

Black Fever

The news that there is a doctor in the village spread fast and on Monday morning Elka's house was besieged by people who wanted to ask something. Boris was concerned more about the safety of the newborn and her mom, so he offered to visit each house and the villagers formed a quiet line, everyone with his grievances which Elka recorded sitting at her garden table. Boris smirked at the picture, so far away from his neat sterile hospital. He took the list and his heavy satchel and started his rounds. The folks were in generally good health - clear air, hard work and healthy diet always had nice effect on human physics. There were several infected wounds which Elka would have taken care of if the people had gone to her, few minor surgeries that could be performed without much of a risk, numerous cataracts to be sent to an ophthalmologist in Bourgas, two abscesses that might have gone dangerous if not opened, some broken bones that had healed not quite right but it was too late to redo them. Boris took notes, gave few vitamins to the children who looked like they may benefit from them after the winter, scared the two village drunkards off their habit to drink more than reasonable. His work would be for three or four more days, he estimated, and he would even be able to sleep at night which was a luxury.

Todor's daughter slept as little as her father. The baby was constantly hungry and Dora was getting drained by sleep deprivation. She was eating much better, but looked waxy and drawn. Elka was helping with bathing and swaddling, Boris was taking night watch for the young mother to get at least some rest, but despite their efforts Dora's milk seemed not to satisfy the hungry mite. The village was not that big and unfortunately there was no other baby being breastfed. After the end of the second week Elka suggested some goat milk to be added to the young lady's diet. They could at least sleep half the night that way and the baby and Dora started gaining weight.

It was few days before Boris was scheduled to go back when a night visitor knocked at the iron-clad doors. Konstantin opened to see an elderly nun carrying a lantern.

'Good evening! Is the doctor here still?' she asked in a whisper as not to wake the sleeping house.

'Come in Sister, I will get him down in a minute!' Konstantin offered.

'No, we have some very sick souls over there and I don't want to bring anything in. I will wait here,' the woman sat on the flat stone at the gates corner.

Boris came running down, carrying his satchel. Konstantin offered him a horse, but the doctor said he had never ridden one, so better not to start learning on the go. He followed the nun under the growing moon.

'She is a young woman, almost a girl, and she comes from the other seaside, from the old lands. She came alone, said that the others had died on the road, but it does not seem to me that she will survive either. It was yesterday, she was shivering a little and we knew it was malaria that is shaking her, but today she turned yellow as a pear and is peeing blood. I came to ask for you to see if something can be done. We would have caught it earlier, but she was alone in her room and another group came and left immediately, we thought she was just sleeping.'

If what the nun was telling him was accurate and he had no reason to believe it was not, Boris doubted there was anything he could do for the poor woman. If the malaria had reached the black water fever, there were few things to be done at all, far less in a place like the monastery. The haemoglobinuria indicated that the woman's kidneys were damaged. The chances were she was not only exhausted but anemic and malnourished, her fighting forces low to start with. The black fever rarely let its victims alive in most favorable circumstances. The nuns had sent an elderly sister to call upon him, he had to oblige and go despite knowing that all his expertise would not stop the life slip away.

The room was brightly lit by several lanterns and candles and Boris knelled next to narrow wooden bed covered with a colorful homemade rug. The girl that lay on it was beautiful, an ethereal beauty enhanced by the ghostly yellow skin that had probably been creamy white, reddish gold hair, high forehead, small nose and bloodless lips that had been once full. They were opened in a painful attempt to breathe and showed two lines of perfect pearly white teeth. She wore only a white long shirt which was drenched in sweat. One did not need a thermometer to feel the waves of fever emanating from the slender body. The nun who was staying with her had tried in vain to cool her with compresses and the room smelled of apple vinegar. Boris

checked the girl's rapid pulse then looked at the silent figure that appeared at the door. He stood up and followed Mother Superior outside the room.

'We cannot do much for her. I think she will die before the night is over. We may try to make her more comfortable by putting her in tepid water for a while. That will give her strength to go through the last rites, I think. I will stay until...'

'Thank you for coming, Doctor Danailov, it is greatly appreciated. Thank you also for the medication you sent with Professor Spassov. I will organize the bath.'

Boris helped the elderly nun to drag the low barrel that was used as a bathtub and poured some of the stored sun-heated water into it. The night was hot for the end of May and he dropped his jacket next to the satchel. The doctor scooped the limp body and carried her down the two flights of stairs to the yard lit by the eerie moonlight. He lowered the girl into the water, shirt and all, trying to keep her hair out of it. Few minutes passed by and gradually the ragged breaths became less labored. The girl opened her eyes, greenish-gray pools of pain, and her dry lips whispered something, then her eyes closed again. The nun went to look for Mother Superior, who hurried back to them. She looked at Boris holding the girl under her arms.

'A miracle?'

'No, a respite and it is not going to last, I am afraid!'

The greenish eyes opened again and the girl said few words which Boris did not understand, as he was behind her. Mother Superior got them though and ran for something. The girl tilted her head to look at Boris and smiled at him, a throbbing, painful smile of gratitude. Mother Superior returned fast with a chalice and a small bottle. She poured wine into the jewel-encrusted vessel and held it to the shivering lips. The girl drank few long swallows and smiled again.

'So that was sweet wine! Dad told me that I would get sweet wine the day I marry and not earlier and I did not want to die without tasting it. Thank you for being so kind to me. Mother, I need to confess something before I go, for I have sinned, I ...'

Uncontrollable shivers ran through the girl's body and she could not continue. The nun hastily made the sign of the cross over her and started reading the prayer to absolve the child's sins. Boris could feel how the girl's heart was beating faster and faster. With some sublime effort the mesmerizing eyes opened and the

cracked lips formed "Amen!", then sipped one more swallow from the wine the nun offered. Mother Superior withdrew the chalice and together with it the last breath left the tortured lips, the heart stopped its mad cadence, the body drained out of tension and life. Boris pulled the limp form out of the water not paying attention to his drenched outfit. He laid her on the nearby bench and looked at Mother Superior.

'Did she have a name?'

'Marina, she was Marina like me long ago.'

Iossif had procured for Mitzi a special permission to pass her exams before May 24th, the Day of the Saints Cyril and Methodius also celebrated as the Day of the Bulgarian alphabet and education. She had been top student and it was not unheard of. Instead of staying in Sofia to celebrate, she and Iossif took Nada with them to the journey to pick up Dora and the baby who had not been registered yet, hidden in Elka's home. Boris had returned full of praise and had had a long talk with Iossif alone, about which Mitzi knew nothing. She knew only that her husband had cashed all his shares in various companies, was converting many of his investments as well as sending sizable amounts abroad using diverse paths.

While Nada, Mitzi and Dora were crying their eyes out over the little girl, Iossif hiked the path to the monastery and met Mother Superior. He brought gifts - a backpack of medicines from Boris, an icon of Saint Marina in gilded frame and a solid amount of gold.

The lips of the wise nun twitched, 'That generous a gift is either for washing guilt or for asking a favor. As you did not need to come so far to wash your hands, than it is the second option. What can a nun help you with, Professor?'

'I want to adopt a girl that has been born in Brashlyan to my goddaughter. The birth's circumstances may lead to danger for the child and the mother, so I need to hide her origin as deep as possible. Boris told me about an unfortunate young woman who died few weeks ago in your care.'

'And she gave birth before she died of puerpre fever without telling us neither her real name nor the name of the father, so I brought the child to the village nurse to try to find her a home. That was exactly how it happened. You will be saving not one soul with this adoption, but many! God will bless this child in your

care. We are living in the time when faith is scarce, Professor. It is a sacred lie I will support without your money.'

'Thank you, Mother, but money will be as scarce as faith. I will be honored if you take it and make repairs to your fortress while there will be chance to do them. My old heart tells me that the bad times will last longer than we thought initially. Doctor Danailov keeps telling me I will die soon, and I was kind of ready, but now that the young mighty men are dying, we the old shots have to pick up the slack. I believe we will meet again, in the meantime take care. If something happens and you need anything, please come to me if I am still around or to my wife if I am not, Mitzi will know what to do.'

On May 26th, under overwhelming security, the baby who had left Brashlyan with a birth certificate naming her born on May 20th, to unknown mother and father, was baptized in "Sveta Nedelya", the cathedral where her adoptive parents had been married in November. Her frail-looking godmother cried over the name of the little girl - she was baptized Dorotea Iossifova Spassova and the town gossip insisted that it was a final bow from her high-school friend to name the child after her. Not many questioned one more solemn act of friendship - Dr. Danailov married the young woman in a quiet ceremony the same evening. The evil tongues were sure that he would be a widower once again before long and the marriage had been a form of encouragement for her last days. The following morning Mitzi, Dorotea, Dora and Iossif boarded the Orient Express to Istanbul. The hurry-up was explained with Mitzi's frantic fear that something might happen to the baby in Sofia and Dora's final wish to see the place of her happy youth. Boris remained in Sofia for few more days to arrange a replacement while he joined his wife for a hasty honeymoon. He left on May 31st, when Vesselin passed the one before the last exam in Law Faculty with excellent mark. In the afternoon of June 1st, Lambri was arrested together with his son right in his office at the University and sent to undisclosed location. The old university cleaner who had run to Lambri's house with the grim news found Nada polishing her husband's orders for the following day's parade for the Day of the Fallen for Bulgarian National Liberty. She sighed, offered him a glass of wine and a piece of bread with cheese, closed the small boxes with the now shiny medals and went to pick up her jacket and cane. There were few people she needed to talk to.

The militia people lifted their shoulders at the question where Lambri and Vesselin were taken, as there were no records of their arrests. The National Security building was impenetrable fortress with armed guards and there was no trace of them there either. Most of the civil offices were closed. Nada went home and started calling the long list of people who could know something. It was supper time and the servants who took her calls promised that their masters would call as soon as they finish their meal. Few people answered themselves and after expressing outrage and assured her that it had been a case of obvious mistake, they all promised to call back after few calls here and there. By nine, Nada put her jacket again and went to the post office. She patiently waited for a call to be placed to "Buyuk Londra" in Istanbul but when she was put through the receptionist informed her that Mr. and Mrs. Spassov and their baby as well as Mr. and Mrs. Danailov had boarded a ship to France that very afternoon with their entire luggage. The old woman staggered back home to the big empty house. She pulled out her own war medals and opened the boxes on the dining room table. These were all hard earned signs of service to the county and its nation. Their colorful ribbons were showing the valeur of the person who was to wear them. What an irony - the same country was swallowing its children like Kronos without looking at their former services, without thinking that its yesterday was also the foundation of its tomorrow. Nada had no illusions that if she would ever see her husband and son, it would be a long way from the next morning. The new order had killed Todor, dragging him from the bastion of freedom, the Parliament, so what would prevent them from killing Lambri snatched from the once untouchable University grounds? Vesselin's only sin was that he was their son. Some people had stopped their history lessons at the era of Boris the Baptizer who had killed his nobility who refused to accept Christianity together with their wives, children and servants. Fifty-two families, eradicated together for not a single one to challenge the new faith. Not one left to fight for the old order, for the faith of their ancestors, to tell the story from the other point of view. Nada sent a silent prayer to the Heavens that at least Dora was spared and Dorothea was in the reliable hands of Iossif and Mitzi. There would be someone to ring the bell, to call to the consciousness of the rulers who had come to rule with the signature of her husband. The morning was wiser than the evening and she would need her strength. That was a battle which she would win no matter the price.

Maritsa entered the silent home and started preparing breakfast. She knew how much attention Lambri paid to the memory of the people who had fought for their country and when no one seemed to wake up at seven she got worried. She tiptoed to Lambri's study to see if he had been working there and she had missed him coming down. The room was empty and his big professor's bag was not at its usual place. The young girl frowned; her master was so set in his habits. Then she caught a glimpse at the opened boxes on the dining room table. She reverently approached the medals. Mr. Mihailov was wearing his awards with such a pride and had told her that there was no higher call for a man than to serve his country in the moment of trouble. When their fatherland had called him he had always answered and those shiny metal pieces on gay ribbons were a testimony to his merit. He reminded her of the old freedom fighters, the ones from the poems at school, with their noble determination to liberate the nation or die. Many of them had died and the second day of June was the commemoration day for the fallen. She better wake her masters up, they may not have heard the alarm clock and be late for somewhere. She went upstairs and knocked on the master bedroom's door. There was no answer. She decided to try her luck with Vesselin, but nobody answered his door either. It was not possible that they all had gone before her arrival, may be he was just sound asleep. Maritsa knocked again, this time louder, but again there was no answer and she pressed the handle to open the door a crack. Vesselin's bed was as she had made it the previous day. He had not said he would stay with friends. It was days before his final exam to graduate, where was he, Maritsa felt a jolt of panic. She returned to the master bedroom door and knocked louder. The fear gave her boldness to do the unspeakable - she opened the door a little and saw only Nada's gray hair above the cover. The young girl crossed herself and approached the bed, relieved to see the quiet rise and fall of the blanket.

'Mrs. Mihailova!' she whispered. Nada turned and opened her eyes.

'I am sorry to have entered, the breakfast is ready and I thought that Mr. Mihailov ...'

'It is all right, my dear, I will join you in a minute!' Nada was trying to sit up and Maritsa rushed to help her.

'Lambri and Vesselin were arrested yesterday and I could not find where they are. I doubt it will be soon before we see them, my dear, so you may also look for another job around. I will pay your wages for another month, but I think it is dangerous for you to stay with us, no, with me. Probably someone is after our house and I am the next to go. You have been good to us and it is not fair to drag you in the story.'

'I am staying with you. No matter what I am staying with you! We will find them! Mrs. Mihailova, I am not leaving you!'

'They will make you, Maritsa! You are young and all the life is in front of you, run, my dear!'

'No, I am not running. You have been good to me and I am not leaving you alone! Don't even try! Now, please, you have to have breakfast and then we will go to the police again and will find them!' the girl put a plate in front of her mistress and a fork in her hand.

'You need to be strong for them, Mrs. Mihailova!'

They were a strange couple, the old woman with her cane and the young girl with chubby open face on whose hand the older woman leaned, going from office to office to office and getting the same non-committal shrug again and again. At midday they were passing in front of Tsar-Liberator's monument across from the Parliament when the sirens started blaring to remind the citizens that they had to stop and think for a minute of the people who had paid the ultimate price to buy the country its freedom. The town stopped like a snapshot and the only moving thing that Maritsa remembered were the tears rolling down Nada's old and tired face.

Tashev was sweating in his new uniform. He had expected a promotion and was looking forward to the wider general's line on his uniform trousers as his district had shown one of the best results in the fight with the national traitors and the enemies of the people. It irked him that Tanas had passed him by. He had been invited to the meeting of the security chiefs in Varna for June 2nd and was even on the list for the official diner but he thought that his work merited more. Instead of dispensing accolades, Tanas had mentioned several missed raids again and implied that personal involvement would have made a difference. When Tashev had reported that the two Mihailovs had been arrested, his announcement was met with disdain. His boss had asked if it should be considered a personal vendetta against the best man and the matron of honor at someone's marriage. Mikhail had had enough common sense not to make a scene, as Tanas was not the man to stand up such a thing. Instead the colonel had politely informed his boss about the situation with someone's adoption, the godmother and her perfunctory marriage and so called 'honeymoon'.

'How interesting, the baby was born nine months after Todorov's untimely death! One could think about strange coincidences, reincarnation and other mysticism!', drawled Tanas in a caustic reminder of Tashev's failure with Todor's execution.

'May be we should check personally the origin of the little bastard?' Tashev half-jokingly had suggested. To that Tanas had shrugged his shoulders in his expensive summer suit and said that digging old graves was not listed as a pleasant pastime in his books.

Out of sheer spite Mikhail had ordered a car to Tsarevo, in fact two cars, as his group of bodyguards had swollen to five. The team was sweating under the sun in the small town waiting for the local security people to come with six horses as the stupid village where Tashev's former passion had found her bastard was inaccessible by other means of transport. Luckily his guards had been peasants not so long ago and could ride and he had gone through several courses himself. Going there and coming back would not be a problem. The cars would wait to bring them back to Bourgas.

'Auntie Elka, Auntie Elka! There are six people coming on horses!' A disheveled mite ran into the garden. Elka wiped her sweating brow and sent the little one to play at the other end of the yard, summoned her son and sent him to the monastery to warn the nuns. He took the shortcut through the gardens silent as shadow. His mother continued to till the garden - until the strangers came to her, they would have gone by the church first.

'Is there a mayor in this hole?' Mikhail yelled in front of the locked library building that was supposed to host the official offices of the village.

'It is summer, Colonel, they are probably all at the fields or at sea. But there may be someone in the church who would be able to guide us. People at such places know each other...' one of the bodyguards said placating. The colonel had overestimated his own riding abilities and was irritable.

An ancient woman was swiping the stone floor and came to point at the nurse's house. Tashev walked fast and banged on the sun bleached door. A woman in her late thirties or early forties opened it and asked what they like.

'Information!' glared Tashev. 'I was told that a child had been left for adoption with you!'

'Yes, but it is gone. A couple from Sofia adopted it, a young woman and an old man came and took her!'

'How did they know there would be a baby here of all places?'

'They did not, they came to pick up their friend with her mother. The girl was very ill and wanted to die at home. The nuns had brought the child the day before, they said that the mother gave birth and died and they asked me to find a home for the orphan, but it is a small village and everyone had his own kids to feed. I thought of going to Tsarevo to give it away when it grows a little bit, but her luck, the couple said they lost a child and had been searching. She was such a small baby, I told them she might be ill like her mother and nobody knew the father; they could get an older child...'

'You talk too much, woman, where is the monastery?'

'Follow the path, then up the clearing, it is not far, I can come to show you.'

'No need, we will find it!' Tashev mounted with difficulty and his people followed him. One of the strangers turned and looked at her with his deep green eyes. Elka breathed a sigh of relief as she had recognized the Keeper. She made a sign of the cross and hurried to bar the door.

Mother Superior was coming down the stairs regally slow. The six visitors were still on their horses after threatening the elderly nun who had initially refused to let them through the gates. Mother Theodora stopped several steps before the last landing and looked down at them. The face of their boss was a contorted mask of pain and hatred which made the otherwise attractive features look ugly and menacing. The remaining five were trying not to get into his line of vision.

'It is God's land, you need to come down and the horses have to be put at the stables. Do you want to pray before the God's mother?' There was not a hint of fear in her calm polite voice.

'Prayers are for the brainwashed! I need to know about the woman who gave birth and died two weeks ago.'

'Who told you about the woman and her child?'

'Answer my question, Mother, or this place will get new management!'

'It is up to God to decide when it is going to be, young man, the new management of this place. But if you so insist, I will tell you. A poor woman came here in the last stages of labor, gave birth and died in my hands few hours later. She did not give us a name, said only "Marina". She was not from the village and we did not know her. We don't know who the child's father was, we were told he had died anyway. The unfortunate

woman was Christian so we buried her in our cemetery as we did not expect anyone to come to ask for her.

Do you know more about her than we do?’

‘No, but I think there was no such woman at all. You have invented her! Another woman gave birth and you are covering for her! You are lying!’

‘I can show you her grave if you want to see it personally!’ bad flames were burning the grey eyes of the black-clad woman. She walked in front of the small group, out of the monastery yard and towards the nearby sunny clearing. The grass there was carefully cut and simple crosses marked the tended graves. Some crosses were old, whitewashed by the sun and rain, some were newer, for not all the monastery visitors were leaving the place alive. The newest cross was at the top of a small mound of black earth where the first faint blades of grass were growing. It had only two lines: "Marina" and "May 20th, 1948". There was a small wreath of local flowers that adorned the cross.

‘It is empty! There is nobody there, I am telling you!’

‘A young woman had found her final rest here and you are insulting her memory!’ Mother Superior’s lips were a thin white line.

‘There is no young woman lying there, the bastard is Todorov’s bastard, and you are covering for them all! I will show you!’

Tashev scanned his bodyguards and his eyes stopped on Tane.

‘Tane, dig under the cross!’

‘No, Colonel, that is not to be done!’

‘This is an order!’

‘You cannot order me to dig a fresh grave, consider me fired, but I am not digging a dead woman from her grave!’

‘There is no dead woman there!’

‘Mother Superior says there is,’ Tane’s voice was leveled.

‘Colonel, you do not really think of digging the grave, it is a sacred ground and you know what happens to grave robbers!’ There was a dismay in Mother Superior’s voice.

‘Fairytales, and you are lying through your teeth, there is no body there. Stamen and Deko, start digging!’

The two bodyguards stepped back and mutely nodded their refusal, their other two colleagues doing the same. Tashev was standing next to the grave facing Mother Superior and Tane who had stood behind the wooden cross like two marble statues. The breeze from the sea was toying with Tane's hair and the nun's white head cover.

'Well, if you are such chickens, I will show you myself!'

'Colonel, don't do that!' Tane said mildly and his hand glided to the knife in his belt.

Mother Superior put her cool hand on his. 'He had been warned! It is a deep grave, young man!'

Tashev was not paying attention. He was looking around for something to dig with. There was nothing remotely resembling a shovel, so he started pushing the soil with his bare hands first, but the work was going slow. His four horrified bodyguards were huddled as he grunted around the growing mound of black earth. Tashev's face was getting redder. He wiped his brow and looked at the hat in his hand. It was new, but he could order another one upon arrival, he thought, and started digging with its hard visor. Tane and Mother Superior were not moving, just staring at him, a hand on the arms of the cross each. The grave was getting deeper and deeper and Tashev was mumbling, 'You see, you see, there is nothing here!' but continued to dig in the lumpy soil.

At the place where the feet of the dead person would be a dirty corner of a cloth emerged. Tashev was lying on the side of the grave and continued to scoop the lumps but he was not so quick and careless. He swiped repeatedly until the cloth was fully exposed with the silhouette of a person beneath with distended belly and hands crossed above it. The rain had soaked the previously white sheet and its color was not much different from the soil around.

'There is nobody inside!' Tashev spat through his white lips. Then he slid his hand and gripped the sheet. It had been tucked safely under the body and at the force of the pull the dead woman's hands flew towards him like a lover was welcoming him with an embrace. The security chief shrieked like a wounded animal, lost his balance and fell towards her. Above him the solemn gray eyes of the nun met the clear green ones of the bodyguard.

Between the five of them they managed to extract the screaming and writhing Mikhail out of the grave. Tane's iron grip held his hands tight enough for the others to tie him with whatever they could spare, Tashev's own belt, his aiguillettes, the leather straps from his gun, which Stamen took care to discharge first and tuck behind his own. Mother Superior left and came back with a long rope and two shovels. Tane took a deep breath and rearranged the dead body properly, covered her with the cloth and quickly filled the grave back. The young man looked at his four colleagues who were holding their tightly bound boss. Tashev was whimpering and his eyes were rolling in his head. Tane stood on his knees in front of the nun and asked her for forgiveness that he had allowed the scene to happen. The dead should not be troubled, he said, and he regretted that he had not stopped the madman from doing it. The nun put a hand on the black curls and looked into the bright eyes, 'If the price of a child's life is an open grave, it is well worth it. He opened the gates of hell himself and he fell first there! Do what you need to do now and remember that there is no blood on your hands in this. God made us with the freedom to choose, all of us.' And she blessed him.