

## **Visit from the Old Lady and the Old Gentleman**

Konstantin stretched in the expensive leather chair. The report was not coming out rosy; in fact it was not coming out, period. He could crunch numbers until the cows come home, but the results would not be nice anyway. Across the corridor, Diana, his boss at the small bank analytical team that he worked for, looked tense also. At their last brainstorm meeting, they had tried to discuss with the Big Boss that the stakes were getting against the stock market and was time to go into safe harbor, so to speak. He had insisted that his gut feeling was that he was paying a bunch of neurotics to deliver bad prognosis. It had been two and a half months since and Konstantin could see the first signs that the neurotics had been correct about the dismal news. It would be another three months or more before they could convince the BB about it, by then it would be too late. It was frustrating, as the BB was not a financier. His cronies were wealthy and had decided to establish their own bank to wash some money. Well, they would not be happy with him and yet chances of getting another one who would know even less about banking were growing exponentially, like the accumulated losses in the neurotics' report.

The young man looked at his reflection in the bullet/UVA/UVB/noise and whatever else possible -proof window. Was he a paid neurotic? May be a well-paid one, but then may be not, because if he were, his Gran would have told him about it long ago. Like any grandchild more or less fond of his grandparents, he quelled the fleeting pang of guilt that he did not spend enough time with them. They did not seem to insist though, staunchly refusing to leave their tiny village in the middle of nothing and move with him to Sofia. Neither had they wanted to go and stay with Mom and Dad in Montreal, nor with Georgi and Lorelei in their unpronounceable village in Switzerland. They did not want to meddle with their lives, they said. Ha! May be they were not precisely meddling but one thing was as sure as the sun rising from the East - they knew everything and then some about everyone of their scattered relatives. It would be too simple to explain it with the internet connection they maintained - on the conscious level Konstantin knew that grandparents like his were rare, but he was so used to the modern conveniences that he could not fathom how someone could do without them. He flicked to his private email and of course, there it was, a little note from Gran saying that they are to be expected for Easter, they had communicated with Mitzi and would stay with her,

and Rada would arrange for them at the hospital for some checks, nothing to bother about, just some fatigue. There was also an advise not to worry too much about his professional duties, as there would always be where to put his math talents. Konstantin smiled at the reflex to look over his shoulder, as if he expected Gran to be there looking at the piles of preliminary data covering every square inch of his desk. Then he closed his computer, grabbed his coat and waved bye-bye at Diana, who was talking to someone over the phone for the last twenty minutes. She waved back and smiled at him, then tapped her pencil at her desk. The working week was over, so he had to go get some decent desserts for Saturday. Where would Gran like to go and get sweets around, he thought, waving at the security guard at the entrance, she would have known a right place.

Sometimes it was frustrating that a grandma could come like a fairy and sort the most difficult questions with a flick, if not of a wand, but of a big black purse. Konstantin smiled fondly at the memories. When he was about to return from France and was planning to go settle in the family home in Plovdiv, Gran unexpectedly abandoned all the intentions to lure him there and instead asked why he did not want to set foot in Sofia. The capital offered, according to the old woman, much more opportunities to develop a career. That coming from his Gran Elka who hardly left her little village at the Black Sea coast, across the country from the city! With the tenacity of a much younger woman, she started sending him the offers that came in the web about a bank analyst, among them one that she insisted had been tailored for him. More to please her rather than anything else, he had sent his resume and to his surprise was summoned for a chat with the owners and the Big Boss. He booked a hotel, got a flight and got the position. That triggered a whole new set of tasks, like a place to live to start with; and there Gran stroke again, unearthing a long time friend - a grandma called Mitzi, who by chance was planning to rent her attic. His first impulse was to refuse to live in the attic of a nice grandma he had briefly met few times. His imagination was painting vivid pictures of cobwebs and kitten skeletons under bats flying amid dusty baskets, but out of politeness to both elderly ladies he had to go and have a look. The attic turned out to be a chambered loft in the middle of Sofia, five minutes walk from his bank, renovated recently for grandma Mitzi's granddaughter who after that had decided that she would be better elsewhere. The rent was small as the energetic septuagenarian assured him she would

rather compromise on the money than on the tenant, and the recommendation of Grandma Elka was worth more than he could count up to. Just because he could count, he signed the lease immediately and was invited to a dinner with his new landlady the same evening.

Konstantin could see why grandma Mitzi could be a close friend to Gran - she did not waste time to reintroduce him to her granddaughter Rada with absolutely barefaced idea to match make. When Mitzi had turned her back to go get a bottle of champagne to celebrate their meeting, both Rada and Konstantin had rolled their eyes at that and by a twist of a fate caught each other in the act, laughed about it and became instant friends.

That had been almost a year ago. Since then his life was getting some form. He was working as hard as he could and that had gained him the trust of Diana, who had been wary of him at the beginning, as he was put on her team without anyone asking for her opinion. His colleagues had introduced him to their friends, as one of them aptly said, "Because young good-looking prospective bachelors are praised catch for elder hostesses for the chance to attract their unmarried daughters, if they have any, and for the younger hostesses for the chance to distract their unmarried female friends if they happen to have such". That happened to be true, as he was introduced to anyone wearing skirt and considered unattached or improperly attached. Even after the independent French girls, Konstantin was somewhat baffled by the grip of the young ladies around him. Either he was not socializing with the right crowd, as Gran cautioned him pretty often, or he was missing something. He had to call Rada twice to save him from the ladies determined to introduce him to their parents after their second date. Both times she laughingly had accepted to grace his lapel, as she called it, while cautioning him against the indiscriminate relationships in the age of AIDS. He had been tempted to tell her that he had heard all that from his parents, grandparents, brother and cousins, but had bitten his tongue, as she had been nice enough to bail him out. It had not been hard for the public to believe it: Rada was uniquely beautiful, despite her young age had a stable job of a surgeon, was considered a prodigy in her field and a protégé of an influential set of professors; and last but not least - was the only granddaughter of a wealthy well-known woman. Rada was also known as the Ice Princess by every

bachelor and fortune-hunter around, their grandfathers nodding in agreement and remembering the glory days of her grandmother half a century before. Whether these memories were twisted by time or not was hard to tell as that young lady the old men described was larger than life.

That his landlady was not an ordinary old woman Konstantin was convinced after few dinner invitations. Mitzi inhabited the first two floors of the enormous house on a quiet central street. The third floor was reserved for her maid, a young woman who reminded Konstantin of Hella, the witch of Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita" - there was no such service she could not render. When entertaining, Mitzi entertained lavishly, but getting an invitation to one of her parties was harder than meeting the country's president. Right after the WWII, after being courted by every bachelor in town, said the lore, she had married very young a much older man, her professor at the University, and was widowed before she turned thirty. To everyone's great chagrin, she had not remarried, devoting her life to their adopted daughter and preservation and publication of her husband's works. When the daughter and her German-born husband had disappeared during an archeological expedition in Africa, Mitzi, as she was universally known, had poured her energy into raising their only daughter, Rada. Even in her early seventies, she was remarkably beautiful woman and despite her sometimes biting tongue, Konstantin could imagine that the bachelors had been running after her in packs. Her appearance was impressive, but far more so were her encyclopedic knowledge of the ancient and modern art, profound knowledge of architecture, the knowledge of six live and two dead languages as her mother tongue. She actively corresponded with half the world as if they lived right behind the corner, having one of the most expensive computers Konstantin had seen in private. Graciously arranged on her enormous antique desk, it was in stark contrast with the almost untouched atmosphere of the beginning of the twentieth century, which was as unique as the house itself. Unlike the ambiance of the house, the spirit of its owner was thoroughly modern and well acquainted with the realities of the day. Konstantin was hardly surprised to get an e-mail from his mother that she was so glad he had found a place to stay around Mitzi, who she knew fairly well. By the time Konstantin got that he had been set up by the grandmas, as Mitzi definitely did not need his money to support herself, he was too settled in his

ways to do something and too hooked to the chance to have cookies and hot chocolate with Mitzi and Rada on Saturday morning to ever contemplate changes of venue.

Rada was the icing of the cake. She was only twenty-five but had managed to graduate with honors from the Medical University and get a position at one of the most prestigious hospitals in the city. At first, the gossipers tried to explain her success with the money and connections of her grandmother. Not long after it was evident that Rada's constant work as a surgical nurse during her student's years was paying off. Her patients were delighted by her humane approach and constant strive for innovative technologies and procedures to be implemented in case the ordinary techniques were not giving the desired results. Rada was known as a doctor who never gave up on a patient, never missed a shift and could patch everything from a sock to a grenade attack victim.

The last was not an exaggeration; one of her very first patients was a bodyguard of nouveau-rich, who had taken the brunt of a blast aimed at his boss. The young man was brought barely alive to the hospital by the boss himself in a helicopter with the plea to be saved regardless of expenses. The patient was classified as a desperate case with zero chances of survival. The department assistant-director had assigned him to Rada partly out of malice, partly as training, and partly for not sullyng his death stats. It had been an evening full of small emergencies and the assistant-director had practically forgotten about the grenade case. In the morning the patient had been still alive as evident by the two Yeti-like bodyguards in front of his room and the one inside. Irked at that despicable breach of hospital norms, the assistant-director had requested for the guards to leave and let him examine the patient. He was almost politely informed that according to their boss's orders the bodyguards were not leaving and that the only person to touch their comrade was the young female doctor who had patched him. One of the nurses who had been present at the conversation was ready to testify under oath that the doctor's visage had turned dark green and he had ordered Rada to be summoned immediately. When she had emerged few minutes later still half-asleep from the nurses' chamber, he had made a scene right in front of the patient's door, not paying much attention to another breach of hospital rules when one of the bodyguards had discretely pinched the buttons of his latest model cell phone. An hour later, the director personally had run into the hospital and three days later the

department had a new assistant-director. The bodyguard had lived, which Rada credited to his vitality and the excellent supplies of medications his boss provided at first call. The boss credited Rada's extraordinary abilities and made that known around the town to the point that she had been treating more gunshots and heavy cuts than any of her elder colleagues.

'Don't worry, child!' one of the elderly surgeons had joked. 'You will be ready for a front-line hospital director in no time! And you will continue to be forever popular among young men!'

Rada had quipped that she would prefer to be popular with the young men in one piece and less need of maintenance and it had become a hospital catch phrase.

It would not be fair to claim that the young doctor was not popular among the maintenance-free male population. Even if she were without a crumb of brain above the amount required to breathe and speak, she still would stop traffic with her looks alone. Rada was neither tall nor short, but the average in her appearance stopped there. She had her father's curls but instead of his carrot-red color, she had fished out of the genetic pool dark mahogany streaked with some copper around her face. Her nose was described as a classic Roman, but suited her high cheeks and almond shaped eyes. Their color had puzzled numerous passport control officers - the blend between her father's grayish-blue and her mother's gray-and-tawny had produced an indescribable combination of gold speckles over a mélange of blue, gray and green, so her eyes could take the tint of her dress and made it their own. "Mermaid eyes!" had heaved one of her artistic admirers and he had not meant it as a compliment. A man could drown in eyes like that without second thought, if not for the icebergs that the admirers claimed were swimming there. Rada was not deliberately cruel, but was known to discourage the amorous attention when she did not like it, which was most of the time. After returning from her year in Swizz finishing school, she had moved in with her grandma and enrolled at the medical faculty, then threw herself in nursing and studying. She claimed there was too much to do and too little time to waste it on badly coordinated movements in stale sweat-permeated overcrowded premises with deafening level of noise (she meant disco dancing) or ingesting unnatural amount of carbohydrates in colors Nature would not even contemplate to create, coupled with some excessively caffeinated chemical concoctions (she meant cake with coke). Mitzi was initially alarmed, but calmed down

when she found that Rada was interested in swimming and skiing as pastime. The sports kept Rada in shape, which she insisted was important for a doctor if she wanted someone to listen to her health advises. Her grandma was still convinced that the young lady needed more entertainment and tried to compensate it with home parties. After the first few, Rada got the habit to scrutinize the guest list before attending, as she told Mitzi "to know whose heart I will be breaking that night". Mitzi was not known for giving up. Neither was Rada, and the soirées continued.

Long before Konstantin's arrival, the lovely doctor had been tired to boot to fend attention from whoever Mitzi considered eligible bachelor around. So under the pretext that she would be showing him the town's outskirts, she had practically kidnapped grandma's tenant in her red Jeep and brought him to a small discrete restaurant in the middle of the road to Pernik. They had a leisure conversation, by the end of which an agreement had been struck - they would show to both grandmas a mutual interest, beg to give them some time to sort it between themselves and then play broken hearts. Since then they had enjoyed the status of an item under the hovering of their respective relatives and having great fun at that. Rada made a point to be seen with him at all social functions that Mitzi would be interested to know about. The young lady was introducing her companion as "old family friend" without passing the chance to sound coy about it. Rumors about her had wings instead of legs to run around, so pretty soon the desired result seemed achieved, hence the Saturdays invitations.

Sudden inspiration stroke Konstantin. Several days before a colleague had been waxing poetic about a party at Sheraton that had been themed around the sixties and the pastry chef there had prepared a charmingly old-fashioned cake with all the arks and real marzipan roses. If he was lucky, he could order one for the morning chocolate! He knew that a little extra monetary incentive went a long way and he stood a good chance of getting it. He changed his direction and mentally patted himself on the shoulder.

Displaying affection in public was not Mitzi's style either, but she was too old to be fooled that easily. The children were playing a game no matter how good the actors they both thought themselves to be. A young

lady in love would not pursue the socks of her object of desire instead of the object himself, right? Rada had been sipping her hot chocolate and complaining how difficult it was to find decently worn male socks for training. Famous Russian surgeon had once mentioned that his technique had improved drastically over darning thread-bare socks and Mitzi's granddaughter had embraced the idea with all her heart, including the subsequent advice to practice cross-stitch. If the young lady was indeed close and personal with Konstantin, she would have known whether or not he had old socks in dire need of darning. Which lead to the obvious conclusion that it was a show to benefit their relatives, as at the moment around the table in Mitsi's sitting room there were only the three of them. Well, the younger generation was obviously unaware that such plans habitually backfired at one point and the wise old woman was waiting for it. She could see the first cracks in the length of the time Konstantin's gaze remained on Rada, in the intimacy of her slap on his wrist when he was trying to get the last caramel-covered pan dishpan arc from the three-tier cake, in the solicitous gesture with which the young man carefully peeled all the marzipan violets from his piece and put them on Rada's plate - she completely forgetting about the carbo-colors theory while devouring both their shares of decorations.

'What a wonderful idea to bring such a cake, Kosta! I did not think they are still being made. Last time I ordered one, it was for Tea's seventh birthday, Iossif was still alive and he decided to order her a seven-tier one. It was almost as tall as her when they brought it.'

'Did she outgrow her cake the next year, Mrs. Spassova?'

'Well, it was soon after Iossif's death and Tea asked for a rose garden cake instead. Her entire dance class was smeared in pink and pale green butter; I had to bring all the tutus to the dry cleaner. You should have seen the face the lady made about it! The next year we went away for a while and it was a small celebration, then somehow the tiers went out of fashion, until recently, I see.'

'How is it that I did not get a twenty-one tiered one when I turned twenty-one?'

'First of all, you were in Switzerland skiing, second, we would need a welder for a construction to hold such a creation, and third - who was going to ingest that amount of cake, may I ask you?'

'Me after skiing! I was constantly eating there! But I skied it off that holiday, every gram!'

'Talking about holidays, have you two already planned something for the summer?'

Konstantin was about to open his mouth, but even chewing on her last violet, Rada beat him. 'Not yet, as I have not got a copy of my time at the hospital. You know, Roumen is celebrating ten years since his wedding, and as he said it had been his longest marriage, he better celebrates as long as it lasts, so he was thinking of taking an extended leave.'

'Sure, if that young nurse with the reddest of all lipsticks I have seen who recently moved to his private hospital is any indication, he better hurries up!' smirked Mitzi.

'How on Earth you know about Matsa, it was supposed to be the best guarded secret in town!' Rada almost dropped her chocolate layer and it was her favorite.

'I have my sources,' assured her her grandma. 'But hopefully you will be able to get few days to dip in the sea...'

'Which one?' inquired the young doctor.

'I was thinking about the Black one - you may visit Elka and Kosta in Brashlyan if you like. They are coming first here for Easter; I hope she wrote you a note about it,' Mitzi turn to Konstantin.

'Yes, she did, I was planning to answer her today. She wrote that they would be staying with you, but I think that there is plenty of room upstairs.'

'Phew, and deprive me of the company? No, no, we have some old gossips to catch up on, and you the young crowd stay out of it, no offense, but we have our own life to live also.'

'Gran mentioned something about the hospital,' that was half a question to Rada, who was serving herself the last piece of the chocolate tier.

'I never discuss patients, but as you count as a relative, I can tell you - they did not mention anything in particular, just general check-up. At their age, it is at least advisable. Grandma Elka is how old?'

'Ninety-four in August.'

'And Grandpa Kosta?'

'Ninety-six two days after her.'

'Well, there is bound to be something that does not fit the norms for twenty-one year old, don't you think?'

'No, honestly, I have never heard them complaining of anything. Gran is constantly worrying about someone else; she does not have time to worry about herself. And she wrote that the last doctor to live in the village

was there around the First World War, may be that explains the longevity?’ Konstantin winked at Mitzi, who winked back and chuckled.

‘I will indignantly ignore your insensitive insult on my profession!’ said Rada without taking her eyes from the remains of the sour-cherry and vanilla tier still on the cake stand. ‘But that does not mean that I will forget it!’ She raised her dessert knife, then caught her gesture and laughed with them.

They would not know what hit them, Mitzi thought, it was a question of time when, and if her prognosis was right, it would be before the fall. A lot of things would happen before the fall, and then the world would go around again and again, like the moves of the pendulum of the big grandfather clock that chimed midday. She looked at her young companions and asked:

‘You will both stay here until dinner or will go upstairs to discuss socks?’

Konstantin and Rada used the rarely opened internal entrance to his loft. It was built to facilitate the communications, as Mitzi had claimed, and indeed, it served its purpose on Saturdays, no one opening the door on the other days. From the side of the loft, the entrance was not even visible - in a bow to Rada’s privacy, Mitzi had put it in a built-in wardrobe and it looked like a spy film from the sixties, the couple emerging from behind the beautiful floor-to-ceiling mirror. The rest of the furniture was an eclectic mix of modern and antique pieces, part brought from Plovdiv’s attic, part from Mitzi’s storage across the hall and few modern accents Konstantin had bought on a whim. As a welcome gift, Rada had given him a heavy-duty espresso machine that could do more than the corner two coffee shops combined. She did not drink coffee herself but said that she would gladly indulge him in his small vices. Konstantin thought about a cup of coffee, but opted for a sparkling water instead. He offered a bottle to Rada, who looked pensively at it, then shook her head. ‘No, thank you, but it reminds me of something. Would you come with me to the cemetery - I thought about visiting grandpa’s grave today. But don’t tell Mitzi, right?!’

Konstantin was puzzled - it was the first time Rada asked for such a thing. No, not the visit to the cemetery, he knew she was keeping with the tradition, but to hide such an innocent act from Mitzi was strange. The young woman took his moment of silence for a refusal and quickly added:

‘But it may not be a good idea to spend your Saturday morning; I will go by myself...’

'I will come with you; I have never been to the Central Cemetery before. Shall we bring something?'

'A bottle of wine, we can buy bread and chocolate on the road. You have an unopened bottle somewhere, don't you?'

'I have several and an open one in the fridge, but as you will drive...'

'It is not for me, silly, but we will take the open one as well. I will get my coat and will wait for you in the car. And not a word to grandma, remember!'

The red Jeep was purring when he jumped in under the chime of the two bottles in a plastic bag. Rada smiled at him, and he detected something else in the smile. Sadness?

'I did not know you were so secretive in paying homage to your grandfather.'

'I am not secretive; I don't want to upset Mitzi. He had died when Mom was eight and she still mourns him. That is more than forty years ago, but she always says for her it was yesterday.'

'She should have been very young widow...'

'She was, but you know, she never remarried. It was always him in her life. I know he was beautiful man, you have seen his portrait, and I know he had been immensely talented, but holding him a candle for forty years is not something we see often.'

'She must have loved him for real.'

'She does. By the way, it is bloody hard to park here. How about if I double park and you run in and get round bread and some kind of decent candies, he will be upset if I turn with something less than superior. Here is some money!'

'I have money!'

'I know you have, but it is not customary to pay for something I will bring to the cemetery, please!'

Konstantin looked at the traffic and decided to argue later. While standing in the line of three people before him, he thought that Rada always talked about her grandfather as if he were alive. And she had not even met the man! He should have been an impressive person to do that to all the females in his family. The young man thought that he should somehow find more, which was to some extent hard, as he could not ask Mitzi directly, but the late Professor Spassov was a pillar in the history of art, so information about him

should be scattered around. The vendor, a cheerful young woman, handed him the decorated bread and the pricey box of imported chocolates with a strange look. In her experience, these boxes were sold with discrete pack of condoms, not bread, but the expression of the buyer was pensive, not eager one either. She suggested a bouquet of early tulips to go with the set and saw a grateful enthusiasm in the young man's face. May be his partner was using another type of protection, who knew. The girl behind the counter counted his change and smiled encouragingly. He smiled back and pushed the door with his shoulder as his hands were full. The vendor's gaze followed him to the scarlet Jeep in front, where the passenger's door opened like a magic. Some people were born lucky, she sighed.

'Two jars of yoghurts and a loaf of bread, please, and I don't have the entire day to stand around while you catch flies!' grumbled an elderly man in a hat that had been in vogue before the girl was born.

'Of course, Mr. Peyev!' smiled the vendor. She hardly remembered the jars with yogurt as they were replaced by plastic before she hit first grade, but he was so entrenched in his ways that it was amusing.

The cemetery's parking was almost deserted - the old ladies who usually came on Saturday were coming by bus, or in the rare cases when younger relative was driving, they would have been gone by now. The weather was still nipping despite the sun that was giving hopes about early spring. Rada took the wine and the flowers and Konstantin took the bread and the chocolates. The young woman was unnaturally silent and he followed her in the short walk to her grandfather's grave. It was a neat double lot, with only one black marble headstone. On one side, there was a woman's name, birthday and date of death in dark bronze letters. The other side spelled "Iossif Spassov" and the dates of his birth and death, the same script as the woman's name, but the patina not so old. There was a bench across the grave, made of the same black marble and it looked used, just like the lanterns on both sides of the headstone. Someone had been taking care of the place, as well as of the grave on the other side of Professor Spassov's half. The graves around looked like people who should have cared for them had abandoned them - or may be it was just early spring and they had not come after the winter. They were in the oldest section of the graveyard, where most of the people were buried at the beginning of the century. The old trees were only starting to get green, but it was easy to imagine that in summer the place was cool under their thick shadows.

Rada fished in her coat's pocket and took out a small bottle of oil and matches. She squatted next to the lantern on her grandfather's side, refilled the little cup and lit the floating wick, then repeated the process with the other lantern. She took the opened bottle of wine and made generous crosses with its contents over both graves, murmuring something inaudible, and arranged the flowers neatly. Konstantin was mesmerized - that was a side of the young woman he had never expected. As if she had completely forgotten him, she stood with a hand on the black stone, and then slightly touched the bronze letters. She was immersed in some kind of a monologue, as her lips twitched at a point, but her companion was seeing only her profile and could not read it. He felt a movement and saw a rags-clad man walking their way slowly. He was looking as if he lived around, his eyes glaring with flames which Konstantin did not like, or may be it was the place that made him nervous. The man came closer, but did not attempt to approach them, just standing few graves away, looking without blinking at Rada. An eerie feeling swept through the banker and he moved closer to her. His steps startled the woman and she looked at him, then she caught sight of the pauper. Rada waved at him to come closer, then took the bread, the full bottle of wine and the still unopened box of sweets and gave those to the strange man. He nodded his thanks, but did not say a word, either because he was mute or did not want to, Konstantin was not sure.

'Take care of them!' said Rada to the pauper as if it was the most normal thing to say. The man nodded again and probably smiled, but the gaps in his mouth were more than the teeth there and the look was more frightening than reassuring. He turned away; Rada touched the headstone one more time and quickly moved close to Konstantin, as if she needed protection. He embraced her and she buried her head in his coat, holding tightly.

'Thank you for coming with me!' she whispered.

'You should not come alone, it is not safe here! Let us move!' Konstantin did not let go of her hand, although it was hard to pass together along the narrow paths between graves. The second they reached a bigger alley, he hugged her again. She was not afraid; she needed to hold to someone real, he thought, embarrassed to have witnessed a very private moment at the grave. They stayed like that for a minute, then Rada let go first.

'It is so awkward... If I dream of grandpa, it is always like a warning sign, like "Look, child, something is coming your way, and it is big!" I know, it is irrational, but somehow it happens to be true also. Like, I dreamed about him before Easter the last year my parents and I were in Africa, and I told Mom about it. She spoke with Dad and they decided that Mitzi was probably lonely at that time and sent me to her, as they did not think it would be a good idea to leave the camp at that moment. I flew to Sofia and Mitzi was really happy about that, then the note came that the camp had been ambushed and burnt and there was no trace of my parents neither among the living nor among the dead. You know, like I am always on his monitor, but he knows the next few steps ahead of the game. You will think of me as a lunatic now, won't you?!

'I won't. You are one of the most rational people I have seen! Now if you look at your watch you will see that we have rational chances to be back at your grandma's dinner table only if we speed up on all red lights. You can claim that you are a doctor and it is an emergency. I will play the patient if you promise mount-to-mouth to prove it if a traffic cop stops us.'

'You don't stand a chance anyway.'

'How come?'

'They won't stop my car.'

'And why would they not do that?'

'I have special number plates.'

'Invisible?'

'No, my dear, the opposite, well-known ones. I patched a traffic cop that had been hit and run over, and he happened to be a fig shot, so he procured me a plate of some special series the cops recognize as their own and don't touch. I did not know until recently, it was just before Mitzi bought me the Jeep when her old Renault died on me. I told him that I was changing cars, so he insisted that I would probably need to change number plates as well. The man in charge of the car registrations looked in some lists then made me wait for few minutes and brought me my current ones. He did not tell me anything about them, but the mechanic that I brought the Jeep for a check-up did. He looked at them reverently and said that it was the first time he could touch those series. I thought he was talking about the Jeep and told him to not try to flatter me, he saw Jeeps every day and fancier than mine, so he spilled the beans.'

'Alas, no mouth-to-mouth! Then let us speed up, Fittipaldi!'

The graveyard fell silent again. A short scrawny man dressed in several layers of haphazardly pulled clothes stole up to professor Spassov's grave and grabbed the half-empty bottle of wine. He started hastily gathering the tulips when a tall shadow emerged from behind him. The rag-clad man with missing teeth was looking reproachfully. The short guy shot a glance at him over his shoulder and started rearranging the flowers again, then sidled up, obviously scared, but still clutching the bottle. The rags moved silently towards him, and he backed into a grave, cornered. The toothless grin emerged again, then an unexpectedly strong hand shot at him. There was a large chunk of bread in it. The short guy took it, shivering, the hand shot again, and on its palm there were several wrapped chocolates. That offering was also accepted. The rag-clad creature then shook his impressive fist at the short man and backed off. His unwilling counterpart sagged to the ground and took a long swallow from the bottle. Few seconds later he bit the bread, then scurried away from the grave without attempting to touch the flowers again.

'I have some splendid news!' Mitzi was excited. 'Hope your plans for Easter are not firm yet! Vesselin and Milena are going to host a party this year in honor of your grandparents and of course, you two are invited. Let me rephrase it, you are coming, no matter what, even if I have to talk to Roumen myself!' That was aimed at Rada.

'I would not miss it, Mitzi, and you know that!'

'It is so nice of them, may be I can go after dinner and talk to them about what I shall bring,' Konstantin tried to smooth over the pause.

'I doubt Vesselin will allow you, but if you two are not against driving a little bit, it might be arranged.'

'You are the most sneaky grandma, you know!'

'Sure, you keep telling me, my dear! If you drive to Melnik and get a case of the very best wine you can find, that may be accepted as a gift. Or better make it two cases; we can enjoy some after the feast.'

'And I may order an old-fashioned cake, a bigger one, for how many people?'

'Count twelve to twenty, but we the old folks will be watching our blood sugar, so not very big.'

'Oh, if you will be watching your blood sugar, may I have all your marzipan violets then?'

'I said we would be watching, not eliminating it, didn't I? No, you cannot.'

'You can have mine, if you wish.'

'My hero!' Rada batted her lashes.

Mitzi shook her head - the conspirators were in their own net and tugging...

Rada slept at Mitzi and woke the banker at seven what he considered an ungodly hour for Sunday, so he insisted on a cup of coffee at least. He hardly had time to shave and shower before the coffee was on the table and his favorite doctor was urging him to drink and go, promising a breakfast on road. Konstantin was not convinced that there would be a living soul on the road except them but remembered that she was doing it all for him. He took out of the cabinet his last reserve of her favorite Lindt chocolates, grabbed two bottles of soda and his wallet and followed Rada's excited dance down the stairs.

'Do you always carry a bag when you go somewhere?' inquired his beautiful driver for whom the content of the pack was still a mystery.

'I am a banker, we carry bags all the time, haven't you been told before? You are a doctor; by the way, you are supposed to have a satchel always handy.'

'Nay, the satchels were when the doctor came to the patient, now the patient comes to the doctor, just like Mohamed and the mountain.'

'If I am a patient you will not come, dear mountain?'

'Well, for you I may do an exception, depending on what is rustling in that bag, as my heart feels it has something to do with me.'

'Your heart tells you right. You would like to start with the water or with the chocolate?'

'I thought you know better than to ask... But I will repeat: my first choice is chocolate, then chocolate and to round the top trio - chocolate.'

'Umm, I have brought only two...'

'I will get what I can...'

'But they are three hundred grams each...'

'In that case you may have one nut on a square from each, but that is the most!'

'How did you know they are with nuts?'

'Because I am nuts about nuts, we sense each other.'

'Remind me to ask the nuts what they think about you!'

'No, you cannot have me on a square of chocolate, thank you very much!'

'Now that is an idea!'

'Speaking of ideas, how many cases are we buying?'

'Depends...'

'On what?'

'On the capacity of the Jeep. I believe we can stuff up to six without much trouble.'

'You know, I genuinely like your line of thinking...'

They arrived in Melnik shortly after ten with pit stops for some food and scenery. Konstantin had never been there before. Mitzi had taken Rada the previous summer and she played guide. Before they bought the wine, they went to Rozhen monastery and soaked in some of the beauty and tranquility of the place. It was still early for the tourists' groups and an elderly man was swiping the yard. It was colder than in Sofia. Rada shivered but not because of the cold. In her dream Grandpa Iossif had been adamant about something that she could not remember. It was important to figure it out and she could not ask Mitzi either. She frowned at the thought and looked around.

'Let's get in the church!' she prodded Konstantin. He stood up and held a hand to her.

In the church it was even colder, the flickering flames of the candles trying half-heartedly to fight the eternal semi-darkness. The painted flowers on the windows were beautiful, and they protected the carved ones from the scalding kiss of the sun. The altar was a masterpiece by generations of wood carvers and painters, thousand of flowers being harvested from the wood and then painted to trick the eye that they had been recently put into the carved vases. After some consideration the icon creators had abandoned the paint and relied on light to define the delicately carved faces of the saints and the surroundings. The gilded parts were

mellow, the gold more like a protective shield rather than ornament. Ages of sooty candles and oil lamps had given the walnut material its glowing finish, kept by the loving care.

Rada looked at the icon of Saint Iossif - that was one of the consolations about having grandfather named Iossif, she could enter any church and chances were there would be his face, always different, but somehow the same - an elderly man standing behind a young woman and her baby, the eternal stepfather, who had accepted to raise a child which was not his... The young woman felt that the trip had not been a mere coincidence, the answer was somewhere around and she should be able to see it. The copy of the miraculous icon of Mary that had given the name to the monastery was straight ahead, her eyes following them. The legend said that the icon was thrown in the sea when a widowed woman tried to protect it from destruction, and despite being encased in iron, it had not sunk but floated until it landed straight ahead of a monastery. The monk who went to retrieve it passed over the water like on solid ground and the icon found its place above the entrance, for that it was called The Portaitissa, the Lady of the Door, protecting the people ever since. There was also an interesting icon of the angel that was giving a saint the rules of monastic life. Those were pieces of a giant puzzle and she was missing some corners of it.

'I read that the small chapel is dedicated to your colleagues, would you like to go there?' softly murmured Konstantin behind her.

'And which exactly of my colleagues you mean?'

'Saints Kosma and Damian, doctors.'

'Oh, then visitation time...'

Rada had one more sweeping look at the gentle flowers covering the altar, the shadow and light defining the faces of the saints and took Konstantin's hand.

The drive to Sofia was full of discussion over how better drink the six cases that they have packed and the mighty demijohn that Rada had insisted they get despite Konstantin's attempts to raise her doctor's instincts about its hygiene. The ancient glass jar looked clean, it was covered by faded wickerwork that had seen a lot of wine being poured in, out and around, if the red stains were any indication. Rada countered that she

did not insist on him eating the basket and asked the grandpa who was selling it to sample his merchandise. The old man had shaken his wrinkled head adorned by a black hat that could have easily been his grandfather's and had poured from the jar into a simple greenish glass. Konstantin prided himself that the bankers keep their imagination at leash, but he could have sworn that the wine that was poured was dark red and the one in the glass was black. Rada took the glass, inhaled deeply and had a hearty swag. She closed her eyes, sighed blissfully and swallowed. The look on her face could be described as ecstatic, not less. Her eyelids lazily went up and she said:

'I am driving; otherwise I will drink it here and now, the entire jar!'

The young woman handed the still half-full glass to Konstantin and murmured:

'You finish it!'

There was no way out - he took a sip cautiously. The wine was an explosion of senses, sweet, deceptively so, as under its velvety smoothness the strong current of alcohol was warming the blood almost instantly. He could detect somewhere the notes of berries and some herbs, something bitter, that was not coming from the cask, but had been added at some point to counter the sweetness, a tinge of something sour. He took another swallow, then some more, as if the next one may bring him closer to the wine secrets.

'I will have to carry you!' Rada's voice tinkered with laughter. He was holding an empty glass and was not quite sure how it had happened.

'It is bewitched wine!' he looked at the old man, who was smiling at them.

'It is a good wine, despite the demijohn's look. I make it myself and you see, for so many years it had been good to me!'

Konstantin paid and lugged the jar to the car. He fervently prayed that the rickety willow basket would hold. If it would not, Rada's Jeep would need a new upholstery, unless she liked red spots all over.

The train was late by few minutes. Konstantin was glad, as he had to finish a table compilation before he left the bank and was late himself. He looked again at the orange numbers on the timetable and run to the platform. It would not be nice to meet Gran and Gramps breathing like a steam engine, he thought while trying to catch his breath. The next thought was that he was really out of form if he huffed and puffed after a

brisk walk and some slalom among passenger and their suitcases. He did not move enough, that needed to stop. The train arrived and he struggled to see the familiar elderly couple. They emerged from a carriage at the end of the platform, Gramps first, carrying a small suitcase of another era, helping Gran to get out without spilling the contents of a willow basket covered with cloth and securely tied. They were so different from the crowd around, it was heart-wrenching, like the time had jumped fifty years back. Gramps in his dark suit and pale blue shirt, clean shaven, his shoes polished to a glimmer, his suitcase having metal corners that were out of vogue since probably the last war. Gran in her dark blue dress and sensible shoes, her white hair in soft curls that had been a staple of women's fashion when they had married so long ago. The basket had been weaved by a gypsy long before Konstantin was born and he could bet a monthly salary that it contained homemade gifts of something delicious. The couple's faces lit when they saw him and he rushed to hug them, then picked up the suitcase and the unexpectedly heavy basket and took them to the taxi station.

'You, young people, could do with some walk around and leave us to have some secrets!' Mitzi without ceremony dismissed them after supper. They had shared the big bottle of white wine that Gramps proudly said he made himself, hearts were lighter after it and the chilled strawberries were delicious in the thick cloth cream, those also coming from Gran's bottomless basket, so Rada and Konstantin were somewhat reluctant to go for a walk. It was early to sleep, late to go out, the time of indecision of what to do with one's evening. They went to the loft and five minutes into their conversation about the morning visit of the elder Kaloyanovs to the hospital Rada yawned and promptly dropped asleep on his wide sofa. Konstantin chuckled, changed the bed sheets, lifted the pliant body and brought her to the screeching spring-bed. He took off her shoes and Rada snuggled, hugging the pillow. Her dress would be a mess in the morning, but looked comfy, so he tucked the doctor in and shook his head. One eye opened for few seconds:

'Six-thirty in the morning!' she murmured and buried her nose deeper in the pillow. Konstantin shook his head again and went to set the alarm clock. He thought about reading a little, but sleep was as contagious as flu. He made his bed on the sofa and switched the lights off.

Three floors down the elder Konstantin bid the two ladies good night and retired. Mitzi and Elka moved to the study and sunk into two deep leather armchairs which had been there since Mitzi remembered. The table lamp was casting soft glow around.

'It is so nice for you to come; I know the journey is not easy.'

'It is the last one, Mitzi.'

'Don't say that!'

'It is not up to me to say that. Last year when we buried Dora I knew already, but did not want all to come at the same time. You were so close and it would not be fair to burden you with everything at once. But now we have to talk.'

Mitzi looked into the fading brown of Elka's eyes and bit her lip. She was serious, calm and composed as she had always been since they have met in that faithful spring fifty-two years ago. Somehow it was impossible to believe that the world would continue to spin the same way without Elka.

'Time has come to put some things right before the summer. The gate needs a new keeper, you know. I don't have daughters neither granddaughters, God has chosen not to give a girl to me. But the gates are to be kept by women, as it is a woman's job. And the ring has to be kept by a man, it had been too long and you see what happened.

But there is more. The ravens are multiple this year and they never lie - hence the war at the neighbors. The pendulum had reached its turning point and will start going back. The time had folded and it may be possible to save someone coming from the underland. The hawk will bring a small boy, badly injured, and you have to save him, and then return him back. Saint Elijah will bring him and he will take him back, you have to be prepared though. You know who the boy will be, don't you?'

Mitzi nodded, then hastily pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and tried to muffle her sobs. So it was true, that was not a fairytale, but the pain was there, raw like in a February evening long, long ago. Elka waited patiently.

'What shall I do?'

The elder woman handed her an envelope.

'These are our funeral instructions. Make sure that Konstantin moves there, after that you will see. I know they were trying to pull some wool over our eyes, but it did not work the way they thought, am I right?'

Through her tears, Mitzi chuckled. 'You are right, I am not sure they know it though! They think they are just friends.'

Both women laughed, a conspirators' laughter that had been there since the dawn of time, when the first Miss Paramecium Slipper had told her mom that she was just friends with the neighboring Mister Paramecium Loafer, and the mom Lady Slipper had quivered with laughter at the idea as it had not had a head to shake. Mitzi rubbed her eyes and said, 'She will probably follow him soon, if not, I will push. I need to call some people also.'

'May be more than you think. There is some activity that I don't like around Brashlyan. Strangers are coming more often, Father Ivan had told me about people inquiring about buying land around, Mother Ephrosinia said the same, some donors had approached her about the history of the monastery, although you know how hard is to get there. We procured her a satellite phone to double the old system but it will be hard to get help fast if needed. We are old, Mitzi, and it starts to feel. The village is what, fifteen houses and as many old people, ancient as we are, some even older. A new blood needs to come and stay. The old ways are not good anymore. I should have had Kosta coming earlier... '

'He was not ready, may be still isn't...'

'There is no choice now. I pray that between the two of them they will manage. You at least had more time with her; she knows more and will be able to guide him. Who else is there left - Father Ivan is getting old like us, Peter is forever there, you, that is it. I know there are others, but our line will dry out like that.'

'What about if Konstantin does not...'

'No, he is a good man, he will understand and will accept it. But he cannot hold alone for long, he has to spin his own net and he had been away rather long, I am afraid.'

There was a silence for a minute. Then Mitzi decided to try something:

'How about Georgi?'

'No, he is needed there. I have no one left.'

Elka looked very old, much older than her almost ninety-four years. Her friend thought that she also looked like an image on an old water-color, somewhat frayed. May be it was the light that etched the lines on her face deeper, hoped Mitzi, may be she had mistaken the signs and it would not be so soon. But then, when had Elka been wrong with readings, once at least? She should have been, Mitzi rummaged through her memory, she had been so afraid for Tea before she had been born. No, not for Tea, she had been afraid that if the baby had been a boy, he would not survive, but it had been a girl and she had lived. Mitzi sighed. As Baruch would have said in such a case, "God had written it in the big books up there and had sealed it!" She ached for the young man who knew nothing of the upcoming events that would turn his carefully arranged life upside down, for his brother and their parents who would be booking planes in few days. She wished she could warn them. She knew she could not speak.

Konstantin's grandmother did feel tired. It was not even the tiredness of her old body, but the gnawing uncertainty that the events would turn right. There was one too many "if"-s that might go wrong as the fabric of time had been stretched beyond anything it had experienced before. Like human soul, it could not be stretched more than it could bear, or it would tear, leaving a gap where many things may fall - or worse, many other things could come out. The only thing left was to pray and hope. And fight even from beyond the grave. That, at least, was honed to perfection for generations. Elka stood up and bid Mitzi good night.

It was not her alarm clock, Rada was sure about it. This was a frog croaking instead of her "Time to Sleep" melody, so it should be one of the nurses who had brought it. She opened her eyes and instead of the hospital white saw the brown rafters of the lot which was once her home. Yeah, she thought, the Genie brought me back while I was asleep. She looked around for the lamp and shook the last drops of dream. The only possible genie - as the only one present - was sound asleep on the sofa, oblivious to the cries of his poor amphibian. Rada fumbled with it a little, only to find that one had to genuinely thwack the animal to make it stop - it probably had been used to it. She tiptoed to the coffee machine and put it to work, then rummaged the fridge for sparkling water. She poured two glasses and went to wake up Konstantin.

He was sleeping on his side and his brown hair, sufficiently longer than the current style of shaved heads, was falling over his face. The sleep had softened the two furrows on the sides of his mouth which made his long straight nose look even longer. His brows might have looked intimidating if not for the round face and his somewhat bigger ears. Rada had caught him introducing himself as a Big Bad Wolf: "Why are your eyes so big? Why are your ears so large? Why are your teeth so big?" The lady who he had been trying to impress had giggled and Rada was unexpectedly irked by the memory. Then she was irked at herself that she had been irked by a harmless joke. She tapped Konstantin's shoulder.

'Sleeping Beauty, it is time to get up and go to work. I will go dress appropriately and return to pick up Grandma Elka and Grandpa Kosta. We won't need you for the hospital visit, but I hope you will treat us all to a nice lunch around one, when I will deposit them with you and you will take care of them for the rest of the day. Mitzi is coloring the eggs at around six-thirty, I will be back. Now get up!'

'The Sleeping Beauty was woken up with a kiss, not with the daily regiment!' grumbled the banker.

Rada bended and kissed the tip of his nose, then waved at him and started opening the wardrobe leading downstairs.

'Hey, Sleeping Beauty was kissed on the lips if I recall correctly!' he was leaning on his elbow.

'She did not need to shave in the morning, if I recall correctly! She was only dusty somewhat. Your coffee is ready, Sleeping Beauty!' Rada was out of sight, when he touched his cheek.

The drive to the hospital was not long and her passengers were commenting on how much Sofia had changed since their last visit. Rada was dividing her attention among the traffic, the conversation and the uneasy feeling that she was missing something again. Konstantin's grandparents were looking tired, but was it from the long journey the previous day in a crowded bus, then an even more crowded train for almost seven hours - or there was another reason? They had come only last year for Dora's funeral and despite the grief on top of the grueling sudden journey, had looked better. They did not look ill, only worn out. She made a mental note to ask the cardiologist to pay extra attention during his check-up.

'We will have the full analysis by tomorrow night, but none of my colleagues had found something that is not reasonably expected at your age,' Rada smiled to the elder Kaloyanovs over her empty dessert plate. She covertly eyed Konstantin's cake which he had not touched yet.

'So it is because the last time a doctor lived in the village it was before the First World War, wasn't it, Gran?' Konstantin taunted the young lady.

'Well, we had one for few days in 1948, but it was a visit. Oh, he had a sweet tooth, that guy... Speaking of sweet tooth, if you are not going to eat your cake why did you order it?' asked Elka.

'To be in the good graces of your Aesculapius, that is why! She always eats at least half of mine on top of her share. May be they are related?'

'Who are related?'

'You and that doctor in forty-eight. Anyway, you can have my cake, if you want.'

He was surprised that it took Rada few seconds to say something - usually the plate was already in motion before he finished the offer. There was something on her mind. She looked at her watch and said, 'I have to be fast, keeping in mind the traffic back!' She snatched the chocolate concoction and dug her fork into it with unexpected force.

'Here is the first egg for your trousseau!' Mitzi handed Rada the first red egg that the joyous company had colored on Thursday evening.

The young woman rubbed it on her forehead. 'How about burying it in Grandma Elka's garden to ward the strawberries from lightning? Any chance we have some left?'

'There is a bowl for you in the fridge. And don't worry; you may do both this year!' Elka smiled indulgent at the cheerful child. She had known her since she was just a pink-ribbon bundle with a carrot tuft of a hair and a noise level of a fire engine in a hurry. She had grown a good girl and Konstantin would be happy, she sighed. The old woman longed to see it herself and may be she would, at least a part of it.

'The doctor you talked about today, that was Dr. Danailov, wasn't him?' the young woman asked.

'You are right, Rada, I was talking about Boris. I think it was one of the few holidays he ever took. He was a good doctor, cured a lot of people and I believe some animals also.'

Despite the smile, there was again the frail look, Rada thought, something was bothering the kind woman and it was not the lack of proper veterinarian in Brashlyan. She should talk to Mitzi about it, maybe Konstantin's grandparents could stay for few more days after the holidays, do some more tests, make them take it easy. The young woman had the same uneasy feeling that descended upon her when some of her patients were about to die out of the blue, the sudden premonition that despite the look of improvement an invisible clock was dripping the last few grains of sand for them. She hated that feeling, probably because it was unerringly accurate and no matter what she did it was not possible to spare the life. At the beginning of her career, she had tried to alert the colleagues about the situation, but it earned her only reprimands about negativism from the younger ones and wary looks from the elders. Professor Nastin, her mentor, had been the only one to sigh and say that she had what needed to be a doctor, but that was his only comment, if one was not counting the book of old German fairytales that he had sent her through Mitzi. She had read the fairytale of the doctor who had been the apprentice of Death herself. He had been given the gift to heal the patients at the beds of whom his mentor was standing at their feet, but not the ones where she chose to stay at their heads, invisible to all others but him. The doctor had been diligently following the instructions and had been a renowned healer with ever right predictions of the outcome of his cases. One day he had seen Death standing at the head of the poor widow's only child and in a swift moment had turned the little one so the Death stayed at its feet. The teacher had shaken her head in disapproval and left, but the child had lived. The doctor had done the trick twice more - with his young wife and his elderly mother, before Death's patience snapped. She took him to a reverberant chamber where millions of oil lamps were burning, one for each human being alive at the moment. The mentor showed him that some of the oil lamps were full, some nearly empty, some burning strong, some feebly flickering. The ones with lots of oil were the ones for the people to live long, the almost empty for the ones to die soon. Death showed him his vial, where few drops remained and then the ones for the child he had saved despite her will, his wife and mother, which were half full. The teacher offered her pupil to decant the oil from their lamps back to his one, from where it had come in first place. He refused to take the life he had saved in exchange for his own. Death left him while the drops of his lamp were burning to bid goodbye to the people he loved as a mercy for his noble decision and reassured him that she would take the child as an apprentice in his place.

She would guess, Elka thought, she was too intelligent not to, but hopefully that would help soften the shock for Konstantin. The grandma smiled reassuringly at Rada which startled her even more - the young woman was not used to someone other than Mitzi to be able to read her thoughts. A sheepish smile followed - her imagination was working overtime, may be Grandpa Kosta's wine was enchanted as well. She should counter the effects with that strawberries' bowl!

Friday's analysis of the tests was not giving any indication for concern, nothing that was unexpected or would point at immediate danger, so Rada allowed herself to breathe easier. She caught herself paying more attention to the hidden glances the two elderly ladies exchanged, to Grandpa Kosta's gestures when he was talking about the wine of the last season and telling funny stories of when he was a child. Rada was trying to believe that it was the load at the hospital that was making her overzealous, but it did not work. On the other hand, the young woman did not want to spoil the rare visit with some unwarranted suspicions and, even with the remote possibility of being right, not to scare Konstantin. He was genuinely enjoying playing guide around after getting two days of "family emergency" leave from his bank. Rada had taken all the possible shifts before Easter in order to be free for the Sunday lunch which was supposed to be a sumptuous affair. Mitzi and Lilli had spend Saturday afternoon with Milena polishing silver and preparing the necessities for a table of twenty, which was not a simple task under any circumstances. Despite Mitzi's reassurance that the elder generation would watch the blood sugar, even only the list of desserts was making Rada salivate, and that was before even having a glimpse at the cake that Konstantin had ordered and would go to pick personally. But at the moment both houses were still quiet while everyone was sleeping over the night-long liturgy. Rada decided to sit in her grandma's study and wait for some movement in Mihailovs' yard and then go offer her help. She took a cup of hot chocolate and sat in her favorite armchair. She probably had spent in it more time than on any other furniture around, except her bed. Rada spent her school vacations with Mitzi, splitting the time between Sofia and Brashlyan. After the disappearance of her parents she had done most of her reading curled in the massive leather chair that was made to order for her grandfather Iossif. It always gave her a sense of security - its deep brown leather was

soft, the stuffing still held the form and all the nails' heads were polished to their bronze perfection. Due to its bulk, it was hard to move it around and Mitzi insisted that it had been placed at the same spot when she had married, which was plausible explanation of the brighter spot of carpet under it. The chair was forever facing the secret garden paved with irregular slate plates and meticulously kept. From where she sat, Rada had a direct look at the komshuluk, the low door in the fence that was linking the patch of green with Mihailovs' yard and the other one that she was sure nobody had seen open since they remembered themselves. It lead to a back yard full of junk, which the owners of the condominium to which the property belonged, never managed to agree how to dispose of.

The young woman was waiting patiently. She had learned the art of it during interminable traveling with her parents - her father has been a famous archeologist and mom followed him wherever his expeditions brought him. When Rada was born, she just joined the caravan, as Mitzi said, and knew firsthand the troubles of the jet-lag, the sturdy airport chairs as if made deliberately uncomfortable, the bumps on the roads of four continents, seen or rather felt from the seat of whatever means of transportation they could fetch. Rada had ridden more camels than ponies, could ride a horse bareback when she was ten, learned to drive on a dry salt lake, and had been taught to respect the nature and its inhabitants by example. On the positive note, she could drop asleep in less then a minute and wake up instantly in full gear, which Mitzi insisted was inherited trait. The best was that she could always return to the familiar house in the middle of Sofia and soak back its tranquility, the sense of stability and the feeling that time mattered less there. She had played in the yard of Mihailovs' as well, being their honorary goddaughter. Pity the elderly couple did not have children of their own, they would make terrific parents, the young woman thought for a millionth time. The times had not been kind to them, not at least, but she had never ever seen them beaten down, at least not in public, and she had spent a great deal of time with them, especially after her permanent return to live with Mitzi. Vesselin was a pillar of strength when she was going through her Latin classes and single-handedly taught her Classic Greek, as he insisted that a decent doctor should be able to understand instead of guess the names of the diseases and their cures. He was joking that he was babysitting her, as she spent the evening hours when Mitzi was not home at his study, he engrossed in his translations and she reading

her lessons. He had established the weekly language routine - Monday she was speaking English, Tuesday was a French day, Wednesday they spoke German, Thursday was the day of the Latin and Friday was Russian, as the TV was showing a Russian language film with subtitles, Saturday was a day of choice and Sunday she spoke Bulgarian only. Mitzi had added her share, as Rada was not allowed to get any sweets unless she could ask for them in proper Turkish. Given her granddaughter's addiction to sweets, that restriction had instantly increased the value of the language for her. Mitzi and Mihailovs had been friends for ages, had gone through a lot together and had absolute trust in each other, it was not a mere neighborly assistance. Their bond was as solid as with Vesselin's elder sister, Theodora, who had been Mitzi's classmate from college and second wife of Dr. Danailov that Grandma Elka had mentioned recently. Rada looked again at the komshuluk and thought how many memories had been passing silently to and fro the two yards, how many peoples' fates were intrinsically woven in the tale of life and how little she actually knew about them. No, not the grand part, not the cornerstones of their history, but about their personal likes and dislikes, their tastes and their friendships. She told herself that she should ask but was it fair to prod into memories which seemed to be too raw decades later? These were personal triumphs and tragedies, running rather deep to just go and share over a cup of coffee. Even she, who had been the privileged center of their universe, had not dare to ask around - or to be precise, she had tried to ask, but had met a steady wall of reluctance, as Milena had once said, "It is too much grief for one person, especially so young!" She was not that young anymore, thought Rada, may be a little bit more insistence or tact would do the trick? Hardly, the silence had become a way of life, and silence had been the only chance for her mother to survive, and for her to some extend. One may argue until blue in the face that the times had changed, but it would not elicit a word above the carefully selected, well known fact. The young woman wished it would be as easy as the sweets and Turkish.

Vesselin stirred up with an uneasy feeling about the upcoming feast. He was not concerned about the food or the guest list - it would be a meeting of friends, not a social function, and if the soup did not turn right or a salad would be eaten with the wrong fork, nobody would ever mention it. The weather looked fine for the mid-April and if a sudden rain made them move the tables inside, it won't make much of a difference either.

Mitzi had added an unexpected guest to the list late the day before, but an extra person at a celebration was nothing new. Milena was sleeping peacefully next to him, so he stood up as silently as possible and went to shave before waking her up. He looked in the mirror and remembered the dream that had disturbed him before the alarm clock rang. In it he had been arranging the dishes for the feast in the back yard when the komshuluk opened and first came his sister Dora, but not the worn-out, weary woman who had died less than a year ago, yet the radiant maiden who had just returned from her finishing school in Switzerland, her hazel eyes full of mischief, her plait in a coronet around her head, dressed in a fashionable dark burgundy dress. She was pulling the hand of Todor, who was also younger than at his death almost fifty-two years ago, the sleeves of his white shirt uncharacteristically rolled up. Third and last came Boris, also casually dressed like at home, putting his never-ending toil aside for few minutes. They all smiled at him and he was both glad and saddened to see them. Dora had come to sit at the half-served table and her two companions had followed pattern. Vesselin was trying to say something, but could not find the right words. Dora waved her hands teasingly, 'No need to add extra plates for us, little brother, we just came to say hi to you. I have missed you immensely, you, Milena, Mitzi, Rada, all. So I convinced these gentlemen to come with me a little earlier!'

'We missed you too,' Vesselin either thought or said.

'Well, you will continue to miss me for a while, in fact for quite a while. It is not for you that the bell tolls!' her laughter had transformed into a bell toll that had happened to be the alarm of his clock and the dream had ended without conclusion.

It was not a good omen to dream of dead people, Vesselin knew, but it had been so vivacious a scene, so realistic, he could almost hear the happy sound of Dora's voice, which crystal notes had long disappeared in the chain smoking and countless coffees that have been her modus vivendi in the late years. He had forgotten how beautiful she had been as a young woman; it seemed impossibly long ago and yet it was hardly fifty years since. He missed her even out of the dream; that was true, for nothing forged a bond better than the fight back to back that they had put. Dora had been a sister, but also a confidant, a fellow warrior, a shoulder to cry in the rare minutes of weakness. It would be the first Easter without her in very long time and it hurt more during the holidays when one had time to reflect on the loss.