

The Hot Days

The wedding party went back and changed into their summer shirts and shorts. Father Ivan came with them to have another glass of wine and to warn them that right before five the fire should be extinguished for the three Hot Days. Mitzi ran to put few dozens eggs to be boiled, rushed the frozen bread into the oven and with the help of the girls finished cooking several vegetable dishes that could be eaten cold. Vesselin led the boys' team into grilling a mountain of meat while sampling it with some more Pilsner. At quarter to five, Konstantin went to tell his home snake that the fireplace would be cold for three days but its water would be there. He put out the fire in the oven, then the cooker and finally poured a bucket of water over the barrel that was used as a barbecue pit. The Hot Days started on time.

It was an ancient tradition for all the fires to be put out and the household and fields work to stop for the three day in July - the belief was that three saints were responsible to oversee that it is done and punished the ones who did not obey by burning their crops. At the end of Saint Marina the Fiery a new fire would be started in a special way, the fireplace would be lit again with the young fire and not be extinguished for the entire year until the next Hot Days. May be the wise church elders had put the three-day restriction as the only way for the servants to have a break during the back-breaking work of mid summer and keep the people aware of the stormy days dangers, as it was almost certain that at least on one of the days there would be a thunderstorm. But the tradition had taken deep roots and even the neighboring Muslim villages were wary to send people at the fields. Sometimes the storms took their time to brew for hours before the deluge, sometimes they started in minutes and the unexpected travelers could be caught off guard. It was the time to sit at home, enjoy the respite and tell stories.

Mitzi washed her hands and sat in the garden where the breeze was bringing the sea freshness. One by one the young and old gathered around her, made themselves comfortable and when everyone got a drink she started the promised tale.

It was not about the saints that would bake the offenders who dare go and cut the grass. It was about another harvest, a bloody one, that started long ago and that had wasted the life of generations of Bulgarians. It was a story about a country torn by political struggle, of unbelievable alliances and despicable treachery, of brothers being torn to the two sides of a barricade and of mothers fearing for their children. It was not a nice story and some of the listeners had heard of it and some have lived through it. It was about the good and the bad and the unexpected compassion and undeserved cruelty, more about death and less about life, but it explained who the people around the table were and how they have come to know it. It was time to shatter the innocence and shove the skeletons out of the closets. Vesselin, Milena and Mitzi put their voices together and the young generation around them was unexpectedly drawn into the maelstrom of time, sliding back by fifty-five years first and then trying not to drown in what for them had always been few pages of a history textbook. The three elder people were extraordinary good story tellers, may be because the imprint in their minds was done with the hot iron of the interesting times they have lived through.

The story started with a small excursion into the last years of the WWII, when the King, Boris III, had come back from a state visit to Germany and died unexpectedly few days later. Whether he had been poisoned by Hitler as many thought, or at the dinner at the Italian Embassy, or it was a natural death was not making difference. The relatively young man had left a widow, a daughter and a son to be crowned at the tender age of six. The regents who were supposed to rule the country were boy's uncle Kiril, a well-known bon-vivant and excellent swordsman, Professor Bogdan Filov and General Nikola Mihov. A year later Soviet Army entered Bulgaria. An organization called "Fatherland Front" took over, initially a broad coalition of people who wanted to turn the country over the republican way of development. The regents were replaced by the representatives of the Front Todor Pavlov, Venelin Ganev and Tsvyatko Boboshevski.

But little by little the internal tensions grew and the coalition started shedding the parties and people who did not agree with the doctrine. The intellectuals who had signed the law permitting the equivalent of Nazi concentration camps ended up in them. The original regents, all the ministers of the last three cabinets, most of the parliamentarians, the top army echelon, journalists, intellectuals were executed in accordance with the hasty judgment of People's court in February 1945 and buried in a mass grave at the place where

an aviation bomb had left a hole during the war. Once the regime tasted blood without punishment, the spiral of terror unwound smashing people and institutions alike to slow down years after the death of Joseph Stalin. The little King was living with his mother the dowager Queen and his sister under a house arrest. The grave of his father at a mountain monastery was desecrated and the body displaced to never be found again. Thousands were snatched from their homes or offices to never be seen again and the rare few who returned were too traumatized to tell. The ones who did tell did not live long as the Stalinists were equally vicious to their own and their opponents.

Some political parties tried to organize a resistance, they were convinced that the situation was a temporary one and sanity would return. They were wrong. A referendum was organized against the constitutional rules but under the presence of the Soviet Army and the country converted to republic. The underage King's mother was offered two ways to leave the country and she chose the faster, as she knew what happened to people who believe in decency in monsters - her own sister had died in Buchenwald concentration camp and the last Emperor of Russia had been killed together with his wife and five children. The King's family left on the day following the referendum.

The communist fraction in the Fatherland Front followed the pattern of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror swept the country in full force. To call it blatant disregard of everything human would be proper and like in France it was done for the good of the people, an imaginary aim that led to more and more bad things. The story of the French Revolution may be a faraway one, but the Bulgarian one was close to home. Not even that, it was the past of the trio telling the story.

Vesselin's father, Lambri, had been a professor in Economics at Sofia University and many other things, as well as a minister in the first cabinet of the Fatherland Front. A staunch republican, he had fought for the republic and at the end of the WWII had helped bring the coalition to existence. By that time he had been into politics for good forty years and a parliamentarian for most of that period and had been sure he had seen everything - the divisions, the battles, the bloodshed. When the hope that Fatherland Front would be different shattered, he withdrew his support and tried to resist the country's sliding into civil war. He had

gone so far as to talk his only daughter Teodora, who everyone called Dora, into supporting his cause by uniting his party with the one of his staunchest allies by engaging her to the party leader Todor Todorov. The medieval sacrifice however had been too late - the day the private engagement was to be announced, Todorov was arrested in the sanctum of the Parliament, stripped of his immunity on the spot, dragged out of the building and disappeared. The parliamentary fraction of his party was arrested as well and their traces were lost also. A flash trial was staged and Todorov was convicted of being traitor of the nation and sentenced to die. Despite the international uproar he had remained behind bars and his captors were enjoying it - they were well aware that he would refuse to run away even if such opportunity arose. They knew him well. The fifty years old man was too proud and too stubborn to sneak out of the country that had taken heavy blood toll on his family already. He refused to confess invented crimes for a chance to get a life in prison as he was convinced that he would be killed anyway. He had nothing more to leave as a legacy except his decent name and his honor, he insisted and resolutely refused to bulge.

Peoples' fates mix in strangest ways. Dimitar's grandfather had been of another opinion about Todorov's legacy. The powerful chief of national security had been the last of few generations of Tanassovs who had followed an ancient story about a signet ring of enormous power. They were convinced that the ring on Todorov's right hand was exactly the one they have been searching for almost a century. But the powers of the jewel came with a hitch - it should have been transferred willingly to the next owner. Any pressure rendered it useless and it could not be bought either. First Tanas Sr.'s grandfather had gotten close and the deal had failed in the last minute, then the same had happened to his father. The situation was worse by the ignorance of the family who had been custodians of the powerful ring - they did not know about its unique features. By a twist of fate the last one who knew and believed it had been Todorov's grandfather. The old man had died unexpectedly and his ring was transferred to his son in his will without an explanation. When the man, by then Prime Minister of the country, had been assassinated in broad daylight in Sofia, his will transferred it to his elder son, Todor's brother. Ten years after their father, his brother had been killed also and the eldest surviving Todorov had received the ring in his will again. Formally, it was given in a free will and its power was intact, Tanassov was convinced and he was doing whatever possible to get it for himself. Todorov was about to be executed anyway and would not need it, he thought, or he could have used it and

changed the course of events. Todorov's lack of faith was his downfall, the Black Cardinal thought while making the final arrangements for the execution to pass unnoticed in the din around the National Unity Day.

Todorov's supporters did not give up to the last minute, but their forces were not match to the cunning and disrespect for human life that was flooding Bulgaria. They tried everything, pulled all the strings, called all favors and drew blank. One more head was about to fall on the altar of freedom and its owner had helped sharpen the blade that would cut it. The man to bear the bad news to Lambri was his neighbor and friend Dr. Boris Danailov. One never forgets the bearers of bad news and neither had done Vesselin. The scene was fresh in his memory.