glasses which she occasionally wore and with the white handkerchief, which she always carried in her inner suit pocket, wiped her tears and put her glasses back on. Pondilaki gently tugged at her and they entered the big waiting room and quietly exited through the other door.

“I will take you home now...” said Pondilaki.

Iana Chakalarova smiled gently and took his hand.

“I am inviting you for tea. Will you accept?” she asked.

“Why not, I will be glad to have tea with you,” he replied, smiled and accelerated his pace.

PART II

1.

Boimitsa was a small town with low houses and narrow muddy streets. There were puddles from the melting snow everywhere. The one level, lonely train station painted all grey was waiting for the train from Solun to arrive. The few passengers lined up under the eaves bobbed from side to side trying to avoid the drops from the roof dripping on their heads. There were barely twenty passengers on the entire platform. The station master, dressed in his railway uniform with a cap on his head, came out and stepped into a puddle. His shoe sank under water and he made a funny face. He took off his shoe, emptied the water and put it back on. None of the passengers waiting under the eaves laughed or moved. Everyone was nestling in their winter coats trying to avoid the cold. The station master went on the track and lifted his head up high.

“Now...” he mumbled and turned left, then right and joyfully yelled: “The train from Solun is arriving. Everyone step up to the platform and be ready. The train will stop for one minute only and will not wait for anyone!”

The people came out from under the eaves and got closer to the rails. The great steam locomotive appeared from behind the curve. It was bellowing a white cloud. A moment later it stopped in front of the station master.

“Welcome!” the station master yelled at the train engineers, while touching his cap with the fingers of his right hand.

The two men greeted him back. One of them pushed the dirty window open and said:

“What’s new, Iorgo?”

“Everything is peaceful here. Like there was no war,” replied Iorgo, the station master.

They were all silent. The two men came off the train and breathed the cold air deeply. They too were dressed in railway uniforms. Each wore a thin leather strap over their shoulders on which hung a leather bag of medium size. Then the conductor came out of the first train car, lit a cigarette and put his matchbox back in his pocket. He took a few puffs and then took a deep breath of fresh air.

“Life is good to you, Iorgos, you bathe in the fresh mountain air,” said the conductor.

“It is true Stefanos. Life is better in the wild. Is this how you joke with an old man?” replied Iorgos.

“The good life is in the mountains, Iorgos. I am not kidding you...” Damn these stupid cigarettes...” said the conductor, coughed several times, and threw the cigarette into a nearby puddle.

“Get on board, its time to go!” yelled Iorgos to the train men. “No one gets off at this damn place,” and then raised his baton high and blew the whistle.

The train men boarded the train and took their positions. The train stood still for a moment and then the engine began to emit a large cloud of steam causing the wheels to move and slightly slide on the rails. Then there was a chain of wagons banging one after another and the entire train began to move slowly. Iorgos smiled. He was amazed that not a single person had come off the train.

2.

The train disappeared into the distance. The great smoke and steam that rose high into the sky also disappeared. Iorgos wanted to return to the train station office but his eyes caught a couple of unusual figures. It was Stavre Nakovski and Evangelia Gasparova standing on the platform. Iorgos was happy.

“Ah, finally I got to see someone get off the train...” Iorgos said to himself and smiled. “After being here for so many years I finally got to see people get off the train in my station...” he thought and could not take his eyes off Evangelia and Stavre. Then, at the same time,

he began to wonder what had led these people to come to this town. He stood there and kept staring at them.

Stavre Nakovski did not look at him. He took Evangelia by the hand and slowly crossed over the rails. They passed by Iorgos who still looked confused. They greeted him by nodding their heads and went around the puddle in which Iorgos had stepped earlier, and entered the train station building. It was warm inside and their bodies felt relaxed. Stavre turned around to see if Iorgos was still standing on the platform when he noticed him standing in the mud and laughed. He again took Evangelia by the hand and the two went through the narrow door of the station leading into the waiting room where one could buy train tickets to all directions.

Iorgos stood there dazed for a few moments and then suddenly he ran into the train station building as if looking for someone but no one was there. He then went to the window and looked outside. There on the street, about midway to the great water, he saw Evangelia and Stavre walking away. He then smiled contentedly.

“My station is no longer cursed,” he thought to himself. “It has been two years since I saw passengers getting off at my train station. Now I can say that I am real station master,” he said out loud and kept looking outside through the window.

3.

Stavre Nakovski held Evangelia’s hand with one hand and with the other he carried a large suitcase. It was heavy and caused his feet to sink into the mud and his face to sweat. It was also getting warm. They walked quietly and Stavre often looked at Evangelia. She did not exhibit any noticeable fatigue on her smooth white face and often stretched a sympathetic smile for Stavre when he looked at her. Stavre kept looking at the short houses whose paint on the walls had faded. In some he noticed bullet holes. They slowly traveled along the street that divided the town in two. On the left there were small variety stores. Every store they passed by was closed.

“The town seems to have sunk into a deep winter sleep. Are there people in these houses?” asked Stavre.

“People are still shaken from the war and that is why they are sitting at home. They are still afraid to come out...” replied Evangelia.

“Only the devil knows what is happening. Let’s hurry. There is a long and arduous road ahead of us. Kostaneria is far...” added Evangelia and they picked up the pace. They followed the same road to the last house which then led them into a great dense forest. They walked rapidly in silence. The road was muddy and unused and their feet kept sinking deep into the soft soil. Stavre did his best to help Evangelia navigate the rough inaccessible road. They did not stop. And even though they traveled uphill in mud, they were not hindered and exhibited no fatigue on their faces. They climbed the first hill and went down into the valley. It started to snow. Stavre Nakovski laughed out loud and said:

“The winter is welcoming us Evangelia, it is welcoming us to our place of birth.”

“I am cold...” complained Evangelia and put on her winter coat. Her lips were blue and freezing. Her nose began to drip and caused her to constantly sniff. Her eyes were tearing.

Stavre Nakovski stopped. He put down the large suitcase, opened it, took out a wool cotton undershirt, tore it into two pieces, took off Evangelia’s boots and wrapped her feet with the dry cotton cloth.

“Now put on your shoes!” he said. “It feels better, right?” he asked her and kissed her. He then closed the suitcase.

“Do you remember our first trip down the mountain?” asked Evangelia.

Stavre Nakovski smiled and helped her put on her boots.

“As long as we don’t pass by Lefter Tsipuriazovski’s house,” muttered Evangelia quietly.

“Why, are we taking a different path?” asked Stavre.

“You never did tell me what happened in the Tsipuriazov house. I found the people murdered, massacred in their own yard. Even though the time was stormy I looked for you everywhere... you have not told me what happened here,” said Stavre.

“The war passed and with it passed the terror. We are alive and healthy and that’s what is important at this moment. Don’t remind me of the war days. I hate them. They make my soul restless and I can’t sleep,” replied Evangelia.

Stavre decided to leave that subject alone. He picked up his suitcase, took Evangelia by the hand and said:

“Let’s go! We don’t want the mountain upset with us. We will freeze in the woods...” and gently pulled her by the hand. They again found themselves walking in mud. The air in the forest was clean and fresh but cool. It filled their lungs as they pressed on. Stavre Nakovski began to cough. Evangelia got closer to him. They walked in silence. Their view was blocked by the deep chestnut forest whose length was deceiving. A cold wind blew and pinched their cheeks. Evangelia took shelter behind Stavre. She did not feel the cold in her legs. Snowflakes clung to her nose and she clumsily rubbed them off.

“Are we going to take a rest? I am tired,” she complained.

“A little further up is a water spring. We will stop and rest there. But for now we must go on or otherwise we will make friends with the wolves,” said Stavre jokingly.

“Are there wolves here?” asked Evangelia with a fearful tone of voice.

“Yes, for the city folk, there are wolves. We the villagers are accustomed to having them as friends...” replied Stavre.

Evangelia became a bit frightened and her eyes began to dart here and there, watching for potential wolves.

“Don’t worry, silly. Wolves are afraid of people...” he told her to calm her down.

“Where are we going?” asked Evengelia surprised when Stavre pulled her off the road.

“Over there, under that beech tree. There is a water spring there. We will stop and rest a bit,” he reassured her.

“I thought you told me that there was a water tap there,” she said.

“There are no water taps in this mountain, only water springs. There is only one water tap and that is in Kostaneria,” replied Stavre and sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree. He then opened his suitcase and pulled out some bread and dried meat wrapped in a white sheet. He put them on the tree trunk.

“Let us now eat a bit, we will need our energy. There is still a long way to go through the mountains,” he said, broke a piece of bread and gave it to her. He then said: “Take your meat and more bread if you want.”

Evangelia took the smallest piece of meat and began to chew on it.

“This mountain scares me...” she said excitedly.

“You will get used to it. Now eat!” he replied.

4.

Two hours later Stavre Nakovski stopped walking. Evangelia, surprised, opened her eyes wide. Just in front of them they saw singing beams partly covered in snow.

“Where have you taken me?” she complained all upset.

“To Kostaneria, of course!” replied Stavre cheerfully.

“The village is incinerated and is devoid of life. Will we live like savages!” Evangelia rebelled.

“Don’t worry! This house is burnt down but we have another house, an older family house which is still standing. We will go and stay in that house until I fix my father’s house,” replied Stavre.

“My dear Stavre, why did you bring me to this desolate wilderness? I will be giving birth in two months. Who is going to help me? You!?” yelled Evangelia.

Stavre put his arm around her, placed his fingers through her hair and kissed her on her forehead.

“Let’s go!” he said and led the way. The snow was pretty deep. They arrived at Stavre’s old family house and went inside. The rooms were small, the ceilings were low and the floors were wet. There were cobwebs everywhere. Small animals scurried away and disappeared into the cracks of the walls.

“We will be fine...” said Stavre and put his suitcase on the wet floor. “We have a bed and bed covers. That’s enough for us to begin our lives in our new world.”

Evangelia sat on the bed, put her head in her hands and began to cry.

“I am going to look around,” said Stavre and left. He soon returned with a load of dried branches. He put them down on the fireplace floor and ordered them on top of one another. He then took out an old newspaper from his suitcase and slid it between the branches. He then lit a match and lit the newspaper. A flame appeared. Soon the room was warm and glowing. The flames began to lick the black copper cauldron that hung over fire.

5.

Evangelia was lying on the bed crying. All this time she did not move from the bed. Stavre was smiling to himself and kept quiet. He left the room and went down to the yard. He then stepped outside, through the village streets and made his way to the village cemetery. He walked to one of the graves and stood there silent for a long time. He was visibly upset and clenched his teeth. He plucked out the weeds from the top of the grave and straightened the lamp that had tilted over time. He left the cemetery in silence and took the long

way through the village streets. He stood in front of his father's house and his heart trembled with excitement. He watched the charred beams in silence while clenching his teeth. He cleared the snow off the beams and removed them from blocking the entrance of what was left of the house. The upper floor was completely burned down. He went inside and looked around. His face eased a little bit. He then went down through the beams in the basement and smiled. The cellar was untouched. He came out of cellar and went onto the street. He suddenly stopped and listened. His ears were filled with creaking sounds coming from somewhere in the village.

"Someone is coming..." he thought and stood there in silence.

6.

He stood there like a stone until the wagon loaded with furniture almost ran him over. The oxen pulling the cart stopped in front of him.

"What the hell are you doing standing in the middle of the road man?" yelled the wagon driver and went towards Stavre.

"Hello Dimitar, welcome to Kostaneria," said Stavre in a calm voice.

Dimitar Popgonev was dumbfounded and, in a surprised tone of voice, said:

"Aren't you supposed to be in Athens?"

Stavre Nakovski laughed loudly and hugged him.

"Come and have a drink with us," said Stavre and led him to the old family house. Evangelia came out to greet them at the door after the oxen pulled into their yard. She was still whimpering when she invited them in. They gathered around the roaring fire and warmed their bodies. There were signs of happiness on their faces.

"Stay here, as our guest until you fix your house," said Stavre.

“Thank you! That is very kind of you,” replied Dimitar cheerfully and swallowed several gulps of rakia from the bottle Stavre handed him. “Excellent!” he said, smiled and pointed to Evangelia. “Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

Stavre Nakovski apologized, laughed and said:

“This is my wife Evangelia. Soon we will have a new member in our family,” and tossed some more wood into the roaring fire.

“Congratulations and good luck to all of you. May God grant you a long, happy, healthy and prosperous life. Bless you!” replied Dimitar Popgonev and twisted his long grey moustache.

7.

They sat around the fire watching the flames dance in silence. It was dark of night. Stavre took the boiling pot off the hook and placed it on the table.

“All we have is bread. We have no spoons. The porridge is ready. Help yourselves; you can scoop it with bread,” said Stavre and invited Evangelia and Dimitar to dinner.

“We don’t need spoons...” said Dimitar and sat at the table. They all gathered around the pot and began to slurp the hot porridge. They could not stay awake after they ate. They were all very tired. They went to sleep, one on the bed and the others on the floor. They all slept in that one room. They quickly sank into a deep sleep. Slowly the fire burned out and the room was conquered by darkness.

II

1.

Stavre Nakovski cut the trees in the mountains and Peno Popgonev dragged them to the village with his oxen. He harnessed his oxen with a wide belt around their necks and tied a long chain with hooks to it. He then stuck the hooks in the log and had his oxen pull it.

“Don’t cut any more logs! We have enough for two roofs,” yelled Peno from the distance.

Stavre Nakovski lowered his ax, put it on the grass and laughed. He hastily put on his leather jacket and joined Peno, who had hooked a log and was guiding his oxen downhill with a long, thin twig. They came down the mountain through the clearing and soon arrived at the road towards the village. On their way they ran into a tall man who smiled at them. Stavre Nakovski smiled back and the man came closer and shook hands with them.

“Welcome to Kostaneria, Uncle Gone. The village is coming to life with you coming back...” Stavre said cheerfully.

“Several families have arrived with me. Kostaneria will be a big village again,” replied Gone.

Peno Popgonev ordered the oxen to get moving again and Stavre Nakovski followed behind.

“When are you planning to move to your father’s house?” Gone asked Stavre.

“In a few days, but you and your family are welcome to come for tea at the old family home,” replied Stavre.

“Gone Slivarov laughed out loud and said:

“So you have become a host, eh? In that case I will come...” and veered off down the road.

2.

Peno Popgonev removed the hooks off the log, took the harness off the oxen and took the oxen home. Stavre Nakovski followed him and then veered off the road and went into the yard of his old family home. He began to kick the tall grasses that had grown between the stones but it was an overwhelming job. He decided to go inside. Evengelia was lying in bed.

“How far are you with the construction of the house?” she asked.

“Tomorrow we will cover it. We will move into a new house, beautiful, clean and dry...” he replied.

“Tonight the Popgonev’s are coming over,” she informed him.

“Fantastic!” he said all excited. “I also invited Gone Slivarov. He tells excellent stories. It will be a lot of fun,” added Stavre and took off his jacket.

“Will you pour some water from the jug so that I can wash my hands?” he asked.

“Right away,” replied Evangelia and took the jug out to the yard. Stavre followed close behind.

“When are you giving birth?” asked Stavre.

“When they want to come out!” smiled Evangelia.

“They? You mean there is more than one?” wondered Stavre and asked: “How do you know?”

“Donka told me. She can tell by the size of my belly,” blushed Evangelia and poured water on Stavre’s hands.

3.

Stavre Nakovski washed his hands and he and Evangelia returned to their room. He sat at the table and waited for Evangelia to bring him his lunch. He was rubbing his hands with anticipation.

Evangelia brought him a bowl of hot beans and some cornbread. Stavre grabbed the bread, broke a piece of it, dipped it in the bowl and put it in his mouth.

“They taste very good,” he complimented Evangelia.

She laughed and left the table.

“I will fix the bed for you so that you can have a nap. You look tired...” she said, pulled out a white sheet and covered the top of the bed with it.

4.

After he finished eating Stavre drank some water. He was very pleased with himself and he did not hide his pleasure. He took off his shoes and lay in bed. Evangelia took his shoes out to the hallway and by the time she returned he was asleep. He began to snore which made her laugh. She too then went to bed beside him.

5.

Evangelia woke up before sunset. She went out into the yard. She poured some water from the jug in one hand and washed her face. She returned to the room. She went towards the bed to wake Stavre but changed her mind and went into the other room. She changed her mind again and awakened Stavre. They both went outside. She poured some water for him and he too washed his face. They both returned to their room. Evangelia sat on the bed and Stavre sat at the table. There was a loud bang on the door which startled Stavre and made him jump off the chair.

“It’s probably the Popgonevs...” said Evangelia and ran downstairs, flung the door wide open and saw an older man with sharp eyes and a cheerful look on his face.

“Come on in,” she said somewhat surprised and moved to the side to let the man in.

“Don’t be afraid, my dear. People call me Uncle Gone and this is my wife Hrisanta. And these here are our children. God has not forgotten us,” he said and asked if Stavre was home.

“I am Evangelia, Stavre’s wife. Come on in, we have been expecting you,” she replied.

When Gone Slivarov entered the room Stavre stood up and they shook hands.

Hrisanta Slivarova and her three children also entered the room. Evangelia sat them on the bed and Gone sat at the table. There was another knock on the front door. The door flung open and Dimitar Popgonev, his wife Donka and their two children, Peno and Dino, appeared. Stavre cheerfully invited them in.

“Wife, please bring us some rakia!” Stavre ordered Evangelia in a gentle tone of voice. “Please sit!” he said and offered Gone and his two sons a place at the table. Donka Popgoneva walked past them and sat with Hrisanta Slivarova on the bed. The two women greeted each other and Donka hugged the children.

6.

Evangelia was heard moaning in the next room. Stavre jumped from his chair and was beside her in a couple of steps. He grabbed her before she fell to the floor. He picked her up and brought her into the room. Everyone stood up. Evangelia looked pale in the face and was having difficulty breathing. Stavre laid her on the bed, brought a bowl of water and sprinkled her face. Donka Popgoneva laughed, went over to her and wiped her face with her handkerchief.

7.

Hrisanta Slivarova looked delighted. She loved children. She had born three of her own, two female and one male, before age forty. Their oldest was 19 and her name was Agapi. The middle was 12 and her name was Kaliopa. The youngest was almost 2 and his name was Kosta. She was a healthy woman. She did everything in the house and in the fields by herself. She rarely allowed Gone to do anything other than to hunt and bring firewood from the mountains. Hrisanta sent her three children and Gone outside the room and then escorted Dimitar and his two sons out. When she returned, she closed the door behind her and went to the bed.

“Warm some water in the big pot and bring some clean towels, I am sure they have some in the chest,” ordered Donka and then turned to Evangelia and, with a smile on her face, said:

“Are you going to give birth, woman?!” and lifted her dress up above her knees, took off her underwear and looked to see if her

water had broken. She then smiled and looked at the pot hanging on the hook above the fireplace.

“Now I want you to push hard and bring the baby out,” Donka said to Evengelia and gently raised her knees and opened her legs wide open. “You will be giving birth to twins,” she added and laughed out loud.

The water in the pot had warmed up and Donka took the pot off the hooks and placed it near the bed. She then took some towels out of the chest and put them on the bed and began to encourage Evengelia to start pushing harder. But all her effort was in vain because Evengelia’s contractions had subsided and she was all relaxed.

“No problem, we will wait,” said Hrisanta and sat down on the bed beside Evengelia. Donka agreed.

8.

Stavre Nakovski stood outside the door and listened. The silence that followed was upsetting him. He was expecting to hear a baby crying. He wanted to enter the room but refrained and stood by the door. He stood there for two hours. Then suddenly he heard a baby crying. He smiled a wide smile but his heart kept pounding. He began to pace nervously. He was very excited.

“It’s a boy!” he heard Hrisanta Slivarova yell out. “May your son be safe and sound!” he heard her yelling.

“Thank you!” replied Stavre cheerfully. “May I come in?”

Hrisanta laughed loudly.

“Not yet! There is another baby in Evengelia’s belly. Wait until I call you,” replied Hrisanta.

Stavre began to pace up and down the hallway. Then he began to rummage through the rooms looking for something but could not find it. He was not sure what he was looking for. About an hour later he heard the cry of a child.

“Surely this must be the second baby?” he yelled out loud.

“Yes! It’s a girl! You have a daughter, Stavre!” yelled Hrisanta Slivarova and told him to wait a little longer.

“What? There are more?” responded Stavre.

“No! No! Wait!” Donka yelled sharply.

9.

Donka Popgoneva put the children on the bed beside Evangelia and said:

“May God bless them and may they be healthy and alive and may they have children of their own...” She then covered Evangelia with a bed sheet. Evangelia thanked her by nodding, smiled gently and showed her love to her little babies. There was a creak at the door and Stavre was inside. Evangelia gave him a loving look. Stavre walked to the bed and kissed her and the babies on the forehead.

“Wife, we are now a big family,” he said. “I am a lucky and happy man!”

Evangelia smiled and hugged her children. Hrisanta Slivarova washed her hands and sat down at the table. Donka Popgoneva brought a bottle of rakia and three glasses from the other room. She put the glasses on the table and filled them with rakia.

“To the health of the twins!” she proposed and raised her glass. Hrisanta and Stavre did the same.

“May they be healthy and happy!” declared Donka and knocked off her shot of rakia in one gulp.

Hrisanta laughed.

“May they be healthy and happy and may they give us many grandchildren,” declared Stavre and looked at Evangelia who had her eyes closed. The twins were sleeping beside her.

“Let’s go home now, Donka,” said Hrisanta and stood up.

“Good night Stavre, and look after your wife and children. Now you are a real host...” said Donka and joined Hrisanta. They went through the door to the hallway and then down to the yard. Stavre accompanied them to the street.

“Thank you and say hello to everyone at home,” he said and went back to the room. He sat on the chair next to the bed and felt overjoyed just watching his wife and twins. He did not put out the candle and left the kerosene lamp burning. He fell asleep sitting on the chair.

III

1.

It was getting light outside. Kolio Bochvarov was preparing to go on a trip. He said goodbye to his wife and went out onto the street. The road was covered with snow and he took careful steps, but with every step he took his feet sank deep into the snow. He stopped in front of Stavre Nakovski’s house. He was amazed to see Stavre with a hammer in his hand that early in the morning.

“When are you moving in?” Kolio asked Stavre.

“In three days. The old family house is too damp. I am afraid my children will get sick,” replied Stavre sounding a bit worried.

“God be with you. If you need help ask my sons, they will be glad to help,” said Kolio.

“There is not that much work left to do. The only hard part now is covering the roof... Where are you going?” asked Stavre.

“I am going to Solun. My wife wants me to buy her a number of things... some clothes and some other things...” replied Kolio and laughed.

“Can you do me a favour?” asked Stavre.

“Name it! What can I do for you?” replied Kolio.

“Please go to café ‘Macedonia’ and ask for Pondilaki. Ask him to come to Kostaneria for the baptism of my children. I want him to be their godfather,” said Stavre.

“No problem, except I don’t know the man,” replied Kolio.

“Ask for him at the café. Everyone there knows him,” said Stavre.

“I will do that for you,” said Kolio and began to walk away. He then yelled: “When I return I want to see you moved into that house!”

“I hope so, Kolio. That is my wish too. I hope to move before you return...” he replied.

2.

Pondilaki was sitting with the dock workers in café “Macedonia” drinking rakia. Suddenly he smelled the aroma of a mountain fragrance and felt a strong arm grab him by the shoulder. Pondilaki turned around and looked at the man’s face. He did not recognize him.

“Are you Pondilaki?” the man asked.

“Yes! From the top of my head to the bottom of my toes,” replied Pondilaki with a smile on his face.

“I am Kolio and I bring you greetings from Kostaneria,” said Kolio.

“Please sit!” replied Pondilaki and yelled at Stoios to bring over some rakia.

Stoios Panagopoulos brought the rakia. Kolio Bocharov picked up the glass, sipped enough to wet his lips and said:

“I bring you greetings from Stavre Nakovski. His wife gave birth to twins, a male and a female, and he is inviting you to go to their baptism.”

Pondilaki laughed out very loudly. The customers in the café turned and looked. Some looked upset. Stoios Panagopoulos came over to the table trembling.

“Stavre Nakovski has twins, a male and a female,” declared Pondilaki cheerfully.

Stoios Panagopoulos laughed even louder than Pondilaki and disturbed even more customers.

“A drink for each of Stavre’s twins, the greatest actor in Macedonia and Greece,” yelled Stoios who ran to the bar, grabbed a bottle of rakia and filled the glass of every customer in the cafe. He then raised the bottle up high and yelled out:

“May Stavre’s angels be happy and healthy!” and took a couple gulps of rakia directly from the bottle. When he was done drinking he again laughed out loud and, while walking way, said:

“Free drinks for all! Stoios is paying!” He then said: “And while Foti Steriov, our proprietor, has disappeared, his delightful wife is upstairs spinning in her room with his majesty the Ukrainian... Now drink. You too Sofia... If none of us cares about the café then to hell with the café. Drink to the health of Stavre’s children...”

Sofia Geleva picked up another bottle. She drank the rakia directly from it. The customers were killing themselves laughing. Pondilaki cheered her on. He then began to sing the song about ‘Apostol Voivoda’. His gentle lyrical voice surprised the dock workers and filled the café with warmth. Stoios Panagopoulos slowly turned around and was surprised to see Pondilaki singing. He could not close his mouth from the surprise he got when he saw Sofia Geleva sit on a bar stool and stealthily follow every move Pondilaki made. His gentle voice and romantic demure made her tremble with excitement. She could take it no more and disappeared into the kitchen. She hid behind the big stove and poured countless tears of regret that she could not have his heart, if not forever, then at least for a moment.

Even though he did not understand the words of the song, Stoios Panagopoulos felt chills run down his spine. The melody of the song made him feel like something sacred was raised in his soul and caused tears to roll from his eyes. He knew those tears were rolling because of the song but he was glad to hear it. He would sing it himself if he knew how to sing. Suddenly Pondilaki was accompanied by the lyrical baritone voice of Manoli Strezovski. All the customers in the café showed great admiration for the song sung by their beautiful voices. Then, suddenly, another voice joined in. It was the voice of an olive-skinned young man sitting by the window in the old part of the café. All the customers in the café turned to see who it was. The boy, feeling the admiration of his audience, raised his voice and tried to sing louder. Iani Rongov, the best bouzouki player in Solun who was in the café performing that night, watched with interest.

The song even drew in Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin who came down from the boarding house. The melody and the voices were overwhelming and were knocking on his heart as if he had something in common with them. He did not know the words but felt like he did. Some words he understood and slowly began to open his mouth and follow the melody. He had images of the Don leaping in his mind, which caused his eyes to gleam and a lot of tears to roll down.

“My God, this beautiful song speaks to me,” Alexei yelled out and tried to follow the melody.

Kolio Bochvarov too joined the singing by releasing his lyrical bass. He was not as good a singer as the other three, but the strength of his voice made up for it. He shook the place and made the windows vibrate. Iani Ronkov no longer wanted to follow the song as an observer... he pressed his bouzouki firmly against his chest and went wild, his fingers taking measured strokes to produce a gentle sound that matched that of the singing voices.

Pondilaki smiled but did not stop singing.

“The bastard has not forgotten his roots...” a thought crossed Pondilaki’s mind.

Iani Ronkov began to cry quietly while gently playing his strings.

“A gene is a gene. I just hope we don’t lose them in this mess and find ourselves alone...” Pondilaki thought.

The melody flowed through the bodies of everyone present in the café and gave them a sense of grandeur. It was like the music made them bolder, stronger and no longer lost in their own lair. Pondilaki raised his voice and so did Manoli and the olive-skinned young man. Iani Ronkov began to play his bouzouki much clearer and with stronger feelings. The participants who did not know the lyrics or could not sing began to clap their hands to the rhythm of the bouzouki. Urania Papaioannou in her festive night gown, grey in colour and rather transparent, appeared at the top of the stairs. She leaned against the wall and allowed the music to penetrate her body. The words she did not know, but the melody was engraved in her mind a long time ago. She had heard it from her grandfather Panaiot. Even after so many years later, the song restored the image of her bearded old grandfather who always sang it. It was like the song was reminding her of what once was, of the good things they had.

“My brother Hristo sang this song. That’s why they locked him up,” Urania thought to herself. She felt sad deep down in her soul and no longer wanted to listen to the song, but could not make herself leave. The more she tried to escape from it, the more she absorbed it into her pores. She felt like she was nailed to the stairs.

Foti Steriov surprised everyone who knew him when he entered the café. The song was upsetting him but he kept on singing it until he reached the counter. He smiled at Stoios Panagopoulos.

“What is Pondilaki celebrating?” he asked with great interest.

“Stavre Nakovski has twins...” Stoios cheerfully replied.

“Sons?” Foti asked.

“A son and a daughter...” replied Stoios.

Foti Steriov laughed out loudly.

“Fill everyone’s glasses with rakia!” ordered Foti.

Stoios Panagopoulos grabbed the bottle and topped everyone’s glasses with rakia.

Foti Steriov again began to sing, this time even louder, but suddenly stopped when he saw Hash appear at the café door with Peter McDonald and Dustin Brown, two of his companions and supporters of the King.

The song stopped them cold at the door of the café. Large goose bumps suddenly appeared on Hash’s face. The veins on his neck swelled up. One of his veins above his right eye and forehead began to throb. He began to foam at the mouth like a rabid dog and his eyes looked like they could kill. The scar under his left eye began to pulsate. He loudly knocked with his foot on the floor and promptly turned his eyes toward the audience. He sent blood curdling glances with his evil eyes at everyone he looked at. His eyes were promising death. But even with all that, he was unable to stop the melody that filled the café.

“Stop! I forbid you to sing! This stinking song has been forbidden!” he yelled out furiously at the top of his voice while stomping on the floor with his boots and dripping foam from his mouth.

Pondilaki saw his insolent behaviour but did not stop singing. He continued to sing the song to its conclusion and then took a sip of rakia. He looked satisfied. He winked at Iani Ronkov in gratitude. He then got up from his chair, approached Hash and sternly and menacingly said:

“Collect your rags and get the hell out of here! You should be eternally grateful to Stavro Nakovski’s twins for your existence... I should have killed you the first time we crossed paths...” Pondilaki then approach the olive-skinned young man who was earlier singing with him.

The young man asked Pondilaki to join him and introduced himself. “My name is Vangelios Kotinaris...” he said.

“You are not Macedonian, are you?” asked Pondilaki and was very curious to know how he learned that song. Vangelios Kotinaris smiled and said:

“Beware of dogs the likes of Hash. I am a Greek but also a Democrat,” he declared and proudly raised his head up. His gaze stopped at Hash who gave a sign to his two companions, Peter MacDonald and Dustin Brown, to sit down at the neighbouring table. They all laughed.

“Your friend is not leaving,” said Vangelios Kotinaris to Pondilaki. He also noticed the five very masculine dock workers, who had muscles from loading and offloading ships at the docks. They moved on Hash and, without saying a word or making a facial expression, without paying attention to his distraught foamy mouth distorted by fear, they grabbed him and threw him out on the cobblestone road. They then calmly returned to the same table and resumed their conversations.

“And that too is done!” said Vangelios to Pondilaki, sighed and with great interest asked him: “And what are you celebrating?”

Pondilaki laughed out loud and quietly said:

“Our friend, Stavre Nakovski had twins...”

“Stavre Nakovski?” asked Vangelios very surprised.

“Stavre Nakovski was my friend. We fought together in the last war. I thought he was dead...” said Vangelios Kotinaris surprised.

“Maybe he is not the same Stavre. The Stavre I knew and fought together with was from Kostaneria. He was an actor in Athens,” added Vangelios Kotinaris.

“Yes, he is the same Stavre and he is alive,” replied Pondilaki.

“Recently his wife gave birth to twins. Now please take your rakia and come and join us. The democrats in this café sit at that table,” he

said and they got up to move, but before they reached the other table Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin got in their way. Pondilaki did not like the situation he was put in but calmly accepted Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin's intrusion.

"Let me ask you something. Do you and I have something in common?" asked Alexei with a calm expression on his face.

Pondilaki did not answer. All present in the café turned their eyes on them. They all expected another storm. Foti Steriov turned pale with fear. Peter MacDonald, looking at Urania's facial expression, bypassed them and leaned on the counter while keeping his eyes on them at all times. Dustin Brown seemed like he was experiencing extreme pleasure. He wanted to see a big fight break out, in which Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin would get the worst of it and permanently leave Urania Papaioannou's bed. He was confident that Alexei would lose considering the number of dock workers present in the café and how they were preparing themselves for a new fight.

The entire café went silent. Stoios Panagopoulos pulled out an iron bar from under the kitchen stove, which he used to open wooden crates, and held it in his hand.

"I want to sing the song again," said Alexei with a distressed and pleading tone of voice. "The song made me feel like I was back on the banks of the Don and in the broad, endless fields of my country."

Pondilaki bypassed his enormous body, stopped in front of the table at which Vangelios Kotinaris had just sat down, turned to Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin and said.

"The Slavic lands are great but we don't differentiate between people. We don't classify them in groups and subgroups. We are all people of this world. We are all the same and all the songs belong to everyone equally... Come and sit at the head of our table so we can sing some songs together. Perhaps we will sing the song about 'Apostol Voivoda'..." concluded Poindilaki and waited for Alexei to decide. Then, after contemplating the idea in his big blond head for a while, he sat down at a different table.

Urania Papaioannou immediately went to him, took him by the hand and led him up the stairs into her room. Stoios Panagopoulos returned the iron rod to the kitchen, pleased that he did not have to use it. Foti Steriov loosened up a little and nervously laughed out loud.

“Drinks for all! I am buying. I want us all to celebrate the future of the Nakovski twins...” declared Foti while standing at the end of the counter with his glass of rakia raised. Stoios left the counter with a bottle and began to top everyone’s shot glasses so that they could all toast the twins. When he was done serving Stoios returned to the counter and filled his own glass. When the toasting was done Stoios smiled and happily put down the empty glass on the counter and began to fill it again. When he filled it about halfway up he was startled by Pondilaki’s loud start of a new song. The customers came alive again. Pondilaki was joined by four others and by Iani Rankov’s bouzouki.

The café shook from the loud voices. The song touched Urania Papaioannou because she came out of her room smiling. She wanted to hear this song because it was part of her. She did not come down to join them, even though she had a strong desire to sing the song herself. She stayed with Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin who, it appears, was more interested in her smooth hips than the song.

It was late in the evening and the boarding house, for the first time in a long time, cancelled its regular program. For the first time Sofia Geleva did not get to show her audience her magnificent naked body from which sprang the aroma of carnations. But she was happy to take a rest. She looked over at Pondilaki and he caught her glance but it remained just that. Kolio Bocharov could not get a grip of himself from all the excitement he was feeling, evident from the way his body moved. He never expected this kind of honour to be bestowed on Stavre Nakovski. He sang even louder. Late in the evening Kolio left the café and spent the night in Pondilaki’s house at Eptapirgon.

IV

1.

Agapi Slivarova was a young, beautiful and healthy girl. She left home and headed for the cemetery. Peno Popgonev crossed the road, joined her and the two ran through the woods and stopped at the edge. They were breathing hard. They were a few hundred metres away from the cemetery. Peno began to stroke Agapi's smooth hair. Agapi blushed. They kissed but felt timid. They were deceived by the desire to make love. They lay down in the snow. Peno stripped his upper body revealing his bare chest. He gently pressed his body against hers and kissed her on the neck. Agapi Slivarova felt excited all over. She trembled with passion. Her left leg stiffened. She suddenly let out a moan and her leg began to loosen. Peno got off her and buttoned his pants. He again lay down beside her and they rolled in the snow. They laughed. After that Peno stood up and stood straight, looking in the distance. Agapi watched him with admiration and with curiosity.

“What's the matter?” she asked timidly.

“I am leaving...” he said and turned his back on her.

Agapi Slivarova blushed again but this time she was angry. She jumped out of the snow and grabbed him by the sleeve. She was trembling.

“Where are you going?” she asked while tugging at his sleeve.

Peno Popgonev pulled his hand away from hers.

“I am going to Solun to find work. The village can't support the entire family...” he said quietly and went down the hill. Agapi Slivarova ran after him. Again she grabbed him by the sleeve and pulled him hard.

“You are not going anywhere! You made me pregnant and now you are running? You will remain in Kostaneria!” she yelled out angrily at him.

“I am not staying. I am leaving. As soon as I earn enough money I will send for you to come and join me...” he said quietly and kissed

her to calm her down. He then pulled his sleeve out of her hand and ran downhill.

Agapi Slivarova ran after him. About fifty metres later she tripped on a root, fell and rolled down in the snow. She fainted. Peno Poptonev kept going. He never did turn back to see his beloved Agapi one more time. He ducked into the woods and ran faster. Agapi Slivarova lay in the snow motionless.

2.

Kolio Bochvarov, climbing up hill, stopped to rest. He took out his canteen and drank some water. He plugged it and put it back in his bag. The wilderness attracted him and he wanted to absorb it all with his eyes. His gaze stopped on the slope where Agapi Slivarova's body was resting. He thought it was Ilinka, the crazy lady from his village, rolling in the snow. But not being sure who it was, he ran towards her. He was completely surprised to find Agapi. He leaned over and lifted her up from the snow and placed her on his back. He then quickly climbed up the mountain to the village. When he arrived in front of Gone Slivarovo's front yard he called out to Hrisanta. Gone heard the call and told Hrisanta that Kolio was calling her at the front gate. They both rushed over to meet him. Hrisanta arrived first and when she saw Agapi she began to cry loudly. When Gone arrived, he saw Hrisanta crying and Kolio holding Agapi over his shoulder. He then quickly ran over and helped Kolio put Agapi down on the bed.

3.

When Kolio brought her back, Agapi Slivarova showed no sign of life except that she was breathing. They sprinkled her face with water and she instantly opened her deep blue eyes. She began to cry. Hrisanta too was crying over her. Kolio Bochvarov left the room. Gone escorted him out to the front gate and said:

“Thank you, my friend, you saved my child.” He then patted him on the shoulder.

“Don't worry about it. We are family,” replied Kolio and left. He then took the road through the village and went home.

Gone Slivarov went back to the room where his daughter was resting. He sat beside the fireplace for a while. He then poured himself a shot of rakia, sat at the table and drank it all at once.

“There is a god after all...” he muttered to himself and put his shot glass down.

4.

A light was lit in Stavro Nakovski’s new house. Evangelia was very happy and smiled contentedly. She hugged Stavro joyfully. One of her children began to cry in the corner of the room. Evangelia let go of Stavre and went over to calm the baby down. She picked it up in her arms and began to cradle it. The child lowered its voice, bringing a smile on Stavre’s face. Evangelia put the child on the bed.

“It is time to prepare the table. Our guests will soon be arriving...” said Stavre, hugged her and they kissed.

“I will prepare the table if you help me...” said Evangelia with a smile on her face.

Stavre Nakovski grabbed the table from the kitchen and took it to the guestroom. Evangelia helped him put it down on the floor and cover it. He kissed her gently on the forehead.

“Now I will help you set it,” he said. Evangelia laughed.

“Fine then, help me... if that’s what you so wish...” she said and gave him the pan with the zelnik.

Stavre Nakovski took the zelkik to the guest room and then came back to the kitchen. Evangelia handed him two bottles of rakia and a bowl of sweet buns.

“Be careful you don’t drop them. We don’t have any more...” she said with a smile and turned her back to do the next job.

Stavre Nakovski went to the guest room again. He then heard a knock on the door. He put the bowl and bottles on the table and

rushed downstairs to open it. There, staring at him, was Kolio Bochvarov accompanied by his wife Andonia.

“Congratulations on your new house,” said Kolio and was escorted to the guest room. His wife Andonia followed.

“Please, sit at the table...” Stavre invited them kindly. “Evangelia has baked a nice zelnik and some sweet buns,” he said and put out the shot glasses. He put one in front of Kolio and Andonia and filled them with rakia. He then poured one for himself, lifted it and cheerfully said:

“Welcome to our new home!”

“We are happy to be here and may your table always be bountiful,” said Kolio and took a sip of rakia.

“Help yourself, take a sweet bun...” said Stavre to Andonia who was shyly looking at the baked goods.

“Thank you Stavre but I will wait until Evangelia comes over to the table, then I will have some...” she timidly said and adjusted her beautiful hair in her dark brown head kerchief.

“I will go and see what is happening with the appetizers,” said Stavre and ran into the kitchen.

“We have guests my dear,” he said and kissed her gently on the cheek. Evangelia began to rush, wiped her hands on her apron and hurried to the guest room to greet them. She entered the guest room smiling, shook hands with Andonia and Kolio and sat at the table. Stavre also returned and sat down.

“I bring you greetings from Pondilaki...” said Kolio.

“Oh, so you found him. How is he?” asked Stavre.

“He lives well in the city. Pondilaki is a special person. There is much strength in that man...” said Kolio and took a long sigh. Stavre laughed. Andonia blushed. Evangelia got up and, without

apologizing, left the guest room. There was a knock at the front door. Stavre Nakovski tapped Kolio on the shoulder and ran down and opened the door.

“Congratulations on your new home,” said Gane Slivarov and crossed over the threshold. Following him were his wife Hrisanta and their daughter Agapi. Stavre invited them to the guest room. He opened the door and asked them to go in.

“Are you expecting guests?” a voice was heard saying at the front door. Stavre turned around to see who it was.

“Come, come on in,” said Stavre cheerfully. “We are celebrating our home opening tonight.”

“That’s why we came. To congratulate you on your new house,” replied Dimitar Popgonev and pointed at Donka standing behind him. Stavre stepped aside and let them pass him by on the way to the guest room. They all went up and sat around the table. Evangelia brought some boiled potatoes and put them on the table.

“Take some while they are still hot,” she said cheerfully. “I am so happy when my house is full of guests. I love you all,” she added.

5.

Vasil Digalovski lived on the other side of Kostaneria in a house which his mother had inherited from her grandfather, who was a priest in the village. Dimitar Popgonev’s son helped them repair the half-burned house. Vasil lived with his mother. He put on his new suit, white shirt and tie and polished his shoes. All this while his mother sat in the corner of the room knitting and watching him.

“Be careful my son! Stavre is an educated man. He lived in Athens and hung around with knowledgeable people. Please don’t embarrass our family...” she said quietly.

“Okay, mother, I will be careful,” replied Vasil.

“Don’t stay there too long. Visit with them for about half an hour and then come back home. And don’t eat too much. Our family has always been mindful of such things...” she said.

“Of course mother! I will simply go there and come back...” said Vasil and went out. It was dark and cold outside but that did not worry him. He carefully strolled down the street trying to avoid stepping in the puddles. He soon reached Stavro Nakovski’s house and knocked on the door.

“Good evening and congratulations,” Vasil said to Stavre when he opened the door.

“Thank you, Vasil. Come on in!” replied Stavre inviting him inside.

Vasil Digalovski was escorted into the guest room where he greeted everyone individually. He sat down in the place selected for him by Evangelia and accepted a glass of rakia from Stavre.

“Congratulations on the birth of your children and may they give you many grandchildren in this house...” Vasil toasted the Nakovski family with a gentle smile. “Finally our people are returning to our village and to their old cradle...” he added.

6.

Evangelia Gasparova cut up the zelnik and gave everyone a piece. Stavre Nakovski filled everyone’s glasses with rakia. Donka grabbed a sweet bread and began to chew it.

“I understand you were an actor in Athens before the war?” said Vasil Digalovski looking at Stavre with interest.

“A great actor,” weighed in Kolio Bochvarov. “He acted for the gentlemen in Athens...”

Dimitar Popgonev leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette. Stavre Nakovski laughed out loudly.

“Who told you that?” asked Stavre.

“I learned that in Solun. The dock workers gave you great honours and drank a lot of rakia toasting the birth of your twins. Stoios Panagopoulos toasted you and during his toast he said that you were the greatest actor in all of Macedonia and Greece,” said Kolio with a serious look on his face while looking directly at Stavre.

“It is true. Unfortunately the times have changed and now here I am in Kostaneria,” replied Stavre and laughed. “There is no theatre here so now I am going to be a farmer.”

“We can have a theatre in Kostaneria. It would be a lot of fun,” said Vasil Digalovski blushing. “I can be an actor too... I can act...” he added.

“Slow down Vasil, this is a village...” replied Stavre.

“Don’t be fooled... There is no big difference between a village and a city. It all depends on how people are organized. I believe Kostaneria can have a theatre. Of course not like the one in Athens in which you participated, but a smaller company which can act when necessary and will provide us with cheap entertainment,” said Vasil Digalovski with a serious look on his face.

“There are not enough people available here to play all the roles required by a theatre. Who needs a theatre in Kostaneria anyway...” said Stavre and shook his head from side to side.

“I am available and I will try to act well. Maybe not as well as you but I can play a simple role, with a few words. I want people to applaud me...” said Vasil with a very serious look on his face.

“You will be good for the role of Oedipus in the eponymous drama...” said Stavre through a smile.

“Let me be Oedipus. We will fix up Vankov’s tavern and we will perform the play there. Agreed?!” replied Vasil and stuck his hand out.

Stavre Nakovski thought for a moment, laughed out loud, shook Vasil Digalovski's hand and said, "Agreed!" which surprised everyone in the room.

"We will all prepare for the play Oedipus. I will be playing Oedipus," said Vasil Digalovski cheerfully, looking quite satisfied.

Kolio Bochvarov laughed out loud. Dimitar Poptonev was a bit concerned and did not get involved in the conversation. He sat leaning against the wall and puffed on his cigarette. They all sat around the table until late evening and then, almost half-drunk, they left and went to their homes. Stavre Nakovski hugged and kissed his wife but Evangelia pulled away from his embrace.

"I have to clear the table," she said.

Stavre Nakovski laughed, grabbed her by her slim waist and lifted her up high.

"Let's go to bed. It's late. You can clear the table tomorrow..." he said and put her down. They quickly prepared and went to bed. Stavre blew out the candle and the light in the room disappeared.

"Are you asleep?" asked Stavre.

Evangelia did not answer. He assumed she was already asleep.

V

1.

On a quiet spring evening Vasil Digalovski, a simple villager, became king Oedipus. No one on Kostaneria expected this to happen. Until that evening if anyone would have said the village was going to have a theatre, they would have been laughed out of town. Similarly, if someone would have said that Vasil Digalovski was going to turn into a king, even if it was Oedipus, no one would have wanted to have a conversation with the person. No one would want to talk with them, not even about the least important things, like no one wanted to talk to lonely Ilinka who, every day from dawn to dusk, measured the road with her little hands, walking in

the mud barefoot. On Easter eve the villagers gathered in Vankov's tavern and sat on the wooden benches and the few available chairs and waited for the curtain to lift so that they could see Stavre Nakovski's miracle in Kostanaria and, of course, Vasil Digalovski who called this place a theatre.

2.

His sudden appearance, with darkened cheeks and a white mouth, all dressed in a dark green gown, wearing a spruce wreath on his head, throwing his arms up in the air, attempting to throw words at them from his white mouth, startled the villagers. They thought he was a monster. They all looked afraid. But that only lasted a few moments until they recognized Vasil Digalovski's figure on the dimly lit stage.

Gone Slivarov sat in the left corner of the theatre and followed Vasil Digalovski's movements dizzily, wondering whether this was real theatre or not. He had seen several performances in the city, put on inside great big white tents, but what Vasil Digalovski was doing did not fit with that image. He decided to talk to Stavre Nakovski, after all Stavre was the most educated man in the village. But he changed his mind when he saw Stavre Nakovski appear on stage disguised as a female.

"He too has gone out of his mind!?" thought Gone. "There is no person here to whom I can talk. Stavre is also a lunatic." He decided not to talk to Stavre. He turned around and watched the villagers looking confused as they tried to follow the tragedy on stage.

3.

Suddenly gendarmes rushed in and invaded Vankov's tavern. Government officials had observed something unusual going on and decided to pay the tavern a surprise visit. As they burst in they too began to watch the play and become involved in the game. What they saw they found hard to believe and so they stood there staring at the stage, tired and blushing from the cold.

4.

Both villagers and gendarmes stared dreamily at the stage. Vasil Digalovski cried like a wild beast and covered his face with his

hands. He then uncovered his face exposing what looked like two red holes for eyes. Donka Popgoneva screamed very loudly.

“Poor Vasil he has lost his eyes!” screamed Hrisanta Slivarova.

Everyone jumped to their feet. They all looked at Vasil Digalovski’s red eyes with great fear. The curtain fell and all the audience could see was the red linen. Gone Slivarov, not believing his own eyes, quickly ventured through the chairs and found himself behind the curtain. He almost collided with Vasil Digalovski.

“Are you really blind?” he asked him, staring at his eyes covered with dark red paint.

Vasil Digalovski laughed out loudly and wiped the paint off his eyes.

“Don’t worry, it’s just red clay. The paint is used as effect to make the scene look more realistic,” explained Vasil, wondering if he had expressed himself comprehensibly because Gone Slivarov still looked at him as if stunned, holding his face and staring at him with his big blue eyes. Vasil wanted to prove to him that he was okay but the bell struck. The curtain was about to go up. There was a wave of confusion in the audience. They all stared at the stage with a certain visible fear on their faces.

5.

There was complete silence in the tavern. The commander of the gendarmes fired his pistol over the heads of the villagers. After that he went backstage.

“Raise the curtain!” he yelled at Vasil Digalovski. “Do it now!”

Surprised by the rude interruption, Vasil Digalovski began to raise the curtain while staring at the frightened eyes staring back at him. The gendarme pushed him hard out of the way and took to the stage. He put his pistol back in his holster and, pleased with himself, laughed out loudly.

“This is political work... We thought this village was burned down and abandoned. But, unlike some other villages, obviously it is not. So, at this time, we must establish a government so that you can legally live in this place,” he said. “We need to choose a village mayor for you. This is how it is as ordered by the Athens government and by his majesty king George.” He then paused to see how the villagers were going to react. Everyone remained silent wondering what atrocities the government was planning for them. The gendarme coughed and said: “First we choose your village mayor as ordered by the government. Do you have any suggestions?”

Stavre Nakovski was standing behind the gendarme. Gendarmes did not fit into Stavre’s world. They reminded him of the time before the war. His impulsive instinct was to tell the gendarme to hit the road but he knew better.

“Why don’t we appoint Dimitar Popgonev as mayor. He is the oldest man in the village and everyone respects him. Of course, if everyone agrees?” said Stavre with aims at appointing the best person in the village as mayor.

The commander nodded his head vaguely. Stavre Nakovski was not sure if he had approved or disapproved. The silent villagers stood there surprised, wondering why the authorities wanted to choose a mayor so urgently and under such circumstances. Why not have proper elections? But after a brief silence there was a lot of chatter and the villagers agreed to appoint Dimitar Popgonev mayor of Kostaneria.

Stavre Nakovski was happy with the choice and showed a slight smile on his face, which disappointed the gendarme who made a sour and distorted face. He was not happy with the decision as was apparent by the look on his face and in his eyes. The gendarme got off the stage and went near Dimitar Popgonev, tapped him on his shoulder and laughed out loudly.

“So, this is the best man in your village?!” he yelled.

Stavre Nakovski sighed deeply. There was a lot of quiet whispering in the tavern. Dimitar Popgonev stood still and stared at the gendarme's cumbersome movements, pacing back and forth.

“Take him and cut off his head!” the commander ordered the two gendarmes who stood beside him leaning on the cobweb infested wall.

Everyone in the tavern thought he was joking. The two gendarmes grabbed Dimitar Popgonev by his arms and took him outside. Stavre Nakovski stood there petrified. Vasil Digalovski was silent. The commander laughed out loudly.

“People, they will kill him. He is one of us, a villager! Let's go out and save him!” yelled Gone Slivarov and dashed out, following the gendarmes who had taken Dimitar Popgonev. But after taking a few steps a tall gendarme jumped in front of him and pointed his bayonet, that was sticking out of the end of his rifle, at his chest and ordered him to stop. Gone Slivarov stopped, went silent and lowered his head. The commander laughed loudly. He then turned and abruptly looked at Vasil Digalovski's face.

“You will be the mayor of this village!” he said sternly pointing at Vasil to everyone's surprise. He then laughed loudly, walked outside, looked at the white-haired man lying on the ground, pointed at him and said: “This is what will happen to you if you defy us. You will be without a head on your shoulders if you ever dare disobey my orders.” He then turned to the villagers and yelled out: “All of you now go home!”

The villagers were silent and wrapped in great fear. They left Vanko's tavern with steps of uncertainty. Stavre Nakovski left last and was met by Donka Popgoneva who threw herself into his embrace, crying in despair.

“Be strong, please be strong Aunt Donka...” he said attempting to calm her down.

Donka could barely stand up. She was crying uncontrollably and was in great pain. She always knew how to hide and be unnoticed.

From a long time ago she knew how to avoid the servants of death. That is why she did not shriek or make any kind of sound when Dimitar Popgonev's grey head rolled on the floor.

Stavre Nakovski grabbed her by her arm and slowly escorted her home. They walked in silence and so did the other villagers who walked with them. He took her inside and left her there to wait for her son.

He went home too. All the villagers dispersed to their homes. They were all concerned. Not a single lamp was lit that night and nobody slept all night.

Vasil Digalovski remained behind in Vankov's tavern with the gendarmes.

"Take that paint off your face! You are the mayor of the village now! What kind of a mayor would you be with paint on your face!" the commander said sternly.

"Yes Sir! I am going..." replied Vasil with a tone of uncertainty and rushed to wash his face in the bucket of water that Stavre had brought earlier to be used after the play. After he washed his face he ran back and quietly stood in front of the commander.

"This circus was sufficient. We don't want it repeated!" said the commander. "Now take us to your house!" he ordered threateningly.

Vasil Digalovski took the lead with uncertain steps. The commander followed and the rest of the gendarmes followed behind him. They entered Vasil Digalovski's house and huddled in a room on the ground floor. They left a guard outside. The commander lay on the bed and the others lay on the floor. They soon all fell asleep.

Vasil Digalovski went upstairs. His mother was waiting for him.

"What happened in the village, son? Who are these people you brought home? Are they your friends?" she asked with a worried look on her face.

“Be quiet, mother, be quiet!” he said quietly and went into the next room. He lay on the bed with his open eyes, thinking.

VI

1.

To everyone’s surprise the gendarmes left Kostaneria. The villagers were thrilled. Fifteen days later, Stavre Nakovski stood leaning against the crumbling wall in Vankov’s tavern waiting for Gone Slivarov to arrive. They were going up high in the mountains to hunt wild game. While resting against the wall Stavre was taking in a panoramic view of the surroundings. Suddenly he jumped upright when he saw a column of gendarmes approaching. The gendarmes were followed by an ox-drawn wagon with a man, woman and three scrawny children riding on it. Stavre quickly ran home. When Evengelia saw the distress on his face she became frightened.

“They are coming... The gendarmes have returned...” he said trying to catch his breath. He then ran down to the cellar and hid his rifle in one of the baskets. He climbed back upstairs and went to the guest room. After that he went outside, sat by the front gate and watched the column of gendarmes in the distance.

“We fought in the war so that others can warm their asses,” he mumbled, while watching the gendarmes.

The same commander was leading them. They stopped in front of Vankov’s tavern and got off their horses.

“Milkiadis go on to that house over there and wait for me!” the commander said to the man behind the wagon harness. Milkiadis tapped his oxen with his twig and they started moving. They stopped in front of Vasil Digalovski’s house. The commander left the gendarmes in front of Vankov’s tavern and went over to Milkiadis. When he arrived he got off his horse, walked over to the gate and knocked loudly. Vasil Digalovski opened the gate. He was trembling with fear.

“Please come in sir, my house is always open to good guests,” he said with a trembling voice. Vasil then pointed towards the entrance to the house.

The commander laughed loudly, turned towards Milkiadis, raised his hand up high and said:

“Mr. Tsakondas, come on in! This will be your future home.” He then went inside the house.

Milkiadis Tsakondas got off the wagon. He then reached over to his wife Evridika and helped her down. Evridika was a skinny woman with many scars on her face that looked like healed wounds but they were pock marks from an illness or bad acne. Milkiadis then offloaded his three children. Evridika stood there and looked around. Her face was thin and she looked undernourished and sick. The three children, all female, stepped over the wooden threshold of the two-story house while licking on lollipops.

“Come, come! I am very happy to have you live in my house...” said Vasil humbly and helped the girls enter the house. He followed behind. When they entered the room they were met by the stern look of the gendarme commander.

“So, now the village has a mayor and a government!” said the commander in a rough tone of voice and handed Milkiadis a rifle with a short barrel. “Don’t spare its use, kill everything that stands in your way,” he ordered.

“Yes Sir. We are in agreement...” replied Milkiadis.

The commander then turned to Vasil and said: “Now go and prepare lunch for my people! We will be here in half an hour!” he then paused for a moment and sternly said: “We will be back here in half an hour, do you hear me?!”

He then turned to Evridika, bowed his head slightly, looked at Vasil and sternly said: “Don’t play games with me! You will lose your head if there is no lunch!”

“Please sit down,” said Vasil to the newcomers and climbed up the stairs to the upper chambers. His mother was waiting. She was very angry.

“You made a deal with the devil, son. They will destroy your home...” she said angrily.

“Vasil did not respond. He bypassed the bed where she was lying and went into the other room.

2.

Milkiadis Tsakondas went outside, unload his bags and brought them into the house. Evridika sat the children down on the bed and began to unpack the bags. She put the clothes in an empty closet in the corner opposite the window. The children kept licking their lollipops and occasionally smiled. Milkiadis went outside again and removed the oxen from the harness and put them in the shed behind the house. He looked satisfied when he returned.

3.

Led by their commander, ten gendarmes got off their horses. They tied their horses on the fence, went inside the house and entered the room where the Tsakondas family was staying. They sat around the big table. The commander looked satisfied and smiled infectiously.

“Well, start eating! This is our house now. The host is treating us.” said the commander to the gendarmes and began to eat.

Milkiadis and Evridika Tsakondas were both confused. The three girls kept licking their lollipops and looking at the gendarmes with fear. Vasil Digalovski stood beside the corner closet and silently watched. The commander kept staring at him.

“Sit down and eat with us!” he ordered sternly.

Vasil Digalovski did not move from the spot. All the gendarmes stopped eating. Milkiadis kept switching his eyes back and forth from the commander to Vasil. A storm was about to erupt. Evridika went over to Vasil, gently took him by the hand, led him to the big table and sat him down in the chair on the commander’s right side.

“Maybe he is not hungry. He ate a little earlier,” she humbly whispered to the commander.

Milkiadis Tsakondas looked angry.

“That lying bitch, she wants to save him!” Milkiadis thought to himself, took two steps backwards and sat on the bed next to the girls. Silence followed as everyone watched the commander’s hateful eyes.

Vasil Digalovski began to eat. The commander laughed dryly. The gendarmes resumed chewing their boiled potatoes. Evridika sighed hard with relief. She was pleased to have avoided bloodshed in the house that she had just inherited.

4.

The gendarmes finished eating. There was loud laughter coming out of Vasil Digalovski’s house as they got on their horses and, without greeting anyone, left the village. Vasil Digalovski silently sat on a stone in his yard leaning against the fence. Beside him sat Milkiadis staring into the distance.

“Let’s go inside, Mr. Digalo,” proposed Milkiadis.

“Okay Mr. Tsakondas...” replied Vasil, separated himself from the fence and slowly went into the house. Milkiadis followed behind and the two men entered the house through the already open door.

“Forgive me for leaving you but I need to lie down for a little while,” Vasil apologized to Milkiadis looking at his inquisitive eyes and then went upstairs to his room. He again passed by his mother lying in bed and, without saying anything, went into his room. He lay on the bed with his shoes on, staring at the black stain on the ceiling.

“Everything is gone to hell!” he thought to himself and punched his pillow.

5.

Evridika Tsakondas lovingly caressed the long blond hair on the heads of her three girls and gave them each a lollipop. She then stared at Milkiadis sitting at the table eating boiled potatoes.

“We have stepped into a snake’s nest...” she said worriedly.

“Don’t ask me what to do. We came to this village to serve the king and the government and I don’t see what is different here. I don’t care if people like me or not. My job is to govern this village. And I will do my duty and gladly cut off hundreds of heads,” he said and turned away nervously.

“Do as you like, but remember that people live with other people and not with animals or alone like the devil. You are the head of this family and you need to take care of us. Do whatever you think. However, always be careful! This village is a snake’s nest,” she said and lay down on the bed.

They were both silent. A strange silence filled the room.

VII

1.

An ox-pulled wagon loaded with barrels and bags was slowly moving towards Kostaneria. The oxen were guided by a man with slick black hair and a long grey moustache. Traveling beside his wagon was a dark-skinned man riding a horse and wearing long boots. He had a smooth bearded face and wore a black mantle over which hung a silver cross.

“Kostaneria is certainly a little village. You can’t get rich quick there, that’s for sure,” said the priest.

“I am not in a hurry. Our work is long-term. We will see...” replied the man leading the oxcart and whipped the oxen.

“Whatever you think Stefanos, but I think the village is not big enough for you to do business...” replied the priest.

“It is not big enough for church work either but still you are going there anyway...” said Stefanos pessimistically.

“Zinda Niarhos always wins. I will be returning from Kostaneria with a suitcase full of gold, just watch and see,” said the priest.

“Bless you, Father, if you can why not...” replied Stefanos and turned onto the village road.

Zinda Niarhos kicked the horse on the belly, sped by the wagon, reached Vankov’s tavern and was stopped by Milkiadis, whose sword was touching the ground and dragged through the dust.

“Good afternoon, Father. Welcome to Kostaneria...” smiled Milkiadis.

Zinda Niarhos got off his horse, shook Milkiadis’s hand and said:

“Hello old man, I haven’t seen you so happy in a long time...”

“Why shouldn’t I be? I am the governor here. Careful what you say...” replied Milkiadis and laughed out loud.

“We have a guest Milkiadis. This is our new merchant,” said the priest.

Milkiadis stopped laughing. Stefanos jumped off the wagon.

“Good afternoon Mr. Milkiadis,” said Stefanos with a smile on his face.

Milkiadis Tsakondas looked at the merchant and said:

“So, they sent Stefanos the Asia Minor colonist to my village. That’s okay, he is okay. Welcome!”

Zinda Niarhos laughed out loud. Milkiadis looked at him curiously.

“Where should I lodge, Mr. Milkiadis?” asked Stefanos humbly.

Milkiadis waited until the priest stopped laughing, looked at the Asia Minor colonist and said:

“Over there, at that place. My house is the second last house on the left side of the road,” and pointed with his hand at the house on the cliff. “Unload your things at that house. That place one time served as a store where goods and foodstuffs were sold. Inside there is room for a coffee shop, I think... but it should be fine for you...”

“Thank you, Mr. Milkiadis,” said Stefanos humbly. He then went inside Vankov’s tavern, looked around and came out again. He then approached Milkiadis and stopped beside him.

The priest piped up and jokingly said: “What? You don’t like it?”

Stefanos looked down.

“Answer the priest!” ordered Milkiadis.

Stefanos raised his head up and looked into the distance.

“It’s fine. I will unload my wagon. The oxen are tired and need to rest. Excuse me....” he said humbly and apologetically and went to his wagon.

“Wait Stefanos, you have not yet earned the place...” said Milkiadis with a cynical look on his face.

“Please Mr. Milkiadis, please go ahead and tell me what you need from me and I will do everything I can to meet your demands,” replied Stefanos.

“You don’t sound surprised by my proposal...” marveled Milkiadis looking a bit confused. He did not know what to tell Stefanos. Zinda Niarhos laughed out loud.

“The first thing you need to do is donate some things. Some you deliver to Mr. Milkiadis’s house and some you take to the church to show God how kind you are. You don’t make note of these things in your notebook because they are donations, not loans. Now be a good

man and go unload your things,” ordered the priest and sat down on a stool in front of Vankov’s tavern.

Stefanos began to unload his goods. He first unloaded the bags. He was drenched in sweat.

“I want this tavern open by this evening!” ordered Milkiadis and then looked at the priest.

“I don’t have a store to open,” replied Zinda Niarhos and shrugged his shoulders.

“Then let us go to the church. I will introduce you to the villagers,” said Milkiadis. “But be careful! The population here is upset and can rebel, so let us not suffer if there is no need for it...”

2.

The church was about fifty metres outside of the village. There was a dense forest of chestnut trees stretching behind it. The roof was red in colour and could be seen from afar. The façade had long lost its original colour, it had faded from the snow and rain that constantly beat down on this mountainous region. Zinda Niarhos released his horse to graze in the big yard. Milkiadis rang the big church bell and then went out into the yard and joined Zinda Niarhos.

“What do we do now?” asked the priest curiously and lazily.

“We will wait for the villagers to arrive. It’s time they met and got a feel for their divine person in the village. All we lack now is a teacher and we will be complete,” replied Milkiadis.

“We will have a teacher in the village soon. I know the person. We were together at roll call. He will be here this fall,” said the priest and laughed.

“The villagers are coming. Be careful! You are a priest again...” warned Milkiadis.

3.

The villagers began to arrive from all sides and gathered in the churchyard. Many looked upset. Stavre Nakovski walked slowly and carefully. Gone Slivarov dragged his feet beside him. They entered the churchyard and stood to the side away from the rest.

Milkiadis Tsakondas gently tapped on the priest's shoulder and then raised his hand to get everyone's attention. Soon there was silence. Milkiadis swallowed hard.

“People!” he yelled out loud and looked up at the sky. “It has been many days since our church had its doors open to those who wish to worship and show their affection to the Son of God. However, it will be different from now on. I am pleased to present to you the new priest who today arrived in Kostaneria. This is God's representative. He has a good heart and much understanding for everyone's troubles. I here, before all of you, surrender to him the temple of God, our village church. I expect you all to know this and to appreciate it. The name of our new priest, standing next to me, is Zinda Niarhos. That is all I have to say for now,” said Milkiadis and moistened his lips with his tongue.

Zinda Niarhos was not happy with the government entrusting this place to him so that he could turn the villagers into an obedient flock of sheep, which the government could then shear when it wished. It seemed to him that he would have no problems turning the poor souls standing before him into obedient sheep. Then, as the priest looked through the crowd, he noticed Stavre Nakovski. An evil smile surfaced on his lips.

“That bastard will help me. I will move into his house. I will have free room and board and everything else that a village priest is entitled to...” he thought to himself and began to walk among the villagers towards Stavre. He stopped in front of him and smiled slightly.

“Help me get acquainted with the people...” he said and extended his hand for a handshake.

Stavre Nakovski slowly looked at his bearded face, at his old dirty black mantle and at the silver cross that hung above it.

“How have we sinned against God to be receiving a killer like this guy?” Stavre thought to himself, turned around and, without shaking his hand, walked away and headed for the village. Gone Slivarov followed. They walked silently.

“You know the priest, don’t you!?” asked Gone with much interest.

“Yes! We met in Athens. He was defrocked then. He spent his days being drunk, gambling and chasing women. Many believed he would never wash the blood from his hands. He killed people for money. The Germans paid well. He would have killed his own mother for money. He came to the cabaret every day, where I was employed as an artist. He is a monster. May God curse the person who sent him to Kostaneria,” replied Stavre.

“Take it easy, Stavre. The man reached out to you. Maybe he has changed? Things do happen in life you know?” said Gone.

“Sorry Uncle Gone but people like him don’t change overnight. They always remain the same. Everything around them stinks of rot. Blood will be spilled in our village. We will suffer a lot. I might be the first one to go,” replied Stavre.

“Don’t think that way. We have a governor in the village. We have a mayor. Our job is to abide by the law and live honest lives,” said Gone.

“That is true, Uncle Gone. We will live just as honourably as he did before the war,” replied Stavre sarcastically.

“Take it easy, Stavre. I don’t believe they will turn the clock back...?” said Gone.

“They have already turned the clock back. Zinda Niarhos, the murderer, will perform God’s works in the Greek language. But outside of Milkiadis and the priest we have no Greeks in the village. Can’t you see what’s happening here?” replied Stavre.

“Anyway, let’s wait and see. Time will tell. Let’s wait and see,” said Gone and turned into the yard of his house.

Stavre Nakovski continued to walk on the dusty road. He stopped in front of Vankov’s tavern. He became enraged when he saw Stefanos the Asia Minor colonist inside. He did not say anything and went home.

4.

Zinda Niarhos stood beside Milkiadis while observing the villagers. He detected mistrust in their glances. He said something. The villagers did not understand what he said and stood there in silence. Zinda Niarhos then began to curse those from the government who sent him to Kostaneria.

“Excuse me...” he then said to Milkiadis in a soft tone of voice and entered the church.

Milkiadis detected anxiety on the priest’s face and smiled.

“Go home now and come back to church regularly!” Milkiadis ordered the people in a stern tone of voice.

The people did not move from their seats. They just stood there staring at his dark face.

“Go home, people!” Milkiadis yelled out loud and turned red in the face.

“Go home, damn you!” he bellowed at them, pulled his pistol out of the holster and pointed it at them.

Donka Popgoneva, standing near Milkiadis, spat at his feet and turned slowly towards the other villagers.

None of those sitting down moved.

“Let’s go home, people! The comedy is over...” said Donka out loud and walked away. The rest of the villagers followed. They left

the churchyard and headed toward their homes. No one said a word. They all quietly went inside and locked their doors.

Milkiadis stood there for a while and then went inside the church. Zinda Niarhos stood by the altar. He looked up at Milkiadis and said:

“They are wild people.”

“No problem, I will tame them!” replied Milkiadis. “The government and the king have confidence in us and support us. We need to fulfill their requirements and strive to implement their ideas. That’s all, Father. So be careful how you behave around them,” warned Milkiadis. “Excuse me now, I must go...” he added.

“Do you have a place for me to stay? Or do you think I will sleep in the church or on the street?” said the priest with an ironic tone of voice.

“There is a small house behind the church. You will be comfortable there. Goodbye, Father. Just think about how you will domesticate your flock...” replied Milkiadis with an equally ironic tone of voice and stepped out of the church. He then walked through the courtyard very quickly and slowed down when he reached his house. He then sat at the table and leaned his head on it. The three girls suddenly jumped on his back. He yelled at them harshly and they ran off to their bed. Evridika looked at him sternly, but Milkiadis ignored her. He lowered his head again and put it back on the table.

VIII

1.

Stavre Nakovski was furious. He could not stop thinking about Zinda Niarhos. This man made him very uneasy. Stavre was returning from Boimitsa because he did not want to shop in Stefanos’s store. When he reached the tavern he peeked inside and saw the priest, Vasil Digalovski and Milkiadis sitting at a table playing Xira and drinking rakia. They laughed loudly and occasionally tapped each other on the shoulder.

“These bastards will destroy us...” mumbled Stavre and went home, sluggishly walking along the dusty road. His face was darkened by the sun and he was sweating.

“We will have to do something otherwise we will all become Greeks...” Stavre thought to himself. He then closed his eyes and shook his thick black hair as if attempting to shake the spurs out of his head. He went into the yard. He noticed Evangelia sitting in the corner with the twins. Both were suckling while kicking their feet in the air and swirling around their tiny hands, completely excluded from everyday life in the village.

“How is life at home, Evangelia?” he asked out of context.

Surprised by the strange question Evangelia laughed wildly. The twins got disconnected from her nipples and drops of breast milk flew out into the air.

“Life for me is you and these two children,” she said cheerfully, and turned to the children.

“May God have mercy on us all...” murmured Stavre quietly, went into his bedroom and lay down on his bed. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

2.

Zinda Niarhos threw a card on the table. He laughed rudely.

“Your turn,” he said and knocked Vasil on the shoulder. Vasil laughed awkwardly and threw a card on the table.

“Is this the card you are dealing?” asked Milkiadis.

“Yes, but I do have a better one...” replied Vasil.

Zinda Niarhos scratched his head, tightened his lips and threw all his cards on the table. Milkiadis looked at him indignantly. Vasil Digalovski bowed his head shyly.

“What’s happening to you, Zinda?” said Milkiadis angrily.

“All sorts of things, Mr. Milkiadis. Some people in this village are privileged by the government and refer to the church as if it is some kind of toothless lioness. Like they were living in another country...” replied Zinda furiously.

Milkiadis Tsakondas tightened his belt and buttoned his shirt. He got up and, burning with anger, said:

“No one is privileged in this village. Are you making an ass out of me?” and grabbed at his pistol.

“If no one is privileged then why hasn’t Stavre Nakovski taken his children to church and baptized them as required by law in this country? Maybe he lives in another country and baptized them in another church?” replied Zinda sarcastically.

Milkiadis Tsakondas sighed deeply and lowered his hand from the gun holster. They both laughed out loud and looked at Vasil sternly.

“What kind of mayor are you? You need to visit Stavre Nakovski immediately and make him accountable. Tomorrow he must bring his children to the church!” Milkiadis loudly ordered Vasil.

Vasil Digalovski humbly bowed and squeezed his hands in fear.

“Everything will be fine, Mr. Milkiadis...” replied Vasil very quietly.

“Do it today! Do it now! Take us to him and he himself can tell us what he thinks. That bastard has chosen a new church, eh! You, Vasil, are you silent because you want to protect him?” the priest yelled out furiously. “Now let’s go! The three of us will go together when he does not expect us,” said the priest, got up and they all headed for the door.

“We must approach the situation carefully...” said Milkiadis cautiously. “We don’t want to create a quagmire.”

“What kind of governor are you Milkiadis? Let’s go! You have the power of the law on your side and you are afraid? If you are afraid then take your gun out and let’s go! Shoot, kill somebody, you are the law,” said the priest and walked out of the tavern.

Milkiadis rubbed his face with his hands. He then grabbed Vasil by his coat sleeve and pulled him in front of him.

“Let’s go! You are guilty of everything. What kind of mayor did they appoint!? Why did they not ask me? Move now!” Milkiadis yelled at Vasil and pushed him hard towards the door.

Vasil Digalovski came out of the tavern and joined Zinda Niarhos. Milkiadis followed. He was red in the face and very angry.

“Let’s go! That bastard will pay for this!” mumbled Milkiadis and went ahead of the other two.

3.

They entered Stavro Nakovski’s house with fury, ready for trouble. Evangelia Gasparova greeted them with kindness and respect. At first she was startled but soon she calmed down.

“Welcome, gentlemen. Come on in,” she said.

Zinda Niarhos looked enraged.

“Where is your husband?” he yelled out and stamped on the floor with this boot.

“He is not here. He is in the mountain collecting firewood,” Evangelia lied, without blushing.

Zinda Niarhos became even more furious and looked around. Evangelia was gripped with fear, she could hardly stand on her feet. She was afraid they might do something to the children.

“Why so much anger, Mr. Milkiadis? We are honest people. The whole village knows that...” she said in an attempt to calm Zinda Niarhos’s fury.

Milkiadis scratched his head and calmed down a little. He then grabbed the priest by the sleeve and escorted him to the door. The priest pulled his sleeve out of Milkiadis's hand, sternly looked at Evangelia and furiously said:

“Tell Stavro I want him and you to come to the church tomorrow and bring the children to have them baptized. If you don't bring them I will cut off your head!” He then walked out of the door. Milkiadis and Vasil Dugalovski followed. They walked down the dusty street in silence.

IX

1.

Zinda Niarhos's threat spread through the village like wildfire. The lamps in village homes glimmered all night. They prayed to avoid evil. Stavre Nakovski got up much earlier than usual that morning. He prepared himself quickly and went to the mountain to collect firewood. Evangelia escorted him to the first chestnut trees behind the house.

“Look after the children for me! I may be a long time in the forest...” said Stavre gently and stepped into the dense woods.

“Go, my dear, go! Don't worry about anything! I will manage. It's best I don't know anything...” she muttered to herself contentedly. “Maybe I should have told him about what happened yesterday? But he is a man and he would have done something. No, no! It's better this way. It is better that he doesn't know! They will kill him. I am a woman and they won't touch me...” Evangelia thought to herself, smiled and returned to the room. She sat beside the children who were still sleeping. She sat on the bed thinking. As time passed she became increasingly alarmed. She suddenly opened her eyes and jumped out of bed.

“Where is he? I told you to bring him to church, bitch!” barked Zinda Niarhos furiously, knocking nervously on the floor with his boots.

There was a noise behind him. It was Milkiadis mumbling. He was nervously pacing back and forth in the room.

“Stavre has not yet returned from the mountain,” she said with a shaky voice and got out of bed. “Please, sit down! I will pour you a rakia.”

“I will pour you a rakia, you Slavo-Macedonian bitch!” bellowed the priest and kicked her hard. Evangelia covered her face. She did not cry. The priest then repeatedly punched her in the face. She began to bleed from her nose and mouth. Milkiadis hit her on the face with his rifle butt. Several of her teeth were loosened by the blows. Her mouth turned red and her lips swelled up before she fell on the floor.

The priest moved away from her and so did Milkiadis. They were sweating. Evangelia lay on the floor beaten, bleeding and barely breathing. Her face was covered in blood.

“Prepare your children for church!” raged Zinda Niarhos.

Evangelia lay there silent, wildly looking at his eyes which sparkled with serious threats. She did not move. He came closer to have a better look. She spat a mouthful of blood in his face.

Milkiadis laughed. The priest overlooked his laughter. Zinda Niarhos became even more enraged, pulled out the double-edged dagger from under his mantle and quickly jumped towards the bed. He grabbed the male child and put the knife to his throat. Frightened, the baby screamed out loud. Tears covered its face. The child was too young to recognize good from evil but the knife must have awakened something in him. The other child also began to scream. Zinda Niarhos got no reaction from Evangelia. He again threatened by placing the knife even closer to the child’s throat.

Evangelia Gasparova sighed deeply and stood up.

“I am all yours... Do as you wish with me...” she replied.

Zinda Niarhos smiled an evil smile and forced Evangelia to go to the village church with him. Milkiadis followed behind, occasionally

letting out a cynical laugh. Both children were screaming. They slowly walked down the dusty street holding their mother's hands. Dust burrowed into their little shoes. The villagers watched from inside, hiding behind their curtains. They walked down the street and then turned into the churchyard. Evangelia stopped. The priest pushed her hard. She let go of her children and fell down face first. Her bloody nose penetrated the dust. The children screamed with fear, yelling for their mother. Evangelia felt warm blood flow from her nose. She took the hands of her children tugging at her dress. The priest grabbed her by the shoulders and dragged them all inside the church.

The villagers started coming out into the street. They heard Evangelia screaming. The screams penetrated down to their souls. They ran wildly in silence following one another. They followed Evangelia's trail of screams. They entered the church. The fear disappeared from their faces and was replaced by anger. There, on the floor, lay Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska raped and sinking into unconsciousness. Her children were screaming frantically tugging at her dress. The villagers took the twins, wiped their tears and tried to calm them down. Gone Slivarov and three other men picked up Evangelia and carried her out of the church. They were taking her home. They walked slowly. Kolio Bochvarov met up with them some distance from the church yard and said:

“The priest and Milkiadis are gone. They disappeared...”

“Did you look for them?” asked Gone.

“Yes! They are nowhere to be found. They will never breathe again if I find them.” threatened Kolio and sighed deeply.

“Those bastards!” yelled Gone and kicked the yard door open. They went inside Evangelia's house, put her violated body gently down and went outside. The two women who brought the children stayed with Evangelia. Hrisanta Slivarova picked up the kettle with warm water that hung over the fireplace and cleaned the blood off Evangelia's face. Her eyes welled up with tears, crying over her destiny. It took the women two hours to bring Evangelia back to life. After that they left her alone with the children. Evangelia put the

children to bed and lay beside them. Fear flowed from her eyes as she anticipated the new storm.

2.

Zinda Niarhos and Milkiadis ran far away from Kostaneria. They looked frightened. They often looked back to see if anyone was following them. Milkiadis was breathing hard.

“You are the guilty one, you bastard. They will kill my wife and children because of you!” yelled Milkiadis as he ran behind the priest.

“Stop whining and be careful you don’t stumble over a root or I will leave you here and they will chew you alive. They will rip you apart with their teeth,” warned the priest.

They ran for a long time and arrived in town. Panting and scared they entered the gendarmerie. The commander welcomed them. He was the same commander who had appointed Milkiadis governor of the village. He was wondering what they had seen that frightened them so much.

“The villagers have raised a rebellion. They will destroy the country!” shouted Zinda Niarhos agitated.

“They will kill my wife and children!” cried Milkiadis and covered his face with his fat hands.

“Help us, commander, for God’s sake help us,” said Zinda Niarhos humbly while his eyes gleamed wildly.

“Calm down! We will go there immediately. We will find out who the troublemakers are that rose up against the government and against the king,” replied the commander loudly.

“Hurry up commander! They will kill my wife and children. Those God damned freaks!” howled Milkiadis.

“We are leaving now!” yelled the commander. “Prepare the horses!” he ordered the gendarme standing around staring at the priest and Milkiadis.

The commander left the office and told everyone to be ready to leave by the time he returned.

“We are all ready to go commander,” replied one of the gendarmes humbly and stepped out of the office. He was followed by the commander, the priest and Milkiadis. They jumped on their horses and rode off. They followed the road through the lush forest but had no desire to admire nature. They were preoccupied. When they arrived at the village they stopped in front of the tavern and got off their horses.

“Welcome commander!” said Vasil Digalovski humbly with fear in his eyes.

“Who here dares to rebel against our kingdom?” the commander yelled at him.

Vasil Digalovski was silent. He did not know what to say or how to answer him.

“We are looking for the rebels, where are they?!” the commander yelled again.

“This way sir,” said the priest and led them to Stavro Nakovski’s house.

They entered the yard. Stavre Nakovski came out from behind the house. He was holding an ax in his hand. He looked very angry and ran towards the priest, ready to split his head wide open. The commander got his pistol out from his leather holster and fired twice at Stavre’s right leg. Stavre Nakovski fell down and rolled in the dust. The commander went towards him and looked at him with irony.

“Are you raising an arm against the kingdom? Tie him to that tree!” he yelled and smiled cynically.

Two gendarmes grabbed Stavre and tied him to the thick chestnut tree trunk with a rope. He squirmed but there was nothing he could do. Zinda Niarhos smiled ironically. Milkiadis entered the house. Evangelia was sitting on the bed. She was frightened.

“Get up and go straight to the church!” barked Milkiadis.

Evangelia got out of bed, approached Milkiadis and spat on his face. Milkiadis wiped his face with his hand, looked at her and, with a pleading tone of voice, said:

“I am not the guilty one here but I will kill you if you don’t listen to me.”

Evangelia ignored him. Zinda Niarhos entered the room and slapped her on the face. Evangelia did not react.

“To church with the children!” he ordered her out loud with a cynical smile on his face.

Evangelia was petrified with fear. She went close to the bed and hugged her children. They were frightened and screaming. The commander entered the room. The priest snatched the children from her hands and began to kick her with his boots. Evangelia did not move. The priest then punched her in the head and she fainted.

“Wake her up!” yelled the commander.

The gendarme that was following the commander grabbed a pot full of water and poured it over her head. Evangelia opened her eyes. The cries of her children blurred her mind. She lay on the floor confused. Two gendarmes grabbed her by her arms and took her outside. They dragged her down the street. A third gendarme with a moustache dragged the two children screaming frantically.

Stavre Nakovski screamed out loud as he tried to tear the rope. He was left alone in the yard tied to the tree. The villagers again looked outside from behind their curtains. Their gentle eyes became filled with fear and hatred, pointing at the belligerents like loaded guns.

They became filled with anxiety tugging at their own flesh and cursing the day they had decided to return to their village. But it was the only thing they had in the entire the world. It had always been theirs.

“They fooled us into expelling the Turks. And when we drove them out they took their place and not only robbed us of our material possessions but are now trying to rob us of our identity,” said Ichko Bonev to his wife and let go of the curtain he was holding open.

Evengelia Gasparova Nakovska again fainted inside the church. They were no cries to warn the villagers. Half an hour later she slowly crawled out with her children firmly clenched against her chest. She was going home. She did not look up at the windows. She knew that every eye in the village was following her. She did not look back, perhaps because her tears were blurring her vision. She arrived at her house. She did not see Stavre in the yard. Her eyes began to dance with fear. She put the crying children on the bed and went outside to look for him. She could not find him. She stopped in front of the thick chestnut tree.

“The damn bastards killed him!” she muttered with a shaky voice full of fear. She picked up the rope that Stavre had been tied on the tree with and wept.

“Stop crying, woman, Stavre is safe. Go, look after your children. We will help as much as we can. Stavre will visit you as soon he is better...” said a muffled voice.

Evengelia turned to see who it was but there was no one there. She went back inside and hugged her children. All three were crying.

X

1.

The snow had melted. The grass on the mountain was loaded with moisture. The little Luda Mara River was already high with its wild water washing down everything that stood along its narrow banks. The river’s wild water rush was heard all throughout the village, especially during the night. Donka Popgoneva could not sleep. She

could not stop thinking of the day they killed Dimitar. She waited for her older son, who had left home without saying goodbye, to return home. The next day Donka Popgoneva began to inquire about him. Every time she ran into someone she asked if they knew anything about her son's whereabouts. She wanted to know if he was at least still alive. She became more concerned with each passing day. Three days after Easter she went to see the Slivarovs. She sat at the table and began to cry. Gone tried to console her. He tapped her on her shoulders but said nothing.

"I don't know why I came to you. Maybe because you are close to me," she said.

"You are welcome to come here whenever you want. Our house is your house..." said Hrisanta and hugged her.

"My son Peno is gone. He left without letting us know. He has not returned and has left no information of where he might be. Perhaps they killed him somewhere. My soul is burning with pain," replied Donka.

"He will return. Don't worry, I am sure he will return. He is probably gone to the city. He probably found a job and is working. Don't worry! Peno is an adult and a smart man..." said Gone to console her.

"Peno is in Solun," Agapi Slivarova piped up, sitting on the bed combing her hair.

Donka Popgoneva suddenly jumped out of her chair.

"Solun? When did he go there? Are you lying to me my child?!" she said and looked at Agapi, distraught.

"We parted company at the Zlatolist pine. He left for Solun. He will be back," replied Agapi.

"My good God, I would have died of anguish and would have never known where my child was..." Donka said.

“Now that you know, please stop worrying!” said Gone to calm her down.

Hrisanta served dinner. After that Donka went home.

2.

Kosta Popgonev, Donka’s younger son, was lying on the bed. Donka went into the room and sat on the bed beside him. Her face was drenched in tears. Kosta got up from the bed and hugged his mother.

“Do not cry, mother! Peno will come back. You’re not alone in this house,” he said.

“Peno in is Solun. Agapi Slivarova told me,” replied Donka.

“How does she know?” Kosta asked.

“She is pregnant. She is carrying your brother’s baby. He went to Solun to earn some money. He promised he would come back for her later, after he earned some money...” she said and continued to cry.

“Then he will come back for sure. If he promised he will return. Don’t cry any more! Nobody needs a sick mother. What will I do if I you get sick? Should I be sitting here beside you worrying or should I be going out there earning a living for us? I need you to be healthy... Do you understand me? You must remain healthy!” he replied.

Donka did not wipe the tears from her eyes. She wiped her face and continued to cry. She then got up from the bed and went to the cupboard. She took some bread, paprika and two eggs out and put them on the table.

“Now get up and eat! You must be hungry?” she said and stopped crying. Her face was pale and she looked sad.

“I am not hungry. I am going to bed early. We are running out of kerosene and the lamp is going to go out any minute. Tomorrow I

will buy some kerosene from the Asia Minor colonist,” said Kosta and turned towards the wall.

Donka took the bread, eggs and pepper and put them back in the cupboard. She then went and sat at the table and began to think.

3.

There was a loud bang at the front door. Donka jumped. She was startled, surprised and frightened. Her lips became rigid, her eyes gleamed and she looked confused when she saw the priest and Milkiadis breaking into her house. Kosta got out of bed and slowly went towards them. Right behind the priest and Milkiadis was the gendarmerie commander.

“What’s this? Who are you waiting for? Grab the bastard...” yelled the commander angrily, rushed by the priest and Milkiadis and grabbed Kosta by his shirt sleeve. Kosta did not resist and allowed the commander to pull him towards the door.

“I will be back, mother. Don’t worry!” said Kosta and went outside, followed by the commander, Milkiadis and the priest.

Donka covered her face with her hands. She had no more strength or tears to cry. She went to the window and watched them lead Kosta away. She stood there in the room stuck in a new world, unknown to her.

4.

They walked down the street. The commander was hissing in anger. The priest bobbed up and down behind him, smiling away. Milkiadis walked last and was in deep thought. They entered the church. There were other villagers in the church. Kosta noticed Gone Slivarov and went towards him.

“What is the meaning of all this, Uncle Gone?” he asked.

“I don’t know, son. Perhaps they will tell us. Have patience!” he said calmly and tapped him on the shoulder.

Kosta was unable to settle down. He went towards Vasil Digalovski who was standing away from the group of villagers, scratching his big nose with his finger.

“What do you think of tonight? Is this some new game...? One day these people will leave! Where will you go? You will stay in this village! So be careful what you are doing?” warned Kosta.

Vasil Digalovski smiled a cynical smile and went towards the commander.

“Shall we start, commander?” he said humbly.

“Go ahead, all the people we want are here. And make sure they listen to you, otherwise your head will be flying...” said the commander with a serious look on his face.

Vasil Digalovski lifted his hand up high. The villagers turned towards him and stared at his ugly face.

“People!” he yelled out loudly. “You are causing me great injustice and forcing me to be rude to you. The priest complained to me that you don’t go to church. Is this not your church? Who are you defying...? Listen to me very carefully and do what I tell you, or your heads will roll. Starting tomorrow I want everyone to go to church regularly. You must also bring gifts and donate them voluntarily to the church. Early tomorrow morning you must come to church and each place two gold coins in its coffers. If you don’t do that you will be taken to the village square and punished and everyone will then know what kind of punishment awaits them if they don’t obey the law that prevails in this country. Anyone who feels brave enough not to attend will find their house burned to the ground with them in it. This country has given you everything: lands, a house, a family... so you should be happy.”

Ichko Bonev could not take it anymore. He stepped up out of the group and said:

“You little bastard! Are you trying to tell me that this country (Greece) has given us everything?! Surely you are not saying that

this country slept with my wife and gave birth to my sons? This land here is mine from time immemorial and I am not giving it to anyone! I don't need the church either, I can do without it! We don't have a piece of bread to put in our mouths and you expect us to give you gold? Are you trying to get rich from our plight, from the plight of the Macedonian people!? We fought for this country (Greece) and this country must respect that. I am not giving you my money. Not to you and not to these predators with whom you have surrounded yourself. Tell them to put their own gold in the church coffers. Is it not enough that we support them in this village?" concluded Ichko foaming at the mouth.

"What is this idiot saying?" asked the commander and grabbed his pistol.

"I don't know. I don't understand their language," replied Zinda Niarhos and shrugged his shoulders. "From his facial expression, it seems to me he does not intend to listen to the authorities and obey the government's orders. He is a rebel and a communist!" added the priest with a grin on his face. The priest's intent was to provoke the commander to start killing the villagers.

"What did that man say?" the commander asked Vasil Digalovski.

"Tell him the man said that you should leave Kostaneria and leave us alone to live in peace!" yelled Ichko Bonev at Vasil.

"He said for you to go back to Greece," Vasil Digalovski translated for the commander.

The commander opened his eyes wide in surprise and began to fume with anger. He pulled out his pistol and pointed it at Ichko Bonev. The villagers all looked startled.

"Shoot me!" yelled Ichko. "That's why you are here. But you will never exterminate us all. This land is ours and we are not giving it up. Shoot me you Monarcho-Fascist bastard!"

"Grab him!" yelled the commander.

Three gendarmes grabbed Ichko Bonev and tied him to a stake in the middle of the church.

“I will hang you all in the village square, you filthy bastards... Now all of you buy two candles each and light them for the souls of the living and for the dead. Whoever does not buy and light the candles will be hung in the village square at dawn,” threatened the commander.

The villagers were silent. They all looked at the commander with fear in their eyes. Milkiadis winked at Gone Slivarov and pointed with his eyes towards the pile of candles. Gone did not acknowledge him but went and bought two candles. The other villagers followed after him. Zinda Niarhos laughed cynically. Vasil Digalovski smiled contentedly.

Gone Slivarov lit the candles and stood in front of them in silence. Kolio Bocharov went near him and said:

“Why, Uncle Gone!?! Why are we bowing our heads to everyone?”

“Be quiet and do what they say. This is not the time for suicide. Our day will come and we will pay them back.”

The commander coughed slightly. He looked satisfied.

“You can go home now. He will remain here in the church for the night. Tomorrow we will execute his sentence. Also, tomorrow everyone must bring two gold coins and put them in the church coffers. You are free to go now...” said the commander in a milder tone of voice.

With his head raised high, Gone Slivarov led the villagers outside the church. They went through the yard in silence. They parted at the crossroads. Kosta said goodnight to Gone and, in a painful tone of voice, mumbled:

“This village is damn cursed! We are cursed!”

“Don’t mumble young man, go home, your mother is waiting for you,” he replied, gave him a gentle shove and went home.

5.

Kosta Popgonev’s mother Donka was waiting for him. She was sitting at the table thinking... contemplating her family’s fate. Kosta approached her and, seeing how she was, put his hand on her head and said:

“Go to sleep, mother, its late!” He then lifted her from the chair and escorted her to bed. He helped her lie down and covered her. He then went into the other room and stood by the window. He noticed three dark shadows moving down the street. He recognized them. It was the commander, Vasil Digalovski and the priest.

“You may all go to hell! I swear you will not be alive for too much longer,” he said to himself and lay down in bed. He lay on his back with his eyes open. The night slowly passed. He greeted the next day with his eyes still open. He again went to the window and waited to see what would happen in the village square. He was concerned.

6.

Early in the morning the commander with five gendarmes entered the church. The gendarmes untied Ichko Bonev and escorted him towards the village square at gunpoint. Kosta Popgonev watched them from his window. He was feeling terrible for not being able to help Ichko. He almost tore the curtain off the ceiling from nervousness. The gendarmes stopped in the village square. The commander approached Ichko Bonev and cynically said:

“Now we will see who is going to leave Kostaneria.”

Ichko Bonev spat on his face and quietly said:

“This is my country. It is you who will be gone from it. I will remain here...”

The commander became enraged. He wiped the spit off his face with his hand.

“Hang him!” he yelled at the gendarmes in anger.

The gendarmes threw a rope over a thick branch of the chestnut tree that was casting a shadow on the window of Vankov’s tavern, prepared the noose, placed it around Ichko’s neck and tightened it. They then brought a table from the tavern and made him stand on top of it. They pulled the rope tight and tied it to a branch on the opposite side. They then pushed the table allowing Ichko Bonev to hang by the noose. The angry commander entered the tavern and poured himself a shot of rakia in one of the many glasses that sat on the counter. He drank the rakia in one gulp and sat down at one of the tables.

“What should we do with the body?” asked one of his gendarmes who entered the tavern.

“Let him hang there until his flesh rots and falls off his bones so that they will all know who they are dealing with,” he said, put his glass down and poured himself another rakia. The gendarme left the tavern. Zinda Niarhos accompanied by Vasil Digalovski entered the tavern. Zinda Niarhos sat at the same table opposite the commander and smiled vaguely.

“Is this what you call God’s service!? Are you satisfied now?” the commander asked the priest.

“Of course, very satisfied, commander. Now the scum will know who holds the power in this village. The monarchy should reward you for this. I too personally want to thank you and bless you as a good son of His Majesty King George, the father of our country,” said the priest, raised his hand and made a cross in the air. Then he mumbled something unintelligible and grabbed the bottle. He poured rakia into the glass that Vasil handed him and drank it.

“Today God walked in Kostaneria...” said the priest and made a face.

The commander was silent. Vasil Digalovski kept shaking his head agreeing with everything the priest said. He too then went silent.

7.

Kosta Popgonev kept looking at Ichko's body hanging by the tree. He was unable to move away from the window. He nervously ground his teeth and kept cursing. He did not go out into the street. No villagers went into the street that day. Stefanos, the Asia Minor colonist, did not open his shop that day. Everyone was anxious and fearful.

XI

1.

The days went by quickly. The villagers walked the streets in fear. They went to work in the fields in groups. The summer passed quickly. The first rains started.

The children played in the dusty village street uninterrupted. The only time they left the street was when they caught sight of Zinda Niarhos's distorted face.

Vasil Digalovski, the village mayor, became inseparable from the commander. He constantly played ksira in the tavern. Milkiadis began to smile at the villagers. Some even waved back by raising their arm. Sometimes he avoided the company of the priest and the commander and spent most of his time with the Asia Minor colonist.

2.

As always, the commander spent most of his time sitting in the tavern drinking rakia and playing ksira with Vasil Digalovski and Zinda Niarhos. One day a man of medium height, with combed hair and a pimply face entered the tavern. He greeted everyone by raising his arm and then stood by the counter.

"A beer please," said the stranger to Stefanos.

"Right away, Sir!" replied Stefanos and handed him a beer.

The stranger drank the beer and sat next to the commander. He looked into the priest's eyes and said:

“Don’t you recognize me?”

“The priest looked at him carefully, gasped in surprise and hugged the stranger.

“Mr. Karahopoulos, welcome to Kostaneria. Forgive me, I did not recognize you,” said the priest. He then turned to the commander and said: “Commander, this is Ioannidis Karahopoulos our teacher. He was sent here to teach the children of Kostaneria.”

The commander smiled as if he was pleased to meet Karahopoulos, extended his hand and they shook hands.

“Please sit down! I am hopeful that you play cards, Mr. Karahopoulos?” said the commander.

“Some people think so. They say I am a pretty good card player, Commander. I am glad to meet you and to be with you in the same village,” said Karahopoulos smiling and sat down.

“This is the village mayor, Mr. Digalovski. He is one of our boys...” said Zinda Niarhos and pointed at Vasil.

“I am happy that we are all together...” replied Karahopoulos and nodded his head. He did not extend his hand for a handshake with Vasil.

Vasil Digalovski pulled his hand back and stopped smiling.

“There is plenty of time, Mr. Teacher,” Vasil thought to himself and went back to playing his cards.

2.

Milkiadis came into the tavern. The priest rushed to introduce the teacher to him. Milkiadis and Karahopoulos greeted each other and the two men left the tavern. They walked down the dusty village street.

“The school building has been preserved. We will organize one part of the building as classrooms and the other part we will turn into living quarters. This will be okay with you I hope?” asked Milkiadis.

“What kind of people are the villagers like?” asked Karahopoulos.

“They are okay. They are tame people. Like any other people. They are good as long as you don’t step on their sore spots...” replied Milkiadis and tapped him on the shoulder.

They entered the school. The inside of the building was filled with dust. The benches were scattered all over the place. After that they took a tour of the other part of the building. Then they went out into the yard. Ioannidis Karahopoulos put his luggage on the grass.

“It’s not bad for a start,” he said and sighed.

“You will do well in the village. Now I have to leave. I will drop by in the afternoon. I have to introduce you to the villagers. Have a rest until then, Mr. Karahopoulos...” said Milkiadis and left the school building. Ioannidis Karahopoulos remained outside for some time. He then went inside.

“I must go to the priest. I need someone to clean this place,” he mumbled to himself and left the dusty room.

3.

In the afternoon Milkiadis pulled the rope and rang the church bell, spreading its sound throughout the entire village. Frightened, the villagers quickly ran to the church. Many decided not to go because they were afraid of what might happen to them. Milkiadis stood there and waited for them.

“Don’t worry, people! It is not bad news. I just wanted to introduce you to the teacher,” said Milkiadis and pointed to Ioannidis Karahopoulos. “This is the teacher. His name is Ioannidis Karahopoulos. He came here from Trikala to teach your children.”

“How is he going to teach our children? Does he speak Macedonian?” asked Gone Slivarov. The teacher looked surprised.

Ioannidis Karahopoulos did not understand what Goro Slivarov asked because he did not speak Macedonian. He just stood there smiling and showing his small teeth with wide gaps between them. He looked at Milkiadis.

“The children will be learning Greek. The teacher will take care of that. Your duty is to send them to school regularly,” ordered Milkiadis. “Also, don’t you dare make jokes about the teacher!” He then made a waving motion with his hand and said: “Now go! Starting this Monday all the children must attend school. They need to be washed and properly dressed.”

The villagers looked upset and had a wild look in their eyes but no one spoke. They silently left the churchyard and went home. Milkiadis tapped on the teacher’s shoulder and said:

“You are invited to my house for dinner. My wife Evridika is a great cook. You will also meet my children. They will be your students.”

The teacher nodded his head and they both left. The teacher went to the school and Milkiadis went to the tavern where he sat beside the commander and joined the game.

PART III

1.

Peno Popgonev walked firmly on the cobblestones until he reached the main road. There he encountered a large group of people with banners that read:

“DOWN WITH TYRANNY”, “FREEDOM TO POLITICAL PRISONERS” and “WE WANT DEMOCRACY”.

The people walking between the large buildings were making a lot of noise. The crowd drew Peno Popgonev down to the city centre. He often looked at people’s faces and wondered what they wanted. He stepped up his pace but was unable to follow them.

“These people have completely different needs than me. Their needs are of no interest to me...” Peno thought to himself. He stood beside a large iron gate and waited for the crowd to pass by before heading towards the seafront.

“I have to find this boarding house called ‘Macedonia’ which Kolio Bochkarov spoke about. Stavre Nakovski’s friends will help me. They will find work for me...” Peno thought to himself and started walking again. He passed several narrow streets and then came upon another main road.

“For heaven’s sake, am I walking in circles?” he wondered and began to perspire. He then crossed the road and went near a bearded man. He tugged on the man’s sleeve. The man pulled his arm away and said:

“What do you want, young man, is this some sort of joke?”

“I am looking for the boarding house ‘Macedonia’. I don’t know the city and I don’t know where to go. Can you help me?” asked Peno politely.

“Yes, I can. You see that street over there,” said the man and pointed with his finger. “After that street go to the first intersection, then turn left and walk along it to the seaside. When you get there

ask someone. Everyone knows the boarding house ‘Macedonia’. Now go!” he said and slowly walked away down the street in the opposite direction.

Peno Popgonev did not thank him. He quickly ran along the main street. When he reached the last street he found himself at the seaside. There were a number of buildings touching one another and on the front of one of those buildings was a large sheet metal sign with the inscription:

“BOARDING HOUSE MACEDONIA”.

He entered the boarding house via the café, walked up to the counter, looked at Stoios Panagopoulos’s face and said:

“I am looking for Pondilaki. Stavre Nakovski sent me.” Penó was very nervous and could barely stand on his feet.

“You said Stavre Nakovski sent you!? Which village are you from?” asked Stoios Panagopoulos suspiciously.

“I am from Kostaneria. Will you help me? I know that everyone in this boarding house is friends with Stavre Nakovski,” replied Penó.

Stoios Panagopoulos laughed out loud. Penó did not know what to make of it.

“Sit down at that table and tell that man that I sent you. I will bring you something to eat,” said Stoios cheerfully and tapped Penó gently on the head.

“What about Pondilaki?” asked Penó in a somewhat demanding tone of voice.

“Sit over there and wait! Listen to what Stoios is telling you and be smart!” replied Stoios.

“So, you are the Cretan who fought in our mountains?” asked Penó enthusiastically.

“Sit there! We will talk later!” ordered Stoios with a firm voice.

2.

Peno Popgonev sat at the table with Tushi Gonev. Tushi was a thirty year-old man with big eyes, broad shoulders and straggly hair parted on the left side of his head. Tushi was leaning against the wall and looked exhausted. He had hardened blisters on both hands. His hands looked like weapons which, in different times, would have killed a bear with a single blow. Tushi was a fast talker and was sometimes difficult to follow. Penó was nervous. Both men were silent for a long time. Tushi lifted his head up and looked at Penó’s brown eyes dancing nervously.

“Judging by the clothes you are wearing you are not from Solun? Where are you from young man?” he asked.

“I am from Kostaneria and I am looking for Pondilaki. Do you know him?” replied Penó. His eyes were gleaming with curiosity.

“You said you are from Kostaneria?! asked Tushi and gave Penó a curious look.

“Yes! I am from Kostaneria!” replied Penó proudly. “I am from the mountains...” he added.

Tushi Gonev closed his left eye.

“You are lying to me, young man!” he accused Penó.

“No, I am not, I swear to you Sir!” blushed Penó.

“To get to Solun you must go through the village Tanovtsi, right?” asked Tushi. He wanted to hear more about Tanovtsi, his native village.

“The village Tanovtsi!?” replied Penó.

“Are you going to tell me or not?” asked Tushi with a frown.

Peno did not know what to tell him. He was very nervous. He thought for a moment and began to feel dizzy. The entire world felt like it was spinning.

“Sir, the village Tanovtsi has been razed to the ground. When I went through it there was nothing. I just saw one goat tied to a fence that was not engulfed by the fire. I untied the goat and let it get lost in the mountains even though it did not want to move away from me. It was afraid of loneliness. That is what I saw in the village Tanovtsi, Sir,” replied Penó.

Tushi Gonev went completely quiet. He had no desire to ask any more questions. Penó’s words were echoing in his head and making his hair stand up. The man went completely mute. Then, without looking at Penó, Tushi jumped onto his feet seeming like he had just witnessed his own death in his transparent eyes. He sat down again and put his head on the table. He was silent. Stoios Panagopoulos came over to their table. Penó did not speak Greek well and Stoios Panagopoulos did not speak any other language outside of Greek. Tushi Gonev was quiet. Stoios lifted Tushi’s head slightly and said:

“I want to talk to the boy.”

“So, talk to him!” replied Tushi and dropped his head back on the table again.

“The boy does not understand Greek well and I don’t know any Macedonian. I need you to translate for me,” said Stoios.

Tushi Gonev nodded.

“Thank you. Stavre left me with a good impression. Did you know that he was here during the war and gave us a beautiful performance? It was most remarkable. The only... Wait, boy, I will bring you some food. I have been rushing so much I forgot about your food...” said Stoios and asked Tushi to translate all this for Penó while he ran back to the kitchen to fetch the food.

Tushi Gonev translated for him. Penó Poggonev began to smile with satisfaction.

“Finally luck is beginning to smile at me...” Peno muttered to himself.

Stoios Panagopoulos came back from the kitchen and brought a plateful of rice with a larger piece of meat in the centre.

“Bon appetite!” he said cheerfully and asked Peno to tell him about Stavre.

Peno Popgonev looked at the food and said nothing.

“Tell him about Stavre,” Tushi translated.

“Oh, about Stavre? Oh, certainly,” replied Peno and laughed nervously. “He is okay. He sends his greeting to all of you. He is now living in his father’s house which he repaired. He has twins. He lives modestly and the whole village respects him...”

Tushi Gonev translated. Stoios Panagopoulos made a motion with his hand telling Peno to start eating.

“Surely you are hungry?” Stoios said.

Peno did not answer. Tushi Gonev did not translate so Stoios poked him gently and Tushi jumped.

“Translate!” yelled Stoios with a commanding voice.

“Eat!” translated loudly Tushi.

“Thank you!” replied Peno.

Stoios Panagopoulos laughed out loud, pointed at the food and left the table. He then poked Sofia with his finger as he passed by her at the end of the counter, telling her to cover up her chest that was being stared at by the customers in the bar. Sofia made a distorted face at him and took her time in covering up. Stoios raised his eyebrows and disappeared into the kitchen. Peno Popgonev ate his food hungrily. Tushi Gonev thought Peno was going to choke on the

large morsels. He raised his head and saw Pondilaki. He waved his hand. Pondilaki was not alone. He was with Iana Chakalarova and Stoian Dzhavalekov. They sat down near Tushi and all three were looking at Peno.

Peno ate calmly.

Sitting at the end of the bar, Sophia smiled flirtatiously. She grabbed one of the bottles from the rack behind her and three shot glasses. She took them to the table where Pondilaki was sitting and put them in front of him. She went back but kept looking at Iana Chakalarova for a long time. She marveled at her beauty. She felt like a germinating sprout full of envy and put some blush on her face.

“A man like him ought to have a beauty like her beside him,” thought Sofia to herself. Iana Chakalarova was upsetting Sofia, who squirmed on the barstool trying to find a comfortable position to sit.

“The girl acted rudely...” Iana pointed out.

“I am used to Sofia being like that,” replied Pondilaki, filled the glasses with rakia and offered them to Iana and Stoian. They took them and drank the rakia. Pondilaki smiled. He was looking at Peno stuffing his mouth with large morsels.

“Is he a relative of yours?!” Pondilaki asked Tushi.

“No. But he says he is from Kostaneria. He brought me terrible news that made my head spin. It made me dizzy. I can’t seem to keep my eyes open. My dear God, these are terrible times we are living in?” replied Tushi Gonev.

Pondilaki smiled, looked at Iana Chakalarova and clinked his glass with hers.

“Cheers!” said Iana.

Peno continued to spoon the rice, filling his stomach. When he was done he went to the kitchen looking for Stoios. Almost immediately

the two came out of the kitchen. Stoios took Peno to Pondilaki and said:

“This young man has been looking for you.”

“I have to get back to the kitchen,” Stoios apologized, introduced Peno to Pondilaki and returned to the kitchen.

“Please sit down!” said Pondilaki to Peno.

“Thank you, Sir! I am very tired. My feet can hardly support me,” replied Peno and sat down.

“How is Stavre?” asked Iana.

“He is okay. At this moment he is in Kostaneria,” replied Peno and then quickly turned to Pondilaki and said: “I have to find a job. Will you help me? I have heard many good things about you.”

“Sure, young man. Any friend of Stavro Nakovski is a friend of mine. Don’t worry!” said Pondilaki.

“I can work. I will do anything. I would be delighted with any kind of work. I will not disappoint you, I promise you,” said Peno with desperation in his voice.

“I will find a job. Do not worry... Have a drink of rakia with us?” replied Pondilaki casually.

“No, no thank you. I don’t drink rakia. But if you insist I am ready to drink... even poison,” said Peno.

“No problem then... For now you don’t have to drink... You will do that later...” said Pondilaki and laughed out loud.

3.

About two hours later Pondilaki took Peno to an apartment in Egnatia. There he met Hristo Sotirovski and his daughter Paraskeva. The two looked at Peno oddly. Pondilaki laughed.

“This is Peno Popgonev from Kostaneria. He is a friend of Stavro Nakovski. Please take him to stay with you for now while I find an apartment for him,” he said.

Hristo Sotirovski extended his hand towards Peno and said:

“Welcome, young man! We will be happy to have you here with us.”

Peno Popgonev looked confused for a moment. He then extended his hand and shook hands with Hristo.

“I am Paraskeva,” said Hristo’s daughter.

“Please sit down!” said Hristo and offered Peno a chair at the table. “It has been a long time since you have stopped off for a cup of coffee at our home,” said Hristo to Pondilaki.

“Another time perhaps, Hristo. I must go now,” Pondilaki replied politely.

“Why so soon?” asked Hristo.

“Goodbye, I must go. Look after Peno for me!” said Pondilaki and disappeared through the door.

Peno Popgonev stood in the middle of the room silent. He was very uncomfortable.

“I am setting up dinner. Please sit down! Surely you must be hungry?” offered Paraskeva.

Peno sat down at the table and they had dinner. Paraskeva then set him up in a separate room. He went to bed with a smile on his face.

II

1.

Pondilaki was sitting alone at the usual table in café “Macedonia” drinking his rakia. From time to time he glanced at several

customers sipping their fish soup. Once in a while he looked at Sofia and smiled. He did not see Kolio Bochkarov enter the café.

“Hello, Pondilaki,” said Kolio and sat down. He then waved his hand at Sofia. She smiled back with a sycophant smile.

“Rakia?” she asked.

“Rakia, doll, rakia,” replied Kolio.

Pondilaki raised his head.

“What’s new in the mountains Kolio? It seems like you are in the city more often nowadays,” said Pondilaki.

“We have no food in the village. The Asia Minor colonist is fleecing us alive. Things are ten times more expensive in his shop than they are in Solun. Why should we spend that much money? It’s only our sandals that we wear out. Our legs are becoming accustomed to the long walks,” replied Kolio.

“You say he is fleecing you? That bastard is taking advantage of people’s misfortunes... How is Stavre Nakovski, by the way?” asked Pondilaki.

“Not good. Evangelia is struggling to do everything on her own as well as look after the children. The government did a number on him. It poked a great big hole in his soul. He is gone now!” replied Kolio.

“What do you mean he is gone?! Didn’t you tell me he built a house and moved into it not too long ago? Did we not drink together to celebrate the birth of his twins? How is he gone!?” asked Pondilaki angrily.

“He has been gone from Kostaneria for three months. We don’t know where he is or if he comes to see Evangelia. She won’t tell us. We don’t know what happened to him after he left,” replied Kolio.

“Why did he leave? Did he do something? Did something happen to him?” asked Pondilaki in a serious tone of voice.

Kolio Bochkarov scratched his ear, took the glass of rakia that Sofia served him and drank it down in one gulp. He then moistened his lips with his tongue and said:

“Sofia, bring me another rakia!” He then stared at her behind as she swung it from side to side.

“I asked you what happened to Stavre?” said Pondilaki and hit the table with his fist.

Tushi Gonev arrived in the café and sat with Kolio and Pondilaki. He looked over at Sofia and ordered rakia. She brought it to him at the table and went back to the counter.

“Will you tell me what happened to Stavre?” yelled Pondilaki angrily.

Kolio Bochkarov looked upset. He looked into Pondilaki’s eyes and said:

“Take it easy. I will tell you everything. You in the city see these things every day. We in the village have nothing to look at. That is not right...”

“I am not asking you about Sofia’s butt, I am asking you about Stavre Nakovski,” said Pondilaki nervously.

“A boy from Kostaneria disappeared a while ago. Perhaps he came here?” asked Kolio, ignoring Pondilaki’s burning question.

“The boy is in Solun. He is working and has a mistress. Soon he will be a father. If God wants to give him children,” replied Pondilaki.

“You asked me about Stavre but I have nothing more to tell you than what I have already told you. That is all I not know,” said Kolio.

“How did all this happen, Kolio? Tell me!” asked Pondilaki.

“Well there is this priest in the village, his name is Zinda Niarhos. He is an awful character. He did not like Stavre because he stood up to him. One day the evil priest decided to take revenge on him. He went to his house and took Evangelia and the children by force. He told them he was taking the children to church to baptize them. But instead of baptizing the children he raped Evangelia... inside the church. Stavre was not home at the time. The entire village rose up against him but the priest and the governor, who was with him at the church, fled the village and returned late in the evening with the gendarmes. They went to Stavre’s house and Stavre came out at them with an ax. The gendarme commander shot Stavre in the leg and wounded him. The gendarmes tied him to the thick trunk of the chestnut tree in his garden. They then took Evangelia and the children to the church and baptized the children. Stavre was left behind tied up in the yard. When they returned he was gone. Since then he has not been seen or heard from. We don’t know if he is still alive or eaten by the dogs. I do not know what more I can tell you,” replied Kolio.

“So the war has begun...” said Pondilaki and sighed.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Kolio.

“Peno from your village is safe. Tell his family not to worry about him,” said Pondilaki.

“I will tell them,” said Kolio and drank the rest of his rakia. He then said goodbye to Pondilaki and Tushi and left the café. He walked the city streets at a rapid pace and soon was in the woods. He arrived at the village in the evening and discretely went to see Donka Popgoneva at her house.

“Your son is safe in Solun,” he said. “And soon you will be a grandmother,” he added cheerfully.

There was a loud knock at the front door. Donka Popgoneva jumped out of her chair. Kosta ran down the stairs from the upper floor and opened the door. Behind it stood Gone and Hrisanta Slivarov with their daughter Agapi. They all sat around the dinner table.

“Congratulations, Donka! You will have a grandson,” Kolio said again, this time more cheerfully.

Young Kosta Popgonev looked surprised.

“Who is giving my mother a grandson, Uncle Kolio?” he asked.

“What do you mean who? Your brother Peno, of course. Go, get the rakia out and let’s celebrate. Don’t stand there, get moving. Take out the rakia!” Kolio demanded.

Agapi Slivarova froze and turned pale. Kosta looked at her for a moment but they did not look into each other’s eyes. Hrisanta Slivarova covered her face with her thin fingers. Kosta became upset. Donka sat down on the bed.

“Why do you think a grandson!? Don’t joke with me Kolio, I am an old woman,” said Donka somewhat disturbed.

“What is wrong with everyone?! Peno is married to a woman in Solun. He has a wife and this woman is pregnant with his child. I think it will be a boy but then it could be a girl! But that does not change anything. You still will be a grandmother!” he said loudly.

“I will kill him!” yelled Kosta and ran up the stairs to his room.

Kolio Bochkarov looked at everyone, one by one starting with Donka. He thought for a moment. He did not like their silence. His gaze stopped at Agapi Slivarova. He noticed her swollen belly.

“Lord God, what have I done?” he thought to himself and bit his upper lip. Then, deep in thought, he pulled away towards the door. “Please, excuse me, I have to go...” he said and walked out of the door.

III

1.

Peno Popgonev left the docks. He arrived home very tired. He did not eat. He lay down to rest. He got up around sunset and made himself some coffee.

“Will you drink a cup, father?” he asked.

“Sure. It’s a pleasure to have a coffee with my son-in-law. You are the most handsome newlyweds. That’s what Irakalo the priest said to me. No married couple is better looking than you two. Make me one, I will have a coffee with you...” replied Hristo Sotirovski and sat down at the table.

Peno filled Hristo’s coffee cup first and then poured some for himself. He sat at the table opposite Hristo and picked his coffee cup up with his thick fingers. He took a sip.

“Drink up, father! The coffee is good while it’s hot,” said Peno.

Hristo Sotirovski took a sip and coughed a rough cough.

“A dry cough is bad. You should watch your health!” said Peno.

Hristo Sotirovski wiped his mouth with his handkerchief and said:

“Don’t worry about me. Pay more attention to your politics. We are not hungry and we are happy. Why get involved in politics? I don’t need to mention this to Paraskeva but it’s different with you. You are understanding and smart. I want my grandchild to be safe. For me the days are very long and I can barely pass them. Life consists of beauty that is far away from politics. Many have lost their heads in my time because of politics. Now...” Hristo took another sip of coffee and went silent.

“Don’t worry! Different times have different symbols...” replied Peno.

“If you stop going to these meetings Paraskeva too will stop and stay home. Then you two can have a child. I want a grandchild. I want my grandchild to piss on my pants, you understand. I want to be with someone until I die. Loneliness will kill me prematurely. I

sit here like an owl until late at night waiting for you two to get home,” he said.

“Paraskeva does not want us to have children, father,” replied Peno and bowed his head in shame. At that very moment the door flung open. Peno lifted his eyes and saw Paraskeva standing on the threshold. She closed the door behind her, went towards Peno and kissed him on his cheek. She then kissed her father.

“Are you two having a good time?” she asked politely and smiled. She then went to her bedroom and took off her coat. “Why weren’t you at the meeting?” she asked Peno with a raised voice and came back to the room where they were sitting. She sat at the table.

“You must be as hungry as a dog?” said Hristo.

“Very hungry, father,” she replied, grabbed some bread from the wooden box and poured herself some stew from the pot into a bowl. “Ah, we are having beans?” she said and smiled.

“I want you to give me a child!” said Peno out of the blue.

Paraskeva’s eyes opened widely. She dropped the bread on the table and stared at Peno.

“No, not that! Having a child will throw me out of the struggle. I want to be useful to my people. Why are you both so blind and cannot see what is happening here? The new government is refusing to recognize the victims of the war who sacrificed themselves to free this country. It is stripping them of their rights which they earned with their blood. It is taking back their promised gift. Instead of freedom the government is offering us slavery. It torments us everywhere. It kills us for no reason. This makes me very angry and drives me to madness. Tonight I told everyone to go to hell. What government! They are all a bunch of clowns. They brought England here to protect their interests, to protect England’s interests. I believe in the victory of democracy but, in that victory, we need to struggle together, across the entire country. We need to be organized and united, not like we are now all together in one basket. After that

we will see what happens. We Macedonians must fight for our freedom,” she said.

“Did the meeting end?” asked Peno while clapping loudly.

“First we need to get our rights to life before we have children. The world does not need more slaves... And please, don’t upset me anymore!” she said.

“Do you think I am crazy for wanting children or just stupid? Don’t you think I can tell from where the sun rises?” replied Peno.

“So you think you are versed in many things, eh?” she replied and began to spoon the beans into her mouth.

“Life is really hard but we have survived. Not everyone who has children is a fool! Wars have never stopped the world from multiplying. Even Stavre Nakovski has children!” he said.

Paraskeva began to grind her teeth.

“We two want a child. You say this is not the right time. We are two against one. By a show of hands we outvoted you. So what do you think of that...?” added Peno looking at Hristo.

While Hristo Sotirovski looked happy, Paraskeva looked enraged.

“This is not some democratic decision where the three of us can vote to satisfy a democratic principle. Clearly you are placing me in a position of disadvantage which is prone to factionalism which, once settled, will leave me no choice but to abandon you, even though I love you two very much. So please give me some credit!” replied Paraskeva looking angry, and continued to eat.

Hristo Sotirovski was simmering with anxiety which made him dizzy. Peno wanted to make light of Paraskeva’s last reply, just to make Hristo feel better but decided against it.

“Maybe she will change her mind. Each day is a different day...” said Peno to Hristo.

Paraskeva shook her head, smiled slightly and said:

“I know you very well. You will give your life for me but not for democracy.”

IV

1.

“I will be out a little later than usual tonight,” said Peno.

“Okay son, just be careful!” replied Hristo.

“Don’t worry father, I am an adult...” said Peno.

Hristo Sotirovski followed Peno Popgonev to about one hundred metres away from where he was working unloading a ship, tapped him on the shoulder and let him go to work.

“Goodbye father!” said Peno.

“Be careful son!” replied Hristo and turned away.

Hristo Sotirovski walked very slowly along the dock. Peno returned with his first bag. He picked up the bag inside the ship and placed it in the shed. He continued to do this for a long time until the ship was unloaded. The ship was finally unloaded late in the evening. Peno did not change his work clothes when he left. He was headed for home but changed his mind when he reached Ignatia Street and decided to go to café “Macedonia”. He sat down with the dock workers who were already there.

“We, the workers, are the children of this country and the entire world. We try and earn our bread with our sweat and our bosses just take it from us. We should be doing something about it. We should lead a class struggle. There are people who believe that there are other values in life that we need to pursue, besides being class slaves. We were not given this life so that we could donate it to someone to make a soft cushion out of it and sit his ass on it. We have already fought once for our country. We demonstrated our

patriotism! But for whom did we fight? For the king and his entourage?! We are the workers and we should be running the government, not to destroy others but to live a better life and not fear the future. We should fight for our own class. When we have money no one can push us around. With money you can do whatever you want. You can even be a deputy in the government,” said Pondilaki, took a sip of rakia, lowered his glass and looked at Peno.

“We have to fight to dismantle the chains of slavery that have been put on us,” said Tushi Gonev.

Peno sat there thinking. He did not want to drink. He often looked at the bottles of booze lined up on the counter.

“Paraskeva is poisoned by the politics in the Macedonian organization. Here they beat me down with the class struggle. Hristo wants a grandson. But all I want to do is live. I am young and capable of working and I want to work. I want to live well, even if it is in a foreign country... I think I will go to America. Life is better there. I am tired of the politics here...” Peno thought to himself. “You can talk until your heads fall off! It will all be in vain. There will always be owners and slaves. This is how this world is. It’s human nature. Maybe I am wrong, but one thing I do know: I want to live free of the thought of how I will do tomorrow: with politics and hunger; with a bloody body full of wounds and hungry... I never want to think of hunger or pain; I want to be full and mellow; truly like... America,” he thought, sighed and, to the surprise of dock workers, left without saying goodbye. The streets were deserted. He walked slowly. He went to the docks and started looking at the ships.

“I am going to America. The misery here will kill me...” he thought and slowly left the docks. He got home late. He did not eat. He was anxious. He went to bed. He felt Paraskeva staring at him. He turned his back on her to avoid her gaze. He could not sleep. He tossed and turned in bed all night. And every time he fell asleep he quickly woke up. He talked incomprehensibly in his sleep.

“You have not been sleeping well for a month now, my dear. What is happening to you?” asked Paraskeva anxiously.

Peno shook his hand.

“Sleep, the night is good for dreaming!” she advised.

Paraskeva hugged him gently and ran her fingers through his hair.

“You must be tired too?” he replied and turned his back on her.

“I will leave with the first ship that sails for America...” Peno thought to himself but could not asleep. He struggled to fall asleep but he couldn't. He got up the next morning and, without telling anyone he was leaving, left home. Paraskeva was surprised. Hristo secretly knew that something strange was happening to his son-in-law. He loved him very much and was worried about him.

2.

Peno roamed the docks for two days. He did not return to his apartment and he did not visit the boarding house “Macedonia”. On the third day he stopped hesitating and decided to climb aboard the ocean liner “Philadelphia”, sailing for America. The ship left the harbour, under the curious stares of the many dock workers who had loaded it with furs from the Kostur workshops, and disappeared into the blue waters of the Aegean Sea. Peno Popgonev disappeared with it.

3.

Paraskeva waited every night awake. She was losing weight. She could not eat. She cried all the time. She finally thought of the worst.

“Surely the police must have grabbed him and dragged him to an island in the archipelago...” she thought.

Hristo Sotirovski too was very concerned about Peno's disappearance and was quickly losing hope. He feared that he may never see him again. He even cried for him. These were the first

tears that Paraskeva had seen him shed. Peno reminded him of something he had long forgotten.

“It’s my daughter’s fault. She is blinded by politics. She forgot about her husband... my dear darling daughter...” he often thought.

They always sat at the table together. Paraskeva even stopped attending the Macedonian organization meetings. She stopped talking about politics. One time she started crying. Hristo put his arm around her to comfort her. He did not know why she was crying.

“I am with child... I am pregnant!” she yelled and ran to the other room.

“Thank you God! You have not forgotten me... I will have my grandson... Thank you Peno, my son...” he thought to himself.

V

1.

Kosta Popgonev got out of bed and quickly got dressed. He came down the stairs, tiptoed his way past his mother’s room, went outside quietly, took to the street and left the village. He was very anxious and breathed rapidly. He walked through the woods and eventually left the village road and began to walk through the dense woods, being mindful not to trip over the rough terrain. About six hours later he came down the great mountain slope and arrived in Solun. His first priority was to visit Foti Steriov’s boarding house. He went from street to street in the city walking quickly on the cobblestone roads like he knew where he was going and soon walked into the café part of the boarding house. He went over to the bar and stood at the counter. His eyes danced with excitement.

“Rakia!” he said to Stoios.

“Immediately, my boy,” replied Stoios cheerfully and handed him a glass of rakia.

Kosta Popgonev grabbed the glass and took a few sips. He looked around nervously, carefully examining the room. He then looked at Stoios and said:

“Does my brother Peno come to this bar?” and took another sip of rakia.

Stoios Panagopoulos looked at him curiously, smiled and said kindly:

“Many people by that name come to this bar...”

Kosta looked at him sternly and said: “There is only one Peno in all of Kostaneria and he hangs around Pondilaki and some of the dock workers!”

“Calm down, young man! I just work here...” replied Stoios and went to a table to top up someone’s rakia glass and then went into the kitchen. He looked puzzled. After that he came back out smiling.

“You must be Stoios Panagopoulos?” said Kosta, as if he had known him from a long time ago.

“Take it easy, boy. This is a café. Calm down!” replied Stoios with a steady voice trying not to tremble with excitement.

“My name is Kosta Popgonev. Peno is my brother,” he said calmly and quietly. “I just arrived here from Kostaneria.”

“You seem to be very anxious...” replied Stoios and turned his back on Kosta.

Pondilaki and several dock workers entered the café and sat at the table where they always sit.

“Bring us rakia, Stoios!” yelled Pondilaki.

“Immediately, Pondilaki!” he replied and flinched.

Kosta Popgonev left his glass on the counter and went towards Pondilaki's table.

“Are you Pondilaki?” he asked anxiously.

Pondilaki waited a few moments and then said:

“Sit down; I can see that you are very anxious.”

“I am looking for my brother Peno Popgonev from Kostaneria. Do you know where he is?” asked Kosta grinding his teeth.

Pondilaki smiled and said:

“Sit down! We are also looking for him. I honestly hope that you can find him.”

Kosta lowered his eyebrows, clouding over his eyes and defiantly said:

“Are you going to tell me where to find him or not?”

Pondilaki did not reply. He took the rakia that Stoios had brought him and took a sip. He then put his glass gently on the table.

“In other words, you are hiding him from me...” concluded Kosta.

Tushi Gonev jumped out of his chair, grabbed Kosta by the collar and forcibly made him sit on the chair in front of him. He then sat down next to him, looked into the eyes menacingly and said:

“We have been looking for your brother for a month. I don't know exactly what you are thinking in that boyish mind of yours. Besides, who here can confirm that Peno is your brother?!”

“He himself can confirm it. Take me to him and he will confirm it!” rebelled Kosta.

“Then go and find him! Bring him here to the café! We will wait here. He can then confirm that you are brothers. Then I will believe you!” said Tushi and took a sip of rakia.

“Where do I find him? If I knew where he was I would not be asking you!” rebelled Kosta.

“Peno is gone. He has disappeared. We are all looking for him,” said Tushi.

“Did he do something wrong?” asked Kosta naively.

Pondilaki laughed and angrily said:

“Peno was our friend. Now if you are satisfied with our explanation then sit with us, otherwise be on your way and go back to where you came from. No one is obliged to listen to you preaching!”

Kosta Popgonev was enraged. His eyes were blushed with anger. He got up and said:

“We will meet again. I will find him even if I have to crawl into a snake pit. Tell him that he will not escape my hand!” and left the café.

Stoios Panagopoulos sighed.

“That boy was ready to kill!” yelled Pondilaki.

“It appears the entire country is headed in that direction. No wonder all the people are simmering. Everything is possible...” said Tushi Gonev and took another sip of rakia.

“There was an article in the newspaper ‘Eleftheria’ that talks about the terror perpetrated by the government army in Kukush Region. It said that about one thousand people fled to Yugoslavia. More were roaming the mountains to avoid arrest,” said Tushi.

“People are dying and here we are talking and talking. Last week we screamed and yelled but it was like the time we screamed and yelled

at 'Irakleos' stadium. We screamed and yelled at the government to stop terrorizing the Macedonian people and to start respecting democratic principles and what did we accomplish by that? Nothing! The right wingers from 'Ethnikis Enosis' had an evening rally with only a few people gathered and demanded the destruction of the Communists. They even accused the neighbouring states of interfering in our affairs and called on the government in Athens to attack and free the lands north of Macedonia to the source of the great river and to the east of Thrace. All we do is fire empty words. Just words. In the meantime the right wingers want to destroy us and we want a union with them?" said Pondilaki.

"Again the workers are frequently on strike," said Tushi.

"What do they want this time?" asked Pondilaki.

"Improved working conditions, higher wages... They also demanded that the government repeal the law on forced mobilization and stop the political terror. I don't know how that went," replied Tushi.

"It's hot. The summer heat is unbearable, the whole country is boiling. I don't know if it's hotter in the political pot or under the solar corona. Sometimes I think we should gather together, go down and level this shameful city administration to the ground," said Pondilaki.

"The Greek military is forcing the Macedonians in the villages to declare themselves Greek. Those who refuse to sign are killed. That is why there are so many people fleeing to the mountains nowadays," said Tushi.

"The government is one thing, the Greek people are another. You, yourself know that the government is not going to implement the people's wishes..." said Pondilaki and took another sip of rakia. The alcohol he drank felt bitter and he pushed the glass away.

Tushi Gonev had no desire to talk anymore. He put his hands over his head and went off into a daydream. Everyone at the table was silent. Kosta Popgonev entered the café and went towards their table. Stoios Panagopoulos's mouth gaped open in surprise.

“I will see you one day. Then I will celebrate...” he said angrily and left the café.

Stoios Panagopoulos closed his eyes, pleased that there was no brawl in the café. Pondilaki smiled at him. Tushi Gonev got up and began to pace back and forth. He was all excited. Again there was silence. Stoios left for the kitchen. Sofia leaned her chest on the counter and put her head on top of the cash box. She closed her eyes and looked like she was falling asleep. Pondilaki looked at her, smiled, got up and said:

“Let’s go! We will come back tonight.” The dock workers followed and they all left the café.

VI

1.

Kosta Poptonev returned to Kostaneria. He heard the villagers murmuring. They were not happy with how Ioannidis Karahopoulos, the new teacher, was behaving. When the children went to school Karahopoulos had a smirk of satisfaction on his face. But that was not the problem. The problem was that there was no understanding between him and the children. Outside of Milkiadis’s children no one spoke Greek and because of that he severely punished the Macedonian children. He made them kneel for hours on top of corn kernels. This was not only painful for the children but damaging to their knees. The children were coming home crying, complaining of the torment and ruthlessness. Only Milkiadis’s children seemed to be doing okay. The girls were cheerful, but watching their teacher punish their friends for not speaking a language they did not know made them want to speak it less and less. Watching their friends being punished also caused the girls to become ill with tummy aches and to regularly skip class. Milkiadis did not know that.

“Your children are not coming to school,” said Ioannidis.

Milkiadis did not respond. He went home and beat up Evridika. She cried for two hours.

2.

From that day forward, Milkiadis's children went to school regularly. Ioannidis Karahopoulos rejoiced and every day invented more and new severe punishments to torment the children. More and more children spilled their blood on the boards of the classroom, leaving many dark red stains for the school bell ringer to clean... stains that could not be erased.

3.

The villagers stayed inside their houses. They only went out to work in their fields.

4.

Vasil Digalovski waddled his fat belly down the muddy street. Every evening he gambled with Milkiadis and Zinda Niarhos. The gendarmerie was in the village. He thought that he was untouchable. The villagers moved away and let him pass when he walked by them on the road. That pleased him very much. He also began to yell at his own mother, who had given him birth. Hatred grew between them, sweeping away her motherly feelings for him. But that did not seem to concern him. He just erased her from his list of relatives. He began to live his life in the company of the priest, the teacher, Milkiadis and the gendarmes. What they said was most important to him.

5.

The village was sinking in fear. Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska kept sinking deeper into misery. Every night she expected Stavre to appear and bring her a hint of happiness. She never left the house at all. She used up her last sack of flour to make mush. She needed to do something more to feed herself and her children, but what? The last two days they ate boiled potatoes. They were starving. She finally got enough courage to go out. She wrapped her head with a black head kerchief and headed for the Asia Minor colonist's store. She bought some groceries and headed home. Inside her house she found Gone Slivarov sitting at her table, watching the children cheerfully playing on the bed.

“What brings you here, Gone?” she asked.

“We are leaving, going over the border, several families are leaving. You need to tell us by tomorrow if you are coming or not,” said Gone quietly and left. He then went to see the Popgonev’s. He found Kosta sitting at the table eating his dinner. Donka was sitting on the bed.

“Good evening, Uncle Gone,” said Kosta. “Please, join me for dinner!”

“We are moving across the border, Donka. Think about it! We already talked about this earlier. Tell me what you are going to do?” said Gone quietly.

“What border? What are you saying, Uncle Gone? You are telling us to leave our country? Our native land?” asked Kosta stunned, almost not believing what he was hearing.

“We must go or they will kill us all like dogs. When the situation calms down in this country we will come back. This is our land, son, and no one can become its owner but us. Now I must go. It’s getting late. And you can do as you like. At midnight the day after tomorrow I will be waiting at the great rock. Be there before midnight. We leave at 12:30. If you are not there then we will know that you are staying in Kostaneria. Goodbye!” he said and left. He went home. He could not sleep all night. He spent the next day preparing. Sometime in the late evening he took his wife and children and secretly left the house. They walked through the gardens and then through the dense groves and about an hour later they arrived at the great rock. The place was well hidden. They hid in a hole at the foot of the great rock and waited.

“God help those who remain behind. They will all face Zinda Niarhos’s knife...” Gone thought to himself and coughed. He then heard a noise. They all ducked down and hid. Gone looked up and strained his eyes in the dark. It was Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska with her two children. One she was carrying on her back and the other was walking in front of her. She looked tired and did not see the Slivarov’s hiding in the hole. Gone came out from the darkness and startled her. She jumped but made no sound.

“It’s us...” said Gone quietly.

“When are we leaving? I am afraid for my children. They are the only reason I am going across the border,” said Evangelia and began to cry.

Gone tapped her on her head and said:

“No need to cry. We will wait a few minutes and then go...”

Evangelia stopped crying.

6.

“Let’s get moving, people!” said Gone and motioned to Evangelia to go first.

“The Popgonev’s are coming...” Evangelia announced and pointed in their direction.

The Popgonev’s joined the group. Everyone was silent as they made their way through the woods towards the border. Their feet were sore. They had traveled a long way.

“We are here!” said Gone. “Our freedom is at the bottom of this hill. Gevgelia is on the other side of the brook. Before continuing they all turned and looked back.

“Don’t look back and don’t be sad! We will be back as soon it’s safe...” said Gone and continued walking downhill.

The people followed him. Only Evangelia and Stavre’s children kept looking back. They smiled gently and nostalgically.

VII

1.

Pondilaki was sitting at the docks on the large trunk that Tushi Gonev offloaded from the ocean liner. He was reading a newspaper. Occasionally he coughed. Manoli Strezovski handed him a cigarette. Pondilaki took the cigarette and put it in his mouth.

“Do you smoke?” asked Tushi.

“One cigarette once in a while to calm my nerves...” he replied.

Tushi Gonev laughed out loud. Pondilaki laughed even louder.

“Mr. Voulgarakis’s government fell...” he said and continued to laugh. His laughter was infectious and made the dock workers also laugh.

“Stop laughing. Continuous laughter is no good for the workers,” said Tushi and stopped laughing.

“Today is a holiday. Let’s go to the city centre...” said Pondilaki.

“What are you talking about? What holiday, Pondilaki?” asked Tushi.

Pondilaki smiled.

“The freeing of Solun...” said Manoli jokingly through a smile.

“Then let’s go!” suggested Pondilaki and stood up. When they arrived they were joined by others who had come to the city centre to celebrate the day of the liberation of Solun. The crowd was carrying banners and yelling. They wanted a new government and democracy.

“People are going on a march. Shall we join them?” asked Tushi.

“Sure. Why not?” replied Pondilaki sarcastically. “What kind of state persecutes the people who liberated it from the Nazis? Since the signing of the Varkiza agreement, according to which we ELAS fighters were required to lay down our arms, we were promised free elections, but since then they have killed 750 people, wounded 5,677 people, tortured 28,450 people and jailed 1,528 people. After all this do we still need to ask ourselves in what kind of state we live...?” added Pondilaki.

“Where did you read all this?” asked Tushi.

“In the newspapers... Journalists are reporting on everything. All we need to do is read the news and we will know everything. Let us go to the café. These people here are crazy. They gather like flocks of sheep and demand their freedom with words... The only way to get our freedom is if we take down the government by force... with arms and weapons...” said Pondilaki and turned the first corner. They spent the evening in the café.

“It’s been several days now that we were the last ones to leave the café,” mentioned Manoli.

2.

“Whoever has family can go! We who don’t have families will stay here and enjoy the warmth of the café,” laughed Pondilaki. “We will wait for Lazaros Papadoglu, our reporter. He is coming here later. He will certainly have new news for us.”

Lazaros Papadoglu was a young man. Everyone in the boarding house was familiar with his merry eyes and smile. And just as they expected he walked into the café smiling and headed for the dock worker table.

“The war has begun. It started in Lamia where government troops collided with the detachments of the self-defenders. The government army faired the worst...” he said softly and sat down on the chair that was offered to him by Pondilaki.

“What did I tell you...” said Pondilaki and handed Lazaros a shot glass. Lazaros poured himself some rakia and sipped a drop. After that he sipped some more, disregarding the dock workers who remained speechless around the table following his merry movements and listening to every word he said.

“To democracy!” cheered Lazaros and drank about a third of his rakia.

“What’s with that strong loan the government took from England?” asked Pondilaki. “The government was promising us stabilization...”

“What stabilization! That’s foolish! Who believes in stabilization? To survive one needs over 400,000 drahmas a month. The workers receive barely 30,000 drahmas and the clerks only 60,000 drahmas a month. The Greek government took a new loan from England. The first loan was already consumed... Gone!” replied Lazaros.

“Who consumed it?” asked Pondilaki wondering.

“The wolves!” replied Lazaros sarcastically. “The new loan is for propping up the military. People say that the new loan London is giving Greece is to secure it and is given in exchange for Greece’s gold bars worth two million pounds sterling, which were taken to the English banks for storage at the beginning of the war with the Nazis. Pondilaki, do you truly believe what the government tells you? Famine is steadily arriving in Solun. That is why there are daily stories of strikes. I saw you at the liberation anniversary. You didn’t stay to the end of the celebration. You should have been there to see what happened...” said Lazaros.

“We heard. The gendarmes came and there was blood on both sides,” replied Pondilaki.

“Every day there was bloodshed. Every time there was a request for bread the police responded with sticks and jail time. The people were completely puzzled. The people of Solun are a very defensive group. They are organizing to preserve their lives. The land is stuttering like it’s suffering from the plague,” said Lazaros.

3.

“The new elections are falsified. The new government is Monarcho-Fascist and loyal to the English. This morning the self-defense units collided with the government army in Lithohori. Blood will flow like never before not only in Macedonia and Greece but also around the world.” said Lazaros.

“We are not at fault for that.” replied Pondilaki.

“It doesn’t matter who is at fault... I must return to the newsroom... Goodbye!” he said and left the café while looking into Stoios’s eyes.

Stoios was very surprised. Lazaros reminded him of Urania Papaioannou and her mesmerizing looks. He went to Pondilaki's table.

“What is it Stoios? What has upset you?” jokingly asked Pondilaki.

“I should clean the guns. There is a long road ahead...” he quite seriously said to Pondilaki and to the dock workers and went back in the kitchen.

To everyone's surprise Kolio Bochvarov showed up in the café.

“I want to add to what Lazaros has told you.” he said. “Earlier he told me that even the dead have voted for the Monarcho-Fascists in Kostaneria. The list had names of people who had died in 1908...” He then went silent and placed his hands over his face covering his eyes.

VIII

1.

A small procession of people was passing by on the street in front of the boarding house chanting: “MACEDONIANS GET OUT OF GREECE”.

Lazaros Papadoglu was sitting in the café with Pondilaki and the dock workers. The people from the procession were screaming so loud they were hurting his eardrums.

“The newspaper says that we Macedonians will cause World War III. Greece wants to get rid of us... Force us out from our native hearth...” said Manoli Strezovski in a mellow tone of voice.

Lazaros Papadoglu was getting even more upset watching the people outside shouting offensive and hurtful slogans. He got up and went outside. Manoli followed him.

“I can assure you Manoli that it is not the Greek people who want you out of Greece. These are nationalists supported by the English

and Americans. This is your country and no one can chase you out.” said Lazaros.

“And what about these people here?” asked Manoli pointing at the procession.

“Don’t worry about them! The Greek people will not allow a handful of people to achieve their desires.” replied Manoli.

Surprised, Manoli Strezovski turned his head. Lazaros’s voice sounded like it was broken into countless pieces and the noise from the street blew them away like ashes in the wind.

“I don’t much believe in the power of your words. I am used to seeing the government for what it really is and for what it does. Especially how it takes power and what it does with it!” replied Manoli.

2.

Manoli Strezovski and Lazaros went back inside and sat with Pondilaki and the dock workers.

“Is there a look of contentment in your eyes?” asked Pondilaki with a smile.

“Well, after this, the people will put their trust back in the communists. This rally speaks very loudly about the oppression of the Macedonians even though they desire to live together with us in the same state.” replied Lazaros.

“I like that! What do you think Lazaros?” asked Pondilaki.

“There is no other way. It is my wish to see all of you Macedonians together. Only that is another story...” replied Lazaros and took a sip of rakia.

3.

“Didn’t I tell you? They agreed!” shouted Lazaros.

Manoli Strezovski looked surprise and alarmed.

“What was it that you told me?” he asked Lazaros.

“The Macedonian and Greek democratic organizations agreed to lead the fight against the government together!” Lazaros yelled out triumphantly.

Pondilaki laughed out loud. Manoli Strezovski looked relieved. Lazaros Papadoglu’s words echoed in his mind: “The Greek people do not represent a group of ferocious nationalists...” Manoli felt stronger, like he was ready to fight against the devil.

“I am ready to fight!” Manoli yelled out loudly.

“This does not affect the people who manipulate the destiny of the country. They falsified the plebiscite. This is what the left and central parties were saying yesterday. They also said that only the English and the Monarcho-Fascists want this kind of government. They are bringing the king back from London.” said Lazaros and coughed.

“I don’t like the king coming back. They will again forbid me from speaking my native Macedonian language, just like they did before the war.” said Manoli sounding concerned.

“Quiet, be careful what you say! Pampas is coming in with his entourage of policemen.” said Lazaros quietly.

“Don’t worry about Pampas! I fear only the army. The army is a big problem for me if it enters the café. Pampas is a timid man, afraid of children...” said Pondilaki and laughed.

“He married Sofia Geleva. He sent his wife and three children to a village somewhere near Solun. He now walks around like a jackass...” said Manoli.

“Urania now will never be able to get her brother Hristo out.” interjected Tushi.

“Why not?” wondered Pondilaki.

“Sofia married Pampas to free herself from Urania’s hooks. Look at her. Look how she is walking! She will trip over herself from being so puffed up.” said Manoli.

Urania’s new star appeared on the stage. The bright lights dimmed and went bright again. Pampas smiled, looked at Sofia and said:

“You are mine now! Only I can look and caress your naked body, the most beautiful body in the world.”

Sofia Geleva did not reply. She smiled and watched the podium. Iani Rankov came out on stage. Sofia laughed out loud and clapped her hands. Pampas looked at her sternly. Sofia stopped her clapping, picked up her glass and said:

“Cheers my dear!”

“Cheers, beautiful!” replied Pampas.

They both had a sip of rakia. The lights then came on full bright. Then, suddenly, they went out and Iani Rankov began to play his bouzouki. All the customers in the café turned their eyes and ears towards the stage.

4.

All the dock workers, sitting at their usual table, were making unusual sounds.

“The king arrived in Greece today. He came off the “Franklin Roosevelt”. The large ship anchored at Piraeus harbour.” whispered Lazaros to Pondilaki.

“I see! So, that’s why Hash and the Monarcho-Fascists are so happy today. The entire company seems to be gathered here. They are celebrating the return of their king...” replied Pondilaki.

“And, as you can see, the Englishmen and the American are here with them!” said Lazaros.

“All we are missing now is the police and the slime from the Balkan countries. And I don’t see Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin here.” replied Pondilaki.

“The police is coming, Pondilaki. Listen to their footsteps!” laughed Lazaros.

“To the health of the new government...” sarcastically toasted Pondilaki and took a sip of rakia.

Pampas, with Sofia’s hand under his arm, took his place reserved just for him and ordered a brandy for two. He looked around and saw Hash celebrating. He smiled at him contentedly. Hash bowed slightly at his police uniform. He then saluted Hash’s bow and gave the Englishmen and the American a sign to continue to have fun. He then turned his eyes and stared at Sofia’s beauty. After that he took a sip brandy.

5.

Rasim Bey stood up, made a tough face and toasted his two companions he was with. Pampas did not tolerate his presence in the café but was afraid to openly confront him so he smiled at him and raised his glass to toast him. Hash saw the Albanian and his companions and went over to them.

“Will you join us, Rasim! We are celebrating.” he said.

“What are you celebrating? A holiday?” asked Rasim.

“We are celebrating the return of the king to this country. We now have a king!” he replied pompously.

Rasim Bey scratched his head and said:

“Okay we will come over. We are happy that your king has returned...”

“Our king, Resim!” said Hash proudly.

Rasim Bey stood up and accompanied Hash to his table. Rasim's companions followed.

"Hello!" said Rasim Bey greeting the Englishmen and the American.

"Hello!" they said back.

Rasim Bey sat down and was joined by his two friends. Hash handed them each a shot glass and poured some gin into them. They all laughed.

6.

Iani Ronkov appeared on the stage again and began to test his instrument. The gentle sound of the bouzouki filled the room. Hash waved his hand inviting him to his table. Iani Ronkov took his time going there.

"Play something cheerful, something that will crown the coming of our king in this country." he said in a mild tone of voice.

"I have to prepare for the evening performance. I am not paid but the king, Urania Papaioannou is paying me to perform!" said Iani in a mellow tone of voice.

Suddenly Hash became very upset and jumped out of his chair. He was frothing from his mouth when he said:

"You will play or I will expel you to Skopje!" He then turned to see how his threat was received by his guests. They all laughed cynically.

Iani Rankov, for some reason, ignored his threat and decided not to play. He, himself did not know why. Unfortunately Hash was not so happy about that and immediately showed his discontent. His eyes went flush and his face turned all red. His nasal cavities went wide open and his face became distorted with rage. Iani Rankov took a couple of steps back.

You will play you Slavo-Macedonian bastard or else!” threatened Hash and drew his dagger from his belt. The large blade flashed in the dim light and for a moment blinded Iani’s eyes.

“Play, you bastard!” Hash yelled out and put his knife close to his eyes.

Iani Rankov took a good look at his eyes and took two more steps back. Hash got even angrier. He made a bizarre face and his eyes turned wild. He then bellowed like a wounded wild beast and waved his knife around ready to stab Iani. His blade flew by Iani’s head. Iani moved away. This made Hash even angrier and this time he aimed to stab Iani. Iani did not look upset. With two quick and long steps, he found himself back on the stage. He calmly grabbed a metal rod he used to support his large trunk in which he kept his instruments and took a defensive position. Hash lost his desire to kill him.

“Maybe now that our duel is over, I can continue with my show. I don’t care if the king is in this country or in some other exotic landscape somewhere on this globe. I live to play my bouzouki and I make my living by playing it...” Iani thought to himself and kept an eye on Hash to make sure he did not ambush him. One time Iani was in love with a beautiful woman but the last war took her away from him leaving him alone to roam around the big city. He now has accepted his self imposed solitude and is living amongst the common people. He neither loves nor hates anyone. Everyone is the same for him. He is not interested in politics and thought nothing about urging the people to fight for their freedom. Also, he wanted nothing from them. Last year he had fallen so low that nothing other than his own bouzouki could make him get up again. Now that Hash tried to strike against his dignity something awakened in him. He suddenly had a strong desire to step on him and crush him under his feet. But, such violence was not in his nature, he was always a peaceful man. He went back to what he did best but would not to surrender.

Hash kept looking at him with his feral eyes flashing and with his glittering knife blade swinging at him. He went up on the stage and firmly pressed his knife blade against Iani’s metal rod and swung it

from side to side determined to continue the struggle until one of them was dead. This, to him, was like going back to his childhood days when he was playing Epatapirgon. But, at the same time Hash kept an eye open for the dock workers who, at the moment, were hesitant to intervene and stop the bloody showdown.

Another bouzouki echoed loudly everywhere in the boarding house. Hash was sweating. He turned and looked. There, in Iani's orchestra, he saw another man playing a bouzouki on the stage. The man played the instrument like his life depended on it feeling his blood flow through his veins as he took measured strikes against the strings.

Pondilaki watched the duel calmly. The dock workers who sat around him were not so calm.

“This game is called the ballad of the undefeated. We often played it when we were children. One of the two must fall. In this case Iani is determined to fight to the death,” said Pondilaki to calm down the dock workers. But that did not help. The dock workers still followed Iani and Hash's movements intensely. They expected some sort of terrible outcome.

Iani Ronkov made a play with his eyes while moving to the sick rhythm of the bouzouki. He took two steps forward towards Hash. A tiny smile appeared on his thin lips. Hash retreated. Iani again jumped towards him keeping his eyes fixed on the blade of the large knife.

Rasim Bey's two companions left their chairs and went towards Iani, making sure they made no noise that might interfere with the melody emanating from the bouzouki. One of Rasim Bey's companions unfortunately failed to completely maintain his composure. He pulled out a dagger with a ribbed blade from the holster he was wearing under his armpit and announced to all present that Iani Rankov now had a new rival. But it was not in his cards to kill a bouzouki player that day. He walked slowly, careful not to stumble, out of fear or lack of confidence. But only he knew why. Unfortunately he tripped over Manoli Strezovski's extended foot and fell headfirst onto the floor. He did not see how the

audience perceived his fall; with great excitement... or not. He managed to raise himself off the floor but a gun appeared in Tushi Gonev's hand and a voice warned him not to move if he wanted to live. He remained on the floor motionless.

Rasim Bey's second companion, from whose eyes sprang a strange nostalgia for something lost long ago, took another two steps and disappeared behind the counter, invisible to the eyes of those present in the café. Pampas was the only one who saw Stoios Panagopoulos grab him by the neck and wrestle him behind the counter.

"Do something! Blood will be spilled!" complained Sofia to Pampas.

Pampas laughed.

"I am not going to my grave because they are fools..." he said and gently tapped Sofia's arm.

"This is the music of death..." lit up Sofia angrily.

"Calm down, crazy woman! Why do you even care?" replied Pampas quietly.

The Bouzouki kept on playing, emitting the warm sounds that flowed in the blood of those present paralyzing their heartbeats. The sick melody was overwhelming and defiant. It broke the silence from which there was no peace not even in the darkest places in this country. No one, outside of Rasim Bey's companions, made any attempt to disrupt the drama and pain caused by the sick melody flowing from the strings. It was as if they were all nailed to the floor of the café. Even Pampas, who on a monthly basis was paid to keep the peace and love among the residents in this large city, did not intervene.

Iani Ronkov firmly pushed the iron rod and watched the reaction in Hash's eyes removing themselves from the music of death. Hash's body shook and uncertainty appeared in his hand holding the sharp, shiny blade of the large knife. It loosened up and slowly pulled back down to half the height of his colourful shirt pointing at the pocket.

Something disturbed his eyes and he began to look for help. His eyes met two revolver pipes, one pointed at Rasim Bey's first companion and the other at the table at which the Englishmen, the American, Rasim Bey and the Monarcho-Fascists sat. He noticed Rasim Bey's first companion on the floor. His eyes could not find the other one. A thought came to his mind to bypass Iani, but the three-tone music suddenly stopped. This killed his latest thought and took him back to the natural merciless lake waters. He jumped two steps back. That saved his life.

Urania Papaioannou appeared on the steps of the stairs leading to the upper floor of the boarding house. She was dressed in a lavish whitish, opaque nightgown.

“The comedy is over, ladies and gentlemen!” she said sternly and loudly right after the music stopped.

The blood pressure in all present returned to normal and everyone went back to doing what they were doing before the drama. They slowly and unsteadily returned to their tables. Hash laughed a mocking laugh more to compose himself than to convince his friends of his triumph or humiliation, depending on how they saw it. With uncertain steps he went back to the table where the Englishmen, the American and Rasim Bey were sitting and sat in one of the empty chairs. Rasim Bey's first companion, released by Tushi Gonev, also returned to the table. The second companion did not make an appearance and was never seen again. Fortunately for Stoios Panagopoulos nobody ever asked for him. It was almost as if such a person had never existed.

Urania Papaioannou went to Pampas's table, bent down and gave him a kiss on his cheek to make sure their friendship was still intact. She then left him all to Sofia who was still emotionally excited by the drama. She frantically kept looking at Iani's bloody eyes. Finally she calmed down.

“This is the first game of death that ended without a winner,” said Pondilaki to the dock workers.

“Don’t jump to conclusions prematurely!” replied Lazaros with a tone of concern in his voice.

Iani Ronkov looked disappointed.

“He has a desire to win at least once in his life. I can read it in his eyes,” murmured Pondilaki and watch him disappear backstage.

7.

It took about half an hour for things to calm down. Urania Papaioannou’s new star, who she had brought all the way from Athens, finally made her appearance on stage. She began to undress to the rhythm of the music and everyone noticed how well she danced in tune with the music. Iani Ronkov was not on stage. But the new star’s dancing, along with the virtuous playing of the bouzouki managed to penetrate the audience’s senses.

The dock workers sitting at the table were concerned.

“The wind will not pass without leaving a bloody trail...” said Tushi.

8.

Urania Papaioannou’s new star went backstage. There was loud a scream. The girl ran back into the café frightened. Stoios Panagopoulos grabbed her and hugged her.

“Iani the bouzouki player is dead. He is lying on the floor backstage,” she said with tears in her eyes.

“What the hell!?” shouted Stoios, sat her down on the chair and ran backstage. He shuddered.

“This is Hash’s doing... He and his ruthless friends did this!” he thought to himself. The café customers anxiously waited for Stoios to appear. When he appeared he was carrying Iani Ronkov’s body in his arms. He stopped in front of the counter and put it down at the new star’s feet. Urania Papaioannou ran down the stairs. She looked emotionless.

“Take the body out of the café. The customers will soon be coming,” she said with a calm tone of voice which was usual for her when she spoke to Stoios. “Then go find Foti! He hasn’t been here for weeks and don’t you tell me you can’t do that...” she added and gently tapped him on the shoulder. She then turned around and went back upstairs to her room.

With the help from two of his staffers who worked in the boarding house, Stoios Panagopoulos wrapped Iani Ronkov’s body in two bed sheets and sent his staffers to deliver him to the cemetery. Without saying a word the two carried Iani’s body away and three hours later they were back in the boarding house. Stoios Panagopoulos compensated them well for doing the extra work. He then treated the two to a glass of rakia in honour of the dead bouzouki player and to his life which he had lived well. He then left the two to finish drinking their rakia while he went to find Foti Steriov at Urania’s request. He left through the back door and headed down the street. The great city had many secret places. Stoios had no idea where Foti might be hiding. After looking at the vague picture of some of the various secret places he might be hiding, he cursed Urania and decided not to look for him any more. What was the point of finding him? Urania was not going to take him back, she was still with Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin who, it seems, never left her bed, her fireplace and the calm waters of the great Don River which he constantly played in his mind. Stoios came back to the boarding house and hid in the kitchen.

IX

1.

Pondilaki was standing on the platform looking at Iana Chakalarova’s big eyes. Sometimes his view was taken by Maria Stavridis’s dear face.

“Say hello to him from me. Don’t forget the vine. He will not accept you without it,” said Pondilaki.

Iana Chakalarova smiled. Maria Stavridis looked at him shyly.

“Don’t worry! We will take care of everything,” replied Iana.

The train began to move and soon left the station. While thinking of something, Pondilaki went down the platform, turned into the waiting room and then left the station building. He walked along the streets at a rapid pace and did not look at anyone, not even at those in front of him. Manoli Strezovski joined him at Patera Hani and together they went towards Vardaris street.

“Gather the people and be at the cemetery at midnight! We are doing it tonight. We can’t take any more risks,” said Pondilaki and pushed him ahead while he turned onto Vardaris Street. A little later he arrived at Nika Maria’s house. The inside of the house was familiar to him because he went there every day. He entered her room and saw her on the bed. Nika Maria was a pile of skin and bones covered with long black hair. She was fighting for her life, or what little she had left. Pondilaki wanted to send her across the border but when he saw her he realized that it was too late. Nika Maria was going to the other world, the one about which priests pray. He sat down beside her and stayed there for two hours. After that all he had to do was give her a decent burial in the cemetery. He covered her from top to bottom with a sheet, lay her down on her bed and went out of the house. He rushed to get to the church. The streets were empty and he arrived quickly. He found Priest Iraklo inside.

“Are you sure it’s Nika Maria?” asked the priest and sighed.

“Yes Father, I will need a coffin and a few candles. It is important to bury her by tradition,” replied Pondilaki.

“Tonight at ten o’clock in the cemetery. Now go!” said the priest.

“Thank you, Father. I will not forget what you are doing for me,” replied Pondilaki.

“For every soul, my son. We are all children of God and should respect that,” said Iraklo.

Pondilaki left and went back to Nika Maria’s house. When it started to get dark outside he looked at his watch. It was a little early. He lay down on the other bed. When he woke up it was just before ten.

He wrapped Nika Maria's dead body with another sheet and threw her over his shoulder. He moved slowly and carefully through the streets, making sure no one saw him. When he arrived at the cemetery he recognized Iraklo's figure in the dark and went towards him. Lying on the ground beside him was a coffin and a few candles. The priest opened the coffin lid and Pondilaki carefully lowered Nika Maria's body inside it. He then put the lid back and nailed it down. The priest smiled slightly.

"Everything is ready. All that remains is for me to dig the grave," said Pondilaki.

"The grave has already been dug Pondilaki. Just help me lower the coffin into it. I sent my people away so that they don't see you. Anything can happen you know. Money is tempting to everyone nowadays..." said the priest quietly and grabbed one end of the coffin. Pondilaki grabbed the other end and the two slowly and carefully lowered it into the grave. The priest then said a few words and did his part over the coffin. Pondilaki then covered the coffin and filled the entire hole with soil. He then put a cross on it. On the cross he wrote: "HEREIN LIES NIKA MARIA." He was satisfied with the service.

"Now let us go, Pondilaki," said the priest.

Pondilaki nodded his head. His hair was a mess. They snuck out of the dark cemetery and went inside the church. Iraklo noticed two strangers following them.

"I forgot to light the candles," said Pondilaki. "I am going back to the cemetery!"

Iraklo smiled and seemed glad to see Pondilaki leave the church. He knew the two people who followed them were standing in front of the church, so he quietly escorted Pondilaki out the back door and they shook hands without saying a word. Pondilaki left for the cemetery. He located Nika Maria's grave, lit the candles and placed them near the cross. He stood there for a while and then quickly went to Hristo Sotirovski's house where old man Hristo lived with his daughter Paraskevi. It was late at night. He wanted to say hello

to them before leaving town. He found them brooding with dark circles around their eyes. They were surprised to see him. Pondilaki sat down.

“What happened to you?” he asked with a serious tone of voice while rubbing his tired eyes.

“We are leaving tomorrow...” replied Hristo calmly.

Pondilaki became upset.

“Why, for what reason?” he asked, looking desperate.

“You know why. They are mercilessly persecuting us and they will kill us. The police are looking for Paraskeva. I want to save my daughter and my grandchild,” he replied.

Pondilaki thought for a moment and said:

“You are right, you are not the only ones. It seems our entire world is falling apart all around us and the many people we counted on in the past are leaving us, vanishing from our sight... even from our country... There are too many events unfolding too fast and I can't seem to gather my wits. I don't know what to tell you. I can only offer you my assistance. The war has started and...” said Pondilaki and without finishing his sentence added: “Leave the keys with the neighbours.”

“The times are bad, my son...” replied Hristo. “Thank you for all you have done for us. And that is more than plenty. The rest will be settled by the Macedonian organization in which Paraskeva is a member. I hope we will meet again but under different circumstances. No one could have predicted that something like this was going to happen and that it would ruin our lives,” concluded Hristo.

“Then goodbye and hope we will meet again...” said Pondilaki, shook hands and left the apartment. Half an hour later he was at the cemetery again. Manoli Strezovski and Tushi Gonev were already there waiting for him. They joined the others. Among them

Pondilaki noticed Vangelios Kotinaris's smiling face. Pondilaki went over and shook hands.

"Let us begin!" Pondilaki said.

Vangelios Kotinaris smiled and showed his white teeth. He gave the sign to move. A moving shadow stopped them in their tracks. The quiet shadow moved among the tombstones and wooden crosses. They ducked down and closely followed its movements.

"Who could it be? We are not expecting anyone else," said Kotinaris quietly.

They all stood there silently watching the shadow. Then, right in front of them, Stoios Panagopoulos appeared. Everyone was surprised. Stoios Panagopoulos was surprised the most.

"Excuse me for being late. I was not able to leave the boarding house on time..." he explained.

Everybody laughed and then left. They had only one rifle. Stoios Panagopoulos was carrying it over his shoulder. The others were carrying pistols. They walked at a fast pace. They arrived at the Vlach cottages before sunrise. Kotinaris stopped, raised his arm up and said:

"We have reached our destination. You may go inside but half an hour from now I want you all to gather in front of that cottage over there. Now go and find yourselves a place to stay."

The dock workers ran for the cottages. It took them only a few moments to disappear. There was silence. The only sounds heard were those of the men snoring.

PART IV

1.

For a long time Stavre Nakovski despised the two strangers who freed him. He did not want to be freed. He wanted to die in his yard in front of his own house. He wanted to leave his bones in front of his own doorstep, but the strangers were persistent and forcibly dragged him behind the house and into the thick grove. He was not very curious about why he had been rescued. One of the two strangers was skinny, dark and tall with unusually thick eyebrows. He was always smiling.

“We all have suffered a great deal in the angry hands of the Monarcho-Fascists. Will you join us,” asked the stranger.

Stavre Nakovski did not answer him. He was thinking of Evangelia and the children.

The second stranger, who had a damaged right eye, was always silent. His name was Todor Rikov.

“How did that happen?” asked Stavre and sat down to rest.

“We were not allowed to speak Macedonian before the war. They did this to me in my own house. They busted into my house and arrested me for speaking Macedonian with my wife and children and then beat me badly. One of the gendarmes hit me in the eye with a wooden bat so that I couldn’t look at him. I spent five years in jail. When I was released and wanted to go home they again warned me not to make the same mistake,” replied the man.

“And, of course, you didn’t, right?” asked Stavre.

“I did it the very same day I returned. I went to the market in Solun and found my neighbour there. He did not speak Greek. So in what language was I going to say hello to him? Greek? Arabic? I spoke to him in the only language we both understood; I said a single word in Macedonian. Is it a sin for a man to speak in his native language? Two months ago a government military unit arrived in my village.

They forced us to declare ourselves Greeks. I managed to get out of the village before they got to me. They cut off the tongues of the first three people who refused to sign,” replied Todor.

“They did the same thing in my village. I spent a long time in Athens and now I am back here again,” replied Stavre.

“Will we ever get out of this hell?” asked Todor.

“I doubt it. Maybe if we abandon your homes and leave our homeland? Or perhaps if we leave this world altogether... Why do they call you Katsar (barrel maker)?” asked Stavre.

The other man smiled.

“My ancestors were barrel makers. That’s what the people called us,” replied Katsar.

Stavre Nakovski laughed loudly. When he stopped laughing dark clouds appeared over his eyebrows.

2.

After walking several hours over the mountains they arrived in the village Parnarovo. They went to a house which belonged to a relative of Todor Riskov. The people there welcomed them like they were part of their family. They gave them food and winter clothes for Stavre.

“You can’t stay in the village too long! The Monarcho-Fascist dogs are circling like vultures and are threatening us with death by firing squad,” said the man who welcomed them into his home.

“Do not worry! We are leaving immediately,” said Stavre and quickly got up. “Let’s go!” he said to the other two. “We will spend the night in the mountains.”

They again found themselves in the mountains. The wind was blowing and it was very cold. Before dawn they arrived at a deserted house which belonged to the Tsiporiazov family. They went inside. There was dust everywhere. The beds and bed covers were

untouched. They were very tired. They went to bed without bothering to shake the dust off the blankets.

“Should we place a guard?” asked Katsar.

“There is no need. The house is quite far away from prying eyes. Go to sleep!” replied Stavre.

“How is your wound? Does it still hurt?” asked Katsar.

“I am fine! Go to sleep now!” replied Stavre and turned his back on him.

They all fell asleep very quickly.

3.

Unbeknownst to them, seventeen people quietly entered the yard of the Tsiporiazov house where the three were sleeping. They were surprised when they saw people sleeping in the beds. Stavre opened his eyes and looked at their sweaty faces suspiciously.

“We are Macedonians, don’t worry! Hello Stavre, nice to see you! It’s a small world, isn’t it?” said the white haired man standing near the door.

“Hello Chonka!” replied Stavre, dazed.

“Don’t worry! We are leaders of the Macedonian organization. We know about you,” he said and turned to the others. “This is Stavre Nakovski of whom Kolio Bochvarov spoke,” he added and asked his comrades to sit down.

Stavre Nakovski got out of bed and took a step with his wounded leg. He felt a lot of pain and yelped slightly.

“Are you wounded?” asked Chonka.

“In the right leg. We couldn’t remove the bullets,” replied Stavre.

“Your comrades are in a deep sleep. Probably dreaming of taking revenge,” said Chonka.”

“It doesn’t matter what they dream. No one cares about us! We are like stray dogs. We do them no harm and they beat us. The hell with talking, let’s me make you some porridge. You must be hungry?” said Stavre and woke Todor and Katsar.

“What is going on? Who are these people?” asked Katsar half asleep.

“They are friends... Macedonians... our people. They are hungry. We will prepare some porridge for them while they rest,” he said and limped his way to prepared the flour. Todor and Katsar joined him. The porridge was ready in no time. Katsar lifted the pot out of the fireplace and put it on the table. They all quickly surrounded the table and began to eat.

“Later we will extract the bullet from your leg,” said Chonka.

“You mean the two bullets?” laughed Stavre.

“Well, if there are two, then two will extract both of them,” said Chonka, smiled and coughed from swallowing wrong.

After they ate Todor and Katsar went up the mountain to hunt game. Stavre remained behind and sat in front of the house. The people who came with Chonka lay down to rest. Chonka sat outside with Stavre.

“Don’t you want to rest and get some sleep?” asked Stavre.

“I am not that tired. I wanted to talk to you,” replied Chonka.

“Do you need a person like myself in your organization?” asked Stavre jokingly. He then said: “Chonka, I already am a member and a member of the Party. I was one of the first people to join the Macedonian organization...” he added proudly.

“Then we can count on you...Right?” asked Chonka.

“Certainly!” said Stavre and sighed.

“We have not seen each other for a long time... since you were in Banko Budbarovski’s cabaret in Athens,” said Chonka.

“Those were the good times, even though it was during the war. In those days I could insult the king’s mother and everyone would laugh. Now it is different. They want to slaughter us for the slightest thing,” replied Stavre.

“Don’t worry, Stavre! Our time is at hand. You will see. The sun will also shine on us Macedonians just like it shines on the other nations of the world. Trust in me!” said Chonka.

“Just don’t tell me that you will return me to Kostaneria with a song!” said Stavre.

“That I will not do... for now. The future however is ours. We are young and we must outlast the struggle. The Balkans have risen for us. There will be a Balkan federation in which we, the Macedonians, will have our own state and will not have to suffer any man’s tyranny,” replied Chonka.

“You talk like this is going to happen in some unwritten fairy tale. But I accept your invitation to fight with you. We will be stronger together. Whatever we get we will share,” said Stavre.

“Agreed!” replied Chonka.

4.

“Goodbye Stavre! Its war time and we might never see each other again... But you do know where our office is...” said Chonka.

“Goodbye Chonka! May good fortune follow you!” replied Stavre.

Stavre Nakovski turned around and, followed by Todor Riskov and Katsar, left the yard. They walked into the thick grove and began to climb up the mountain.

“Does your foot hurt? I see you are limping slightly,” said Katsar.

“It still hurts; the wound has not fully healed. We must move slowly, otherwise I might lose my leg. That’s what the doctor said,” replied Stavre and laughed out loud.

“Who are we meeting with?” asked Todor Riskov curiously.

“Some people from Yugoslavia,” replied Stavre.

They all went quiet. Stavre walked in front. Todor walked behind him and Katsar walked last.

5.

They walked for eight hours. They arrived in Bel Kamen and, as was previously agreed upon, they sat on a stump to rest their feet. Less than ten minutes later they were ambushed. Five well-armed men jumped out of the woods with their guns pointed at them. Stavre, Todor and Katsar jumped to their feet and raised their arms up high. There was silence.

“When would you die for your freedom?” asked one of the five while still pointing his gun at them.

“Before the sun sets,” replied Stavre, standing there rigid and motionless. He then loosened up a bit.

“The sun is ours and will never set,” said the man and spread his arms to hug him.

Stavre Nakovski hugged him back and pressed his arms tightly around his shoulders. Todor and Katsar remained motionless with their mouths gaping open in surprise.

“Lower your arms! We are among our own people here,” said Stavre.

Still confused Katsar and Todor slowly lowered their arms.

“Bring the bag and boxes!” said the first man to his companions.

They all moved fast without saying a word. When they returned they brought back one bag and five boxes and laid them down in front of Stavro. The bag was unusually long and thin.

“There are machine guns in the bag and ammunition in the boxes. Now goodbye until we see you here again in ten days,” said the man.

“Goodbye and see you back here in ten days,” replied Stavre.

They shook hands and the five men left. Stavre lifted the bag and put it over his shoulder. Katsar and Todor picked up a box each.

“Hide the other boxes in the bushes! We will return for them,” said Stavre.

They put down the boxes that they had picked up and hid the other three in the bushes. They then picked up the original boxes and placed them on their shoulders. They traveled a long distance on rugged terrain in the mountains and often stopped to rest.

“Where are these people from?” asked Katsar.

“I am sure they are from the other side of the border. Who else has such weapons!? We know that the ELAS fighters surrendered theirs after the Varkiza Agreement was signed,” replied Stavre.

It was dark and they were silent as they entered the yard of a house. They put down the bag and boxes in front of the door. Stavre entered the house first. He stood there stunned. There were human corpses everywhere inside. Stavre counted nine. The bodies were so badly beaten that Stavre could not recognize them by their faces but only by the clothes they wore. He surmised that they were part of Chonka’s group. Todor and Katsar entered the house and were petrified at the sight.

“Let’s get out of here!” said Stavre. “We will hide in the Vlach cottages.”

They took the bag and crates and moved away from the house. They were at the cottages before midnight. They had a restless sleep. The next few days they waited, hoping that some wild game might pass by that they could shoot to fill their hungry stomachs. But, unfortunately, nothing came by. After that they decided to go up the mountain and do some hunting. They took two machine guns and some ammunition and went off. They wandered around in the snow for a long time before they spotted a young deer. Katsar hesitated and did not want to shoot. Stavre Nakovski killed the deer with his first shot. They returned to the cottages and roasted the animal. They were so hungry they were unable to eat much...

6.

They were very lonely in the cottages and their souls were hungry to socialize with other people. Nine days later they went back to the meeting place to meet with the five men from beyond the border. On the tenth day they met them at the same place.

“What’s new?” asked the man.

“Someone massacred the people who sent us here. We don’t know who did it. They said they were leaders of the Macedonian organization. Now we are cut off from them,” replied Stavre.

The five men did not show any concern.

“Hide the guns in a safe place and wait for the right time...!” said the man.

They separated.

7.

“These people came from Skopje. They want to fight with you against the Monarcho-Fascists. Their wish is to return to their recently abandoned homes,” said the man and, together with the other four, went in the direction of the border.

Stavre Nakovski looked at the people curiously. He didn’t know any of them. Their faces were tame but from the look in their eyes they were ready to fight. He led them to the cottages. When they arrived

he assigned them a place to stay. He then began to nervously pace from cottage to cottage.

“We will need to supply us all with food. We are now thirteen. I must make contact with the democratic army headquarters. It is the only way to solve this problem...” Stavre thought to himself.

The next day he came out of the cottage, which he had dedicated as the headquarters of this unit and loudly yelled out:

“Fall in!”

The people came out of the cottages and hastily lined up. They were all armed.

“Follow me single file!” he ordered and they began to march.

8.

Stavre Nakovski was determined to get in touch with headquarters at any cost, which he anticipated was in the mountains of western Macedonia. They wandered around for a long time and ran into similar groups, but could not find the headquarters of the democratic army. It was as if it existed in name only. Tired, they were returning to the cottages but when they got closer Stavre spotted people all around them. The men stopped, took defensive positions and observed. It was midday. The sun finally came out of the dark clouds that were hanging over their heads and above the cottages. Stavre spotted someone he recognized and jumped up with joy, surprising the men.

“Pondilaki!” he screamed out loudly and ran to greet the man who was walking between two cottages.

“Stavre!” yelled Pondilaki and smiled a great big smile when recognized him.

“They are hugging...” one of the men remarked. The others looked on wildly in disbelief.

“Stavre!” yelled Kotinaris and ran towards him. They embraced. The men stood there stunned, staring at them with their mouths wide open. They were all confused. When they left the cottages there was no one left behind. The new faces were a strange presence. But the magical moment of mystery did not last long. They were all introduced to one another and found themselves cheerful and smiling. They all forgot that they were tired and had not slept well for days.

9.

Stavre Nakovski could barely come to his senses. He escorted Pondilaki and Vangelios Kotinaris into the cabin he himself had designated as the headquarters of his unit, which consisted of himself, Katsar and Todor Riskov. Katsar was already in the cabin, had lit the fire and was boiling tea in the fireplace. They sat down. The tea was soon ready. They drank quietly. Pondilaki and Kotinaris left the cabin and went to sleep. Stavre was left alone. He was in deep thought but could not keep his eyes open and his mind sharp. He was very tired and fell asleep in his chair. The next day he woke up earlier than the others. Kotinaris entered the cabin with a smile on his face.

“It’s like in the old days...” he said.

“Only now we are not fighting Nazis...” replied Stavre and offered him a cup of tea.

Kotinaris took the cup and looked at it.

“They look like the same cups we drank from in 1943?” he remarked with a curious look on his face.

“They are. We didn’t bring new ones...” Stavre replied looking concerned.

“Something troubling you, Stavre?” asked Kotinaris.

“Food!” snapped Stavre, worried.

“No problem...” replied Kotinaris.

“No problem??” snapped Stavre.

“We will hunt. We will hunt mountain game. We will supply ourselves the same way we did during the war against the Nazis,” replied Kotinaris.

“Perhaps we should free Kostaneria first?” suggested Stavre.

“Kostaneria was burned down to the ground...” replied Kotinaris looking down.

“It wasn’t. Most of the people returned to the village and repaired their houses,” said Stavre.

“So then we should attack and occupy it...” replied Kotinaris.

“You should lead the attack Kotinaris, you are a soldier and an experienced fighter. You can be the commander of this unit!” suggested Stavre.

At that moment Vangelios Kotinaris lost the character of the cheerful young man that Stavre remembered from the war. His blond hair was neatly combed and lines of principled firmness and restraint decorated his pale face. His transparent blue eyes that reflected his strong character, honesty and patience, did not vibrate like before but were quite calm and absorbing everything that Stavre said.

“Thank you for your vote of confidence, Stavre! But will the others agree?” replied Kotinaris.

“I have already spoken to Pondilaki. He agrees. After all, you are the only one among us who has combat experience,” said Stavre.

“Then when shall we set out for Kostaneria?” asked Kotinaris.

Stavre Nakovski laughed.

“You are the Kapetanios now. You decide!” said Stavre and walked out of the cabin.

Vangelios Kotinaris was left alone in deep thought, holding the old cup with tea in his hand.

10.

Vangelios Kotinaris stood inside the cabin designated as the unit’s headquarters. Stavre Nakovski came in. Kotinaris offered him a cup of tea. Stavre took it and quickly gulped down the warm liquid.

“Today we will take Kostaneria,” said Kotinaris.

“Why today?” wondered Stavre.

“Because tomorrow it may be too late,” replied Kotinaris.

“I don’t know what you have in mind but I will respect your orders...” replied Stavre. He finished his tea, went outside, lined up the men and waited. Kotinaris came out behind him and laughed.

“Is this the army? Is this some sort of joke?” said Kotinaris and stood in front of the men. “Line up one behind the other, in a single column and follow me!” he yelled and pulled in front of the men. Stavre pulled in behind him and the rest of the men followed single file. Pondilaki walked at the end of the column. After about four hours of walking down the mountain the men were deployed around the village. They lay down on the wet grass and waited for their orders to attack.

11.

Pondilaki had a great desire to visit Kostaneria. He thought that village life was idyllic, good enough for a man to live his life in peace.

“Your group will enter the village first!” Kotinaris said to Pondilaki.

Pondilaki looked upset. He pushed Tushi Gonev with his elbow and gave him a sign with his head to go behind him. Stoios Panagopoulos took his position behind them, followed by Stoian

Dzhavalekov, Nikos Zaikopoulos and Manoli Strezovski. They quietly pushed their way past the first houses, making sure they were not seen, and took their positions behind Dimitar Popgonev's house.

12.

That morning Zinda Niarhos did not go to the church. He went to Stefano's store and sat with the teacher Ioannidis Karahopoulos, Vasil Digalovski and Milkiadis and played Xira. Zinda was telling them something and occasionally showed his yellowed teeth and often laughed out loud.

Stavre quietly went inside the store and loudly yelled out: "No one moves!"

His loud yell nailed them on their chairs. They raised their hands above their heads and obeyed his order like they knew what he was thinking.

Stavre Nakovski took them out of the store, surrendered them to Tushi Gonev to guard and fired a shot into the air to signal the others that the job was done. Kotinaris laughed and entered the village with the rest of the unit.

13.

For days Stavre Nakovski was preparing for this moment, when he was going to tear off Zinda Niarhos's head. He had this evil desire to tie him to a stake, skin him alive and let the bugs eat him. Now that he had him in his grasp he no longer wanted to harm him in that way. He couldn't understand why. He ran home. On his way he ran into Kolio Bochkarov. They embraced.

"I am going home. How are Evangelia and the children?" he asked while panting.

"It's best you don't go home! She left with the Slivarov's and Popgonev's and crossed over the border," said Kolio. He then grabbed him by the arm and led him back towards the village square.

Stavre Nakovski could not believe what he just heard. Every smell and every sight reminded him of his past and the good times. He struggled with himself to snap out of it but was unable. Both his spirit and body were weakening and he felt like he was going to collapse. A child's cry got his attention, but only for a moment. He could not tell if it was real or a hallucination. He heard another and then another. He turned around to see who it was, and there in front of him was the large village church. He kept looking and inside the door he saw Milkiadis Tsakondas, his wife Evridika and their three children. Their children were crying and squealing loudly to heaven, as if wanting God to hear their prayers, praying for their father.

Evridika Tsakondas ran from one to the other but was unable to pacify them. She left them to bathe in their own tears and cry to exhaustion. They left the church and took to the road. The youngest kept stumbling over the potholes and falling on the road. Her knee began to bleed. She looked at it and started crying even harder.

Evridika tried to comfort her but was unable. She too began to cry. She was crying because of the terrible situation she was in. She wanted to make amends with Stavre so that he would forgive and spare the father of her three children for what he had done to Stavre and his family. Her eyes were filled with tears and she could not see clearly. She did not see the stone... Even if she had seen it, the outcome would not have been any different. She tripped over it and her frail body hit the ground. She bit a mouthful of soil as she fell right in front of Stavre's feet. She stood there on the ground powerless and shaking, feeling sorry for what had happened to Stavre and contemplating Milkiadis's fate. She spit the soil out. Her three daughters kept tugging at her dress screaming and melting in tears. She composed herself and grabbed her daughters. She stood up and looked at Stavre. She stopped crying. She wiped the blood from her mouth and stood there stunned.

"I know he is a beast but there is no one else to support my children," she said with a quiet and sad sounding tone of voice.

Stavre Nakovski watched this woman trying to compose herself, attempting to stand up on her thin legs and trying not to fall over. He then turned his gaze to her daughters who were melting in tears.

“The people will decide his fate,” he said quietly so as not to further upset her children.

Evridika Tsakondas screamed out loud.

“If there is a need to pay the people I will give them my life. I can’t support my children by myself. He brings the bread home. You know that better than anyone,” she cried out.

“Go home, woman. The people will determine your fate,” Stavre said through his clenched teeth as he entered Stefano’s store. “Pour me a shot of rakia!” he said sternly.

Stefanos filled a shot glass with rakia and handed it to him. His hand was shaking. Stavre picked up the glass, took a sip and looked out the window. He saw Evridika Tsakondas walking away at a slow pace, going home. He felt sad for her daughters who were frightened, kept crying and kept looking back hoping to see him one more time. They were clenching Evridika’s dress with their little hands. Far beyond them, in front of the local church, by straining hard, Stavre saw Tushi Gonev escorting Milkiadis, Zinda Niarhos, Vasil Digalovski and Ioannidis Karahopoulos inside the church.

“Even death has its dignity,” he thought and spat on the floor.

14.

Vangelios Kotinaris arrived at Stefanos’s store panting and anxious. He looked at Pondilaki and then at Stavre and said:

“What should I do with the prisoners?”

“Execute the priest and let the others go home. Let them go where they came from,” replied Stavre abruptly without giving it a second thought and with a bitter tone of voice.

Vangelios Kotinaris gave them a military salute and went towards the church.

“You made a mistake!” said Pondilaki. “You should have shot them all! We will have problems with our own people,” he added.

“I can’t!” replied Stavre as he kept thinking of Evridika and her crying children covered in tears, clutching at her colourful dress, an image he could not get out of his mind.

“You are making a mistake!” said Pondilaki.

“Some people are born under a lucky star,” replied Stavre, took another sip of rakia, put his glass down, left the store and at a rapid pace arrived in the churchyard.

“Execute your orders!” he said to Kotinaris.

Kotinaris called on the fighters to assemble. He then took two of them, went inside the church, escorted the priest out and placed him against the wall. Zinda Niarhos stopped crying and praying and stood against the wall petrified with fear. The bullets ended his thoughts that somehow his lips were going to save his life. He collapsed on the grass and lay there lifeless. Vangelios Kotinaris sighed. Pondilaki approached Stavre and pulled him by the sleeve. They both went to Stefanos’s store and were joined by Tushi Gonev.

15.

Escorted by two fighters, Milkiadis and Vasil Digalovski came out of the church. They were lucky today. Their lives were spared. They silently walked by the fighters and went their way.

“I saw a vision of my own death,” Milkiadis thought to himself and looked at Vasil Digalovski who walked beside him with uncertainty. They both walked away with their heads down. They heard screaming and turned fearfully. They saw Ioannidis Karahopoulos running, scrambling to get away from Kostaneria. He did not even pack his things. They continued walking. Milkiadis separated himself from Vasil but soon changed his mind and joined him again. They turned, took the village road and went home. Milkiadis was living in Vasil Digalovski’s house on the ground floor. Vasil Digalovski was not sure that his life had been spared. He walked

past his mother's room and felt her eyes looking at him. He knew that she despised him.

"I gave birth to a little owl, not to a person," she said.

Vasil did not turn to look. His mother's cursing was far less harmless than the looks in the eyes of the villagers and the people who came to Kostaneria with Stavre Nakovski. He went into his room and lay down in bed with his head covered.

16.

Stavre Nakovski stayed late in Stefanos's store drinking rakia with Pondilaki and the dock workers until the last glass of rakia was drunk. He then got up, looked at Kolio Bochvarov and said:

"I guess I will be your guest tonight?"

"I would love to have you as my guest!" replied Kolio, got up and was ready to go.

"I will see you all tomorrow..." Stavre said to the dock workers, saluted them and followed Kolio out of the store. They walked in silence and soon reached Kolio's house. Stavre went to bed right away but could not sleep. He eventually did fall asleep.

II

1.

Life normalized in Kostaneria. The villagers felt free. They went to work without worries. They walked along the dusty road relaxed, confident and proud. Their faces became bright with smiles. The cold wind blowing from the sea, making the chestnut leaves vibrate with excitement, did not seem to bother them. They went out in the forests and collected firewood for the winter. And they did not vote in the election.

2.

Kolio Bochkarov held the newspaper in his hands and read out the names of the people who comprised the new government in Athens.

“From the past twelve governments that came after the war with the Nazis, these members of the new government have occupied the highest posts available in this country. They are now all gathered together. But, to this day, no one has assured me that their intentions for this country are good,” said Kolio and hit the table with his fist.

“The newspaper you are reading is old,” said Pondilaki and laughed out loud.

“What do you mean it’s old?” rebelled Kolio.

“The new government has taken a loan from the United States to the tune of three hundred million dollars. Mr. Truman has assured US lawmakers that these dollars were intended to destroy the communists in Greece. According to the newspaper ‘Kathimerini’, England and the United States don’t care if democracy in Greece exists or not,” said Stavre.

“Truman gave Greece this loan so that the United States could establish opposition to the Soviet Union. The same kind of loan will be given to Turkey, if it already has not been given. You will see!” said Pondilaki.

“None of this will matter after our victory...” said Kotinaris so convincingly that everyone was able to picture democracy in the warm chairs in the Athens parliament.

“Forgive me people, but today I have a meeting with the people from the other side of the border. Let’s go Kotinaris,” said Stavre, got up and left. He was followed by Vangelios Kotinaris and about a dozen of his fighters. They left the village and headed for Bel Kamen.

3.

They walked sluggishly along the goat paths. Kotinaris suddenly stopped and waved his hand for everyone to stop. He listened intently. Stavre Nakovski came over to him and asked him what was going on.

“A large group of people is approaching,” Kotinaris said anxiously.

“Then send someone to find out who they are,” replied Stavre.

“I will go myself!” said Kotinaris and began to climb the hill without waiting for Stavre’s approval. He soon came back.

“They are villagers.... They are wandering around the mountains...” he said.

“Let’s intercept them,” suggested Stavre.

They went to meet with them. They stopped in front of their path and a little boy came to the front.

“Where you going?” asked Stavre.

“We are going north across the border,” replied the boy.

“You can stay in Kostaneria. We will protect you,” said Stavre, intending to deter them from leaving.

An old man came to the fore. His eyes were full of tears.

“Those cursed will come to Kostaneria too and will burn it down. They will leave no house intact. They told us to go to Skopje to our king...” the old man said.

“If you leave you will let them destroy our hearth. You will also convince many others to leave,” said Stavre with a worried look on his face, but soon he realized that his words were flying with the wind and no one was paying attention. He selected five of his fighters and sent them to escort them to the border. Stavre was very sad to see his people leaving their homeland. He stood there a little while longer and then left for Bel Kamen. Soon he and his men arrived and met up with the people from beyond the border.

“The king is dead. You have a new king. His name is Paul. Good luck with your new hangman,” said the man from the other side of the border who led the other four.

PART V

1.

Lazaros Papadoglu sat on the chair behind the editorial proofreader. He looked peaceful. He leaned over the table, took out a pen and an ink cartridge and, after thinking for a moment, began to write:

“The streets of Solun are full of human corpses these days, about which no city resident knows how they got in front of their door. The city government has hired funeral services whose workers walk the streets every morning, collect the corpses and bury them in a large pit in the cemetery. People on the side of the political left are spreading words through the city that this terror is perpetrated by several gangs which, to some extent, are protected by the new government. Some citizens are afraid to walk the streets. The people from the funeral services are complaining that they can’t handle the capacity. The streets are beginning to reek of carrion. The carts on which the funeral services load the corpses are too few and they are unable to collect all the dead. Lately our city has begun to lose its inhabitants even during the day. The many people who come out to shop for food, which is necessary for their survival, stumble over the many corpses. Hunger has overtaken the city. The residents continuously think of their stomachs. And it is no wonder that they take to the streets seeking bread. Unfortunately no one is giving them bread, and whatever there it to purchase is sold for exorbitant sums of money (gold is worth as much as mud), so they have turned their anger towards the government in Athens, accusing it of being the culprit for this crisis. The blame also falls on the United States and England, behind whom the Greek government hides. The first thing the people want is for the Greek government to drive out the foreign troops from this country and introduce democracy.

King George II’s death did not touch the citizens of our city or those across our country. The people once again have gathered in the streets and have spat on the government and on its fascist policies. The police and gendarmes have exhausted a lot of iron. Troops have flooded the cobblestone roads of our city. Every city resident now knows that blood must be shed in order to change the government and force the Americans and British out. The people are openly and

bravely entering into a conflict with the police and gendarmes, believing that only with bloodshed will they achieve their desired freedom and fill their stomachs. They believe this is the only way they can escape from the lap of death.”

He then signed the article “LAZAROS PAPADOGLU” and leaned back in his chair. Moments later he handed it to the editorial proofreader. A man with a coarse face and glasses took it and quickly looked it over. He made no changes and gave it back to Lazaros.

“Take it to the printing house. The editor is there,” he said and placed his elbows on the chair as he leaned back.

2.

Lazaros Papadoglu went down to the printing house. The editor reviewed the text and nodded affirmatively. He was pleased with it.

“Give it to Hronos to put it in,” he said quietly.

Lazaros smiled proudly. A number of people wearing hats and long coats entered the printing room. They held pistols in their hands. They lined up at the door and began to fire. Lazaros turned pale with fear and dropped to the floor. Hronos grabbed his chest and fell dead on the floor. The intruders kept shouting. Lazaros sneaked between the printing presses and fled into another room. From there he went to the back door and, frightened, found himself in the street leading to the market. He ran down the alley holding the right side of his chest.

“Damn it, I have been shot by the fascist bastards!” he grunted and stopped running. He arrived at Agios Ekaterinis and stopped. He then ran again with his head down. He didn’t know where to hide. He needed medical attention.

“Pondilaki and the dock workers have long gone from the city. Who should I contact for help?” pondered Lazaros. He felt ill and was petrified with fear. He raised his head and looked. He saw Urania Papaioannou walking towards him, trying to balance herself. She

grabbed Lazaros by the waist and managed not to fall down and bang her head on the pavement.

“Well, well if it isn’t our reporter!” she said and smiled at him.

Lazaros’s face was pale. The wound from the bullet was hurting. Frightened he stared at Urania’s beautiful face in silence.

“I am being chased. We will talk another time...” he replied and wanted to escape from her grasp.

Urania smiled at him again with a softer and warmer smile. Lazaros was still upset and trembling.

“Do not worry, scribbler. We, the Macedonians, don’t eat people. Come with me! I will help you,” she said and pulled him by the hand. They went down the street. They turned off twice and went into an alley. Urania stopped in front of a house. Lazaros recognized the house.

“Is this your house?” asked Lazaros.

“Yes. No one is going to look for you here. You will be safe!” she replied and took him in. He was still holding the right side of his chest. He was afraid. His eyes anxiously darted from place to place inside the room where Urania had taken him.

“Lie down on the bed and calm down!” she said and walked out of the room. Lazaros hesitantly lay down on the bed.

“I must go. Urania is a government person. She will betray me,” Lazaros thought to himself.

Urania was back in the room. She appeared in different clothing. She was wearing a bare-necked dress with a slit on the right leg. She walked quietly and steadily.

“Make yourself comfortable! Relax, feel as if you are at home! she reassured him and sat beside him on the bed. She then helped him

take off his coat. She noticed a large red spot on his blue shirt. She was surprised and seemed upset.

“You have been shot!” she said and began to unbutton his shirt. She looked at his wound and smiled.

“It’s only a flesh wound. I will bandage it with a clean cloth,” she said, got out of the bed, went to the closet, picked up a bottle of rakia and a clean white T-shirt. She cleaned the wound with the rakia, ripped up the T-shirt and bandaged him with it.

“Lie down and sleep, you will regain your strength,” she said softly and went into another room to lie down and rest herself. Her wonderful body was irritated from fatigue. She lay down on the bed and covered herself with two colourful blankets. She began to think.

“Damn fate. One of these days I will end up in some dirty muddy ditch, stabbed by someone with a sharp blade. They all carry knives in this city these days and cut off heads without asking questions as to whom they belong. And there is no one to prosecute them because... on the contrary they will be given a reward. What kind of crazy times are these?” Urania thought to herself and slowly closed her large eyelids. The next day she woke up at noon. She prepared a meal and went to the other room where Lazaros Papadoglu was sleeping. She woke him up.

Lazaros Papadoglu jumped. He was startled.

“Don’t be afraid! Lie there. There is no need for you to get up! Let your wound heal and then we will worry about what happens next,” she said and handed him a large tray on which lay a plate of scrambled eggs, a chunk of cheese and a cup of tea.

Lazaros slowly picked up the tray and looked at her curiously.

“You don’t believe me? I am not angry at you even though I can see it in your eyes that you doubt my honesty... I am not hiding you because I like you or because I need something from you. I want to help you because you remind me of my brother Hristo,” she said calmly.

“I knew your brother Hristo. They sent him to a prison in Akronafplia with a group of communists,” replied Lazaros with a trembling voice and began to eat quickly.

The news startled Urania. She turned towards him, looked him in the eyes and said: “I don’t believe you!”

“So, now you don’t believe me? I was the one who took the list of names to the Macedonian organization,” he replied.

Urania felt weak at the knees, like she had lost the lower part of her beautiful legs. She then collapsed on the floor and disappeared into another world, known only to those who fall unconscious. Despite his own pain, Lazaros Papadoglu got out of the bed, dragged her to her own bed and laid her down on her silk sheets. He then poured some rakia under her nose. She opened her eyes and looked at him. He was happy to see that she was still alive. He laughed out loud victoriously and poured some rakia on her beautiful forehead.

“Uhhh!” she sighed painfully and slowly got out of bed. “It is already late. I must go to the boarding house and pick up the money. You stay here and keep quiet. No one is going to look for you here. If you don’t trust me then you can leave!” she said and handed him the big key that sat on the shelf. “Take it with you, I have another one,” she added and went into the other room. She got dressed and went out through the front door.

Lazaros Papadoglu was upset. His heart began to beat fast. He did not trust her. He had mixed feelings and could not decide what to do even after the door opened and Urania Papaioannou was back.

“I see you are still here?” she said with a smile on her face. She went into the other room. She came back dressed differently. Lazaros was feeling anxious. Urania noticed.

“I don’t mean to alarm you, young man. I am not going to ask you to go to bed with me. I want to observe you from afar. You remind me of my brother Hristo. I hope that he is still alive,” she said and shook

her beautiful body. She prepared him a meal and brought it to his bed. Lazaros accepted the food.

“Eat now!” she said. “The news from the printing house ‘Agonistis’ reached the boarding house. The government killed three people and wounded seven. The whole printing house was ransacked. I fear that you are the eighth person that was wounded and if I were you I would not show my face in public. They are searching for you. If they find you they will kill you. You have gotten on their nerves and they are sniffing for you everywhere,” concluded Urania.

Lazaros had nothing to say. His view was clear and there was concern in his eyes. Urania sat beside him on the bed and messed up his hair.

“Don’t worry! I will send you to a safe place. They will never find you there,” she said calmly, took the tray off his hands and got out of bed.

“Keep quiet! If they find you in my house we will both suffer,” she said and went to her room. Lazaros stretched lazily on the bed and about a half an hour later he was in dreamland.

3.

Urania Papaioannou brought him new clothes, modest for her taste, but too rich for Lazaros. Urania helped him get dressed. She brought a bag from the other room and gave it to him. She then kissed him on the forehead.

“You must leave now. Pampas’s people have been following me. You will go to Kostaneria and ask for Stavre Nakovski. Tell him I sent you, and be careful on the road. The military, police and gendarmes have killed people and asked questions later. Hide well and take shelter in the forest,” she said.

“I have been near Kostaneria before. Thank you. I don’t know how you repay you for this,” muttered Lazaros.

Urania Papaioannou looked at him with her beautiful eyes and pushed him out of her door. Lazaros walked along the alley and

soon disappeared in the low houses where the security service never go at night.

Urania returned to her room and stood there concerned. This room at one time was the most beautiful room in her house. She left the house without locking the door. She wrapped her face with her long woolen scarf and, with a sad look on her face, arrived at the Sveta Katerina (St. Catherine's) church. There was no one else inside except for priest Iraklo. He did not know her but opened his eyes wide open when he saw how much money Urania left at the Sveta Bogoroditsa (Holy Mother) icon. He was tempted to go over and remove her black scarf to see what kind of person was behind it, leaving so much money, but he was afraid that he might make her angry. He did not want any trouble. Also, this money could go a long way to providing food and clothing for the poor people of Solun as well as for those needing protection from the government. He left the secret of the woman hidden behind her black veil.

Urania lit two large candles. She thought nothing of the priest. She prayed to the Virgin Mary for the life of her brother Hristo, like it was her last hope to save him.

Iraklo could not help himself. He approached her. He did not dare unveil her but did speak to her.

“You have left a lot of money. The church thanks you for the gift...” he said and politely bowed.

“Give it to the communists, Father! Every day you will receive the same amount. Let them buy guns and let them shoot. Let them take power at least for a while so that they can save my brother,” she said and left the church without saying goodbye.

The priest was surprised and upset.

4.

Urania returned to the boarding house but did not stay with the customers. She went into her room and lay on the bed. She was very tired and fell asleep.

There were no customers downstairs in the café. Only Hash and the Monarcho-Fascists Rasim Bey and his companion sat at a table near the bar. Urania's half-drunken girls were sitting on their laps. They did not see Urania when she passed by them and went upstairs. The Monarcho-Fascists drooled over the girls, being happy to pass their day without a concern. About two hours before midnight the lights went out. There was silence for a moment. Then a spotlight appeared on the stage. The room was filled with the gentle whining sound of the bouzouki. Only one bouzouki was playing. Three half-dressed dancers appeared under the spotlight. They began to twirl their bodies, following the rhythm of the music.

Rasim Bey was holding one of the girls on his lap and licking her large chest with his tongue. At the same time he kept one eye on the smooth and well-shaped bodies of the dancers who curled, twisted and twirled to the rhythm of the music.

“Lower the blinds on the windows!” Rasim Bey ordered his escort.

Skender humbly bowed his head gently and lowered the curtains, shutting out all eyes looking in from the outside. Rasim Bey smiled and looked satisfied. He then removed the girl with the large breasts from his lap. He went on the stage and approached the dancers. He began to dance with them. Hash laughed out loudly. The Monarcho-Fascists began to clap their hands in rhythm to the music. Rasim Bey, pleased that the dancers accepted him and that he did not have to force himself on them, began to caress their naked bodies. The dancers went closer to him and kept butting him with their hips. He could barely stand on his feet. The bouzouki did not stop playing for an hour. After that everything stopped. The dancers kindly left Rasim Bey under the spotlight.

“Come back!” he yelled at the dancers. They ignored him.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin appeared at the café door and filled the entire place with his cavernous voice. The two Cretans followed him. The door behind them slammed shut with a loud bang as if announcing the entry of Urania's new star, now entering the stage of the boarding house “Macedonia”. The bouzouki began to echo and she began to twist her agile body. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin licked

his lips with his tongue and loudly screamed “silence”. There was silence... only the bouzouki was heard playing.

“April is my month and it has always been my favourite,” Alexei growled at Hash, releasing his cave voice to shake the room. “Bring whiskey from the bar!” he ordered the Cretans and sat near Hash at the Monarcho-Fascist table. The Cretans brought a bottle of whiskey from the bar and put it on the table in front of him.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin drank his whiskey with his eyes glued on the body of Urania’s new star dancing on the stage in café “Macedonia”. He wanted to deceive the naked body because he wanted it for himself. He grabbed the bottle from the table. He wanted to stand up but he felt someone’s heavy breathing behind his neck. He turned and saw Rasim Bey’s face.

“She is mine tonight. I will mess her up like no other before and I will pour everything I have into her,” said Rasim Bey and kissed and slobbered the Ukrainian’s forehead.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin looked him over from top to bottom. He was disgusted with his drunkenness and appalled by his appearance. He rudely gave him a push. Rasim Bey stumbled over the table and collapsed on the floor. He was unable to stand up. He felt no pain. He wiped his bloody face, shook his head hard and, furious, crawled towards Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin ready to kill him.

One of the Cretans jumped out of his chair at lightening speed and threatened Rasim Bey. But before he could reach him, Skender, Rasim Bey’s escort, jumped at him and, without warning, undetectably stuck his knife in his back. Then, before the Cretan even had a chance to cry out, Skender slit his throat.

The second Cretan saw what happened and went wild. He was amazed at how fast Skender had moved. He jumped out of his chair and ran towards Skender. He then pulled out his knife with the large, ribbed blade and threatened him. They looked at each other like a couple of roosters before a cock fight. They were testing each other. Suddenly they lunged at each other. Skender received a bloody right hand. During the second lunge the Cretan received a cut on his

chest. After that they separated but still circled each other, looking for an opening to lunge again.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin laughed so loud that he vibrated the glasses and bottles sitting on the counter. He stood up and with single blow sent Rasim Bey under the table. He then grabbed Skender and strangled him with his bare hands. Then, as if nothing had happened under the sun on a clear calm day, he turned his attention to the naked body of café “Macedonia’s” new star.

“Keep playing!” he yelled at the bouzouki player, picked up the naked girl’s fragile body and took her to the boarding house rooms.

“Have a good time with this beauty Alexei, and try and hold on to her for a long time. But remember, tomorrow we are leaving Solun. We are going to the mountains to hunt communists,” said Hash and clapped his hands to order another drink.

5.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin climbed up the stairs. Café “Macedonia’s” new star was fearfully resting in his large arms. He passed by Urania Papaioannou’s room. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin did not turn to look. It was like the room never existed and neither did his lover with whom he had enjoyed staying for days at a time, away from the people. He pushed his way into the naked star’s room and put her down on her bed. He then lay down beside her. His sizable frame caused the bed boards to cave in. He hit the floor like a monster in human form with a big bang. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin laughed out loud. Stuck between the floor and Alexei’s massive body, the new star was barely able to breathe. She felt severe pain in her abdomen but had no breath to complain. The Ukrainian sank his mouth into her chest and mercilessly bit the new star’s breasts until she screamed to high heaven.

“How much money should I pay for dinner?” Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin asked with a serious tone of voice.

“Five thousand?” replied the girl with a twist.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin laughed so loudly that he shook the entire boarding house.

6.

Urania Papaioannou woke up. She made an angry face and got up to lock the door. This was the first time in a long time that she actually locked her room door. She felt lonely and afraid, especially after she heard the Ukrainian's loud laughter. She slept during the night feeling like someone was going to bust through the door and do her great harm. The circle of people with whom she had mingled until yesterday and those who she had swirled around her little finger were no longer with her. She did not understand why they had left and would no longer support her. She had done nothing to make them go away. She got out of bed and went in front of the mirror to look at herself. She noticed wrinkles on her forehead and around her eyes. She did not like what she saw. Dark thoughts began to occupy her mind and she saw herself aging fast. She quickly dismissed that thought because it made her feel unpleasant. She looked away and reluctantly and sluggishly went back to her bed and dropped herself on it. In the quiet she listened to Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin's rough voice clamoring with café "Macedonia's" new star, whom Urania herself had brought here from Athens at Dustin Brown's request. Finally it was morning. She opened her blood-shot eyes wide open. Her stomach growled of hunger. But even though she was starving, she did not want to go down to the café to eat, for fear of running into the Ukrainian, or some of his friends, especially Rasim Bey and Hash. She waited for a long time until she was convinced that they had left. She wanted to toss something in her mouth quickly and leave before they returned. A strange fear began to overcome her. Something was telling her that she would not survive the day. It seemed to her that she occasionally saw apparitions coming over with a white carriage covered with black transparent sheets, inviting her to climb aboard. It seemed to her that a black figure was threatening to shackle her and take her to his kingdom. She did not see fear in his eyes, which she could clearly see belonged to Hash. There was something about these eyes that drove her to the border of madness.

"I will have to leave the boarding house for good," she thought.

"This is crazy. I have lost my authority as the owner of this boarding

house,” then quickly fried some eggs with cheese. She ate very quickly and returned to her room. She looked for her ownership papers for a long time. She was unable to find them. She gathered some food in a larger bag and left the boarding house. Walking on the street she remembered the coins she kept under the mattress. She went back to the boarding house. She stood by the bar counter. She heard a noise and shuddered with fear. She slowly turned. When she calmed down she saw tears running down the new star’s face, making her look a lot uglier than she was. She looked nothing like the girl she had brought from Athens and made the new star in the boarding house “Macedonia”.

“That bastard crippled me. Now I am broken. I will never be able to work again and follow my mother’s craft. Look what the monster did to me...” she muttered having difficulty speaking because of her constant sobbing, and opened her small chest to show Urania what he had done.

Urania blushing looked at her breasts and saw red spots all over them.

“You are not the only one with bite marks and damaged breasts,” said Urania calmly, but not to appease her. She said it to confess her own darkness that was clutching at her soul and threatening to burst her spleen open. She looked at her new star’s damaged chest but did not mourn for her. Her biggest worry was where to find someone as beautiful as her that was willing to bare herself to her customers. Urania was no longer proud of even her own beauty. She hid her breasts even from herself because they made her suicidal.

“Go back to Athens! I will give you enough money to start a new job that is not dependent on stripping. Open a kiosk and sell donuts or a booth and sell cigarettes. Do anything except strip because you can lose your life,” said Urania and led her upstairs into her room. She then took out a large number of coins and gave them to her. She took the money and stashed it in her purse.

“What’s your name?” Urania asked her.

“My name is Irina,” replied the girl with a slight shy smile. She then slipped by Urania and went out towards the hallway. She stopped at the door, turned and said:

“Hash, the Ukrainian, Rasim Bey and the Monarcho-Fascists will be gone a long time. They left the city and went to fight the communists. If there is a God they will never return,” and disappeared down the hallway.

“Poor girl!” muttered Urania and closed the door. She lay down on her bed, stuck her head under her pillow and wept. She tossed and turned a long time before she fell asleep. She woke up early in the morning and came down to the café. She nibbled on some dried meat and then climbed up the stairs and went into her room. She lay there and fell asleep again. In the afternoon she heard a knock on the front door of the boarding house. Half-asleep she went to answer it. She was unwashed and wearing a nightgown. Her eyes were blood-shot and swollen. She opened the door and saw a young man.

“Come in!” she said.

The man at the door was young, good-looking and tough. He reminded her of her brother Hristo. He came in. He was carrying a bag in his hand. Urania recognized the bag.

“Take the bag! A young woman gave it to me before she died,” he said calmly and handed her the bag.

Urania took the bag. Some unknown force inside her made her stare at young man.

“What happened to Irina?” she asked quietly.

“She died. Some boys took it upon themselves to rape her on the train. She fought back. I was sitting in a nearby cabin when I heard her screaming. I ran but I got there too late. The boys had fled. The girl was lying there with a knife thrust in her neck. She managed to tell me to bring this bag to Urania Papaioannou,” said the man calmly.

“I am Urania. Sometimes God punishes innocent people,” she said.
“Thank you for doing this.”

“Forgive me but I must go. I have commitments,” said the man.

“Before you do, please come in and have a drink of rakia with me,” she said.

“Thank you, but I don’t drink alcohol,” replied the man and reached out to shake her hand.

Urania accepted his hand and pressed it firmly.

“When you are free please come back. I would love to talk with you,” said Urania and let go of his hand.

“Thank you for the invitation and goodbye. I hope our paths cross again...” replied the man and left the boarding house.

Urania Papaioannou stood there silent like a rock. And even though she swore she would never get naked in front of anyone... she would never take off her clothes and reveal the shame of her beautiful body... she wished to have this stranger in her company. Deep inside she hoped that the stranger would visit her again. She returned to her room, locked the door and lay down on the bed.

“I know those hoodlums went to hunt communists but what happened to the Englishmen and the American?” she wondered. She closed her eyes and turned facing the wall. She kept tossing and turning a long time before she fell asleep.

II

1.

Twenty kilometres southwest of Solun, Peter MacDonald was calmly walking among the soldiers with a smile on his face. He was wearing a new uniform. His boots burrowed into the grass and pulled grass blades out of the ground. He walked into the unit’s headquarters. Inside he found Hash, Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin and Rasim Bey.

“Have some brandy! It’s good!” said Hash and laughed wildly.

Peter MacDonald sat down on the chair offered to him by Rasim Bey and took off his hat. Hash poured some of the yellowish liquid from the bottle that read “BRANDY” into a glass and handed it to him.

“Cheers Colonel!” Hash toasted MacDonald.

Peter MacDonald took the glass, lifted it up high and laughed out loud.

“To the destruction of the Communists!” he said brazenly and drank some.

“To the destruction of the communists! Long live England!” yelled Hash enthusiastically, gulped down the entire glass and filled it again. His face blushed from the alcohol. His eyes gleamed wildly.

“When are we moving out, Colonel? I can’t wait to get some action,” said Hash.

“We are leaving this afternoon. There will be one hundred of you. You have weapons, clothes and food. It is up to you now to complete the task flawlessly,” replied MacDonald.

“What about our horses?” asked Hash indignantly.

“You will get your horses ten kilometres north of Voden,” replied MacDonald.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin laughed so hard he spilled his brandy.

“Will we be getting military horses?” asked Alexei.

“Military! First class! The best!” replied MacDonald. “I hope you will justify the funds we spent on you for this operation,” added MacDonald.

“Don’t worry! We will cut more communist heads than Hitler himself did!” said Alexei reassuringly.

“Well, Alexei, I hope so...” said MacDonald, stood up, walked out of the building and went into a small village house with several rooms. Outside he was approached by a young man wearing a belt of cartridges around his chest. The young man smiled. MacDonald noticed the gold tooth in his upper jaw.

“How are you, Mr. Kovachevich? Are your soldiers obeying your orders?” asked MacDonald jokingly.

Vlade Kovachevich smiled shyly. He seemed afraid. MacDonald was unable to ascertain where the fear was coming from. Why was Vlade afraid and from what.

“We are ready for action. My ten people are waiting,” replied Vlade.

“Good Vlade. I hope you will fight better than you did in Serbia against Tito’s communists,” said MacDonald, pulled out a box of cigarettes and offered him one.

“Thank you, I smoke tobacco,” said Vlade.

Peter MacDonald took out a cigarette and put the box back in his coat pocket. He clicked his lighter and lit it. He took a long puff, held the smoke in for some time and then exhaled slowly.

“Colonel Bortas has arrived. I will see you later, Mr. Kovachevich,” said MacDonald with a friendly tone of voice and went out to meet the man with the unusually large moustache riding a horse.

“At your command, Colonel!” said Bortas and got off his horse. They shook hands.

“My respect, Colonel!” replied MacDonald politely. “The government sent us the best officer in the Greek army. The communists have no chance against you,” he added.

“We will cut them to pieces, Colonel. What kind of army have you prepared me to lead?” asked Bortas with much interest.

“The best! They are all tested and hardened fighters. They very much want to fight against the communists. You will see for yourself at the front,” replied MacDonald.

“They have no other choice! God, we will be one hell of an army! Where are the soldiers from?” asked Bortas.

Peter MacDonald looked at him and smiled shyly.

“From the neighbouring countries... The communists offered them a rope around their necks and they fled. Every one of them has committed crimes and has a hundred lives on their conscience. This country is Eldorado for them. I hope you know how to appreciate the benefits of such a course and turn it in our favour,” replied MacDonald.

“Certainly, Colonel. What officer would not wish for an army that he can destroy for the right struggle without a care about it...” said Bortas and laughed out loud.

“You did not understand me, Sir. These criminals are desperate people without any chance of starting a new life. The epaulets on your uniform mean nothing to them. They will kill you if you stand in their way. These were criminals of the first order in the countries they come from. There is no chance of them ever returning to their homeland...” replied MacDonald.

“Then we will have a party every day!” said Bortas and laughed again.

“It will be a slaughterhouse, Colonel, a slaughterhouse. Let the blood flow. No one shall be spared. Everything will go under the blade of the knife,” said MacDonald with a serious tone of voice and went back to the building from which he had come earlier. Bortas followed. They went inside.

“This is Colonel Bortas, your unit commander,” said MacDonald with a stern voice.

Hash, Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin and Rasim Bey stood up.

“Sit!” said Bortas quietly.

Hash filled a glass of brandy and handed it to Bortas.

“Drink with us, Mr. Bortas,” he said.

Bortas’s face turned serious. He refused the brandy and looked at Hash sternly.

“I am ‘Colonel’ to you, young man!” he shouted at Hash in a loud and stern voice.

Hash laughed cynically and pushed the glass of brandy towards him again.

“Drink with us, Colonel!” he said humbly.

Bortas smiled and accepted the brandy.

“Thank you, young man. You will make a good soldier...” replied Bortas and before he finished speaking Hash said:

“And I will serve the monarchy well, Colonel!”

Bortas laughed, raised his glass and said:

“To the monarchy and to our friends from England!” and then took a drink.

“Have a drink!” yelled Hash looking at Peter MacDonald.

Everyone was surprised. Bortas coughed. Peter MacDonald took a couple of steps towards the window. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin and Rasim Bey grinned.

“Long live the king!” Hash yelled again.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin and Rasim Bey raised their glasses towards Hash. Hash topped them with more brandy.

“Long live the king!” they both shouted.

“This is how you should toast when you drink. So that everyone knows who you serve,” said Hash and grinned contentedly.

Bortas exhaled deeply. He was calming down. Peter MacDonald swallow hard and slowly began to loosen up.

“Let’s go gentlemen!” said Bortas, finished his drink, put his empty brandy glass on the table and went outside. Peter MacDonald, Hash, Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin and Rasim Bey followed.

“Gather your people! It’s time to go!” Bortas ordered Hash.

“Right away, Colonel!” replied Hash and separated from the group. He then dragged a man with a trumpet in his hand and positioned him in the middle of the yard. He looked at him sternly. The man looked upset.

“We are the military!” Hash yelled at him in a threatening tone of voice.

The man loosened up slightly and kept looking at Hash.

“What kind of shit military are we? We have no uniforms and we are here to save our own hides...” said the man.

“Then blow the damn trumpet to gather the others!” replied Hash calmly.

The man blew the trumpet. Three rows of men quickly formed and disappeared into the woods and from Peter Macdonald’s view.

1.

It was late morning. Iorgo, the train station master at Boimitsa train station, raised his baton that directed train motion. The great steam locomotive was puffing noisily, covering the entire place with fog. The train began to squeal, creak and bang. It then stopped a dozen or so metres in front of Iorgo.

“Boimitsa!” Iorgo yelled out loudly and put his baton under his arm. He waited one minute and then raised his baton again. The steam locomotive began to puff raising a great cloud of steam which covered its large iron wheels. The engine began to move creating a cascading banging noise along the entire train as it tugged on the wagons behind it. Iorgo held his baton up high until the last wagon passed him by. He then lowered his baton and looked around. He noticed two women and a couple of scrawny children walking towards him on the platform. One was brown-skinned, smaller and uglier than the other but had a cute face and skinny legs. She was holding a child in her arms.

“The child is still suckling...” Iorgo thought to himself as they came closer. They smiled at him.

“Good afternoon!” he said and smiled back at them.

“Good afternoon, train master,” replied Iana Chakalarova. “We are looking for German Gelebeshev. Can you tell us where he lives?”

Iorgo continued to smile, trying to look his best.

“I will show you. Come with me,” he replied and went inside the station. Iana Chakalarova and her son and Maria Stavridis, carrying her baby in her arms, followed. He escorted them through the waiting room and they came out of the station on the other side. He stopped and gave them directions.

“Turn at the second street and you will find German in the third house. He is a good man,” he said.

“Thank you for your help sir!” replied Iana with a smile and the two women went down the street. Iana’s son followed behind.

“Good luck to you!” he yelled behind them. “What a beauty?” Iorgo thought to himself about Iana. He kept looking at them until they disappeared from his view at the corner of the second street. A cold raindrop fell on his bald head prompting him to go inside.

2.

Iana Chakalarova was the first to arrive at German Gelebeshev’s front gate. The gate was open and she entered the yard. The courtyard was a mess, there was scattered luggage and the flowers in the garden had dried up. She looked confused. She climbed up the stairs and knocked on the door of the two-story house. She waited a while. A woman over forty, wearing a dark brown head kerchief embroidered with silk thread, came out. Her face looked exhausted. Her eyes were sunken and her lips were cracked in several places.

“Come on in,” she said and invited them in with a swing of her arm.

“Thank you. We are looking for German,” replied Iana.

The woman did not reply. She took them to a large room decorated with colourful rugs with a strange, beautiful and warm pattern. They sat on a bed covered with a burgundy bed cover. They felt tired from their long journey.

“German will be back tonight,” said the woman who, from Iana’s angle, looked like she had been very beautiful when she was young. The woman was kind to them.

“My name is Neda. German is my husband. Now please excuse me I have to get back to the kitchen. I am preparing some food...” she said and disappeared behind the door.

Maria Stavridis with little Kosta leaned on the bed and fell asleep. Risto, Iana’s son sat beside her and dozed off. Iana was the only one with her eyes open.

Neda came back and noticed them sleeping. She smiled gently.

“They are tired,” said Iana quietly.

“Let them sleep! Why aren’t you sleeping?” asked Neda.

“I haven’t been able to sleep for a few days now...” replied Iana and sighed.

“Then come over to the kitchen! I will make you something to eat. They can eat when they wake up,” said Neda.

3.

The lunch was modest. Neda went out into the yard. Iana leaned on the bench and disappeared. She woke up three hours later. It was evening and German was back. Iana could not keep her eyes off him. She had never seen such a handsome man before. He had a mild and mellow voice. Iana listened to every word he said.

“Pondilaki helped me a lot. I owe him my life. Three years ago he took me out of the Pavlos Melas prison. The Germans were going to execute me. Many of our people never came out alive from that prison,” said German.

Iana was silent. She never took her eyes off him and listened to every word he said. Later that night German left their room. The next day he got up very early. He watered the livestock and baked some bread in the oven. Iana Chakalarova slept until ten o’clock. German waited for her in the kitchen. She looked sleepy. He offered her warm bread and milk. She sat at the table and they had breakfast together.

“In two days I will be transferring a large group of people over the border. You should all go with them,” he said.

Iana Chakalarova did not reply. Anyone who noticed her would have seen that she could not keep her eyes off German. She remained silent. Occasionally she sighed. She was happy that there was a plan to transfer people to the other side of the border. People who were afraid could still leave. But German saw great hope in her.

Maria Stavridis was still worried. She kept looking at German's mouth but did not know what he was saying. She did not speak Macedonian. To her, their departure remained a secret.

4.

After spending three days in German's house Iana Chakalarova, her son Risto, Maria Stavridis and her son Kosta, accompanied by German Gelebeshev, left the house and headed into the forest. They walked for two hours. High in the mountains they met a large group of people in a meadow. They were startled. German approached them smiling. He had a peaceful look about him. Some of the people ran over and shook his hand.

"We have arrived," said German.

Iana Chakalarova nodded with her tired head. A middle-aged man wearing a black coat and shaded glasses came towards her.

"According to the description I was given in Kostaneria, you must be Iana," said the man and stuck his hand out. "My name is Ziso," he then added.

Iana Chakalarova looked upset. She extended her hand and they shook hands. Iana was now confused. She did not know who this man was and was surprised by his behaviour. She thought the man was joking.

"My name is Iana Chakalarova!" she said with a stern tone of voice.

"That's exactly what they told me... Pondilaki and Stavre Nakovski are sending you their regards from Kostaneria," he said.

"Iana smiled. The redness disappeared from her face. Ziso turned away, went towards German and said:

"We will wait another five minutes, just in case more arrive, and then we will go."

German nodded affirmatively with his head. About five minutes later Ziso looked at his watch and loudly said:

“Okay people, we are leaving!”

German went to the front. The others followed him. They walked along the crest of the mountain headed towards the top. At least that’s what Iana surmised. The mountain terrain was wild and rugged which slowed down their progress. They were all wearing soft shoes which did not help. Their feet began to ache and their knees were weakening. Fatigue soon overcame them and they needed rest. They sat on the wet grass but their rest was short. German’s soft voice led them through the stony ground.

Maria Stavridis began to stagger and fell down from fatigue. She managed to fall down on her back and did not hurt her child who fell on her stomach as she landed on the ground. Iana Chakalarova ran up to help her and took her child off her. She then helped her get up.

“I will carry him,” Iana said.

Maria Stavridis was in tears. A column of about a hundred people stopped moving... but soon began moving again. The sun began to beat down on them mercilessly, burning their heads.

“Rest!” German yelled out loud. The column stopped moving.

The people sat down on the grass. German allowed them to eat but was not happy with their pace of movement.

“Don’t leave any trace that we were here. If the government troops or criminal gangs find out that we were here they will pursue us and kill us to the last one,” warned German with a firm tone of voice.

“It would be good to take shelter in the woods and travel during the night,” said Ziso.

“There is no need for us to go to the woods. We are already in the woods. We will stay here until dark. Then we will continue. We are close to the border but this belt of land is very dangerous. Especially if we run into the border patrol,” said German.

I agree!” said Ziso and lay down on the grass.

5.

They all lay hidden under a large chestnut tree, hoping that the moon would be out during the night. Ziso was satisfied with how things were progressing but German looked a bit nervous. Iana Chakalarova was tired of sitting on the grass and was anxious to get moving. Maria Stavridis was hungry and was eating bread and cheese.

The day passed and they resumed their trek through the woods. Ziso was leading. They began to climb the second mountain peak. Ziso smiled. They had reached the border belt. They turned and began to follow the bottom of a brook. They were chest deep in bushes and vegetation. Maria Stavridis’s baby began to cry. Fear leaped into everyone’s eyes. Iana Chakalarova cradled him in her arms but could not stop him from crying. German’s face lost its blush and turned yellow. He looked angry. He went over to Iana.

“Shut him up!” he said angrily.

Iana became upset.

“What do you want me to do? Suffocate him?” she replied with the same tone of voice.

“Better one of us than all of us. Shut him up! I am ordering you!” he threatened.

Iana Chakalarova didn’t know what to do. She hesitated. The people began to murmur.

“Do you want to get us all killed?” asked a woman who was close to her. “Put your hand over his mouth or I will!” she threatened.

Maria Stavridis turned pale with fear. Even though she did not understand the language in which they spoke, the woman sensed that her son Kosta was the reason for their anger. She went over to Iana and, with her eyes full of tears and fear, stared at her. Iana’s eyes welled up.

The people were getting really nervous. The child would not stop crying. Iana Chakalarova kept cradling him but it did not help. German grabbed the baby from Iana. Maria Stavridis screamed. She raced towards German and grabbed him from his hands.

“Kill me! The baby must live! It is not his fault that there is a war and misery...” she pleaded nervously looking at German. She unbuttoned her chest and pulled out her right breast. She put her nipple into the baby’s mouth, with her thin fingers. The baby stopped crying.

“It will be the end of us with that child!” the same woman yelled at Iana.

Iana quickly looked away. She listened and heard footsteps. “Horses!” she thought. They all shut up and ducked down. They thrust themselves into the grove quietly. Their hearts were beating wildly. Everyone’s thoughts were on the child. They were afraid it would start crying again. Maria Stavridis covered his face. She was ready to sacrifice him. She anxiously looked into his eyes, pressed her hand over his mouth and nose and held him tightly. The horses slowly disappeared into the distance. He was still squirming, but barely, when she let go. The baby took a painful breath. She considered herself lucky. She was happy. Iana and German helped her out and brought her back to the others. They then all left together. Ten minutes later they arrived at the Prevalets border crossing. Maria Stavridis was completely calm and smiling now. She was sure that her son Kosta was going to live.

6.

Led by Ziso, the group of refugees descended down the slope and, about an hour later, arrived in a small town. They walked down a narrow cobblestone road and stopped in front of a large building. Ziso went inside and several minutes later came out with a long-haired man wearing a leather jacket. They stopped in front of the group. The long-haired stranger curiously looked them over one by one and constantly raised his eyebrows. Ziso approached him.

“Comrade Bozhin, where can we stay?” he asked.

The man turned to look at Ziso and his eyes caught Iana Chakalarova's beautiful face. He thought for a moment.

"We can put you in the school building! I will show you where it is," he replied and led the way.

Ziso and the others followed. They were all exhausted. Iana Chakalarova picked up Kosta. Her son Risto walked beside her, wiping the dirty sweat from his face with his hand. Maria Stavridis was struggling and could barely stand on her feet. They soon arrived at the school and were placed in the classrooms. They all sat down on the benches and most fell asleep. Bozhin and German left the school.

IV

1.

Iana Chakalarova and Maria Stavridis came out of the building and began to look for the address that the administrator had written on a piece of paper. They soon arrived at the grey, two-storey house. Iana knocked on the wooden door. She heard a male baritone voice inside.

"I will be with you in a moment. I need to get dressed..." said the man inside.

The women looked at each other. A tear dropped from one of Maria Stavridis's eyes. Iana fixed her hair. The door opened and a man appeared at the threshold. He was smiling. He had not shaven in a long time. He had gentle eyes and a properly shaped nose.

"Did the Board send you? Please come in," said the man and motioned them to come inside. As they passed by him he tapped Risto, Iana's son, on the head and followed them into the room with the open door. His wife greeted them inside. She extended her hand to Iana and they shook hands.

“My name is Traianka. Please sit. I will treat you to some sweets...” she said and then said hello to Maria Stavridis. “I am sure you are all tired,” she added.

“What is your name?” the man asked Iana.

“Iana Chakalarova,” replied Iana. “This is Maria Stavridis,” she said and then pointed at Maria, with Kosta sitting in her lap.

“It’s bad down there. We can hear the shooting all the way here. The town is full of refugees. What did you do to anger God to punish you like this?” asked the man.

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know...” replied Iana.

Traianka was back in the room. She was carrying a tray with a large jar on it. She put the tray on the dresser and pulled out three small shallow bowls from the shelf. She opened the jar and, with a spoon, scooped some sweet from the jar and placed it in the shallow bowls. She then took some tiny spoons from the shelf and placed everything on the tray. She then walked over to her guests and offered them each a bowl and spoon.

“You will be staying in that room,” said the man and pointed to the door of the room.

Iana Chakalarova took the sweet.

“What is your name?” the man asked Risto, Iana’s son.

Risto did not know what to say. He looked at his mother shyly. She smiled.

“And what do they call you, Uncle?” she asked the man.

“I am Kocho,” he said and smiled.

“My name is Risto!” Iana’s son piped up.

“No... you are lying to me...” replied Kocho.

“I am not lying to you, Uncle!” replied Risto, surprised that the man did not believe him. “Ask my mother!” he insisted.

“Okay young Risto, I believe you! Later I will take you to the orchard and we will pick some apples. Would you like that?” replied Kocho.

“Yes I want that. I love apples. Can we go now, I am not tired,” replied Risto enthusiastically.

“Let’s leave that for later...” said Kocho in a gentle tone of voice and left the room.

2.

Traianka gathered the little dishes and spoons and put them back on the tray sitting on the dresser.

“I will show you to your room. Rest for now and later we will have lunch,” said Traianka and led them to the room designated for them and left them. Maria Stavridis put little Kosta on the bed and covered him with an old blanket. She then lay beside him. Iana Chakalarova lay down on the other bed. Risto stood in the middle of the room staring at the crumbling walls.

“Come here and lie down!” Iana said to Risto. Her voice trembled and her eyes welled up with tears.

“No, I don’t want to sleep. I want to go out to the yard,” he said and left the room. Iana lay there for a long time thinking. She was very tired and fell asleep. She woke up late. Maria Stavridis was still sleeping. Traianka looked in. She noticed that Iana was awake.

“You will have to go to the Board. They will give you coupons for food. You can’t purchase food without coupons. And bread too...” she said and left.

Iana Chakalarova got out of bed, painstakingly put on her shoes and went outside to the yard. She saw Risto standing beside the fence. She grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him with her. They soon

arrived at the Board building. They were cheerfully greeted at the front desk by a man with an eagle beak, shaped nose.

“Here are some coupons for three days. After that we will determine if you will still stay here or move elsewhere,” he said and handed her the coupons.

“Where will they take us? God, I should have stayed in Solun. Where to now?” she asked.

“Don’t worry! You will be accommodated in a village somewhere around here...” he replied in a kind tone of voice.

“Sure...” muttered Iana Chakalarova. Risto anxiously grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the door. They rushed home panting and went into their room. Maria Stavridis was still sleeping. Little Kosta was awake.

Risto went out into the yard. Iana lay on her bed and silently wept.

“These are cursed times!” she thought. “Terrible times...”

3.

Iana Chakalarova found herself at the front desk behind which sat the man with the eagle beaked nose.

“Good morning!” the man said cheerfully. “You will be going to the village... damn... I forgot its name. It’s written down here somewhere. It is near the village... Anyway, go, get ready! They will take you there by truck.”

Iana Chakalarovo took the long list from the man’s hands and looked at it. She was unable to read it.

“The alphabet... what alphabet is it written in?” she asked the man indignantly.

“In the Macedonian... in the Cyrillic alphabet...” she heard a voice behind her say. She turned around. Her eyes opened wide.

“Evangelia! What are you doing here?” she said, hugged her tightly and began to weep.

“I have been here for a while. When did you arrive?” asked Evangelia.

“Three days ago,” she replied. “How is Stavre? Is he here too?” Iana asked.

“That’s what I wanted to ask you. Stavre has been missing for several months. I am here with the children. We have twins, you know?” she replied.

“God bless them! You say Stavre is missing? Come over to our place, we can talk some more...” said Iana.

“Okay...” said Evangelia and followed her. She began to cry on the way. Then Iana began to cry. Then they both began to laugh. They were both smiling when they entered the house.

“Do you think we will ever go back?” asked Iana as she entered the room. Evangelia followed her inside.

Maria Stavridis made an unusually grimacing face. Evangelia was surprised. Then they had some tea. When they finished their tea Evangelia stood up.

“I must go. Today we are moving. This is our fate now...” she said and left.

Iana and Maria also hastily began to prepare for their trip. They said goodbye to Traianka and Kocho and left for the Board building where they were greeted by the same man.

“The truck is here waiting for you,” said the man, got out from behind his desk and escorted them to the truck. Iana helped Maria climb into the cab and then handed her Kosta. Risto then climbed in and Iana climbed in last. The driver put his key in the ignition and started the engine. It began to hum and move slowly. Iana waved goodbye to the man with the eagle beaked nose.

The road was bumpy. About an hour later they crossed a bridge over the great river and then turned right. They took the road leading to the village. They soon arrived in front of the village Board. They got off the truck. A tall, skinny unshaven man of about fifty came over to greet them.

“Welcome!” he said smiling. “Please feel free like you are in your own home! This is our country...” he added and brought them into the school building. He then apologized that he had to go and left.

“Is this where I am going to spend the rest of my life?” wondered Maria Stavridis and began to cry.

V

1.

The school was opened to the children in the fall and Iana and Maria were moved to a house at the end of the village. They were happy there. Risto began to attend school. He stayed up late at night under the lantern and studied from the book he was given at the school. His teacher, Ivan Tomovski, often came over and helped him with his lessons. He began to appear more frequently at the house and even began to teach Iana how to read. The villagers began to talk, wondering if there was more to the teacher’s visits to Iana Chakalarova’s house than teaching. The teacher always shook his head implying “No!” But then it happened: they began to fall in love. The teacher began to spend more time with Iana. Then there was the unnamed witness who claimed he saw Iana and the teacher naked in bed. The teacher had no choice but to admit that he was in love with her and that he wanted to become engaged to her.

Iana was not sure about his announcement. The teacher, however, was ecstatic. The village bachelors envied him. Iana began to isolate herself. She pondered her situation for a long time and began to avoid the teacher. However, he kept forcibly crawling into her bedroom but Iana never tried to dissuade him. This is how she greeted the spring when she began making plans for how to start supporting herself.

One day a stranger arrived in the village and went inside the village Board office. About twenty minutes later the village Board president summoned Iana and Maria. The stranger greeted them.

“My name is Georgios Kokoianis,” he said. “I am looking for volunteers who are willing to work at the Katlanovo hospital where wounded fighters from the Democratic Army are brought to be nursed back to health. We need nurses,” he added.

Iana Chakalarovo volunteered immediately.

“I will come and work at the hospital. I have first aid training,” she said enthusiastically.

“Thank you, comrade. The wounded fighters will appreciate your help,” replied the man.

Maria Stavridis looked at Iana and said:

“What about Risto?”

“He will stay with you, Maria. I have to help at the hospital. Risto is a big boy now. He will be able to help you. Also, I will come and visit you from time to time,” replied Iana.

Maria Stavridis was silent.

“Get ready, we are leaving in half an hour...” said Kokoianis.

Iana nodded affirmatively, left the Board office and headed for home with Maria following her. The moment they arrived she began to pack her suitcase.

“Where are you going, mother? Are you taking me with you?” asked Risto.

“No, son! You will be staying with your Aunt Maria. You will continue with your schooling. I am going a little further away. We will see each other less often until I am able to take you with me,” she replied.

“Okay, mother. I can look after myself,” replied Risto.

“Thank you, son. You are a smart and brave young man!” she said, took her suitcase and went outside. Risto remained behind wondering what was happening.

“Are you going somewhere?” Iana heard a voice saying in the distance.

She turned to see who it was. Wrinkles appeared on her forehead. She sharpened her view. It was the teacher.

“Yes I am leaving right now, Ivan. I must go,” she replied.

“Are you leaving because of me?” he asked.

“My people are bleeding in the mountains. If you don’t understand that it best I don’t explain it to you!” she replied.

“You are lying to me! You are leaving because you don’t want to marry me!” he said.

Iana looked around then looked him in the eye and caressed his face with her hand.

“My people are being destroyed and they need me. Our love is over. My homeland is calling me,” she replied.

“Is this not your homeland?” he asked.

Iana became enraged. She partly shut her eyes and clenched her teeth tightly.

“Listen, Ivan! If you need a woman until I come back, go look somewhere else. I can’t ignore my people just for you...!” she said in a rough tone of voice and left. She ran down the hill on the road and did not turn to say goodbye. She stopped in front of the village Board building, left her suitcase at the door and went inside. She then came out with Georgios Kokoianis and the three other people

who accompanied the village Board president. Kokoanis helped her put her suitcase on the jeep and then they all climbed aboard. Iana sat on the back seat. Kokoanis and the three others sat in the front seats. The jeep drove off.

2.

The road led them to Skopje. Three hours later they crossed over the River Pchinia and turned right. They traveled on the road that followed the river. It was winding and bumpy. They hopped around on their seats. Suddenly people moving around on crutches appeared before them. They had arrived at the hospital. The jeep stopped and they all got off. Kokoianis took Iana to the reception area. They stopped in front of a makeshift desk.

“This is the new nurse,” said Kokoianis.

“You may go now Mr. Kokoianis,” said the woman behind the makeshift desk and turned her attention to Iana.

Iana Chakalarovo turned to look where Kokoianis was going and then sighed.

“What is your full name?” asked the woman behind the counter.

“Iana Chakalarova,” replied Iana.

“Date of birth?” she asked.

“1917,” replied Iana.

“Place of birth?” she asked.

“Solun,” replied Iana and looked at the ledger in which the woman was writing down all this information.

“Are you married?” she asked.

“Yes!” replied Iana. “But my husband was killed in the Second World War.”

“Was he a communist?” the woman asked.

“Yes! He was a member of the CPG,” replied Iana proudly.

“Do you have children?” she asked.

“One. Male,” replied Iana with a sad look on her face as she thought of Risto.

“Where is he located now? Address?” asked the woman.

“He is in Marvintsi, Valandovsko,” replied Iana quietly like it was a secret.

The woman finished writing down the information, looked at Iana, stood up and began to move away from her desk.

“Come with me! I will show you to your quarters, kitchen and where you will be working. But first we need to find you clothes to wear and you need to take a bath,” said the woman.

Iana followed her silently. They entered a narrow room. The woman looked at Iana and pulled out a clean white bundle of clothes from the large shelf and gave it to her. Iana took it. She then pulled out a long white coat and handed it to her.

They left the room and climbed up to the next floor. They stopped in front of a door with patterns. The woman went inside. Iana followed. The room was small. There were two iron beds with old mattresses resting on them.

“This is your room. When the other girl arrives there will be the two of you here,” said the woman and placed some bed sheets on the mattress. “The bath is in the bathroom and the kitchen is downstairs. Have your bath and go down and eat something!” she said.

Iana was silent. The woman left the room and she was left all alone. She kept looking at the mattress for a long time. She put her suitcase on the floor and opened it. She took out her blankets, white tablecloth and pillow case and put them on the bed. She held her

coat in her hand. She sighed a difficult and painful sigh and went into the bathroom. She took off her clothes and washed them in the tub. She then took a bath and wiped her body with a towel. She put on the white coat over her naked body and carried her clothes under her arm back to the room. She opened the window and spread her clothes to dry. She made the bed and then lay down to rest. She fell asleep. About an hour later the same woman who had brought her there woke her up. A young woman was with her. Iana quickly got out of bed, nodded her head and said:

“Excuse me, I must have dozed off.”

“This is your colleague. She is from Bapchor. Her name is Maria. You will do well together...” said the woman and left.

“Please sit. My name is Iana. I am from Solun,” said Iana.

“Please let me get washed first, then we will talk,” replied Maria. “I am really dirty and uncomfortable like this,” she added.

“Okay, no problem,” said Iana and lay down. Maria went to the bathroom, had a bath and soon returned. Iana was sleeping. Maria sat down on the other bed, leaned on the iron bars and dozed off naked.

VI

1.

Iana Chakalarova was often alone in her room. She thought more frequently about her son. Some unknown force was pushing her to go and see him. She often saw photographs of her patients with all their family members together. Many had pictures of their wives. There was a younger man in the hospital. He was from Drama. He kept a photograph of his son on his chest and showed it to everyone in the hospital. He also showed it to Iana. They became friends. The man constantly looked at the photograph. This caused Iana a lot of pain. She began to hope that they would give her time off to go and visit her boy in the small village near the great river, but the war was raging on and every day the number of wounded in the hospital

increased. Those who were healed were sent back to the front, but there were only a few of them.

The only thing that made Iana think less of her son were the stories she was hearing from the front, told by the wounded fighters who she was helping in the hospital, which made her so angry that she wanted to pick up a rifle herself and go out there and fight.

She was alone in her room during the evening of New Year's Eve when there was a knock on her door. It was Georgios Kokoianis. He was so excited that he was red in the face. He was smiling when he sat down on the other bed.

“Get ready to move. You are leaving in two days. You are going back to your own homeland,” he said excitedly.

Iana Chakalarova looked at him with a sharp look and was about to say:

“This country here is also my homeland, Mr Kokoianis!” but decided not to. “I will be ready, Mr. Kokoianis. Don't worry!” she said instead.

“Then I will see you in two days...” replied Kokoianis.

“Can I go and see my son before I leave?” she asked.

“Sorry, I can't approve that. Only headquarters can. I will inquire promptly,” replied Kokoianis and left.

2.

Iana Chakalarova climbed into the truck. She sat on a wooden bench under the tarpaulin. She looked into the faces of the young people being sent back to the front. The truck left and soon arrived in the Pchinia valley heading for Gevgelia. Iana was hoping to see her son. Kokoianis was also sitting under the tarpaulin.

“Sir, we will be passing by my village. Will I be able to see my son?” inquired Iana looking upset.

The truck hit a large pothole. Iana and the others were sent flying up off their seats. They landed hard on their asses. Some grumbled and murmured. Iana was silent, thinking of Risto.

About three hours later the truck stopped. The young fighters raised the tarpaulin. Iana was staring at Kokoianis's pale face.

“Everyone off the truck! From here on we go on foot!” ordered Kokoianis.

Iana Chakalarova got off the truck.

“Why did you not allow me to see my son?” asked Iana.

Kokoianis turned red in the face and looked uncomfortable. He became upset but said nothing. Iana passed him by silently with contempt. She lost the colour in her face. Concern appeared in her eyes.

“Death is a bad companion but love is greater than everything else,” Iana thought to herself and followed the young men traveling over the rough terrain.

3.

Soon they arrived at the border and crossed it quietly making sure no one saw them or heard them. They stopped at Bel Kamen and waited. A while later they saw several silhouettes in the snow-white distance. They hid behind the stones with rifles ready to shoot. They looked confused and upset at the little column approaching. Iana recognized someone in the column. She ran out from behind the rocks yelling. Everyone was confused.

“Stavre...! Stavre...!” she kept screaming as she ran towards the column. Then she reached out and lunged at one of the men and put her arms around his neck. They hugged tightly.

The column stopped. The people behind the stones put their guns down. Stavre Nakovski wept with happiness.

“Iana! What the hell are you doing here?” he asked her quietly.

“Stavre my friend! It must have been God’s will to send you my way,” cried Iana.

“Let’s get moving people!” said one of the fighters.

Stavre and Iana separated from their embrace.

“Let’s go! It’s a long way to Kostaneria,” said Stavre, put his arm around her and led her along the goat paths through the mountains. The young men who came with Iana and Stavre’s fighters followed. Their feet were getting sore from the rugged terrain. Some were getting stuck in places where the snow was deep. They all moved silently. They did not rest at all before they arrived in Kostaneria in the evening. They passed by the first set of guards and entered the village. Several dogs barked at them. No one got upset. They stopped in front of Stefanos’s store. The newly arrived fighters were sent to various houses. Iana was sent to Kolio Bocharov’s house. She was very tired and immediately fell asleep.

Tired, Stavre Nakovski sat down in Stefanos’s store. The Asia Minor colonist brought him some rakia. After he drank his rakia he fell asleep.

VII

1.

Lazaros Papadoglu wearily walked along the slope and slowly approached the first line of guards. He stumbled over a root, fell and rolled in the snow. He lay in the snow for a moment or two. He then brushed himself off and continued. Two armed men appeared from behind the trees. Lazaros stopped. He was frozen with fear.

“Are you looking for someone, friend?” one of the men asked him threateningly with his gun pointing at him.

“I am going to Kostaneria. I am not at war with anyone,” replied Lazaros sounding upset.

“Do you have relatives there?” asked the other man who appeared to limp from one of his legs.

“I have. I am going to see Stavre Nakovski,” Lazaros replied.

The man with the limp laughed out loud showing that he was missing a lot of teeth.

“Search him!” the limping man ordered.

The other armed man approached Lazaros carefully, searched his pockets and under his arms and then moved away from him.

“He is clean. Like he is off to a wedding...” he said.

“Let’s go. Walk in front of us!” ordered the limping man and pointed with his rifle in the direction he wanted Lazaros to walk.

“But I am going to Kostaneria...” rebelled Lazaros naïvely. He was confused and wanted to get away from the clutches of the two armed men.

“We are from Kostaneria...” said the limping man and shoved Lazaros in the back with his rifle barrel. “Now let’s go!” he yelled out.

Lazaros Papadoglu walked slowly in front of them. His legs were heavy and he could not move any faster. The limping man pushed him forward with his rifle barrel prompting him to move on. Lazaros sped up. When they arrived in the village street they met other armed men. Lazaros kept looking at them in amazement. About half way down the little village Lazaros began to slow down.

“Stop!” yelled the limping man. Lazaros stopped. “Wait for me here! I will go inside and see the commander. I will be right back.”

Lazaros Papadoglu cursed the day that he had taken advice from Urania Papaioannou, who had sent him here to Kostaneria. He was sorry that he had run into these two men and sorrier for mentioning Stavre Nakovski’s name. “Now they will bring me before a judge

and shoot me,” he thought and began to despair. He then contemplated overpowering the other man and running away but did not have the courage, so he decided to wait. The limping man finally came out and went towards him. He approached Lazaros and said:

“The commander is not here. What did you say the name of your relative in Kostaneria was?”

“Stavre Nakovski,” replied Lazaros.

“I will check immediately. And what is your name?” he asked.

“My name is Lazaros,” he replied.

“Okay then, I will immediately check to see if Stavre Nakovski is related to you,” replied the man.

“I want to see him,” said Lazaros and flinched at the thought that Stavre Nakovski might say that he doesn’t know any Lazaros, which could easily happen, and then they would shoot him.

“Was Stavre a relative or not?” wondered the limping man. “Maybe this Lazaros was hiding something?” he thought.

“We should jail him in the basement while we wait for the commander to arrive,” he said calmly to the other armed man. “Why are we wrecking our brains with him?” he added.

“Please take me to Stavre Nakovski, I beg you,” said Lazaros calmly.

The limping man pondered for a while, then pushed him with his rifle barrel.

“Let’s go!” he said sternly.

Lazaros began to move. About twenty metres along the street the limping man stopped. He then went inside Stefanos’s store. Moments later he came out with Stavre Nakovski. The limping man then pointed at Lazaros.

Lazaros laughed out loud and yelled:

“Pondilaki! Pondilaki my brother you save me from death!” and then ran down the street and threw himself at Pondilaki who was coming towards him.

“How the hell did you get here Lazaros?” asked Pondilaki and laughed out loud.

“God, what luck! Those two would have killed me!” said Lazaros and, while hugging Pondilaki, pointed at the limping man.

Stavre Nakovski giggled loudly. Pondilaki heard his laughter. Lazaros became upset. The limping man was confused. The other armed man lowered his rifle and tossed it over his shoulder.

“Go back to your posts! This man is one of us!” yelled Stavre.

The limping man saluted and he and his co-fighter left and went in the direction of the village’s lower neighbourhood where they had come from. Stavre Nakovski went towards Pondilaki and looked at Lazaros.

“This is Lazaros Papadoglu, a journalist from Solun,” said Pondilaki and tapped Lazaros gently on the shoulder.

“Glad to meet you!” said Stavre cheerfully. “Are you a democrat?” he then asked.

“A communist!” replied Lazaros proudly.

“And the soldiers who brought you here... they too are communists. In future watch out that you don’t kill each other!” said Stavre.

“And you are Stavre Nakovski?” asked Lazaros.

“Yes... that’s me,” replied Stavre.

“Urania Papaioannou sent me to see you. My life was in danger,” explained Lazaros.

“Urania Papaioannou?!” said Stavre.

“Yes exactly, her...” said Lazaros proudly.

“That’s great... Urania Papaioannou...” muttered Stavre and laughed. “This is Iana Chakalarova a true beauty,” said Stavre and introduced Iana to Lazaros and the others.

Pondilaki was delighted. Lazaros opened his eyes wide. He could not get enough of the beauty that was coming over to meet him. Iana came close and gave her hand to Pondilaki but instead of shaking it he grabbed her and hugged her.

“Welcome... We are now complete...” he said.

“Let’s go inside the store!” suggested Stavre and walked in. Pondilaki led Iana by the hand. Lazaros walked in behind them. Stavre sat in the usual wooden chair and invited the rest to join him. They all sat down.

“It’s a nice day. I hope it will be peaceful,” said Stavre and coughed.

“Some rakia here?!” ordered Pondilaki.

Stefanos brought a bottle of rakia and glasses and then went back behind the counter. Manoli Strezovski walked in with mail from supreme command and placed it in front of Stavre.

“From headquarters?” asked Stavre.

“Yes, from headquarters. They said it was important...” replied Manoli.

Stavre Nakovski opened each envelope. There were typewritten letters inside. He read over them quickly and carefully and set each page aside when he was done. He then whistled loudly.

“The new government is asking us to be more active,” Stavre said to Pondilaki. “It is ordering us to open free schools, to implement agrarian reforms, to nationalize the forests and pastures, and to respect the rights of minorities and treat them as equals.”

“These are affairs of the state. Only the government in Athens can decide on such matters!” said Lazaros surprised.

Pondilaki laughed.

“Now we have two governments in one country. Last year they sent us documents declaring Greece a democratic and free state, and a non-aligned republic. Where have you been living?” replied Pondilaki to Lazaros.

Lazaros Papadoglu turned red in the face.

“The name of the president of your new government is Markos Vafiadis,” said Pondilaki to Lazaros sarcastically.

Lazaros was completely confused.

“They want two of us in supreme command. Who do you think we should send?” said Stavre to Pondilaki.

“Iana Chakalarova and Lazaros Papadoglu. They are smart, literate and great democrats,” replied Pondilaki and laughed.

Iana and Lazaros were both surprised. Stavre continue to browse through the letters and then raised his head.

“I thought of sending you,” said Stavre to Pondilaki.

“They are younger and are making their own future. If they make mistakes they will be making their own mistakes with no one to blame,” replied Pondilaki and took a sip of rakia.

“Agreed! They leave tomorrow after breakfast,” decided Stavre.

Jana and Lazaros looked at each other. They were confused.

VIII

1.

The next morning Manoli Strezovski went from house to house and woke up first Iana and then Lazaros. They both got dressed in a hurry and joined him in the yard of one of the houses. They quickly walked down the village road and then veered off and disappeared towards the mountain. The forest in places was very dense and they had difficulty getting through. They were scratched and scraped by the tree branches. The terrain was also rough and rugged and they quickly became fatigued. From time to time Manoli Strezovski allowed them to rest. Again and again they looked at each other wondering what was going to happen. Their biggest worries were that they might run into a government army patrol. These patrols were out there all the time crisscrossing the countryside and mountains. Twice they stopped to eat and ate all the food they had in their backpacks. They arrived at the outskirts of a small village and waited until it was dark. Led by Manoli Strezovski they slipped under the cover of darkness and softly knocked on the door of one of the houses. A moment later a lamp was lit inside. The weak light glowed through the window to the outside.

“Who are you?” asked the man inside.

“The scabby fish,” replied Manoli very quietly.

“Go in the barn! I will bring you food,” replied the man.

Manoli led them to the barn. A few minutes later a man arrived and handed Manoli a bundle wrapped in a colourful cloth.

“We have no more. If you plan to spend the night here you must go before dawn. We get visits from the government soldiers every day. If they find you here they will kill you and they will destroy the entire village. Good luck to you and have a safe journey!” said the man and went back inside the house.

Iana was not used to the smell of the barn and did not know what to make of it. Lazaros, from time to time, held his nose. Manoli laid

down his coat on the straw and, while the other two looked for a place to lie down, went to sleep. The other two eventually found their spots and lay down. Iana could not sleep. She kept thinking of her son. She was still awake at dawn. The day arrived in the village earlier than they thought. It was too late for them to escape. The village was filled with government soldiers. Lazaros was overpowered by fear. Iana noticed his restless eyes and tried to calm him down. She began to caress his head as if attempting to remove the government soldiers out of his head.

Manoli Strezovski looked around like a fox breaking into a chicken coop, trying not to scare the chickens and alert the farmer. He looked through the door cracks but all his eyes could see was himself in front of a firing squad. He looked into the distance. He saw soldiers coming towards the houses.

“Follow me!” he said quietly and they all slipped out of the barn. Iana pushed Lazaros in front of her and they went into the yard completely unnoticed. From there they fled into the dense forest. They climbed up the mountain and stopped to rest. Their minds were filled with bloody images.

“What was the man’s name? The man who gave us the food?” asked Lazaros.

“Hristo Sotirovski,” replied Manoli quietly. “Why are you asking?”

Lazaros did not answer. He watched the soldiers dragging the villagers out of their homes and gathering them for a village meeting. He noticed them dragging a man out of the house where they had received the food. The villager was an old man with a warped back. One of the soldiers hit him hard on the head with his rifle butt. The man collapsed on the side of the road.

“I don’t see Hristo Sotirovski among the villagers being dragged out. He must have escaped?” said Lazaros with a tone of uncertainty in his voice.

Iana Chakalarova’s face went pale.

2.

Two soldiers broke into Hristo Sotirovski's house. They were middle-aged men. Hristo cautiously welcomed them inside and offered them a place to sit down. The soldiers paid no attention to him. It was as if the hospitality in his own house did not matter. One of the soldiers rudely pushed him down and he collapsed on the floor. Paraskeva appeared at the door of the other room. She looked beautiful and proud. The soldiers were confused by her appearance. Paraskeva stood there quietly, avoiding any movement or facial expression that could provoke them. The soldiers went towards her. Paraskeva's eyes were filled with fear.

“She is mine!” yelled the soldier with a pimple on his face.

The other soldier silently made his intentions. He could not get his eyes off Paraskeva whose breathing by now had drastically increased. The soldier with the pimple on his face thrust himself towards her in an attempt to grab the beautiful woman for himself, like he knew she would not come to him quietly and submissively.

Paraskeva pulled back a couple of steps. Then, suddenly, she thrust herself forward and collided with the soldier. She was about four inches taller than him. He leaned down and sank his head into her stomach. Paraskeva fell down, rolled on the floor and hit her head against the wall. It was a hard hit and her sight became blurred. All she could see was fog. She tried hard to regain her sight but was unable. She felt another hard blow on the back of her head which pushed her sight even deeper into the fog. She was half-conscious when she heard her dress ripping. The soldier was tearing it off while she struggled wildly to get away. Paraskeva tried very hard to focus but once again was unable. But she did gain enough of her sight to see the soldier attacking her. She pushed him away but only briefly. He attacked her again and butted her in the stomach with his head. Paraskeva fell to the floor face down and her nose began to bleed. The soldier jumped on top of her and clamped her down tightly with his chest. He laughed. Paraskeva took a swing at him, dropped him on the floor and grabbed him by his face. He screamed with pain. His face was covered with his blood. The other soldier was frightened by the sight. Paraskeva squeezed his face and dug her fingernails into his eyes. His eyes popped out of their sockets

and hung over his cheeks. She let him go, rose up and lunged at the other soldier. Her hands were bloodied. He moved aside and hit her on the head with the butt of his rifle. Paraskeva fell to the floor and passed out. The soldier went towards her and was determined to stab her in the stomach. He took his bayonet out. The veins in his face were pulsing. He looked very angry. The other soldier's screams were driving him mad. Suddenly he stopped and turned around. Hristo was right behind him. At lightening speed the soldier swung his bayonet and drove it into Hristo's stomach. Hristo slowly bent forwards and dropped to the floor.

"Now it's your turn you bitch!" he yelled at her with clinched teeth. "I will fix you good so that you never forget this day." He then took off his pants and lay on top of her. When he was done he buttoned his pants, picked up the other soldier off the floor and went towards the open door. He looked back to see if Paraskeva had gained consciousness. She still lay there unconscious. They left and went towards the village square.

3.

The government forces commander on horseback became enraged when he saw the soldier with his eyes gouged out. He rode his horse closer to him.

"Who did this?" he yelled at the other soldier. "The whole village will burn for this," he said and ordered the soldiers to line the villagers against the wall.

The commander turned his horse around. The horse jumped up with its front legs in the air. The soldiers quickly lined up the villagers against the school building. The villagers were afraid.

"Who did this?" yelled the commander and pointed at the blind soldier bleeding from his eyes.

"I killed them Commander. Those damned who did this are dead!" replied the other soldier.

The commander moved his horse closer to him.

“Form a firing squad! Quickly!” he ordered.

The soldiers lined up and took aim at the villagers.

“Fire!” he yelled anxiously.

The soldiers fired their guns and the villagers fell flat on the ground.

“Only bullets for this scum! I will cast you all out of Greece, you stinking bastards!” he then yelled.

The soldiers lowered their guns as their commander approached them.

“Follow me! Everything we meet from now on goes under the knife!” he ordered. “They will remember Kapetanios Theofilos.” He then moved his horse forward. The soldiers followed. They left the village and disappeared down the road.

4.

“Let’s go back there! There may be survivors?” said Manoli with a cracking tone of voice.

IX

1.

Iana, Manoli and Lazaros ran down the hill and went inside Hristo Sotirovski’s house. Manoli ran over to Paraskeva, picked her up off the floor and put her on the bed.

“Is she alive?” asked Iana.

“Yes, she is!” replied Manoli.

“Sprinkle her with some water,” yelled Lazaros and started looking for a water jug. He found one in the kitchen and quickly returned back to the room. He sprinkled the water on her face. Suddenly she opened her eyes.

“My child!” she yelled out.

“What child is she talking about?” Iana wondered.

“Down there, under the bed...” she pointed.

Iana Chakalarova lifted the bed covers on the side of the bed where she was pointing and saw a baby in a large basket. His mouth was tied with a head kerchief. He was huddling quietly in his blanket. Iana pulled the basket from under and untied his mouth. The child began to cry. Iana lifted him and put him down on the bed and washed his face. The baby calmed down and began to cheerfully wave his arms.

Paraskeva slowly stood on up on the side of the bed and looked down. There, she saw Hristo’s dead body lying on the floor. She did not react. She got off the bed, looked at Manoli and said:

“Let’s get out of here! I am afraid of this place...”

“Put on some heavier clothes!” suggested Iana.

Paraskeva went into the next room and come out wearing a black overcoat. She then took the baby in her arms and wrapped him in a blanket.

“Let’s go!” she said with a pleading tone of voice.

2.

The forest they were traveling through was sparse. Their feet were hurting from constantly stepping on rocks. They did not rest at all. Paraskeva was very tired. Lazaros carried the baby. They arrived at Supreme Command Headquarters at night. The guards took them to the security office. The duty officer set them up in one of the houses. Paraskeva was sent to a different house. They all were very tired and quickly fell asleep.

The next morning Iana went to see Paraskeva. She was surprised when she walked in. Paraskeva was not alone. There were many women with small children in the house. Paraskeva was nursing the baby. She gave Iana a sad and painful smile. Iana sat at the end of

the bed and the two women sat there looking at each other in silence. Iana then stood up abruptly, stroked Paraskeva's hair and left. An older woman, a little older than Iana approached her in the hallway and said:

“Hi, Donka!” with a cheerful tone of voice.

Iana Chakalarova looked at the woman carefully. She did not know her.

“Forgive me...” apologized the woman, looked down and said: “I thought you were Donka from Lerin, a good friend of mine who I have not seen for years...”

“I am sorry about that...” replied Iana and asked: “How do I get to headquarters?”

“Are you going to headquarters?” asked the woman.

“Yes,” replied Iana.

“I also am going to headquarters. Let's go together...” said the woman and introduced herself: “My name is Sofia Grncharova. I am from Lerin.”

Sofia grabbed Iana by the hand and they walked together. They smiled as they entered the house where the headquarters was located. They went into one of the rooms. It was empty.

“Sit down! The officer will come. He is one of us (Macedonian), a villager from Pozdivishta,” said Sofia.

Iana sat on a wooden chair by the window. She looked outside.

“Do you have a family?” asked Sofia.

“No I don't. I was orphaned at twelve. I was raised by relatives. I was married but my husband was shot and killed at Edi Kule because he was an anti-fascist. We had a boy together. I left him with a friend in a village in Yugoslavia where we were evacuated. I

don't know what's happened to him. I was unable to see him before I was brought here," replied Iana.

"You left your boy and came here?" asked Sofia surprised.

"First I went to Katlanovo. There is a hospital there that looks after the wounded fighters from the Democratic army," replied Iana.

"Were you wounded?" asked Sofia.

"No. I worked there as a nurse," replied Iana.

"You left your own child with a friend to be able to participate in the struggle?" asked Sofia even more surprised.

"Yes! This is my fight!" replied Iana.

Sofia tried to imagine how a struggle could be more important than a child when the door suddenly opened and a tall man with a big moustache walked in. He welcomed the women with a head nod and sat on a wooden bench at the end of the table.

"This is a new friend. She is from Solun," said Sofia.

Iana Chakalarova blushed slightly.

"I come from Kostaneria as requested by headquarters," said Iana.

The officer gave her a friendly smile.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked.

Iana and Sofia shook their heads "no".

"Then, let's get on with the more important things... The women's Congress is at twelve o'clock. It will be held in the building adjacent to the house in which DAG's leadership is situated. This is why we called you here. Now you are free to go. I believe that you are prepared for the Convention?" said the officer and looked at the two women.

Sofia sighed. Iana smiled. They both left the office and parted company. Iana seemed very excited. The large number of armed fighters in the surrounding vicinity seemed to disturb the peace in her soul. She walked around in circles and kept looking at the fighters and their tired faces. Just before twelve o'clock she walked into the hall where the Congress was being held. It was a small school building. The hall was decorated with slogans such as: "LONG LIVE DAG!" and "DOWN WITH THE MONARCHO-FASHISTS!"

She sat on a wooden stool. The hall was filled with women. She saw Sofia sitting at the head table up on the stage. The Congress began. Many women spoke. There was a pause. Sofia stood up and loudly said:

"I nominate Iana Chakalarova to be appointed member of the immediate leadership. Please take a vote by show of hands."

"Iana please stand up!" yelled one woman from the back row, "so that we can see who we are voting for."

Iana Chakalarova stood up. All women turned to see who she was. Some sighed a quiet sigh.

"I am Iana Chakalarova !" said Iana excitedly.

"Iana Chakalarova is the wife of a pre-war communist who was shot by the Nazis in Edi Kule prison. In order to extend her notion of human freedom, Iana has left her own child in Yugoslavia to be taken care of by strangers, and had voluntarily come here to fight with us for the freedom of all our people and thus has shown her conviction and justification for our struggle..." said Sofia loudly for everyone to hear.

Moments later the women began to raise their hands.

"According to the number of yes votes, the majority of our membership has accepted Iana Chakalarova's appointment to the immediate AFZH leadership. I now nominate Iana Chakalarova as

the first candidate for the presidency of AFZH,” announced Sofia. “Let us now continue with the elections, but first let us congratulate Iana in her new appointment and wish her much success in the struggle for our final victory for democracy in this country.”

Other women spoke after Sofia. Iana was also seen raising her hand up high, voting.

The Congress continued well into the next day. Iana calmly followed the presentations and program. Sofia’s voice kept ringing in her ears. The Congress ended late in the evening and Iana rushed to see Manoli and Lazaros. They were in their room.

“You are now an official. It is a great honour for all of us...” said Lazaros cheerfully.

“We should go and visit Paraskeva. It is not nice to leave without saying goodbye...” said Iana, changing the subject.

“Paraskeva Sotirovska was evacuated with the group that left for Poland,” replied Manoli.

Lazaros Papadoglu looked confused. He first looked at Iana and then at Manoli.

“What kind of evacuation are you talking about?” he asked frantically.

“Calm down, young man. Evacuation! Thousands of people leave this country and go north. Some will stay in Yugoslavia, others will go to Romania, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia ... According to Supreme Command, the number of people crossing the border to the north on foot, with only a blanket in their hands, is very large. Macedonia is emptying. Our people are being driven out of their homes. They are leaving for other worlds, frightened, tired and hungry, to start a new life... a life on wheels. No one knows where they will stop and when they will return back to their homes. Now they are leaving to avoid being burned by the flames of the government army... the gendarmes... the police... Nobody knows what will happen! May God help us... I am now going to command,

and if there are no new tasks for us we will be going back Kostaneria. I need to calm my soul down,” said Manoli, got up from his bed and went out through the wooden door.

Iana and Lazaros were surprised by Manoli’s comments and remained in the room looking stunned with much unrest in their own young souls. They looked like they were watching the devil taunting them.

3.

Iana, Lazaros and Manoli left headquarters and traveled over the mountains which now became their temporary new home. Manoli moved fast over the rough terrain. Iana followed right behind. Lazaros kept complaining about his aching ankles. About fifty kilometres from Kostaneria they left the goat path and veered off into a grove.

“That was close, we almost fell into their jaws,” said Iana.

“Please be quiet until they pass!” said Manoli quietly.

Lazaros Papadoglu was stunned as he watched the military unit passing by. The soldiers were riding on horses.

“What kind of army is this? No uniforms... no symbols... This is one of those criminal bands paid for by the government to destroy us...” said Manoli.

“I know them... there is Hash, Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin, and Rasim Bey,” muttered Lazaros.

“What did you say?” asked Manoli.

“They are Monarcho-Fascists. I used to see them every day in the café “Macedonia” in Solun... I know them...” replied Lazaros.

Manoli Strezovski looked again. The three notorious figures now appeared clearly before his restless eyes.

“The bastards! Who knows how much they are being paid by the government to kill...” muttered Manoli and spat.

Hidden in the grove they kept quiet until the strange army bypassed them by. They left the grove and continued on their trek. Manoli looked nervous and angry.

“They will sell their own children for American dollars. The scum! The bastards!” he muttered angrily.

“I heard people talking at headquarters. They were saying that in Kostur the government troops have used chemical weapons and poisons. This is the kind of means the government in Athens has chosen to destroy us,” said Lazaros.

“You need to collect this kind of information, young man! You know how to write. One day when you are sitting in a comfortable chair you can write about it! Let us all know what happened...” advised Manoli.

They finally entered Kostaneria but walked very carefully. Iana Chakalarova decided to run ahead.

“Stop!” yelled Manoli.

Iana stopped, turned and looked surprised.

“Why?” she asked.

“We need to find the two guards before we get shot. We need to be careful,” he replied.

“But they are our guards...” complained Iana.

“We have been away for a long time. We don’t know if things have changed here, or not? And who here knows that the beautiful Iana Chakalarova is returning to Kostaneria? Or do you think everyone in the village knows that?” replied Manoli.

Iana Chakalarova bowed her head down slightly, recognizing her mistake.

“Don’t blame yourself! You need more experience...” said Manoli.

“Let’s go!” suggested Lazaros.

“Be vigilant!” warned Manoli and began to walk.

They entered the village unnoticed by the guards under the cover of darkness and quietly disappeared into their designated houses.

4.

The next day Iana Chakalarova got up early in the morning and went to Stefanos’s store.

“Hello, Stavre!” she yelled, looking in from outside the door.

“Welcome back, doll! How was Supreme Command?” replied Stavre waving her in.

Iana Chakalarova walked in and sat beside him.

“Now I am an official. A great beast...” she said jokingly.

“Who will you now hunt?” asked Stavre jokingly and took a sip of his rakia.

“Women! I will hunt women. Is that okay with you?” she replied.

Stavre Nakovski thought for a moment, but before he had a chance to make another witty remark Manoli Strezovski entered the store. They shook hands. Manoli sat beside him.

“Bring some rakia for Manoli!” ordered Stavre.

“Bring me one too!” he added, looked at Iana and said: “Will you drink one?”

“I will have one. Let it be known!” Iana replied, laughed out loud and said:

“And look at you? You have become a big shot! A leader no less...!?”

“I like you. You are a smart woman Iana!” replied Stavre.

Stefanos, the Asia Minor colonist, brought the glasses of rakia and put them on the table.

Stavre Nakovski picked up his glass and drank it all at once. He then got up and said:

“I must go. I will see you later...” and walked out of the store.

Iana and Manoli sipped their rakia slowly. The Asia Minor colonist occasionally and curiously looked in their direction trying to catch what they were saying.

“It is a terrible time,” Stefanos thought to himself. His only wish at the moment was to survive the war. “The war will probably not last long. I will have to go far away where there are no people and stay there for a long time. The further away from this hell the better...” he tried to convince himself.

X

1.

Manoli Strezovski came into Stefanos’s store panting.

“The great Stalin is quarreling with Yugoslavia. This is a bad thing. This is a terrible irregularity in Supreme Command. The ‘coma’ supports Stalin’s opinion. Now we are done for...” said Manoli all broken up.

“Slow down! Have a bit of faith in the people, Manoli!” replied Stavre with a calming tone of voice.

“They suspended the entire Macedonian leadership. They are being accused of fractionizing... Every day they send appeals to the government troops to fraternize with our fighters...” said Manoli.

“We heard about it on the radio from Kolio Bochvarov. Every day they feed us with new sugar-coated crap. But we need to fight and not play politics. Knife to knife, a tooth for a tooth, otherwise they will again exterminate us, this time to the last one...” replied Stavre, took a sip of rakia and looked at Pondilaki.

“I am not saying anything...” said Pondilaki calmly.

“We need to create a people’s militia in Kostaneria...” replied Stavre, got up and quietly left the store. He walked down the village street with a clouded mind and went into the house he rebuilt. Memories of Evangelia and his children began to fill his mind. He lay down on the dusty blanket on the bed and closed his eyes. He did not come out that day. All this time he slept in the house, which he himself had raised from the ashes.

XI

1.

Stavre Nakovski left his house and went to visit Kolio Bochvarov. He was at home crouched in front of his radio.

“Sit!” said Kolio and pointed with his hand to the bed. “I am listening to the news,” he then added.

Stavre sat on the bed and leaned his back against the wall. He looked at the little box from which a voice was coming.

“The Democratic Army wants to put an end to the fratricidal war. The government in Athens is demanding unconditional surrender...” said Kolio with a worried look.

“Bastards!” muttered Stavre and stepped off the bed. “Let’s go to the store. I want to see Pondilaki,” he added and took a few steps towards the door.

They left the house and went up the street. They passed several fighters before entering Stefanos's store. Pondilaki was sitting with Iana Chakalarova and Tushi Gonev drinking rakia.

"Are we going to surrender?" asked Pondilaki with a serious look on his face.

"Nobody gives a damn about us! We have been erased from this world..." replied Stavre jokingly.

"The chiefs are starting to resort to new tactics..." said Pondilaki.

What new tactics Pondilaki? Can't you see what they are doing? They are carving a place for themselves in the government? They are asking the United Nations to intervene and remove the US and England from this country. We did not get involved in this fratricidal war alone and on our own! We were drawn into it. If it wasn't for America and England intervening we would have lived beautifully. We won the war against the Nazis. We would have formed a democratic government and that's the way it should have been. Did our leaders not know all this when they went to the mountains?" replied Stavre.

"All I know for sure is that the summer is passing fast and fall will be here soon. It's best not to talk about it. I am afraid that we will all burn in the fire that we started. I am looking at the fire burning and spreading and it will soon invade Kostaneria. It will be difficult. The wagon has begun to roll downhill. Now anyone can say whatever they want," said Pondilaki.

"Shall we have a drink, people?! The Monarcho-Fascists can go to hell! This land is ours and we are not giving it up!" said Tushi Gonev, raised his glass and took a sip of rakia.

XII

1.

Kolio Bocharov walked in Stefano's store agitated and panting and said:

“According to the radio a battalion of government troops has crossed into our ranks. The soldiers killed their commander.”

“They will attract other battalions. We will win. I believe...” said Stavre, turned and saw Iana Chakalarova at the door.

“When did you return? What happened?” asked Stavre looking at her.

Iana Chakalarova slowly leaned on the table and came closer to Stavre. She then leaned on Stavre’s shoulder and sat down.

“Give me a glass of water! My throat is dry from the heat...” she said.

Stefanos brought her a glass of water. Iana took it, drank a little, and lowered the glass on the table.

“Speak! What happened?” Stavre demanded to know.

“Take it easy, Stavre, don’t rush me!” replied Iana in a broken voice.

“Tell me! Don’t keep me in suspense!” demanded Stavre sounding upset.

“We have a new president in the interim government and a new military commander. Markos Vafiadis was removed. He was suspended and expelled from the Party Politburo,” said Iana.

Stavre Nakovski looked confused. He looked calm now.

“Why did they remove him? What did he do?” asked Stavre.

“I don’t know. But there is more. General Headquarters at Mount Vicho has ordered the mobilization of all men and women ages seventeen to thirty-five. This smells bad, Stavre, it stinks...” said Iana with a concerned look on her face, sighed a deep sigh and continued: “There was also a fight between the movement leaders who were in support of our relations with Yugoslavia and those who followed Stalin’s line. Unfortunately those who argued for keeping

good relations with our northern neighbour lost their leadership positions. They and Vafiadis disappeared. Even though this was not yet officially resolved it will be resolved soon.”

“Idiots! Stupid idiots! Who cares about Stalin’s war with Yugoslavia? I don’t know why we squawk so much for Moscow. I waited for Stalin during the war. They assured me in the prison that he was coming to help us. But it appears he was wiping his ass with our requests... They collected the children by force to keep their own butts safe. The Macedonians will be the last rampart built from the bones of our dead who they promised to protect. They will crush us all...” mumbled Stavre to himself.

“The villagers are prepared for the winter, Stavre. We have started shooting our commanders and not worrying about ordinary fighters,” said Kolio Bocharov.

“What are you talking about? Who is shooting commanders? Where? Why?” asked Stavre in an angry tone of voice. “Nobody tells me anything! I am the last to find out!”

“Georgis Gorgadis, commander of the XIV DAG Brigade, was sentenced to death by the military court and immediately shot. This was because he failed to take Voden. He lost many fighters in the battle,” said Kolio.

“Solun! We need to take Solun and not Voden. One of these days I will personally go to Command and tell them how to run a war. The political types! That’s why the man and his friends who were providing weapons for us disappeared... You stupid idiots, you screwed up this war. Now we will have to fight with stones...” muttered Stavre nervously and left the store. He ran down the village street and climbed high up the mountains. He then began to scream profanities...

When he calmed down he said: “We sure screwed up things...” and sat down on the grass. He looked towards the grove and closed his eyes.

XIII

1.

“This year passed. The government is again bravely telling us that we will win. The five people from the other side of the border who brought us weapons, ammunition, food and clothes have not been seen for a long time. It must be a big quarrel for them not to be coming. Who knows what kind of mess this is? Lately all I hear is accusations. I am not interested to know whether the leader is blamed for his right orientation in politics, or for his opportunism. I just don’t care! For me all this is a bad sign. Everything is going to hell. Iana is attending the Macedonian National Liberation Front Second Plenum and will bring back new news. But what kind of news will she bring? Will they change the program of the struggle and their politics?” muttered Stavre to himself and had a sip of his rakia.

Tushi Gonev walked into the store and said:

“Iana Chakalarova has returned. I am sure she has some new news from Supreme Command?”

“Bring her here! Ask her to come here immediately!” ordered Stavre.

Instead of sitting down, like he was preparing to do, Tushi Gonev dashed his ass out the door. A few minutes later he returned with Iana Chakalarova.

“Hello, Stavre!” she yelled out and sat down beside him. “You look preoccupied... lost in your thoughts...” she added.

“Don’t screw with me, talk!” he said impatiently.

“Aren’t you going to let me rest a bit first...” she replied jokingly.

“Please Iana speak, otherwise I will go crazy! Spill the beans...” he said with a serious tone of voice.

“The chiefs are proposing a struggle for the unification of all Macedonians in a single independent Macedonian state. What do you say to that?!” replied Iana.

“The chiefs... Why don't they destroy the government in Skopje by themselves? Why are they now forcing us into this fratricidal war in which they expect us to destroy each other? Does that screwball think we don't know how much time he spent in Belgrade warming his ass, sipping drinks in the foreign government offices? Stavre has not forgotten World War II. Then too they wanted to push us to exterminate ourselves. Only then the wind was blowing from Berlin. Who are we disturbing? The Balkans? The world? Who? Let them attack Skopje on their own. I am not helping them. In fact I want to do the opposite, I want to break their heads... Turn on the radio Stefanos! Perhaps Supreme Command will tell some jokes. Perhaps they will ask us to kill our own wives and children...” said Stavre.

“Why are you so cowardly? We will do what we choose to do, plain and simple!” said Tushi.

The radio began to talk. The third piece of news was: THE CPG CENTRAL COMMITTEE DENIES THE NEWS THAT AN AGREEMENT FOR THE CREATION OF A BALKAN COMMUNIST FEDERATION AND THE MACEDONIAN STATE HAS BEEN REACHED, WHICH WILL UNITE MACEDONIANS IN ONE COUNTRY. THIS KIND OF NEWS IS BEING SPREAD BY ATHENS.

“Well, here is your Conference. The political types again! The war requires human lives, not political figures. This will not go unchallenged. Someone must be held accountable to the people,” said Stavre.

Iana was silent. Tushi Gonev finished his drink and left the store. Stavre Nakovski kept staring at a dot on the wall. Iana thought he was going crazy.

XIV

1.

Iana Chakalarova and Manoli Strezovski again found themselves at Supreme Command in Prespa. After a brief stay they again went back to Kostaneria. They rushed all the way back. Iana was nervous and moved fast. Manoli tried to keep up. They arrived in Kostaneria in the dark of night. Iana ran into the village. Manoli ran after her. He was unable to catch up. His biggest fear was that she would be mistakenly shot by the guards. Iana ran inside Stefanos's store. Stavre was sitting with Pondilaki, Tushi Gonev and Stoian Dzhavalekov, calmly drinking his rakia. His eyes darted at her and he became startled watching her panting and looking nervous. He wanted to invite her to sit with him, but before he had a chance to say something she cried out:

“This is outrageous! I am going insane!”

“What is it with you? Every time you come back from Prespa you are nervous and believe someone is going to shoot us all,” said Pondilaki with a serious look on his face.

“I am not joking!” yelled Iana.

“Then calm down, sit down and tell us what's going on!” said Stavre.

Iana Chakalarova sat next to Pondilaki and said:

“I am not going to Prespa again. Next time you can send someone else!”

“Slow down, Iana! What happened?” asked Stavre concerned.

“They constantly lie! They constantly argue! They invent things. I will tell you everything that happened. But first I want some tea. Bring me a tea, Stefanos,” she said.

“Right away, Miss,” replied Stefanos humbly.

Iana Chakalarova smiled at him.

“Now tell us everything...” requested Pondilaki.

“They are concerned about us Macedonians. Many of us are deserting the ranks of the army. They say we are cowards,” replied Iana.

“Who said that?” asked Stavre with a dazed look on his face.

“The new commander. The Macedonian organization printed leaflets condemning the slogan for a free and independent Macedonian state within a Balkan Communist Federation, stating that slogans like this are detrimental to the Greek and Macedonian democratic movement. That was in the news. After that we found ourselves in hell. Villagers were being displaced. The Monarcho-Fascist army was attacking and destroying villages. We were almost caught. Thankfully we knew our way around. There was not a soul left alive anywhere. We only had one meal all this time. There is no village that was not attacked. There were no people anywhere. The unexpected just happened. Only God knows where the villagers disappeared. What a misfortune,” said Iana.

“You are kidding me, right?” asked Stavre with a surprised look on his face and smiled.

“Here is another piece of news! We have established a ‘Communist Party of Aegean Macedonia’. I hope this is big news for you... A few days ago we stopped living in Macedonia. We are now the residents of ‘Aegean Macedonia’...” added Iana.

Stavre looked at her with disappointment and said: “In other words, the wagon is now rolling downhill. ‘No love affair ever ends in happiness,’ just like in the ancient plays. This is like an ancient tragedy... What a mess we have made? Not even the best psychic could have predicted this. Our hopes are rolling downhill with the wagon and are about to hit bottom... Every day they scream for twinning the armies. What a mess we are in...” Stavre then turned to Pondilaki and in a desperate tone of voice said: “Say something, Pondilaki! You are quiet, as if you are not part of this mess.”

Stefanos brought Iana her tea and put it on the table. He also brought some sugar in a ceramic bowl and a teaspoon.

“It is done now... It is over. What can I possibly do in this whole mess? I have no magic wand...” replied Pondilaki and took a sip of his rakia.

“Then I will sing!” yelled Stavre with tears rolling down his cheeks. He began to sing. He chose the familiar patriotic “Apostole Voidvoda” song. His deep, lyrical voice filled the room. His melody filled the store, bounced off the walls and spilled out onto the village street, raising the dust that had accumulated since the last rain... blown from the fields.

Pondilaki could not resist. The song was boiling his blood. He also raised his voice and combined it with Stavre’s. The others joined in. Iana Chakalarova sang with them. The song filled the village. Their voices reached Vangelios Kotinaris. He too began to sing. Voices were heard singing in all corners of the village. The grove roared... the mountains cried... but the song did not subside...

2.

Milkiadis’s wife, Evridika Tsakondas, popped her little head out of the window. The singing was making her nervous. She was restless. She was afraid. She was reminded of the day when God saved her husband from a bullet. She was afraid that day was about to be repeated. Standing beside her was Milkiadis. He was shivering and his eyes were filled with fear. He grabbed his children and began to pace back and forth, waiting for his fate to be determined.

3.

Vasil Digalovski lay in bed. He was shivering. He knew that the people of Kostaneria had not sung that song for years and when they did it was because something big was going to happen, just like it did in the days of the great uprising. His mother lay in the next room. The song moved her...

“You are a buffalo! You are the only freak to be born in Kostaneria. You make me feel ashamed. Not even the oxen want to live with this kind of shame,” she yelled out angrily.

Vasil Digalovski did not reply. He knew that his life lay in her old hands.

“Stavre didn’t kill you... not because he didn’t want to spoil his soul with your blood. He didn’t kill you because of my late father Iovan. You can be thankful of that. Everyone sang songs about Iovan and celebrated his deeds because he was a good man. He always defended the poor and the oppressed. He gave his life for Macedonia. That is why Stavre didn’t kill you. He left you alive so that you can take your own life... so you can put a bullet in your own head. If you are not ashamed of living then live, but don’t have any children. They don’t deserve to carry your shame. You would not want people pointing a finger at your children, grandchildren and great grandchildren for generations to come saying there goes the offspring of the Judas who betrayed his own people, just like Judas betrayed Christ in the old world. The people will always remember what you have done. You made your own fate my son...” she said with tears dripping down her cheeks. “It would be best for God to take my soul... Just to save me from you. Why do you do this? Why have you brought shame to my family? Why have you dumped my dignity in the stench of the compost pile...?” she continued.

All this time Vasil Digalovski was silent. The song was cutting through his body like a knife. He wanted to come down and beg for forgiveness. He wanted to go outside and apologize to all the fighters. But he did not have the courage to look anyone in the eye.

He stumbled his way over to his rifle hanging on the wall and grabbed it. He pressed the hammer back and pulled the trigger. The bang echoed through the house and escaped to the outdoors. A large flame flared out. The bullet struck him on his chest. Vasil slowly slid down and fell to the floor. He lay there motionless.

The old woman wept. “Forgive me son, it is stronger than me...” she muttered and at the very moment fell to the floor.

4.

The shot was louder than the singing voices and cut the song like a knife. Stavre Nakovski jumped out of his chair and ran out to the

street. He ran in the direction of the shot and ended up in the Digalovski house. Everyone ran after him. They all went inside. They were disturbed by the sight.

“May God forgive you, mother,” said Stavre loudly, lifted the old woman’s frail body and put it on the bed. “Tomorrow we will bury her in the village cemetery... with military honours,” said Stavre to Vangelios Kotinaris with a stern tone of voice.

“And him?” asked Kotinaris pointing at Vasil Digalovski’s dead body.

“Throw him on the compost pile for the dogs and wild beasts to tear apart. He does not deserve to be buried with the people of Kostaneria,” replied Stavre while standing over the bed, staring at the old woman’s face. “Now leave me alone with her!” he added and waited for everyone to leave the room. He then sat on the bed beside her and stayed there all night long without moving a muscle. He treated her like she was his own mother.

5.

Milkiadis Tsakondas was trembling like a leaf in the downstairs room. Evridika was squeezing her thin fingers in her hands nervously. Only the children were sleeping. The adults could not sleep all night... All night they expected death to crush through the door and take them away.

6.

The next morning they buried the old woman in the village cemetery. After the funeral Stavre went to see Pondilaki. He sat on the opposite bed. He noticed the bed was covered with a beautiful and colourful woolen blanket.

“The government in Athens has instituted a general offensive to wipe out everything that moves in the mountains and fields. Everything that belongs to the Democratic Army,” said Stavre with an anxious tone of voice.

“What is your plan then?” asked Pondilaki.

“I don’t have a plan. More precisely Vangelios Kotinaris should have a plan. He is the military commander,” replied Stavre.

“I understand... Fighting in the city is a bit different...” said Pondilaki and shook his head as if intending to regain his clarity.

7.

Up on top of the hill Tushi Gonev was laying flat on his stomach looking into the distance through his binoculars. Pondilaki was standing beside him. Stavre Nakovski coughed a dry cough. Tushi handed him the binoculars and said:

“Look at your friends more closely! It’s as if they can’t live without us...”

Stavre Nakovski took the binoculars and looked into the distance.

“They are coming straight for us...” said Stavre and handed the binoculars to Vangelios Kotinaris who was then scratching his chin.

Kotinaris took the binoculars and smiled.

“Our lives are in your hands. The same goes for the people of Kostaneria. Decide what you want to do and do it fast... before it’s too late!” said Stavre to Kotinaris calmly.

Vangelios Kotinaris looked through the binoculars and whistled. He was surprised.

“There are over five thousand of them. Where the hell did the government get so many soldiers?” he said, looked around at the others and said: “Let’s go, people! Let’s head for the village.” They set off for the village immediately and collected as many fighters as they found on the way. When they arrived in the village they went from door to door and gathered all the villagers and everyone who resided in their houses and brought them to the village square. When everyone was present Vangelios Kotinaris stepped up in front of them and calmly said:

“People! A large army was spotted in the distance. It is coming fast in this direction. We must go and hide immediately. Whoever wants to stay in the village can stay but the rest must go. Those who think they are unsafe in this country we will evacuate. We will take you over the border. Does everyone understand?” he yelled out loudly.

They were all silent. After that they went back to their homes and prepared to leave. Everyone took whatever they could carry in their hands and came back to the village square. The majority of the villagers wanted to be evacuated. They were prepared to go over the mountain ridge and follow the group of ten armed fighters waiting to escort them across the Yugoslav border. Surprised at the commander’s order Stavre stopped the fighters, turned to Kotinaris and said:

“Don’t you know that our relationship with Yugoslavia has been soured? Are you sending them to be killed?”

Kotinaris looked at him and said: “Listen Stavre, politics are politics but people are people. No matter what the politics, the people will find a way around them. Don’t worry; they will reach their destination safely.” Kotinaris then turned to the fighters and said: “Go now!”

The fighters left and Stavre and Kotinaris followed behind.

“We can’t go that way. We are slaves of politics. We need to take a different direction...” advised Kotinaris.

“Where will we go?” asked Stavre.

“We have to go to Prespa, to Supreme Command. I hope it’s still there when we arrive...” replied Kotinaris.

Kotinaris looked through the binoculars at the first hill, smiled and said:

“You can relax now Stavre. The army is coming this way. Your villagers are safe. They have crossed the border and are now on the other side. Kotinaris then walked away to join the fighters.

Stavre Nakovski smiled and followed.

“Yes, they are coming this way... to uproot us...” he muttered to himself and accelerated his pace. He soon caught up to Kotinaris and the two walked together to the top of the mountain.

XV

1.

Sweating profusely, Vangelios Kotinaris walked in front of the brigade. Beside him was Iana Chakalarova hanging on to Stavre’s shoulder. They all walked slowly. They were all silent. Vangelios Kotinaris stopped and instructed the fighters to take the goat path. He took his binoculars out and looked into the distance. His face looked tired. He handed the binoculars to Stavre Nakovski and said:

“They have been quietly following us for two days and two nights. They are sure they will catch us. Maybe they know where we’re going?” said Kotinaris worried.

Stavre Nakovski looked through the binoculars and then gave them back to Kotinaris.

“Why haven’t they shot at us?” asked Stoian Dzhavalekov.

Pondilaki laughed.

“When they start shooting our heels will turn our asses blue...” he quipped, grabbed Stoian’s hand tightly, looked him in the eyes and said: “You came here all the way from Skopje to lay your life for us. Let me thank you now because I may not get another chance. My sincere thanks for all that you have done, not only for us but for the sake of all the Macedonian and Greek people.”

Tushi Gonev began to cry. He too firmly shook Stoian Dzhavalekov’s hand.

“There is no need for tears... Let’s get moving!” interjected Iana.

Vangelios Kotinaris looked at her strangely. Iana gave him a stern look.

“Okay people. Let’s go! Let’s pick up the pace! We have a long way to go,” ordered Kotinaris and followed behind the column. The others followed him.

2.

Tired they climbed along the ridge of the mountain and entered a dense forest. About an hour later they were all exhausted and sat down to rest. It was getting dark. They spotted a fire burning in the distance at the bottom of the hill. Vangelios Kotinaris finished eating the last piece of bread and got up from the cold stone he was sitting on.

“We are leaving!” he said sternly.

The fighters got out of the grass and prepared for departure. Vangelios Kotinaris led them through the dark. They were making a lot of noise walking over the crunching leaves on the rough terrain. Eventually they reached the top of the mountain.

“The government troops are not coming after us, are they...?” asked Pondilaki.

“Why are they coming then? According to my estimates we are about five kilometers away from Supreme Command... I can’t understand the rational of their commander? Why don’t they attack? Surely they have a plan!?” replied Kotinaris.

“Don’t bang you head against the wall, Kotinaris! Look around you and it will be perfectly clear to you,” said Stavre.

Vangelios Kotinaris looked around in every direction and whistled. He was both surprised and upset.

“We have landed in the middle of the fire... Let us hurry, otherwise the government troops will roast us on a spit,” he said and hurried to get to the head of the column. Iana Chakalarova followed close behind. She looked concerned.

“Pay careful attention when you approach our guards! They have orders from the supreme commander to shoot at everything that moves... I better go ahead because I know the password and have contacts there,” she said.

“No need,” he said looking concerned. He often looked at the big fires that surrounded the mountain. He felt his heart beating fast. He was pushing himself with all his strength. He led the fighters over a narrow plain and he then entered the woods. He stopped for a moment and then continued.

“Stop! Who goes there?!” he heard a stern voice yell out.

Vangelios Kotinaris stopped. He seemed less concerned. His anxiety began to fade. He unbuttoned the top button on his shirt and muttered: “Finally!” A bullet flew over his head. Iana Chakalarova pushed him into the juniper bushes and fell on top of him. The fighters flew behind the trees and hid. Vangelios Kotinaris came out of the grove, put his arms over his head and yelled out:

“It is us, fighters of the Democratic Army...”

There was silence. Iana Chakalarova listened to her own heavy breathing. Vangelios Kotinaris looked into the darkness and yelled out:

“Don’t Shoot! It is us!”

“Which unit are you from?” asked the stern voice.

Vangelios Kotinaris looked at Iana.

“Tell them whatever you want! Otherwise we will be roasting in two fires,” she said very quietly.

“We are from the 114th Division. This is Captain Kotinaris’s battalion,” yelled Kotinaris loudly, trying hard to mask the tremble in his voice.

“Captain Kotinaris step forward, the others stay behind!” yelled the stern voice.

Vangelios Kotinaris raised his hands high and dropped his rifle. The rifle butt got stuck in the grass.

“I am coming out!” yelled Kotinaris.

“Wait! Maybe they are not who we think!” said Pondilaki quietly.

“I think so too! Maybe they are not!” said Stavre.

“I am going anyway! We have no choice. If I don’t come back to get you do the best you can on your own...” he said and slowly went in the direction of the stern voice.

“Wait! Wait! Perhaps there is another way!” shouted Iana excitedly.

Vangelios Kotinaris did not turn to look at her frightened eyes. He climbed up the slope and stopped.

“Come closer, Captain,” said the stern voice.

Vangelios Kotinaris took careful steps.

“Stop!” yelled the stern voice. “For God’s sake, is that you Kotinaris?” asked the voice.

Vangelios Kotinaris was surprised. He stood there stunned but full of excitement trying to remember where he had heard that voice and who was the man addressing him.

“My dear Kotinaris...” said the man in a kinder tone of voice.

Vangelios Kotinaris looked confused. A tall man wearing a belt with cartridges around his chest came out of the dark shadows.

“You...!” yelled Kotinaris surprised.

“Yes... me... my friend. Come and give me a hug...” said the man and opened his arms wide open.

Vangelios Kotinaris went towards him and they entered into an embrace. There were tears in their eyes.

“What the hell are you doing here Vangelios?” asked the man.

“It’s a long story, friend. I will tell you another time...” replied Kotinaris looking relaxed.

“Don’t Shoot! Those are our fighters,” the man advised his guard and escorted Kotinaris up the hill to the guard house.

“I recognized your voice; otherwise you would have been dead now,” said the man.

“Why?” asked Kotinaris looking confused.

The man laughed out loud.

“The 114th Division?! We are the 114th Division...” the man said cheerfully. “Call your fighters to come here,” he added.

Vangelios Kotinaris thought for a moment.

“Are you going to call them or shall I?” said the man.

“They will not come. I will have to go and get them,” replied Kotinaris.

“Go then and we will talk later because hell is about to break loose any moment now,” said the man.

Vangelios Kotinaris smiled with a painful look on his face. He then ran down to the grove looking for his fighters in the dark. He couldn’t see anything.

“Stavre, its Kotinaris...” he yelled out in a muffled tone of voice.

Stavre Nakovski came out from behind a tree. Iana Chakalarova also came out.

“It’s okay, they are our boys... we can go up now...” said Kotinaris.

“Excellent! We made it. Bravo Kotinaris!” said Iana.

“Follow me!” said Kotinaris and went towards the guards.

They climbed up the hill. Vangelios Kotinaris noticed the trenches all over the place with fighters crouching in them. “This is not a not a military post, it looks more like a front,” he said.

“Go in the trenches quickly. They will start shooting at any moment now. We have been fighting the government troops for several days. There are so many of them...” someone said.

Vangelios Kotinaris stepped into a trench and was followed by his fighters. Tired, Iana Chakalarova leaned on Kotinaris and said:

“What do you think of this place?”

“I still have difficulty comprehending what is happening here ...” he said and pushed Stoios Panagopoulos with his machine gun. “Don’t go to sleep!” he said, “stay awake if you want to see the light of day. It may be your last...”

Stavre Nakovski laughed out loud. He upset everyone. They looked at him sternly.

“We are at the end of the world. Even if we come out of this hole alive we have lost our country and what we are fighting for. We lost everything...” said Stavre.

Vangelios Kotinaris was confused. Pondilaki tapped Stavre on the shoulder.

“What are your politicians saying about this, Iana?” asked Stavre.

“The politicians blame Yugoslavia. They say that Yugoslavia is working with the government in Athens and allowing it to strike us from behind,” she replied.

“Did they tell you this during your last meeting?” asked Stavre.

“Yes. I just didn’t have the time to tell you...” replied Iana.

“They are lying! You know that for four days we personally went along the border. You were there with us. Many times we walked along the border and there was no such thing happening there. Why did you not tell them that this was a lie? They need a scapegoat to cover their own asses. Today Yugoslavia... tomorrow who? Who will they blame tomorrow?” asked Stavre.

“I don’t know. Perhaps there will be no tomorrow. Perhaps it’s best that way...” replied Iana.

“Be careful Iana! The times are bad. The fire pit has been lit and the spit is ready. It is now waiting for the sheep to arrive...” said Stavre.

“Oh, you are so confident there will be a tomorrow!” replied Iana with a surprised tone of voice.

“Yes, there will be a tomorrow for some of us. The fire can’t swallow us all. History says that someone will remain alive to tell our story... to inform the new generations. This is how it has always been. I do not see why now it would be any different...” said Stavre.

Iana Chakalarova kept quiet. She had no strength to continue the conversation.

“Oh, dear life...” muttered Stavre.

There was a big bang. A grenade exploded nearby. The explosions deafened everyone. Stavre was covered in soil. He had his hands over his head. There were pieces of iron mixed with earth flying everywhere around him. The sky became cloudy with aircraft. An army of soldiers appeared at the foot of the mountain; they were running uphill from all sides. Planes were flying over them leaving

devastation and fire behind. There were many stones around Stavre Nakovski. They were on fire. Three metre high flames were rising from them.

“My God, what is this? What is this evil? How is it possible for stones to burn?” mumbled Stavre and looked at Iana.

“Are we the last ones alive? Is this the end of the world?” shouted Iana confused.

Three more successive shells fell into the trenches. The fighters were running everywhere. Vangelios Kotinaris jumped out of his trench and started to wave his machine gun wildly.

“Let’s go, people! Follow me!” he yelled out and ran for higher ground. The fighters who were in and around the trenches followed him. They climbed up to the top of the mountain and descended down the other side. They left everything behind that was going to slow them down. They wanted to leave this hell as soon as possible.

Pondilaki rolled down the slope across the clearing. He stopped rolling at the bottom. He got up, dusted himself off and looked around. He was looking for the dockworkers. He did not see any of them. He followed the other fighters to a large meadow. He had no gun. He went near a fighter with a big moustache and asked:

“Where are we?”

“At Bileshko Pole. This is Albania. We are safe here until we return to Gramos again,” replied the fighter.

“Are we going back again?” asked Pondilaki with a surprised look on his face.

“That’s what the chiefs at Supreme Command ordered,” replied the fighter and went towards the cottage that stood several dozen metres away.

Pondilaki followed the fighter. He was hoping to find the dockworkers. He found Iana inside and went with her. About ten minutes later they all had gathered together.

“Where is Stavre Nakovski?” asked Pondilaki with a worried look on his face.

“I don’t know. Maybe he went to headquarters,” said Iana. “Maybe Stavre is with another group, he said goodbye to everyone and disappeared among the fighters,” she added. Pondilaki and the dockworkers stared at each other wildly but did not know what to do.

“We will wait. They will order us to return to the front for sure,” said Kotinaris and sat down on the grass.

Everyone else also sat down. They were all going to wait.

PART VI

1.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin, accompanied by Hash entered café “Macedonia”. They sat at a table by the window. A young and beautiful lady was standing at the bar. Her face was white and her head was covered with long blonde hair that came down to her shoulders. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin laughed out loud, sounding like his voice was coming out from inside a cave. Hash struck the table with his fist. The blonde woman jumped. She was startled.

“Rakia, young lady! Bring rakia!” Alexei yelled at her.

“Two large glasses and a bottle!” said Hash and giggled.

“We dusted those communists well, ha...” said Alexei.

“They needed it, Alexei,” replied Hash.

The blonde came over and put the bottle and glasses on the table.

“You can pour your own drinks,” she said and then naïvely asked: “Did you just come back from the war?”

“Yes, we came back from a battle. We won the war. We are winners...,” said Hash proudly.

He then opened the bottle and poured rakia into the glasses.

“I know,” replied the blonde, “I heard the news on the radio. They announced the defeat of the Democratic Army. Since then every day there have been demonstrations in the city.”

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin laughed loudly. The café door flung open and Peter McDonald and Dustin Brown walked in. Their uniforms and hair were covered in dust and sweat was pouring down their dusty faces. Their eyes were puffed up and bloodshot but were glowing with pleasure. They sat at the table next to Alexei and Hash.

“Bring two more glasses!” yelled Hash.

“Right away, sir,” said the blonde and went to the bar.

“What’s your name?” Alexei yelled at her.

The blonde turned and a tiny smile appeared on her lips.

“Eva Zuzelska, sir,” she replied in a soft tone of voice.

“Eva Zuzelska! Where are you from, Eva?” asked Hash.

“From Poland! From Krakow,” she replied proudly, turned and went to the bar. She took two glasses from the shelf and brought them to the table. She then bowed humbly and went back to the bar counter.

Hash poured rakia into the glasses and handed them to Dustin Brown and Peter MacDonald. He then raised his glass up high and toasted:

“To victory!”

The other three also raised their glasses and toasted “To victory!” They then all took a sip of rakia.

Then, with a distorted smile on his face, Hash raised his glass again and said: “To the American aircraft and to their pilots without whom Vicho and Gramos would not have fallen. To the English officers...! To the American officers...! My fatherland will forever be grateful.”

Totally uninterested, Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin kept raising his glass and toasting with them. His face looked pale and tired but darkened from the scorching sun. He started drinking like he was trying to get drunk. Eva Zuzelska watched him curiously.

“He wants to get drunk. He wants to forget the heads that he cut off with his oily hands,” Eva thought to herself as she poured rakia into his glass. He took a long drink and moistened his lips. Eva looked at

him again and thought, “Who knows how much money the government gave them to cut off heads?”

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin stood up and walked over to the bar counter. He then pushed Eva Zuzelska against the counter with his own body and quietly and seductively said:

“You are so beautiful. I will buy this boarding house and everything with it. You will then be working for me and not for that lousy whore Urania.”

Eva Zuzelska did not react. At that moment Urania was walking down the stairs. Alexei turned and looked at her.

“The boarding house belongs to Foti Steriov, Alexei. He has the title,” said Urania.

Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin slowly pulled away from Eva Zuzelska but kept looking at Urania.

“I will be back in an hour. Then we will see,” he said and stormed out of the café, to everyone’s surprise.

Urania went into the kitchen. A few moments later she came out and, while standing in front of Eva Zuzelska, said:

“From now on, every day you will bring my food to my room.” She then walked past her and climbed up the stairs.

Eva Zuzelska kept looking at her until she disappeared behind the door into the rooms. After that she had a shot of rakia and went into the kitchen.

2.

Hash suddenly jumped off his chair. Peter McDonald and Dustin Brown looked at him indignantly.

“Excuse me, gentlemen, I have a little thing to do,” he explained. He then ran by the tables, climbed up the stairs and flung open the door to Urania’s room. He was panting.

Urania Papaioannou was sitting on her bed eating the grilled meat she had earlier taken from the kitchen. She turned and looked at him. He was breathing hard looking at her. She went back to eating. An ironic smile appeared on Hash's distorted mouth. The scars on his lips and cheeks were highlighted by the dim light in the room. Hash stood there quietly at the door and stared at Urania.

Chewing very slowly, Urania ate the last piece of bread on her plate and stood up. With measured movements she took off her dress. A beautiful body with well rounded breasts and bitten off nipples which had not completely healed, appeared before Hash's eyes.

"If you want to have me, wait for me to completely heal. Only a beast would have me this way," she said.

Hash hesitated. He wanted her beautiful body. Drool kept dripping out of his distorted mouth.

"Have it your way, but until then I will be in charge of the boarding house and collect the money," he said rudely.

Urania did not answer. She picked up her dress and, with slow movements, covered her naked body. She then walked over to the door, opened it and with her hand showed Hash out.

A smile appeared on Hash's distorted mouth. He gave Urania an ironic wave with his head and left the room. Urania took a long breath and held it for a long time. Her stress level dropped down to normal.

"So, he wants to own the boarding house, ha?! That son of a bitch! Foti Steriov owns the boarding house. You can take it, but you will have to give it back when Foti returns. Times are changing. Go ahead, take it!" Urania thought to herself, distorted her mouth and smiled a mild victorious smile. After that she laughed out loud and filled the room with infectious laughter. She calmed down so much so that she barely managed to change the direction of her fall. Instead of falling on her bed, like she wanted to, she fell on the floor...

3.

The boarding house door opened with a loud bang and Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin appeared from behind it. He walked past the table where Hash, Dustin Brown and Peter MacDonald were sitting, finishing the last of their drinks, and climbed up the stairs. He entered Urania Papaioannou's room.

"Come with me," he ordered her rudely.

Urania Papaioannou became upset. Alexei grabbed her by the arm and pulled her towards him.

Urania Papaioannou did not resist. She put on her shoes and went with Alexei. They left the boarding house and went to a law office several blocks down the street. Alexei opened the door and led her in. He then pushed her forward. Urania almost lost her balance but managed to stay on her feet.

"This man is a lawyer, his name is Mikis Porfirogenis. He will tell you everything you need to know about the sale of the boarding house," bellowed Alexei looking at her angrily.

Urania was silent. The lawyer waited a few moments for her to calm down and then opened a folder. He pulled out two typewritten pages and handed them to her. Urania took them and looked at them carefully.

"When your husband disappeared, you, as his legal wife, became the owner of the boarding house. All you have to do is sign a request to delete him from the living. But, you don't have to do that. You also have another option. The part that belongs to your missing husband you can sell to Alexei," said Mikis Porfirogenis and looked at Alexei inquisitively.

Urania Papaioannou was quiet. Alexei Ivanovich Starovkin pulled his dagger out from his belt and yelled out "sign!", in a threatening voice.

“I have no choice. All right, gentlemen, I will sign. I will keep the hostel for myself and sell the café and bar to Alexei. Each will collect the profits from their own part,” said Urania.

Mikis Porfirogenis looked at Alexei.

“I agree,” replied Alexei and extended his hand to Urania. She shook it. Alexei then pulled a little bag out of his pocket, extended it towards Urania and said: “There are three gold coins inside. The government gave them to me. It was my pay for the many heads I cut off. The coins are yours.”

Urania took the small bag with the gold coins and put it in her large black purse.

“Good luck with the café,” she said.

Alexei bowed slightly and said:

“And you with your gold coins.”

Urania Papaioannou signed the documents. Mikis Porfirogenis took them and put them in a folder.

“Good luck to both of you with your profits,” the lawyer said and stroked his short black moustache which made his face look fatter. He then stood up and helped Urania to the door. He sent the two of them off along Ignatia Street.

Alexei and Urania walked side by side nervously. They had walked about two hundred metres when Alexei said:

“Excuse me, but I have some urgent matters to attend to...” and turned towards the port.

Urania Papaioannou smiled at him with an ironic smile, turned her back on him and continued walking slowly on Ignatia Street.

1.

Urania Papaioannou walked through the café feeling furious. She did not look at Eva Zuzelska or at the customers sitting in the café and bar. She climbed up the stairs and entered her room looking very nervous. There was a surprise. Stavre Nakovski was sitting on her bed.

“Hello! I have been waiting for you!” said Stavre.

Surprised, Urania kept looking at his handsome face with much curiosity. She went closer to him and they shook hands.

“Welcome to the boarding house ‘Macedonia’! How long are you going to be in the city?” she asked.

“Are you worried because I am here? I don’t know how long I will be here. We lost the war and the government is after me. I thought perhaps I can hide here,” he replied. “Where is Foti?” he then asked.

Urania Papaioannou sifted through his tangled hair with her thin fingers and smiled gently.

“First make yourself comfortable! Don’t worry about the other things! It will be like in the old days before the war, but not like the ones that ended four years ago. We will talk later. Now I will bring you some food. You must be hungry? You look like a beggar in front of St. Demetrius,” replied Urania.

Stavre Nakovski smiled. Urania waved her hand and left the room. She went down to the kitchen and filled a plate with roasted meat and some bread. She then went back upstairs and placed the plate on a small table. She went in front of the mirror and looked at herself.

Stavre came out of the bathroom half wrapped in a pink towel.

“You haven’t lost a gram of your looks. If I wasn’t your sister-in-law I would be all over you right now... I brought you some food,” she said.

Stavre sat on the stool beside the little table.

“You didn’t tell me where Foti Steriov is,” he said with a mouthful of roasted meat.

“Foti disappeared about two years ago and we have not heard from him ever since... how is your family? I heard you had twins,” she replied.

Stavre Nakovski was silent.

“I hope they were not killed during the war?” she asked anxiously and grabbed his head with her hands.

“No, No! They are alive and well in Yugoslavia. So they tell me...” he replied with a broken voice. He stopped eating.

“Eat! Eat! It’s my treat...” said Urania jokingly.

“I can’t. I get choked up when I think about my children. Our damned fate! Will there ever be a day for us? For me to play with them, like a father should with his own children... To be able to admire them and love them...?” he replied.

“How did you get here? I forgot to ask you. Did anyone see you?” asked Urania.

“No, no one saw me. I came in through the back door. I was very careful. I don’t want to bring you trouble,” replied Stavre.

“Lie down and rest now! I will go out for a walk. I will buy a new dress or something...” she said and went towards to door.

“Don’t buy anything for me. Things are very expensive here. I will never be able to pay you back?” replied Stavre.

“There is plenty of time. Life is long enough to get our debts settled. Lie down!” she said and walked out of the room.

Stavre Nakovski smiled kindly. He then left his food on the little table and went to bed. He closed his eyes and fell asleep...

2.

Urania Papaioannou turned the corner onto Venezelos Street and entered the fourth store. She looked at the salesman seductively.

“Pack me a suit number 52 and a shirt number 43. And hurry up. I have guests at home waiting for me,” said Urania in a mellow tone of voice.

The salesman came out from behind the counter and pulled out a dark brown suit from the suit rack. He placed it on top of the colourful paper that was resting on the counter. He then pulled out a cream coloured shirt from the shirt rack and packed them in the same paper. Urania handed him a gold coin.

“Is it enough?” she asked.

“More than enough,” replied the salesman.

Urania grabbed the package and winked at him. The salesman, looking confused, smiled. Urania went out of the store. The salesman ran after her. He stopped at the door and kept looking at her behind until she disappeared into the crowd.

3.

Urania Papaioannou was in a hurry. She noticed two people following her. She ran and hid in a large building. The people following her passed by the building and ran down the street. Urania came out of the building and ran back to the boarding house. She collided with Hash as she entered the door.

“You sold the café?” said Hash threateningly.

“I had to. I had no choice. You’re never around to defend me,” she said in a rough tone of voice, pushed the door wide open and rushed by him and between the tables.

“The hostel is mine. My people are looking for you. They will find you...” replied Hash, laughed a contagious laugh, put his hand to his throat and said, “crunch”. He then went out and down the street.

Urania passed by the tables, climbed up the stairs and entered her room. Stavre was sleeping. She put the package in the corner of the room.

“God I am going crazy. I forgot to buy shoes... Oh God, what number?” she thought. She took some thread from the drawer and gently and carefully measured Stavre’s left foot. She then tore the thread and put it in her purse. She came out of her room and went downstairs into the café. She passed by Eva Zuzelska but did not look at her. She pushed a chair out of the way with her foot and stepped outside. There was a shoe store at the corner of the street. She went inside.

“I need men’s shoes. Here is the measure of the foot,” she said.

The salesman was an older man. He took the thread and looked at it.

“Please hurry, Tanas!” she said.

Tanas came out from behind the counter with a box in his hand. Urania grabbed the box and handed him a gold coin.

“That should be enough!” she said and left the store in a hurry. A few moments later she was back in her room standing in front of the bed. Stavre suddenly woke up startled. He looked at her frightened eyes...

“What happened to you? You look like you have seen a ghost!” he said.

Urania managed to compose herself.

“Get up, I bought you some clothes. We must go... Unfortunately you can’t go. You can stay here in my room,” she said and went out.

Stavre Nakovski jumped out of bed, hastily got dressed and ran after her. He caught her and grabbed her by the hand. She was running and refusing to stop.

“Please explain to me what is going on?” he asked.

Urania was silent. At the corner he tugged on her hard. She refused to stop. Stavre was confused. He ran along with her. They passed several streets. Urania finally stopped.

“We made it!” she said and tossed the fear out of her eyes.

“Please explain to me what’s going on!” Stavre insisted anxiously.

“We have to hide. Some people are bothered by my presence,” said Urania and pulled on his sleeve.

Stavre silently followed her. They rushed down a stone road covered with small stone cubes and arrived in Urania Papaioannou’s old dilapidated house. Urania was panting and out of breath. She collapsed on the bed.

“We are safe here. Sit down! Make yourself comfortable. The house is big and empty. I have no clientele and no girls working for me. No one is going to look for us here,” she said.

“Please explain to me what is happening!” Stavre demanded to know.

“Please sit down,” she said.

“I am not sitting down until you tell me what is happening with you. What is this circus?” replied Stavre angrily.

“They want to kill me! Are you satisfied now?” she snapped back angrily.

“Who wants to kill you?! Why do they want to kill you? And how?” yelled Stavre, enraged.

Urania Papaioannou smiled gently.

“I can’t tell you any more. It is best that you stay away from this game. If I can I will manage on my own, if not, the stray dogs will

be eating my dead body in the big city dump. I will not even have an ordinary funeral the kind most mortals have in this city full of rot and stench..." said Urania and laughed. Her eyes pooled with tears.

Stavre was confused. He wiped her tears and caressed her hair.

"Were you friends with my brother Hristo?" Urania suddenly asked.

"Good friends... Where is he now?" asked Stavre.

Pamapas's people killed him. Someone betrayed him. I was very concerned about his safety. The bloody bastards, one day they will pay for this!" she cried out.

"Rest now! I will go and look up some of my friends in the city," said Stavre.

Urania put her head down on her pillow. Stavre stepped out of the house. He had a concerned look on his face. He rushed along the streets and did not speak to any of the people passing him by or walking in the same direction. He arrived at a five storey house and went inside. He climbed up the stairs and stopped in front of a door with the inscription "DONE BINDOV". He knocked several times but no one answered. He waited a while. A modestly dressed old woman came out from the door on the opposite side. She looked frightened. Stavre went closer.

"Go away, my son, as far away as you can from this house! The police took Done. Every day they come back to check and see if any of his friends have visited his apartment. Go away!" she said.

Stavre Nakovski looked at the old woman curiously. A moment later he ran down the stairs and onto the street.

"I never thanked the old woman for warning me," he thought to himself. "It's too late now. I must be careful. I must not be seen, especially by the police. That would be bad for me..." he thought.

He walked the streets for two hours.

“Now I can get back to Urania’s. I am sure no one was following me,” he thought and went inside the one storey house.

III

1.

Stavre Nakovski was sitting on the bed in Urania’s old house watching Urania Papaioannou preparing dinner. They were both nervous.

“Why didn’t you go back to Kostaneria? To your own home,” asked Urania.

“Solun is a more secure place for a refugee to hide. They will arrest me in the village. When we left for Prespa the entire village left. At least I thought so because I personally escorted them to the Yugoslav border. After that I went to Gramos. It was very bad there, even the stones were burning. Everyone crossed over the border. I didn’t want to leave my homeland. I was hoping to rebuild the military and return to the battlefield. I took shelter in the mountains and waited. Unfortunately it was all in vain. Then I returned to Kostaneria. I was surprised to see people there. I went to Kolio Bochvarov’s house and found his wife Magda there. She looked very nervous and afraid... everything went wrong after that...”

“Why didn’t they cross the border?” asked Urania wondering.

“Kolio Bochvaro was afraid he may forever lose his ancestral home and returned. Others followed him. Unfortunately, a few days later the military came to the village. Ioannidis Karahopulos, the village teacher, also arrived at the same time. He accused Kolio of working for the enemy and the soldiers shot him... I too wanted to go across the border. However I stayed and here I am...” said Stavre.

“And you think you can put an end to this confusion?” asked Urania.

“I hope so. It can’t last forever?!” replied Stavre.

“Nobody is crazy enough to get out of their chair now. Even if the King himself wants to, the English and the Americans will not let

him...” said Urania, took the pot off the stove and put it on the table. She then brought plates and spoons and set them on the table.

“It’s dinner time! You must be hungry? I am so hungry my gut is gurgling...” she said.

Stavre Nakovski got off the bed and sat at the table. Urania put some stew in his plate. Stavre smiled.

“The beans are very nutritious...” said Urania.

Stavre Nakovski was silent. He spooned a few beans from his plate and put them in his mouth. He looked at Urania and felt odd. It looked like somehow she was disappearing from his sight, but only occasionally.

“I have a feeling that one of us will soon be leaving this world...” he said in a serious tone of voice.

Urania Papaioannou laughed loudly. She nearly choked from the food in her mouth but managed to recover.

“Don’t be so dramatic! Our life is ahead of us...” she said and laughed again.

2.

After they ate Urania Papaioannou picked up the plates, spoons and pot and placed them in a larger pot that sat on top of the stove.

“Okay! Now we can go for a little walk,” said Urania.

“It’s dangerous out there. The police are everywhere,” replied Stavre.

“No matter, we are going anyway. We will dress up in old ragged clothes and go to the pier,” said Urania cheerfully.

“We are asking for trouble...” replied Stavre.

“I have been cooped up for seven days behind these four walls. I can’t take this anymore. I will go crazy,” she explained.

“Go ahead then, I am not going,” he replied.

“Are you afraid...?” she asked.

“I am not afraid. We should wait a while longer. The confusion will subside. Then we can go out as often as you like,” he replied.

“If you are afraid then I will go alone,” she said, put her coat on and, as she headed for the door, looked back and said “I am going” and walked out the door.

Stavre Nakovski jumped out of bed, put on his old jacket and ran after her. He caught up to her and walked beside her along the cobblestone roads. They soon came to the seaside. The splashing water calmed their souls. A silent wind was blowing. They walked a long way and then turned back. The place smelled fishy, deceiving their senses into thinking that they smelled fish soup. They went towards the café “Macedonia”. They walked in through the back door. The kitchen was empty and in disarray. Urania walked through the door then peeked into the café. She saw the new cook. He was standing leaning on the counter, facing the other way. The sound of a bouzouki was heard playing in the back. The lights went dim. There was a gentle stroke on the strings followed by two sharp ones and then a gentle one again. Urania strained to see what was happening. She noticed a naked body in the middle of the café. She recognized it... It was Eva Zuzelska. Her girlish body was wafting to the sound of the bouzouki, raising the passions of her deceived customers. Then everything went quiet. Eva Zuzelska gathered up her clothes from the floor and bowed at the guests showing her naked behind. She then disappeared behind the stage.

Urania noticed Peter MacDonald sitting with one of the girls. They were glued to each other and discussing something. At the next table she saw Sofia Geleva caressing Dustin Brown’s face with her chest.

She also saw Hash. He was sitting closest to the stage.

“I don’t see the Ukrainian. Why is that ugly bastard not looking after his end of the boarding house?” she wondered. She then looked at the table where her brother Hristo used to always sit and felt anxious. She felt sad for the loss of her brother. She felt a tightness in her throat... she felt like she wanted to cry from the depths of her soul but decided not to... She clenched her teeth and firmly maintained her composure.

3.

Stavre Nakovski was standing behind her. He was afraid someone was going to see them. He grabbed her by her arm and pulled her towards him. Then, almost forcibly, pulled her out onto the street. It was very dark outside and impossible to clearly see faces. They grabbed each other arm to arm and went down the bay feeling calm and alone in the world. A warm wind was blowing and messing their hair. Urania leaned her head on Stavre’s shoulder and the two returned to Urania’s ramshackle house on whose door still dangled a red lantern. The lamp was not lit and the red glass was broken. They went inside and lay on the bed. They were tired and fell asleep.

4.

The next morning they were awoken by the rolling wooden wheels of a wagon moving along the alley way. They did not immediately get up. When the wagon passed by Urania’s old house Stavre Nakovski got up and got dressed. He then fell back into the bed and rested there for a while longer.

“Where do you think you are going?” asked Urania when she saw him all dressed.

“I am going out to pick up something to eat. I am hungry,” he replied.

“Don’t take too long! And be careful no one identifies you and comes after you...” she advised.

“Don’t worry!” he said and went out.

Urania turned in her bed facing the wall and fell asleep again.

5.

Stavre Nakovski stopped in front of the Sveta Katerina (St. Catherine) church. He hesitated about going inside but eventually walked in. He stared at the frescoes and icons as he inconspicuously looked for Iraklo, the priest.

“It’s like he had been swallowed by the ground. Maybe he is gone and I am wasting my time,” he thought and came out of the church. Large crowds were gathering on the road and shouting: “WE WANT PEACE! AMERICA GET OUT! ENOUGH BLOODSHED!”

Stavre passed by the crowd and, while in deep thought, found himself four streets over at the city market. The stands were empty. There were only a few proprietors. From their clothes he gathered they were villagers. He walked up to one of the counters and asked:

“Are these beans from this year?”

“I don’t have any other beans,” replied the man behind the counter.

“Please give me half a kilo,” said Stavre.

The man nodded, scooped up three handfuls of beans and placed them on the scale. He then added a few extra beans and said:

“Exactly half a kilo, sir.”

Stavre Nakovski handed the man a small skin sack and the man put the beans from the scale pan into the sack and placed the pan back on the scale. Stavre took out a few bills from his pocket and handed them to him. The man took the money and put it in his pocket.

“Eat the beans in good health, sir!” he said.

“Thank you. Spend the money in good health,” Stavre replied and left the counter and the market and headed back to Urania’s old house. He felt calm as he jogged down the cobblestone alley. But he was shocked when he went inside. Urania’s body lay there naked

with cuts all over it. Her flowing blood made him sick to his stomach. He dropped his bag of beans and ran over to her.

“She is alive!” a thought flew into his mind.

Urania Papaioannou opened her eyes. Stavre Nakovski felt her warm breath smelling like sweet chestnuts.

“Don’t worry! Everything will be fine,” said Stavre.

Urania Papaioannou opened her mouth but there was no sound, only a whisper.

“In the other room... in the cupboard near the window... there is... a bag with money... and... a sack... with... gold coins... take them...” she whispered, smiled and exhaled.

“The poor woman is dead...” Stavre thought to himself, picked her up off the floor and laid her on the bed. He noticed the nipples on her beautiful breasts had been burned. He covered her with a sheet and sat on the bed beside her.

“How much blood must be spilled to satisfy the soul of the bully?! How long must we be afraid for our lives and hide to avoid the knife in the back from the backstabbing paid assassins, the scoundrels or the police? Who is to blame for all this?” thought Stavre. He had a lot in his mind. He thought of Evangelia Gasparova and of his twins. He then looked at Urania’s luscious bloodied lips. All sorts of images began to stir in his mind, images of the torn up corpses left all over the mountains. He could hear the unbearable ringing and whistling of flying bullets, the loud explosions of grenades and shells, and the roar of the airplanes swooping down and dropping fire from the sky. The images of the people burning were mixing with those of the burning stones. He began to sweat and felt cold all over his body. He was getting very tired trying to make sense of what was happening. He fell asleep with all those images running through his mind. About half an hour later a loud bang on the door shook him awake. He jumped out of bed. He was hearing voices outside. They were making him very nervous.

“Her companion is here. He is a communist,” he heard a voice saying.

Stavre ran into the next room, opened the cupboard next to the window and opened the leather purse inside it.

“Poor Urania, she was telling the truth. There is a fortune here,” he thought. He opened the window and jumped out through it. He ran between the houses and in less than five minutes he found himself on Ignatia Street surrounded by many strangers. He managed to calm down and took the road towards the train station.

IV

1.

The train rumbled toward Athens. Stavre Nakovski sat in the last car. The compartment was empty. He tilted his head on the window and fell asleep. He slept for a long time. The conductor passed by but did not see him. The window curtain was covering his body and the light in the compartment was off. He woke up late at night. People he did not know had entered the compartment and sat beside him. He moved to make space. Once in a while he glanced at their worried faces. The train engine headlights cut through the dark highlighting the flying bugs in the air. Stavre Nakovski got up and left the compartment. He clutched the small leather bag in his hand. He stood by the exit door of the car and waited for the train to stop. The clanking sound of the wheels banging against the track and the cars banging into one another was deafening. Stavre opened the door, got off the car and quickly stepped away from the platform. He went inside the waiting room but did not stay. He came out the other side of the building and ran down the street.

“I will go to Vanko Budbarovski’s cabaret. He will hide me,” he thought and hid in a house in order to avoid the two civilians who were coming towards him. When the civilians disappeared in the dark Stavre came out of the house.

“Policemen! Surely there must be a curfew? It’s late,” he thought and began to run again. The streets were dark and narrow and surrounded by tall buildings. The only light filtering out was that

from the windows. He finally arrived at Vanko Budbarovski's cabaret. He shuddered at the sight. About a dozen metres ahead of him he saw a collapsed building.

"The cabaret is gone. Everything is destroyed. Where do I go now? Perhaps I can go to Vanko Budbarovski's house?" he said to himself and began to think. "Or maybe I can go and visit Ksanthina Periklis? I helped her become an actress and earn a living. But she lives in the Peloponnesus... It may be best if I went to the Peloponnesus? No one knows me in that village near the Mediterranean Sea. When things subside I can always go back to Kostaneria," he convinced himself and smiled. "But, what was the name of her village? Oh God my Lord, what was it called? Damn it, how could I have forgotten it? Anyway, I should go to Vanko Budbarovski's place now," he decided and continued walking down the dark street. He then ran down several streets, came out near a large fountain, and turned left on the next street which led to some underground corridors. When he came out he found himself a few metres away from a stone slab. He then slowly and carefully entered the tall house located next to it. He quietly walked up the stairs to the second floor. He stopped breathing for a moment and knocked on a door. He listened. There was no sound made and no one responded. He knocked again. There was silence again. He was getting upset. His heart was pounding. He looked at the other four doors in the hallway. There was no activity. He knocked again. Again, no one responded. He remained still for another moment. A door opened on the floor above. Stavre was startled. He pressed firmly on his little leather bag, ran down the stairs and disappeared onto the street. He ran fast but did not look back to see what he was running away from. When he passed the last city houses he stopped running. He walked slowly. Suddenly he had an idea.

"I will go to the old run-down single storey house," he thought. "It's not far from here. Maybe half an hour or so away..."

Hidden away behind some lumber that was scattered on the right side of the Athens-Piraeus road, he approached the old run-down house. The house was nestled inside a small grove. He carefully went inside and looked around in the dark. He was so tired he collapsed forward on the dusty bed. Dust flew everywhere and filled

his mouth. He spat on the floor. He did not cover himself with the blanket. He squeezed the little bag under his chest and fell asleep.

2.

Stavre Nakovski woke up. He washed his face at the well with cold water and wiped it with his coat. He walked around the outside of the house. He came back inside and sat on the bed. He was hungry. He wanted to sleep but couldn't. He lay there until it was dark. Hidden in darkness he followed the road to Piraeus. He arrived at the harbour late at night. He was tired and could hardly move. He saw a man in a boat. He carefully approached him.

“Get on the boat! I know what you want,” said the boatman quietly.

Stavre Nakovski hesitated.

“Come on, man, the police or gendarmes will spot you. Either climb aboard or go away.”

Stavre, still uncertain about what to do, put his foot inside the boat.

“Welcome to the ‘Agamemnon’. This is my boat. I have taken many like you to the other side of the Corinthian Gulf. Ten gold coins and I will take you to the other side.”

“Okay,” said Stavre. “When are we leaving?”

“Now!” replied the boatman.

“Then let's go!” said Stavre.

The boatman laughed quietly.

“First the coins, my good man,” he replied.

Stavre Nakovski doubted the honesty of the boatman and looked at him curiously. The boatman laughed.

“Maybe you don’t have any gold coins. One of my compatriots was killed by three people I took to the other side. Such are the times my good man,” the boatman said.

Stavre opened his leather bag, took out the little bag with the coins, counted ten and gave the boatman five.

“You will get the other five on the other side of the bay,” he said and put the other five coins back in the little bag. “I will also need a gun,” he added.

“I don’t have a gun,” replied the boatman quietly.

“I will give you ten gold coins for the gun,” insisted Stavre.

“Agreed?” said the boatman and laughed quietly. “You must be very rich...” he added.

“You will give me ammunition with the gun,” insisted Stavre.

“One box of bullets,” replied the boatman.

“Three boxes of ammunition,” insisted Stavre. “I am giving you ten gold coins. This is a lot more money than you can earn in ten years working,” said Stavre.

“I will give you three boxes,” agreed the boatman. “Now go below,” he insisted.

Stavre Nakovski carefully descended down to the next level of the boat.

“Give me the gun and the ammunition!” he then said.

The boatman laughed and started the engine. The boat began to move. The boatman turned the steering wheel with one hand and pulled three boxes of ammunition from a cupboard, with the other. The entire cardboard was packed with boxes of bullets. Stavre sighed. The boatman gave him the boxes.

“Now give me the gun,” said Stavre anxiously.

“You will get the gun on the other side,” said the boatman calmly and laughed.

Stavre Nakovski looked at him curiously. The boatman nodded his head affirmatively.

“On the other side, my good man,” he said quietly and stared at the dark blue waters of the calm sea.

3.

The shore on the other side was deserted. Stavre Nakovski gave the boatman the fifteen gold coins and stuck his hand out.

“Here is your gun, my good man! Look after yourself because there are people in this country who will kill you for much less than what you have. Here your head is not worth a broken Drachma. Be careful!” said the boatman, waved a friendly wave and pulled away. Stavre Nakovski coughed and covered his face with his hands.

“He is a good man. But how many good people still exist in this country... especially in the Peloponnesus? It’s a damn shame I still don’t remember the name of that damn village,” he thought. He looked towards the boat that brought him there but it was gone. All he could see were the lines on the surface of the water over which it traveled. Piraeus was on the other side in the distance with lights burning bright in the harbour. Stavre left and began to walk away slowly. His feet were hurting from walking on the rough terrain. He was very tired and his hunger was making his stomach hurt. He arrived at the foot of a hill. He saw a light.

“This must be the house the boatman was talking about,” he thought to himself and accelerated his pace.

The house was very low, made of dried mud and covered with straw. He knocked on the door. He waited. An abnormally fat woman opened the door. She was chewing on some bread.

“Come in!” she said in a rough tone of voice.

Stavre Nakovski went inside. The room was small. It had a low ceiling. Stavre bent his head forward to avoid hitting the ceiling beams. To the left of the door was a straw mattress lying on the hard ground. On the other side, pushed against the wall was a wooden bed covered with a rough patched up blanket.

“You will sleep on the straw mattress,” said the fat woman in a rough voice. “If you want to eat, the food is included in the lodging,” she added.

“I will pay,” replied Stavre.

“Pay now!” insisted the fat woman.

Stavre took a gold coin out of his bag and gave it to her. The woman took the gold coin and slid it into the patchwork pocket of her soiled woolen dress. She took a plate out of the wooden chest and with a large wooden spoon scooped some soup out of the large kettle hanging from the rafters in the middle of the room, poured it in the plate and gave it to Stavro.

“There is no bread,” she said in a rough voice.

Stavre took the plate, ate some of the soup with the big spoon and frowned. The fat woman laughed. Stavre continued and ate all the soup on his plate.

“Now go to sleep. It will soon be dawn. I need rest,” said the fat woman, blew out the tallow candle and sluggishly lay down on her wooden bed.

Stavre Nakovski slid onto the straw mattress and fell asleep.

4.

They got up early the next morning. The fat woman did not come out to send Stavre off. Stavre kept walking on the dry rocky ground.

“I think I will go in this direction. Only God now can take me to Ksantina Periklis...” he thought to himself, then suddenly he yelled

out: “Oh, God thank you!” and laughed loudly. He remembered the name of the village, it was called “Periklisis”.

He walked along hoping to run into someone. It was cold. He put his coat on. He saw an old man in the distance and went towards him. They both stopped when they met. They both began to examine each other with much attention.

“You’re full of lice,” said the old man.

Stavre Nakovski laughed out loud.

“You must have slept at sweet Melina’s place,” said the old man and laughed.

“Which way is Periklisis?” Stavre suddenly asked.

“The place is all stones. What will you be doing there? Go to Sparta, they hire shepherds there,” replied the old man.

“I want to visit a friend. He promised me a job,” said Stavre.

“Periklisis is on the other side of the island. Your shoes will rip to pieces before you get there. Go west!” replied the old man.

“Thank you, I will,” said Stavre.

“It’s nothing, son. Just follow the road. But be very careful there are all kinds out there who may want to bring you harm,” said the old man anxiously.

Stavre Nakovski was surprised and opened his eyes wide open.

“Don’t worry, son. Peloponnesus will not surrender you. My son died in the war,” said the old man and began to cry.

“Thank you Sir and goodbye!” replied Stavre.

“Goodbye my son and take care!” said the old man.

Stavre waved at the old man and continued to walk on the rocky road towards the west.

V

1.

Stavre Nakovski roamed the island for a long time. He arrived in Periklisis on the seventh day. He stopped in front of the house that was pointed out to him by a lame child as the house that belonged to Ksantina Periklis. The lower part of the house was built with stone blocks. The upper part was covered with boards. There was a porch at the front of the house which could be accessed via wooden stairs. Stavre climbed up the stairs carefully. The boards looked rotten. He knocked on the wooden door. A moment later a young girl opened it. She had braided hair that parted at her cute, high forehead.

“Good morning Mr. Stavre,” she said smiling, stepped aside, bowed humbly before him and invited him inside. She then ran behind him. “Please, sit Mr. Stavre!” she said kindly and pointed to a wooden bed.

Stavre Nakovski was completely confused. He sat down on the bed without taking his eyes off the girl.

“My mother is not home right now. She will be back in half an hour. She went to gather some pears,” the girl said and sat opposite him. Her face grew serious. “You are Stavre Nakovski from Athens, right?” she asked, which surprised Stavre even more. “We have a picture of you. My mother often talks about you... My name is Poliksena,” she added.

Stavre sat there flabbergasted. The girl got up and went to the next room and came back holding an old yellowed photograph.

“Mom keeps it under her pillow,” she said proudly.

Stavre did not know what to say. He looked at the picture with a confused look on his face and again turned his attention to the girl.

“Will you please bring me a glass of water?” he said.

“Of course, Mr. Stavre. Mom told us a long time ago that one day you would come and visit us. She told us to give you everything you want,” the girl said, went down to the yard and returned with a glass filled with well water.

Stavre Nakovski drank the water. He then took some money out of his pocket, extended his hand towards the girl and said:

Take it, buy something for yourself...”

The girl took the bills and nodded humbly in gratitude.

“You must be very tired, Mr. Stavre. I will let you sleep and I will wait for mom on the stairs,” she said cheerfully and walked out of the room.

Stavre Nakovski sat on the bed for a few moments. The lice started to bite him on the head. He came out. He sat on the steps a little lower from Poliksena. He was embarrassed to scratch his head in front her so he went behind the house and began to rub his head. He scratched his entire body. He heard Poliksena’s voice and became upset.

2.

Poliksena came down the stairs.

“Mother, Mr. Stavre is here, your friend from the picture. He is there, behind the house,” said the girl.

Ksantina Periklis ran behind the house.

“Stavre!” she yelled joyfully. “Stavre!” she yelled again and began to cry. She then ran over to him, jumped on him and threw her arms over his broad shoulders and squeezed him around his neck. She continued to cry.

Stavre Nakovski put his arms around her waist and squeezed her, driving all doubts from his mind about Ksantina’s friendly sentiments.

Poliksena came over. She watched every move they made with sadness on her face. She looked at her mother's tearful eyes and heard every cry she made. The little girl began to weep. Ksantina relaxed her arms and gently released her grip on Stavre.

"Don't cry my dear! Mommy is crying because she is happy," said Ksantina to her daughter and caressed her hair. She wanted to pick her up in her arms, but the little girl was too heavy for her fragile muscles. Stavre caressed Ksantina's hair and then lifted Poliksena above his head.

"You're smart and a beautiful girl..." said Stavre and smiled.

Poliksena stopped crying and wiped her tears. Stavre picked her up with one arm and placed his other arm around Ksantina. A few moments later they were all smiling and happy. They went inside the house. Stavre put Poliksena on the bed. Ksantina placed her head on Stavre's chest. They stood there for a few moments. Poliksena looked confused. Stavre and Ksantina began to laugh. Poliksena joined them.

"You must be hungry. I will make you something to eat," said Ksantina quietly and pulled away from Stavre's embrace. Stavre sat on the bed. Poliksena went out into the yard.

"You look tired and dirty and you are in need of a bath. I will warm some water for you but first I will prepare some food," said Ksantina and got busy.

"There is no rush! My biggest fear was that I would not be able to find you..." said Stavre.

"How did you find me?" she asked with much interest and put some potatoes in a large pot, filled the pot with water and put it on the stove to boil.

"At first I had forgotten the name of your village. And then I remembered it..." replied Stavre.

“And...” asked Ksantina and laughed.

“I remembered it and that’s how I got here... to be with you...” he replied.

“It was different in those days... a long time ago when I was in trouble. Do you remember the day when you found me at the train station frozen and crying? Oh my God...” she said.

“You were a good actress. I knew that the moment I saw you. I had a nose for those things...” said Stavre.

“I was a good whore too...” she added.

“Where is your other child? I remember you had two girls?” he asked.

“She is working. Two old people in the neighbouring village hired her. She is a smart girl and all grown up. She needs to work because we don’t have enough food to survive. She will be here on Sunday...” she replied and asked: “How long are you staying?”

“It all depends on the conditions. I do not know how long...” he said.

“So, this house can count on you to be its host?” said Ksantina jokingly.

“Sure, why not? Anything is possible...” replied Stavre.

They both broke out into laughter.

PART VII

1.

Stavre Nakovski got up early in the morning. He got dressed quickly and went out to the yard. He thought for a little while and then took the road leading to the shore. He roamed around the water for about two hours. He returned back to the house. He was tired and sat on the stairs. Ksantina came over and stroked his hair.

“What are you thinking about, Mr. Stavre?” she asked. “You know your head will hurt if you think too much...” she added jokingly.

“We need to do something... some sort of work. Not just hard labour... What do you think we should be doing?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Here comes Dionis, perhaps he will know,” replied Ksantina.

Dionis Vlahos slowly climbed up the slope. His hair was wind-blown from the sea breeze. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

“Good morning Ksantina,” he said.

“Good morning Dionis,” she replied.

“How are you, Sir?” said Stavre, got up, went down to the bottom of the stairs and stood in front of him.

“Something big must be in the plans I imagine...?” Dionis replied.

Stavre Nakovski extended his hand out and grabbed Dionis’s and helped him walk up the hill. They stopped at the top of the hill.

“I want to do something. I can’t sit idle. But what can I do?” asked Stavre.

“That’s easy Mr. Stavre. The seashore is loaded with reeds. There are also many tamarisk shrubs by the river. You can weave various items made of reeds and tamarisk,” replied Dionis.

Stavre Nakovski thought for a moment while looking at the blue Mediterranean Sea.

“Yes, but I don’t know how to weave or do anything with tamarisk and reeds,” he said.

“You will knit bushels, baskets and other such items and that will keep you busy and make you some money. The three of you in this family can work together doing this. Think about it,” replied Dionis.

“Who will teach us how to weave?” asked Stavre.

“Everything in due time, Mr. Stavre,” replied Dionis.

Stavre Nakovski laughed out loudly and the two men went down to the house. They went inside. Dionis sat on the bed. Stavre sat on one of the chairs. Ksantina offered them rakia.

“To weaving!” said Dionis.

“To weaving!” replied Stavre.

Dionis drank the entire glass of rakia in a single gulp. He then filled his glass again and drank the second glass in a single gulp.

“Tomorrow we gather the reeds and tamarisk. The following days will weave...” said Dionis.

“Agreed, Mr. Dionis! I will wait for you at dawn at the coast,” replied Stavre.

“Then I should go. I have some old friends coming over to visit me,” said Dionis and stood up.

Stavre Nakovski escorted him to the yard.

“I will wait for you, Mr. Dionis,” he said.

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Stavre!” replied Dionis.

2.

“I think we have collected enough reeds. We can start weaving now. It’s an easy job,” said Dionis, grabbed a few reeds and began to intertwine them together.

Ksantina and Stavre watched him carefully and followed his skillful movements. Stavre took a few reeds and began to cross them over each other. Dionis laughed.

“You are a fast learner. But the reeds should be held in water for some time to soften them up, then it will be easier to curl them,” said Dionis.

“Let’s take them to the creek and put them in water,” said Ksantina.

“Okay,” agreed Dionis, grabbed a bundle and took them to the creek.

Stavre Nakovski took another bundle and followed him. Ksantina grabbed as much as she could carry and followed right behind. After they placed the reeds in the water Dionis pressed on them until they were submerged. He then placed large rocks on top of them to keep them under water.

“Now everything is as it should be. You can sleep in peace. In two days we will start weaving. Now let’s get back and have a few drinks of rakia,” said Dionis.

Stavre Nakovski smiled contentedly. He often secretly looked at Dionis’s tame face and admired the man. They returned to the house. Ksantina served them rakia.

“Tonight I will make sarailia (type of sweet meat). Please stay for dinner!” said Ksantina.

“Thank you! With pleasure, but some other time,” replied Dionis.

“Then I will save you a few pieces and give them to you when you come to weave,” said Ksantina.

Stavre Nakovski laughed loudly.

“Come tomorrow! Aliko will be here. It’s Sunday...” he said.

Dionis Vlahos finished his rakia and said:

“It’s time to go”. He then got up, smiled and left. Stavre walked him to the door.

“He is a wonderful man,” said Ksantina.

“Wonderful...” agreed Stavre, sighed contentedly and lay on the bed. He fell asleep.

3.

Aliko Periklis was Ksantina’s older daughter. She was twelve years old. She was dressed in a new yellow, well-structured dress with a high, closed neckline. She came over to Stavre Nakovski and timidly extended her hand for a handshake. She then hugged Ksantina and began to weep. Ksantina stroked her long blonde hair. They all went inside the house. The table was set. Aliko washed her hands and sat at the table.

“Let’s have lunch. Today is Sunday, a holy day...” said Ksantina.

“I just want some sarailia. I am not hungry,” said Poliksena.

Everyone laughed. Ksantina took three pieces of sarailia, put them on a plate and set them on the table. She then crossed herself and sat down to eat. Poliksena ate the three pieces of sarailia, left the table and went into the other room. After she ate, Aliko also left the table and went into the other room.

Ksantina cleared the table and also went into the other room. Aliko and Poliksena were lying in bed asleep. Ksantina came out and found Stavre sleeping on the bed in the kitchen. She stepped out onto the terrace. Moments later she returned to the kitchen.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” asked Stavre.

Ksantina laughed quietly and sat on the bed beside him.

“Because they took my bed...” she replied and smiled.

Stavre Nakovski laughed loudly.

4.

Ksantina Periklis lay in bed beside Stavre Nakovski. She secretly thanked Aliko for giving her the chance to be alone with Stavre. By taking her bed, Aliko simply forced the two to sleep together. Who was to know how two warm bodies, with needs, would react being in close proximity to one another.

They lay there and caressed each other. Even though it was the middle of the day no one got out of bed. The girls didn't come to the kitchen, even at dinner time. Ksantina Periklis was awakened by the sound of the well bucket being dropped. She got out of bed and quickly got dressed. She went down to the yard and washed. She looked for Stavre and smiled. Stavre was coming back with a bundle of reeds in his hands.

“You are so impatient...” she said to him.

“No work no bread,” he replied jokingly and put the bundle down on the ground.

“How are we going to weave when the reed are wet? I do not believe anything will come out of all this,” she said.

“It's better if you do believe. Have some faith. Anyone who doesn't believe will go to hell,” said Stavre and laughed out loud.

II

1.

The sun was setting. Stavre Nakovski went downstairs and headed down the road to the sea. He walked slowly. He was careful not to stumble on the many stones that covered the road. He passed the last houses in the village and took the coastal road. He often looked at

the sea. The setting sun was reflected on its surface. He knocked on the door of the small house and waited for a response. A moment later Dionis appeared at the door. Stavre smiled. Dionis smiled back and invited him inside. Stavre went in. They sat beside a small low table. Dionis lit a cigarette and then took out a half-empty bottle of rakia and put it on the table. He brought two glasses, filled them with rakia and then gave one to Stavre.

“I do not know what I would do without you,” said Dionis.

“You will live, like you always have, Mr. Dionis, what else would you be doing?” replied Stavre and smiled.

“Live, but not like this. The war wiped me out. Now I hide like a rare beast from the hunters who pursue me and want to put me in a cage. With you my time passes much easier. I am more content. If someone two years ago would have said listen, Dionis, don’t be a fool, throw away that rifle and sit quietly on your ass, I swear to you, I would have broken his head. Now I see how naive I was. Everything went to hell!” he said.

“Don’t despair, Mr. Dionis!” said Stavre.

“I can’t stand it... I am going crazy...” replied Dionis.

“Do you regret picking up a gun and going to the mountains?” asked Stavre.

“Only sometimes... only during moments of hopelessness... I went to war thinking that I could improve my life. I fought against Hitler and his servants in Greece. But instead of rejoicing, I fell into a bottomless pit. I see no sign that will warm my soul. It’s over for me. What is important now is whether I blame myself or not. But then, who cares about that? The entire Peloponnesus stood up and went to war against the Monarcho-Fascists. And what did that do for us? We took to the mountains because the villagers could not endure the torture and torment perpetrated against them by the fascists. They killed, burned and pillaged. The government supported and encouraged them. They were cutting heads on the island...” replied Dionis.

“Did you again pick up a gun and go to the mountains?” asked Stavre.

Dionis took a sip of rakia, carefully put his glass on the table and said:

“I have nothing more to lose. I lost two sons in 1944. The island was crowded with the English army. My sons fought at the front... They fought like lions but the English were better armed and more numerous. This is what some people, with whom I fought against the Nazis, told me when I returned. I had no tears in my eyes to cry for them. I came to Periklisis. My house was destroyed, bombed by British aircraft. My wife was also killed. What could I do? I settled in this small house that we used only when we went to work in the vineyard. I am alone in the world, Mr. Stavre, all alone and lonely. It would have been better if I had died in the war. That way I would not have to struggle and think of my terrible past... It is easier for you, much easier. Your time passes with Ksantina and the girls. You even earn some money weaving baskets and you don't do that alone. Loneliness slowly kills you...” said Dionis.

“My life is far from Periklisis, Mr. Dionis. I have even worked in Athens. I was an artist. Many people came to see me my plays. It was nice. I miss that life. But it is difficult for me too. You are the only person in the village I can talk to about my past. I am afraid someone might report me to the police. They will sentence me to twenty years. I live in fear. Is that how life should be?” replied Stavre.

“Don't worry, Mr. Stavre! The people of Periklisis will never surrender you to the authorities. Every house in this village has lost someone. Some died fighting against the Nazis. Many fell in the war against the Monarcho-Fascists. The people are firm but amiable. There is no need to avoid the people from this village. These people know how to respect, how to cry and how to rejoice. They have never succumbed to tyranny,” said Dionis.

“You inspire me with courage... Thank you...” replied Stavre.

“Just weave your bushels and baskets and don’t worry about anything! Periklisis is a fortress of democracy. Poverty keeps the villagers together. Their solidarity is well known...” said Dionis.

“I am still afraid, Mr. Dionis. I have been through a lot over the years and I am still afraid. It is hard for me to confide in anyone,” replied Stavre.

“Don’t be afraid, Mr. Stavre! Have some faith in people! Approach a man kindly and he will give you ten times of kindness in return,” said Dionis.

Stavre Nakovski smiled, finished his rakia, stood up and said:

“I have to go, Dionis. It’s getting late.

“As you please, young man. Come back again. Say hello to Ksantina and the girls. Bring them with you when you come back!” said Dionis. A tear appeared in his eye.

Stavre Nakovski waved his hand, opened the door and went outside.

“I will try to get closer to people, Dionis, but only if they are like you. If not then what would become of me... and my desire to live?” said Stavre as he walked away.

2.

Stavre Nakovski followed the same path on his way back. Even though it was late, Ksantina and Aliko were still working in the yard, weaving baskets. Stavre sat down on the hard ground beside them.

“It’s time to stop working. It’s late. You will go cross-eyed...” said Stavre.

“When are we going to start the construction of the new house? A whole year has passed. You constantly talk about it with mom but have done nothing...” complained Aliko to Stavre with a trembling voice, while looking straight into his eyes.

“Why do you ask? We will begin with the building when we are ready,” replied Ksantina surprised.

“Because I detest living in this old house! I want to feel like a person. We have enough money to build a new house. Why don’t we build one?” complained Aliko.

“Okay, Aliko, we will build a new house. We will start next week. Is that okay with you?” asked Stavre.

Ksantina was surprised. Aliko jumped with joy.

“Now wash and go to sleep,” said Stavre.

“Are we really going to build a new house?” asked Ksantina surprised.

“Why not!? We have everything we need...” replied Stavre, got off the ground and reached out to Ksantina. “Let’s go to sleep now. It’s getting late,” he added.

Ksantina grabbed Stavre’s hand and pulled herself up from the ground. Stavre drew up some water from the well and helped her wash her hands. They went up the stairs and into the kitchen. Ksantina looked at the room with a nostalgic look and said:

“I will be sad abandoning this house.”

“There is no reason why. This house will serve as a workshop,” Stavre replied and went to bed.

“Aren’t you going to undress?” asked Ksantina.

“Tonight I will sleep in my clothes. Something more powerful than me is telling me to do that...” replied Stavre looking serious.

“Then I too will sleep with my clothes on,” said Ksantina and jumped into bed.

They both lay there quietly. Stavre started snoring. Ksantina turned her back on him and soon fell asleep.

III

1.

Winter in Periklisis appeared suddenly and earlier than usual. The village was covered in snow. Poliksena loved the snow. Aliki looked very serious. Every day she marched around the new house. She admired the new and beautiful furniture. She had a separate room with a large mirror. She began to hide her knees from Ksantina and Stavre. She became more attentive to them. She started to get up later in the morning and went to bed earlier in the evening. Ksantina and Stavre were increasingly alone. Poliksena walked to school.

2.

Ksantina was sitting on the bed knitting a sweater for Poliksena. Stavre Nakovski was fixing the stove. Poliksena came into the room, ran around Stavre several times and returned to her room. Stavre put the large cover back on the stove and sighed contentedly. He then washed his hands and went out onto the terrace. Ksantina came out and joined him. They both stood there leaning against the fence. They were silent. Ksantina looked through the window into Aliki's room. Stavre also looked in the same direction. They then both looked at each other strangely. Aliki was standing naked in the dim light looking at herself in the mirror. Ksantina blushed. Stavre pretended he did not see her blush. The two looked at Aliki again. She was standing in front of the mirror caressing her lush breasts and body. They noticed that she liked the feeling. Aliki had bountiful breasts, smooth legs, soft skin, beautiful facial features and soft juicy lips. She smelled like a blooming acacia flower.

Ksantina and Stavre silently left the terrace and went down to the yard. They then headed for the hill behind the house. They went past the water hole where they soaked the reeds, passed the grove and climbed on top of the hill. Stavre Nakovski walked more sluggishly than usual. He was in deep thought. Aliki's naked body brought back memories of Evangelia Gasparova and his twins. He could not remove the thoughts of them from his mind. He walked in the snow deep in thought. He grew more concerned.

Ksantina Periklis noticed his state of mind but did not say anything. She did, however, want to know what was troubling him. They had enough money. They could buy whatever they wanted. He could mess around in bed with her as much as he wanted... But, there was something else... what was missing? Ksantina followed him in silence. They came down from the top of the hill, passed the grove, through the yard and up the stairs. They went to their room. Ksantina got undressed, put on her nightgown and lay down in bed. Stavre sat down at the table and remained there in deep thought for a long time. He then went to bed next to Ksantina fully clothed. He got up early the next morning. He was still in deep thought. He went out to the yard and washed his face at the well. Around ten o'clock he put on new clothes and shoes and took out the bag Urania Papaioannou had given him before she died. He pulled out the little pouch and removed ten gold coins from it. He put them in his coat pocket. He then put the pouch back in the bag and placed the bag in the corner of the closet. Ksantina came over to see him. She looked at him curiously. Stavre shied away from her look.

“Are you going somewhere?” she asked in a gentle tone of voice.

“Yes. I will be away for several days. Forgive me but I must do this,” he replied.

“Okay, if that’s what you want. You have done a lot for me. I am not going to get in your way, even though I feel like I am going to lose you. In situations such as this I ordinarily would be fighting to keep you but I know you too well to stand in your way. So, go to where you have in mind to go,” she said.

Stavre Nakovski kissed her on the forehead and walked out of the door. He went down the stairs, across the yard and down the street. The snow was cold and crunched with every step he took with his heavy shoes.

Ksantina stood on the balcony and, with a sad look, watched him walk away further and further until his silhouette got lost in the horizon. Her eyes filled with tears. She went to her room, crashed on the bed, covered her head with a pillow and cried.

IV

1.

There were many people at the train station in Athens. Stavre Nakovski stood on the platform and waited for the train to Solun to arrive. He was very nervous. His eyes looked dull and deficient. The train appeared on the platform and stopped noisily. Stavre climbed on the first car and got into a compartment. He sat on the seat next to the window and absentmindedly stared at the carob trees outside. The train began to move. Two elderly women, a young girl and a middle-aged man sat next to him in the compartment. Stavre kept to himself looking out the window. He managed to doze off and woke up before the train arrived in Solun. He got off the train and nervously walked along the platform. His eyes were full of fear and darting in every direction. With a quick pace he headed for Café “Macedonia”, hoping to find someone he knew. He stopped near the café, thought for a moment and went inside. He ordered rakia and sat on a bar stool at the counter. The girl standing behind the counter looked at him strangely and inquisitively. She filled his glass and pushed it towards him.

“Here is your rakia, sir,” she said in a gentle tone of voice.

Stavre Nakovski nodded slightly. He drank the rakia, paid the girl and walked out of the café. He walked slowly and in deep thought. He did not look at the people passing him by on the streets. He went inside the Sveta Katerina church and looked for the priest Iraklo. He looked everywhere but did not find him. He left the church even more concerned. He walked down two streets and turned onto Venizelos Street. He was headed for Odos Vardaris. He stepped up his pace. He passed by several uniformed men. His heart was beating fast. He passed by several houses and went inside Urania Papaioannou’s old house.

“It was a good thing I kept the key,” he thought to himself. He lay on the bed for a long time with his eyes wide open. He tried to sleep but couldn’t. He got up. “I will go to Yugoslavia... illegally...” he thought.

He put on his shoes and went out. He went towards Solun's exit. A little later he was panting, climbing a mountain. He turned right before Kostaneria, then climbed over a few more hills. He smiled as he arrived at the Vlach cottages. He went inside. There were dry twigs in the fireplace. He lit a fire and warmed himself. He sat by the fire and fell asleep. He was very tired.

2.

The next day he went towards the border. He arrived at Bel Kamen. He remembered the people who used to come over the border and bring guns. It seemed like it was a long time ago.

“How long was it? How many years have passed? Five or ten? Maybe more? I don't remember... It was like a dream... No, it was not a dream. It certainly was no dream...” he thought to himself. He sat on the rocks and thought for a long time. He decided to return to the Vlach cottages. He was hungry. He boiled some water and made tea in the old cups. He drank it. His intestines began to gurgle.

“It's best I turn back. I don't know for sure exactly where Evangelia and the children are in Yugoslavia. Perhaps they are not in Yugoslavia at all. Perhaps they are in another country. It is best to ask the Yugoslav Embassy in Athens. I will have to ask in secret so that no one will know!” he thought to himself. He did not light a fire. He came out of the cottage and stepped in the snow. He climbed up the first hill and stopped. He looked down at the foot of the hill and there, before his eyes, was Kostaneria. He was afraid to go down to the village. He went down the hill and disappeared into the woods. He arrived in Solun in darkness. He again found himself in Urania Papaioannou's old house. He collapsed on the bed and fell asleep.

3.

He woke up early the next morning. He locked the door, above which dangled a red lantern, and walked rapidly to the train station. He did not wait long for a train. The massive steam engine deafened all the passengers waiting to go to Athens. He ran behind a post and climbed on board when the doors opened. He found an empty compartment. He was very tired. His eyes were fatigued, full of despair... and with some nostalgia. In Athens he raced to the

Yugoslav Embassy, filled out a form and gave it to one of the clerks. He came out of the embassy building in a better mood. He headed back for Periklisis.

He arrived home at night. Ksantina was sitting beside the stove waiting for the carrot soup to cook. Aliki ran out of the room to greet him. Stavre was exhausted from his travels and lay down on the bed. He soon fell asleep. Ksantina covered him with a blanket. She sat beside him on the bed thinking.

“I would give anything to know what is tormenting him,” she thought and leaned on his hip. She then got up and set the table for dinner.

Aliki and Poliksena ate the carrot soup and returned to their rooms. Ksantina did not feel like eating. She leaned on the table and fell asleep.

V

1.

The days in Periklisis were passing very slowly. The people had no occasion to celebrate or enjoy happy moments. Stavre Nakovski began to distance himself from Ksantina and the girls. He often watched little Poliksena in secret, practicing writing letters on the wooden table. Poliksena in turn ignored him, which made him want Evangelia and his own children even more. He again went to Athens and twice after that to Solun. Again he went to Athens and wrote a letter to the Yugoslav government in Belgrade. His blood pressure began to rise and he became very nervous. He often woke up in drenching sweat and demanded from the mailman to give him the letter from Yugoslavia. After that he was not able to sleep at all. Every day he became angrier. There was no response to the letters he sent to Yugoslavia and that frustrated him. He began to spend the nights pacing back and forth in the yard. He often slept beside the burning stove in the old house. He stopped weaving. His hands were shaking from his nervousness. He sent a letter to the government in Skopje. He stopped shaving. His hair was always straggly. His clothes smelled of sweat. He never answered Ksantina's pleas to

change his clothes. One day he climbed up the hill. He began to curse and swear loudly.

2.

That very same day a letter from the Yugoslav government in Belgrade arrived. Aliko received the letter. She did not show it to Ksantina. She hid in her room and opened it. She read it twice carefully. She said nothing to Ksantina.

3.

Stavre Nakovski came down from the hill. He went to the old house. Aliko went after him. She found him sitting on the bed. She handed him the letter and sat next to him. Stavre opened the letter. He swallowed nervously. He read the letter and bellowed like a wounded beast. He tore the letter to pieces. Aliko hugged him and placed his shaggy head on her wholesome breasts. Her heart was pounding. She kept him there to calm him down.

“We will write another letter. You are not the only one looking for his wife and children. There are people on the island who wrote hundreds of letters...” she said to him reassuringly.

Stavre Nakovski was left with a gaping mouth in his surprise. He slowly pulled his tangled hair from her chest and stared at her pearly blue eyes.

“Do you know? How?” he asked.

Aliko raised her head high.

“Tomorrow we will go to Athens. Don’t worry! The entire country suffers from your kind of pain,” she replied.

“My God, dear Lord!” said Stavre.

“We will tell my mother we are going to Athens to find new markets to sell our bushels and baskets,” she said.

Stavre Nakovski did not know what to say. He just closed his eyes and raised his head in gratitude.

“Until tomorrow,” she said, got up from the bed, caressed his hair and left the old house.

Stavre Nakovski lay in bed awake all night. He could not sleep at all. The next morning he greeted Aliko with bloodshot eyes.

“Shall we go, Mr. Stavre! Wash and get dressed in your best clothes! We will visit places where you need to be nicely dressed,” she said gently and helped him get out of bed. Stavre went outside and washed himself at the well. He then got dressed in his good suit. Aliko combed his hair and fixed it nicely. They left and arrived in Athens tired. They stayed in one of the five storey lodges which offered rooms for sleeping. It was late. The administration buildings were closed. They went out for a walk, had dinner at a nearby tavern and returned to the lodge.

Stavre Nakovski struggled to sleep for a long time. Finally he closed his eyes and sank into a deep sleep. About half an hour later he jumped. He seemed startled. Aliko also woke up. She looked at Stavre. Tears were running down his cheeks. He was sobbing very quietly but she could hear him. She got out of her bed and slid into his. She hugged him gently. She began to run her long, thin delicate fingers through his hair. Stavre Nakovski fell asleep. Aliko sighed contentedly and let him dream. Aliko never had a father and had no idea what fatherly love was, but she had a big and soft heart.

4.

Aliko woke up early in the morning and quickly got dressed. She then woke Stavre.

“We have to go, Mr. Stavre. Please hurry up!” she said.

Stavre Nakovski got dressed and they went. They went inside the Red Cross building. A thin man with a thin whitish moustache, dressed in a brown city suit, clean white shirt and patterned tie, working behind one of the counters waved them over.

“We want to fill out one of the forms. We are looking for some of our relatives who disappeared during the Civil War,” said Aliko.

The man handed them one of the forms. Aliki took it to one of the tables reserved for that purpose and gave it to Stavre to fill out. She then handed it back to the man behind the counter.

“Now you can go home and wait for our report!” said the man.

Aliki took Stavre by the arm and quietly and inconspicuously led him out of the Red Cross reception room. They went to the railway station and by evening arrived in Periklisis. They were tired. They did not eat. They both went straight to their beds.

VI

1.

Ksantina and Aliki loaded up their donkey drawn wagon with bushels and baskets and got on it. Ksantina took the reins in her hand and whipped the donkeys. They continued along the road and stopped in front of Tomazos Karaianopoulos’s house. They were greeted by Tomazos and his son in their courtyard. Aliki cheerfully waved her hand and the boy climbed up onto the wagon. He sat beside her. He looked at his father happily and took the reins from Ksantina.

“Goodbye, Daddy!” the boy said cheerfully.

“Have a good trip,” said Tomazos.

“We will be back soon,” said Ksantina. “Don’t worry, Tomazos.”

“I will look after Dimitri, Mr. Tomazos... Goodbye!” said Aliki and smiled.

Dimitri whipped the donkeys. Aliki turned around and waved her hand to Tomazos. The wagon turned the corner and soon left the village.

“It’s a nice day for traveling,” said Dimitri. “Maybe we can have a swim at Pilos,” he suggested.

Ksantina laughed out loudly and shook her head “no”.

“If you want to swim in Pilos, then we should go to Kalamata. It is a larger city and we can sell our bushels and baskets much faster. From there we can then go to Pilos and you can swim as much you want,” she added.

Dimitri smiled. Aliki nodded affirmatively. Then, suddenly, the front wheel of the wagon hit a pothole. The wagon tilted and they held on tight to avoid falling off. The wheel came out of the hole and the wagon continued on its way down the road. The three were silent. The sun appeared on the horizon. The wagon drawn by the two donkeys rumbled over the pothole-filled road. They pulled away from the coastal road and entered a thicket. Five hours later they arrived at Pilos. The place was a little bigger than Periklisis. They unloaded the bushels and baskets. A crowd gathered around them. Ksantina sold a few baskets. The people began to leave. It was getting dark. They went inside a boarding house. They huddled in a room with five beds. They were very tired. They got up very early the next morning. Ksantina washed herself and went outside. Dimitri went into Aliki’s bed.

“No, Dimitri, don’t, mother might come back!” she complained.

“Just a little bit, Aliki,” he pleaded.

“No!” she yelled and jumped out of bed.

Dimitri hit the bed with his fist. He then looked at her lush breasts and well-rounded rear. Aliki put on her dress and washed. Dimitri got out of bed and the two left and joined Ksantina.

“Let’s go to Kalamata! There aren’t too many customers here,” said Ksantina.

“If that’s what you want, mother,” replied Aliki. Dimitri looked at her sideways and smiled.

2.

About noon the next day they arrived in Kalamata. The little town captivated them with its beauty. Ksantina admired the low, colourful houses. They went to the market located in the town centre. They set themselves up on one of the last stands and waited. The town's people were buying everything except bushels and baskets. Ksantina began to feel desperate. Aliki and Dimitri kept looking at each more frequently. The market bell struck two o'clock. The vendors in the various stalls began to gather their goods. Finally, several people came over and purchased a total of twenty baskets. Ksantina was happy. After that no one came over. The people began to leave. In minutes the market was empty and Ksantina was the only one left there. She packed her bushels and baskets and the three went to a nearby lodge. Ksantina was very tired and fell asleep on one of the four beds in the room. Aliki and Dimitri went out to see the town. They walked down the narrow streets, came out of the city, took the seashore road and arrived at the sea. They sat on the rocks for a while and looked at the vastness of the blue water in silence. Aliki got undressed completely naked and jumped into the water. Dimitri was surprised and hesitated.

“Come on in, the water is lovely! It's the same as in Periklisis,” yelled Aliki and dove underwater.

Dimitri took off his pants and shirt and prepared to jump.

“Take off your underwear!” she yelled.

Dimitri jumped in with his underwear on.

“Why didn't you take off your underwear? It will be wet when we return to the lodge. It will take an eternity before it dries,” she said.

“I am shy about swimming naked,” he replied and swam in the blue water.

Aliki overtook him and jumped on his back. Dimitri sank underwater and was unable to get her off. She got off him but he kept sinking. She dove after him and pulled him up. He again sank underwater. Aliki went after him again but he swam fast and got out of the water. He was tired and lay down on the rocks.

Aliki kept swimming and having fun. Finally she came out of the water and lay down next to him.

“Why are you so sour? The water is great for swimming,” she said.

Dimitri did not reply. Aliki laughed, got closer to him and touched his naked body. He felt crawling chills all over. Aliki began to smooth his hair and slowly shifted to his body. Dimitri gently touched her body. His hands shook. Aliki kissed him. Dimitri twitched. Aliki raised his head from the rock and hugged him around the neck. She kissed him again. She then started to touch his body. Dimitri began to respond. With his right hand he began to remove his underwear. Aliki moved to the side. She was all excited.

“Don’t you dare get me pregnant?! We have to get married first,” she said.

“Then why do you tease me?” he asked.

“Because I like it, exactly because of that,” she replied while rubbing her chest and her nipples.

“When we go back I will discuss it with my dad. I can’t do this anymore, not like this...” he said.

Aliki laughed loudly and lay next to him.

“Take off your underwear and put it on a stone to dry otherwise we will be sitting here all night. I am sure my mother is waiting for us,” she said.

Dimitri took off his underwear and put it on a stone next to him. He then spread his arms and grabbed Aliki’s naked body. She pulled away, stood up and ran between the rocks.

“If you catch me, I am yours,” she yelled out cheerfully.

Dimitri ran after her, caught her and pushed her down in the sand. He kissed her. He began to smooth her body with his hand and

kissed her gently all over. Aliki responded to his advances. She began to blush and exhaled with satisfaction. She then felt the warmth penetrating her body. She opened her eyes wide open, first by the surprise and later by the sweetness. She was pleased and so was Dimitri. They got out of the sand and jumped into the water. They swam fast. They came out of the water and again found themselves on the sand. Late in the evening they returned to the lodge. Aliki entered the room first. She noticed Ksantina was sleeping. Aliki smiled. Dimitri came in. Without undressing Aliki went to bed on the bed beside window. They were both quiet. Aliki was in deep thought. Dimitri was thinking of her all night.

3.

Ksanina got up early the next morning and quietly washed and dressed. She looked at Aliki and Dimitri with admiration and went out of the room. She quickly ran to the market and brought all her bushels and baskets with her. She set up on one of the stands and sat on a bushel. In time other vendors began to appear. An elderly man took the stand next to her. He was selling oranges. He came over to her.

“I will take twenty bushels and ten baskets, if you sell them to me for a good price,” he said inquiringly.

“Agreed!” replied Ksantina and smiled.

“In that case I will take thirty bushels,” said the man and stuck his hand out to shake and close the deal.

“How about you also take thirty baskets!” replied Ksantina but did not offer her hand.

The man thought about it for a moment and then said:

“Okay, we have a deal!”

Ksantina extended her hand and they shook on it. She was pleased. The man gave her the money and she left for the lodge. She walked inside the room smiling. Aliki and Dimitri were still sleeping.

“Wake up!” she yelled out loudly.

Dimitri jumped out of bed unexpectedly while Aliko looked at her mother lazily and said:

“What mother? What’s happening?”

“We are going home!” she replied.

“We can’t go! What about the bushels and baskets?” said Dimitri with a confused look on his face.

“I sold them... I sold all of them this morning. Get up and let us go!” she replied.

Aliko and Dimitri got out of their beds, washed in the small fountain in the hallway and waited downstairs. Ksantina paid for the lodging and joined them. They all walked over to their wagon in the yard behind the lodge. Dimitri harnessed the donkeys. They climbed aboard and took to the city street.

Ksantina was pleased. Aliko kept looking at Dimitri and smiling as if wanting him to kiss her. Dimitri was silently guiding the donkeys.

“When we get home we will have a party,” announced Ksantina and began to sing. Her voice echoed through the barren landscape.

“When will we get home, mother?” asked Aliko.

Ksantina stopped singing.

“Tomorrow at noon we will be home,” she replied.

VII

1.

Stavre Nakovski was sitting in the old house and weaving baskets. He was in deep thought. His hands were shaking. His forehead was wet with sweat. He skillfully twisted the reeds one over another trying hard to calm the vibration of his hands. There was a knock at

the door. He got up off the floor and opened the door. It was Tomazos Karaianopoulos. He looked calm.

“Good day!” said Stavre. “How can I help you?”

“Old Dionis, your friend, died. Will you come to bury him?” asked Tomazos.

“Right away, give me a moment to change,” said Stavre and asked him to come in.

The two men walked upstairs, Stavre changed his clothes and they left. They walked down the stone-ridden street at a quick pace and arrived at Dionis’s hut. There were many people inside. Stavre was surprised. There was also a priest. Dionis’s body was placed in a coffin. After a brief ceremony they all left and headed for the village cemetery. Stavre and Tomazos followed behind the procession. They were looking at each other curiously. Tomazos was richer than Stavre. He had two stores.

“The children are in love, Mr. Stavro,” said Tomazos.

“They are old enough. Ksantina told me they are in love. Good luck to them,” replied Stavre.

“Do you think we should engage them now and have a wedding after the grape harvest?” asked Tomazos.

Stavre Nakovski extended his hand. Tomazos shook it.

“Agreed!” replied Stavre. “Aliko has everything she needs. We will also give her some money,” he added.

“Agreed, Mr. Stavro! And good luck to them!” replied Tomazos.

The procession walked slowly. They arrived at the village cemetery. The four men carrying the coffin put it down beside the grave. The priest, standing near the coffin, read a few lines from an old black book and the four men lowered the coffin into the grave. Two gravediggers, villagers, covered the coffin with soil.

“Let’s go, Mr. Stavre! May he rest in peace! He told me a lot of things about you,” said Tomazos.

Stavre Nakovski became upset but said nothing. He continued to walk on the uneven rocky ground. Tomazos followed him. They silently arrived in the village.

Tomazos grabbed Stavre by the arm and said:

“Let’s have a drink at the local bar.”

Stavre Nakovski did not reply.

“You have been in this village a long time but I have never seen you in a bar...” Tomazos said but did not get a reaction from Stavre. He continued: “The old times are gone. The bad times are over. The junta is the government now but it’s not that bad. There are good sides to it. Our time is over. Life is now for the young. Let them decide for themselves. Let them fulfill their own desires...” said Tomazos and pulled him down the alley leading to the village pub.

They went inside and sat at one of the five tables. The bartender was a sluggish lazy man. He brought two glasses and filled them with rakia. Tomazos raised his glass and said:

“To the health of the children, Mr. Stavre!”

“To the future of our children,” Stavre toasted back with tears in his eyes and a blushing face. “Why didn’t the embassy or the Red Cross reply to my letters?” he thought to himself. “God knows where my children are? Maybe Evangelia is sitting somewhere talking to someone about the future of my children just like I am doing with Tomazos,” thought Stavre, took a sip of his rakia and put the glass back on the table.

“What are your plans for the future?” asked Tomazos.

Stavre Nakovski coughed slightly, looked into Tomazos’s eyes and said:

“I am waiting for my day when I die, Mr. Tomazos. I built a new house. The children are grown. All I have left now is to peacefully live the years that God gave on this earth...”

“I think I will build a new house. For Aliko and Dimitri. So that they can be happy,” said Tomazos.

“If you need money, tell me! I have money,” said Stavre.

“It is not necessary, Mr. Stavre. It will be my gift for their wedding,” Tomazos replied.

“Then allow me to get them the furniture...” said Stavre.

“If that’s your wish, then let it be!” replied Tomazos.

Stavre Nakovski finished drinking his rakia.

“Let’s go, Mr. Tomazos. I still have work to do...” said Stavre.

Tomazos drank the last of his rakia and stood up.

“Put it on my tab, Mr. Telios!” Tomazos said to the bartender.

“Take care, Mr. Tomazos! Plenty of time to pay...” replied the bartender.

Stavre left the village pub, said goodbye to Tomazos and returned home. He lay on the bed and fell asleep fully clothed.

2.

The sound of rolling wagon wheels was heard in the yard. Stavre woke up and lazily stretched on the bed. He listened. He heard Ksantina’s cheerful voice.

“We sold everything,” she yelled.

“Mr. Dionis died. We buried him today,” yelled Stavre.

“Oh, the poor man,” replied Ksantina with a sad tone of voice.

“I just got back from the funeral. I was there with Tomazos,” he said.

Ksantina came into the room and sat on the bed beside him. She parted his hair with her fingers.

“May God forgive his sins! He was a good man...” she said.

Stavre put his arm around her and slowly brought her closer. He had a strong desire to turn her over. He put his hand on her chest and then lay on top of her.

“Take it easy, Stavre. I am pregnant, we will hurt the baby,” she said.

PART VIII

1.

Pondilaki was sitting in the grass next to the cottage in Bileshko Pole. A number of fighters laid down their guns in a pile. About an hour later they gave him a sandwich. He ate it, got up, took a stroll among the fighters and returned to the dockworkers. After spending two weeks in the meadow, Pondilaki and the dockworkers boarded a truck. They waited in silence. The truck eventually drove off. They sat in the back on the wooden floor and kept quiet. Some time later the truck stopped. An Albanian soldier lifted the tarpaulin. He motioned to them to get off. Pondilaki jumped off first. After they all got off, the truck left. They all looked dazed. They sat down on the grass.

They were sitting in a large valley. There were no houses nearby. No one came to see them. They spent the night outdoors. The next day it started to rain. They were drenched. It stopped raining in the evening. They slept outdoors on the wet grass. It rained for the next six days. On the seventh day Pondilaki climbed aboard a truck.

“I am going to Bureli! Wait for me here! I’ll be back,” he said to the dockworkers.

2.

He arrived in Bureli at nightfall. The town was filled with fighters. He looked at the face of everyone he passed. He was looking for Stavre Nakovski. Late at night he leaned against a tree. A strong hand shook him. He turned around and smiled.

“Vangelis Kotinaris?” he said.

“I don’t have much time, Pondilaki. If you see Iana, tell her not to go to the meeting. It will be very bad for the Macedonians,” he replied.

“Why, Vangelis? What is that supposed to mean?” Pondilaki asked.

“Don’t ask me! Just make sure she doesn’t go there!” he replied.

Vangelios Kotinaris disappeared in the dark. Pondilaki was upset. He left the tree and went looking for Iana Chakalarova. He saw the dockworkers he had left behind standing near a tall building. They were leaning against the wall. He was panting when he arrived.

“Have you seen Iana Chakalarova?” he asked.

“No. Everyone is inside the hall. There is some sort of argument between the leadership. Let’s go inside,” said Tushi Gonev.

“Why have you come here? I was going to come back for you,” said Pondilaki.

“Everyone had to leave. They brought us here by truck,” replied Tushi.

“Let’s go inside,” said Pondilaki.

They went in. It was a large hall.

“There are so many people! There are certainly two thousand fighters in here...” said Pondilaki.

“Maybe more...” added Tushi Gonev.

Pondilaki lifted himself on his tiptoes to see what was happening at the other end of the hall. A dozen people sat on the stage looking very nervous. One of them stood up. Pondilaki pushed up with his toes and focused his ears to hear what the person was saying. He saw the man point his finger and heard him say “Lesi, micro skuliki!?” and then saw him spit at the man sitting closest to him. Someone bumped into Pondilaki and he lost his balance and sight of the man. A group of fighters made their way inside and pushed everyone out of the way. Dripping with sweat, Pondilaki went outside. He leaned against the wall and sighed deeply and painfully.

Nikos Zaikopoulos followed him. He was in a foul mood.

“If the Soviet officers were not here these Greeks would have shot the Macedonian leaders. They were betrayed by the CPG Supreme Command. What a mess!” said Nikos.

“Meaning, it’s the same old song,” said Pondilaki and brushed the hair on his forehead to the side.

“It’s a war, Pondilaki. The songs, in fact, are always the same, only the melody changes,” replied Nikos.

3.

Pondilaki and the dockworkers spent the night outside at the end of the building. Pondilaki was thinking of Stavre Nakovski. He was sorry that he did not go back to the mountain to search for him. He did not care much for the propaganda blaring outside claiming that the fighters are in Albania to regroup and that, according to the leadership, the Democratic Army is preparing to go back and fight. Pondilaki was well aware that the fighters were already disarmed and no unarmed soldier was ever sent to fight at the front. A little later the fighters were loaded on a Soviet ship in Dirahio and left heading to an unknown destination. Pondilaki and dockworkers sat below deck quietly. They were confused. The discontent was visible on their faces. They had traveled a long way. They heard the voice of a mulah. They listened carefully but learned nothing. The boat stopped. They heard people walking on the deck. From what they were saying, Pondilaki deduced that they were civil servants. The people spoke Turkish. Pondilaki was familiar with some Turkish words. He understood every word they said but did not say anything. A while later the voices disappeared. The ship began to move again. Pondilaki knew something and sighed. They were traveling for a long time...

They got off the ship. Their faces were black from the coal dust. They squinted. Their lips were glued together. They were taken around the harbour and loaded on a train. Pondilaki huddled together with the dockworkers in the same car. They traveled for a long time. They were silent contemplating their fate. They got off the train near a large city. They walked a long way and arrived in an army barracks. They huddled in the barracks. An agitation and propaganda spokesman from the Democratic Army voiced the

leadership's message which read: "We are in the Soviet Union near the city Tashkent. Our stay here is temporary." Some of the fighters believed the message. Pondilaki reconciled with his fate and began to breathe a little easier. He was getting ready to face the new climate and environment. The dockworkers did the same. They were, however, surprised by the clean, white sheets and comfortable beds in which they spent their first night.

"What now, Pondilaki?" said Tushi Gonev.

"Now we wait!" replied Pondilaki in a calm tone of voice.

II

1.

Pondilaki went inside the administration building. The little man with a broken nose wrote his name in a large book. Pondilaki smiled, took the rubles from the dwarf man and counted them. Exactly five hundred. The dwarf man then gave him a new fur coat. Pondilaki left the office without saying goodbye. In the afternoon he went to the "Russian language hour". When the "Russian language hour" was over he and the dock workers found themselves in another room. They sat on wooden chairs and waited. Moments later the door opened. A tall man with a gentle face appeared.

"Zdrastvuite tovarishi!" he said in a kind tone of voice.

Nikos leaned over towards Pondilaki and said: "Today he will again talk about the great Soviet victories and their great patriotism. He thinks he is so great..."

"Don't be so cruel, Nikos! The man is doing his job," replied Pondilaki.

"The Red Commissar Piotr Semionovich Gabirov..." said Nikos and laughed loudly.

Pondilaki sent him a stern look. Piotr Semionovich Gabirov smiled at everyone and said:

“Dear friends, Greeks...” before he was interrupted.

“We are not all Greeks, Comrade Gabirov!” interrupted Tushi Gonev.

Piotr Semionovich Gabirov pushed his anger deep down inside his big body and inquisitively looked at Tushi Gonev.

“How? Get up, Comrade! Explain to me!” the words flew out of Piotr Semionovich Gabirov’s mouth.

Tushi Gonev stood up. Everyone was looking at him.

“We are Macedonians. We speak a Slavic language just like you do, Sir! Please, in future address us with the word Macedonians!” he said and then sat down.

Piotr Semionovich Gabirov could not hide his surprise.

“Harasho... Tovarishi Greeks and Tovarishi Macedonians!” he started all over again keeping an eye on Tushi Gonev.

“This is how it is Comrade Gabirov, we need to know who is who, if we want to be friends. I know you will want to see me later...”
Tushi Gonev thought to himself.

2.

Piotr Semionovich Gabirov finished his lecture exactly on time and said goodbye to his students. Pondilaki and the dockworkers left the classroom and went to their rooms. They did not discuss what had happened. Tushi Gonev was hoping to meet with Gabirov after class but that did not happen.

3.

The next day they left the barracks all dressed in new city clothes. Pondilaki felt good about moving to the city. They put him in a room in a two-bedroom apartment where a small family was living. Stoian Dzhavelev was also put in the same room. They went to work together. Pondilaki and Stoian worked in a big factory called “Tashelmash”, which manufactured machines for harvesting cotton.

Pondilaki could not remember the name of the Institute. The two were sent to be trained. A short time later they became machinists. They were earning good money... just like the locals.

Stoian Dzhavalekov was lounging on his bed. He looked concerned. Pondilaki come over and sat on the other bed.

4.

“Did you hear... the Macedonian leaders were given severe sentences,” said Stoian.

Pondilaki jumped out of bed.

“What...? Why? How?!” he yelled out all confused.

“Iana Chakalarova was given a heavy sentence. She was imprisoned for five years for betraying the international communist movement. The others were given even harsher sentences...” said Stoian.

“The times are bad. Be very careful, Stoian! Do you have any money? My money flew away very quickly,” said Pondilaki.

“I don’t have any either. You know that the CPG takes half my salary...” replied Stoian.

“It’s highway robbery, Stoian. They take mine, maybe someone has justified it, but why are they taking yours? You’re not a member of the CPG and you have nothing to do with its leaders sitting on their asses in Moscow, enjoying the great restaurants and keeping Comrade Stalin company. The war ended. What are we waiting for here? We should be going home,” said Pondilaki.

“If that is even possible...” replied Stoian sounding disappointed.

They two men went to sleep. They were awakened by a knock on the door the next morning. Pondilaki jumped out of bed and opened the door.

5.

A short man with an eagle nose and darting eyes entered the room. He worked with Pondilaki in “Tashelmash”. Pondilaki invited him in. He sat on the bed.

“Is something wrong?” asked Pondilaki.

“We need your help. We want to do a performance,” replied the man.

“Who? What? When? Where?” inquired Pondilaki looking confused.

“We are from the drama section of twelfth town...” replied the man.

“And what do you want me to do?” asked Pondilaki.

“We need costumes and props for the show,” replied the man.

“Well, then, give me a list,” said Pondilaki.

The man smiled contentedly and gave Pondilaki a piece of paper.

“We all thank you... we will prepare a beautiful show...” said the little man and left without saying goodbye.

“New chores. This is my life, Stoian,” said Pondilaki, got dressed and went out. He went to visit with the committee of the twelfth town. He was greeted by a man with a dark moustache.

“Hello, Gavras!” said Pondilaki.

“What’s new Pondilaki?” replied the man.

Pondilaki gave him the list and said:

“We need costumes and props for the show.”

“They have been here already. I can’t help you,” said the man and blushed.

“You can’t or you don’t want to,” said Pondilaki calmly.

“I don’t want to. That play would never see the light of day,” replied the man.

“Well, we will see about that,” said Pondilaki and left slamming the door behind him. He went down the street. Suddenly he laughed. He began to walk faster. A few minutes later he found himself in the lobby of “Novoi Theater”. He went to the administration office where he met with a middle-aged man with a calm expression on his face.

“Please, Comrade! How can I help you?” asked the man.

“We have a small problem. We want to do a performance for which we will need costumes and props,” replied Pondilaki.

“No problem. We will give them to you. All you have to do is choose what you need from the theater...” said the man and asked: “What is the name of the show you are putting on?”

Pondilaki was confused. He looked at the paper he was holding and slowly opened it. He read the title several times carefully and said:

“The Macedonian Bloody Wedding, Comrade Lebedev”.

“I have never heard of such a play. Please let me borrow the script. I want to read it,” replied the man.

“I am sorry, Comrade Lebedev, but the play is written in the Macedonian language. I am afraid you will not understand any of it,” said Pondilaki.

“We will translate it, Comrade Pondilaki. If it’s good we will have it performed here on our stage,” replied the man.

“Of course Comrade Lebedev and thank you,” said Pondilaki, stood up from the armchair, said goodbye and left the office. He then ran all the way to the Canteen Club. There he found the actors of the drama section of twelfth town. He sat at the table.

“Tell us what is happening, Pondilaki!” one of them shouted loudly.

“Everything is okay. You will have to go and choose your own costumes and props because they don’t know what you need. The theater promised me that they give you what you need. You will ask for Lebedev when you go there,” he said and handed them the list and the text. He then said goodbye and left.

“See you on August 2, at the premiere,” one of the actors yelled out cheerfully.

III

1.

Tushi Gonev came out of the “Tashelmash” Institution’s big iron gate and headed for downtown. Halfway down he changed his mind and went home. It was late but Pondilaki was still awake. Tushi walked into the room, took off his coat and hung it in the closet. He then sat on the bed.

“Where is Stoian Dzhavalekov? I have not seen him for days,” he asked.

“He moved. He now lives in seventh town. I was with him yesterday. We saw the play ‘The Macedonian Bloody Wedding’ together. The activists from the town drama section performed the play,” replied Pondilaki.

“It’s so nice to hear things in our native language...” said Tushi, thought for a moment and said: “Did you know that Stalin died...? We should be very careful in times like these. Times are always turbulent when leaders like him die...”

“Don’t worry! Stalin’s death doesn’t concern us. We are guests in this great country and that is the way we should behave...” replied Pondilaki.

“Perhaps you are right, Pondilaki. That’s how we should behave,” said Tushi, took off his pants and shirt and slid into his bed. He turned his back on Pondilaki and soon fell asleep.

A few moments later Pondilaki too slid into his bed and soon fell asleep.

2.

Pondilaki got up early the next morning. He put the coffee pot on the stove, went to the washroom and washed his face. By the time he was done the coffee was boiling. He removed the pot from the stove and placed it on the table. He turned off the stove burner. He poured himself a cup in a porcelain mug. He then sat at the table and began to drink. He looked at Tushi.

“Do you want some coffee?” he asked.

“Why not,” replied Tushi and jumped out of bed. He then put on his pants and shirt, washed his face in the bathroom and sat down. Pondilaki filled the other porcelain mug with coffee, gave it to him and asked:

“Do you remember Café ‘Macedonia’, Tushi?”

“Sure I do... Sometimes I dream about it. I am sitting inside and listening to Iani Ronkov play the bouzouki...By the way, what happened to Stoios Panagopoulos? I haven’t seen him for a long time,” replied Tushi.

Pondilaki laughed.

“Why are you laughing, Pondilaki?” Tushi asked.

“Stoios Panagopoulos married a Mongolian woman. He likes it here and doesn’t want to be reminded of Café ‘Macedonia’. He asked me not to mention it anymore...” replied Pondilaki.

“So, the Cretan wants a family. Good luck to him,” said Tushi.

Pondilaki took another sip of the coffee, looked down at his porcelain mug, rubbed its handle with his finger and said:

“I can’t stop feeling sorry for Stavre Nakovski,” covered his eyes and continued:

“Who knows if he is still even alive...? But don’t bury him until you look into his eyes. We pulled him out of Edi Kule prison dead and he came back to life... I was ready to ask for my gold coins back... But the man survived. I am a witness to that...”

“But I didn’t tell you... About going back with a gun... What do you think of that?” said Tushi.

“Are you nuts? Now is not the right time. Calm down, Tushi! I will tell you when we return to free Café ‘Macedonia’. But for now we need to hibernate!” replied Pondilaki.

Tushi Gonev nodded affirmatively and messed up his hair. He took a sip of coffee from his porcelain mug and stood up. He then saluted Pondilaki military style and limped out of the room. Moments later he came back.

“Did you forget something?” asked Pondilaki.

“Yes, I forgot to tell you that tonight I am meeting Lazaros Papadoglu at the canteen club. You are invited. Lazaros is inviting you,” he replied and left again.

Pondilaki laughed and took a sip of coffee. He then collected the cups and coffee pot and put them in the sink. He washed them with hot water and put them back on the table. He lay in bed and stared at a crack in the ceiling. He sighed a long sigh. He heard a quiet knock on the door. Pondilaki jumped out of bed and slowly opened the door. It was Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska. She had no tears running down her cheeks but they were pooling in the white part of her eyes. They embraced. Pondilaki took her hand and sat her down on the bed. He sat on a chair at the table.

“I will boil you some coffee,” he said, got up, filled the coffee pot with water, put two teaspoons of sugar and two spoons of coffee and put the pot on the stove.

“Where is Stavre?” asked Evangelia unexpectedly and smiled a sickly smile.

Pondilaki looked down. His heart began to palpitate. He did not have the courage to face her. Evangelia stood up and went to him. She put her hand on his shoulder.

“Something happened, didn’t it? He was left behind in the mountains? Tell me!” she pleaded.

Pondilaki was silent. The coffee was ready. He poured the black liquid into the porcelain mugs and handed one to Evangelia.

“Take it, drink some coffee!” he said.

“Why are you torturing me with your silence?” she asked.

Pondilaki took a sip of coffee and looked straight into her eyes.

“Drink the coffee! We will talk later,” he replied.

“Tell me now. How can I drink coffee under these circumstances? Tell me... where is my husband?” she demanded to know.

Pondilaki sighed deeply.

“I do not know,” he said through the sigh.

“Is he dead?” yelled Evangelia.

“None of us saw where he disappeared. When we found ourselves in Albanian territory, he was not there. We looked for him in the ship, but it was all in vain. I guess he stayed behind in the mountains... I don’t know if he was killed. I also don’t want to wound your soul by saying that he is dead when I am not sure,” he replied.

“So, there is a chance that he is still alive. Lord, I have searched over half of Europe to find him and nothing...” wept Evangelia.

“You are a lucky woman, Evangelia! Don’t Cry! Stavre is a survivor and I am sure he is alive. Do you remember when we pulled him out of Edi Kule prison? You are a lucky woman...” he said.

“If I was so lucky I would have stayed home in my own hearth... and not have to wander the world. I left the children in Hungary. Now I must go back and be with them,” she replied.

“Don’t cry! You are making me cry. I can’t hold back my tears. If you continue to cry I will have to go outside,” said Pondilaki.

“Go, go Pondilaki. Leave me alone so I can cry over my destiny...” she replied.

Pondilaki found himself in a dilemma. He picked up his coat and went outside. Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska lay down on the bed and began to cry aloud.

3.

Pondilaki walked the streets for a long time. He went inside various restaurants and immediately came out. He could not find any of his acquaintances. He then went to the canteen club and found Tushi Gonev. He was sitting in the corner drinking vodka. Pondilaki sat next to him on a wooden chair. Tushi ordered him vodka. The waiter brought it over.

“You look preoccupied!” said Tushi.

“Evangelia Gasparova came over to see me. She is looking for Stavre Nakovski. Someone told her he was in Tashkent,” replied Pondilaki.

“This is why you look preoccupied?” asked Tushi.

“I want to return to Solun. That’s where I belong. My soul is in pain and cries for my city of birth,” replied Pondilaki.

Tushi Gonev took a sip of vodka.

“I am sure we all will be going back soon, Pondilaki. I don’t believe the Soviets will want to keep us here forever,” said Tushi and sighed.

“What we have done, Tushi? Now these countries need to agree on our fate. This is politics. Everyone pulls to their side at our expense,” replied Pondilaki.

“What will you do with Evangelia?” asked Tushi.

“I will send her to the Town Committee. They will know what to do. For now she will stay here with us. We will put her up in the kitchen,” replied Pondilaki.

“Do you think Stalin’s death will change things in the country?” asked Tushi.

“If you constantly keep thinking of what will happen to us, you will die young my friend. Put your hat on and wait! Something will change in the country. Hopefully it will be good for us,” replied Pondilaki.

“Did you leave Evangelia alone?” asked Tushi.

“Yes, I left her alone. I can’t stand it when someone cries...” replied Pondilaki.

“I am sure she is hungry. We should bring her something to eat,” said Tushi.

“I will take care of that. I feel responsible for the Nakovski family and I want to help them,” said Pondilaki, drank the last of his vodka, stood up and said: “Goodbye Tushi, I will see you tonight.”

“May the Lord be with you, Pondilaki. If you need me I will be here,” said Tushi.

Pondilaki left the canteen club and headed downtown. He bought bread, half a kilo of salami, a few cans and a bottle of natural juice from a large store near the theater and returned home. Evangelia was lying on the bed. She was not crying. She was in deep thought. Pondilaki entered the next room that was used as a kitchen and left the grocery bag there. He returned to the room with Evangelia and sat at the table.

“Surely you must be hungry?” he said.

“My stomach is growling with hunger but I am too upset to put anything in my mouth... my damned fate!” replied Evangelia.

“You’re not the only one suffering from such a fate. There are tens of thousands of Macedonian families scattered around the world. Everything will be fine eventually but first we need to preserve our health...” he said, looked at her and continued. “Did you say you left the children in Hungary? We thought you were in Gevgelia! That’s what Iana Chakalarova told us.”

“I was in Gevgelia but only for a short time... They moved me and several other families first to Skopje and from there to Hungary. I have no idea how this happened. However, I found myself in Hungary,” she replied.

“There certainly must be a lot of Macedonians there?” said Pondilaki.

“Thousands! Every day they cry. Mothers on one side, children on the other. They don’t know where their husbands and fathers are. Every day trains arrive and bring new shipments of people...” replied Evangelia.

“Do you want to eat a little something? I bought warm bread,” said Pondilaki.

“I can’t eat, Pondilaki, my system is upset. Now I am worried about the children. I left them with the Slivarovs. I should get back to Hungary,” she replied.

“Don’t worry! We will sort things out so that the children can come here. Tomorrow we will go to the Committee. Don’t worry!” he reassured her.

“It’s easy for you to say that but you are not me, Pondilaki,” she replied.

“If you don’t want to eat then let’s go for a bit of a walk. The city is nice... it will calm you down a bit. Let’s go for a walk!” said Pondilaki, stood up, took Evangelia’s hand and pulled her up from the bed.

Evangelia stood up and reluctantly followed him. There were many people outside in the street. They went towards the city centre. About two hours later it was dark. Tired they slowly walked back home. They ate dinner and waited for Tushi Gonev to arrive. It was getting late so Pondilaki set up the bed in the kitchen for Evangelia to sleep. She was tired and went to bed. She quickly fell asleep. Pondilaki waited a little longer but when Tushi did not show, he too went to bed. He fell asleep.

Pondilaki got up early the next morning. He waited about half an hour before Evangelia woke up. They ate breakfast together. Then, after they had their coffee they left and paid the twelfth town Committee a visit. There they added Evangelia’s case to the long list of cases. The clerk who looked after them was very polite. Pondilaki took Evangelia to the canteen club. She had some tea. They soon returned home and Evangelia prepared lunch. They had coffee with their lunch. Pondilaki got dressed and was ready to go.

“Where are you going?” asked Evangelia.

“I am going to work, Evangelia. Starting Monday you too can go to work. That’s what the man from the Committee said,” replied Pondilaki and smiled.

Pondilaki left Evangelia alone. She tidied up the table and then washed the dishes. She lay on the bed and closed her eyes.

“I hope I have better luck here in Tashkent,” she mumbled. “Maybe the sun will shine on me here...” she thought to herself.

IV

1.

Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska was given a job at the textile factory. They also gave her a new apartment in seventh town. Pondilaki visited her often. They had tea together. There were frequent quarrels between the new arrivals in the city. They were instigated most by the Party leadership. The newcomers were divided into four groups and each group had its own candidate running for party leader. The situation was getting tense. There were fights between the groups every day. They found a dead man in front of Evangelia’s house. He was a newcomer. Evangelia would not have known this if it wasn’t for the quarrel between Stefana Makelarova and her husband Vanko, who lived in another part of the apartment. Pondilaki was with her that evening. They heard the quarrel and broke into the Makelarov house uninvited. The man and the woman were fighting. The room was upside down. Clothes and bedding materials were scattered all over the place.

“Markos’s nits did this, damn you all!” yelled the woman.

“Watch what you say, woman!” yelled the man while pulling her hair.

“May God strike you all dead!” the woman yelled.

Vanko pushed her hard and she fell on the floor. Blood was gushing from her nose. She screamed even louder.

“Go away!” yelled Vanko.

“I will go! It’s better than living with Markos’s bastard?” she yelled back.

“Your bastards aren’t any better. Support Zahariadis for...” yelled Vanko when he was interrupted by Pondilaki.

Pondilaki looked at them with a stunned look on his face.

“Take it easy, people! What is this ugliness? You have children,” he said with a calm tone of voice.

“Because he likes Markos he has to hang onto his coat tails? Those nits... Those lice...!” Stefana yelled out.

“Take it easy, Stefana! Think about it...” said Pondilaki and was interrupted.

“There is nothing to think about. He either comes to my side or I am going to leave him,” said Stefana and began to pack a larger bag with clothes that she was taking out of the closet.

“I am not coming to your side. Not even dead,” yelled Vanko.

“Then go to hell!” yelled Stefana and walked out of the house with the big bag in her hand.

Vanko sat down. He was nervous and very upset.

“You are not thinking right. You are behaving like a child. Don’t you care about your children? Family comes first. Screw the politics. If those you two are supporting were any good we would not have lost the war. We would not be suffering in foreign countries. We would be in our own homes... in our ancestral place,” said Pondilaki.

Vanko was silent. Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska was biting her nails off from nervousness. Pondilaki took her by the hand and escorted her out of the room, down the hall and back to their kitchen.

“Stupid people! They kill each other over other people’s politics,” mumbled Pondilaki.

“The people are not stupid Pondilaki! This is our fate...” replied Evangelia.

“What fate? Can’t you see they are pecking at each other for the mistakes of others? What do I care who will be head of the party? I want to go home and bask in my own fireplace. They can go to hell as far as I am concerned...” said Pondilaki.

“We all want to go back to our own hearth, Pondilaki. I haven’t slept many nights thinking about it. Thinking about Stavre and the children. I want to see us all together again and have a meal together... Damned fate!” she replied.

“I have to go. It’s getting late. I hope you will forgive me for leaving you alone under these circumstances,” said Pondilaki.

“Go Pondilaki! Come back when you have time. When I’m alone dark thoughts go through my mind and I feel like I am going to go mad,” she replied.

“Goodbye, Evangelia! I will drop by again soon,” he said and left.

“Goodbye, Pondilaki and come back soon!” she replied.

Pondilaki disappeared behind the door. A half an hour later he was home. Tushi Gonev was sleeping. He did not want to wake him up. He quietly slid into his bed and soon fell asleep.

V

1.

Pandura Nakovska arrived in Tashkent unexpectedly. She was accompanied by an elderly woman. They boarded one of the many taxis at the railway station. Pandura gave the driver a piece of paper with an address written on it. A half hour later they stopped in the yard of a one storey house. Pandura and the older woman got off the taxi. The older woman paid the driver and the taxi left. They entered the house. Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska was sitting on the bed embroidering a tablecloth for the small folding table. She suddenly jumped up surprised and yelled out:

“My daughter, my dear child!”

Tears began to run down Evangelia's cheeks as she took Pandura in her arms and squeezed her tightly. Pandura also wept. The older woman stood to the side and kept quiet.

"My dear child!" cried Evangelia and looked around the room. Frightened, she then pulled away and, with a shaky voice, asked:

"Where is Peno?"

"Peno is in Budapest, mother. His music teacher did not want him to leave. But please don't worry! He is okay. As for me..." replied Pandura, but before she was finished talking Evangelia interrupted her and angrily said:

"I am not sending you anywhere. Will you stay here with me? We will bring Peno here too. How can his teacher forbid him from going to see his mother?" Tears continued to flow from her eyes as she continued to hold Pandura firmly in her arms.

"Forgive me!" said Evangelia to the older woman who was standing next to Pandura. "I am sorry I forgot you. Please, sit down! I will make some coffee."

"My name is Anastasia. I brought you your daughter. She is a beautiful child. Clever and beautiful... Thank you for the invitation, but I have to go. My family is waiting for me," replied the woman.

"Do what you have to. I am not going to delay you," said Evangelia.

"I am going. Goodbye!" said the older woman and left the room.

"Who is this woman?" Evangelia asked Pandura.

"I don't really know, Mother. We traveled together. She offered to help me. I don't know who she is," replied Pandura.

"Damn fate! We never got the chance to even meet the woman," said Evangelia.

"I am hungry, Mother," said Pandura.

“Now my dear, now...” replied Evangelia dazed. “Sit at the table and I will bring you something to eat.”

Pandura sat on a chair at the table.

“You didn’t tell me. How is Peno. What is he doing? Is he studying?! That cursed teacher, he did not allow me the pleasure to even give him a hug! Now others decide for our children...” said Evangelia.

“Don’t worry, mother! Peno is fine. The teacher kept him for his own good. He will come next year,” replied Pandura.

Evangelia put a bowl of stew and some bread on the table.

“Eat my child, eat!” she said and sat opposite to her. She could not take her eyes off her. She was so happy she could fly.

Pandura finished eating. She then got up and sat on the bed next to her mother. The two embraced and cried together. In the evening they went out for a walk. Evangelia took her to the canteen club where Pandura met many of her colleagues. They came back home very tired. They could not sleep and stayed awake for a long time. The next day they slept late. It was Sunday. They went for a walk. Evangelia took her to the zoo and they looked at the caged animals. After that they went home, had lunch and lay down to rest.

“Tonight we will go to the opera,” said Evangelia.

Pandura smiled gently and turned her back.

“Sleep, my child! I am here for you and I won’t let anyone take you back to Hungary,” she said and hugged her gently.

Pandura took her mother’s hand, smiled and held it in her hands. She soon fell asleep.

Evangelia could not sleep. She kept looking at a dot on the ceiling until they got up again.

VI

1.

Pandura complete her primary and secondary education in Tashkent. After that she enrolled in the Faculty of Technology and graduated from a four year program. From there she went to work in large factory where Pondilaki worked. Initially she helped in the laboratory. Later she began to independently carry out her own experiments. She skillfully spun the test tubes with her thin long fingers. Even though Pondilaki visited her at the laboratory several times he never did ask what kind of work she was doing. But, at the same time he never did pay much attention to the technological mumbo jumbo being done there. He often visited her and her mother at home and sometimes went to the cinema with them. One time he was invited and agreed to see a much praised performance in the “Novoi Theater” but when he found out it was opera he left. He helped them with everything, even with repairs to their electric and gas stoves. In time he visited less and less with his dockworkers. Tushi Gonev and Lazaros Papadoglu came by his apartment several times before they left for Moscow.

“You have risen to high society,” said Pondilaki jokingly. “Have a great time at the capital.”

This was the last time they saw each other. This is how he remembered their serious faces. They reminded him of Piotr Semionovich Gabirov, the Red Commissar. He accompanied them to the end of the street. They parted company with promises that they will again see each other.

2.

The next day Pondilaki went to the canteen club and met up with Manoli Strezovski. While they were drinking their coffee they were joined by Stoian Dzhavalekov. He was holding a newspaper under his arm. Pondilaki laughed. He was surprised to see Stoian buy a newspaper. Stoian handed it to him. Pondilaki looked at it carefully and after reading a few words, jumped out of his chair.

“This is the newspaper ‘Nova Makedonija’...” said Stoian Dzhavalekov. “It arrived from Skopje...”

Pondilaki opened the newspaper wide open and looked at the big black letters. He could not believe his eyes. Written in big black letters were the words “Nova Makedonija”.

“So it was not a lie. The Macedonians do have their own state,” said Pondilaki.

He flipped the pages and occasionally whistled surprised.

“It’s a real newspaper and written in the Macedonian language...” he mumbled contentedly.

3.

There was another surprise for Pondilaki in the fall. The first Macedonian school books, intended for students, arrived from the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. These books were also read by the adults. They admired the letters which reminded of their rich culture and origin. They read the historical texts the most. Not because they were written as stories, but because they depicted the Macedonian hardships and great feats of the Macedonian brigands. So, with help from Stoian Dzhavalekov and Pandura Nakovska, Pondilaki learned to read and write in the Macedonian language. Two years later he wrote a letter with his own hand and completed the form he received from the Yugoslav Embassy in Moscow, which expressed his desire to move to Skopje. In the same envelope he also put Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska, Stoian Dzhavalekov and Pandura’s documents. He then sent them by mail to the embassy and eagerly waited for a response.

But they were not the first Macedonians who made the effort to move back to Macedonia. There were many families that had already left and many were applying for repatriation. They were rejoicing like little children. Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska received a letter from her son Peno. He was in Canada. Evengelia was so happy she ran over to Pondilaki’s place to give him the good news. She found Stoian Dzhavalekov and Manoli Strezovski at his apartment. They were not much for conversation. Something was

bothering them. They did not even open their mouths to greet her. She sensed that something was cooking.

“When are you going?” asked Manoli Strezovski.

“I haven’t received my papers yet,” replied Evangelia. “My son Peno contacted me from Toronto,” she added and became upset. “Where is Pondilaki?” she asked.

“He went to the post office to mail some new documents. He will be leaving for Greece,” said Stoian Dzhavalekov.

“For Greece?” wondered Evangelia. “Why is he not going with us to Macedonia?” she asked.

“He has nostalgia for Café ‘Macedonia’ and the White Sea. This is his wish. One can’t create beauty by force...” replied Stoian Dzhavalekov and then said: “You and I will travel together. Skopje is my city. I will assist you with everything there. I have friends, neighbours... Don’t worry!” he reassured her.

“I am not worried about accommodations,” replied Evangelia and smiled. Her wrinkles on her face stretched revealing her beauty.

“Tell him to call me when he comes back,” she said and left. The two men looked at each other surprised.

4.

About a month later Pondilaki said goodbye to her and left for Greece. The train leaving the station reminded Evangelia of Stavre. She cursed a thousand times the day the Lord uprooted the Macedonians from their homeland and sent them around the world. She felt terrible for not asking Pondilaki to look for Stavre and let her know what happened to him, but it was too late now. The train was rumbling towards Moscow. About fifteen days later Evangelia visited Stoian Dzhavalekov and showed him the documents she received from the Yugoslav Embassy. His eyes opened wide and sparkled with joy. She also told him that Manoli Strezovski left for Sofia. He was disappointed that the government in Athens sent him a negative response.

5.

Pandura Nakovska went over to the leading administrator sitting in the lobby of the administration building and smiled.

“Goodbye, Comrade Savorkin. Here is my letter of resignation,” she said and walked away leaving the man confused by her action. He wanted to ask her why she was leaving the plant, but Pandura had left the building. He did not know that the same afternoon the young lady was leaving by train and going to Moscow and from there by plane to Belgrade. When Stoian Dzhavalekov arrived at her house her bags were already packed. The only thing that remained to do was to call a taxi. They all got on the taxi and arrived at the train station. The conductor placed them in the second car.

“Let’s hope we have a safe trip!” said Stoian.

They were all in deep thought and their faces were glowing as the train left the station. They did not exchange a single word all the way to Moscow. They were hatching their own separate thoughts in their minds about their arrival in their homeland. Stoian Dzhavalekov already forgot about what he had to do three days ago. He was no longer interested in the honey he left at the awning of his window. He wanted to see his parents and friends and that took his full attention. He was separated from them for twenty-five years. He was barely twenty when he crossed the border and found himself in Solun. Now at age forty-five he is returning to Skopje. He thought of his friends and comrades... By now they probably had a pile of children and perhaps grandchildren. His thoughts drew him closer to people with who he shared bread in the war years. He often looked at Pandura who spent her entire trip to Moscow looking outside the window and wondering what she thought about going to this mysterious city and living with people like herself. Evangelia Gasparova looked strangely confused. She looked like she was tormented by some unknown strong bitterness. She sat there in deep thought looking outside the window and feeling like she was somewhere else.

The train finally arrived at the station in Moscow. Pandura got off first. She took the suitcases that Stoian Dzhavalekov handed her

through the window and waited for everyone to get off. They each grabbed their suitcases and left the station.

6.

It was cold the next morning. They arrived on time at the airport, but due to heavy fog, the flight to Yugoslavia was canceled. That suppressed their joy a little. But, about half an hour later they met with Iana Chakalarova who was also flying on the plane to Yugoslavia. That cheered them up a bit.

Stoian Dzhavalekov noticed the gray hairs on her head and the deep wrinkles on her forehead and around the eyes. Her face looked quite ascetic. Also there was no trace of her soft juicy lips. He wondered where her beauty went. When he met her in Kostaneria he couldn't take his eyes off her. Now she looked like a tired old bent over woman.

Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska greeted Iana Chakalarova and then introduced her daughter Pandura to her.

“The last time I saw her she was just a baby,” she said to Evangelia with tears in her eyes. This reminded Iana of her own son who she left with Maria Stavridis.

“Now he is certainly a man. Perhaps he is married and has children...” Iana thought. She then extended her frail hand towards Stoian Dzhavalekov but then changed her mind and threw her arms around his neck and gave him a long embrace.

“Time has played us...” said Iana very quietly. “Like we were a cursed seed...”

“Best we keep quiet”, said Stoian. “Our Odyssey is not over...”

They all stopped talking. Pandura paced nervously in the waiting room eager to hear the voice on the speaker. Soon she sat down on a comfortable armchair and joined the others. Finally they heard the voice on the speaker.

“Passengers going to Yugoslavia prepare to depart.”

The fog outside was not completely gone.

The iron bird soared in the sky carrying the precious cargo to Belgrade.

7.

After landing at the airport they took a taxi to the train station and by nightfall the train left for Skopje. They heard the train conductor yell “Kumanovo”. Stoian Dzhavalekov went to the window. Even though it was still dark he recognized the land marks over which the train was traveling smoothly. His heart was pounding like a hammer. Iana Chakalarova woke up.

“We have arrived,” said Stoian.

Iana Chakalarova smiled. The train soon entered the station. There was a lot of clinking, clanking and banging before the train stopped. The unexpected metallic noises made by the train braking awakened Evangelia and Pandura. They opened their eyes and smiled.

“We have arrived in Skopje,” cheerfully announced Stoian. “There are a lot of people waiting on the platform. Maybe our friends are here too?”

Unfortunately Stoian’s joy was interrupted. He did not recognize the Skopje train station. Everything he looked at was unfamiliar to him. The only thing he recognized was the half ruined railway station building and the old “Bristol” hotel.

He got off the train and was all excited about the many changes made to the city. Distracted by the new picture of Skopje Stoian forgot about his fellow passengers. The noisy voices of the people getting off and Evangelia grabbing his hand brought him back to reality. Only then he noticed the women inside holding the suitcases. He quickly ran back inside and grabbed the luggage. He let the women go ahead and as he was getting off he saw two women hugging and tears welling in their eyes. Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska was firmly holding Maria Stavridis tightly. Both women were crying. The two women were lost in their own world and no

one could tell if they were shedding tears of joy or of grief for their lost dreams. They hugged and kissed and no one could separate them. Finally Evangelia calmed down and pointed at the young lady getting off the train.

Maria Stavridis looked at the girl and was wondering who she might be. She could not remember ever seeing her face.

She looked at Evangelia curiously as if seeking an explanation.

“This is Pandura, my daughter. Don’t you recognize her?” she said with tears in her eyes.

Maria Stavridis let out a loud cry of surprise and grabbed and hugged Pandura. She was pressing so hard the girl thought she would crack her ribs.

“My dear child!” she sobbed. “The last time I saw you, you were a baby swinging in the cradle. What a young woman, what a beauty you have become...!” she said.

When she was done with Pandura Maria embraced Iana Chakalarova.

“Cry as much as you can,” whispered Iana. “I lost my tears in the cold cell in Moscow.”

Stoian Dzhavalekov shook hands with Maria Stavridis. Iana Chakalarova was afraid to ask about her son. She feared she would collapse on the platform if there was bad news. She often sought to look into Maria Stavridis’s eyes hoping she would have good news for her... to calm her soul. Then, when she could no longer endure the suspense, she said:

“Why didn’t Risto come to meet me?”

Maria Stavridis’s face brightened.

“He doesn’t know you were coming. If he knew he would be here. You are a grandmother, you have two grandchildren. You will see the darlings soon,” she replied.

Iana Chakalarova smiled a huge smile and again hugged Maria Stavridis. They then left the train station and went to Maria’s apartment in Avtokomanda.

Maria Stavridis had a two-bedroom apartment, decently furnished with old furniture. They gathered around the table.

“Welcome to our homeland!” said Maria and offered them quince jam and coffee. “The children are at work right now but will be here in the evening.”

They all looked around at the many framed photographs neatly hanging on the walls. They had coffee.

“You can lie down and rest,” said Maria. “We will talk later. We are together now and things will work out in our favour.”

8.

Stoian Dzhavalekov was getting anxious. He could not fit in their conversations. He thought it would be best if he left and went home to his parents. He said goodbye and ignoring the pleas to stay a little longer, he hurried to get home. He found the house locked up and very messy. He felt his soul clench. He dropped his bags at the door and went to the neighbour. He never expected the neighbour to recognize him. Neither did he expect to find a familiar face behind the colourful house he left in 1941. A man appeared from behind the door.

“Are you looking for someone?” he asked indifferently.

Stoian Dzhavalekov smiled a sad smile.

“Are you looking for someone?” the man asked a second time.

“I am looking for your neighbours”, said Stoian unimpressed. “The people who lived there, Mitre and Natka... I am looking for them,” said Stoian barely muttering.

“They died about seven years ago,” replied the man quietly. “Surely you must have come a long way?”

“Yes, I have come a long way. From the Soviet Union,” replied Stoian. “They were my parents...” he said with tears pooling in his eyes. The man then turned around and without saying goodbye shut the door. Stoian stood there thinking of what to do. He returned to his home, broke the lock and went inside. He looked around. He remembered the cupboard where they kept jars of aivar and as a child he used to climb on a chair to get to it. Everything seemed like he left it on the day he left home to join the partisans. Even the lamp seemed to be the same from thirty years ago. He looked out the little windows, sat on the bed and covered his face with his hands. His desire that inspired him to return to his homeland, his courage and strength were all sapped out of him. He felt very weak and tired. He fell asleep.

EPILOGUE

1.

Beaten down by time and splashed by the blue of the great salt water, the houses in Solun began to slowly disappear. After expressing their gratitude for the many years of standing, they suddenly began to fall victim to the construction machinery, being replaced by huge modern buildings fit for a big city which wanted to imprint its mark on the world as a metropolis. A dozen buildings located in Bariatia disappeared overnight including the entire boarding complex and Café “Macedonia”. Stavre Nakovski looked for Urania Papaioannou’s one storey old house in vain. The red lantern stopped hanging over the large wooden door the same day the big student demonstrations broke out. Stavre did not find the house or the boarding house “Macedonia”, which was a landmark in Solun for centuries. He wandered the streets but the feeling of a man who hides a terrible thing from other people did not leave him. He had been expelled and banned from returning to his country by the monarch and by the new people in the Athens government.

The new buildings and the broad and colourful squares distracted him, but he continued to think of the time he had spent there twenty years ago. It was as though the clock that kept him alive had stopped. The feeling did not leave him even after the arrival of the new government which proclaimed freedom and democracy. Stavre, however, doubted everything, he saw past that and everything else that threatened him and the little piece of freedom he had. He tried to show a friendly face to all who passed him by on the street leading to the seafront. He often blamed himself. Reason told him to walk with his head held up high and not to be afraid. The new government, after all, was democratic! Had he not fought for democracy? But, at the same time, the new government did not recognize the rights of the Macedonian people. This gave Stavre a solid reason not to trust it. He sat on a bench at the seafront. He watched the wavy salt water flow back and forth. He remembered the days he had spent in Edi Kule prison without bread and water.

He met none of the people who he had fought with in the new war, nor any of those who he had fought with against Hitler’s army.

“Maybe they are still rotting in prison...” he thought to himself.
“Those who fled to Albania should certainly be healthy and alive...?”

I have to go to Kostaneria one more time...” he thought but was afraid of Milkiadis Tsakondas. “He will hand me over to the police and then I will have to spend a long time in prison...” he convinced himself.

2.

One time he went over to the village. He sat on the hill all day and watched the villagers make their way on the dusty village street. He saw his house. It was as he had left it. It was as though no one had put a foot in it for twenty years. There seemed to be a crack on one place in the roof. Perhaps it was a hole, he could not tell for sure from the distance. He concluded it was a hole, a big hole allowing rainwater to leak inside. From that he figured that the inside of the house probably smelled like rotten fruit.

3.

He looked away from the waves of the White Water (Aegean Sea). He left the bench and walked among the city residents. He found himself at the train station. He arrived in Periklisis at noon the next day. His son Peno greeted him. His son was now a grown man. That day was his twentieth birthday.

“Sometime you will have to take me with you to Solun. I feel like I know that city from your stories. I have a great desire to walk on its streets... I also want to visit Kostaneria,” he said.

“In time, my son! There is plenty of time for that,” replied Stavre.

Peno was an adult and tortured by his desire to understand his past but he did not have the burden that tormented Stavre. He was a strong man and felt he could crush stones with his bare hands, which made him feel brave. He spent his days in the old house weaving bushels and baskets. Sometimes he worked late into the night unable to stop. He wanted to be very rich. Some unknown force drew him like a magnet with promises of making him a landowner. He did not pay too much attention to Stavre’s headaches, even though they forced him to take a greater responsibility in their business. He enjoyed the work. It was a pleasure working. He took pride in managing the thirty workers from dawn to dusk weaving baskets. The workers were afraid of him. He was stern but his voice was

calm and composed. Every infraction was punishable by ducking of some pay. Stavre Nakovski was not happy to see Peno enter into politics. He got angry at him. He begged him not to jump into the fire. But he never told him that he had sacrificed his own youth in the bloody wars. He tried hard to dissuade him, even though secretly he admired his clarity and that he had found purpose in life. Stavre always waited at the door, with a cigarette in his mouth, for him to return from a meeting with the Socialists. Stavre and Peno did not discuss much. Stavre stayed at home and often went to bed, justifying that he had a headache. He went to the bed in which Ksantina Periklis Nakovska waited for him with open eyes. Stavre, however, did not pay much attention to her wrinkled body, her greying hair, her thinning lips and her dark eyes, eagerly waiting for him to say a sweet word. She often stayed with eyes open until morning. Then, being tired, she slept through the day. She avoided going to bed for several days. Ksantina had lost her fervour which burned his soul when they went to bed. Stavre Nakovski had fallen into a new realm. He constantly thought of the past. He wanted to go back in time. Watching his son made him even more determined to go back in time. He stopped dissuading him from his politics. He left the company to his son and became distant from Ksantina and her daughters. Aliko often teased him when they came to visit him and cuddled her children, two little girls, in her lap. The last two times she came over she concluded that something strange was happening with Stavre.

“Don’t pay attention to him. He is joking,” said Ksantina.

Even though Stavre was not her real father she loved him very much. She decided not to tease him any more. Even Poliksena learned to be careful of how she behaved towards him.

4.

One day, without telling anybody, Stavre Nakovski left and went to Solun. He was drawn by some unknown force that he could not explain, even though he wanted to detach himself and get rid of the chains which pulled him to the city, he still went there. Again he hoped it would return him back to twenty years ago. Perhaps it was more than twenty years ago? No account of the time was taken.

He stayed at the “Mediterranean” hotel which brought him back to the time he had gone there the first time. It was scary what happened then which he did not want repeated or cared to remember. He sat in the hotel summer garden and drank his double coffee and soda water. He was not happy with the strangers walking by and was hoping to see someone he recognized. The waiter brought him another cup of coffee in a porcelain cup and went away to serve the girl sitting three tables away from him.

5.

Out of the blue, Stavre Nakovski suddenly decided to go and visit Kostaneria. He was willing to risk his little piece of freedom for a short visit. The next day he was off and came face to face with Milkiadis Tsakondas, his wife Evridika and their two daughters who were accompanying them. They were coming straight for him. If he could he would have avoided them but it was too late. He took a deep breath and listened to his heart pound loudly as he anxiously waited for them to come to him. God, he was hoping he would never meet Milkiadis...

He decided to go towards them, determined to pass them by bravely. He did not succeed. Milkiadis’s eyes were glued on him and a moment later Stavre noticed him poke Evridika on the side with his finger. She looked up and looked at Stavre with a curious but tame look which brought him back in time... to twenty years ago. But the man they came over to see did not look anything like the man they knew who had pardoned her husband. Time had taken its toll on that man. He no longer had the playful eyes, luxuriant hair, proper nose and full lips. He was only a shadow of the young man who had a full glow for which all the women went crazy. A warped white-haired man with a grey beard, a grizzled exhausted face full of wrinkles, stood before her. His black suit with his two rows of tabs, white shirt, tie with a cherry-red line in the middle, black semi-cylindrical hat and a silver chain that sprang from the side of his coat pocket and hung on the opening of the collar, only completed the picture of a young and handsome man gifted with natural elegant movements. But this man was not that man.

“Yes, that’s him, no doubt about it. It’s Stavre Nakovski,” muttered Evridika. “A man with a soft heart and immeasurable courage,” she added.

Stavre Nakovski stopped. Evridika smiled gently at him.

“Welcome Mr. Stavre! Welcome home!” she said and a tear slipped down her cheek.

Stavre Nakovski looked confused. He extended his hand.

“Good day,” he said quietly, and nodded to greet the girls. He pulled back his hand.

“Good day Stavre!” said Milkiadis.

Stavre Nakovski was silent. He looked away somewhere in the distance.

“Welcome home!” he muttered with some uncertainty.

Stavre Nakovski looked at Evredika. Her eyes begged him to come to terms with Milkiadis.

“I can’t turn a blind eye. He did me a lot of harm,” he thought, nodded at the girls and passed them by.

Evridika took the girls by the hand and stepped away. Milkiadis stood there staring at the dirt road, confused. Moments later he slowly followed Evridika and her children.

6.

Stavre Nakovski walked down the same dusty road he had walked over many years ago and imagined seeing the houses, the people and things he had seen twenty years ago... maybe thirty or more years ago... Everything was mixed up in his mind. For a moment he felt like he heard something and got weak at the knees... he staggered. The soil gave away and his mind entered a clean white space. His eyes were closed and it seemed to him the earth had turned upside down. He felt nothing for a few moments. The tear that ran down his

cheek brought him back from the dead. He recovered from his ailment and when he felt better he went straight to his house. The outside was overgrown with weeds. He was overwhelmed. He remembered the hole in the roof. He went inside. The rooms were filled with cobwebs covering the beds with the colourful embroidered rugs. Everything was layered with a thick layer of dust. The few mice living there were scared away by the knock of his shoes entering the house. He paced around. The silence terrified him. His presence drove away the creatures that lived there.

“Lord God!” he said and crossed himself and with a heavy heart moved to the other room. The door almost collapsed when he opened it. Dust covered his black suit and cobwebs hung on his hat. A large chunk of mortar broke off from the ceiling and fell on the floor. It picked up a lot of dust and splinters flew in all directions. He looked at the ceiling curiously and concluded that there was no danger of more stuff falling off it. He sat on the double bed covered with all sorts of junk and a thick layer of dust. He pushed the junk aside with his thin fingers and tried to wipe the dust off the bed. His eyes became wet as he remembered the hazy days of his childhood and the games he played here. He became all excited but was afraid his heart could not take the excitement. He thought of the twins and in his mind they pointed to Evangelia Gasparova. It seemed like he was looking into their eyes. His mind was blurred. He just wanted to die. He was glad that this was happening in his own home. He lay on his bed ready to close his eyes forever. A while later he calmed down, got up, wiped his tears with his white velvet handkerchief and left the house. A little later he found himself in Stefanos’s store. Stefanos recognized him immediately. Stavre was looking old. Time had taken its toll on him and he looked like an old man ready to hit the grave. They did not hug. There were no smiles. They just shook hands quietly and Stavre sat at a table. The Asia Minor colonist offered him a glass of rakia and they toasted.

“To your return!” said the Asia Minor colonist and drank the rakia.

Stavre Nakovski took a sip and put his glass on the table.

Referring to the rakia, Stavre said: “It’s hot enough to make you angry...”

They sat there silently staring at each other wildly. Stavre drank the rakia and left the store. He sluggishly walked down the street. He arrived at the church and stood there. He felt darkness overcome him as he tried hard not to remember the evil that took place there. Unfortunately he was unable to control his thoughts and they quickly overtook him and carried him to the past. Several children ran out of the school building and disappeared in the distance. An old man ran after them. Stavre's heart rate began to rise. He forced himself to slow it down but he couldn't. The man came closer to him. Stavre did not recognize him. It was the teacher Ioannidis Karahopoulos. He sighed deeply and his body felt relieved as if a mountain had dropped off his back. He turned and quickly walked away. He left and disappeared into the forest. He was in a hurry. He arrived in Solun in the evening and went back to the "Mediterranean" hotel where the staff was courteous and smiled often. The hotel was almost empty. The weather was nice. He sat in the summer garden and enjoyed the aroma of the oleanders. He drank his coffee and tried to gather his thoughts.

7.

The aroma of the oleanders in the summer garden of hotel "Mediterranean" brought Stavre back to Solun several more times. He always sat at the same table. One time while sitting alone...

8.

A man a few years older than him came over to his table. He was wearing a single-breasted grey suit with a buffed vest and a glittering gold chain hung from his vest pocket. In the dim light Stavre assumed it was holding a pocket watch. The man smiled a friendly smile and extended his trembling hand.

"You really don't recognize me?" the man said.

Stavre looked long and hard at the man's swollen face shaking his head suspiciously. Then there was a smile on his face. "Pondilaki! You are alive! Please sit down!" he said quietly in his hoarse voice and adjusted a chair for him to sit on.

"Not here. I will take you to another place," replied Pondilaki.

9.

Pondilaki took Stavre to a little bistro near the coast. They went inside. It was dim but in the dark his eyes made out Manoli Strezovski. He was sitting with a middle-aged woman. She was wearing a round hat with a number of distasteful colourful flowers pinned to it made of fabric. Manoli jumped off his chair. They embraced and sat down.

“This is our friend Sofia,” said Manoli, “she worked at one time at the boarding house ‘Macedonia’. We had a nice time together.”

Stavre Nakovski looked at her and smiled. Sofia stretched a smile on her thinning lips and gently tapped Pondilaki on the shoulder.

“This is Stavre Nakovski. Our old friend,” said Pondilaki. “The only one we are missing to be complete is Foti Steriov. To have a new Café ‘Macedonia’ or something like that...”

“Where is Foti Steriov, what happened to him?” asked Manoli looking at Sofia Geleva.

“From what I know Foti disappeared before the war. We will have to ask Urania Papaioannou, she may know,” replied Sofia Geleva.

“Urania is dead... Time will bring Foti back like it did us. If he doesn’t show up then we will have to bury him,” said Stavre.

10.

Pondilaki left the bistro late in the evening to take Sofia Geleva home. Manoli Strezovski wrote Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska’s address on a piece of paper and pushed it towards Stavre.

“She told me to give it to you when I found you. I don’t know if you are happy about this but those were my orders,” he said.

Stavre Nakovski looked at the piece of paper. He felt his chest rising from the strong beating of his heart. He thought of Evangelia Gasparova like she was someone from his distant past. The piece of paper brought him back to reality. He was feeling sick.

“Please, take me back to the hotel!” he said to Manoli and stood up.

They came out of the bistro and a clear and quiet breeze coming from the sea brought his breath back. They arrived at the hotel and stopped at the front door.

“I will see you tomorrow,” said Stavre and went up the stairs to his room. He went to bed but had difficulty falling asleep. He was at war with the piece of paper. A new front had opened up for him. The new war that appeared before him did not want him to kill. It demanded the opposite... love...

11.

As time passed Stavre’s situation became even more disturbing for him. He did not know what to do and where to go. Should he go to Skopje and be with Evangelia Gasparova Nakovska and the twins about whom Manoli said nothing, or should he return to the Peloponnesus to the house he had built for himself and spent thirty-five years with Ksantina Periklis, his son Peno and his manufacturing business? He wanted to consult with Pondilaki but was embarrassed about starting such a conversation. However he decided...

“I will go to Skopje. That is my destiny. Time has played me and left me hanging in the air...” he thought to himself.

12.

He calmly and slowly got off the train at the Skopje train station and quietly slid into a taxi. He handed the driver the piece of paper with the address.

“I know where it is. Don’t worry, I will take you to the house,” said the driver cheerfully and gave him back the piece of paper.

Stavre took it, put it in his wallet and put the wallet in his coat pocket.

“Are you Macedonian? I see you talk with Macedonian words!” said Stavre.

“And how should I be speaking? This is Macedonia and we speak Macedonian,” interjected the driver and looked at him strangely.

Stavre Nakovski smiled contentedly.

“In Periklisis the children were taught that beyond the border was Serbia,” he thought to himself and then he remembered the people who had brought him weapons during the war. “Maybe they are living in Skopje,” he thought to himself and was glad to be in Skopje.

The taxi crossed several streets and stopped in front of a high-rise building. Stavre paid the driver and got out of the car. He went inside the building and climbed up the stairs to the third floor. He rang the bell. An old woman appeared at the door. She was slightly bent forward but had the clear eyes that attracted Stavre like a magnet in the town between the great river and the high mountains. Even though she had a wrinkled face and her head was wrapped in a black head kerchief, he recognized her. He extended his hand. The strong smell of sarma (cabbage rolls) emanating from the kitchen distracted him. He saw tears in Evangelia’s eyes. He followed her to the living room. He sat on the armchair next to a rack full of books. He sighed deeply. He was silent. Evangelia wiped the tears from her eyes and sat opposite to him in the other armchair. She stood up.

“I will make some coffee,” she said with a trembling voice. She went into the kitchen and wept in anguish. The floor was wet with her tears. She did not have the strength to prepare the coffee. The poor woman shook and lingered around the stove trying hard not to fall on the floor. She wiped her tears and made the coffee. She put the cup on a colourful plastic tray and placed a small porcelain dish with quince jam near it and took the tray to the living room.

Stavre took the coffee and the sweet and put them on the small folding table. They were silent. As if fearing that the spoken word would destroy the long absence from their marriage. The strong aroma from the sarma cooking compelled them to move to the kitchen table. Evangelia placed a white tablecloth on the table and set it. They had no appetite and did not eat. They sat there quietly.

Evangelia stood up and left the kitchen. She came back and spoke, cutting the silence of uneasiness.

“I prepared a bed for you to rest. You must be tired from the trip,” she said. She led him into the bedroom and let him lie down. She returned to the kitchen and wept again.

13.

Stavre Nakovski stayed with Evangelia four days. They spent most of the time in silence. He asked her how the children were doing.

“Pandura, her husband and their children are in Toronto visiting Peno. They will be there for two months,” she replied and felt the emptiness all around her without Pandura standing next to her. And that was all. She took Stavre to the train station. They were silent. The train left. She returned to her house and felt the void that was created by his departure. She was sorry to let him go. She sat in the apartment alone and cried most of the time.

“Damn, I never asked him for his address. Perhaps he will come back again? He will come back again,” she cried loudly, and encouraged her tears to flow. “Flow,” she said, “flow damn it and fill Macedonia with brine, maybe then no one will want it.” She was unable to calm down. She could not sleep all night. The next day she received a telegram. It was sent from Solun. She rejoiced. She opened it. She read the text and turned pale. She wept.

“God forgive me! If I had held him here he would not have died. I am damned! I let the railway people find him dead on the train. Now they are calling me to go and bury him! It is as if they don’t know that I am not allowed to set foot in Solun or anywhere on the territory of that country! They chased me away many years ago! Let them bury him. Perhaps we are cursed by an unknown force. Oh God...” she said and re-read the telegram. She went into the living room, lay down on the sofa and cried ... “Why is time playing with us? Who sinned so much that we have to be chased away from home and to be filling the world with tears? Will we ever go home? To die on our native soil...”

14.

The railway people found Stavre Nakovski on the train. They looked for his address written in his passport and personal documents but could not find it. He was listed as a resident of Urania Papaioannou's old house, which was then reported to the police. But they searched in vain because the house was torn down a long time ago. He was buried by the people from a funeral home at the expense of the state. No one came at his funeral. Pondilaki and Manoli Strezovski would have certainly worn black suits and would have laid a wreath on his grave, had they known. Not even Sofia Geleva heard about his death. His disappearance from the world of the living was not published anywhere. If it was someone would have placed a flower on his grave. He disappeared like he had never lived...

Iovan Parlapanov

(Bio-bibliographical note)

Iovan Parlapanov was born on January 12, 1948 in the village Marvintsi, Valandovo. He studied at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje (History of literature - the peoples of Yugoslavia). He dealt with literature for many years. He published prose articles in many newspapers and magazines including the titles "Mlad Borets", "Trudbenik", "Makedonia", "Chetvrti Iul", "Borba", "Stremezh" and "Sovemenost". His works were also translated into the various languages of Yugoslavia.

The author participated in numerous photo monographic exhibitions such as "NOV vo Makedonia 1941-1945", "Februarskiot pohod", "XIV Mladinska Brigada 'Dimitar Vlahov'..." and multiple displays, features and promotional texts about NOV and the revolution.

He won first prize in the traditional general-Yugoslav competition for stories with themes from NOVJ for 1982, which is traditionally announced every year the SZBNOVJ "Chetvrti Iul" magazine in Belgrade.

The author is a representative of the poetry performance “Vrakianie nema” based on Risto G. Iachev’s verses performed on stage at Salon 19, 19 in the Skopje Centre for Culture and Information.

In 1983 he released the novel “Otade pekolot” published by IRO “Kultura” in Skopje. This was the first novel trilogy entitled “Pekolno vreme” dedicated to the struggle for existence, national and social freedom of the Macedonian people in Aegean (Greek occupied) Macedonia.

The novel “Smrt vo Solun” (Death in Solun) is his third novel of the trilogy “Pekolno vreme”.

Iovan Parlapanov has lived and worked in Skopje since 1953.

About the novel

In efforts to wrap up the story of the struggle for existence, national and social freedom of the Macedonian people from Aegean (Greek occupied) Macedonia, Iovan Parlapanov has painted a picture of the inhuman persecution perpetrated by the Greek state apparatus against the Macedonian and other progressive people in Greece, who aspired to step into the future encircled with human dignity. With precise chronology Iovan has used lush language and distinctive style in a documentary style structure, to introduce almost everything that took place on the territory of Aegean (Greek occupied) Macedonia during the war years. He gave us an opportunity through the events, fates and personalities to observe the genesis of evil that grew into genocide like none in the Balkans. Modestly and fabulously he places us in something more terrible than hell, something that only man could imagine... The novel is filled with all the political turmoil that took place in Greece during and after the war. Its main feature is the anti-war message to eradicate the horrors caused by human folly and greed with a single conclusion: no other people experience the tragedy of Macedonians from Aegean (Greek occupied) Macedonia, regardless in which geographical areas they live...

Branimir Stanoievich