House on the Lake

A Novel

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The same dream woke her up again. The house... She bought it. It became hers. That small, most unattractive, perhaps a century-old house with a rusty padlock on the front door, scattered Turkish roof tiles and peeling walls on all sides was hers. She had never been inside. Surely the inside would be even worse than the outside. But she loved it. The moment she learned it was for sale, she wanted to buy it. Even if it was worse than it appeared, she wouldn't change her mind.

Her desire to own it had been born in her a long time ago. She wanted to buy a house on the lakefront. Even if it was a one room house resembling a hut! And – she was in luck - the house she was dying to own was just a few steps away from the lake. It was right here. Next to her! And it was for sale!

And again the same dream: the house was hers. She fixed it up. It was more beautiful than all the other houses around it!

She thought about that house for almost three months. Not owning it was making her sick! It can go to hell, she thought. It wasn't mean t to be… that was it. Best to forget about it!

She decided that recently... Only recently...!

1

...We were sitting in the yard of our close friends' house, near Lake Ohrid, sipping brandy and eating salad. We were long-time friends with this couple, several decades. Without any particular intention, I said to them:

"My husband and I have been vacationing here in Ohrid for thirty years in various houses by the lake. It would have been nice if we could have had a house of our own, even a little one. Is there such a house that we can buy?" I then turned to our friend Nikola and said "Dear Nikola all these years I haven't been able to convince my husband, your friend, to go on vacation or spend our holidays elsewhere! Unlike my friends and relatives who have traveled to other countries, I have never been anywhere, except here in this Ohrid of yours! My husband is attached to this place like he was born here."

"Well, where else would he be able to sit for twelve hours with a fishing rod in his hands waiting to catch a fish if not here on this shore? And tell me is there a more beautiful place anywhere in the world with a gentle nature like we have here? We have a lake, we have mountains, forests, not to mention churches, monasteries, museums, everything your soul desires...

I didn't know you wanted to buy a house here. You've never mentioned it before. You never mentioned what kind of house you were looking for... or how big either?" replied Nikola.

My husband Mitko kept looking at me like he wanted me to change the subject. From the expression on his face I got the impression that he was getting uncomfortable and that I should stop talking. He considered what I was saying inappropriate, even if it was a joke. At the same time my friend Ljubica, Nikola's wife, turned towards her husband and said:

"Nikola... Tell her about the house next door, on our street… The one that has been for sale for a long time…"

"Get out of here… that rundown house?! That's not a house for people like them. Violeta would never buy a house like that!" replied Nikola.

"Why, what's wrong with the house? They can fix it up a little, paint it and it will be fine. They mainly need it for the summer..." said Ljubica.

Ljubica then left and went into the kitchen.

I looked back at my husband. He looked at me mockingly and with disbelief. He couldn't believe that I was talking about buying a house in Ohrid, especially since we'd never discussed it, not to mention where we would find the money to pay for it.

While Nikola and Mitko continued to sip brandy and munch salad, Ljubica made coffee for us.

After we finished drinking our coffee I took Ljubica outside. I was getting anxious and wanted to see the house right away. I wasn't interested in its size and condition; I just wanted to see it, even if it was broken down and decaying...

We stopped in front of the little house. What could I say? It was a house with a door and two windows - all facing the lake. The front door was dilapidated. A huge old padlock hung on it! Its roof was covered with broken, century-old ceramic tiles. The plaster on its walls had peeled in several places. I felt my heart pounding.

Ljubica said something. I didn't hear what she said. Her words sounded like they were spoken from afar, like an echo. I was distracted by my thoughts of making repairs to the house …, refurbishing it…, renovating it…

We came back and joined the men.

Nikola, who suspected that we had gone outside to see the house, asked:

"Did you like it?"

From the tone of his voice, I figured that he thought I would be disgusted by it and it would never occur to me to buy such an antique house. He was even afraid that I would be offended by it if they offered it to us. Everyone remained silent...

"Who is selling it?" I asked.

"I'm authorized to sell it…" replied Nikola.

I looked at him in disbelief.

"How much are you asking for it?" I asked.

Nikola gave me a price. I did a quick calculation in my head and figured that I had enough money. This was emergency money that I'd stashed away in the bank on my own over the years. My husband didn't know about it. I kept it hidden from him because he was a big spender.

Later I decided to visit the house again but this time I went alone. I stood some distance away from it and admired it. I loved that small, dilapidated house. In fact, I loved it more than any other house or apartment in this city.

I went back to Ljubica's house. No one said a word. I too kept quiet for a while. I was afraid of saying something that might anger my husband. When I was dead sure that I wanted that house, in a trembling voice, I said:

"I'm buying the house…"

When no one reacted I again said, "I'm buying the house…" this time louder and more resolutely.

Both Nikola and Ljubica first looked at me and then at my husband. They couldn't believe what I'd said. That I had decided to buy the house, which was a big investment, without consulting my husband and acting like it was no big deal. Then they looked at my husband, expecting him to say something – agree or disagree. If nothing else, at least say that he wanted to see the house too. But nothing from him; not a word...

At that point Nikola said:

"Maybe you should think about it for a while, there's no need to rush. We'll open the house for you so you can see what it looks like inside."

"I don't care what it looks like inside. It can be fixed and it will be fixed!" I said immediately and resolutely.

I then asked, "Who owns the house?" I was eager to find out more.

"The people who own the house aren't from here… not from this city..." replied Nikola.

After a short silence, Nikola raised his head, pointing towards the sky, and said:

"The owner of the house will be flying here on an airplane scheduled to land in Ohrid at any moment now."

I couldn't believe how fast things were moving. It had to be a coincidence that the owner was coming here today!

I was trembling with excitement! My husband nervously grabbed his fishing rod and went to the lakeshore to fish. All this was obviously annoying him a lot but he said nothing. Perhaps he didn't believe that anything was going to come of it. Where was I going to find the money? What I was doing must have seemed ridiculous to him… That's because he didn't know I had money, which I had been secretly saving in my account for years.

After my husband left I stayed with Nikola and Ljubica, patiently waiting for the owner to arrive.

About half an hour later a taxi stopped in front of Nikola and Ljubica's house, next to their yard. A bright faced woman with natural blonde hair, not older than fifty, came out smiling. A short, distinctly black-haired man also came out, took out a suitcase and left it next to the blonde woman. After that the taxi left. The blonde woman walked towards the house and greeted Nikola and Ljubica warmly.

"Here I am, I have arrived," she said in Serbian.

Immediately before greeting her Nikola shouted:

"Milena this is Violeta, your new neighbour. Only minutes ago we made a deal with her to buy your little house. She and her husband have been our friends for years."

The blonde woman, who had just arrived, opened her eyes wide, looked at me, greeted me and said:

"Well Nikola, my dear friend. You should have told me about this a few days ago. You should have called me. Unfortunately I sold the house to this man from Belgrade and brought him here to give him the keys. He's already paid me. He is a colleague of mine. In fact we have been working for the same company for a long time."

Milena introduced the black-haired little man. The man said hello and shook everyone's hand. I was so disappointed that I shook the man's hand mechanically. I had no desire to meet him – the man who had unknowingly made me unhappy. I had been looking forward, like a little child, to owning that house.

I was so disappointed! I went from happy to miserable! I kept looking at my friends switching from Nikola to Ljubica, looking for a way to reverse this deal… looking at them for salvation. I felt like taking Milena aside and offering her more money than the little man

had paid her. Finally I decided to speak to Ljubica, knowing very well she wouldn't agree with what I had to say. I whispered in Ljubica's ear but her answer was:

"This is a done deal, not a bidding process," she said, and touched her right cheek with her finger.

The woman was absolutely right!

I felt ashamed after I said that... But at the same time I had bitter feelings that my house had been snatched out of my hands. It wasn't a nice house but no matter… It would have been mine... With the money I had, I could only buy this kind of house… But it wasn't meant to be...

The man took the keys but didn't go inside the house. I just couldn't believe it. Nikola handed him the keys… to a house he had just bought… and he didn't go inside! Perhaps he'd been inside before, I thought to myself.

We all went upstairs, to the top floor of the big two-story white house attached to the little house. Milena also owned this house.

Milena, the little man, Ljubica and Nikola with whom she obviously had a long-standing friendship sat around on the top floor. I also sat with them. I went up with them hoping that the deal might fall apart and that all wasn't yet lost.

Soon the little man's cousin, who lived in Ohrid, joined us. His name was Zhevair. He was an emotional man. He felt sorry for me when he found out that I had an overwhelming desire to buy the little house. He was almost tempted to ask his cousin to give it up and let me have it. He was the only one who saw me holding back my tears.

And now, after many years passed, I couldn't remember who, myself, the cousin or Milena promised me that if the little man, Milena's colleague who had bought her house, ever sold it, he would offer it to me first. This promise, which at the time seemed strange and illogical, helped me get through my painful disappointment.

My husband Mitko came back from fishing late that night. I wasn't asleep. I told him what happened with the house and that the buyer and the owner had come from Belgrade together… When I finished telling him he seemed relieved. It seemed to me like he was glad that it had all ended the way it did. Maybe it was just me feeling that way - I thought. Mitko didn't say a word.

My dreams started up again when we returned to Skopje. They lasted until the next summer. It seemed like someone was manipulating my dreams. Many nights all I could dream about was the little house in Ohrid! Different dreams same house.

As soon as we arrived in Ohrid the following summer, even before we unpacked our bags in the house where we'd vacationed for several years, I slipped away unseen and went to see the little house. It was exactly the same as we had left it. The same huge rusty padlock hung on the front door. Not a single roof tile had been moved. My heart started pounding. I wanted to know what had happened but who could I ask?! Should I look for the owner's cousin? Where would I find him? What was stranger about all this was the fact that the house hadn't been renovated. Why? Maybe the man didn't have the necessary funds to renovate it.

I started asking around. One, another, a third... Some of the neighbours said that the new owner had health problems, others, that his wife didn't like the house, others, that there was some disagreement between him and his neighbour who lived behind his house. Who was right?! I needed to know but without creating more illusions for myself... Like there was no other house near the lake!

But I wanted this one! I wouldn't be able to find another so close to the lake.

I was left in suspense. I don't know how I lasted until the next summer. When we arrived the following year, the situation with the house was unchanged!

At that point I decided to find the owner's cousin. He was surprised to see me when I rang his doorbell. It was important for me that he hadn't forgotten me and that he received me with kindness. He was happy to explain the entire situation and the reasons why the house wasn't renovated.

One day his cousin from Belgrade asked him to replace some of the broken ceramic tiles on the roof to prevent snow and rain from dripping inside. But, the moment the cousin climbed on the roof his neighbour from behind his house yelled at him and told him to leave. He told him he wasn't allowed to make repairs to that house and threatened him with violence.

"What gives you the right to forbid me from climbing on the roof of my cousin's house, especially since he gave me permission? I said to him in a quiet voice, but loud enough for him to hear me. I told him I wasn't coming down…" said Zhevair and continued, "And, to my great dismay, the neighbour quickly took a ladder from his yard, which was not partitioned from my cousin's yard, and climbed onto my cousin's roof. He then immediately began to push me violently. He pushed me to the edge of the roof, where there was a real possibility that I would fall off. I was shocked that he had the guts to do that. I am much younger and much stronger than him. I could have thrown him off the roof with just one wave of my hand. But at that moment I remembered my three children and my wife who was unemployed. I didn't want my children ending up on the streets. I did the right thing, of course, and quickly climbed down. I wasn't going to be reckless, which could have cost me a lot. When I told my cousin this, he agreed that we should wait a while."

Zhevair also told me that it was almost impossible to repair the house due to the uncooperative government services, which were unwilling to give their approval for the various repairs. But despite all that, he said that his cousin still persisted and hadn't given up on the house... But if he did, Zhevair promised me I would be the first person he contacted.

I left disappointed...

4

It was late spring. The last days before the start of summer... Another year had passed and soon we would be packing our bags and going on vacation. My husband always planned to go to Ohrid. That was his exclusive destination. Everyone knew that in advance and wasn't allowed to question it. It used to annoy me a lot. But now my mind was there too.

The weather was getting hot and it became more and more difficult to work because of the high temperatures. Both my husband and I, and especially our children, couldn't wait to go on vacation. But every year they expressed dissatisfaction about going to Ohrid. "Not to Ohrid again?!" they used to say.

"Why does it have to be Ohrid? Is there no other place in the country for you? Ohrid… Ohrid… Ohrid…!" one of them said.

They protested, even though they knew their protests would change nothing. Their father was adamant.

The last days before going on vacation were probably the hardest for everyone, including me. That last day was especially tiring for me. I could hardly walk up the stairs to the apartment coming back from work.

"Mom, before I forget, Aunt Milena from Belgrade was looking for you," my daughter said as she greeted me at the door.

"When?" I yelled with excitement and ran to get the phone.

"Mom, let me finish… She called about two hours ago."

I got my notebook out and began to look for her phone number. I couldn't find it. I then immediately called Zhevair in Ohrid, the cousin of the man who had bought the house.

"Hello, good day. I hear Milena from Belgrade was looking for me?!" I said quickly and excitedly.

"Yes, we were looking for you," he said. "We wanted to tell you that my cousin has finally made up his mind... He is selling the house. Things didn't go right with it. Would you be able to go to Belgrade because my cousin is seriously ill... He can't travel. But... let me also tell you that he will be asking for more money… much more money than he bought it for. He wants to buy a two-room apartment with the money he gets... or you can buy the two room apartment for him... in Ohrid… and then you can make the exchange."

I didn't like the words in his last sentence at all. I wanted to immediately call Milena. I felt if I delayed he might change his mind...

"Zhevair please give me Milena's phone number, I want to call her." I said.

Zhevair gave me the number and after I thanked him I quickly hung up.

I immediately called Milena.

"Yes," I heard her ringing voice say.

"Hello Milena, I hear you have been looking for me…" I said with a trembling voice.

"Yes I have, I wanted to tell you that my colleague who bought my little house in Ohrid wants to sell it but," she said and paused for a moment. She then said "but under different conditions... He is asking for much more money than what he paid me to buy it. He will give up the house only under the new conditions. I tried to dissuade him but he refused to change his mind..." replied Milena sounding uncomfortable.

She also told me about the amount of money he was asking for but I pretended I didn't hear that so I said:

“We will talk about it when I come to Belgrade. I will be there in two to three days.

We couldn't agree.

Our conversation in Milena's apartment in Belgrade wasn't pleasant at all. Apparently Milena's colleague selling the house wanted to make a big profit, especially when he found out that the little house had become my life's obsession. He wanted three times more than he'd paid. When I heard that, I got angry and ended the negotiation. I left for Skopje on the first train.

Two weeks later, I went back to Belgrade. I arrived by train early in the morning. I didn't get any sleep the night before. And despite the outrageous conditions imposed on me, I didn't give up on the house!

Is it possible that what I was doing was something that was preordained?! What was driving me to want that house so badly? That small dilapidated house already in ruins built a century ago, by who knows who? It wasn't just the house… What attracted me to this place was the lake. The lake was right next to the house that made me want it so badly! That beautiful, wonderful, sparkling, playful, restless, overflowing with different shades of colors, frightening with roars, sometimes completely silent and soothing, divine lake – here right next to me... in every moment of the day and night next to me, with me...

I decided to talk about this whole matter with my husband Mitko. I was afraid that he might not agree with what I was doing. I told him I was going to Belgrade to talk with Milena and the man who currently owned the house. But all Mitko did was shrug his shoulders and raise his eyebrows. But I knew he wasn't happy. The expression on his face gave me the idea that he wasn't pleased. But that didn't stop me from going to Belgrade. This time I was accompanied by my niece.

The next evening my niece and I returned from Belgrade with an agreement in hand. It was a piece of paper with several signatures

and stamps on it. I also had the key to the big, rusty padlock. I couldn't believe it!

The house, that little house on the very shore of Lake Ohrid, was mine! Was this real or just a figment of my imagination? To make sure it was real I kept reaching into my pocket and feeling the key.

When I returned home my husband had already left for work and my children had gone to school. From the start I knew Mitko wasn't happy with what I was doing and thought I was foolish. He wouldn't be happy when he found out I'd bought the house.

A while later I too went to work. I decided not to tell my colleagues that I'd bought the house. I felt I needed some time to assure myself the house was mine. Ours... Also I didn't want to tell Mitko over the phone. I wanted to see his reaction. I wanted him to be happy!

When we got home the four of us ate our lunch in silence.

After we finished the children left for their English lessons. They didn't ask how I did with the house in Ohrid. It was as if they were afraid to ask.

I couldn't believe that Mitko hadn't asked either.

I couldn't stand it anymore. Just as I was finishing clearing the table I said:

"We should open a bottle of champagne and celebrate! My big dream has come true… and I believe yours too! We now own our own house on the shore of Lake Ohrid!" And, excitedly, I took out a bottle of champagne from the cupboard.

After a moment of silence my husband spoke slowly and said:

"And you, Violeta, you call that a house? I would be embarrassed to show people what we bought! I mean the kind of house my wife bought!"

He emphasized the second sentence pronouncing each word with a tone of irony.

"What do you mean by 'my wife bought'? You surprise me! And as for the house, you can be sure that everyone will envy us after we fix it up!" I replied. "And I don't understand why you need that irony!"

Mitko stopped talking and made an unusual face at me. I felt that something wasn't right. I was hoping he would say something more but he didn't. Our conversation ended without a resolution.

He didn't even look at the bottle of champagne.

Before he went to the window and stood there with his back towards me, he had a cold look in his eyes. It was directed somewhere, I wasn't sure where. I had never seen such an expression in all the years we'd been together.

"I thought you would be overjoyed, given that you love Ohrid and the lake. We've never been on vacation anywhere except for Ohrid. Many of the people we know have been to other places, even countries, many times and spend their annual vacations on various seas."

Mitko remained silent. He didn't even turn around to look at me. I slowly took the champagne glasses off the table and put them away. All that time he stood there, looking out the window, with his back turned to me. I was annoyed with him and wanted to yell at him but to avoid that I left the dining room and went into the living room. I left the door to the dining room open.

When the children came back from their English lessons they went directly into the dining room and one of them yelled:

"Mom, I'm sorry we didn't ask you how it went in Belgrade. We were in a hurry to go to school. Did you buy the house?!"

I came back from the kitchen quickly. When I told them that the house was finally ours, knowing how much I wanted to buy that house, they jumped with joy and threw themselves at me, hugging me.

After they had finished hugging me they looked at their father, who had opened a newspaper and wasn't looking. They quickly realized that for some reason he was in a bad mood, but they still went to him, one on each side, and gave him a hug too.

After that they wanted to know how my trip to Belgrade was and if everything regarding the purchase of the house in Ohrid was finalized.

"Will we be able to spend the summer in the house?" my daughter Slavica asked.

Mitko laughed quietly at that question but the children didn't notice.

"There are a lot of repairs and renovations that need to be done before it can be used," I said. "It will depend on whether we can find good construction workers who will do the work unsupervised. I won't be able to supervise them because I have to go to work here in Skopje. So, it may take some time before we are able to use the house. But the most important job is done. The house is ours. To tell you the truth, I still can't believe it… It still feels like I'm dreaming..."

From time to time Slavica and my son Mile looked at their father sitting in the living room looking at the newspaper. And all this time they never once asked me what was wrong with him. I guess they didn't want him to hear them.

8

A week or two later... News about purchasing the house quickly spread among our friends, even more so among our relatives. All of them were congratulating us. I noticed this irritated Mitko. He was constantly in a bad mood and rarely spoke to me or to our children. This sapped my happiness and robbed me of my joy...

One day Mitko didn't come home for lunch and he didn't call to let me know he wasn't coming. He always called me when he had to stay and work. This was the first time he'd done this since we were married. I also noticed that he stayed in bed longer on the weekends when he wasn't going to work. He often went out in the evenings without telling me where he was going. He was constantly sitting in front of the television when he was at home. He had withdrawn into himself. He was in no mood for conversation.

I was eager to go to Ohrid and visit the little house. I was hoping to spend a weekend just looking around. I had not yet been inside. We purchased it out of the blue! There wasn't much to see of the outside and I imagined the inside was even worse. But that didn't worry me at all. Human hands could fix anything...

Unfortunately Mitko was constantly in a bad mood and I didn't dare say anything to him. I waited a while but there was no change. One day I decided to speak to him.

I said "Mitko, is there something wrong with you? What's happening to you? Are you okay health-wise? Is there something wrong at work?"

This time he was in a bad mood too and didn't feel like talking. He just waved his hand and left the room. He went outside. When I looked out the window, I saw him nervously pacing in the yard. I started to worry. I didn't know how to get him to tell me what was wrong. Was it because I'd bought the house in Ohrid? Or was it something completely different?

During the second month after we purchased the house in Ohrid something unexpected happened. I could never have fathomed that something like that could happen...

Mitko left home.

Shortly after lunch one afternoon I watched him hurry into the bedroom, take his clothes out of the closet and pack them in suitcases. He packed only some of his belongings, not everything. I figured that he took only what he needed. He then picked up his suitcases and before leaving the house he said something garbled, which I could hardly understand and sounded like he wanted to live alone for a while. He then left the apartment. I looked out the window and saw him put his suitcases into the trunk of a taxi, which he'd obviously called earlier. He then got in the taxi and left.

I didn't know what was happening. I felt distressed. I couldn't move. I thought I was going to collapse... I couldn't believe that my Mitko was even capable of doing such a thing... How could he do that…? Suddenly leave me and the children… and without an explanation… Not even a word!

I never got the chance to ask him where he was going. I truly thought he was going to come back… any moment now.

But he didn't...

All night I lay awake alone in the bed we'd shared for many years. I tried to figure out what I'd done that would make him do such a reckless thing. Was it because I had bought the house in Ohrid? I had a hard time believing that that was the real reason. Maybe it was because I'd never told him about the money I had saved without his knowledge... Any other husband would have been amazed by his wife's frugality... And more amazing would be the fact that I didn't spend the money on myself. I bought a house for everyone… On the very shore of his favourite lake!

All kinds of thoughts ran through my mind... Was it possible that he had another woman with whom he had a relationship…? And had he used the house as an excuse to leave me?

When our children asked me where their father was, I told them that he'd gone on a long business trip. I too wanted to believe that… I wanted him to come back. It was best to tell them a lie until I figured out what was really happening. Mitko often went on long business trips, so my children believed me; they had no reason to doubt me. He worked for an insurance company and often went on long trips.

9

Painfully difficult days followed. The uncertainty was the worst. Didn't I deserve an explanation? Shouldn't he have talked to me? Explain whatever had happened to him in his life… even if it was another woman…? It was possible for a middle aged person, be it a man or a woman, to fall in love with another person. Sometimes people were unable to resist feelings like that. But he chose to leave home without saying a single word. This made me question every action, not just his but also my own. But there was nothing I could find that was so overwhelming to cause this sudden break.

It was becoming increasingly clear to my children that I was hiding something from them about their father's absence. Eventually I would have to tell them the truth. They weren't that young… They couldn't be deceived that easily. Unfortunately I didn't know what to tell them because I myself didn't yet know the real reason for him leaving us.

Sometime later I decided to speak to a mutual friend of ours who worked with my husband. I asked her if he came to work regularly and if any of the other employees knew what had happened between me and Mitko. She was surprised by my question. Not only did she not know about us but neither did anyone in the company, because my husband's behaviour hadn't changed. He went to work regularly, same as before, did his job normally and often traveled on business. He didn't seem to be particularly upset.

I wanted to know where he went after work, especially where he lived, so I came up with a plan. It was a bit humiliating but I decided to follow him after he left work. I would park my car in a place far away from the company entrance so that Mitko wouldn't see me. I would then follow him where he went after work. Mitko was riding a bicycle so I wasn't worried about him seeing me. One day I put my plan into action and followed him from his work to a large house. He didn't see me following him. I waited in the distance as

he locked his bicycle in the bicycle rack in front of the building and went inside.

After he went inside I waited a while before going to the entrance. There were four doors on the ground floor, apparently to the four apartments. I hesitated but still rang the doorbell of the first door on the left. An older man came out. He had grey hair and wore glasses with thick lenses, behind which I could barely see his light blue eyes.

"Excuse me Sir," I said, "a little while ago a man came into this building. He looked like a friend of mine whom I've been looking for... Are you the caretaker of this house?"

"Yes, yes I am," he replied and looked at my face carefully, as if wanting to read the real reason why I was here.

"Did you see anyone enter through this door not too long ago?" I asked quietly.

"Yes, a gentleman came in not too long ago. He is a newcomer to this building. He rented apartment number 7. A fully furnished apartment on the second floor," replied the caretaker.

I was going to ask him if the man moved in alone or with a woman, but I figured that would be inappropriate. I thanked him and immediately left in a hurry. I was afraid I might be tempted to climb up the stairs and go to Mitko's apartment. There was no doubt that he lived here. I must have also piqued the caretaker's curiosity. He stood outside the entrance until I drove away.

The next evening I went back. I parked my car not far from the building. I tried to figure out which was his window. Not long after I saw a silhouette. It was my husband behind one of the curtains on the second floor. I never doubted that it was him. I strained my eyes to see if there was another silhouette, perhaps of a woman. I didn't see one. I felt better for a moment... But then I thought she could be lying down or sitting down, so that she couldn't be seen.

During my second visit with my friend Nena she tried to persuade me to call him on the telephone and ask him to meet with me. Or perhaps she could arrange a meeting for us, which she could also attend if necessary. I agreed to the second option. I had to somehow figure out what was happening with Mitko.

Later that day Nena told me that he didn't want to meet with me. Nena then tried to persuade me to go and see him at his work, but I couldn't decide if that was a good idea. At that moment I felt hurt.

10

Soon I would have to tell my children what I knew about their father leaving... It was strange that they hadn't yet run into him in the city. Or perhaps they had and already knew that he'd left home but were keeping quiet about it.

Every day I came home from work depressed, disappointed, still not believing what was happening to me. One day I felt a hand on my right shoulder. I turned suddenly... It was a family friend. He was an older man who was friends with my father, a psychiatrist by profession.

"What are you thinking about? You look tired..." he said.

And even though he said that like he was joking, he had a worried look on his face.

"I was looking for you. I wanted to talk to you about your husband," he added.

I was surprised at his question and said loudly:

"What about him?"

"This kind of conversation, Violeta, is not for the street. Can you come to my office tomorrow? You can come anytime…" he replied in an unnatural and still joking tone of voice.

"Where are you headed right now?" I asked. "Can we go to your office right now? I can't wait until tomorrow," I added.

The doctor hesitated a bit but agreed.

"Then, let's go," he replied with a smile after he saw how upset I was.

There was no one in the office. Even the cleaning lady was gone. The doctor asked me to sit down. "What could he want to tell me about my husband?" I wondered. "What could he possibly know about him? How would he…?" My entire body was trembling... "Something bad must have happened to him?!" I thought.

Would you like a coffee?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," I said, "I would really like one right now."

"If my memory serves me right, you drink your coffee with half a teaspoon of sugar," he said.

"I can't believe you remember that. You have a good memory," I replied.

"Unfortunately that's not always good, especially in my profession. You work in a bank, right? I envy you. You are right there with the money," he said.

"What is there to envy? I am a lawyer. The money isn't mine, it belongs to the bank…" I replied jokingly.

"The coffee is ready," he said and after he gave me my cup he said:

"According to the doctor's code I shouldn't be telling you this, especially things from someone's distant past. But since you've been with Mitko many years, I will break that code. Mitko, your husband, was my patient when he was sixteen and seventeen years old. He felt he'd been mistreated by his father and much older sister and that his mother did nothing to protect him... So in his own mind he felt that the three had conspired against him. Compared to his sister, Mitko was a quiet person and calm in nature. He never stood up to his father, to his often harsh dominance, primarily physical, and withdrew into himself. He started falling behind in his studies and the teacher, who was obviously not a good teacher, also started humiliating him in front of the other students. He even physically abused him from time to time, as Mitko later told me. As a consequence of all these things, and also due to the very frequent absence of his father from home, he spent a lot of time in bars with

various people both male and female. Then he started to skip school and locked himself in his room at home. All alone...

Concerned about Mitko's behaviour, his father, who was a friend of mine, asked me to have a talk with him. One day I met him by chance when he was leaving school. He agreed to see me. His therapy lasted several months. With my help and some medication he overcame his burden.

And, as you know, he completed his university education in Skopje. Living in the dormitory helped him a lot to get rid of his psychological burdens. His parents were grateful for what I'd done and for educating them about how to deal with him. I insisted that they let him go to Skopje instead of keeping him home to study in Kavadarci..."

The doctor paused for a moment and then said:

"I've already said too much. But still I thought it was necessary for you to know all this, so that you can accept his current behaviour towards you more easily.

He told me in detail everything that happened between the two of you. He came to see me several times.

But let us go a little further back. I was caught between a rock and a hard place when you decided to get married. I was close to both families. I wanted to tell you about his crisis but I figured it was in his past... Pubertal, like some delayed puberty. I knew more about him than anyone else. I was convinced that his problems belonged in the past. That's why I didn't say anything to you or your family. And at the same time, knowing you from a young age, I was convinced that you were a very strong person and that you could help him succeed in life. And I wasn't lying to myself..."

I sat motionless the entire time the doctor was talking, like someone had nailed me to the chair. When he stopped talking I said:

"All these things you're telling me took place in the distant past. They are gone. But this is now, what's happening to him now?!

What is bothering him now?! Like everything else a marriage has its ups and downs. If something is bothering him so badly let him speak... Let him complain... Let him rebel... Why is he like this? He is scaring me and our children! I'm worried about him."

He said: "Things are not so simple. Mitko's situation is similar to dormant bacteria that lurk in the human body. You can never predict when they will activate. As far as I understood from the recent conversations I had with him, the immediate reason for his current, in a certain sense uncontrolled, situation was the purchase of the house in Ohrid."

I wanted to immediately react when the doctor said that but I let him continue.

"Your husband doesn't like that house. And you didn't even consult with him when you decided to buy it. You completely ignored him. You made the decision all on your own. He was surprised in a bad way. He was more surprised, even shocked, when you told him you'd hidden money from him. His trust in you collapsed all of a sudden. Is that true...? Did you decide all on your own to buy the house?! Every time he came to see me he started the conversation with the words: 'What do I count for in our marriage? I count for nothing! I'm nobody!'..."

"Is that what he really said?" I asked.

"To be honest with you, if I were in his place, I would feel the same way..." replied the doctor.

I stared at him and angrily said:

"He set himself up for that! Ever since we began our life together he gave me almost all his money, including his earnings from work. I was responsible for all of our money. On top of that he avoided his responsibilities for solving problems. He left that up to me... because he knew I would do my best. And I did. It was as if I had a gift for practical things. I bought the smallest and largest things by myself. He seemed overjoyed that he didn't have to deal with things. He didn't have to think or worry about anything. He had devoted

himself, all these past years, to his own pleasures, enjoying his own peace. Even taking care of the children didn't seem to be part of his responsibilities."

"Knowing him I believe you," replied the doctor. "He inherited a bit of that from his father. Even though he was in constant confrontation with him he inherited some of his father's characteristics. But buying a house is a big investment, wouldn't you agree? It doesn't matter if it is big or small, new or old... On the other hand, I won't let him off the hook either because he didn't immediately object. He should have immediately reacted! As soon as you started talking about buying the house in Ohrid, he should have said something if he didn't want you to buy it."

The doctor got up from his chair and started pacing back and forth as if deciding whether to tell me more things or not.

"There is something else you should know, which I guess you don't know. For sure he didn't tell you about his meeting with his sister and brother-in-law in the old bazaar in the city. This took place before he left your house. He told me about his meeting during one of our visits. I concluded that the problem regarding the purchase of the house surfaced even more after his conversation with his sister and her husband.

He told me he went for coffee and a chat with them.

During their conversation he said 'My wife bought a house in Ohrid…' He wanted to boast to his sister and brother-in-law.

After they had their laugh, they both, in a single voice, said 'That's impossible… How could Violeta buy a house… with what?'

'She bought it on her own, I was neither for nor against it,' replied Mitko.

'That's how it's always been with you,' said his sister, 'just like that, no big deal!'

'Anyway, where did Violeta get that kind of money? Did she inherit it or something? That sister-in-law of mine is dangerous," added his sister mockingly.

'She saved it. I didn't know about it but she saved it!' replied Mitko. 'My wife knows that I am a soft soul... If I knew about the money I would have spent it. She knew that. If I had money in my pocket I would have spent it in some bar somewhere. Before I met her half my salary was spent in bars! She was right to hide it from me,' said Mitko.

'Get out of here... that's impossible! Why can't I save money like that? I try very hard to save enough money from the first of the month to last me to the end of the month... and still I fall short,' added his sister.

There was an agonizing silence, after which Mitko immediately left," concluded the doctor and stopped talking.

I didn't say anything so he continued:

"When he came to see me the next day, I could tell by the expression on his face that he wasn't himself. He looked like he had experienced some kind of trauma. As the days passed after his meeting with his sister he became worse. He started looking for flaws, for things that had gone wrong while living with you. He couldn't sleep. He spent many sleepless nights. He began to hate the house you bought in Ohrid and your apartment in Skopje. Everything seemed repulsive to him. Soon afterwards he left. What really threw him off is how his sister and brother-in-law reacted to the news of you purchasing the house. If that hadn't happened he would have been okay. But the way his sister reacted brought him back to the time when he experienced his traumas during his teenage years. His sister's words made him feel that you saw him as unworthy. He felt like you intentionally devalued him and humiliated him..."

"It's idiocy on their part," I yelled out loud angrily, "they will die of envy, of jealousy, especially her, my sister-in-law. You said it

yourself; Mitko had suffered a lot from her and from his father. They created this condition in him!"

At this point Violeta was trying to make sense of all those things the doctor had told her. But it didn't make things easier. On the contrary, something even more terrible was pressing against her chest. She was overcome by some new, unknown fear of what would happen next. Would Mitko manage to overcome his condition, which he'd obviously carried with him from a young age? And now, without knowing, had she hurt him badly? And what if his condition was irreversible? Would it destroy their marriage permanently?! She was afraid of the thought that she would have to continue her life alone, without him. She would have to raise their children and handle all of life's problems all on her own!

I kept quiet for a while, sighed, and then said:

"So, this is how far we have come! That's why one shouldn't want too many things and after they get them, it's not good to be overjoyed... Thank God no one in our family knows about this... I can still cover things up for him… on account that he travels a lot for his job…"

The doctor advised me to be patient and hope that his therapy would help him. He also advised me not rush to see him. Wait until he sorts himself out. He told me to tell our children that their father had left because he was angry at me for buying the house in Ohrid. He didn't want me to buy it but I'd bought it anyway.

11

Vacation time was approaching. The children didn't want to go anywhere, least of all to Ohrid. They already knew their father wasn't coming home because of the house I'd bought in Ohrid, and they were tired of vacationing there every year anyway. I didn't dare ask them where they wanted to go this summer...

Before going on our vacation I decided to go to Ohrid alone. This was my first time since I'd bought the house. I always handled things on my own even before my relationship with my husband was strained... But this time it was different.

…I needed to sort out some documents relating to the sale and purchase of the house in Ohrid. Fortunately for me a colleague of mine from my generation, a lawyer who lived there, was helping me even before I left for Ohrid.

After we filled out some of the paperwork and drew up a document that put me in possession of the house, my lawyer friend said:

"We will go to the office where your next door neighbour works. He is also a lawyer and Court secretary. Hopefully, if nothing else, we'll have a coffee together. Maybe you know him. I was pleasantly surprised that your next door neighbour is also a colleague."

When we went to his office we found a tall, thin man sitting behind his desk, looking at me curiously.

"Trajan, I came to introduce you to our colleague and now your next door neighbour," my lawyer friend said to the man sitting behind the desk.

The man was a stranger to me, and obviously I to him. But the man still didn't understand what kind of colleague I was to him or which neighbour. My lawyer friend then explained that we had gone to

school together, and that I had just bought the small house that was almost glued to one of the walls of his house.

Suddenly the man behind the desk jumped up like a snake had bitten him. And, even though the light in the office was dim, you could see his face changing colours from yellow, to red, to yellow. Obviously he was very angry. I instinctively retreated towards the door as he yelled through his gritted teeth:

"That cannot be! No one is allowed to live in that house! No one is allowed to buy it!"

My lawyer friend found himself in a difficult situation. He was shocked by the man's rude and unfriendly reaction. He was speechless. When he pulled himself together he said:

"But why?! Why do you care?! Let's be honest about it. The previous owner begged you for an entire year to buy the house! She waited for you to make up your mind! The woman came all the way from Belgrade twice to see you. She had to book a hotel room in the middle of the winter. I even tried to convince her to lower the price to one third of the selling price but you stubbornly refused to buy it! You said you didn't need it. You said you already had a big house for your small family... And... now, why do you care who buy's it?!

There was silence.

"Now that the house has been sold, money paid and a contract signed, the only thing you can do is spoil your relationship with your new neighbour," added my lawyer friend angrily.

"There'll be no neighbour!" the man behind the desk yelled and began to walk towards us, as if wanting to tell us to leave his office immediately.

We looked at each other and quickly left. This was the first time that my lawyer friend had witnessed such behaviour from this man. He was embarrassed and didn't know what to say.

"He'll calm down," he said, "but what puzzles me is why he didn't buy the house when he had a chance, when Milena offered it to him at a reduced price? I don't believe he himself knows. He must have thought the house would never sell. And with its gradual deterioration, which began a long time ago, he figured it would be declared uninhabitable and would be condemned. At that point the authorities would have to demolish it for safety reasons. That way, he wouldn't have to pay anything for it and his house would be in the first row, overlooking the lake."

Then, after a short pause he continued:

"So it's true then that, even though the house was for sale, he intimidated the prospective buyers and dissuaded them from buying it. I didn't want to believe that but it seems to be the truth. I am very disappointed, really disappointed! From this moment on I want to forget him."

I couldn't believe that an educated adult, a lawyer even, could act this way in front of a person he had never met before.

Ultimately, everyone has their own yard and their own gate! With such an unfair attitude this man would lose everyone's respect. One never knew when they would need another person's help so it was important not to burn bridges. To say "good morning" or "good afternoon" to people is enough to maintain good relations. But how it started out with this guy, there was no promise that there would be anything good in the outcome.

"We are in a mess again with the house in front of us! We got rid of one, but new buyers have surfaced, the situation will become worse. A husband, a wife and a son-in-law, three educated people," said Trajan to his wife as soon as he came home from work, even before taking off his coat and shoes.

"And on top of all that, my colleague Jovan, my dear friend, brought the lady to the office. You know the woman who bought the house from the previous owner. He brought her there to introduce her to me. I wanted to grab him by the neck and choke him!

"Jovan? I don't believe it. I didn't expect that from him," replied his wife.

"And then in front of her he said: 'Who should we blame for you not buying the house... Milena waited for you for a whole year, and even reduced the price for you by a third of what she was selling it for to other buyers. Like a next door neighbour she gave you first choice. And you kept saying that you didn't need it, that your family wasn't big, and for the three of us, you said, the house we have is too big already.' These are the words he used!" said Trajan.

"I can't believe it! He said all that in front of her?!" replied his wife, shook her head and began to swear.

"For as long as I'm alive they will not set foot in that house! Never! Never!" yelled Trajan with eyes wide open.

"Sooner or later that house will be ours... it can only be ours," replied his wife while circling around him.

Moments later their son came home. After his father told him what had happened; that another person had bought the house from the previous owner, the son began to argue with him and his mother.

"Who is to blame for that? Everyone was trying to persuade you to buy it, but you thought you were smart. You were lying to yourself when you thought that you could get the house for nothing, without spending anything. Now you're whining. It's too late!" said the son.

All three went silent...

"Dad you missed the train," the son continued after a short pause. "And now what, are we going to fight with everyone who knocks on the door of that house? We already have a big house, thank God! I want you to give up on that house. I've had enough...!"

After angrily uttering those words the son went upstairs. He continued to feel anxious and nervous. What his mother and father had not realized was that all their friends and relatives had condemned them for their dishonest dealings with regards to the house. Even the son's friends from the neighbourhood, with whom he'd grown up as a child, looked down on him. He liked the neighbourhood. He didn't like what his parents were doing and he didn't want to move away on account of their fixation with the house.

The son came down again and joined his parents. At this point his father told him about his meeting with the new owner and her lawyer, who had brought her to his office.

Trajan said, "All the paperwork regarding the sale and purchase of the house has been completed. The house is paid for and she now owns it."

"Thank God, now you can all calm down and end this nonsense," replied the son sounding relieved.

"On the contrary," they both said in a single voice. "Now they will truly find out who we really are...who are the bigger lawyers!" said Trajan.

"Do what you want, just don't get me involved... Clearly you are out of your minds! All our neighbours are disgusted with you; even our relatives and friends are appalled at your actions. Since you are a

lawyer, let me ask you this - can someone forcefully appropriate something that is not theirs? Can you appropriate the house while its owner is still alive? It's their right to do what they want; when and to whom they can sell it!" said the son.

"Look at him! Did you hear what he said? He is trying to teaching me what is right and what is wrong! Doesn't he see that we are doing this for him? Who else would we be doing this for?!" said Trajan to his wife.

"Please don't do this for me. I don't want it. If you are doing this for me, please stop immediately!" replied the son.

After saying that he left the house.

"Ungrateful! Everything we've done is for him, and what does he say? I don't want it!" said Trajan.

When I unlocked the padlock on the house with help from my neighbour Nikola and opened the front door, I was amazed by what I saw! The place was damp and had a heavy odour of a worn out, rotting tarpaulin, which was spread over the floorboards. There were holes on all sides of the roof. The hundred year-old roof tiles had been displaced. Torn out electrical wires hung down everywhere. There was no running water and no drain pipes anywhere. Part of the back wall, towards the backyard, had collapsed as much as a metre. A door leading to the backyard hung on it but it was stuck. I managed to open it but with great difficulty. Behind it was a heap of garbage. The backyards, mine and my neighbour's, had no dividing walls or fences. That surprised me and also worried me a little.

The inside of the house was very simple but at the same time very practical. From the entrance one could go into a not so small hallway and from there into the two rooms, one to the left and the other to the right. The room to the left was much bigger and I figured it would accommodate the kitchen and bathroom. But where had they been before?

It wasn't possible for a house not to have a kitchen or a bathroom. Many years later I found out that the original kitchen and bathroom were located in an extension, behind the house, which had an entrance through a back door. My neighbour had demolished it with help from the authorities, allegedly because it was unhygienic.

Was I wrong in paying so much money for this dilapidated house? I could have purchased a good two-room apartment for the same price! That thought crossed my mind but only for a secons. The next moment, when I looked out the window at the lake only a few metres away, I knew that I had taken a significant step in my life.

After I left the house and locked the front door with the old padlock, the first thought that crossed my mind was, thank God Mitko wasn't here with me! He would have thrown me into the lake or he would

have thrown himself in! But for me, in my vision, it was the most beautiful house in Ohrid because I believed that one day it would become that beautiful...

When I crossed the street, after taking only ten steps, I was at the shore of the lake. I was filled with happiness, like someone had gifted me with the most wonderful palace in the most wonderful corner of the Earth!

"Did you see our new neighbour, the lady who bought the house, when she was here? She was doing this and doing that all day long looking like she had bought a palace or something. Is she looking forward to this chicken coop?! This jinxed place?! I saw her when she was having coffee. She doesn't seem that educated to me! I also know her husband. She went here and there hustling around, looking for connections to get the house fixed up. She will get permission when I see the back of my head," said the wife.

"Be careful what you say. She will find someone, she will bribe them, she will fix the house," said the husband nervously, "and before you know it she will make the place suitable for living."

"Do you think it could be that easy? Just spit and paste? It will take her more than a month just to clean out all that garbage that's inside. The whole electrical installation has to be replaced. Didn't we tear that down? And water... where from is she going to get water? Even if she sends the devil to dig she will never find the water pipe. She will never find it. Not to mention the sewer pipe. They are both under the ruins of the extension, which used to house the kitchen, bathroom and toilet, which we demolished, thanks to a friend who condemned it because it was a hazard. Well, at least we got rid of the extension. Let's see how she is going to live without a kitchen or a bathroom!" said the wife.

"Oh my dear wife, don't you know that these people from Skopje are connected with everyone? They have bought half the city," replied the husband.

"And you? Do you think you have fewer connections than her? How many people have you done favours for? How many properties have you saved? How many times have you allowed the law to slip through your fingers? How many times did you whisper in people's ears to bribe the judge when they were sued in court so that the case would resolve in their favour? Not to mention the bribes in the

municipality. You have helped many people who owe you favours. You have even helped people who didn't need help. There was even something for the porters and couriers. I'm not worried, there is plenty left for us, thank God, otherwise how could we have afforded this house with a single, small paycheque," said the wife.

"Why don't you yell a bit louder so everyone passing by can hear you? Today you don't need to say much before someone nails you, so shut your mouth. We need to figure out whom to convince so that she doesn't get permission to do anything in that house, not even replace a single roof tile. Since we uncovered parts of the roof, water has been dripping inside. The hundred year-old tiles we removed have been stacked on the roof for decades. I'm sure water has been dripping inside from all sides. Not to mention the wall in the back which half-collapsed when we tore down the extension. When it rains, a torrent flows inside. Everything is rotten. The house is uninhabitable, not even for a horse, never mind for people. Does she know what she bought?! She is throwing away good money for nothing!" replied the husband.

"She will never live in that house... Just a little longer and the house will rot completely from the inside and it will be condemned. We need to be on guard. As soon as workers appear in the yard we must immediately report them to the construction inspector. Mile, that short guy who rides a bike, will be here in a few minutes. He would have still been lingering in the village if it wasn't for you. He worships you... He will do anything for you. Every time he passes by here he brings a bottle of homemade rakia (brandy). Also, you're well connected with the Secretary of the Municipality. When her paperwork reaches him he can delay it for as long as possible. You also need to ask the archivist who receives requests for house repairs to hide it somewhere, if anything comes by her, and let you know you that such a request has arrived," said the wife.

I figured that the most important thing to do was make the house liveable as soon as possible. If my neighbour, in the last few years when no one lived in the house, had the intention of ruining it to such an extent that it wouldn't be liveable, he had achieved his goal. It was obvious that many things had been deliberately damaged. First, the entire floor had rotted because roof tiles had been purposely taken off, allowing rainwater and snow to leak inside. Water had dripped inside for months if not years. Also part of the wall towards the backyard had been demolished on purpose. The water and drainage pipes had been removed and no longer existed. The electrical system had been destroyed and there was no electricity.

In order to start the repairs on the house I had sent a written request to the construction services at the Assembly. I had to do that because nothing could be done without their approval. I couldn't even repair the half-fallen wall without their permission. I wasn't allowed to repair the roof or remove the broken roof tiles, even though it was raining inside the house and rotting the floors. I wasn't allowed to replace or remove anything without permission. All these rules bordered on absurdity.

I had to wait a long time before I got a response to my written request. Unfortunately the answer I received was negative. I couldn't believe it. They said I wasn't allowed to do anything, not even the smallest of repairs.

Being left without any options I decided to go and visit the authorities in person. I was received by a young official. After listening to me patiently, he told me exactly what was written in the letter, which he probably wrote himself. His tone of voice was serious and unfriendly.

I wasn't happy with his response so, given that he was young and probably inexperienced, I raised my voice and said:

"Do you realize that rain and snow are falling inside the house?! The roof is damaged on all sides and needs repair! Even cats and dogs come inside and do their business on the floor! You do understand, right?!"

"You also must understand that, as I wrote to you in the letter, nothing can be done until the Urban Plan is adopted. You can't even move a tile," he replied in the most unfriendly manner.

His voice sounded like it was playing back from a pre-recorded tape.

"How long do I have to wait for this Urban Plan to be adopted? I understand years have passed and still it hasn't been adopted. The authorities have been mulling over it for almost six years and nothing... All I'm concerned about is this small stretch of land in this part of the city, along the lakeshore…" I said but it was all in vain because the official wouldn't budge.

I also spoke to many other officials, but all I got were negative results. I did this for months only to get the same answer.

My chances of getting a work permit were slowly diminishing so I decided to take matters into my own hands. I found two construction workers who were willing to work on the house on weekends when I was there and little by little I began to fix some things inside, behind closed doors. Over time, as I gained their trust, I hired the workers to work part-time even when I wasn't there.

Of course, the main obstacles still came from my next door neighbour... He and his wife, as well as part of his extended family, were still hostile towards me. Our bordering walls ran parallel to each other at a distance of only ten centimetres. So they kept an eye on what was going on in my house and, in every possible way, tried to prevent my workers from working. My neighbour was doing all this, hoping to force me to give up on the house. And what was even more amazing, my neighbour believed that he would succeed. That's why my workers and I had to make sure the neighbours weren't at home when they came to do the repairs.

But the job was laborious. The workers had to sneak in and work quietly, mostly inside the house. All the rotten floorboards were replaced and the floor was covered with new sheets of linoleum. When my neighbours were not around the workers worked on the roof, replacing the old ceramic roof tiles. It was important to fix the roof in order to stop the water from dripping inside.

After the roof was repaired I had a place to stay in Ohrid.

Every time I went to Ohrid from Skopje and found the neighbours weren't home, I called the workers to come and work. Unhindered they were able, piece by piece, to rebuild most of the house including the old, half-demolished walls. Unhindered by the neighbours, many times they continued to work even after I left for Skopje.

Twice the workers called me in Skopje to tell me that someone had demolished parts of the house that they had renovated. Surely this must have been done by my next door neighbour (who shamefully was a lawyer) and his wife.

Both times after I received the calls I came to Ohrid on the weekend and both times I called the police. The police officers looked over the damage and wrote something down in their notebooks, supposedly documenting the damage. Both times they looked around searching for evidence and both times they asked:

"Are there any eyewitnesses…?"

When I said "no", they said, "Then how do you know it was your neighbours?!"

I tried to explain to the police that there could be no witnesses because our backyards were undivided and connected. Those parts of the house that were deliberately damaged were accessible only to my neighbours and were hidden from the eyes of passers-by. The parts that were damaged weren't visible from the street. They were behind Milena's big white house. In fact, that part of my house could only be accessed from the shared backyard. I repeatedly explained to the police that, in order to enter the backyard of my

house, a person would have to pass through my neighbour's yard. Such a person would not be able to enter from the front of my house because it was connected to Milena's big house. And why would a stranger come and damage my house? What would be this person's motive? Why would a person do that?

It was obvious that my neighbour had used his connections, even with the police, to prevent me from renovating my house. His actions were especially influenced by his wife who behaved unruly towards me, threatening and cursing me at every opportunity. At that time I didn't know anything about her. It seemed to me that sometimes she did these things out of boredom, having nothing else to do. She walked around all day gossiping about people. She only had one child, a son who was studying in the capital and, while her husband was at work, needed something to do to fill her time.

But despite what had happened, I didn't give up on the house.

A little later I decided to hire an electrician who lived nearby, and together with his colleague they fixed all the wiring and connected the electricity to my house through an old electricity meter that was still functioning. The electricians also added several sockets for connecting electrical appliances, including my stove. This was a major breakthrough.

I had some old friends who lived in Ohrid, who were wonderful people. Not only were they happy about every new repair I made to the house, but they also helped me make it happen. One day my friends pleasantly surprised me with a door. It was old and used but very well preserved. They said they no longer needed it. This was a perfect match for my old front door which I had replaced, along with the rusty old padlock. The windows were old too but well preserved, they even had iron bars for greater security.

Both Marga and Ivan, the friends who gave Violeta the door, had lost their jobs almost at the same time. Ivan, a lawyer by profession, working for a branch of a trade organization, had lost his job more recently. The organization's director and a group of his people declared bankruptcy over night and put the company, with a large amount of debt, into receivership. The

property was sold at rock bottom prices. The workers were forced out of their jobs. Ivan was also included in the list of those people who were let go, probably because he knew too much. They were afraid that he might reveal to the public, facts about malpractice and the condition of the company, as well as about the money stolen by the management team with help from government officials.

Almost simultaneously, two months later, Marga, a planner in the city's Planning Bureau, was made redundant. Ivan and Marga had two children. They were both in high school in the upper grades. Ivan and Marga didn't have much savings.

After both of her friends lost their jobs, Violeta went to see them. Marga met her at the front door of her home and asked her to go inside the garage. Violeta had no idea why Marga was leading her there. The garage looked like it had been recently renovated and inside it were shelves and racks with clothing arranged on them. It looked like an improvised clothing store with pieces of underwear arranged on two racks and socks on several shelves. There were also men's, women's and children's clothing hanging from racks.

"We have to live somehow…," said Marga angrily and in tears while hugging Violeta.

Violeta didn't dare say anything. There was nothing that could be said, not even reassurances, or anything else that might bring optimism.

After their visit in the garage the two women went inside the house and upstairs where Ivan was waiting for them. As usual, Marga served everyone sweets. Ivan asked the women if they wanted to join him and have a drink with him. He obviously wanted Violeta to stay a bit longer. Ivan usually had long discussions with Violeta on a variety of subjects and often introduced a bit of humour, with a note of criticism for government policy but not in a sarcastic way.

Now, after what had happened to Ivan and Marga, Violeta didn't know what to say and was unable to relax in this painful situation. But from the very first sentences Ivan uttered she realized that he had already found a way to objectify their new state of affairs.

"Well, my dear friend," he said to Violeta, "we are neither the first nor the last to be struck by fate in this day and age. What is happening now has been in the making for a long time. People from both inside and outside have worked on this scenario. You see large companies, huge trade organizations, factories, agricultural combines, etc., have being deliberately devalued for a long time by their unscrupulous management in conjunction with crooked figures from the government. After putting them under forced administration, their aim was to immediately appropriate them for themselves for small amounts of money while kicking the workers to the street and leaving many without work."

Ivan then got up, went into the kitchen and brought some sliced cheese, several forks and plates and continued his conversation, that is, he followed up on his previous thought.

"All those factories, trade organizations, agricultural combines, various industrial facilities, with hundreds of thousands of employees, who painstakingly created these industries after the war, precisely by those same employees, at enormous cost, effort and self-sacrifice, in the name of a better future, a future with a better life for everyone, and above all, for future generations, were now being expropriated by crooks. That same working class that created these organizations is now left without work, without a means to make a living. People from the working class, as well as intellectuals, are literally being thrown out onto the street. Many have to resort to driving taxis and working in stalls in the market selling fruits, vegetables and trinkets to survive. This also applies to those people at the top who refuse to be dishonest."

Marga tried to stop Ivan from talking. She was afraid that he was getting too stressed out by what he was saying, but Ivan didn't listen and continued.

"Workers were supposed to be their own managers… People were promised that. But those promises turned out to be just pitiful, empty slogans.

The only rights workers have now are to strike and roam the streets. All those promises made to compensate them for the loss of their jobs with new jobs turned out to be empty promises. Most of the industrial facilities are damaged and have been looted and production is reduced to a minimum. The state continues to borrow money and has even increased its borrowing… and all this on the backs of the taxpayers, forcing them into poverty. As a result, some people are impoverished to extremes. At the same time people who abandoned their villages to create the working class now have nowhere to go. No conditions are created for them to return to their villages… after many decades of absence.

In this turbulence people tend to become depressed, their health suffers and their lives are turned upside down. Some become so desperate that they will do anything to survive. As a result, they can easily be manipulated and used to achieve the personal goals of those in power."

By now Ivan had realized that he had been talking for a long time. After he apologized he said:

"I've been talking like a speaker at a conference; I shouldn't have had that second glass of rakia (brandy). I hope there was no one eavesdropping. There are all kinds of informers around you know!"

Violeta stayed a little longer. Before leaving she said that she believed they would find a way out of this unfortunate situation. That's what she really thought.

Hardworking and strong people never give up on anything. Thanks to their tireless hands and help from their two children, Ivan and Marga's small improvised shop in their garage grew into a big store in the city centre, where you could buy all kinds of clothing in fashion, for men, women and children; domestic and imported clothing. People of all ages eagerly waited for the latest shipments of contemporary fashion clothing to arrive.

Their children eventually graduated from university, found good jobs and started their own families.

16

After I bought the house, Ljubica and Nikola were the first of our friends to notice that my husband Mitko didn't come with us to Ohrid. I had already thought of what to say to explain why Mitko wasn't there. On my way to their house I bought a package of freshly ground coffee and went to see them.

No sooner had I arrived than Nikola asked "Where is my friend Mitko? Since when did he miss an opportunity to come here?"

"You know how Mitko is. He's never in favour of practical things. He didn't want to come because the house hasn't been made livable yet. He will come when the house is completely renovated…" I replied.

"There are all kinds of rooms for rent in this area! You could have rented one," said Ljubica.

"He figured the repairs shouldn't take too long and was willing to wait them out," I replied.

"He is mistaken! He'll have to wait a long time…" added Nikola.

From the tone of Nikola's voice, I gathered they didn't believe me. They refused to believe that Mitko would rather wait than come right away. Nikola knew that Mitko was addicted to fishing and that it was impossible for him to give it up, unless of course he went fishing somewhere else. One time Mitko had told Nikola that when he wasn't in Ohrid fishing he would be at some river or at another lake... But since they'd bought a house here it made no sense that he would go fishing somewhere else. My friends found my explanation a little hard to believe!

"Nikola, let me ask you something. Doesn't it seem a bit strange that Mitko isn't coming at all this summer? I can't believe that he can do without Ohrid. There must be something else going on..." said Ljubica.

"I will say something, even though I might be wrong... Mitko is angry because Violeta bought the house without his consent! I think that first of all he didn't like the house and secondly it was very strange that Violeta didn't even ask him if they should buy the house. She suddenly decided on her own... She said 'I'm buying the house', just like that, do you remember that? She committed herself to buying it as soon as she found out it was for sale. She did that immediately before she had a chance to see the house. Mitko, as you remember, then grabbed his fishing rod and quietly went to the lake. He didn't say a word. He didn't agree or disagree. Violeta didn't even care. I hope we're not responsible for what happened!" replied Nikola.

"What are you thinking, Nikola? How are we responsible?! She asked us if there were any houses for sale near the coast and we answered her. That's all we did! Who would have guessed how she would react? On top of that, we didn't know that she would have the money to pay for it... so much money. We know they lived a modest life, with good salaries, like us. The fact that she didn't discuss the purchase with Mitko, and that she decided on her own, has nothing to do with us. I wouldn't even think about it!" said Ljubica

"She was so determined and tried so hard to buy that particular house, and lo and behold, after three years of waiting, she succeeded!" replied Nikola.

"I believe that in those three years Mitko and Violeta would have had the opportunity to talk about it and come to a mutual agreement on whether to buy the house or not. But it would seem they each stood their ground and she decided to buy the house anyway,

without his consent! We will find out what happened when Mitko comes to Ohrid. One time I thought of calling him on the phone and asking him to come. I wanted to say that 'fishing wasn't the same without him' but I said to myself, it's better to stay out of his business and so I gave up," said Ljubica.

"To tell you the truth, you did the right thing! Don't get him all riled up even more. They have been married for many years, they will eventually find a solution!" replied Nikola.

18

The obstacles to moving into the little house were many. Before the house had been abandoned a family of six had lived in it for over thirty years. They had a bathroom, of course, and other rooms. Where did they go? Where did the pipe delivering water from the outside go? Not to mention the drainage system? Where did all they disappear? Who destroyed them? The neighbours on my block claimed they didn't know. I was convinced that they knew but didn't want to tell me… Not only that, they refused to tell me who had brought down the extension. I was a stranger to them of course, and they didn't want to run the risk of spoiling their relations with my next door neighbour. They must have known because the extension had been demolished only a few years ago and I was sure it hadn't fallen on its own. But it was clear to everyone, that without water and drainage the house would be uninhabitable.

That summer Milena, who lived in Belgrade, didn't come to Ohrid. She had given me the keys to her big house before and allowed me to use it as long as I looked after it. Most of the responsibility for looking after her house fell on Nikola. I had looked after it occasionally, when I was in Ohrid.

To this day I still don't know why Nikola didn't help me with the renovations… He made every excuse possible to avoid helping me in any way. He also wouldn't tell me where I could find the connections to the water and drain pipes. Maybe he too was afraid of my next door neighbour. Perhaps he didn't want to offend him. Nikola and he had been next door neighbours for many years.

Having no other option, I decided to call on the water company to help me. I sent them a written request asking them to connect my house to the water network. They never answered. The same thing happened with my request to the drainage company. I suspect that my next door neighbour was responsible for their silence as well...

There was also something else. Some of the people from Ohrid didn't like strangers coming to their city and resisted people going there from other cities. It was probably envy. They didn't like outsiders buying up their houses, especially the houses along the lakeshore! For illogical reasons the local people didn't like people from the capital, even though most of the tourists in Ohrid were from Skopje. Most citizens of the former Yugoslav republics vacationed around the Adriatic Sea. Foreign tourists from distant countries were few in number. Most tourists from foreign countries spent only a short time passing through Ohrid while heading for or returning from the beaches in Greece. Despite being a tourist destination, Ohrid, with all its beauty and right conditions for vacationing, wasn't yet well known, and a large number of people who rented out apartments for tourists invested very little to make them more attractive and affordable to stay in.

Besides me, my sister's husband was the second happiest person regarding the house I'd purchased in Ohrid. My sister was also happy, of course, but not as much as him. My brother-in-law was born in these parts of the city and his life's aspiration was to own a house in Ohrid. That's why he was overjoyed when I bought the house… that someone from the family now owned a house in Ohrid. He didn't understand why my husband reacted the way he did… getting angry at me for buying the house in this wonderful city... especially on the lakeshore. My brother-in-law went to see my husband several times, to discuss the matter, but my husband refused to talk about it.

My brother-in-law lived and owned a house in Skopje. He had made additions to it and was somewhat experienced with construction work. He wasn't as experienced as the construction workers but he was a good helper. He also supervised the work and managed to finish it very quickly. Despite being a doctor, he had a special gift for technical details.

One day, while we were struggling to solve the issue of bringing water to my house, he spotted a hole in the adjoining wall of Milena's bathroom. He fitted a pipe through the wall hoping to connect the water pipes from my house to those of Milena's house. But in order to do that we needed to turn off the water. There was no valve inside Milena's house so we asked our neighbours how to turn it off from the outside; more specifically, we asked our neighbours to tell us where the main shutoff valve was on the street. Amazingly no one seemed to know.

We then contacted the Waterworks but they too couldn't help us. They told us that the water for the entire region had to be turned off and it wasn't possible to do that. The valve to turn off the water, they told us, was located in the city square. But as we later found out, there was a shutoff valve located in the immediate vicinity of my house. Unfortunately it was deliberately covered up and we were

unable to find it. I guess they didn't want us to bring water to my house. But my brother-in-law solved the problem by connecting the pipes from my house to the pipe in front of Milena's water meter, and the water we used was measured by a separate water meter we installed.

The next issue was connecting the sewer pipe. We solved that problem in a similar way. In doing so, we had to dig through the entire backyard until we found the drain pipe from Milena's house. We connected our sewer pipe to hers.

Our next door neighbour tried several times to stop us from digging in the yard, arguing that we had no right to do that. He even physically threatened the workers but he failed.

We later rebuild the torn down wall which bordered our next door neighbour. Later we asked our friends to help us rebuild the roof and lay roof tiles. Eight of them showed up. Their numbers intimidated our next door neighbour who caused us no problems. Eventually the house was rebuilt and made inhabitable It was the middle of summer when we finished.

I just returned from Ohrid. I was pleased that my house was progressively being renovated. I was happy to tell my children that. And it was true; the house was completely different in appearance. People passing by stopped to look, wondering if it was the same house. Some even asked me questions and rejoiced with me as I answered them.

Late in the evening before we went to bed my son, with a bit of worry on his face, said:

"Mom, Dad suggested that my sister and I to go on vacation with him to Greece. It will be for fifteen days. Are you going to allow us to go?"

I was about to scream but I restrained myself. I don't know how many times I had begged Mitko to take us on vacation to Greece or somewhere else on the sea, instead of Ohrid, but he didn't even want to hear about it. Why is he doing this now? To spite me?! But the moment I realized it wasn't the child's fault I refrained from screaming! I realized that we were in a new situation now and my children were asking me for permission to let them go on vacation with their father. And of course I felt they should, so I asked:

"When are you expected to go?"

"This Friday," he replied.

At that moment my daughter came out of her room looking a little guilty. She asked:

"Mom, are you going to be angry if we go?"

"No, of course not, why should I be angry? I know you're tired of vacationing in Ohrid every year, you should go to Greece. I will go to Ohrid, I still have a lot of things to do there. You should come to

Ohrid when you return. The renovations on the house should be done by then," I replied.

Both of my children ran over to me and happily started hugging me. They were probably relieved that I hadn't gotten angry with them and also because they would have a chance to go to the sea for the first time. And let's not forget the fact that I had allowed them go on vacation with their father.

I was well aware that I had no right to keep them with me. At the same time, I was happy that they had made contact with their father and that they were seeing him from time to time; that they weren't estranged from their father. He also gave them money, as much as he could afford, which they always brought home and gave to me knowing that I would spend it on our common needs.

That Friday my children took a taxi to the railway station where they met their father and the three went on vacation to Greece.

After I sent my children away on vacation I went back to a completely empty apartment. I cried for the first time since Mitko had left. "Life is very cruel," I thought. There is bitterness in everything, even if you get the most desirable thing you want. At times it seemed that what was happening to me could only happen to other people… "That could never happen to me..." I thought. Then, after so many years of living together, Mitko decided to make a drastic move and leave me. He left so unexpectedly that it was a shock to me. I couldn't have even imagined it; that such a thing could happen to me. But it did! Now the question was, "could we patch things up and return to the harmonious life we used to have?' I didn't know; if that was even possible. I felt sorry for our children. They were torn between their father and me in the best years of their lives. Why? It made no sense... Something that was so wonderful had turned upside down. Now I had nothing left but hope. That hope kept me going. My friend, the psychiatrist, helped me keep that hope alive.

My closest family members, my friends and many others with whom I associated couldn't believe what had happened between me and

Mitko. Some tried to convince him to come back home, but apparently he wasn't ready yet.

The only people I didn't hear from were his sister and brother-in-law. They didn't even call me on the telephone. Well, I didn't call them either.

Every time I went to see the psychiatrist to inquire about Mitko, he assured me that it wouldn't be long before Mitko returned to me and our children. But that "not long" continued to prolong. At times I almost lost hope. My whole body convulsed at the thought of "what if it never happened?" I repeatedly asked the psychiatrist to arrange a meeting for me to see Mitko, in his presence of course, but he believed that Mitko wasn't yet ready for that.

"I will decide when you can see him," he kept telling me.

"But you don't understand, Doctor, I'm afraid that the longer we wait the further away he will be from us," I would say to him.

Despite all my pleading the psychiatrist stood his ground. Sometimes I felt like ignoring his advice and going to see him anyway. "Perhaps when he leaves work," I thought, but I was afraid of aggravating him even more. It was important to me that he hadn't distanced himself from our children. They became more and more mature with each passing month. Not once did they blame me for the difficult situation in which we all found ourselves. They regularly went to see their father and loved him no less than when he was at home.

Unfortunately, after her last visit with the psychiatrist, Violeta had lost all hope that things would be sorted out soon. But the psychiatrist persisted that he was certain that the current situation would be resolved soon. Violeta, however, wasn't so sure… She started to question if listening to the psychiatrist was the right thing to do. The psychiatrist again advised her not to contact Mitko and not to ask him to talk about the hurtful things that had happened to him. Violeta wanted to tell Mitko that at no point did she mean to do anything with regards to purchasing the house, without his agreement. She had no idea

that her actions would offend him so much. Mitko surely remembered that she had bought both the first and second car on her own! He had no problem with her making the purchase instead of him. Mitko himself had told her that he wasn't very good at doing such things. Violeta figured that if she spoke to him directly she would find out if Mitko had left because of the house… She wanted to know from him if what she did had humiliated him… She wanted to tell him that she'd bought the house because she believed he would be overjoyed, because he loved Ohrid. About the money...? She wanted to tell him that she wasn't hiding the money for sinister reasons… She hid the money because if Mitko knew it existed he would have spent it. He knew that… He also knew that they lived a decent and modest life.

Violeta was sure she could convince the doctor to let her speak with Mitko if she explained these things to him the next time she went to see him. On the other hand, if Violeta acted too passively with Mitko he might think that he had been right to leave her. And what if he thought that she was indifferent to the fact that he'd left home? Would he think she no longer loved him?!

A few days earlier when my children and I were packing their bags for their vacation to Greece, without warning, I asked:

"Did you ever think that I no longer loved your father?"

My son and daughter first looked at each other, and then immediately rushed towards me, gave me a hug and said:

"No mother, never…!"

I asked the question with hopes that, since they were going to spent a long time with their father, they might be able to convince him that I still cared for him, to assure him that we could resolve our current issues and could again live together as a family like we had before. Although I didn't tell them this explicitly, I thought the children would understand my message. I don't know why I hoped that after vacationing in Greece, they would be able to convince their father to

come home with them. But that didn't happen. Mitko didn't come home.

For the first time in a long time, that summer Mitko didn't come to Ohrid. I didn't know what to tell my friends. There was no other way out except to lie to them. I told them he had problems with his spine and the doctors ordered him to lie down!

The children and I became used to living alone. After returning from Greece my son and daughter immediately came home to be with me. Maybe they were sorry that they'd left me alone all this time while vacationing with their father.

A few days after they arrived we went to see the house. My son and daughter couldn't believe how much it had changed.

"Is this the same house?" one of them asked. "No, it can't be!" replied the other one.

"Mom, in spite of all the obstacles, how did you manage to dress it up so well? We can live in it now..." one of them said.

The next day they called their father begging him to come and see the house. They even took pictures of it and sent them to him.

Unfortunately Mitko didn't come.

One day Mitko came home unexpectedly, just like he'd left. A taxi stopped in front of our house one afternoon and Mitko got out of it. The taxi driver opened the trunk and handed him his suitcases. After that I heard Mitko come inside the yard, unlock the front door of the house and walk in. He then put his suitcases in the hallway. I was lying down on the couch in the living room pretending to be asleep. My heart started beating fast. I didn't know what to do. Mitko tiptoed inside the house quietly and when he saw me lying down he moved his suitcases into the bedroom. Some time later I heard him taking a shower. I figured he'd come back.

Some time later the children came home.

When I heard them come inside I pretended to wake up. They didn't make a big deal about their father returning. They behaved like adults and showed no surprise. It was like he had just come back from a business trip. They started telling him how they were doing in school, what the teachers were like, what their plans were for their education in the future, etc. I tried not to meet Mitko's gaze and he did the same. I remembered the advice my friend the psychologist had given me about how to behave around him. Most importantly to be calm...

When I mustered up enough courage to speak I said, "Who wants to set the table for dinner? And who wants to make the salad?"

Both of my children ran into the kitchen and began to bring out plates, forks, knives and glasses. Mitko went into the kitchen and started making the salad, which he used to make regularly. My daughter turned on the television where we watched advertisements for vacation destinations...

After watching for a while my daughter was first to speak, "Dad, this year I'm not going to object, like other years, if you say you

want to spend the summer in Ohrid! If we go there you don't have to spend money on hotels!"

We all laughed. The program on television started playing beautiful music like we had especially ordered it.

From then on we continued with our lives like nothing had happened. Like Mitko had never left…

...Even though I was prepared for anything after Mitko returned home, I still felt like I was living in a vortex.

I was startled when, a few days ago, I heard the psychiatrist's voice on the telephone. I hadn't heard from him for a long time. I thought that something bad had happened to Mitko. But then he said:

"My dear Violeta I have good news for you. A little while ago Mitko unexpectedly came to see me. He said he had been asleep for a long time. When he woke up he left the house. He was so confused he stepped out on the road and was almost run over by a speeding car. After he recovered from his shock he thought about it. He sat down on the side of the road and watched his whole life flash before his eyes, like he was watching a film. Panting from exhaustion he entered my office trying to catch his breath. Moments later he said, 'Violeta may have been wrong for what she did but she didn't deserve the harsh punishment she received from me... Her and our children… I'm afraid there's no going back for me. I don't believe Violeta will ever forgive me…' He said all that in a single breath. After he said that I thought about it for a moment and said, 'If she still loves you, and you love her, I think forgiveness will come on its own...' His face turned bright and before I could add anything, he left my office. I don't know what he will decide to do..." concluded the doctor and hung up the phone.

I stood there listening quietly until the connection was broken... The children must have heard what the doctor said and started hugging me excitedly. Then they ran around the apartment jumping for joy.

...We were all so grateful to the doctor… We were a family again...

In the fall, I submitted another request to the City Assembly asking for a permit to do some general work on the outside of the house. I made the request both in writing and orally. I tried to convince the president, the second person in charge from the top in the City Assembly that the house, although small, should have a better appearance, especially on the outside because it was located on the first row, next to the lake, where tourists and locals went by. From what I had heard, the president was not only good at his job, but he was one of the most visible, cultured and educated persons in the City Assembly. I figured he would understand what I was trying to do; which was investing money in the betterment of our community. Even though my house was small, if properly looked after, it could add to the beauty of that unique, wonderful and beautiful coastline.

This time I got a positive response and it was miraculous! This person thought about it and decided to approve my request. I couldn't believe it. I could hardly restrain my excitement when I went to see him. After I spoke with him I made an appointment to see him again in three days to pick up my permit. I excitedly thanked him many times as I left his office.

Unfortunately, on the third day, I was detained in Skopje doing urgent official work at my job so I asked my sister Mirjana to go to Ohrid early in the morning and pick up my permit. I arrived in Ohrid in the afternoon.

Like we agreed, my sister arrived in Ohrid in the morning and went to the Assembly office at nine o'clock when it opened. About two hours later Mirjana called me on the phone to tell me that she wasn't able to get my permit, she wasn't even able to see the president's secretary. She was held up in the reception area as people came and went. She was told to remain there until she was called by the president's secretary. Several hours later I called her to see what was happening but I wasn't able to get her on the phone. I was getting annoyed not knowing what was happening.

After I finished the job I was working on in Skopje, I took the first bus to Ohrid. I found the house locked. My sister wasn't there. I thought she had gone somewhere to do something else. I figured she didn't know I was here and was getting anxious looking for her, or

she figured I hadn't yet arrived. In any case I was getting frustrated waiting for her.

Finally there was a knock on the front door. I figured it was her and ran to open it. It was her but by the expression on her face I wasn't sure if she'd gotten my permit. Now that she was here I no longer cared that she was late. She handed me my permit and said, "success - finally!"

I was about to ask her what had happened when she said, "Be patient, I will tell you what happened, I will tell you what obstacles I had to go through this morning to get you your permit and why I am late. I came back straight from the Assembly!"

"You mean to tell me that you spent this whole time, from this morning, at the Assembly?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yes, I spent all this time there. I haven't eaten anything since this morning, I haven't had anything to drink, not even water," she replied sounding tired, shaking her head as she spoke.

"Really?!" I asked and then said, "First have a bite to eat and something to drink and then you can tell me what happened."

While Mirjana was having something to eat I looked over the permit. When I was done I went over and gave my sister a big hug and then I jumped with joy all around the house.

After Mirjana was finished eating she started to tell me what had happened. She said she was told to wait until the president signed the permit. She was told that the permit had been typed and would be given to her soon. But that didn't happen. After waiting for several hours in the reception area she was finally called to go to the secretary's office. There too my sister sat and waited for hours. While waiting she saw the president come out of his office several times. Each time he came out and passed by the secretary he looked uncomfortable. He was angry, sweating and looked nervous. Something wasn't right but Mirjana didn't know what it was. All this time he didn't ask her to go and come back tomorrow. He kept

her there. She understood that he was trying hard to get her the permit the same day, but she didn't know why he just didn't do it.

In a twisted way the secretary tried to explain to her that the permit had to also be signed by another authorized engineer but all the engineers were out in the field... And the permit would be signed when they returned but the secretary either didn't know or she didn't want to tell my sister when they were coming back.

"It seems that the engineers went away on purpose, they literally disappeared after they found out the president was looking for them," said the secretary in a quiet tone of voice.

"The end of the working day was approaching," continued Mirjana. "The president opened his office door and angrily asked the secretary to call another engineer... I don't remember what her name was. He also told the secretary not to tell her why he wanted to see her. The secretary immediately left and soon after came back with a woman, who was probably the engineer. The woman walked into the president's office and moments later I heard the president say 'I'm ordering you to sign this permit; it's your official duty!'

After a short silence the president's office door opened, the engineer came out and left.

I then heard the call bell ring. The secretary immediately went into the president's office and when she came out she handed me the permit and said, 'Tell your sister Violeta that I couldn't believe that her enemy had so many tentacles. How can there be so much evil in the souls of people? Also tell her that there are good people too.'..."

"My dear sister," I said, "the president didn't want us to know that he was surrounded by corrupt people. Worse than that is the fact that those people work against him and are trying to depose him. They oppose him at every opportunity and won't allow him to act according to his conscience... And he knows that."

I have won the battle… for now. Or at least it seemed that way. I thought that my next door neighbour's belief that he could force me to give up my house by harassing and pressuring me would be reduced to a minimum.

But that didn't happen. He didn't relent and neither did his wife. They both continued to threaten me and my family and harass my workers. Also from time to time, they damaged my property at every opportunity.

My biggest fear was that my husband, his male friends or even the workers might get fed up being harassed, lose their patience and physically attack the neighbour. I did my best to avoid that. Most often I tried to solve conflicts on my own by calling the authorities. That helped… most of the time.

One time one of my workers climbed on the roof to rearrange some of the ceramic roof tiles. I was inside the house when suddenly I heard the next door neighbour yell loudly at the worker, ordering him to stop working and get off the roof. I immediately found myself in my yard. I saw the neighbour standing in his yard threatening the man with violence. It sounded to me like he said he was going to get his gun and shoot him... I immediately asked the worker to come down. In the meantime my next door neighbour grabbed a pick and raised it high in an attempt to scare the worker and force him to stop working.

I called the police. Two policemen arrived immediately, like they were nearby waiting for the call. The policemen made an attempt to detain my neighbour but somehow they quickly agreed to just give him a warning; to refrain from violent behaviour.

His wife, on the other hand, kept shouting insulting words every time she passed by me, and sometimes spat at me. She even stuck

her tongue out one time while standing at her window, believing no one else would see her. It was comical!

That summer Milena too came to Ohrid but just for a few days. She was supposed to travel abroad, to Sweden, where her daughter was married and lived. Milena was my age and the more I got to know her, the more I appreciated her company. Even though she had been left single and alone at a young age, her husband had recently died and her daughter had moved abroad, she seemed happy and had a constant gentle smile on her face. Her naturally blond hair stood like a halo around her head and perfectly matched the movement of her restless blue eyes. She often laughed out loud and made others around her laugh. She often said that she had an obligation in Belgrade to take care of two older women, her mother and her mother-in-law. At the same time, she worked for a big airline and had a lot of responsibility.

It seems Milena came to Ohrid to see the progress we had made on our small house. She hadn't seen the house since she'd sold it to me. She was curious to know what we had done with it. While we were renovating the place she called to tell me not to block the door that connected her big house to mine and not to fence our two backyards because there was no other exit door to the back. Had we blocked the door we wouldn't be able to go out if there was any need for it, especially if we needed to do roof maintenance. She was very helpful with her suggestions. Having a common backyard was necessary for both of our houses.

There was a small old wooden door located at the back of the house exiting into the yard. It had an unusual huge antique door lock. From that we found out that the house had been built about a hundred years earlier.

It appeared that both my little house and Milena's big house were built during Ottoman times. After doing some research we found out that both houses were built by a Turkish governor from Bitola, so that he could vacation in Ohrid, the most beautiful city in all of Macedonia. He often went there alone or with his friends. The house had a huge old wooden gate, with an entrance from the lake. The staircase at the entrance extended to both houses symmetrically,

ending at the veranda where there were tall wooden doors leading to the four huge chambers. Inside there were three other doors, two leading to the two bathrooms and one to the pantry. The ceilings in the rooms were covered with wood. Carved in the centre of the ceilings were wooden ornaments. Wooden staircases led to the upper floor. The upper floor had a number of rooms. A dozen or so small glass skylights were built in the middle of the ceiling above one of the rooms. All the rooms, both on the lower and upper floors, had wooden floors.

The small house was used to house the servants who had direct access into the big house through an entrance that connected the two houses. This way the servants could go from the little house to the big house without having to go outside. Over the years, however, someone sealed the connecting door with a wall. The front door of the small house was also very old but it was installed later, along with iron bars on the windows which were installed for protection by the family who later acquired the house.

When the workers started doing repairs on the back wall where the old door was located, we decided to replace the big door with a smaller, more modern one. But in order to do that we needed to build a smaller door frame. A large part of the wall had to be closed off. At this point, however, none of our neighbours knew that we had obtained a permit to do the job.

Just as the door frame was coming together, our next door neighbour and his wife ran from their backyard into ours and started pushing the frame with their hands, trying to wreck it.

The workers and I were amazed at their brazen attitude. As we stood there stunned, we started yelling at them to stop doing that. When my husband Mitko heard us yelling he came running outside, still sleepy. He was sleeping in the big house and was awoken by our shouts. The moment he saw the neighbours pushing the door frame, which had just been built, he grabbed a huge brick and was ready to toss it at them. Thank God one of the workers grabbed him and saved the day.

The two quickly fled back into their yard. They rushed so fast that they almost broke their legs running through the pile of broken bricks. From that day on, they were more cautious when they expressed their displeasure.

After that incident I decided to install bright lights in the yard and keep them on all night as well as have someone stay on guard. One of us either had to stay awake all night and watch the place or sleep in the yard to make sure nothing was destroyed. It seemed like we were renovating our house during the World War II occupation.

When we weren't there, our next door neighbours often threatened our workers in an attempt to convince them not to work for us. They frequently intimidated them, blackmailed them and threatened their lives. Many of them left.

After we got our permit we managed to renovate some part of the house each day. One day I was alone with the workers. It was a Sunday. I had asked them to remove some old ceramic roof tiles and replace them with new ones. It was around nine o'clock in the morning. Just as they started working and hadn't even removed ten tiles, a stranger came into my yard. He was wearing pyjamas under his pants. He introduced himself as the president of the Ohrid Municipal Court. I didn't know the Ohrid Municipal Court president nor what he looked like, but I began to wonder if there was something wrong with this person. Immediately after he introduced himself he began to threaten both me and my workers. He ordered them to stop working immediately. He said that there was a dispute regarding a wall, the one on the neighbour's side, and therefore we were not allowed to repair anything in the house. He tried to tell us that the house I'd bought had only three walls, and that the fourth wall belonged to my next door neighbour. He also implied that the roof of my house stood on top of my neighbour's wall! And because of that my neighbour was suing me. And because of the pending lawsuit all construction activity had to stop until this issue was resolved by the court.

At first I was confused but as I quickly recovered from my confusion I told this person that I hadn't been notified of such a lawsuit. I also said that I hadn't received an order to temporarily

stop the renovations on my house. Unfortunately he pretended not to hear me and continued to loudly threaten me and my workers. At that point I got angry and said:

"I don't know who you are or who you claim to be. If you truly are the President of the Court then please give me a written order to stop the work. This kind of business is usually conducted during business hours on a working day, not early in the morning on a Sunday. You come out here in the yard of my house on a non-working day, at nine o'clock in the morning telling me you're the Court President and I'm supposed to believe you? And why are you chasing my workers and ordering them to stop working? What do they have to do with you?" I also said, "Since I don't know who you are then please give me a signed order to stop the work. Also make sure you write your full name and your personal identification number on it so that I can verify who you are."

Even before I was finished speaking to him I pulled out a pad of paper and a pen from my purse and placed them on the terrace table. When I was done talking I pointed to them and said, "Now write the order!"

At that moment he looked away and spoke to my next door neighbour who was standing behind me. I hadn't noticed him but he was standing right behind me. He said:

"Imagine the nerve of this woman. She doesn't believe that I am the President of the Court! Tell her, please!"

My neighbour and his wife both said:

"Yes, he's the president, he is!"

Encouraged by their validation he began to yell at me. He said:

"You impudent woman…! How dare you question my credentials and ask me to do this?"

He then angrily pointed at the pad of paper and pen.

I then brazenly said, "Who then should I be asking to write the order if not you, the Court President. If you truly are the Court President than that's who you are but don't expect me to believe you. A court president does business in court on a working day, not in my yard on a Sunday morning wearing pyjamas and attempting to prevent my workers from doing what they are paid to do!"

After I said that his face turned red and he started to walk away towards the exit of my yard. I guess he'd decided that he'd had enough. But just as he was about to leave another stranger arrived. He flew into my yard like an arrow. He was a short, ugly fat man. He was out of breath probably from running. He must have been called by my next door neighbour. From the first step he took into my yard he started yelling at my workers to stop working. Initially he ignored me but then he said:

"I'm Judge Petreski, I am handling Trajan Ceneski's court request and I order you to stop the work immediately, because both you and your workers will be charged and fined!" Trajan Ceneski was my next door neighour.

Just like I told the other person who was still standing in my yard, I said to him, "Every citizen knows that judges lead legal disputes in the courts, as prescribed by law, and not in people's yards and by intimidating them."

Like the other person he too ignored what I said and again started yelling at the workers and attempted to take down their names.

When I asked him to give me the order to stop working in writing he pretended he didn't hear me right and said, "Are you refusing to accept the court order?" This was a ploy on his part to make it look like I was disobeying the Court.

I then loudly said, "Stop your lies, I asked you to give me the court order in writing!"

Just as I said that another person landed in my yard. This person was shorter and uglier than the supposed judge. He introduced himself as Ratko the building inspector. Now I had three strangers in my yard

who claimed to be government officials. I guess my next door neighbour had also called him to strengthen his attack against me. This man too started harassing my workers even more violently. He ordered them to clean themselves up, get dressed in their normal clothing and leave the house. I advised them to do so, so as not to face any consequences. The building inspector, or whoever he was, was also rude to me.

After the workers went inside to change I was left outside with the circus consisting of my next door neighbour, his wife, the so-called president of the Court, the so-called judge and the so-called building inspector. What a spectacle this was... After the workers hastily left, the so-called building inspector triumphantly closed the door. After that they all shook hands with great satisfaction, loudly cackling with pleasure and rejoicing, attracting the attention of locals who just happened to be passing by. Some came over to see what was going on and were amazed by the spectacle. Some mocked them while wondering what their reward would be for this brazen act of corruption. It was clear to me that this wasn't only an abuse of office, but also an abuse of the law. What kind of lawlessness was this in this day and age?!

A few days later I found a thin, dirty sheet of paper stuck in my door which looked nothing like an official document. It was just an ordinary piece of paper claiming to be a court order to stop all construction work on my house. It had no date, no stamp and the signature was smudged. It became clear to me that this was an act on their behalf to placate my next door neighbour. Why had they committed this illegal act? Only they knew.

A little later I informed the authorities in writing about this. I told them what had happened and that these characters who were charged with upholding the law were actually abusing their privileges. Surprisingly the authorities took some measures to get the truth. The Court President was forced to leave his post. The building inspector was transferred to another job. Only the judge remained in his old position.

Unfortunately, even after all that, my next door neighbour didn't give up on his attempts to pressure us to give up our house. My

other neighbours were surprised at his ill-will towards us and no longer kept silent. When asked they told the truth. That my neighbour was given many opportunities to buy this house, but he didn't want to. It was clear that he hoped to eventually acquire the house for free after it was condemned to be demolished. So why did my next door neighbour go through all this with me? Was he angry for his own mistakes? The entire situation he put us through was absurd. When I bought the house I knew nothing of its history, especially with my next door neighbour.

This reminded me of a recent comical incident that took place between two people, who were actually close friends. One day these two went fishing with their friends at the lakeshore. They were using custom made hooks. One of them caught a big fish weighing several kilograms, but as he tried to reel it in his fishing line snapped and he lost the fish with his hook left in its mouth. Four or five days later the same group of men went fishing again at the same spot. This time the other man caught a big fish and managed to reel it in. When he brought it ashore, everyone saw that it had the other man's hook in its mouth. At that point the man who had previously caught it and lost it yelled:

"Hey, that's my fish! Give it to me! That's my hook in its mouth. You all know that… That fish belongs to me…" he said and grabbed the fish attempting to take it forcefully from his friend.

"How can that be your fish when I caught it with my hook and reeled it in with my rod? You lost your fish the other day. It went back into the lake! The fish I caught is mine!" said the other man.

At that point an argument ensued which could have ended badly. Fortunately the others confirmed that the fish belonged to the person who had reeled it out of the lake, thus ending the argument... This was similar to how the situation with my house went.

One of the things that encouraged me to continue to fight for my house was the fact that almost all my neighbours disapproved of my next door neighbour's unscrupulous behaviour... his and his wife's. Even his own close relatives, who lived close by, didn't approve of his conduct. When people began to find out about my next door

neighbour's unfair practices in his dispute with me, they started giving me their support. That included two young brothers with university degrees. They stopped by my fence every time they passed by, encouraging me to fight and giving me their support.

There was also a Turkish family that lived on the same street right behind my next door neighbour... father, mother, son and daughter. They were native to Ohrid, humble people, and, as some would say, good, hardworking people. They owned a shop in the city and made a good living. They were on good terms with all their neighbours. Every time we ran into them they always smiled and had something nice to say. They won me over the moment I met them. Their children had been raised among Macedonian children and were good friends with them. There was no difference at all between them and the Macedonians except for their religion, traditions and customs. They spoke Macedonian just like us. For centuries their relations, sociability and friendship with their neighbours had been nurtured. They always greeted each other when they met and never failed to celebrate each other's special religious holidays. When I met the lady of the house, the children's mother, I could see from her noble face that she had passed on her characteristic traits and behaviour to her children. It was the same with her husband.

However, I didn't meet the Turkish lady's husband until much later. One day I was on the sidewalk trying to fold a large nylon sheet that had been left on top of my fence by my workers after they removed it from the roof of my house. I tried to pull it out and fold it on my own but I was unable. As I was struggling a stranger pulled up and helped me. I politely thanked him. I later found out that he was the Turkish woman's husband.

After all the troubles we'd had with our drinking water we found out that there was a clear water spring at the end of the street. The water traveled through a large pipe and emptied into a decorative well. The well was located in the courtyard of the two brothers I mentioned earlier. The two brothers lived in the same house, were married and had two children each. Their mother, Velika, also lived with them and they all got along well. The well was practically available to whoever wanted water and the courtyard gate was always open. This is what their father, who one day unexpectedly

died, wanted and by doing so they fulfilled his bequest. Their yard was full of many kinds of flowers and green plants, beautifully arranged and cared for by the family with love and attention. The place was so beautiful that anyone who went in the courtyard didn't want to leave. Following the pathway to the house after entering the yard gate was a natural canopy of kiwi trees loaded with overhanging fruit. These, as well as other trees, kept a thick shade over the tables set up in the courtyard and fountains gushing spring water. It was no surprise that many tourists rented their two-story house and spent their summers there year after year. All the paths in the courtyard were paved with terrazzo and light brown pieces of marble. The environment all around was beautifully arranged. The decorations were created by the skilful hands of the family, especially the hands of the younger brothers and their mother. People who regularly visited their place felt their vitality renewed. The clean currents of air that gently blew over the lake waters day and night, the spring water that people regularly drank were made possible by this noble family. All these good things certainly contributed to preserving people's health.

Their yard was separated from their neighbour's yard by a small fence made of several evergreen trees, each artistically pruned to a special and beautiful shape. The place was furnished with tables and benches made of thick natural wood, arranged in close proximity next to each other. The various decorative trees all around were of different shapes and sizes. The yard was also decorated with many colourful flowers. And in all this resided the two brothers and their families. Their two story house with several apartments was especially built to accommodate tourists. Even though this place wasn't at the lakeshore, by its beauty, hospitality and good service it attracted many people. No one seemed to mind that the lake was fifty metres away at the end of the street.

Next to the yard of these people was another two-story house where a family of four lived. They supported themselves by making and selling candles. They were so busy working they had no time to socialize with their neighbours. It felt like they were living closed inside the walls of their house. But that wasn't true, most of their days they spent selling their candles. Their craft was very important

especially among people of faith. Their children also helped with the business.

Next to the candle makers' house was the house where our friends Nikola and Ljubica lived. Their house was old and dilapidated and looked like it was leaning against the candle makers' house. Nikola worked in one of the few local factories in this town, which you could count on your fingers. He was quite thin and had a devilish expression on his face. He was often humorous and always had something to say, as if it was constantly on the tip of his tongue. He was well liked by many people. Most often his jokes had an undertone of satire addressed at the current government. He even joked about people passing by, about tourists he didn't even know. In his jokes he often compared people's behaviour to that of animals and birds. One could say that he was full of wisdom and cunning. His wife, my good friend Ljubica, worked at the Historical Archives. She was devoted to her household and domestic duties. Their daughter was married in Skopje and lived there with her husband and children. Their son lived with them.

According to some legal technicality, Ljubica was scheduled to retire from her job prematurely and soon. She was very disappointed when she found out. The next time I saw her she was very worried about how she would survive without a job. She was also worried about how she would spend her time. Her prospects of getting another job were slim because this was a time when companies were disbanding and factories closing down. This, of course, was done deliberately by the people in power to devalue the worth of government owned assets so that they could seize them for themselves at lower prices. Not too long after Ljubica lost her job, Nikola and their son, who worked in the same factory, also lost their jobs. All of a sudden all three were out of work.

One day when we were sitting on the stone fence at the lakeshore, near our houses, Ljubica said:

"We just planted a vegetable garden, I hope that will be enough. I don't know how else we're going to survive.

I knew that Ljubica was capable of fine embroidery and had done a lot of embroidery work, especially on large tapestries.

So I mentioned to her that I'd heard that expatriate Macedonians visiting Macedonia adored that kind of stuff and wanted to buy them for large sums of money and take them back with them to remind them of home. She laughed and said:

"Poor us if we have to depend on them…"

I then remembered one time she'd told me how much she wanted to go to art school but that her parents wouldn't let her. Then without even asking her, they enrolled her in the school of economics.

"If not embroidery why not art?" I replied. "I know it's kind of boring but you could start drawing again. What do you say?"

She laughed again.

"You're kidding me, right?" she said.

A few days later she invited me for coffee and shyly showed me a sketch she was working on. It was of a stream with a weeping willow on the side with hanging branches. It was nice, I really liked it.

"You see, you are really talented!" I said.

When I was ready to go I offered to buy the drawing and immediately took out some money, not much but also not a little. She laughed even more this time but I gave her the money anyway. I put the money on her table, grabbed the sketch and ran for the exit. She tried to put the money in my pocket but couldn't catch me.

I hadn't seen her for a while. But when we met at the lake, she boasted that she had made more sketches.

I found out from our neighbours that a famous painter had come to her house to vacation for the summer and saw her sketches and paintings. His encouragement seemed to have awakened her desire

to paint. Months and years later she made contact with many painters who helped her learn the craft. So painting became her daily activity for many hours. She continued to do this for years and painted and sold several hundred paintings, some on canvas. Her husband Nikola helped her frame them and participated in several exhibitions of amateur painters. She even managed to show her paintings at an exclusive exhibition set up just for her.

Her husband Nikola spent most of his time in the streets or on the lakeshore promoting Ljubica's paintings with much wit and humour. He contributed a lot to the affirmation of Ljubica's paintings. He himself was the son of artists. But even though he was a craftsman, he greatly appreciated art. Their house was filled with many artistic paintings painted by good artists and together with Ljubica's paintings it looked like an art gallery.

Our street became even more beautiful when another large, modern house was added to it. It was built on the site of an old, empty Turkish house which had been locked up for years. As a result more space was created to accommodate vacationing tourists who came to Ohrid from different countries from all over the world. Even though they were middle aged, the owners worked tirelessly to create the right conditions for their guests. Their children, who already had their own families, helped them as much as they could.

The former multi-story Music School, located on the corner of our street, was one of the buildings most noticed and photographed by tourists in the whole area. This building really looked imposing with its oval windows overlooking the lake. It had taken many years to build it but it was worth it. Even more striking were the multi-coloured flowers hanging down, like curtains, which decorated many of the windows. Unfortunately the building was privately owned by wealthy families who didn't open it for tourists to spend their summer there.

At this point I must also mention two other brothers who lived in our immediate neighbourhood who contributed to the culture of our community. One was a doctor, a top specialist, the other a famous pathologist. Both had acquired their education in Belgrade. Their father was also a doctor. The people of Ohrid remembered him as

one of the most humane people in the city... and even though he belonged to a different nationality the old doctor had no problem making friends with everyone. He belonged to a humane profession dedicated to helping all people. The new house was built on the same plot as the old house where the two brothers and their families had previously lived. The house was located next to the old Music School. It extended to the other corner, all the way down the street, which began from the lakeshore and led to a large intersection towards the cenre of the city. This new building, appropriately named "villa", was beautiful in appearance and had windows overlooking the lake. Many tourists vacationed there. The owners were gentle and friendly people who always smiled and greeted me every time we met.

Two or three weeks after the so-called President of the Ohrid Court came into my yard to stop me from doing further work on my house, I received a blue envelope in my mailbox at my address in Skopje. It was stamped with a court seal from the Court of Ohrid. Inside it was a document outlining the lawsuit that my next door neighbour had launched against me. It was a basic request to establish that the back wall of my house was his property and he wanted it back. This particular wall, according to my next door neighbour, had been erected parallel to his wall on his property about twenty years ago. As I went inside my house with the piece of paper in my hand I laughed. "So now according to my next door neighbour my house had no fourth wall and my roof was held up by only three walls..." I thought to myself.

Towards the end of the summer I received a court summons to attend a hearing. It was in Ohrid.

When I went inside the court I immediately recognized the judge. He was the same person who had come into my yard with the Court President that Sunday morning to chase my workers away and stop them from making repairs on my house.

When the trial started I addressed the judge as follows: "Your Honour, the claim my esteemed next door neighbour is making is absurd and should never have made it to trial. It should have been dismissed even before the trial was scheduled. How can the fourth

wall of my house not belong to my house? Was my roof built on three walls?"

Unfortunately the judge didn't react; he pretended not to hear me. Once again, at that point I realized that this trial was rigged. My next door neighbour and the judge were friends or the judge owed him something. The trial was a sham… a tragic comedy. At one point my next door neighbour claimed that the fourth wall of my house was not mine. That wall, according to him, was a dividing wall since Ottoman times, erected on his property. It was the wall that divided his yard from that of Milena's husband's father. And now he wanted it back. That would certainly mean that my house was extending onto his property and had to be taken down! What nonsense!

After the first hearing was postponed, in order for my next door neighbour to summon his witnesses, another forty-seven hearings followed, which I had no choice but to attend. All those times I had to leave my job in Skopje to be in Ohrid. But when I arrived, I would find that the hearing was postponed for some reason or another, either a witness didn't show up or my next door neighbour failed to attend because he was working in another city. Even though the trails were scheduled in advance, most of them were postponed but I was rarely notified.

At one of the trials, my next door neighbour summoned a fake expert from the land registry. He walked into the court with a big book and a huge scroll and made a claim that the disputed wall belonged to my next door neighbour and not to me, the new owner who'd just bought the house.

As was expected, the judge ruled in favour of my next door neighbour, beyond reason.

I wasn't going to stand for that, of course, and so I appealed the ridiculous verdict. Unfortunately, due to some irregularities in how the trial was conducted, the upper court sent the case back to be tried again in the lower court.

Before the second trial started I asked the court to remove the judge who presided over my case during the first trial. To my surprise, not

only did the court remove the judge and appoint another, but the first judge himself was happy to be taken off this ridiculous case.

After the new judge scheduled the first court hearing, my next door neighbour realized that his frivolous claim would be dismissed so he requested that the court appoint a new judge. The court again appointed a new judge, this time a woman.

"My torment will continue..." I thought to myself when I walked into the courtroom. But then I saw the new judge, a young, beautiful, modern woman, who at first glance made a good impression on me. I was happy to see her presiding over my case. And for the first time I secured two witnesses. One was present but the second one excused himself with a written statement, claiming that he couldn't attend the hearing due to illness.

But to my surprise, the judge wouldn't allow me or my witness to testify. But she did allow my next door neighbour and his witnesses to testify.

When I tried to object the judge threatened to remove me from the courtroom. After that it became risky for me to say anything.

At the end of the hearing, the judge scheduled a new hearing. In fact, the court decided to conduct an on-site inspection and hold the hearing there.

I was convinced that this hearing too would be a travesty but it had to be endured.

On the day of this hearing, held in the field, a new expert was summoned at the invitation of the court. This was a young man who could hardly instil any confidence in anyone. The judge came to the trial wearing thin high heeled shoes, a tastefully selected outfit and a gorgeous, expensive necklace.

Everyone was informed in writing that the trial was going to be held in the large yard of my next door neighbour's house. This was the first time I had entered his yard. He and his wife were already there waiting.

The hearing began after the judge and the court stenographer arrived. The first thing the judge did was call the expert to the stand to provide his opinion. To my surprise he, quite convincingly, said that the disputed wall couldn't have been a wall separating the two yards because it had a chimney on it, which obviously was as old as the wall, made of the same material and was the only chimney on the house. He also stated for the record, that the wooden beams on which the bricks rested were the same kind of beams as the ones on the wall, which the plaintiff (my next door neighbour) claimed to be his. On top of that, the expert said that the connecting wall facing the street was built at the same time and with the same kind of material. In fact, the expert was certain that both walls were made of the same material and built at the same time.

At first my next door neighbour and his wife didn't seem to understand what all that meant and what it had to do with their claim. So the expert also explained that the ceramic roof tiles, which of course rested on the four walls, were Turkish and very old. They were lined up next to one other and hadn't been moved for a hundred years.

After the expert finished giving his testimony the court announced that this was the last hearing before a verdict would be delivered.

At this point I didn't have much hope that a verdict would be delivered in my favour. But I figured let it be whatever it was going to be.

I couldn't believe my eyes when I read the verdict which had arrived in my mailbox at my permanent residence in Skopje. It wasn't only in my favour, but it also prohibited my next door neighbour from appealing it or from taking further action against me. But he launched an appeal anyway which the upper court shut down, finally freeing me from this deceitfully designed torture...

But not for long...

A new lawsuit arrived. This time my next door neighbour claimed that, while repairing the roof we had extended its rear part seventy-five centimetres into his property. The court was asked to rule on whether that part of the roof should be shortened or not. In other words, my next door neighbour was asking the court to make a decision to cut that part of my roof off.

The court document that was sent to me, presumably written by a lawyer, was very poorly written, like it was written by someone who didn't even have a high school education, let alone a law degree. My name was written in lower case, house in upper case and there wasn't a single period or comma... Not to mention the poorly written content...

I soon found myself in the courtroom attending a scheduled hearing. A new judge was presiding.

I was asked to make a statement in my defence so I said, "Your Honour it's not clear to me what the plaintiff is asking of me. Can you please read the document for me?"

"Why?" asked the judge. "Can't you read? You're an educated woman."

"Please indulge me, Your Honour. I am asking you to please read it precisely because I am educated. I have read hundreds of documents, some written by half-literate people but I haven't seen a document written like this."

The judge looked at the document and tried to read it. But since it was so poorly written he couldn't make out where sentences started and where they ended. After looking at it for a moment he couldn't

refrain from bursting into laughter. I also started laughing. After that the judge addressed the plaintiff with the following words:

"Well, my dear colleague, you've really overdone it this time..."

It seemed to me that the judge hadn't previously read the document, but regardless of the comical situation, he continued with the hearing.

I said, "Your Honour this lawsuit has no basis because our two houses at the roof level are ten centimetres apart from each other. How could my roof encroach onto his property seventy-five centimetres? If that were the case my roof would be protruding inside his bedroom. This is an irrational claim."

Disregarding what I'd said, the judge quickly ended the hearing and didn't schedule a new one.

He ruled in favour of my next door neighbour.

I decided to appeal the ruling but the appeals court sent the case back to the trial court.

At that point I decided to call on a commission with authorized experts from Skopje, to determine the actual situation, to show that there wasn't even ten centimetres between my house and my next door neighbour's house and to prove that there was no possibility that my house was protruding into his house seventy-five centimetres, as he claimed. After the commission conducted an on-site investigation and submitted its report it revealed that my next door neighbour's claim was absurd at best. This time the Ohrid Court judge didn't dare rule in his favour.

After going through this frivolous but agonizing legal process, I found out that in some countries in the world there were penalties against people who initiated frivolous lawsuits. If such a law existed in our country, many judges, court presidents, experts, witnesses, etc., would be punished. Not to mention people like my next door neighbour.

I always went to the lake, even when I had very little free time. I usually sat on the big stone on the quay, walked along the shore or went to the city centre, which wasn't far from my house. I mostly went there at sunset to admire the huge artistic landscapes under the setting sun that lay between the sky, the mountains and the lake water, painted by nature's magic. Being engrossed in the natural beauty of the landscape I hadn't noticed a friend coming my way. I only became aware of his presence when he said my name aloud.

"Good to see you again," he said. "I wanted to ask you if you're up to date with the work being done on the new urban plan, in this part of the city where your house is located. If your house is left as it is out of the plan, it will remain that way until the Municipality decides to demolish it. If it's not included in the plan the renovations you made won't be recognized. What's even worse is if the house is not included in the plan, one day you may be without a house..."

This bit of news wasn't good for my situation given the problems I'd had with my next door neighbour in the past. I was pretty sure he was up to no good again. I had made far too many sacrifices for that house and I wasn't prepared to lose it because of some bureaucratic detail. It was my dream house and I wasn't going to let some administrator delete it, cross it off the plan! I almost had a nervous breakdown. I couldn't believe what was happening... Again! My head began to spin as I tried to think of what to do. What conditions did I have to meet for my house to be included in the plan? Who decided if my house was put in the plan or left out?! Who would definitely decide the fate of my house and mine with it?! I thanked my friend for the advice and quickly left for home.

The first thing I did was find out which team of experts was working on the proposed plan and in which institution, so that I could act preemptively.

Two days later I found myself walking down a long corridor in the building where I was told that whatever went into the plan or was left out of it would be decided there. A secretary was sitting in a small room. She was petite. She smiled at me the moment she saw me. From the first words she spoke I could tell by her dialect that she was from my hometown. "What luck?!" I thought. I then proceeded to tell her the troubles that had brought me there.

"Don't worry," she said. "The chief architect working on the plan is one of us."

She then picked up the telephone and told the man on the other side who I was and why I had come to see him. She then directed me to his office, after which I immediately went inside... But from the very moment he greeted me he avoided looking at me. He avoided meeting my gaze. So I asked him if it was possible for me to find out what the status of my house was in the pending plan and if it was already included.

The man, the one the secretary referred to as "one of us", took the project plan out, placed it on his desk, pointed to my house and said, "Your house is left status quo, that is, it is included in the plan but as is." After I asked him what that meant, he said, "its permanent survival is unforeseen." I immediately reacted and said that that was unacceptable and that he had to do something to change it. I begged him to do whatever he could to put it in the plan permanently. But from how he reacted I was sure my next door neighbour had already gotten to him, and it became clear to me that he had already been bribed.

I was almost in tears when I returned to the secretary's office. She knew right way the kind of answer I had received from the man who was "one of us". She said:

"I will arrange for you to see the director, he's the one who will make the final decision. He is away for a few days but you can call him when he returns, here is his telephone number. Call him on Monday."

"I will," I said and thanked her.

The next Monday, I called the same secretary to ask if she had made an appointment for me to see the director. Another female voice answered and told me that the secretary I was looking for was on sick leave and that she was going to be away for several days. Several days later I called again and got the same answer. This seemed kind of suspicious to me so the next day I went to see for myself.

I went into the secretary's office but there was no one there. I then went out into the hallway looking for someone in the other offices. Just as I was about to enter an office I ran into a man much younger than me, with short hair, wearing a short black leather jacket.

"Are you looking for someone?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm looking for the secretary who works here…" I answered.

"Do you need to see her personally, or…?" he asked.

But before he finished asking I interrupted him and said, "No, she was supposed to arrange a meeting for me with the director."

"Do you know the director?" he asked.

"No, I don't know him," I answered looking a bit confused.

"I'm the director," he said, smiled, opened his office door and invited me in. I became even more confused as I followed him inside. I then sat down on the stool next to his long desk.

"I see you have many books written by Macedonian writers," I said looking at the big bookshelf standing behind him. "Had I known you were an avid reader I would have brought you two of my latest novels…" Then I introduced myself.

He didn't say that he didn't know me or that he hadn't heard of me as an author but the next couple of hours we spent talking about Macedonian literature composed by Macedonian writers, some of whom were his personal friends. After I told him that I was also a

journalist, he started telling me stories of historical importance, which I hadn't heard before.

Finally he asked me why I wanted to see him.

After talking to this man for a while I felt like I had known him for a long time. I told him that I had come to see him because I very much liked the little house on the lake and I wanted it to be placed in the proposed plan. I told him that it was my life's desire, as a writer, a poet, and a journalist to own a house by the lake, even if it was the smallest house. And when that wish finally came true I wanted to preserve the house.

I then jokingly said, "I wanted this house so much that maybe a greater power granted it to me… That and because my family and I, without exception, spent every summer vacationing in Ohrid.

"So, what's the problem?" he asked sounding interested.

"Well, one of your engineers showed me the plan and I found out my house wasn't on it," I said.

"Are you sure? Who did you speak to?" he asked.

"Victor Nikoloski," I replied.

The man then picked up the telephone and asked Victor to bring him the plan. When Victor came into the office and saw me, he looked guilty like he had been caught doing something dishonest. The director opened the plan and, with a little help from me and Victor, found my house.

"Why would you erase the house of a poetess? Don't you know that she will compose poems and write songs about the beauty of the lake and the city?! I don't see your objective reason for doing that," he said.

The director then took a felt tipped pen and marked the house so that it would fit into the new plan like the other houses, with the possibility of being upgraded.

Victor opened his mouth to say something but the director cut him off and told him to leave. He collected his papers and left the office.

I was so happy I wanted to jump up and hug the director, a man whom I didn't know until a little while ago. I thanked him and promised him that I would come back soon and bring him copies of some of my books. And I did. It was a real pleasure to talk with him, a man who was knowledgeable in many things, past and present, about which he spoke sensibly and very clearly.

The plan went through many drafts and dragged on for quite a long time. As the plan was nearing the final version I found out that my house had again been removed during one of those many drafts. And it wasn't only my house… According to the rumour mill the same was done to the houses whose owners hadn't put money into the pockets of the engineers hired to draw up the plan.

The very next day I went to see Naum Filipovski, head of urban planning in the City Assembly, to find out what had happened. Naum and I knew each other. As soon as I walked into his office he kindly told me that he had to go to the Urban Planning Office in a hurry to attend a meeting.

"Why don't you come with me and we'll inquire together," he suggested. "But first please wait for me in the secretary's office until I make a few phone calls and then we will go."

When we arrived at the meeting we were served coffee. And since I knew the director of the Urban Planning Office, I told him why I was there. He immediately said "unfortunately your house doesn't fit into the plan…" He said that like he'd known beforehand what I was going to ask him. It seemed like someone had tipped him off only minutes before I arrived.

"It's not true," I said. "I saw the plan with my own eyes and my house was included in it."

"That may have been in an old version," he added and tried to pull away from me in order to go to his meeting. But I persisted.

"I want to see the final plan," I demanded.

At that point he sent someone to get Svetlana Naumoska, one of his engineers, and to ask her to bring the final version of the plan, which supposedly was ready to be sent to the Ministry in Skopje for approval. But at the same time I saw him make a phone call. I figured he was talking to someone about which version of the plan she should bring.

Not long after Svetlana arrived. I didn't know who she was and I didn't think she knew me. After she opened up the plan the director, with a categorical tone of voice, asked her to confirm that my house wasn't included in the final plan and told her my full name.

I don't know why but as I looked into her eyes I thought to myself, "This woman has difficulty lying." I don't know whether it was the innocent expression on her face, or the look in her eyes but I figured she was uncomfortable delivering the message. I was convinced that my intuition was correct. She was a fragile young woman. As the director pressed her we waited for her to reply, like waiting for a verdict to be delivered...

"Here is Violeta's house, Director, she should be happy because her house is included in the plan," she said. "It is included in the plan," she repeated.

"My dear colleague, you've made a mistake," replied the director looking nervous.

"No, Director, there is no mistake; you must have confused it with another, an earlier version of the plan. And yes, I do remember that. There was an earlier version in which someone tried to erase Violeta's house, even though it was included in the plan that was sent by the authorization institution that had drafted it.

The director looked angrily at Svetlana. He thought that she would bring the other version of the plan as he had instructed someone over the telephone. Those who sent her here probably hadn't understood him correctly.

The director and the head of urban planning looked at each other. It would appear that their deal hadn't worked out and neither one had looked at the actual plan. They knew it was exactly as the engineer said. So, the inevitable question was... Had they been bribed?! What had they gotten in return?!

"Well, that's good," one of them muttered.

"Thank you," I said to both of them then turned to the engineer, thanked her, said goodbye and left. "Today was my lucky day…" I thought to myself as I walked away.

I would never forget the courage Svetlana, the woman engineer, showed in front of her superiors. She showed herself to be a great person and for me she has remained this way to this day. I never asked her to do this for me; she did it on her own.

When I returned to Skopje, I found out the plan had already been sent there so I went to see it for myself to confirm that my house was still in it. Apparently the plan was sent days earlier and had been adopted by the Ministry. I was suspicious that someone might have deleted my house before it was approved. There I was introduced to a very serious and hardworking woman, a top expert in the field of construction. After I talked to her and told her the trials and tribulations I had to go through and about all the behind-the-scenes games that were played regarding my house in Ohrid, she went, got the plan and started looking at it.

"Don't worry," she said, "everything is fine. Your house is in the plan with provisions to add another story in the future like all the surrounding houses. Even that next door neighbour of yours, you are talking about, right behind you, has been given the right to build a two-story house.

I thanked the woman and immediately I knew that we would become friends in the future.

Then an unbelievable thing happened. The urban planners decided that all the houses in my immediate neighbourhood, including mine,

would be allowed to have a ground floor, two floors above that and an attic...

My next door neighbour was the first to raise a floor above ground level. But because the existing houses were built in a patchwork pattern, the approved plan wouldn't allow him to add windows to his newly built floor facing my house. Considering that I had also received permission to add another floor, my floor would block his windows, if he decided to build them outside of the approved plan.

I started applying for permits to upgrade my house according to the new urban plan. I figured that since my house was already in the plan things would be easier, since the hardest part had already been done. In fact, I also needed documents to register the ownership of my house in my name with the city registry institutions.

The first place I went to was the land registry. I went to see the land registry's director because I was told that everything passed through his hands. The moment I saw him I recognized him. He was the same person who had brought the expert to falsely testify at my trial during the dispute with my next door neighbour about the wall. He didn't even wait for me to explain why I'd come to see him. He told me, categorically, that my house wasn't a separate construction unit and didn't appear as a separate house in the land registry.

"That's not true!" I said angrily. "Tell me then, on what basis was my house included in the urban plan, if it wasn't a separate construction unit?!"

"That doesn't interest me," he replied coldly and went to talk to another person who had just come into his office.

"That's not right… Get someone from your office to look into it," I said.

"I just told you what the situation is, there is no reason to involve others," he replied.

I knew the director was the law here because there was no one higher to see, but I wasn't going to give up. After I left his office I stepped inside the office next door and approached one of the clerks working there. Just as I was about to ask him a question, hoping to get him to look in the huge land registry, I recognized him. He was the expert who had given false testimony at my trial. At the same time the director came running. He must have anticipated that I was

going to go directly to his employees. I left without saying a word. It became clear to me with whom I was dealing.

After I returned to Skopje, someone I knew who had gone through the same troubles as me in Ohrid suggested that I go and see the director of the national land registry.

I took his advice and went. I was well received by the director's office, which immediately put me in touch with the director. After I told him why I'd come to see him, he called one of his clerks who moments later brought a huge book into his office. With a little effort, the clerk, with some help from me, found my house. And indeed it was registered as a separate building unit. I was very happy; it felt like someone had given my house to me as a gift. After I thanked the two men the director sent me away with the following words:

"Please pass on my greetings to the Ohrid land registry director from the national land registry director and tell him to take another look at the land registry catalogue, in which your house has both a place and a number."

The national land registry director didn't believe that there was a need for him to send an official from his office to investigate the Ohrid land registry. But if the Ohrid land registry director didn't act professionally towards me, he said, to tell him to call the national land registry director personally on the telephone.

I again went to the Ohrid land registry office to see the director. He was in his office with two other people and a half-empty bottle resting on a small table in front of them. Then the comical situation began.

"You again…!? Can't you see I have people here!?" he said rudely.

"Forgive me," I replied. "I just dropped by to bring you greetings from the national land registry director in Skopje." And after that I told him everything that the director had told me… word for word.

Even though he'd had a few drinks he immediately sobered up and invited me to sit down. He apologized to his guests for the interruption, which meant that they had to leave. He then began to speak to me politely, addressing me with the royal "you" and sometimes by my full name.

"Well, you shouldn't have gone to see him, you shouldn't have disturbed him. We would have solved the issue here. We would have looked a little more carefully. Wait here," he said.

"Now he speaks humbly," I thought to myself as I watched him rub his hands together. "Only God knows how many people he has screwed wasting days and days of their time running them around, robbing them of their rights and making it impossible for them to get their jobs done. I couldn't prove that he'd taken bribes nor how much he'd taken, but I knew that almost every person, at least once, had the need to knock on his door and stand before him." As he left the office, he asked me to wait. He even offered me coffee.

"No, thank you," I said.

Ten minutes later he came back muttering something quietly and then said:

"Well, this is what you get when you work with incompetent people… They will put you in situations where you can make mistakes… sometimes big ones! And then, who is to blame? The director, of course! Imagine, the house was registered as a detached house in the land registry and that was dozens of years ago, and those blind people of mine gave me completely wrong information. But here," he continued with divine pleasure, raising his voice, "thank God the mistake will be corrected!"

He paused for a moment, looked at me while squinting, and said:

"Now immediately, the document will be drawn up by the officer in charge, to whom I have already told that he will be punished for the mistake he made earlier. And know that he will really be punished. You see, he and those like him lead us superiors astray, and then we bear the consequences…"

Soon after that one of his employees came into the office and brought a document. He then placed it on the director's desk for a signature. Before the man left, the director continued the farce, pointed a threatening finger at the man while saying, "The next time keep your eyes open if you want to keep your job."

The poor man kept his head bowed down as he left the office. I thought to myself, "I'm sure the poor man has a lot to say about his boss and might even spit on him. Only God knows how much abuse he has taken." After signing the document the director handed it to me, gave me a forced smile, shook my hand and, once again, humbly apologized.

Now I had one less hurdle to jump. This document was the key to the land registry data for my house and to regulating further matters in connection with the judicial certification of the purchase agreement.

Before I became involved with the land registry and the problems I encountered, I had submitted a request to the public revenue office to determine how much real estate tax I had to pay.

When I went for a follow up to the public revenue office, the clerk told me that I would need the sales contract and the minutes from the commission for assessing the value of the house, as well as a document from the land registry. Since I already had all that and some other documents that might be required, I requested an invoice for how much I had to pay. I wasn't sure how it was going to go given that the web of the black spider spun by my next door neighbour might have reached even here. The same clerk told me that the typist was sick and there was no one to type the invoice. I came back a few days later and got the same answer. When I came back a third time the clerk explained that the invoice was now typed but that the director was away and hadn't yet signed it. Another day passed. This time I was told that the director was in a meeting and wouldn't be able to sign the invoice. After this meeting the director was scheduled to go to another meeting and so on. And so this went on for days.

One day I stormed into the office and angrily said to the clerk, "So, it seems to me like you don't want my money!" and I stormed out.

Many times I begged the clerk to let me speak with the director but she repeatedly made excuses for not allowing me to see him.

One day I decided to storm into the director's office without permission. I strolled by his office and waited until his secretary went to wash the coffee cups. When she left I walked in unannounced. From the very first words he spoke I suspected that he too might be part of the spider's web. He cut me off the moment I started explaining why I was there. He said the document he was expected to sign hadn't yet reached his desk. He said he would check to see if the document was completed and his staff would notify me in writing when I could come and pick it up. "Even better," he said, "leave an address where they can send it to you…"

"Sorry, I don't live here all the time. I live in Skopje and I also work there," I said.

"Leave the address of your permanent residence then…!" he answered coldly sounding like he was impatient with me.

I realized that my communication with this corrupt official, in the true sense of the word, was over so I left. As I walked away I heard him reprimand his secretary in a loud voice for letting me into his office, which of course she hadn't. This convinced me even more that my assumptions about him were correct...

Days and weeks passed by and no trace of my invoice. Every time I telephoned his office a female voice answered and tersely said:

"When it's ready, you'll get it."

I didn't know what to do. I was preoccupied by thinking of how I was going to get out of this impasse.

I kept asking people around the city if they knew anyone, a friend, a relative, a boss… who could influence the director to act on my case. I was practically left with no other choice but to do that. After

some time, I got the name of a woman who was not only influential in Ohrid but also in the entire country. She couldn't easily be ignored. By some coincidence, this woman was a famous and prominent scientist who was also close to the professorial team at an institution where I had close friends... One day I was invited to a gathering where I got to meet her. During our discussions I familiarized her with the absurd situation I was in regarding my house. She was surprised to hear that, especially the part about how the director behaved towards me, stalling the entire process. Annoyed by the whole thing she picked up the telephone and called him directly. I noticed that she knew his phone by heart. She said the following to him:

"I'm here visiting with a friend from Skopje. She complained to me that she has been waiting for months for a document that your office should have issued her, in order for her to pay her tax for the transfer of ownership of the house she bought. Tomorrow she'll be coming over to your office to pick up the document for which she has been waiting for weeks. This is a legal obligation she has been waiting to fulfill. She wants to pay her taxes in order to certify the purchase agreement for her house. What time should she be there?"

There was silence on the other side of the telephone.

"You heard me didn't you?! I will tell her to come at eleven o'clock in the morning. Goodbye," she added and hung up the receiver.

All that time I kept quiet and listened to this woman speak with such confidence. I was amazed. I liked the way she had addressed him!

She then said, "People have changed so much in recent years that even our closest friends and relatives aren't the same. They have become obsessed with money, are unscrupulous and will do anything to get it. It has become an integral part of our lives. I don't know why, perhaps because we lived in poverty for a long time. Obviously the West has hugely influenced us in this regard. We opened our doors wide for them, and in order for us to take faster steps towards their way of life, their strategists have worked out an unprecedented system for us. Everything that comes from the West is well thought out propaganda. Not to mention many of the movies

they give us for very little money, which shun our literature. We have been sailing in a ship without a compass for a long time. And let's not forget that it wasn't too long ago that we endured terrible bloodshed in the name of other people's ideals, which should have improved our lives, along with gaining us our freedom."

Despite how little I knew this woman I came to admire her in a short time. She had the courage to say out loud exactly how I felt and what I thought. After being with her for a while I thought of her as a dear friend. And it was like that for the rest of my life. I looked forward to seeing her at every opportunity and every time I met with her I felt energized and spiritually enriched.

I found myself at the counter at exactly 11 o'clock in the morning the next day. I was greeted by a hostile looking clerk from behind the glass. As soon as I told her my name she said:

"The director already signed your invoice but before I can give it to you it also needs to be signed by one of the arbiters. Come back tomorrow, otherwise you will have to wait a long time. The arbiters are out in the field and I don't know when they will be back.

"I will wait," I replied.

I went over to a nearby newspaper stand, bought myself a newspaper and came back and sat on one of the chairs in the lobby. I sat there for almost two hours. I read the newspaper end to end, things that interested me and things that didn't. I watched people come in and out. I had no idea who was supposed to sign my invoice and if they'd come back from the field or had left and gone home.

Around two o'clock in the afternoon I went back to the counter, leaned towards the small opening, behind which stood the face of the frowning clerk, and categorically said:

"I want to go and see the director!"

"The director can't do anything for you!" she replied rudely.

"Then get someone to sign my invoice and get it back to me!" I said and took a step in the direction of the director's office.

At that point she called one of the arbiters who apparently had been there all this time, and told him what it was all about, but he said that the director hadn't ordered him to do anything, and therefore he wouldn't sign the invoice. I just got angry and ran for the director's office door. His secretary ran after me but I was in his office before she could stop me.

The moment the director saw me he looked away and said:

"Your invoice has been signed. Go to the counter and get it from the clerk."

"Yes, I know that!" I said, "But she won't give it to me because it's not signed by an arbiter and none of your arbiters are willing to sign it."

After he heard what I'd said the director started looking awkward. Had he told the arbiters not to sign my invoice? I wasn't sure. His face looked thin, full of worry and almost expressionless. He picked up the telephone and called someone. Moments later the same arbiter who had refused to sign my invoice earlier, walked in.

The moment he put his foot inside the door the director ordered him to sign the invoice and do it here in front of him. The arbiter then quietly asked:

"Why me?!"

It was quit clear to me that there was something odd about his question…

"Now go and get the invoice, bring it here and sign it!" ordered the director.

The arbiter went outside, got the invoice, signed it and angrily left. The director handed me the invoice and said:

"Now go to the counter, have it certified, pay it and make sure you get a receipt to show that you have paid it."

I took my invoice, said goodbye and left. I went back to the clerk. I gave her my invoice and she asked me to sign a piece of paper indicating that I had received it. I then paid her and she gave me a receipt and a copy of the paid invoice. I took them and left. And thus I painstakingly closed one more door.

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I took my entire folder of completed documents to the Court where I had to certify the purchase agreement of my house. I went directly to the clerk to give her my documents.

"Come on in," she said. She was a young, well-dressed woman with an accent in her speech, which revealed that she wasn't from Ohrid.

I informed her that I'd come to the Court to certify the contract for a house I'd recently purchased, and that both the former owner who sold me the house and I didn't live in Ohrid. I asked her to prepare an affidavit as soon as possible, so that it could be entered in the court records. She said no problem. But after she looked at the contract her colour and facial expression changed, and after a short pause she said:

"It's not that easy. All documents need to first be thoroughly reviewed and approved."

"And who is in charge of reviewing them?" I asked.

"The Court's Vice President... Come back in ten to fifteen days…" she replied.

"Isn't that kind of long?" I asked.

"That's not long. You should be happy if the job gets done in that time," she replied.

I left my documents with her and she gave me a receipt verifying that I had submitted them. I also asked her to write down the date when they would be ready for pick up. I insisted she do that. After she did I left. I couldn't believe that here too I was running into roadblocks.

Two weeks passed, and a third, and a fourth and still my documents weren't processed. I inquired about them several times, both on the telephone and in person, but the answer was the same – the vice president is busy, there are many other items he needs to review. I was beginning to doubt if she had even submitted them to him at all. I started thinking about going to see him personally.

I then remembered a comical situation from a few years ago. My daughter had bought an apartment in Skopje, in a building that was still under construction. We had to make a down payment but we were short of money, so in order to get a loan we had to get a certificate from the public revenue authority indicating that we had paid all our taxes in full. We were warned by the construction company, from which we bought the apartment that, if we didn't bring confirmation that we had made a down payment by the next day, the apartment would be sold to someone else. We had to get this apartment because it would have been very difficult for us to get another one in a new building. Plus we couldn't miss out on the favourable long-term loan they were offering.

Just as we found this out, I rushed to the public revenue administration building and found the place where receipts were issued. Sitting behind the glass of the only counter that issued receipts was a fat clerk eating, all greasy with mayonnaise and ketchup. She was probably eating a hamburger. Then it was time for something sweet. Well, then for coffee. Even though there was a sign on the counter indicating that the clerk was on break, and even if you didn't want to be, you were witness to everything that was going on.

There was no indication as to when the break would take place but I assumed it was taking place right then... I waited patiently. Finally the clerk raised the miniature glass on the counter. I bent down and, in a humble voice, said that I needed a receipt and that it was urgent.

She handed me a sheet of paper and said, "Fill out this form."

I filled it out, returned it to her and waited.

A moment later she came close to the glass, gave me a piece of paper with a number on it and said, "Come back in a week."

I was shocked when I heard her say that so I said, "Please, I need the receipt right away, they will sell my apartment if I don't have it by tomorrow morning!" I continued to plead with her in a humble worried voice.

"I told you to come back in a week!" she said resolutely cutting me off.

I tried hard to explain my situation repeatedly but my pleas didn't help. She moved away from the glass and paid no attention to me.

I paced up and down the corridor in despair. As luck would have it a good friend of mine came along, a man with a big soul. When he asked me what was wrong I told him about my hopeless situation.

"Don't let yourself get upset, I have a friend who will help you. She'll know what to do. Don't worry about this clerk, she's hopeless…" After my friend said that he told me to wait there.

The man's friend arrived soon after he left.

The moment she arrived we greeted each other. She was a thin woman in her thirties, had long hair braided and twisted around her head. As soon as I explained to her what my situation was she said:

"Let's go and buy 100 grams of coffee."

After I bought the coffee I gave it to her. She also took my piece of paper with the number the clerk had given me.

"Wait for me here," she said and walked towards the clerk's counter.

From where I stood I was able to hear what the woman was saying. She didn't stop at the counter she entered the booth, gave the clerk the coffee and began to hug her. The clerk stood there confused.

I then heard the woman say, "My dear, it's been a long time since we've seen each other. Had I not been in America, I would have come to see you a lot sooner. I was in America with a folklore group for an entire year. But don't you worry I'm here now. Wow, you look great, how have you been? Wait, before I forget, a cousin of mine bought an apartment but got stuck with an appointment so she sent me here to see you. She needs a tax receipt from you urgently. They will take her apartment if she doesn't produce it right now. I know you have hundreds of receipts to issue each day but please be a dear and issue this one for me now. Here is the number. I know you have a lot of work to do and everyone wants things fast."

Unaware of who this woman was and being embarrassed to ask, the clerk immediately issued her the receipt. The woman took it, said goodbye to the clerk promising she would be back to see her again soon and ran across the street. I ran after her and got it from her. I thanked her wholeheartedly and left.

Sometime later I went straight to the Ohrid court. The receptionist told me that the vice president was still very busy and that she didn't know when my documents would be reviewed and be ready for certification. From the expression on her face and from the tone of her voice I sensed a bit of hostility, or maybe it was just me. In any case, I didn't like what she said and how she said it so I stormed right past her, intending to go and see the vice president immediately even though I knew he wasn't receiving people that day. I knew about that because I had previously inquired. I knew his name, how old he was and when he'd graduated from the Faculty of Law in Skopje. We weren't of the same generation, but we must have met sometime while attending university. And since I took a two year break from school, we graduated around the same time.

I quickly found his office. There was no secretary at the door. I listened and heard voices inside. I knocked on the door and walked in. He was sitting in the armchair behind his desk. I immediately addressed him with the words:

"Hello, colleague... I haven't seen you for a long time, maybe since our graduation... but you haven't changed a bit, I recognized you

right away. I came here to visit you…" and after that I told him my name.

He got out of his chair and greeted me kindly. It wasn't clear to me whether he recognized me or not so I helped him out a bit. I said:

"We were students together at the Faculty of Law in Skopje, we were much younger then, but I remember you well."

"Of course, I remember you," he said and took a shot glass out of the cupboard to pour me a whiskey, which he was already drinking with his two guests. His guests, who were apparently paying him a friendly visit, soon left but we continued our conversation about our university and subsequent days. All the while I tried to figure out if he really remembered me or not… but it didn't matter because I told him that I'd bought a small house and the problems I had experienced with the bureaucracy. Finally I told him the problems I was having here in this court. I said, "I filed my registration papers here in this court almost a month ago and I've heard nothing back." He looked at me strangely and wondered why the clerk hadn't delivered the documents to him yet. I told him that the woman who'd sold me the house lived in Belgrade and she too needed to be here for the certification but she couldn't stay here for more than one day because she worked in Belgrade. I asked him if he could give me a definite date as to when my documents would be signed and ready for pick up.

He seemed glad that he could help out a colleague and immediately offered that we should go and see the clerk. He asked her for the documents, scolding her for holding on to them for so long and not submitting them to him earlier.

She on the other hand, looked surprised that I had suddenly appeared, accompanied by the vice president, looking for my documents. But she didn't look worried.

"I must have misplaced them somewhere," she calmly said sounding like she had already prepared an excuse. Hearing her say that the Vice President got angry and said:

"What do you mean you misplaced them? Didn't this lady remind you many times, even today before she came to see me to give me the documents? Shouldn't you have found them by now?"

But even now the clerk said she couldn't find them.

The vice president and I stood there waiting.

A moment later, with a tone of anger, she said, "I'll bring them to you when I find them!"

"No, you will find them right now!" replied the vice president raising his voice.

At the same time the vice president sensed that something wasn't right, something dishonest was taking place.

We waited there staring at her. Seeing that she could no longer delay, she took the papers out of a filing cabinet and handed them to him. She was red in the face. The vice president then went over them on the spot and sternly said to me:

"We will have your documents signed and ready for pick up the day after tomorrow at 11 o'clock!"

"But you know how many items I have to go over...," said the clerk trying again to delay the process.

"I know that, but these documents have been sitting here for an entire month…" he interrupted.

The vice president and I stepped out into the hallway.

He said, "Feel free to call and tell the woman from Belgrade to come. I'll be waiting for you the day after tomorrow at 11 o'clock in my office." He then cordially said goodbye. I thanked him and quickly left the building. I was happy... he wasn't in the net! "Let's pray that they don't catch him in it until the day after tomorrow!" I thought to myself.

I called Milena in Belgrade and made arrangements for her to come to Ohrid. She immediately accepted. Milena was a wonderful person.

The very next day, one day before the agreed date, she arrived by plane. She wanted to be in Ohrid that night so that we could be sure that we made it to the vice president's office on time. It was best that no one knew she was in Ohrid, at least not until the job with the papers was finished. No one, not even her best friends, knew she was here! She had lost trust in everyone.

The next day we were in the vice president's office at 11 o'clock sharp. He welcomed us warmly and didn't hide his pleasure in being able to help us.

After we had our coffee the three of us went to the clerk's office together. When the vice president asked the clerk for the documents, she rudely replied that they weren't ready yet. In an angry voice the vice president ordered her to finish the job now and told her that we weren't leaving this place until the job was done. He then asked some people in the next office to bring out three chairs and we sat down.

"Okay, the moment I'm done certifying the documents, I will call you. You can go now," said the clerk.

The vice president's face turned red. He didn't like the way she was treating him. The clerk had showed disrespect for his authority as her superior, especially in front of me and Milena, his guest from Belgrade.

"No, we will wait here!" he said in a threatening tone. "This lady here came all the way from Belgrade for these papers and she is scheduled to leave by plane very soon."

The three of us sat there for ten minutes while the clerk prepared the documents. We then all signed them, as was required by law. We signed both the documents and the large book. The vice president then applied his seal on them.

Before we left the clerk said:

"The certified contract will be ready for you in a week."

At that point the vice president stepped in and said to us, "Come back in an hour and pick up your papers." Then he addressed the clerk in a stern voice, "You prepare those papers now because the parties are coming back in an hour to pick them up in person. As I already told you, they don't live here and they need to go. I hope, you understand!"

We said goodbye to the vice president and agreed to meet in his office in an hour.

An hour later we came back and were about to enter his office. The door was open. At that point the clerk, holding our papers in her hand, ran towards us. She looked angry as she handed them to us. I had the feeling she wanted to attack us physically. When I saw that the vice-president was alone in his office, I knocked and went inside. Milena followed. I immediately took out a bottle of whiskey from my bag and asked him for some glasses so that we could celebrate the final step of legalizing our "historic" agreement, for the purchase of that half-demolished sixty square metres house, built a hundred years ago!

When the vice president saw the bottle he said, "You didn't have to do that, I could have provided the drinks, I have my own bottle here."

"It's more proper if we treat you. What you did for us was no small matter," I said and Milena agreed.

He opened the bottle I gave him and we each had a drink. We then thanked him for his help and for being true to his word and we left.

We left this building where justice was rightly or wrongly served. Where people were tried and lives were salvaged or ruined depending on whether they were judged justly or their legal rights were trampled. A building where human destinies were decided, sometimes absurdly... A building where people came to claim their

rights ended up crying or rejoicing depending on the conscience of their judge. What kind of people should dispense justice? The answer to this question is complicated. For one, they should be fair and impartial… in a positive sense. Perhaps most of all they should be humane... much more than most! But how many of these judges fit that profile?!

When we left the building, Milena and I gave each other a big hug. A great weight was lifted off our shoulders. We were finally free from the black spider and those in its web.

I was curious what Milena had said to our neighbours when they asked her why she was here now. Of course she usually came to Ohrid during the summer and surely the neighbours would be curious to know why she was here out of season. She, with all her natural humour and cheerful spirit, told them, "The plumber called me…"

When we sat down to have our lunch in the nearest restaurant, Milena said:

"My dear friend, after you bought that house from me, everything we did, that was associated with it, was like a military operation the kind we carried out during the 1941 occupation. It was a mission against a secret organization of people no one knew. What kind of people were they? What did they look like? Was there some hidden evil that united them? Were they spirits that conspired to do evil?"

"Please Milena let's not spoil this wonderful day. As you saw today there are also good people. If there were no such people, we wouldn't be here today," I replied.

"That's right. You are right. Cheers…" said Milena and we raised our glasses and toasted.

Later I accompanied her to the airport. I was sad because she wasn't here more often so we that could visit more frequently.

I was walking down the street feeling great. I was very happy. I felt like telling everyone that justice had won after all. But I kept quiet

because I had no idea how many of them, my neighbours, my acquaintances, would share my happiness with me. I didn't believe it would be a big number. And why should they? Thousands of people built huge houses, whole palaces! I thought people would be jealous of me for having a house by the lake. And maybe they would. For me it was a miracle of beauty to have the lake day and night in front of me, next to me...

That lake was in me, in my soul, both in my dreams and when I was awake...

Finally I didn't have to worry about going to courts, attending trials, having my walls demolished, problems with my water system, drainage system and electricity. Many people of several generations had spent their vacations in that small house. In time even my grandchildren came for visits.

But... unfortunately we weren't immune to becoming sick. My husband wasn't well. He was sick for several years. No doctor or medication could help him.

…I was left alone with our children and grandchildren for several years. It wasn't easy, and no one was able to change the situation or bring us back to where we had been...

Even though the plan in which our house was included allowed us the option of upgrading it to have two floors, we didn't have the money. With my husband sick we had only one salary that we could depend on. We had also taken out loans that needed to be repaid.

One day I went to town to buy some groceries for home and ran into a friend in the grocery store who knew about the problems I'd had in purchasing my house in Ohrid.

He said, "Have you decided to upgrade your house or have you given up? I don't believe that you've given up," he said, answering his own question.

He then asked, "Have you found workers to do the job?"

"There is no rush, we still have another six months to think about it and raise some money," I said.

"What another six months? Didn't you know that the Assembly changed the rules? According to the new rules you must start building within six months from the day the plan was approved, not

twelve months as it was before, or you will loose your building permit. And as far as I remember your deadline to get started expires soon," he replied.

"Is that true? Are you joking or trying to scare me?!" I said and laughed.

"No, Violeta, I would never joke about something like that," he replied.

I gave up on buying groceries, left the store and got home as soon as I could. I almost forgot to say goodbye to my friend and thank him for the information. My hands were trembling as I opened my papers. He was right! It was happening to me again. But lucky for me I'd met the man before my permit expired! At the same time I was overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness, just like before. It would be a shame if I had to start building again with borrowed money. But, on the other hand, I wasn't prepared for failure… to lose my ability to upgrade my house, considering how hard I'd had to fight to get this far.

About an hour later I was on my way to see my sister and her husband and ask for advice as to what to do. The construction workers who were building their weekend house hadn't yet left. They were still working. They had already laid the first floor and were preparing to raise the columns for the second floor. Hundreds of houses had already been built in the Lagadin neighbourhood where my sister was building her weekend house. This was one of the most beautiful neighbourhoods in the immediate vicinity of the city.

From the moment my sister saw me she knew that I was worried about something so she immediately asked me what was wrong. Soon my brother-in-law came over looking concerned. I told them what I had found out from my friend… The both looked worried.

I knew that they had barely enough money to cover their own construction costs, and they were looking forward to at least putting a roof on their building.

But my sister said, "Don't worry, we'll think of something. Too bad we didn't know about this earlier!"

We had lunch and took the local bus to Ohrid. I couldn't believe that, after all the trouble I'd been through to get this far, I'd come so close to losing my right to upgrade my house. Now there was a danger that if I lost my right I would never be able to get it back again. I was stressed out. I went home feeling depressed and with that I went to asleep.

The next day I woke up very early in the morning with a severe headache. Even before I was completely awake, I heard a vehicle stop in front of my house. I looked out the window. Three people in work clothes got out of a white van. They looked like the workers who were building my sister's house. Immediately after that, my sister and brother-in-law got out of their car that had stopped behind the van.

"Violeta, open the door and make five cups of coffee," I heard my brother-in-law yell out loud.

I wasn't sure if I was awake or dreaming. But after they came into the house, I said:

"What's all this about?"

"Don't ask too many questions. Your sister and I decided to loan you our workers for a while. Let them work here for now and then we'll see what happens. We can't allow your permit to expire. And here is some money to start with."

He then put the money in my hand.

Tears filled my eyes. I hugged them both.

Soon a big truck arrived. It had been sent here by my brother-in-law to pick up the things that I had in my house so that construction could start immediately. My things had to be loaded onto the truck in the next couple of hours.

After we loaded everything onto the truck my sister said, "We'll take your stuff to Lagadin and store it in our garage," and then she got in her car and drove off, following the truck. My brother-in-law stayed behind to manage the workers. They started working immediately.

And this was how we started upgrading my house.

I couldn't believe it. It was a miracle… I got a loan from my sister and brother-in-law. Even though they were building their summer house in Lagadin and didn't have enough money for themselves, they gave me what they had to help me. On top of being a doctor, my brother-in-law was also a humane person. My sister too was humane and would give her soul to help anyone, let alone me. Even if we were twins we couldn't have been so close. My brother-in-law was overjoyed when I bought my, albeit small house. Next to it there was a big two-story house. Not too long ago it had been a boarding school. My brother-in-law and his older brother used to live there when they were students. My house served as a kitchen and storage area for the boarding school, where food products were stored and food was prepared for the students and staff. This was during the Second World War, Bulgarian fascist occupation.

My children went home, each having their own work responsibilities. I was just about to retire from my job. My household goods were loaded onto a big truck and moved to my sister's garage in Lagadin. The house was empty.

After the truck with my household goods left, curious to find out what had happened, my neighbours started asking questions. Some were wondering if I'd sold the house. Some couldn't understand why I'd fought so hard to buy this house and then could sell it just like that! Some wondered why I would abandon a house with a view of the lake… Some even came to my door to ask me personally…

I wanted to say, "Yes, I did sell my house," just to see their reaction, but of course now wasn't the time to do that. Nor did I tell them that I was upgrading it. I just said, "We'll be renovating it."

A few days later the workers began to work on the roof, removing the new tiles for which I had paid a lot of money.

The workers also began digging the foundations for the columns that would hold the slabs for the upper floors. The concrete columns, according to the building code, had to be 55 cm thick and imbedded inside the existing walls.

I assumed that this plan had been drawn up by the same spiteful woman engineer employed by the construction service in Ohrid, about whom everyone complained. She was the same engineer who had done everything in her power to prevent us from getting our upgrade permit. She couldn't come to terms with the fact that the head of construction in the Municipality, in order to support his decision, had to call a commission of four other engineers from nearby towns to evaluate the possibility of the upgrade. The commission of course unanimously gave its support, which angered the engineer.

The woman engineer, who by the way had unusually black hair, was probably hoping that when we started our construction and tried to embed the concrete columns into the existing walls, the walls would fall down. But her wish didn't come true. The walls were more than fifty centimetres thick, and at the same time unusually strong, regardless of the kind of material which was used to build them a long time ago.

We first dug up the footings on which the concrete pillars would rest. Then we dug up the walls where the connecting beams would be placed.

I was told that we needed one more worker to continue the job. I was also told that I could find such a worker in the market in Ohrid where unemployed workers often came looking for work. I asked one of the older people I ran into if he knew any of the few workers

standing around who could handle mixing plaster for long periods of time. I didn't ask him because I figured he was too old for that kind of work. The old man discreetly pointed at one particular person by moving his head so that the others wouldn't notice. I told the man what I needed from him and he immediately followed me. He told me that his name was Boris. On the way to my house we negotiated the amount I was going to pay him per day and he immediately began to work, the moment we arrived. I was happy with him; he was a hard worker and an honest person.

Boris, my newly hired worker quickly fit quite well with the other construction workers. After I explained to him what he had to do next I said:

"You know cats dig with their claws. Your next job is to dig openings in the four walls, by any means possible, according to the measurements you will be given, no less and no more. Also you must do it gently and make sure the walls don't move. If all goes well you will receive a special reward..."

And that is exactly what he did. He dug the openings at the exact measurements without disturbing the walls. No wall moved, not even a centimetre.

The moulds for the concrete pillars were then carefully fitted into the openings that Boris had dug, to accommodate the iron bars and concrete in accordance with prescribed construction standards. The iron bars were bound in bundles and fitted into the moulds extending above the roof as prescribed. When the first four pillar moulds with iron bars were raised a semi-liquid mixture of concrete and sand, mixed at a prescribed ratio, was poured from the roof into the moulds and left undisturbed for several days to harden. After this was done it became clear to our neighbours what we were doing so they stopped asking questions.

Since the construction engineer hired to supervise the workers, to make sure they followed standards, wasn't there all the time I had to step in and do that myself. On top of that I also had to procure the necessary building materials for the job.

The most difficult task about raising the pillars was placing a pillar on the part of my wall that bordered Milena's wall. This pillar had to be placed outside my wall because there was a washroom built of stone that couldn't be disturbed. Here we again faced resistance from my neighbours. When one of my workers began to dig the

footing for this pillar, three of my neighbours related to my next door neighbour began to threaten him with violence. He managed to finish digging but with great difficulty. We then had to lower the mould from the roof into the excavated hole for the footing, pour the concrete mixture into the footing and fill the mould up to the roof, the same as the others.

We didn't have many problems raising the concrete pillar on the right side of my house that ran parallel to my next door neighbour's house because this wall was the same as the other walls. It was dug from the inside of the house. Soon after that we inserted the connecting beams.

Even after the house was upgraded and Violeta and her family lived in it for several years, the same woman engineer who had tried to remove it from the first urban plan, tried to remove it from the second urban plan which was being drafted by a company in Gostivar! "Imagine that, working on a plan for the Ohrid coastline in Gostivar?! Why there?!

But despite being drafted in Gostivar, Violeta knew that the Ohrid Municipality would have to review the plan in public as well as have public hearings which Ohrid residents could attend. So, as a precautionary measure, Violeta took a few pictures of her house and all the documentation she had associated with its construction and she and one of her neighbours went to the public hearing. As she entered the hallway where the plans were open for viewing she was in disbelief. Her house was not included in the new plan. Then, when they went inside the room where the debate was being held, she saw the same woman engineer sitting on a chair behind the head table. The woman opened the debate, and beside her, as my neighbour pointed out, stood the authorized engineer from Gostivar, who was supposed to explain changes to the plan and answer questions.

Violeta was the first person from the attendees to speak. She went up to the head table with the photographs of her house in her hand and, in front of everyone, showed them to the engineers. She then said that her house was included in the previous plan but it wasn't included in the proposed plan

displayed in the hallway, and added that she didn't believe this was done by accident.

She said, "I built this house with proper documents and a construction permit issued to me in accordance with the municipal building plan and paid for all the necessary utilities. I have the documentation here in my hand."

The Gostivar engineer turned around and tried to find her three story house on the wall behind the table where the new draft plan was displayed. When he saw that it wasn't there he turned to the woman engineer and asked her what had happened. However, she denied any knowledge of what had gone wrong. The only thing she said was that someone must have made a mistake. The Gostivar engineer tried to calm Violeta down by saying that a mistake had been made and that it would be corrected. He then apologized. If the woman engineer's face wasn't so naturally dark everyone would have noticed that it wasn't red. This was because she had no conscience and no shame.

Violeta was convinced that her house would be put back in the new plan but to make sure it was she contacted the Gostivar engineer personally. For some time Violeta was considering investigating to find out who had removed her house from the new plan and if bribes were involved, but eventually she gave up. This was Violeta's last contact with this woman full of malice.

...It was no longer possible for me to stay overnight in my house, so after the workers left I stayed with my friends. Their hospitality and, above all, their friendship kept me happy and encouraged to comfortably continue with my work. During the colder days my friends put me up in a warm room and sometimes invited me for dinner.

We were all excited when we reached the point in the construction when we could install the concrete slab for the next floor up. The lead worker in my crew hired a rebar expert from a nearby village to install the rebar for the slab. He was a skilled worker and fitted the floor with what looked like a carpet of metal rods weaved with a loom. I couldn't help but marvel at this man's skilful hands.

My lead worker hired a few more workers to expedite the pouring of the concrete for the slab. The concrete was mixed into a semi-fluid mixture, loaded into wheelbarrows and carried along planks laid diagonally to the ground to where the slab would be placed. It was then poured over the framework of nailed planks upon which the rebar grid was arranged. After the concrete was poured it was levelled with a straight plank by two workers. The job was finished in a few hours. We then ate lunch together, as was customary in the Macedonian tradition, serving the workers first. My son's long-time friends who lived in Ohrid prepared the feast and served us during this special celebration. They were always there and willing to help out not with just the food, but also offering practical advice and help.

In order for the plate to be strong, the concrete and rebar had to be left undisturbed for a couple of weeks and water had to be sprinkled on top to cure the concrete properly so that it wouldn't crack. During this period of time the workers were not needed here so they left to work elsewhere but agreed to return in two weeks.

Fifteen days passed and there was no word from them. They didn't even report to the construction site in Lagadin at my sister and brother-in-law's house. All attempts to reach them by telephone were unsuccessful.

Then a friend of ours told my brother-in-law that he had seen them working on the house of an expatriate from Australia in one of the nearby villages. We drove there and found the house. When the workers saw us they quickly got off the building and tried to run away. We could see that they were visibly embarrassed. The oldest of them, in an attempt to justify their absence, told my brother-in-law that the owner of the house they were working on had begged them to help him because he would soon be leaving for Australia and wanted to finish building his house before he left.

"We also have to admit that he offered to pay us a lot of money," explained the older man.

My brother-in-law got a little angry and said:

"The least you could have done was tell us that you were going to do this. We would have had no problem letting you go. Well, I would have given you my consent. And you wouldn't have left us hanging at the door every day, waiting for you to come… You didn't even call us on the telephone."

"Well for that, we are to blame boss," replied the older man.

"How many more days do you need to work here to finish the job?" asked my brother-in-law.

"One more week," replied the older man.

"We'll wait for you. After that we will expect you to be there, right?" said my brother-in-law.

"We will be there for sure," replied the older worker.

A week later they arrived at my house to collect the money that I owed them and to remove the boards and supports that held the

concrete slab. After that they said they were going to work at my sister's house in Lagadin until the roof was put on, but couldn't promise me that they would come back to work on my house. They said the group was splitting up and three of the younger men, the sons, were leaving to work abroad.

The most important thing for me was to start the construction to upgrade my house. We did that but we had no viable plan on what to do next...how to continue...

Should we have suspended the construction?! Unfortunately a house in itself is a big liability. When you start building it takes you under its power, binds you and doesn't let you go until you finish it. That's how it was. Building a house with borrowed money would incur huge interest costs, especially if you had many and long delays, but we didn't give up. Fortunately the house was covered. It had a roof on it as well as doors and windows. Thanks to the help I'd received from my family I had exceeded all realistic expectations. In addition to working at their regular jobs, my son and daughter painstakingly worked day and night to help me out.

After the first group of workers abandoned me I found another group; a father and three sons. But it wasn't easy. It was difficult to find well-trained craftsmen because these people inherited their construction skills from their predecessors, passing the trade from generation to generation, learning as much as possible. Most of them were people from the villages. I made a deal with the lead worker to continue the construction and we signed an agreement on how much money I would pay them to build the next floor, extend the concrete pillars and add a second slab. The lead worker suggested that we raise all pillars simultaneously and told me how much material to purchase and how much it was going to cost. Since I was already familiar with most of the building warehouses, it wasn't difficult for me to get the material. All purchases I made were delivered to my house and unloaded.

The first wall was eleven metres long. After several rows of bricks were laid along the entire length, I often came outside to see how it looked. I was happy with the work.

Unfortunately most of the work was done by the father and the younger son, who was very young for this kind of work. The boy had to carry the heavy bricks on his shoulders from the ground up to the top of the floor, climbing up a makeshift wooden ladder. One time I complained to his father that this job was way too hard for a boy of his age. His father said:

"Let him learn. Let him find out how bread is earned."

I bought good quality bricks from a warehouse where I used to get almost all my building materials. The owner had gained my trust so much so that he often sold me the highest quality materials for the regular price. Perhaps he felt sorry for me, being a woman and having undertaken such a laborious task alone.

Building the pillars was easier this time because they were added on top of the previous ones and the neighbours couldn't get in the way. When they were built and the concrete was cured the workers started working on the front wall facing the lake. This job was a bit more complicated because of the many windows. Most of the wall was designed to have windows with wooden frames and glass facing the lake. The wall on the side also had a window facing the small street.

After everything was finished the lead worker told me that they were going to start building the next slab in three days. When they raised the supports and hammered the planks for the next slab, I told him that I was going to hire the same rebar expert I had hired to reinforce the previous slab. Unfortunately the man wasn't happy and preferred to do the job himself. I didn't agree with him and told him that I was going to pay for the reinforcement myself and he didn't have to worry about it.

I went to the village where the rebar expert lived and persuaded him to come and prepare the next slab for me. At first he was hesitant but then accepted my offer. I was again happy with the good job he did.

When the rebar was in place, it was time to pour the concrete. I wasn't experienced enough to know if the new work crew was capable of doing this difficult job. But since this plate was the same as the previous one, built by the other crew, I suggested to my new crew that they use same technique the old crew had used to carry the concrete from the ground to the slab. I suggested they set up a pulley system with a rope and a wheelbarrow and pull the concrete up from the ground to the slab. They would mix the concrete at ground level, load it onto the wheelbarrow, pull it up to the slab and unload it. It was my understanding that the pulley system would be motorized and the wheelbarrow would be raised and lowered by an electric motor.

My plan was acceptable to the crew so they set up the pulley system as I suggested. The lead man's son and another worker worked at ground level mixing the concrete with the electrically operated mixer and loading it onto the wheelbarrow, one of them rolled the wheelbarrow to the pulley platform and then tied it with a rope. The other one raised it up to the slab. The lead man then poured it on the slab. The technique worked for a while until something in the apparatus broke and the work had to stop. A couple of the workers took the broken part away and had it repaired. After it was put back they resumed their work.

In the meantime clouds began to form above and it began to rain; before all the concrete had been poured.

Soon after it began to thunder and the rain intensified. And as the storm came closer lightening bolts began to strike in the immediate vicinity. The workers were soaked from head to toe. I began to panic, worrying for their health and safety, so I ran to one of my

neighbours who had a shop nearby looking to get some plastic covers.

"Cveta," I yelled, "we're building the next slab on my house and my workers are soaked from head to toe by the pouring rain, do you have any large, empty plastic bags the workers can use to cover themselves? They can't stop the job and need to finish it. We can cut holes in the bags for their head and arms so that they can continue to work. Please, I beg you, see what you can find. I feel sorry for them."

Cveta my good-natured friend and neighbour shrugged her shoulders and said:

"I don't have any empty plastic bags, not one…"

I ran back to my house drenched and because of the heavy rain, but mostly because of the dangerous lightning strikes, I tried to persuade the workers to stop working and go inside, but they wouldn't listen. The older man said that they couldn't do that because, as a rule, once work began on a slab it had to be finished, rain or shine… The work must not be interrupted.

Not even fifteen minutes passed when Cveta showed up carrying three big, empty plastic bags with holes cut out to fit heads and arms, as I had asked her. I immediately gave them to the workers and they put them on.

Cveta then said, "I was worried about you after you came to see me. I thought to myself, 'where was this poor woman going to find plastic bags in the rain?' so I looked through some empty boxes I had laying around and found these bags as well as some smaller bags for the workers to put on their heads."

I grabbed Cveta and gave her a big hug, thinking to myself, "A person could never feel abandoned as long as there were good people like her…"

After Cveta left it began to rain even harder, this time with stronger lightning bolts and louder thunder, at least that's how it seemed to

me. Fearing for their safety, I again pleaded with the workers to stop working but again they wouldn't listen. I even suggested that this couldn't possibly be good for the concrete in the slab, but still they refused to stop. Not only was I afraid, but there was a real danger to those people's lives.

It was still raining after the workers left. I got soaked again in the short time it took me to lock my front door and run to a nearby restaurant. I walked inside literally dripping wet. My coat and hair were soaked and I was dripping water all over the floor. It was like I had just fallen into the lake with my clothes and shoes on. When Rada, the owner of the restaurant, saw me she loudly said:

"You poor woman you're going to get sick. Take off your coat and throw it on the radiator. Take off your shoes and socks and go in front of the radiator, I'll turn it on.

Rada then grabbed two large towels, wiped my hair and rubbed my head with one to warm me up. She then wrapped my head with the other one. That felt good. Branko, her husband, also came over and scolded me for working in the rain. But he too was once a builder and knew how unpredictable things could get when building a house. When he was done lecturing me he asked the waiter to make some tea for me... I had one cup and then another. I stayed in the restaurant almost until they closed. By then my clothes and shoes were dry so I took a taxi and went to my friends for the night. And, even though I was late arriving, they had waited for me and put me up in a warm room.

I could never forget the kindness my friends showed me. They were truly good people. They treated me like I was part of their family. Not only did they help me dry my clothes and keep warm, but they welcomed me into their place like a very good friend. But more than anything I was warmed by their kindness and humanity. I had met them not long ago but I was quickly drawn to them by their nobility, which radiated from their eyes and from every part of their face. Their diligence, their tireless work, their love for the work they did, filled me with respect for them.

Branko and Rada had bought a very old house by the lake that had originally belonged to a Turkish family. It was made of durable wood but unfortunately it hadn't been occupied for the last forty years. Its latest owners were three sisters who inherited the house from their parents but after they got married they moved abroad. And so the house wasn't maintained and it began to fall apart. The sisters weren't confident that they could sell the house themselves, not under its current condition, so they left it to a local relative to look after. Unfortunately their relative wasn't that interested in their house and allowed it to further deteriorate. Their relative, however, was authorized to sell the house if such an occasion arose.

Because of the poor economic conditions in their native village, Branko and Rada had to move abroad at a young age looking to improve their lives. However, life wasn't easy anywhere and they had to work hard in painstaking, often physically difficult jobs. But eventually they managed to save enough money to buy a restaurant in a coastal tourist spot where they attracted quite a few customers. They did well but felt this wasn't a good place to educate their three children. There was also the constant homesickness and wish to return to their birthplace, which drove them to start looking for a place in Macedonia. During one of their visits to their parents, they found out that an old house by the lake in Ohrid was for sale. A friend advised them not to contact the local relative, who was desperately looking to sell the house, but to get in touch with the three sisters who owned the house. They did that and found them. Then they hired a lawyer who negotiated the sale price and they paid for it through a bank. The lawyer then took care of the paperwork and the house was theirs. The local relative gave them the keys. Initially he didn't believe that Branko and Rada had bought the house. He thought they were fraudsters, but after they showed him the paperwork he relinquished the keys and let them in.

The old wooden house was even older than my house. But I didn't know it had a big backyard in addition to the big front yard.

The house was close to the lake and only a few hundred metres away from my house.

Right next to the old wooden house was a well-built two-story house. It was a house on the corner and next to it was a well-traveled street that led towards the city centre. There was also a one story stone house inside the courtyard of the big house. An elderly woman lived in the big house. Her two sisters were married to Serbians and lived in Belgrade. The old woman had a serious accident and wasn't well and often behaved erratically. She lived on a disability pension but no one was sure if she was actually disabled or was pretending so that she could get disability. She was unpredictable. She dressed nicely, wore expensive clothes, had her hair done by the most expensive hairdressers and was visited by various people. She even managed to marry a pensioner who'd served in the military.

During the summer months her sisters and their families came over and vacationed with her. The house belonged to all three sisters. They had inherited it from their parents and, by mutual agreement it was equally shared by the three.

After her husband died the old lady was left alone in that big two-story house. But when her new neighbours, Branko and Rada arrived, they changed her life.

I found out about the old wooden house being sold when its new owners, Branko and Rada, began to paint the stone house. Passing by it one day I noticed that it had been painted with a thick layer of brown and dark green oil paints. Soon the little stone house that stood in the front yard had been transformed. A wooden-framed glass window was added on the front, through which they intended to sell sandwiches. After it opened many people, especially young people, came to buy snacks. Rada and her two daughters could hardly keep up. Soon after they opened they began to sell all kinds of ice-cream flavours which attracted passers-by, especially children.

They added large tiles and flowerpots with colourful flowers in their yard. They then added tables and chairs and began to serve coffee,

juice and other drinks in the outdoors. Days later I noticed they had added a thin decorative canopy made of canvas, to protect their customers from the hot summer sun. People who wanted to sit down and refresh themselves by the lake with coffee and cold drinks flocked to this place.

Over time I became more and more convinced that this well-organized family lived in perfect harmony. Even their eight-year-old son had to work. He collected the cups and saucers from the tables and carefully and meticulously wiped the tables. I was having coffee in their café one day and decided to praise the boy for working so hard. The little one told me that his parents paid him for the work that he was doing. I was worried that he might be missing school but I was reassured that all three of the children also attended school regularly and that they all were excellent students.

Gradually this café, which apparently was growing into a restaurant, began to serve all kinds of food. It attracted even more people both during the day and late in the evening. The family had to employ several waiters, cooks, etc. Serving good quality food and providing excellent service, this restaurant evolved into a great place to dine in the city.

As the children moved up in grades and needed more time to spend on learning, their parents reduced their work schedule in the restaurant. But they were free to work of course, if they wanted to help during their free time.

When the two girls were ready to pursue higher education one went to study abroad and the other went to Skopje. Their brother stayed with his parents while he was a student.

While all this was going on, a number of new and major events began to develop, things that had been brewing for a long time, especially after President Tito's death. Yugoslavia began to disintegrate into its constituent parts. The two northernmost republics, Croatia and Slovenia separated first, prompting the others to do the same. Some separated in a peaceful manner and some through armed struggles. Fortunately for us, Macedonia separated without a military conflict. Our separation was achieved in a peaceful way with the expressed free will of the citizens in a referendum. Our president Kiro Gligorov did his best to prevent bloodshed and achieved our independence with an agreement. The separation, unfortunately, had a great impact on all our lives. Borders were set between the small, new states which hadn't existed before.

The moment the borders between Macedonia and Serbia were opened the two sisters who lived in Serbia and owned the big house at the corner took the opportunity to come to Ohrid. After the new borders were raised they feared that they wouldn't be able to travel to Macedonia and would probably lose their house in the future. During their visit, one of the sisters sold her part of the house to Branko. It was the part which had a window with a view of the lake.

A little later Branko and Rada partitioned the part, built several smaller apartments and started renting them out to tourists, mostly foreigners.

As could be expected, the second sister who lived in Belgrade also sold her part of the house to Branko and Rada. That part too was partitioned into small apartments and rented out to tourists. The old lady whose name was Fime still owned the third part of the house but it had a separate entrance that led to another street away from the lake.

Being intimidated by Macedonia's independence and having to cross a border, the two sisters who lived in Serbia stopped coming to Ohrid. Their sister, who continued to live in the same house, felt even more alone and more vulnerable so she turned to Branko and Rada for attention and she eventually became part of their family, especially after her health began to fail with age. She frequently ate her meals at Branko and Rada's restaurant; it was handy for her, so to speak, since it was located in her backyard. That's how Fime spent the last few years of her life. After her death, her heirs sold her part of the house to Branko and Rada.

It was unbelievable how the dice of life rolled with the destinies of these families.

Taking risks can be rewarding sometimes with big returns. But other times one could lose a lot. But the smart investment Branko and Rada made, depending on their own skill, creativity, and above all tireless energy, contributed to the construction of a huge three-story hotel with a restaurant on the lakeshore where the old merged with the new.

All of Branko and Rada's children graduated from university, majoring in professions of their choice, but still they helped their parents, working in this beautiful building by the lake, even after they had their own families. Many other people were also employed by Branko and Rada. Their facilities were enjoyed by a large number of guests, both domestic and foreign from all over the world.

Every time I went to visit my long-time friend Nevena, in whose house we had been vacationing for fourteen years, I passed by the hotel and looked forward to see if anything new had been added. Nevena's house was located next to the hotel and as I recall she always welcomed us with open arms every time we went there. She cleaned the rooms for us and covered our beds with bright white, ironed bed sheets. She was more like a close relative to us than a hostess. Our special request was to put us up on the ground floor and she always did.

The rooms she rented to tourists were never empty. There was always a demand for them during the summer. Nevena was a hardworking and lively person who always smiled. She walked up and down the stairs to the upper floor of the house more than a dozen times per day. She made sure everyone was looked after. She was always nice to everyone. Even after I finished building my house, I couldn't help but go to Nevena's place for a visit and to at least have coffee at her clean tables in her yard. Nevena's hospitality and sociability was passed on to her children and grandchildren. She came from a prominent family. Her brother was a famous photographer, one of the oldest in the city. Everyone in her family was well-educated. Her daughter, who lived in Skopje, was one of the most noble and extraordinary women I have ever met. She built a house in Nerezi. There was no one in that village or in the surrounding villages who didn't respect and love her. In the years when she lived alone she painted several landscapes. She wanted to leave something behind after she died; she knew she wasn't going to live long.

And now, back to my house.

After the supports and framework of the second slab were removed I left for Skopje. A few days later my lead worker called me on the telephone and asked:

"Since we have some extra material left why don't we build the next set of pillars?"

I said, "You can do that but you know that I have no money to pay you. I probably won't be able to pay you for a long time. Also, we still haven't decided what we are going to do next and when. I need to discuss this with my children first."

"Here's how we're going to come to an agreement," he replied. "When you get the money you can pay me. What could your children possibly say? Once the house is built, it is build… I'm sure they'll agree with that."

"I don't know what to tell you..." I said before we lost the connection and the telephone went dead.

I decided not to talk to anyone at home about this but the lead worker called me again a few days later and informed me that the work was completed.

I immediately left for Ohrid to see what they had done. The new concrete pillars were up and the building material was gone. The only things that were left were the forty new large beams lined up in the yard, side by side. I called the lead worker and left a message to inform him that I was at my house in Ohrid.

The next day he called me back early in the morning. He said that a baby, his granddaughter, had been born and that it would make a big impression on everyone in his family if I went to his house. I

decided to go. I knew that Labunishta was a large village, populated mostly by Albanians. Most of those people were Macedonian speakers who had accepted the Muslim faith. And because they were isolated these people spoke archaic Macedonian, which was considered more pure than the literary Macedonian language. I went to the village by taxi. The lead worker was waiting for me in front of a huge, recently built mosque as we had agreed. Just as we greeted each other, he proudly boasted that it was his brother who had provided the money to build the mosque.

When we arrived at his house, there were several women sitting on the ground, on mattresses, and six or seven children and grandchildren were running around them in the middle of the large living room on the ground floor. His wife whom I knew from before, because one day she had come to the construction site, immediately welcomed me with open arms after which the two daughters-in-law and another woman I didn't know greeted me. They offered me sweets and beverages. I gave them a gift for the new baby and the toys I had brought for the other children. We then chatted a bit about this and that. The children immediately took the toys and began to play with them, occasionally looking at me curiously. The older ones asked me what my name was.

Before I left I praised the lead worker and his sons for their hard work. The lead man's wife said that they were grateful to me also for offering them employment. I promised them that I would come and visit them again another time and left by taxi back to Ohrid.

When I got back I gathered the beams and, one by one, secured them in a room on the ground level, which we used as a warehouse. I also had stored bricks in the same room.

A few days after I'd come to Ohrid, I met a close friend of a relative. She had an apartment in the city and often stayed there for several days. She was a widow and had no children from either her first or second marriage. She had inherited two flats from her husband who had died a few years ago and, as a bank clerk, she was making good money. As we continued to walk she asked me why I was in Ohrid. I told her about the troubles I was having building my house… That's when she offered to loan me some money… for a longer term and

with low interest... She said that she had a lot of money in the bank and it wasn't making much interest there anyway.

I called my family in Skopje.

My children advised me that it was up to me to decide what I wanted to do.

They were pretty sure which way I would decide and how to go about solving the problem. They knew I was already a prisoner of the house that we were building and the only way out was to finish it.

The amount of money I asked to borrow was close to what I needed to add the next slab on top of the pillars that had already been built.

The day after I received my loan from the lady, I called the workers and invited them to come back to work. The next day they did. They also brought with them a cement mixer. It was a rare kind made in Slovenia. It looked more modern than the others and worked more efficiently. To safeguard it they tied it with a thick chain to one of the sturdy bars on the ground-floor window and locked it with a huge padlock, as they had done before with their other mixers.

The lead worker wrote down what and how much material I should get in order to continue with the construction job and left for his village. He said he would come back in two or three days. I too left and went to Skopje to get some necessary things.

A day later he called me and said:

"Do you know anything about my cement mixer? It looks like it was stolen."

I was surprised by his question. I said to him, "How could I possibly know. I wasn't there. I left for Skopje immediately after you left. And even if I was there, I wouldn't have been in the house because I don't stay in the house during the evenings and overnight."

"Come to Ohrid as soon as possible…" he said, "let's see what we can do."

I took the first bus from Skopje to Ohrid as I had many other times before, and got off at the stop closest to my house, near the high school. From there I walked down the street that led to the lake, where my house was located. On my way I passed by a house that was being built. This house had been started almost at the same time as mine, so I wanted to see how far the construction had progressed. When I looked in the yard I saw the same kind of cement mixer as the one my workers used. I thought it was curious that this group of workers would be using the same kind of cement mixer, given how

rare they were and right after the one was stolen from my house. There was something fishy about this… If the cement mixer was stolen the thieves wouldn't dare use it so close by. Then I suddenly remembered. The lead worker who was building this house was a relative of the lead worker who was building my house...

I became suspicious that something was going on here but I couldn't quite connect what it was. Could the cement mixer not be his and the real owner came and took it without telling him? Was the cement mixed his and he forgot that he'd loaned it to his relative to finish some work? Or was he telling me that it was stolen because he didn't want to work for me because he had been offered more money to work somewhere else? In any case I wasn't happy with what was happening.

He was sitting in my yard when I arrived. After greeting each other I asked, "Did you report the theft to the police?"

"What are you talking about? If I did that they wouldn't believe me anyway, they would think I was lying," he replied.

"You should have," I said.

"You don't understand," he replied, "you haven't dealt with the police. What's worse, I now have nothing to work with. I won't be able to work…"

"You will manage," I said. "You will borrow a cement mixer from someone…"

"No one will give me one… They need it to work…"

I opened the front door to go inside. I was still hesitating to tell him about the cement mixer I saw in the yard where his relatives were working. I was afraid of what situation he would find himself in if he realized that he had been caught in a lie. He didn't know that I knew that the workers working at the other site were his relatives. The engineer supervising the work had told me they were relatives.

In the end I decided not to tell him that I'd seen the cement mixer and where I'd seen it. After we got inside, we sat down and in a categorical tone of voice I reminded him that he was fully capable of managing the work and that he needed to build the stairs from the ground floor to the first floor. I then asked him to immediately measure how much and what kind of materials were needed to build the formwork, how much rebar was required as well as how much sand and cement!

"All three of my sons have gone to work in Italy, so I will need one more worker and for that you will pay me another hundred euros in advance," he said.

I thought about it for a moment and said, "Okay, now let's have some coffee."

I put the coffee pot on the gas stove and lit it. I then went outside the front door and telephoned my friend, the husband of the friend where I was staying, and asked him to come over as soon as possible. He arrived while we were still having our coffee. I took out a sheet of paper and said to the lead worker:

"My friend here, in front of you, is a lawyer. I will draft an agreement and we will both sign it. I will write down that you agree to start building the stairs immediately and that you are asking for another hundred euros for that, despite the fact that in the previous agreement it was agreed that you would build the stairs for the money I already paid you. I agree to pay you another hundred euros after you build the stairs because, as you said, you will also hire a worker. I will write all that down on this paper..."

After I had drafted the agreement I read it back to him. The man looked at my lawyer friend several times inquisitively and then signed where I had written his name and I signed where I'd written my name. I dated it at the bottom of the page. I had to do this because I wasn't sure if I could find a new lead worker if he left. The stairs needed to be finished urgently.

My lawyer friend and he then immediately took measurements for everything that was needed to be procured to build the stairs. After

that we drove to the lumberyard where they cut planks for us. On our way we also hired the extra worker needed to help out from those waiting at the market to be hired. They started working the moment we got back. The next day, late in the evening, the staircase was built. I gave the lead worker the extra money he'd asked for and asked him when he was coming back. He said he would come back by taxi to pick up his tools in a couple of days.

When he came back he didn't look like he was going back home. He was dressed in working clothes. I mechanically memorized the number of the taxi and the company it belonged to. An hour after the man had loaded his tools and left, I called the taxi company and asked them to send me the same taxi. I told them that the passenger in the taxi had forgotten one of his tools and he needed it for his next job. So he'd asked me to send it to him where the taxi driver had taken him. When the taxi driver came, I told him to take me to where he had taken the worker with the tools.

He remembered where it was and he took me to a house that was being built. I told the taxi driver to drop me off at the main street, nearby. I paid him and he left. I returned and saw the man up on the scaffolding working. I walked home.

Again I was left without workers... Perhaps now was the time to delay the rest of the construction. But during a conversation I'd had with a catering inspector, with whom I often had coffee at my favourite restaurant he had suggested that I shouldn't stop the construction

"A house without a roof," he said, "is like a man without a head. You should continue with the construction even if it's a bit at a time. You shouldn't abandon the building, even for a short time, especially since you aren't in town all the time. There are many mean, envious people who could do damage."

"They can't really do anything anymore," I replied.

"You don't think so? You just don't know what bad people are capable of..." he said.

Almost every time I went to see my house I passed by the other house that was being built. A few days after my workers left I again passed by the other house and saw the cement mixer was still there... But I didn't care anymore.

One day I went to the market to buy some fresh fruit and on my way back I ran into Boris, the man who had done some work for me. He was standing there with several other workers waiting for someone to hire them.

He was happy to see me and immediately asked me how I was doing with building my house. I told him about the problems I was having and he said, "You know, there is a group of local workers with whom I have worked before; a son-in-law, a brother-in-law and a nephew. I don't know if they are working right now but I can ask..."

"Okay," I said, "if they are free then ask them to come over to my house tomorrow and we will see what we can do..."

The next day the workers came by. They looked over the construction site to determine what else needed to be done. They examined the material I had on hand and determined how much more I needed to buy. We agreed on how much I would pay them for the work. They also agreed to start work the next day. After that they left. I was delighted that we were going to continue with the construction and finish building the third and final slab.

The engineer I had hired to supervise the construction came over less and less. He said he had many obligations. I couldn't decide if I should replace him or not. He had been recommended by a friend and we worked well together. Without him I had to do the supervising myself and, because I wasn't experienced, I had to rely on the experience and competence of my construction workers. I knew what to do with many of the elementary things because I had learned them from my previous workers.

My new workers started working early in the morning because they lived locally and didn't have to travel far. The agreement was that they first finish all the stairs before they could work on the slab. I reminded them of that and they agreed that they had no problem with finishing the stairs first. All three workers were middle-aged men and had confidence in their abilities. In terms of materials, I told them where to find them and that there was everything they needed to make the slab, as well as the planks and beams that were needed to build the stairs. We bought sand and rebar and they started working immediately. Because they were working high up on the house I couldn't see what they were doing. They used an unstable wooden ladder leaning against the outside walls to climb up, which I didn't dare climb so I relied on them to do things right. More importantly I trusted Boris, he was a good person and wouldn't have recommended these people if they weren't competent.

When I came to the site and went inside on the ground floor I could hear them working non-stop. But several days later the stairs still weren't built.

Once again I mentioned to them to finish the stairs first so that they could use them to climb up. I said it would be easier for them to

climb up the stairs instead of that rickety, long wooden ladder. But they insisted that the slab needed to be build first and that the staircases would come next.

Occasionally the lead man's son came over to the site to help them procure the necessary material they needed. He drove an older car.

But despite my recommendation, they decided to build the slab before they built the stairs. They also tried to convince me that the third slab should be lighter, that is, they should build it with bricks, through which they would drive rebar, just like they had done with many other houses. I told them they should consult with the civil engineer the moment he arrived before they did anything. But they said the engineer had already agreed.

A few days later they told me that everything was ready and that tomorrow they would pour the concrete for the slab. The next day they attached a pulley with a cable and an electric hoist to the same large plank on which they lifted the wheelbarrow full of concrete, which they poured into the prepared formwork.

It was Sunday. After lifting several wheelbarrows of concrete they ran into a problem. The fuses blew. The lead man's son went to the store, bought fuses and climbed up to install them. They continued to work. Less than an hour later the fuses blew again. They had to stop working again. Another set of fuses were purchased and the work resumed.

I prepared food and at noon I invited them to come in to eat. After they ate the lead man told me that we were running out of cement and that we needed at least three more bags to finish the job. I told him that I had purchased exactly the same number of bags for this slab as I purchased for the other two slabs we'd built. He persisted. I reminded him that it was Sunday and that there were no stores open where it could be bought. He said he had a friend who guarded one of the warehouses and he would let his son in to buy the cement.

"If we run out of concrete it will be too late, what will we do then, and you know that the job can't be interrupted while we pour the slab," he warned me.

He left me no choice so I gave his son the money and he went and brought three more bags of cement. After they worked for a while the lead man called me from above and told me that they needed at least three more bags of cement. I looked over to where the bags were stacked and noticed that they were indeed decreasing, but I wasn't convinced that they would all be used up. At the same time I convinced myself that even if I bought too many bags it wouldn't be a problem. There was still a lot of work to be done... And so again I gave his son more money and he bought three more bags.

When the son came back I noticed he parked his car on the far side of the sidewalk and didn't unload the three bags he had just purchased. He left the site, went somewhere and came back half an hour later. I told him to unload the bags and move his car off the sidewalk because he was going to be fined. He pretended he didn't hear me and went somewhere again. The pouring of the concrete was coming to an end. One of the workers announced that this was the last batch of concrete they were mixing.

At the same time I saw the lead man's son leaving in a hurry. He drove his car away without unloading the bags. I didn't know what to do. If I accused him of taking the bags I would have a problem with the workers, most of all with his father, and that would mean that I would be left without workers again. So I pretended I hadn't seen anything when in fact it was premeditated theft. I counted the rest of the bags and found that I had five left. I began to distrust the workers and wasn't sure if they would rob me blind when I wasn't there. I also began to suspect that in the past they were taking other building materials without my permission. They probably took stuff when I wasn't there; the several hours in the evening when I was with my friends.

A few days later when they came back to work they immediately started laying the bricks. Again they didn't bother to build the stairs.

In the meantime, without the engineer's or my permission, the workers began to hastily build the two remaining staircases. When I asked them why they were rushing, especially after it was getting dark, they told me they wanted to surprise me.

A few days later, after the concrete on the staircases had dried and the workers removed the framework, I noticed that the stairs weren't built well not like the previous stairs. I complained to them but they tried to tell me that they had no choice because that part of the house was narrower and they had to adapt to the asymmetric shape. Unfortunately it was a fait accompli and there was nothing to be done.

There was still my roof that needed to be built. I paid the workers for the work they had done and sat them down for a chat. I asked them if they had built a roof before on other houses. They assured me they had so I hired them to build a roof for my house. After they cut the beams to size they began the work. In time the new roof took shape. It looked solid.

Then we went to the store (this time we went with my car) and bought emery cloth, which they nailed to the beams and on top of it the boards on which the ceramic tiles would be laid. The roof was ready in a few days. The ceramic tiles were then arranged. When they called me to go up to the attic and have a look, I easily climbed up the new staircases and up a short wooden stepladder. I was so happy that the job was done I forgot all my troubles. Lake Ohrid looked beautiful from my upper floor.

A few days later I found and hired a master electrician who installed all the cables and sockets in the new part of the house. I purchased all the necessary materials and paid him in instalments for the work he'd done. I already had electricity in the lower part of the house before we started the upgrade and all the electrician had to do was wire the upper floor. The man really knew his job well and wired my house in no time. I now had electrical outlets and lights all throughout the house.

Unfortunately, I still had to deal with connecting my house to the city's water supply and drainage system. But thanks to my good friends and above all to my son, who was friends with the director of the water supply and sewage departments, we were finally able to complete that job. On the day that we were connected a team of people from the water department came to my house in an official van and delivered the tools and necessary materials to complete the connection.

First they dug all over my yard until they found the underground water pipe. Our next door neighbours from behind us, from whom we had endured much torment in the past, came running to see what was happening. The workers found out that the original water pipe through which our house was getting its water ran through the next door neighbour's yard so they decided to dig a new ditch close to our house and connect us directly to the main that ran along the street. While digging they discovered that there was a special pipe through which water came only to our house but it had been cut and plugged about one metre before it reached the house. The moment it was revealed that the pipe had been cut our next door neighbours disappeared out of sight. They had probably cut the pipe a long time ago.

After this was revealed many of those who saw what had been done wondered when and how the pipe had been cut, and if there were any witnesses. Unfortunately even if people knew no one dared speak.

Both the water and sewage systems were soon installed.

Eventually after each member of my family contributed as much as they could, the debts incurred for upgrading the house were paid off.

Soon afterwards we installed new doors and windows and added new carpets in the living room and the hallways. We also purchased new couches, dressers, a stove, a washing machine, a refrigerator, tables and chairs. The house was now well furnished. We added railings to the staircases and balconies as well as ceramic tiles. We bought outdoor chairs for the balconies and sat and enjoyed the sunrise and sunset every day. The scenery was so great that even if you weren't a poet, you would become one. The natural beauty was sure to make you restlessness and fill you with the desire to create. Everyone who was born there and lived next to this unique gift of nature felt great, not only in body but also in spirit.

We could now say that our house was built and we no longer had to worry about any further investments. But we would be wrong because a house was never finished; it would always require new things...

My brother-in-law, the doctor, finished building his weekend house at about the same time as I finished mine. He too endured just as much as I did but his love for his native land gave him strength and filled him with joy for what he had created. He was proud to be able to leave his son and daughter this beautiful house at the foot of the mountain with a view of the lake and its unique landscapes.

My sister and brother-in-law's house became our family's second home where we all gathered together from time to time. My children and their children always shared everything. My daughter and my sister's son also shared a profession. They were both directors.

With time we continued to slowly improve our house in Ohrid.

Almost simultaneously my sister and I added a façade by the skilled hands of a group of young workers.

One could see my cream-colored three-story house with large glass windows from the lakeshore. It had risen in the same place where a small, dilapidated one story house had once stood.

EPILOGUE

With her latest novel, our well-known Macedonian novelist Dragica Najcheska, whose work we have been following for a long time, continues her series of successful narrative works, in her recognizable style, and in a form that logically follows on from her previous novel, "Lifelong Noose".

The novel "House on the Lake" deals with a seemingly simple topic, easy to read, contemporary and current. The main character, Violeta Nikolovska, buys a small abandoned house on the shore of Lake Ohrid. But immediately after buying it, with her first attempts to prepare it for living and vacationing, things in her life become extremely complicated. Even in her wildest fantasy, Violeta couldn't have imagined the trauma and painful moments she would go through and how long they would last in the following years, until she finally lived in it.

The main plot, the purchase of the house, continues in a whole series of subplots, starting with the most personal one - relations with her husband and her family, and continues with her relationship with her neighbours. An entire series of even more complex relationships are created in the new environment in which quick decisions have to be made and a new coexistence has to be started.

Her first conflict begins with her next door neighbours, who were offered to buy the house but refused. It soon becomes clear that they were hoping to get this small house for free. After failing to do so, they gradually damage it so that one day it will collapse and they can have it condemned. But their plans are disrupted because Violeta decides to buy it and restore it. Her next door neighbours refuse to accept that fact, that the house now has a new owner, and continue to use all possible pressures, still believing that in this way they can dissuade the new owner from renovating it. In fact, Violeta's dream, who is an artist, is to own a house overlooking the lake, hence the name of the novel.

One of the most important, complex and current threads in this novel is the fact that it is linked to bribery, servitude and personal interests before peoples' interests, and thus before the law, deeply

embedded in the mechanisms of the state's institutions. In that sense, it is valuable to show a large number of officials - representatives of the government who are well paid by the state, and with many privileges, who are charged with protecting the interests of the citizens, guaranteed by existing laws, while they mostly break the laws and, on the contrary, work exclusively for their own benefit.

The suffering and absurd occurrences experienced by Violeta, the main character, are caused by the corrupt, often bribed officials from the judiciary, the authorities in the Municipality, the Public Revenue Administration and the local land registry office. Bribery is not only in the form of money, but also in large loan services and even blackmail. The direct cause and effect of this development is precisely linked with her next door neighbour and his contacts and connections because he himself is employed in one of the key positions in the local bureaucratic machinery.

Despite all those painful experiences and injustices, even rigged court trials, with invented, non-existent facts, Violeta manages to move into her house and realize her ownership rights. She is helped in this by several good people who are in key positions in some of the city's institutions.

Representing people from different layers and profiles in society, although in a small geographical area, Dragica Najcheska, author of the novel "House on the Lake", paints a picture of the development path our social community has taken in the past decades, starting from the mid-eighties. At the same time, many of the mechanisms discussed, recognizable in a completely different socio-political system, sound more relevant today than ever before.

As in all her previous works, Dragica Najcheska wrote about contemporary topics, with a realistic approach, immediately winning over the reader from the very first events of the action. Her highly recognizable artistic statement, on the other hand, incorporates a new form of storytelling, first introduced in the novel "Lifelong Noose". This novel approached the topic from three angles, three aspects of the same story: the first, the most basic, in which the main protagonist, who drives the action, speaks in the first person about

the events and experiences she encounters; the second, from the point of view of the storyteller, the author, in the third person, but only treating the actions and feelings of the main protagonist, separated by bold letters; and the third, the dialogues, the events that happen independently of the main narrator and the protagonist to other characters, antagonists, those who are directly confronted with the intentions and actions of the main protagonist, is presented by italic letters.

The kind of language Dragica Najcheska is using here provides a special dynamic, and also puts the reader in a privileged position, to be able to find themselves on several different sides that make up the mosaic of relationships, the complexity of which can be followed and understood more easily in this way.

Dr. Georgi Stalev