

VOICES IN THE WIND

A NOVEL BY GROZDANA OLUJIC

*...and they endured as smoke,
in dreams and impermanence...
Rig-Veda, India*

Which yet my soul seeketh, but has not found... ...

Ecclesiastes, Chapter 7

On the 17th floor of a New York hotel, in the images changing rapidly before him, like a slide show, Dr. Danilo Aratsky felt he was not alone in the room. He reached out to turn on the lamp, but the lamp was not there. And neither was the bedside table. Colorful neon signs were all that cut through the empty darkness, illuminating part of the cheek and hair of a woman pressed against his shoulder. Who could this woman be and how had she gotten into his bed? Dazed by the long trip and lack of sleep, Danilo Aratsky flinched when the woman's warm body moved and her ring-encrusted hand touched his thigh.

"Wonderful," crossed his mind. "This is someone else's room, someone else's woman. They won't find me here."

"Do you think so?" Out of the gloom, where the ghosts of the Aratsky family were coalescing, came his sister Veta's hushed voice and Grandfather Dr. Luka Aratsky's cough, because he always coughed when he was excited, trying to keep Little Rusty from finding him. Little Rusty, yes, that's what Luka had called him as he smoothed the boy's reddish hair. Behind closed eyelids, Danilo Aratsky saw himself again, three years old, pattering barefoot behind his legendary grandfather, careful not to

trample on the newly sprouted flowers growing luxuriantly all around, planted by the old warrior's own hand.

"My God, that was a long time ago!" sighed Danilo Aratsky. "And yet they still found me on the other side of the world."

"Because we couldn't not find you," said Luka Aratsky, barely audible, and Danilo shuddered.

What did he mean by that?

An eternity had passed since their death and this night on Lexington Avenue, with half of Europe and the black waters of the Atlantic standing in between. "They could have bypassed me at least once," Danilo said to himself, not knowing that the ways of the dead are more mysterious than the ways of the Lord...

A shiver ran down his spine.

"Go back to your graves and leave me in peace," he choked, seeing his sister's Veta shadow come out from behind the fluttering curtains, asking whether it was possible, could he have forgotten, *they* did not have graves, and they never had.

Drops of water trickled down Veta's black hair and turned into a glittering pool at the end of the room. "Good Lord," he thought, "how long will she keep dripping water from the river where she vanished? How long will they keep seeking me out to remind me that they have no place to return? Which is true enough. . .

"But *I* can't be responsible for all the Aratskys in the world!" - he murmured.

"Do you think so?" The voice coming from the crowd of ghosts was indistinct and barely audible. "We only *exist* through you."

"My Lord, what a great way you found to exist," said Danilo, putting a pillow over his head. The room was shrouded in heavy, slimy silence, the only sounds being the din from down in the street and water dripping from Veta's hair. If he pretended long enough not to see or hear them, their voices would fall silent and their spirits would scatter—unless he had fled in vain again, hoping they would not find him on the other side of the world.

But as the anonymous writer of the *Karanovo Chronicles* noted, they would find him anyway, in the subway, in the reeds around Karanovo and Jasenak, by the seashore, in the canyons of streets and on mountain peaks, citing as evidence an intricate map of

Danilo Aratsky's journey, from Karanovo and Jasenak to Hamburg, Belgrade, New York and Hickory Hill.

The author of the famous *Karanovo Chronicles* left out a few important stops on this journey. Perhaps out of negligence or perhaps from the conviction that anything not connected to Karanovo and the once-powerful Aratsky family – was unimportant.

“Rubbish,” said Danilo to himself and tried to fall asleep. But sleep would have nothing to do with him that last night in New York, just like the first night when bodies slid down the windows of the Atherton Hotel, hitting the cement with a dull thud. “I must be imagining it,” he had murmured and then realized that what was happening was not one of his nightmares. For days afterward all the New York papers had written about the suicides at the Atherton peopled by the old bookkeepers, nurses and teachers whose homes had been destroyed to make room for buildings with their tops lost in the clouds, where there was no room for the former tenants. Tiny rooms with shared bathrooms became their final lodging – while their savings lasted. When they were gone, the last way out was to jump through a window.

There on Lexington Avenue, watching the ghosts as they darkened his window for a moment, he suspected that something terrible was happening. He listened to drunken voices rising from the bottom of the street and stared at the lighted windows of the buildings around him. Their inhabitants walked on each other’s heads, ate, mated, quarreled, turned off the lights and disappeared in the darkness.

On his very next trip to New York, their monstrous lives had ceased to interest him. Only the Atherton, with the dull thud of bodies on concrete, throbbed in him like an open wound. What he did not know was that he would remember this night in bed with an unknown woman in a similar way, perplexed at the speed with which the fate of the Aratskys passed through his mind on this, his last night in New York, as proof that the lives of his ancestors, attached to their living descendants, never ceased to repeat and endure.

“How and in whose memory will I live on?” wondered Danilo, gazing at the alternating colors of light on the naked woman’s shoulder. Her face eluded him, hidden by locks of light hair. The dark-blue vein rising and falling on her neck was all he could see.

Young and plump, the woman was sailing through waters known only to her, breathing loudly in her sleep, while the shadows of the Aratskys mingled with the lights of the New York sky, sprinkled with tiny extinguished stars. Who was this woman? And how had she gotten into his bed? Danilo put his arm over the woman's breasts and smiled.

"Good night and bon voyage, Danilo Aratsky," he whispered to himself and glided into the softness of the woman's body, surprised at the ease of her consent and the intensity of his passion.

Without waking up, the woman took him inside her and started to snore.

"Wonderful, princess!" Danilo smiled and gazed at the building across the way, speckled with lighted messages.

In a few days, he would have to decide whether to stay in America or leave forever. If forever existed? If everything did not happen by chance: love, and hate, death and life? If everything was not just the repetition of what happened to some long-ago Aratsky who fell asleep in the dark forests of Zakarpattia and woke up staring at a powerfull flowing river. And there, on the banks of that river, as the family legend went, he made his home, the first one in Karanovo, unaware that he was building on the bottom of the Pannonian Sea that had disappeared into the Black Sea, with the shells and fish, sprites and monsters of all kinds.

Suddenly awaken, Danilo Aratsky started trembling: was the darkness of the Zakarpattian forests stirring in him again or were migrations the fate of the Aratskys, who seemed unable to put down roots somewhere and live and multiply without wars, exile, sudden and violent death.

"*But wars kept coming, with no end in sight!*" wrote the zealous author of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, not citing the names of the warring parties or how long the strife lasted – increasing Danilo's doubts that any lasting peace could be established in the future, as though war was already there, just outside the door.

"Some happier people did not seem to suspect or see or believe in the existence of this" wrote "Whisperer from the Lord's Dream," as the chronicler called himself.

* * *

The woman behind Danilo's back moved and said something in a Baltic language. He could not make it out, just as he could not remember whether the woman had already been in the bed when he laid his head on the pillow, without turning on the light, or had crept into the room while he was asleep. Her dress glimmered on a chair *while the Aratsky ghosts drew closer and then disappeared, by turns*, real only in Danilo's memory and the tattered pages of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, found in a gloomy second-hand book store in Tartu, near the shores of the Baltic Sea. Danilo did not know who had taken it there or how it got to Hamburg and then Belgrade. As a sign of gratitude for Dr. Luka Aratsky's saving his life, some older man had given it to Danilo and vanished. The man's name and whether he knew that Luka Aratsky was long dead remained a secret. He had been searching for an anatomical atlas printed 156 years earlier and discovered the *Karanovo Chronicles*, the greatest work devoted to the Aratsky family, the oldest and most powerful in Karanovo.

And so, after wandering for years, the *Karanovo Chronicles* reached Dr. Danilo Aratsky. Then many years later it was given to Danilo's son, Damian, as part of Danilo's *Journal*, in which he slid down the family tree trying to turn back time, convinced that their fates did not proceed from generation to generation but repeated, like someone's cruel joke that a person's life has as much meaning as they give it, if, in the meantime, they have not forgotten who they are.

* * *

Old age does not have to knock on the door for this to happen. Someone said this somewhere and Danilo had tucked it away in his memory along with a host of other words, just as insignificant.

A chilly day and a whirlwind of birch leaves... Whose life had given rise to these memories of the first signs of autumn as he stared at a redheaded girl with her cheek pressed against a tree trunk? Who was she talking to, going from tree to tree, surrounded by pavilions with bars on the windows, under a turbid sky, on a path without a single living soul, on the grounds of the Prince's former stables, turned into the Psychiatric Hospital at Guberevac? Breaking the rule against talking to patients without the presence of a doctor or orderly, Dr. Danilo Aratsky, an intern at Guberevac, went up to the redhead

and asked her who she was looking for, what was wrong. Her answer that she was looking for the tree that had imprisoned her soul seemed funny for a moment, then dreadful. No, not just her soul but her name as well. The girl smiled benevolently as she explained that this was why she was wandering without a name, a stranger to her own self. Because. Because. Until she found her name, she was the same as a pebble on the path or a snowflake that the sun's first rays would turn into a drop of water or something even more insignificant, nameless. "The doctors and orderlies certainly know your name," mumbled Danilo.

"Do you think so?" said the redhead, pressing even harder against the tree. "If they knew, they wouldn't call me Milena, and sometimes Ruža!" The girl fell silent and turned her back to him. Don't ask her anything else, *words fled her like startled birds*. She had filled a bright notebook with what things were called, all in vain. The world around her was breaking up faster than morning mist. The doctors' attempts to carve her name in her memory were all in vain, *and her name really was Ruža*. Ruža Rašula, a child without parents who had grown up in orphanages, just like Danilo. She was resolved to find her parents and relatives, find out who she was, find the tree that had stolen her soul. The girl did not believe her name was Ruža Rašula. "What a silly name," she laughed. She had refused to answer the doctors' questions, refused to eat, had stopped washing, sleeping, talking with the patients and orderlies.

"Your name is Ruža! Ruža Rašula!" said Dr. Danilo Aratsky, trying as hard as he could to help his first patient, amazed at how quickly the girl was losing herself. She was only twenty-three or maybe twenty-five. Alzheimer's was rare at that age, and yet – soon Ruža Rašula would not be able to remember anything. Hidden in a tree trunk was the key that could free her soul, only she did not know where to find that tree, that key. "Ruža Rašula is not my name," she whispered secretively. "It isn't. It isn't."

Ruža Rašula suddenly disappeared.

Danilo Aratsky had tried to find out what happened to her. To no avail. He saw her one more time, when the country started to disintegrate. Did her kind smile mean that she recognized him? He could not tell, and he was not even sure that it really was Ruža Rašula and not some other redhead girl who crossed the street against the light and disappeared into a crowd of strangers without a backward glance.

* * *

Leave or go back? Remember or forget? Given the possibility, not even Danilo Aratsky was certain what he would choose.

* * *

If only his dead Aratskys would only forget him and break off the connection that neither space nor time could control, perhaps their visits would stop. All he knew about his family came from the fuzzy memories of the citizens of Karanovo who had turned the lives of the Aratsky family into a myth about beauty and curse. The *Karanovo Chronicles*, however, left open the possibility that it was not only beauty but some sort of disguised madness. Because what else could it be but madness, Luka Aratsky's incredible refusal of a medal for bravery, turning down the rank of colonel? What else but madness, was his statement that all wars are damnation and he would not be part of them, that after the Balkan wars and the Great War, all wars were dead for him, which was why he had consigned his officer's uniform to the flames.

On page 23 of the *Chronicles*, the creator of the Aratsky legend stopped for a moment and then somewhat later, notwithstanding his complete admiration for Luka Aratsky, wrote that neither he nor Karanovo could understand Luka's refusal to serve on the General Staff.

“One day he might suddenly appear with a general’s epaulettes, which means so much to his beautiful wife Petrana, who turned the heads of officers, aristocrats, gamblers, rich men and lowlifes from Karanovo to Vienna.”

“Only fools could refuse such an honor!” said beautiful Petrana angrily, and Luka Aratsky murmured with a smile that “her husband was one such fool!” Reaching the rank of general was no small achievement, but he had not studied medicine to learn how to kill, but to save people...

And that is what he did until the first tank of the Second World War entered Karanovo. The town was bedecked with white rags as a sign of surrender, terrified by the stories that Hitler’s soldiers turned prisoners into soap.

Just then someone threw a hand grenade at a group of children that had run out to see the iron monster. When and how Dr. Luka Aratsky managed to catch it in midair and run under the tank was a subject of different interpretations in Karanovo. The only thing

they agreed was that the tank burst into flames the same instant, Dr. Aratsky along with it, so the family had nothing to bury but a few of the old warrior's charred bones. His exploits were spun into the stuff of legends,

Luka had always been ready to help the sick and expectant mothers. Particularly expectant mothers. The author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* did not write accidentally that the children Dr. Luka Aratsky brought into the world could populate a small town. The destruction of a fetus was a sin worse than murder in his eyes.

"Every child is a blessing from God!" he said over and over. "And one day they will bring someone joy!"

When that day would come and who would receive the joy or misery was not noted in the *Karanovo Chronicles*. On page 68, however, was a note that the funeral of "Doctor and Colonel Luka Aratsky was attended by all of Karanovo, and that his redheaded grandson Danilo announced that Dr. Aratsky was not dead. He had flown into the sky and would return as a flower or bird, because nothing and no one disappears forever!"

"All we have to do is wait!" added Little Rusty, which amazed all those who heard him and alarmed all those who loved him.

* * *

Is this why the airy ghost of Luka Aratsky detached itself from the agitated crowd on the 17th floor of a New York hotel and touched Little Rusty's arm?

"I promised to come back, Danilo! And you see, I came back..." Luka Aratsky's voice fell silent and Danilo trembled, remembering the prophecy written in the *Karanovo Chronicles* that "*all male members of the Aratsky clan become almost transparent on the eve of death and hear the fluttering of angel wings*".

Dr. Luka certainly had not heard the fluttering of angels when the tank exploded, although the *Karanovo Chronicles* carried his contention that "each person comes into the world with an angel on their left shoulder and a devil on their right shoulder". Which one got the upper hand depended on chance or fate.

Wonderful! And what if Danilo, like his mother Natalia in her time, did not believe in one or the other?

* * *

Danilo had not been interested in whether any of his ancestors had an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other until he came across the Aratsky family tree in the *Karanovo Chronicles*. It had been carefully drawn several centuries back. On that stifling New York night, next to the woman who murmured something in her sleep about two hundred dollars, Danilo Aratsky tried to breathe life into the Aratsky family tree by memory, based on a picture taken of them all at a christening, wedding, or some such celebration. This photograph, along with several others, usually helped him remember the faces of his father and mother, brother and sister, cousins, Petrana and grandfather Luka Aratsky. He himself was not in the group portrait; perhaps he had not yet been born or was cowering somewhere, frightened by the voices of his relatives who had slobbered his cheeks with kisses.

“The eye of God is everywhere! All-seeing and all-knowing!” said someone’s menacing voice every time he remembered that family portrait, yellowed and scratched from age and the migrations . From fleeing Karanovo, the orphanage in Jasenak, Belgrade, Hamburg, New York...

“Running off in vain.” Luka Aratsky’s voice, darkened by age, barely audible, made him jump on the bed. “You cannot run away from yourself!”

“Or from you …” said Danilo Aratsky, feeling a slight tingle in his fingertips. He was amazed that his Aratskys had managed to recognize him among millions of people. Why, he could not even make himself out on the family portraits anymore, even though he remembered tirelessly tagging after tall and bony Luka as he bent over a tiny blue flower whose fragrance followed him wherever he went. Danilo called it “Luka Aratsky’s flower” to himself, but he could not remember whether the tiny blue odoriferous flower had germinated on his grandfather’s grave next to the roses and verbenas.

“It germinated, of course it did!” came Veta’s ringing voice. “You took care of it together with Grandfather. Have you forgotten?”

Danilo actually seemed to make out the elongated airy ghost of the old warrior among the dead Aratskys, and himself, a small boy, walking behind him, trying to hear what Luka Aratsky was saying to the flowers. Unless, later on, it had just been his imagination – when he read in the *Karanovo Chronicles* that his famous grandfather

talked to the flowers, birds and, on nights of the full moon, some small shiny creatures that jumped out of the trunk of the walnut tree, sang and laughed, and then disappeared.

If they ever existed.

* * *

Surrounded by ethereal glass towers and intertwining lights, Danilo Aratsky started. The room was real and the woman whose breath was burning his neck was real, even though, dazzled by the lighted signs, he was unable to see her face. The messages written in streams of light on the surrounding buildings reflected on her bare shoulder, alternating. “Try our Imperial Burgers”, “Be Part of Majestic Entertainment”. He did not have to read any further. He knew that everything would be “Royal”, “Imperial”, “Majestic”, as though that great country built by religious fanatics, murderers and fugitives of all kind yearned for the aristocratic splendor of their European homelands. So “Royal Mental Hospitals” and brothels sprang up on the edges of the desert where “aristocrats” with resonant names offered their services. Both the girls and the visitors knew the facts of the matter, but they played along with the sweet delusion.

Was his country as it fell apart faster and faster, was it playing along with a similar delusion? Danilo felt a shivering fit seize his body and knew it would be followed by drenching sweat, which had compelled his wife Marta, the very first weeks of their life together, to ask for a separate bed and then a separate room.

In Danilo Aratsky’s *Journal*, which reached his son Damian many years later, September 27 was noted as the date of “the first night in separate beds”, several years before Danilo left for Germany and then America.

Suddenly, like a rumbling earthquake, Danilo felt blood rushing in his ears, heard someone’s stealthy footsteps in the dark and saw the ghosts of the Aratskys bending over his bed, then they scattered and regrouped again.

“Have you come back again?” he said angrily.

“What else did you expect?” said a deep male voice in the darkness, sounding offended. Danilo could not recognize the voice. The room was dark, but in a few moments a cascade of light would jump through the window with more messages. Danilo hissed:

“Get lost! This is someone else’s room, someone else’s woman! Go back where you came from!”

“We told you that we have *no place* to go back to.” Veta’s light hand touched his shoulder and caressed his red hair tenderly, just like she had always done when she wanted to console him, repeating that only angels and fairies have hair made of flames and gold.

“Stop the nonsense, Veta!” said her mother Natalia Aratsky, reprimanding her like so many times before, unhappy that Little Rusty was so different from all the other children in Karanovo, from his brother and sister, from his cousins.

Veta loved him for that very reason and even in death managed to hold onto her tenderness for Little Rusty, the name their grandfather called him. The rest of the family had followed suit, secretly fearing that Danilo’s fiery hair might not be just by chance, or be good. Just like it was not comets that were cutting up the sky over Karanovo, heralding wars and fires, although they did not have to be announcing in the Balkans; they came on their own.

The sound of his sister’s dripping hair got louder. “Good Lord, how long will she keep dripping, how long will she leave a wet trail wherever she goes?” thought Danilo Aratsky, starting to tremble, and he sat up in bed.

The drops from Veta’s hair fell on him like leaden rain, like the ice she fell through in the third year of the war.

In the crisscrossing New York lights, Danilo felt Veta’s hand on his cheek again. He knew that when she removed it, a stream of water, or sweat, would pour down his skin.

* * *

Then the picture changed...

As he jumped all around, Little Rusty heard Grandfather Luka admonish his pretty-eyed granddaughter Veta not to leave the house even at dusk, making her giggle derisively. “The eye of God is all-seeing!” he repeated.

“All-seeing?” asked the young girl skeptically. Her famous grandfather could not believe that. She, at fourteen, had already noted some fishy parts in the story. If that Eye was all-seeing, all-knowing, it would have to know about her father’s gambling debts and

the women who made her mother Natalia wipe her tears secretly And it did not know!
And did not see!

The old man explained in a slow, calm voice that she was not to give any thought to the foolishness of adults. War was just about to knock on the door and that was a big enough worry! He shook his head anxiously as he stroked Veta's cheek. "Beautiful and ill-fated! That's what my little granddaughter here will be!" Pain cut his breath like the blade of a sword.

Luka no longer knew who worried him more: his son Stevan, a handsome gambler, his courageous and unhappy daughter-in-law Natalia, or his grandchildren Petar, Veta and Danilo. He loved them and pitied them. Equally! He realized he would not be able to change anything in their lives: in a year or two a rifle would be pushed into Petar's hands and he would be sent to kill or be killed. And Veta? Veta, like his wife beautiful Petrana, would be her own curse and menace. "It's a good thing Danilo is little, he won't remember anything!" whispered Luka Aratsky to himself. Natalia said the same thing out loud when the old man went up in smoke and flames.

Sensitive and defiant on the verge of adolescence, Veta suspected that the old man had not run under the tank to save just the children, but the honor of his son Stevan as well. Right before the occupying forces entered Karanovo, as a reserve captain in the Royal Army, Stevan had quickly trained a company of smooth-faced young men and turned his judge's chair over to his deputy, an ambitious and brutal old man who had managed to stay out of every war.

"The Germans will enter Karanovo over my dead body!" Stevan repeated and then, without a single bullet being fired, let himself and his company be captured and sent in cattle cars to concentration camps in the north.

* * *

"It's a good thing you're little, you won't remember anything!" said Natalia when the radio announced that Belgrade had been razed to the ground and the Second World War had started. But Danilo did remember his grandfather's death and his mother's trembling hand in his hair, and his reflection in the mirror, convinced that the flame of his hair was to blame for everything that happened. If it was not so, why did everyone ask him where he got that hair? No one in the Aratsky family or in Karanovo had red hair.

That was why his father had fled like a coward, that was why his grandfather had been blown up, and Petar and Veta bowed their heads in shame when women in black at the wake whispered:

“That child’s hair is a sign of fires to come, you’ll see!” - Danilo remembered.

On the walls of the room lighted only by candles, their enlarged shadows swayed like the wings of black birds while Danilo, his hair standing on end, waited to hear the fluttering of angels. But there was no fluttering, and since Natalia had not allowed the children to see the body before the coffin was nailed shut, Danilo and Veta believed the story that their legendary grandfather was not dead, but had taken refuge until the war was over. Older and more guarded, Petar tried in vain to convince them that he would not return: Luka Aratsky was mixed with the grass and shrews and would not be coming back. “What safe place was Natalia talking about,” wondered Little Rusty, and Luka Aratsky replied from the darkness of the New York night that there are no safe places in war.

“Get Damian out of the Balkan inferno, Danilo. Every war is hell!” Luka Aratsky’s voice faded, but what he said, and paid for with his life, had so much weight that he had to be believed. Tense to the point of exploding, Danilo stared into the darkness, trying to make out Veta among the Aracky’s dead. In vain.

“The worlds of the living and the dead are incompatible, sister,” he whispered. “And maybe they aren’t...” he added several moments later.

Colonel and Doctor Luka Aratsky had lived through the two Balkan wars and the hell of the First World War, where more people died of hunger, cold and typhus than bullets. Just before the end of the war, imprisoned in Russia, he had treated those who imprisoned him, with the hope that there would be no more wars. And then conflicts began between the “Whites” and the “Reds”. That civil war, where brothers and neighbors killed each other, stayed with him as the most horrendous thing that could happen to anyone. Thanks to a Russian woman’s love and gullibility, he managed to escape and prayed to God and the devil that his son Stevan would not go through anything similar. As far as he was concerned, all wars were over...

Except – that is not what happened. New wars were starting in the Balkans, more atrocious than them all. Luka Aratsky was not on the 17th floor of a New York hotel just

by chance. Nor was Danilo inadvertently struck dumb. His son Damian was naïve and childlike, under the influence of his ambitious mother Marta, an easy target. Luka Aratsky suspected that she would push Danilo's only son into war. And he admonished: all of Marta's people had been part of the earliest resistance in the Second World War, after the war they were fanatical Communist Party purists, ready to remove every "enemy of the people, external and internal". And now there were more and more people like that. And lastly, Marta said, "Wars are a great opportunity for someone to make a name for themselves!"

"And die!" replied Danilo.

In the New York darkness cut by lighted advertisements, Danilo seemed to see the scorn on his wife Marta's face, coming back to him over the years. She was not among the Aratsky ghosts. She was alive, and even if she was not, she would not come within a hundred kilometers of him. It was just the reverse with the Aratskys: they came as close as they could. "For the souls of the ancestors circle endlessly around their living descendants so that through them they can feel the heat of the sun and the touch of human skin..."

* * *

This was about where Danilo Aratsky stopped writing in his *Journal*, a painful interruption that was broken several months later with one single sentence. To Damian's great surprise, it was not about the Aratskys or his mother. It said, "*He lived a long time and turned into a man with the heart of a dog...*"

Who? Someone from Marta's family? Rašeta, the director of the hospital? The investigator on Goli Otok – concentration camp? Even many years later Danilo was unable to solve the mystery of the Man with the Heart of a Dog and then he stopped trying, upset by his maternal grandmother Simka Galičanka's announcement that *after the wars, fish will swim through the streets of Karanovo but neither she nor Veta nor many other people will exist anymore and only three males will be left of all the Aratskys*.

Leaning on his elbow, Danilo tried to set his eyes on Luka Aratsky's airy ghost, but instead of the famous old man he saw Veta's wide-open eyes and heard water dripping from her hair, something the citizens of Karanovo remembered even when everything else had been forgotten: the terrible, icy winter of the third year of war, and

the hunger, and the fear, and Veta's panicked dash for the river in which she vanished at the age of sixteen.

* * *

Various stories had circulated about Veta's last day. Except that none of them was reliable and eyewitnesses were not to be believed. Some maintained that soldier Hans Miller, whose footsteps paced in front of the Aratsky house: seven forward, seven back, and then again, had run after the beauty from the Aratsky family in the hazy winter dusk. Others were convinced it was an older soldier who tried to rape Veta and he might have done it too, but no one could say. They all remembered her streaming hair and the thud of soldiers' footsteps, causing Veta's panicked fear. *All that was left behind her on the bank was a schoolbag and the cry of birds in the sky swollen with the large, heavy flakes of first snow.*

Several days later Hans Miller's footsteps had stopped pacing on the square in front of the Aratsky house and city hall, and the author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* wrote that "the soldier who drove Veta, the prettiest girl in Karanovo, to her death vanished through the same crack in the ice."

Whether he had been killed or killed himself was a matter of speculation.

In reprisal, the Germans quickly rounded up fifty hostages and shot them.

Simka Galičanka, Veta's maternal grandmother, was one of them.

In the heavy wet snow that fell, the citizens of Karanovo seemed to see Veta's streaming hair still fluttering, as the wind rifled through the pages of the scattered schoolbooks on the spot where she tripped and fell, before she slipped under the ice.

The anonymous author of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, who claimed to be the "Whisperer from the Lord's Dream" went back to Veta's unexplained death several more times, convinced, along with her mother Natalia Aratsky, that "beauty in the Aratsky family is the equivalent of a curse, perhaps even madness"!

Karanovo remembered Natalia's words, although it was not clear whether they referred solely to Veta or to Natalia's mother-in-law Petrana as well, she whose elfin face made men and beasts stop in their tracks. Perhaps it even referred to Stevan; white-haired Natalia had married him in spite of her mother Simka Galičanika's prediction that Steven would find every woman sweeter than his wife, which proved true.

“If that one bears a child larger than a potato, cats will be born with wings!” said beautiful Petrana, unable to stop herself, wondering what her handsome son found in that skinny girl without a father, a home and roots.

“You never know!” said Stevan, waving his hand indolently.

“Sometimes you do!” said beautiful Petrana, laughing out loud. “Mice only give birth to mice!”

“Ask Father!” said Stevan, shifting the burden to others, as usual. “As a doctor he knows more than both of us about giving birth and dying.”

But beautiful Petrana had not asked and Luka never said anything about it, conscious of the fact that whoever stood between a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law was standing on the edge of a knife.

And when Natalia started bearing big, healthy children, Petrana could not fail to notice the victorious smile on her daughter-in-law’s face and her own husband’s concealed tenderness for her and the children, Veta in particular. She had quickly metamorphosed from a skinny little girl to a beauty similar to Petrana from the time she first met Luka in Vienna. Luka had been studying medicine and she, visiting her relatives, was setting fire to the imagination of the Imperial City’s inhabitants.

That was when Petrana, with eyes that captivated the men of Vienna, conquered Luka for all time.

Those eyes were born again with Veta, but gentle and compassionate, ready to sacrifice and love – something beautiful Petrana had never even tried.

* * *

In the thin darkness of the New York night, Danilo felt that he had spent several hours treading on paths taken by the Aratskys for centuries, proud and confident that peace awaited them somewhere at the end.

But peace was neither in them nor around them.

Little Rusty had whimpered day and night searching for Veta, but she was nowhere, not even in his dreams; he longed for the touch of her hand, the tenderness of her voice calling him to lunch or to bed.

“Little Rusty! Come here, Little Rusty!” He had been hearing her voice for years, but she did not come until the Aratsky’s dead began their visits.

This time Veta must have been somewhere nearby because the sound of her dripping hair could be heard through the wailing fire trucks and the loud drunks. “Can her hair still be trickling,” he thought, “is she still waiting in the crowd of ghosts for someone to tell her where they are going?”

They really have no graves to return to! But he was not the one who had concocted a war in which Luka Aratsky was blown up, Veta vanished in the icy water, and Stevan was hanged from a willow tree next to the same river where his daughter began her eternal voyage on the underground and aboveground waters of this world. Was it his fault?

Overcome by the oppressive New York sky, the loud breathing of the unknown sleeping woman and the crisscrossing streams of light up above, Dr. Danilo Aratsky started praying to God and the devil for the Aratsky ghosts to find peace, and then he set sail for sleep.

But sleep would have nothing to do with him this time either.

The only sounds were the noise of the city down below, the ghosts stirring in a corner of the room and water dripping from Veta’s hair.

* * *

When Veta vanished under the ice, in Danilo’s memories and the *Karanovo Chronicles* she seemed to join her father Stevan, fated to fight the winds, scorching heat and snows; her grandfather Luka, blown up with a tank and its crew; and her mother Natalia, buried in a common grave, if the stories about her end were true.

Danilo Aratsky shuddered, feeling a chill pass through his body from his toes to the top of his head. What did the dead Aratskys want? What did God want? What did fate want? *Everyone in his family had been sacrificed to earth, air, fire and water. What was yet to come?*

“New wars!” came the voice of Simka Galičanka from somewhere in the distance.

Where – Simka Galičanka had not said, but Karanovo knew that whatever she portended would come true. Gifted at finding medicinal herbs, interpreting dreams and foretelling the future, Simka Galičanka had never been wrong, causing the citizens of Karanovo to feel a mixture of admiration and awe.

Petrana alone neither feared nor admired her, although she recognized Simka's power to cast spells on fish in the water and birds in the air. Why else would Stevan Aratsky have married Natalia? Her mother, Simka Galičanka, had appeared out of nowhere, without a husband, father or brother, with a little white-haired girl who barely opened her mouth to speak, but her words were remembered along with her eyes, the color of iris, by turns dark-blue or purple, depending on the time of day and the surroundings...

Danilo Aratsky suddenly got a clear look at Simka Galičanka's face in a beam of light, appearing only in a flash, and fear coursed through him. She had not visited before. What did she want?

"It's a good thing you remembered that she wants something!" Someone's soft voice reached Danilo's ear, but whoever issued the warning suddenly disappeared. He remembered: three of you redheaded will be left, she had said that long ago. What three did she have in mind?

Of all the Aratskys, only he and his son Damian were still there, and maybe his brother Petar? Danilo had not believed in the possibility of Petar's death, although the last news about him came from a rocky Adriatic island where death was considered a net gain. Ever since Danilo had run away from the Home for War Orphans in Jasenak, he had been accompanied by his dead relatives, and Petar had not been found dead or alive. Who were the three? Petar might be the second male and Damian the third, but then again? When the wars that Simka Galičanka predicted were over, he might not be alive, and would Damian be found among the living? And was Damian his son, anyway? Whenever Marta was infuriated she screamed that Damian was not his son and that her father had nothing to do with Petar Aratsky's fate. Everyone in her family knew the right side to choose, one with no mercy for traitors. If Petar had not been one, he would not have ended up on Goli Otok Island. Why had he gone to see the most hardened enemy of the state just before the man left for Goli Otok? What did they have to say to each other? If it was not a conspiracy, why had they gotten together?

"*That* is something your father knows best, Marta!" said Danilo, revealing the long-kept secret that he knew who her father was and what kind of beast lay hidden inside him. "*He* was an investigator on Goli Otok. While there was still life in the

inmates, he forced them to move rocks so big a horse couldn't carry them, from one pile to another. When they dropped dead, no one dug them a grave. Rocks were poured over the corpse without a word and it was left there with no farewell, no name, no tears."

"Released from his misery!" some inmates would whisper here and there, as though such "release" held a spark of hope for them – death was the only way out. The least painful. *One after the other, without a judge or judgment, they held their tongues and died.* Marta's father never said whether Petar had been an accidental, incidental victim. But he had never believed Petar's story that the evening before his neighbor was taken away, he had dropped by to pick up the man's dog. He was going to take care of it while his neighbor was away on a trip.

"Only a fool would believe that story, and my father isn't one!" said Marta, with hatred in her voice that Danilo could not counter. He had not known what to say, except the simple truth that Petar loved dogs and felt sorry for the neighbor who had lost his whole family in the war. After all, his neighbor had said he would only be gone for a few days...

"So Petar was a fool after all!" said Marta, laughing scornfully, and Danilo felt there was nothing more to expect from his marriage. She was no longer the shy girl whose smile had attracted him the moment they met. "Who stays on Goli Otok for just a few days? Did he stay there a few days? Because of a dog! Rubbish! What happened to that dog?"

Danilo did not know, just as he never found out whether Petar met his neighbor where they sent him, the man whose request to take care of his dog had sealed Petar's fate. Marta never told him. For her and her father, Petar was something one did not talk about, like a shameful disease, someone whose existence jeopardized their lives.

"You might as well stop making inquiries! Petar was ashes to ashes long ago, maybe just a few little bones stripped clean by the fish..." Marta had hissed after Danilo's inadvertent story about mother, who kept a lighted candle in the window for thirty years so that when her son came back, if he came back, he would know they were waiting for him, that he had not been forgotten. "Petar has been forgotten. All those buried in the rocky ground on Goli Otok – are forgotten. No one is waiting for them

anymore. No one keeps a lighted candle in the window..." Marta's voice sounded threatening, vengeful, ugly.

Danilo bowed his head.

He was tired to death of waiting, of Marta's remarks, of hospital director Rašeta's scorn and hatred, of himself, of his patients that he most often could not help...

"And the years passed..."

Petar's name was not among the living or the dead in the Red Cross archives and lists. The rare returnees from Goli Otok, half-dead from fear, kept silent.

Perhaps Petar had disappeared from this world in similar fashion, without a word. He had been quiet and silent when alive, and had given no sign or mixed with the other Aratsky ghosts that began to accompany Danilo the first time he ran away from the Home for War Orphans in Jasenak. Then they followed him to Belgrade, Hamburg, New York, to dusty little towns in the American Midwest and back again. But Petar was not anywhere. Danilo stopped looking for him until absent-minded Milun from Karanovo said in passing that he had met someone named Aratsky in a German beer hall, but had been so drunk he forgot both the man's face and his name. Aratsky was an unusual family name. The man had been tall and blond, and drunk as well.

Petar was tall and blond.

"Did he have both legs?" said Danilo, feeling every muscle in his body twitch.
"Did he?"

Milun repeated that he did not remember. He had been drunk and the other guy was drunk too and sat there glued to his chair. If he had stood up, he might have seen whether the man had two legs or twenty. What was the point of Danilo's question?

"Nothing! If he'd had only *one* leg, I'd know it was Petar. This way, it might be just another dead end. But what if it isn't?"

Danilo Aratsky took out an album of family photographs from the bag that he always dragged around with him. It was never out of his sight and neither was the collection of rare stamps that Luka Aratsky had collected for decades, unaware that some of them had become the rarest and most expensive in the world.

“Do you recognize anyone?” asked Danilo, sticking some of the last family portraits under Milun’s nose, but he just shook his head. No, none of them was the man he had met in Germany...

Following Milun’s eyes, Danilo Aratsky looked closely at the faces on the portraits, secretly hoping he would recognize at least someone so they could join the family tree. Danilo was having a terrible time trying to revive those branches and twigs inside himself.

“Why, you don’t even recognize their faces anymore,” he scolded himself, evoking memories of his ancestors. Maybe he had been too small when the pictures were taken? Maybe it had been before he was born, maybe he knew the names of his ancestors and relatives only through the *Karanovo Chronicles* and other people’s recollections. After all, it was too early to be forgetting. He was not Ruža Rašula. Horrified, he remembered the girl who was looking for her soul in tree trunks and had forgotten the names of the most ordinary objects.

No, he must not let himself turn into Ruža Rašula! He tried with all his might to recognize the faces on the family portrait that he looked at most often since leaving his marriage and Belgrade, conscious of the fact that he who forgets the past has no future.

The picture was probably taken just before the war. There, in the mild air of early autumn or spring, in a garden overflowing with tiny blue flowers that Luka Aratsky had planted wherever he could, solemn in their light summer clothes, *stood the Aratskys, facing eternity.*

The head of the family, Dr. Luka Aratsky, a warrior who hated wars more than the plague, was in the center of the circle, behind someone’s empty garden chair, probably his wife Petranā’s. To his right was Stevan, radiantly handsome, then Natalia, barely bigger than the child she was holding. Petar and Veta peered out from behind her, frightened and curious, and around them was a crowd of men and women with three little girls and a boy in a sailor suit squatting at their feet. Petranā was not in the picture, she was frequently not in Karanovo. Little Rusty only remembered her from the portrait by a Viennese painter, her scornful eyes so bright they took away your breath. Trying as hard as he could to remember, Danilo did not know whether he had ever called her

Grandmother. Perhaps it was because, even at a very advanced age, she looked younger and prettier than all the women in Karanovo.

And no one knew what she had in mind, wrapped as she was in a veil of secrecy. And even less where the fortuitous wind would take her to live the love she had not yet lived and see cities she had not yet seen, and get to know people and places that she would later hate, try to forget. And forget!

Danilo did not know who the children were squatting under their mothers' skirts, or how old he was as Natalia held him firmly in her arms, or how many Aratskys were standing before the camera with their enormous house in the background. Or had it only seemed enormous because he was little. The house was gone, just like the crowd of relatives from the family portrait. The Aratsky house, upright and tall, existed only in that photograph and in Danilo's memory. Because houses, like people, endure in the memories of those who once knew them.

And what if those memories faded and the person who once knew them forgot themselves, disappeared, became Ruža Rašula. Scatterbrained. Lost Ruža Rašula?

* * *

Sweat poured down his spine. He knew that when he got up, a puddle of sweat would be left behind and excerpts from his life would continue to alternate with changes in the streams of light in the moonless and starless sky.

"There's always a way out," he thought, consoling himself. "Whether it's in heaven or hell, it makes no difference. Heaven promises memories, hell a thin veil of oblivion." There seemed to be moments in the gloom of the New York night when he preferred the latter.

His fellow countrymen who had left hell and were scattered from Amsterdam to Alaska and Australia, were partial to oblivion. And they forgot, consenting with sadness and shame to become numbers, uprooted, outcasts, unaware that in so doing they had initiated a new circle of disappearances, lies and deceit in the worst of all wars, because it resulted from unpaid political bills, unburied dead from almost half a century ago, stupidity and hatred.

Damian might soon be on one of the battlefields. He was not old enough to be a soldier, no one could force him to pick up a rifle, but he could join up as a volunteer.

Marta's relatives, uncles, cousins – all had been warriors with a red star on their forehead. At the end of the war they were victors and the guardians of their victory. Avengers. What if Damian succumbed to Marta's war cries? And believed in the righteousness of the wars that were breaking out like boils on the homeland's body? What if he went off to war and died?

* * *

"*Keep the memories alive and leave this world that is not yours!*" was written on page 69 of the *Karanovo Chronicles*.

"Where should I go and what world is mine?" someone had added in the margin.

Who?

Danilo could not tell by the handwriting, which was not important just then. What if Damian really did go to war? Or threw down his weapon and brought general scorn upon himself, just as Luka Aratsky had done when he came back from the First World War, when he refused a medal for bravery and the rank of colonel, declaring wars to be a damnation that he would not be part of. Because *no matter where and why war is waged, every war is a damnation and sin that God watches in silence*.

Beautiful Petrana had begged in vain for him to accept the rank and everything that went along with it.

"Is he really that crazy?" she murmured, sobbing and shouting by turns, and then sobbing and laughing as she paced from wall to wall like an animal. "Only a lunatic would exchange the highest military rank for the stink of a hospital!"

"Perhaps!" said Dr. Luka Aratsky, staring at the radiance pouring out of his wife's eyes that caused a tingling in men's groin and hatred in women's hearts.

"Good Lord, why do such eyes come into the world?" he mumbled to himself.

Later, the citizens of Karanovo could not remember what Petrana Aratsky had replied to his statement that every war was worse than the plague. If she had said anything.

What they all remembered, and it was noted in the *Karanovo Chronicles*, was when she left for Vienna with some Hungarian aristocrat. She came back when they had all forgotten her, thin and silent. "But still so beautiful that no other woman in Karanovo could compare to her." Her son Stevan Aratsky, Danilo's future father and judge, was

seventeen years old. Hiding behind the curtains, girls would watch him walk by, blushing and quivering.

He did not recognize the woman who appeared at the door of the Aratsky house. He was astonished by her appearance and the shining black coach driven by a liveried coachman. He was even more astonished when she stood in front of him, started to cry and stammered, “Where’s your father, Stevan?”

If he said anything as he brought her into the house, Karanovo never found out, but the news traveled as fast as the wind that when Luka Aratsky got home after visiting a patient, he received Petrana without reproach, as though knowing she would come back one day. She was wearing a gorgeous lilac dress with a veil over her face, pale and beautiful, almost surreal. She was tired and ready to flee again, they suspected, because she had not dismissed the coachman. Three days and three nights he waited for her with the coach and two black horses while the negotiations went on between her and Luka about something that Karanovo was never able to find out.

According to the *Karanovo Chronicles*, she did not come out of the Aratsky house until the third day, upright and pale, accompanied by her husband.

After the coach headed for the quay, where the man who had caused her to leave Karanovo and her family awaited, Luka Aratsky went back inside the house and did not leave it until he grew a beard that he never shaved. Luka’s housekeeper and his assistant at the hospital spread the story around Karanovo that Dr. Aratsky had not taken a bite to eat or a drop to drink, but that Stevan never put down his glass, guzzling red wine until he fell under the table.

“There are more intelligent ways to ruin your life!” cautioned his father. “Petrana has left. Petrana will be back!” he said, trying to calm his son, who was already having visions of white mice scuttling down the curtains and birds with cat heads.

“Petrana will be back!” repeated Luka.

But Petrana did not come back and unverified, contradictory stories reached them about her sojourns in Vienna and Paris – the young count who whisked her away from Karanovo had lost his estate playing cards, raised his white-gloved hand and shot a bullet into his mouth, turning his just-married beauty into a widow and heir to houses in Vienna and an abandoned farm on the Hungarian steppes.

Why she returned to Karanovo several years later not even Petrana could say: according to the rumors, poets and ministers, aristocrats and lowlifes from the Imperial City were vying for her favors. The great Klimt himself had painted her portrait and crowds rushed to see the “Dreamy-Eyed Beauty”, but Petrana paid no attention to either that or the stories being woven around her.

When they had already forgotten about her, Petrana went back to Karanovo. This time in a car with a roof that could be raised and lowered, dressed in black, with an enormous black hat adorned with a yellow rose. Stevan was already in his third year of law school and Luka Aratsky spent more and more time at the hospital, where the smells were to capture the heart of his redhead grandson, making it clear what Danilo’s future profession would be.

Danilo Aratsky could not even imagine his grandfather without a stethoscope around his neck. Bent over stretchers carrying the injured, he strongly opposed hasty operations.

“*This is a peasant people!*” he said, fighting for every patient. “*Without arms and legs they will be beggars...*”

* * *

In the gloom, still not certain what his decision would be the next day, Danilo Aratsky again saw Luka bending over someone’s sickbed, perhaps a bed of roses and dahlias, whispering: “Here’s a bit of water to make you grow! And some for you too...”

Like a door into a magical world, the memory of a bright spring day opened before Danilo Aratsky and he saw Luka and himself, quite small, walking between verbenas and rosebushes, paying no attention to Petrana whom Luka Aratsky had received for a third time, to the general amazement of both relatives and friends.

They had spent two nights and two days talking then. No one could tell what they talked about. They spoke softly and in a foreign language, said Nega, Luka Aratsky’s housekeeper.

On the third day, when Petrana got up to go, on the table behind her she left an untouched glass of wine and a yellow rose, its fragrance causing the citizens of Karanovo to suffer for weeks. They maintained that Petrana was a witch; she put spells not only on Luka Aratsky and the crazy Hungarian, but any male she came into contact with.

* * *

Many years later, when Danilo Aratsky had already forgotten all sorts of things, he remembered Petrana's yellow rose by the freshness it never lost and its fragrance that caused unrest in men's groins and hearts.

But he did not remember Petrana. His memory of her and her last visit to Karanovo was a reflection of other people's recollections that reached him through unreliable stories and excerpts from the *Karanovo Chronicles*. Page 47 noted that the last time she came to Karanovo, Petrana was riding in a black car driven by a black man in a white suit.

She had come with three trunks, solid black with silver fittings and locks that no one knew how to open, which was why Stevan, by then a judge, had ordered them to use an axe.

This time, refusing to see her relatives and neighbors, Petrana stayed in Karanovo barely a few days, causing the news to spread through Karanovo as fast as the wind that Petrana's famous face had been disfigured by some terrible, shameful disease.

That story, however, was of short duration, even shorter than the stories that maintained Petrana was the devil's seed, descended from werewolves, a witch's daughter in disguise. The woman who periodically cleaned the Aratsky house shattered this story about Petrana's disfigured face: she stated that Petrana was more beautiful than ever before, so beautiful that next to her Natalia looked like a little freak that had strayed from some unknown world.

No one could get a word out of Natalia about her. Veta, who otherwise talked very little, just shrugged her shoulders at any question about Petrana. Petar was silent, as usual. Danilo had not yet been born.

For her grandchildren, Petrana was a black angel that fluttered through their dreams, and disappeared.

* * *

Dazzled by the spectral light of the New York advertisements, Danilo shuddered.

Was that indistinct spirit behind Veta – Petrana? Part of his dream? Rubbish! Petrana had left the world of the living so long ago that certainly not even her spirit was left.

Just a few weeks after leaving Karanovo, on her way to Paris, she had died of meningitis. She was buried somewhere in Switzerland, where mist alternates with snow. “Is that why her ghost is blurry?” mumbled Danilo. “Perhaps it’s not a ghost but a wisp of smoke that wandered up from the street?” Natalia’s laugh resolved the issue at once:

“It’s obvious you didn’t know Petrana! She wouldn’t enter a dump like this under any circumstances!”

Natalia’s laughter faded and her strange redheaded child asked:

“Well, did you know her? Does anyone ever know anyone?”

“Even eternity is not long enough to get to know a woman and the devil!” Danilo heard someone’s voice coming from the crowd of ghosts, muffled by a cough, probably Luka’s. Once long ago he had said the same sentence, unaware that Little Rusty had heard it and remembered, staring at the slanted light caught in a climbing bindweed and the petals of a rose.

On a hot summer day, the sun was pouring through the branches of young fruit trees and large dahlia blooms. Everything in God’s world was sleeping, dazed by the incandescence: cats, sparrows and even the storks on the roof. Luka Aratsky and Little Rusty were the only ones up. And maybe Petrana, hidden in the petals of the yellow rose whose fragrance still wandered through the town, arousing an indistinct yearning in the girls and thoughts of running off into the world in the boys.

If it were not for the yellow rose, Petrana would be forgotten. Perhaps? Because all it had taken was for Veta to change from a skinny skinned little girl into a beauty to revive the stories about Petrana.

Whether Luka Aratsky loved or feared his granddaughter Veta, who had Petrana’s face, Danilo could never figure out. He was captivated by Veta’s voice, radiant eyes, laughter... Nevertheless, he could not help but see that everyone admired Veta and everyone envied her a little, because she walked and dressed like no other girl in Karanovo, and her cheeks smelled of honey.

Veta was particularly affectionate toward her grandfather Luka and Little Rusty. Nevertheless, Luka Aratsky treated Veta with a certain reserve tinged with melancholy, barely hidden unease, even suppressed anger. Natalia could not tell which of these had the prevailed , which was intended for Veta and which for Petrana, who had returned to

her father-in-law's life through Veta. Ever since Natalia had entered the Aratsky home, a mutual and quiet, but never overt, tenderness had been established between her and her father-in-law. Stevan, with the instincts of a possessive male, was the only one to suspect the strength and depth of that tenderness, although he never understood Natalia's admiration for his father.

Natalia was and remained a locked house for Stevan. He could find neither the way there nor the key that opened it. At times she was like Chinese boxes that fit one inside the other, but the secret of the last one was never revealed. He considered the story a dim-witted concoction that Natalia, following in her mother Simka Galičanka's steps, had gone to the rise above the cemetery and waited for the devil in order to snatch his red cap, the one that gives whoever holds it the power to see and hear what others do not see and hear. And yet! The first time he set eyes on Natalia, Stevan had shuddered from some secret thrill. Then, caught in the trap of her eyes, he forgot his initial fear, only to remember it when it was too late to change anything in his life.

More than ordinary female complicity was needed for the scrawny girl who barely reached Stevan's waist to conquer Petrana's handsome son. Even those who had not believed that Natalia heard the grass growing and what the dead and those yet to be born were saying in the rustling leaves, now believed. Wasn't she able to tame a wild horse by laying her hands on him, lure a fox with her eyes, drive death away from the dying? Couldn't she diagnose disease faster than her mother, who had come from the south and never gotten used to Karanovo, and neither had the town gotten used to her? Simka Galičanka's violet eyes penetrated straight to the gut, but what frightened people more than those eyes was Simka's mysterious silence, her sudden departures to the forest across the river, the herbs she brought back with her that she used to treat whooping cough, stomach problems and other illnesses, even snake bite, confirming the locals' suspicions that she was a sorceress, maybe even a witch.

Tiny Natalia Aratsky had inherited her mother's ability to heal, her iris-colored eyes and power to foretell fates...Not even the oldest citizens of Karanovo remembered her ever talking to anyone for more than a few minutes... Her collocutors would be so gripped by her eyes that they most often forgot what she said, if she said anything.

“Squeeze water from a stone and you’ll squeeze words from Natalia!” said Petrana the first time she met her future daughter-in-law, not understanding what her impetuous son saw in a woman with tits no bigger than a dog’s. Everything about Natalia bothered Petrana: her radiant eyes, the timbre of her voice, the touch of her small hot hands that caressed and healed at the same time, and the tranquility emitted by Natalia’s whole being.

Even with the greatest effort, Luka Aratsky was unable to stifle the hatred that blazed inside Petrana the moment she saw Natalia in her house. But that same moment he realized that Natalia understood Petrana more than he ever had. Not even the indestructible fragrance of the yellow rose surprised her, nor did she try to get rid of it.

“It would be a futile attempt!” she said unceremoniously. “Petrana is there in that rose and no one can get her out of this house...”

For months, Stevan tried in vain to get her to explain what she meant by that. “Petrana left Karanovo long ago. Even if she were to come back, who could be certain she wouldn’t leave again? Forever? And finally, even the yellow rose will fade one day,” he said smiling, as he went through court documents for the next day’s trial.

“Do you think so?” came Natalia’s barely audible voice, surprising him.

“What’s there to think? All roses fade!”

“Not *this one!*” said Natalie, laughing bitterly. “Understand that once and for all,” she added sharply. “*Not this one!*”

Stevan just shrugged his shoulders, suspecting that Natalia knew something he would never understand. So what!

Stevan started preparing for the next day’s trial of a farmer who had killed half his wife’s family claiming he did it by order of God’s emissaries. And God is everywhere! All-seeing and all-knowing...

* * *

“Does He really know?”

In a cattle car heading for Auschwitz, chilled to the bone and hungry, Judge Stevan Aratsky remembered the question he had asked God, the devil, someone else? The man who had been sentenced to death, guilty of killing three children, his wife, father- and mother-in-law, had been convinced that God was everywhere and was all-

knowing. He would forgive. Nonsense! In the cattle car together with the soldiers in his company, *through the stink of sweat and urine, the fragrance of Petrana's yellow rose seemed to reach his nostrils, as strong and captivating as that day when she left it on the table, next to the untouched glass of red wine.*

In the thundering train taking them north, Stevan suddenly heard Natalia's calm voice announcing the birth of twins. The Aratskys, gathered around the table, looked at each other in disbelief: there was no sign of pregnancy on the flat skin of her stomach. How could she hear the beating of two little hearts?

"That's impossible!" Stevan remembered his derisive laughter of long ago. "It will be at least three months before you're able to hear anything..." he had added soothingly, surprised at his father's reproachful look and brief, categorical statement:

"If she says she hears them, then she hears them!"

It was not worth arguing with Luka Aratsky. It was not possible to argue with Natalia. Depressed and hurt, Stevan saw himself take a bottle of grape brandy out of the cupboard and, as though all of eternity lay before him, start to drink. The stars had not been crossed very happily at his birth – he no longer fooled himself: no matter what he said, Natalia would just shrug her shoulders and do whatever she intended to do. Petrana was right: he had been wrong to ask Natalia to marry him. Barely reaching his armpit, he had been convinced that she would espouse his every word like the law. The only thing that worried him was Petrana's presentiment that Natalia would be unable to have children.

"*Not even the size of a potato! Not even the size of a potato!*" he had heard Petrana grumble. "*You are the last Aratsky, mark my words...*"

Petrana's doubts filled his days and nights with something all the Aratskys feared, driving them to distraction – the prospect of the magnificent Aratsky house being left without children's laughter or tears.

That house had seen the birth of heroes and cowards, beauties and eccentrics, doctors and highwaymen, statesmen and warriors, merchants and teachers. It had been the site of weddings, christenings, celebrations, sorrows and joys. Stevan simply could not imagine that large house with an empty yard, empty rooms. He had been overjoyed when, disproving Petrana's words, Natalia started having children less than a year after

their wedding, first Petar, then Veta, then the twins. Finally, just when everyone thought there would be no more children in the house, she had Little Rusty, and stated:

“Well, that’s enough! Misfortune should not be propagated!”

Stevan was not sure what she meant by that. But Luka Aratsky understood at once that his daughter-in-law was right. The boy with locks of red hair scattered on his forehead was so shriveled and thin that it was possible to count all of his ribs, the little bones on his arms and legs, the rosary of his spinal column, and the bones of his hands and feet covered in pathetic blue skin.

“Call the priest” said Luka Aratsky, frowning at his son. “And get a coffin ready. This child will not see another day!”

Bewildered by the look on his father’s face, Stevan obediently headed for the door to fetch the priest and a carpenter, realizing the gravity of that undertaking. The only funeral parlor in Karanovo was closed because of the sudden death of its owner and the heirs’ squabbling over the division of the property.

But before Stevan even opened the door, Natalia sat up in bed and said:

“Come back Stevan and don’t make a fool of yourself! This child will have the misfortune to outlive us all.”

* * *

Surrounded by a crowd of his dead in the New York Hotel 17th floor, Danilo Aratsky remembered the legend about his birth that followed him like a shadow and smiled.

The voices of the dead and the living mingled in his ear, insisting that he remember, recall. They only endured by means of his memories.

Pitiful people! But how had they managed to find him after all his wandering through little Midwestern towns? The Balkan madhouse had not been enough for them, they were looking for him in this one too!

Danilo uttered a vile curse at the woman and himself and the spirits of the Aratskys that had popped up from eternity, from icy places of general chaos and oblivion, seeking their salvation from the person whose birth had not brought joy even to his near

and dear, who had needed half his life to understand that covering one's tracks was a delusion and waste of time.

* * *

"There is no place where you can hide from yourself!" He thought he heard his mother's voice. Then he realized that he was talking to himself, exonerating himself for something he would never dream of doing. Then why hadn't he challenged the reports by the Guberevac Psychiatric Hospital inmates? Not just one report but *four identical accusations* written in the same hand, in the name of elderly patients in the ward for the worst mental cases, who no longer knew who or where they were. The handwriting on the reports was the same, the spelling mistakes too. And it all boiled down to the claim that in less than 30 minutes, Dr. Danilo Aratsky had tried to rape, and might even have raped Katica Borović from Vršac (67), Mara Miljuš, a refugee from Banija (43), Nevenka Pejin (place of birth unknown, age unknown), and Rebeka Hirschle (74) who did not remember her name and was convinced she would be starting school in a few days. She already knew the Latin alphabet and was surprised that she didn't know Cyrillic. She had finished four years of elementary school and Cyrillic was taught in the third.

Mara Miljuš was the sole survivor of the fire that destroyed her family home in Banija. She remembered her loved ones disappearing in the smoke and flames that night, in the war; she screamed at the sight of a lighted match, the glowing tip of a cigarette, red sky at dusk.

What kind of witness could she be?

What a fool he had been to run away from accusations which, in the name of the mentally incompetent, someone had written, signed and sent to the District Attorney's office. Who?

There were patients on the Ward that no one had visited in years, both literate and illiterate, but none were capable of compiling a report on the unseemly behavior of Dr. Danilo Aratsky on May 23 between 11:00 and 11:30, in the room where the signatories shared the same space and same misery. Director Rašeta informed the staff, without telling Danilo about the reports. Investigator Toma Bambur had received them several days earlier and considered them to be someone's stupid joke or an act of vengeance.

This is why Dr. Aratsky was not summoned for a “preliminary interview” before the entire hospital knew about the “Aratsky incident” and had discussed in great detail what, when and how it had happened. Marta had shouted at her husband to go away, disappear, or she and his son would bear the stigma too. She had screamed in rage, repeating, “If I’d only known... If I’d only known...” What?

* * *

It took several months for Danilo Aratsky to realize what his wife meant to say. If she meant anything? If she wasn’t just trying to get rid of him as quickly as possible, while he, taking no note of the game being played around him, was convinced that everything the patients claimed was rubbish that no one would believe. Rolling in the hay with four women in less than half an hour! Without a single one screaming or trying to escape? Not one had said anything to anyone until the reports appeared, written in the same handwriting, with the same content, signed on May 23.

Nevertheless, they had *all* believed it, except for a few doctors and orderlies who knew about Rašeta’s decision to remove Dr. Aratsky from the hospital because of the patient who was placed against his will in the ward for the most difficult cases. The man had cursed, in public, someone who should never be cursed, and Dr. Aratsky, as though it was all right to spit at the head of state, had nonetheless asked that the *unfit* man be taken home: he would be fine when he sobered up; he was drunk, not sick!

For reasons of his own, Rašeta had kept the blasphemer “for observation” and stuffed him with drugs, trying to keep him there as long as possible. He had cautioned Dr. Aratsky not to interfere in the case. He, Rašeta, knew what he was doing and why he was doing it...

Dr. Danilo Aratsky had jerked as though struck by lightning: did Rašeta by any chance know what he was doing with those four reports and why he was doing it? Is that why he no longer cautioned him that he was the youngest, he should wait a bit before commenting on the work of his older colleagues. Before Danilo had been there any time at all, he had written a report accusing the head nurse of piercing a patient’s eardrum while syringing his ears. “That lunatic needs his eardrum like the psychiatric hospital needs an inspection” had been the director’s comment.

“Withdraw your report, Doctor!” Rašeta had advised him. Then he kept repeating that same sentence day after day until the poor man’s eardrum seemed to reverberate inside Dr. Danilo Aratsky like a drum, the whole world seemed to be covered with that eardrum and trembled from the pain inside it.

Rašeta was seething with anger at the young fool who had turned a lunatic’s eardrum into a world-class issue. He would do better to take care of his wife and son. He could not call the most dedicated staff member to account because of a shitty eardrum, if that’s what it was all about. Or was Danilo Aratsky after the director’s chair?

“Either withdraw your report, Doctor, or leave! It’s your choice ...”

“There’s no choice to make!” replied Dr. Aratsky calmly. “The report stays...”

And it stayed, but from that day onward Dr. Danilo Aratsky was on duty twice as often as the other doctors.

And time passed. The “eardrum” incident started to fade in people’s memory. And it might have been forgotten if Rašeta and the head nurse, with a giggle, had not reminded him from time to time to count the “eardrums” in the hospital, another one might have disappeared...

The patient’s pierced eardrum had festered for a long time. And then the man suddenly disappeared. Written in his patient file was: “Transferred”.

Where? To the ward on Avala? To the Kovin insane asylum? To the other world? Where? Dr. Danilo Aratsky had never found out and there was no sense in asking. Dr. Rašeta was already flaunting those four reports and Marta asked him scornfully why he had chosen lunatics to do what he did, destroying his reputation and hers too? What a stud!

Her eyes shone with hatred he had never seen before. Paralyzing! After that, she lashed out: “You’re dead as a doctor! A nobody! All that’s alive is your shame and those four unfortunate women whose accusations you didn’t even try to deny, because you know that you’re guilty. Guilty before God and man!”

Danilo sensed something so threatening in Marta’s voice, so terrible that it started to take his breath away. “Before God and man!” Since when did she care about God and man? As though a cake of ice was pressing on his chest, Danilo Aratsky started trembling at the dim realization that Marta was hastening his departure from Belgrade “before his

ball of shame unwound all the way and impressed on Damian that he was the offspring of a monster that accidentally became a doctor”.

He could not follow her words any more: the stamp of dishonor would not follow just him but his son too and later the son of his son’s son. And then the Aratksys would cease to be a proud example of distinction, just because of what he had done to those poor women who had been forgotten by God and man.

“What?” he wanted to shout, to stop her gushing words that poured over him like excrement, but his voice broke. Sweat streamed down his forehead, cheeks, neck and chest, there was a roaring in his ears. Suddenly he was sopping wet as though someone had doused him with hot water. Paralyzed. Dumb. Unable to defend himself, deny the four reports, ask whether anyone with an ounce of sense could believe it was possible to do what he had been accused of in a dark room where the four women were never apart, in less than half an hour, without anyone shouting, calling the duty nurse, anyone at all? Marta had been holding those reports, just like Director Rašeta. Didn’t she see that they were the same: the same words, the same accusations, the same handwriting, like the same hand had written them. *Whose?* He wanted to ask her why she couldn’t see that the whole thing was a setup, and then it crossed his mind that she might ask him why, if he was innocent and the reports didn’t hold water, why hadn’t he asked for a court investigation? Why hadn’t he spoken up?

Anyone else would have raised the roof at reports by mentally incompetent, seriously sick women. Why hadn’t he spoken up? He had retreated. Fled. Thereby admitting that there was some guilt after all... He knew, just like his father Stevan knew when he agreed to be captain that he had undertaken the responsibility to stay with his soldiers to the end.

Something poisonous, something terrible gushed out of Marta’s mouth, Marta’s eyes, her whole being. Then he realized: he would not be put on trial. He had already been sentenced and the verdict had been reached back when he refused to declare a drunk man seriously mentally ill, in spite of the diagnosis bearing three signatures of three reputable psychiatrists from three republican centers.

The “eardrum incident” was just a preview of what was to come. He was guilty for those four unfortunate women whose evidence was not particularly convincing. They

would maintain that what happened did happen and then say it didn't. Sometimes they couldn't remember. Nevertheless, he was guilty!

Danilo Aratsky suddenly felt sorry for them and for himself. If he fled, they would declare him guilty, unworthy of the medical profession. His right to treat patients would be taken away, the only thing he had ever wanted to do in his life.

If he stayed and accepted the covert war with Rašeta, Marta, with Marta's whole family that was well distributed in all the services, those four poor women would be questioned, terrified, hounded, stuffed with sedatives until they forgot what little they remembered and were turned into vegetables. No, not vegetables! Even they remember pain, but into what the Little Rustyhead had become. *Ruža Rašula! Scatterbrained rose! Nameless to herself. Nonexistent. A secret dismay and defeat to all those committed to the human mind.*

He suddenly understood the destructive power of fear that once long ago had crushed his father like a python as he rolled north in a cattle car with his soldiers. Or was it cowardice that he did not have the strength to resist? What?

* * *

What is this life we live abroad?

Miloš Crnjanski

Now, many years later, staring at the crisscrossing streams of light from the building across the way in which the faces of his dead family appeared and disappeared by turns, Danilo remembered the scream that shook his entire being when he decided to leave everything and go as far away as possible as quickly as possible, even though everything inside him was shattering.

Then began the migrations, with the constant hope that someone would remember the doctor who considered that even the most miserable, forgotten and rejected have the right to their eardrums. But the paths he took branched from Belgrade to America and no one even thought to ask why he had left, why he had had to go. Everything he had been saddled with had taken place in a madhouse, but not everyone in it was mad. Perhaps the world outside the walls of Guberevac Psychiatric Hospital was even madder? Perhaps the entire world was a madhouse? Or was everything rapidly turning into a madhouse?

He had not wanted to accept this thought when he interned for a while in Toponica or later in New York, as the Atherton suicides slid down his window and hit the ground with a thud, shrieking or silent, like autumn apples in Karanovo.

He remembered his first scream, just as remembered those four unfortunate woman from Guberevac for all time, still not understanding *why* he had not spoken up and allowed them to drive him out of Belgrade, out of Damian's life, out of his own self?

In a lukewarm puddle of his own sweat, next to the woman panting in her sleep, he tried to remember for the umpteenth time: if he had been right, what had made him spit at everything and run off like a complete idiot?

* * *

"I wouldn't think about that right now!" Danilo was surprised to hear his mother's calm voice in the stream of cold air coming from the new York's East River.

In both life and death, Natalia Aratsky spoke very little and rarely. Now she followed him closely, silent and illuminated by a thin veil of light. This made her once redhead child and later accused, doctor and fugitive, think that she had not died with the twins when the house was hit, if she died at all? If those who inhabit the memories of so many people can ever die? Everyone in Karanovo was convinced this was impossible. Perhaps this is why some of the notes in the *Karanovo Chronicles* allow the possibility that Natalia Aratsky did not end up under the plaster and bricks with the twins. In the widespread movements of peoples, she had gone somewhere and would return to Karanovo when things settled down. And then when she left, she forgot who she was and where she was from... Cases like that happened in wars on all sides. Hadn't Blagoje Bajin come back from the war when everyone had already wept and mourned him, eleven years after the end of the war in Galicia? He had come from Siberia, not Galicia, where the inhabitants of Chukotka had taken him in, unaware that the Great War had ended long ago. He brought a lively slant-eyed wife with him and two little children who spoke neither Russian nor Serbian, which was not strange, because Blagoje had forgotten his mother tongue.

Papers had arrived confirming that Blagoje Bajin, resident of Karanovo, a private in the 4th Assault Company, had died in battle in Galicia. No one could remember how the error occurred declaring Blagoje dead, just as Blagoje could not remember who

pulled him out of the trench filled with the dead bodies of the 4th Assault Company, or when. He woke up in a temporary hospital after two months in a coma and realized that he was in Siberia. But he could not remember how he got there or what his name was or figure out what they were saying to him until he learned a few words in Russian. Then life took a calmer course: he assumed a Russian name instead of the one he had forgotten and became Semyon Ivanovich Chernoglaz, he got married and had two sons. The daughters he had left behind in Karanovo only appeared sometimes in his sleep as toddlers, making him wonder why there were little girls were in his dreams.

The Swiss Red Cross brought him back to Karanovo where he learned that the girls in his dreams were his daughters and that when he had been declared dead, his wife had remarried and given birth to three children, two with her second husband and one with her third husband, who had adopted all the children as his own.

Hearing that the late Blagoje had returned as Semyon Ivanovich Chernoglaz, Durđa Bajin cried for three days and then decided to leave everything as it was. To Karanovo's general amazement, Blagoje took his Russian wife and his boys to his parents' house, but refused to change his name. He had been happy in Russia with that name, he explained to his parents, relatives and neighbors. They were curious as to how his father's and grandfather's name had been inserted between the last name of Chernoglaz and the first name of Semyon. What devil had been playing with Blagoje, whose father and grandfather were called Ivan. Or had Blagoje, hovering between life and death, remembered his father's name? Or had it been someone named Ivan who brought him back among the living? He did not know. He did not even try to find out. Semyon Ivanovich Chernoglaz loved all the children, Đurđa's and his own, exactly the same way.

His parents and neighbors wondered whether the Russian woman would love them too. Not for long. She grew to love them, became friends with Đurđa and was closer to her than Semyon Ivanovich Chernoglaz when he was called Blagoje Bajin.

* * *

Jumping ahead in time, the citizens of Karanovo wondered whether something similar had happened to Natalia Aratsky, was she now happily living somewhere with the twins under another name?

But there were also doubts. No, Natalia was not the kind to forget, to give up. And then – there was the testimony of the neighbors and relatives, so contradictory that the “Whisperer from the Lord’s Dream” did not know which one was right: the one where Natalia and the children were in the Aratsky house when the Allied bombs plummeted down on Karanovo just before the end of the war and turned the magnificent house into a huge hole with a little lake, a white pig floating on its bottom, dead; or the one where Natalia had not been in Karanovo during that Easter bombing? “Which, in all likelihood, was more probable,” noted the chronicler.

When the rubble was cleared, Natalia and the twins were not found, either dead or alive. And armies were passing through Karanovo, each one killing and looting the same way, which is why the Aratskys only left the Farm in the marsh periodically, forced by winter to return to Karanovo, to the house where a German soldier was pacing, following Veta’s every move. “How old is he?” Natalia wondered, surprised that a boy with peach fuzz on his cheeks was in the army, in a foreign country. Who was he protecting in front of the Aratsky house, located between the courthouse and city hall? His lustful eyes instilled fear in Veta that stayed with her day and night. This might be why Natalia decided they would leave the house surreptitiously and go to the Farm in the marsh. Or was it because of Stevan – Miller’s seven steps forward, seven back, were driving him crazy. And everything could have been different.

Could it?

* * *

As he rolled out of the cattle car headed for Auschwitz, Captain Stevan Aratsky was convinced that he was rolling to freedom. But what he got in Karanovo was a new, even more shameful captivity, hiding in the attic and hearing the pacing of the German guard under the windows of his house: seven forward, seven back, then again. What if it crossed the soldier’s mind to check whether there were any fugitives in the Arastky house, and he discovered the dusty little room in the attaic, pulled him out of there like a half-dead cat and shot him in the head? The hope was fading that the war would run its course and they would survive, hunger was ever-present, even though Natalia tried to slow down the general decline. To no avail.

At the very beginning of the second year of war, everything of value disappeared from the Aratsky house in exchange for a sack of potatoes, some dry meat and beans. Nevertheless, for the first time in its existence, they were starving inside the Aratsky house. Not even the local farmers had anything with which to blackmail their former bosses. The piano was the last to leave the Aratsky house, not because Veta had waited until then to stop tormenting herself and others with etudes, but because the village blackmarketeers did not know what to do with it.

* * *

*I got in from my trip,
dusty and hungry.
And longing for another world.*

Vasko Popa

Tired of being a fugitive and fearing that a punitive expedition would discover his hiding place, chilled to the bone and hungry, Stevan finally accepted Natalia's proposal to go to the abandoned Farm as soon as the weather turned warm. It was built on a small island between two by-channels of the Tisa River, overgrown with reeds and inhabited by frogs and marsh birds.

Then all the Aratskys started eagerly getting ready for the day they would leave for the Farm that some long-ago Aratsky had built in the marsh, like some sort of hunting lodge to hunt wild geese and deer.

They had no idea how they would live there and took only the most essential things, excited as though going on an excursion. A dangerous excursion. Because they had to steal out of Karanovo before dawn, bypassing Hans Miller and the guard at the entrance to town.

So the departure date had to be postponed several times... They finally reached the edge of the marsh when it seemed they would never get there. At the Farm in the marsh, time stood still, like the black, stagnant water around the Island overgrown with reeds where the marsh birds built their nests. Fish and wild duck eggs became the basic

food of the Aratsky family and the two oddballs who had been forgotten on the Farm when all the other servants fled, taking everything they could carry.

Danilo could not remember when Natalia first heard the sound of rain on the reed roof. To everyone's surprise, she climbed up onto the roof, repaired what needed repairing and came down as though getting out of bed. She had been determined to repair the broken roof in Karanovo too, and did so before both the roof and the house disappeared.

Petar was gone from the Farm for a while. How long, no one could say. *The days, weeks, months on the Farm flowed together into something like eternity, with no beginning or end in sight.* At least that is what it seemed like to Stevan as he stared at the bottom of a glass and tried to follow a falling star, the path of the moon doubled in the black marsh water, and the bright blue sparkle of the morning star. The fate of every creature on earth depended on how the stars were crossed at birth. Even when he was dead-drunk, Stevan could not figure out which stars had determined his fate, although over time he saw more and more white mice pushing their way out of the walls of the Farm built by his legendary ancestor Toma. Yes, Toma! Toma the Haiduk. The *Karanovo Chronicles* had a whole chapter written about him, longer than the one about the youngest and prettiest Countess Rohontsy who had once, long ago, white and naked, ridden a black horse as though flying. Her father would bring friends from Vienna, Paris and London to his manor on Pearl Island to hunt roe deer and wild boar, there among the willows.

Whether the young countess had been locked in a room in the manor at that time or the guests, not believing their eyes, watched her ride bareback on a black horse, naked, as she passed between the willows like a belated cloud, the servants did not know. But during the full moon, they seemed to see some light flying from one end of the Island to the other, accompanied by the thudding hooves of a black horse and a voice singing a song that had never been heard on the Tisa or its surroundings.

* * *

*Are you really sure
that deerhunters won't burst out
of the darkness one night*

like human head hunters...

Ljubomir Simović

“Maybe we’ll hear it too!” said Stevan to Little Rusty, unaware that Natalia had overheard him as she was getting the twins ready to go to Karanovo.

“Better leave the little ones here!” cautioned Veta. “Strange armies are traipsing all around...”

“I won’t die from a bullet, Veta! Remember what you saw in your dream? And I’ll be less suspicious with the children...” she added, knowing at the bottom of her heart that she was wrong: everyone is suspicious in war, and a soldier’s duty is to shoot...

Stevan did not even try to disagree with her and stop her from going: he knew it would be in vain. Wrapped in the marsh’s mist, Natalia and the twins disappeared among the reeds like the long-ago train that had hauled his soldiers off to death.

With a shudder, Stevan forgot about Pearl Island and the naked beauty riding bareback on a black horse.

His ears were filled with rumbling train wheels and the echoing voices of young men.

* * *

Packed into a cattle car, without food or water, in the stench, they had been rolling along the rails for so long that no one was able to count how many days and nights they had been traveling, because the train stopped frequently on side tracks or on the open line when some crazy lad like Petar blew up the rails, coming out of the darkness and disappearing into the darkness. The cars stank of excrement and urine, the straw under them was rotting, and next to the living were the decomposing bodies of those who had not withstood hunger, suspecting that the damned train was taking them straight to hell, which was not far from the truth.

Their first warning came from some prisoners with a yellow star on their sleeves that they met at an incidental station when the engineer ran out of fuel. The moon was hanging low in the sky, attached to the top of a poplar tree, larger than an ox-cart wheel, so the cars of the Jewish train were brightly illuminated.

That train composition must have been standing at the station for days, because the stench coming out of the cars was worse than an uncleaned stable. The soldier who discovered there was someone alive in those cars was the youngest in Stevan's company, he had picked up a rifle for the first time just a few days before the war and died without reaching his 19th birthday.

The soldier's eyes were to hound Stevan Aratsky through all the days of his isolated life in Karanovo and on the Farm, filled with croaking frogs and the clattering train. And bickering with his second and third soul; in happier days, before he threw down his rifle and started to flee, he did not even know they existed...

"There's someone over there, Captain Aratsky!" said the little soldier from Orahovica, crawling over to him and tugging at his sleeve. "Someone's groaning."

Thinking that the soldier was hallucinating, that he was dizzy from hunger, thirst and fear, Stevan waved his hand dismissively. But when he pricked his ears, he really did hear groaning, sobbing and words that he recognized were curses and lamentations in Yiddish.

"It's a Jewish train!" he muttered and ordered one of the soldiers to knock on the bar that closed the cattle car to signal that their car was not empty either. Those on the sidetrack quickly replied, knocking in return.

Thus began a conversation in which they found out from the Jews that everyone, even children and the elderly, was being taken to one of the camps from which there was no return.

"The same thing must be happening to you!" concluded one of the Jews in a thick voice, and then he fell silent.

"Is that right, Captain?" asked Adam from Orahovica.

Stevan did not know what to say, but he decided to escape the first chance he got, convinced that it was better to be shot while running away than to rot in some camp in Germany. The morning he set eyes on the Jews, who looked more like phantoms than human beings, hastened his decision. When they were let out of the cars for a minute to dispose of the excrement and decomposing corpses, Stevan got down on all fours, crawled to the other side of the embankment and rolled down the slope, certain that he would get a bullet in the head before he reached the bottom.

But the German guards did not notice he was gone: the train suddenly started, taking Stevan's soldiers to a destination that none of them could even imagine.

The composition with the Jewish hard laborers stayed on its track and reeked. As soon as night fell, he got out of the bush and headed south, in the opposite direction from the one taken by his soldiers.

* * *

He reached Karanovo black and blue, in rags, barefoot and starving. He did not know how long he had walked through the thickets of blackberries and some thorny bush, at night, avoiding German guardposts and populated places.

Seeing him at the door, shocked that he looked like a walking skeleton, convinced that Stevan's ghost had returned, Natalia crossed herself and whispered:

“Go back to where you came from, miserable soul! May you have eternal peace and tranquility!” Turning to ice, she ran and lighted the icon lamp, ordered the children to pray to God to save Stevan’s soul, then slammed the door in her husband’s face and burst into tears.

“What’s wrong, Mother?” said Veta, self-possessed, opening the door and letting her father inside. “What soul are you talking about? Can’t you see that Father has come back?” Holding him by the elbow, Veta led her father to a chair and put a bottle of liquor on the table.

Natalia looked at them in wonder, unable to believe that this wretched, starving creature in rags was her husband and not someone raised from the dead. Perhaps that was why, in answer to Stevan’s question about his father’s whereabouts, she just raised her hand to the sky and said:

“Up there! Where else would he be?”

For a moment Stevan thought he was dealing with a crazy woman, so he sat down and started to drink. He discovered that along with the one soul he did not know how to handle, there were two others, perfidious and contradictory, ready at the same time to sin and repent. Without a word, Veta sat on the other side of the table and looked at him with wide-open eyes, pale and pensive. Then she got up, went to the kitchen, cut some bread and cheese, and set a plate in front of her father. Stevan ate and drank the whole night

long. During that time, Veta sat and watched him eat and drink, until he started talking to his third soul.

* * *

That winter was the worst and coldest of any that Karanovo remembered.

Birds froze in the air and fell on treetops and rooftops with a dull thud, the same that Danilo would hear later when he saw the Atherton suicides slide down his window.

Danilo did not remember that second winter of war in Karanovo, but he remembered the story of the camps in Germany where they made soap out of the prisoners.

“Why do they need so much soap?” said Veta with a loud laugh when she heard the story from a girlfriend.

“*That* is not funny, Veta!” said Natalia, interrupting her. “And stories like that are not for everyone’s ears...” She turned her eyes to Little Rusty, not knowing that he had already heard them, just as he had heard his father’s comment that it was impossible to turn all of Europe into a soap factory! That, as impossible!

* * *

Every memory is the present...

Novalis

And yet! It so happened that the impossible became possible...

They were starving in the Aratsky house. Its inhabitants were freezing in that terrible, icy winter. In the little attic room, Stevan felt more and more vulnerable. He could hear Hans Miller in his sleep, that soldier whose lustful eyes froze Veta to the core, and felt his pacing at the back of his head. Seven forward. Seven back. And then again!

Those steps marked the days, weeks and months, and time flowed, autumn turned to winter, winter to spring and summer. Hidden in the house, one day Stevan decided to give his poor soles a little rest and forget the torment of being on the run: he bathed,

changed clothes and resolved to go to the Courthouse, convinced that his every move would be followed by the women who had crowded in to watch all his trials, be they for murder or smuggling tobacco from Herzegovina.

Suddenly he was stopped at the door by Natalia's warning voice:

"If I were you, I wouldn't rush to show my face to the world!" she whispered. He started and came back, not understanding what she wanted to say. Had someone been looking for him?

"Did anyone ask after me?" he mumbled.

"Do you mean: did any of the women ask?" Natalia replied, continuing to wash the dishes. "No! It was the fathers, brothers, mothers, fiancées and wives of the soldiers who went to war with you who came, asking what happened to their sons, brothers, fiancés, husbands. After so many months they should have received a letter, a message. Reports about firing squads, survivors, escapees and wounded were received long ago from prisoners in the companies of other officers. But nothing was heard about Stevan Aratsky's company."

Why had only he come back?

* * *

Hidden in that sentence was a poisonous tangle of questions that would be wrapped around Stevan Aratsky's name and the names of his children until he died and even after his death. The echo of quiet contempt in Natalia's voice escaped Stevan's notice at first. Focused on whether the Court was working, he passed over his wife's reproach in silence. When all was said and done, he was not just a reserve captain, but a judge as well, and murderers, cheats, robbers popped up all the time, even when the country was occupied. His job was to judge by the law, and according to his own instincts, and they had never betrayed him.

When he sat at the judge's bench, the courtroom would be filled with those who followed all his trials.

"With women?" Natalia laughed as she put a head of cabbage on the table.

"Them too!" Stevan choked, realizing his mistake. "Why should it be any different now?" he continued, although he saw at once that he should have kept his mouth shut.

“Because there’s a war on! Because they’re chasing you now...” Natalia lowered her voice and slowly, barely audibly, reminded him of the forgotten Aratsky Farm on the edge of a marsh overgrown with reeds. “The sooner you realize that and the sooner we leave here the better. Warmer, brighter days are coming, the curfew lasts from six in the morning to six in the evening...” He concluded by her words that they should take advantage of a moment of Hans Miller’s inattention, sneak out of the house and go to the Farm. He knew that’s what would happen. The servants had left the Farm long ago, only a feeble-minded lad and an old man were left, but it was just as possible that they were dead and the Farm had become a ruins with their ghosts wandering around, along with the wild ducks.

Horrified, Stevan Aratsky raised his head and admonished his wife that he was a judge.

“My job is to judge and not chase wild ducks and vampires around a marsh...”

“You are a captain too!” said Natalia, interrupting Stevan’s humiliating excuses where self-pity mixed with belated defiance. “Your job was to fight, and since what had happened, the wisest thing would be to stay in hiding until the war is over and Karanovo forgets that you were the only one of them all to come back. This war won’t last forever...” she added, trying to ease his fear of solitude on the Farm.

“And what about the fact that I will be buried alive there?” said Stevan, smashing a glass on the table, managing to cut his hand but not to shock Natalia.

“Get the most essential things ready. We’ll take off before dawn!” said Natalia calmly, as though offering him a cup of coffee. She bandaged his cut hand and started packing her own, Veta’s and Danilo’s things, leaving Petar to choose by himself what he would take.

Then silence arose in the house and only the steps of the German guard under the window were heard: seven forward, seven back, and then again... Everything around them began to change and turn lighter. Spring entered Karanovo triumphantly – as though there were no steps, as though there was no war...

* * *

To her dying breath, Veta would not be able to forget the expression on her father’s face when he agreed to Natalia’s decision, but asked that they postpone their

departure for a while until he packed some things that would help him fill the days of solitude and waiting on the Farm. She was surprised at her father's request that they take along the stamp collection and set of ivory and ebony chess pieces, Petrana's present to her son from Vienna or Budapest. "Who will you play chess with on the Farm?" she wanted to ask, but stopped herself in time, picked up the photograph albums and put them in her rucksack along with several books.

When everything was ready, Natalia asked Veta's unspoken question: who would Stevan play chess with on the Farm? Wild ducks, frogs, turtles?

"Maybe with them too!" said Stevan, smiling at Veta hastened her preparations for departure.

So the long-forgotten stamp album reached the Farm in the marsh. Some distant Aratsky ancestor had started collecting stamps and spent an entire fortune on them, and Luka Aratsky had supplemented the album with rare specimens that he found and bought over the years in the most unbelievable places.

The stories about those stamps from Japan, Mauritius, Australia, India, China, Russia, Iceland and Costa Rica thrilled all the Aratskys, from the oldest to the youngest, introducing them to the world of plants and animals from far across the seas, but also historical slip-ups: some ruler would have just enough time to issue a stamp with his picture and then a new ruler, in a new war, took his place on the throne and on the postage stamps, while he, like all those before him, convinced of the perpetuity of his rule, coat of arms, power, and long and serene life.

The Aratsky family postage stamp albums, bound in velvet, ivory and silk, held a place of honor on a special shelf, surrounded by silence and the cryptic whispering of the adults, which is why Danilo, from the moment he took his first step, held them in awe, considered them mysterious and exceptional, particularly since none of the Aratsky children were allowed to touch them without permission from the adults.

* * *

In the gray light of a New York hotel, Danilo remembered the first stamps he saw when he was four or five years old. Probably four, and maybe even three and a half, because his parents were already talking about war like a monster from a terrible dream, no one and nothing could stop it. Small European states were falling one after the other,

although war still had not reached Karanovo. He knew that because he had been sitting very close to Luka Aratsky when he opened the stamp collection for the first time and looked at a stamp with the picture of a dwarf that came from some Scandinavian country. Norway? Iceland? Maybe Denmark? He could not remember.

“What’s this” he asked his grandfather, nestling against his knee, bewildered by the old man’s patience as he transferred the stamps from one album to another, using some tool from his doctor’s office.

“A dwarf!” replied Dr. Luka Aratsky succinctly, not realizing that a space would open in his grandson’s soul and creatures would enter it that neither Natalia Aratsky’s common sense nor Danilo’s later experiences would be able to remove. And this despite the adults’ reservations that creatures such as dwarfs, fairies, witches, elves, angels and devils even exist.

“How can something that doesn’t exist be on a stamp?” mumbled Natalia’s redhead little boy in the darkness, in his little bed next to Luka Aratsky’s bed. “If all those strange flowers exist that can’t be found in Karanovo, and all those strange animals from the other side of the world, then there are dwarfs imprisoned in a garden where wild roses grow.”

Parallel worlds, impossible as well as real, took root in the boy, became part of him, aided by Luka Aratsky’s patient explanation that the life we live is only *one* of various forms of life that exist on earth, and not the best one.

The orchid on the stamp of some South American country dazzled Danilo’s confused heart even more, not only because of the name that sounded different from that of any other flower he knew, but also because of Grandfather’s passing remark that the marvelous flower was actually a treacherous trap for butterflies and gnats that it lured with its fragrance and shape, and then gobbled them up so that nothing was left of them except the odor of rot and decay.

* * *

You enter yourself.

The world connects and closes like a ring.

Octavio Paz

The day that Marta accused him, even before the four unfortunate women agreed to let someone sign the reports for them, Danilo smelled the odor of the carnivorous orchid in her breath and realized he was lost. In the rapid-fire “production of enemies” those years, people disappeared faster than the dew. Fifty-four types of “enemies of the people” had been enumerated in a newspaper column barely larger than a footnote, and this finally opened his eyes. So the story that it was enough to find two or three witnesses for the “darkness to swallow up the enemy” was not just cock-and-bull!

And there were four signed reports against him. Inspector Toma Bambur would have no trouble finding a few more witnesses if Rašeta needed them. Hadn’t Danilo Aratsky been surrounded by suspicious characters since a young age, hadn’t he refused to listen to the most well-intentioned warnings? He had continued to write to Aaron Levi when the man had already been condemned in some way, in abstentia, for illegally crossing the border...

Aaron Levi? Where was Aaron Levi now? The former Little Rusty had received his last letter from Regensburg, before he moved to Hamburg.

In Regensburg Aaron had managed to find employment in a hospital that was like a nursing home for so-called “displaced persons”. If Danilo decided to come, he would certainly find him a job. Germany, like half of Europe, was full of lunatics and German doctors were reluctant to accept work in institutions such as the Regensburg Krankenhaus. The person who would deliver the letter was not a “displaced person” but a shipper on the Danube inland industry, reliable. He could send his answer back with him.

What answer? How many years had passed since the day Aaron said, “To hell with it all,” and left, just like hundreds of thousands of others, for a better salary or because of someone like Rašeta? Danilo could not remember, just as he could not remember whether he sent an answer to Aaron’s Regensburg letter with the shipper...

Well, now that the shadow of death was hanging over him, now he remembered Aaron and was happy to have withstood Marta’s curiosity and not answered her questions. Who was Aaron Levi and where was he? How long had he known him? When had they become friends?

“He was in the Orphanage with me, then at the university. I don’t know what happened to him after that,” he had said without much ado.

“Your sort, the Aratsky sort, has friends just like you, scattered throughout the world...” she had said and looked at him scornfully. “A family like yours couldn’t possibly give rise to people who would love this country more than themselves...”

He could not tell whether she was referring to Stevan or Petar by that. In her opinion, both were equally suspicious, equally dangerous and equally hostile toward everything that was sacred to her and her family. Shining vistas of socialistic heaven opened effortlessly before her. Danilo Aratsky did not detect them in even the most distant future. But what he did see was Marta’s face with its increasingly treacherous, vengeful smile, while her mouth opened only to eject a stream of abomination that stung him in the face – he heard the sound of her voice but did not understand the meaning of her words.

Defeated, one night he packed the essentials, the photograph and stamp albums, his diploma and Damian’s white rabbit, kissed his sleeping child and ran into the night, not knowing where he was going or where he would stop. The street he took down to the train station was called *Balkanska Street*. That was the same street he had taken to Belgrade, to study, pulling a suitcase with clothes, albums and books uphill on *Balkanska Street*.

The little park in front of the station had smelled of linden trees, but without knowing why, the odor of rot and decay had accompanied Danilo the whole way. He had the dim feeling that this time there would be no going back. And yet he still hoped that before the train reached Sežana, he would find the strength to jump off the Athens-Belgrade-Munich train, go back to Belgrade and untangle the deadly web that had been woven around him in recent years, forcing him into the absurd situation of consenting to everything for the sake of peace.

* * *

Many years later, in a foreign country, a stranger to himself, surrounded by only his dead, Danilo Aratsky whispered, “Well, did you find it? That peace...” vaguely convinced that everything was not lost for all time or forgotten. He was remembered by the people he encountered, the city streets he walked, the beds he slept in, the women he met along the way.

But, he remembered them too. He detected his ancestor's habits in his own habits, discovered their fears in his own fears, the features of their faces on his own face.

Through the *Karanovo Chronicles* he tried to find out what he had inside him from Toma the Brigand, Simeon the Meek, Mihailo, who was born in a golden placenta and increased the Aratsky wealth by unbelievable proportions, Dr. Luka Aratsky, who was interested in neither glory nor wealth, just like Stevan, Luka's son and Danilo's father, a good-looking gambler whose fate had been determined by the stars. And then going back down the Aratsky family tree to that first one from Zakarpattia, who fell asleep in deep, dark forests and awoke on the banks where the Danube and Tisa joined together. He built a house there that no longer existed and never would again unless some new Aratsky was found to create a new home for the Aratskys.

And then, here he was, alone with everything he remembered thanks to the stories of the Karanovo survivors, family photographs, letters found in the ruins when, near the end of the war, Karanovo ceased to exist, when the children found in the cellars and attics were taken to an orphanage, located on the banks of a marsh, in Jasenak...

These were just a lot of crumbs that built his life, the life of every person on earth, in which the most nonsensical things could play a key role, rescue someone from their fate or change it, even twenty years later.

* * *

“All you need is the stamp album and chess set and everything will be all right...” From the other side of the world, from the other side of life, Natalia's remark to Stevan came fluttering to Danilo's ear.

And yet! Heading to the Farm in the marsh with the magnificent chess set and rare postage stamp albums, Stevan Aratsky had no idea that these albums would be what saved him and his redhead son, born so the Aratskys could keep existing through him, from the nightmares and madness, driving out the croaking frogs and buzzing mosquitoes. Thanks to the chess set and stamps, the days seemed less lonely and the nights less black for Stevan, Veta and Danilo. But the true meaning and value of some stamps would only be revealed much later when Danilo sold the “Blue Mauritius” to an avid American collector of rare specimens and provided a roof over his head, first in America and then in Belgrade.

* * *

Danilo could not remember when he first saw the Farm in the marsh, surrounded by reeds, blazing in the sunset. He wasn't even certain if it had been sunset or sunrise; he remembered the sullen expression on his father's face, the twins' elation when the frogs started croaking and Veta preoccupied with organizing the things they had brought.

The Farm seemed just the same to Stevan as when Grandfather Mihailo brought him the first time to see the wild ducks, roe deer and greenish little marsh turtles. Only the servants were not there to greet them with salt and broken bread, or the livestock that used to wander freely about the marsh. Because as soon as the war started, the husband and wife who took care of the Farm, along with a half-crazy lad and old man left over from who knew when, had gathered the livestock and everything else they could and disappeared. They left crazy Pantelia on the Farm, his beard already down to his waist, and the old man who was only fit to sit on a stool in front of the house and watch the reeds and frogs.

* * *

“Life here will be impossible!” grumbled Stevan Aratsky as he entered the abandoned, half-demolished house. Then he remembered that life was possible even in train cars full of shit and corpses, so he fell silent.

Natalia uttered not a word. She looked around, wiped the scraps of food off the table and ordered the lad to pick up a broom and clean the room and kitchen, because except for a little detached room, a cellar and attic, there were no other quarters. When the water rose, frogs and water snakes moved into the cellar. Pigeons had already taken roost in the attic. And they multiplied so rapidly that not even the lad managed to decrease their number by using their tiny bodies for some sort of pigeon stew.

What worried Natalia was not the cellar with frogs and water snakes, but the roof where storks had built nests. Perhaps the same ones that Danilo had marveled at in Karanovo. Covered with reeds and houseleek, the roof was in better shape than Natalia had thought at first glance. It would not need repairs very soon. Natalia filled a bucket with water and entered the house. The lad could not understand that he was supposed to wash the floor with that water.

“Then you explain it to him!” said Natalia to the old man, who just shrugged his shoulders. She was not sure whether he could hear – he might just see her mouth moving. He was sitting on a stool and waiting for death to take him away, as it took away all the creatures in the marsh.

Natalia could not rely on Stevan Aratsky. She got down on her knees and dipped a brush into some powder and started scrubbing the hard oak boards until they regained the color and shine they had when the Farm was created, built on the very edge of the marsh where there weren’t even fishing cabins.

Out of breath and wet, before dark she managed to put the scattered dishes in order and peered into the cellar where nothing could be done. The spring floods had left the cellar full of water with zigzagging tadpoles and water snakes. When one swam up almost to Natalia’s feet, Stevan thought she would scream and jump away like any other woman. But Natalia just moved calmly to the side and let the snake ripple out into the marsh.

“Why didn’t you kill off that vermin?” Stevan shouted at the lad with such disgust in his voice that Natalia shuddered.

The feeble-minded lad looked at him and shrugged his shoulders, saying that frogs and snakes and everything else in the marsh were God’s creatures and God was everywhere. His eye was all-seeing. He was all-knowing. When old man Dojčin had his wits about him, he had said that between humans and beasts of prey there was one single difference: beasts of prey killed when they had to, humans did all the time. Crazy Pantelia laughed out loud and pointed to the old man.

“Now he can’t hear a thing. You can say what ever you want. You can croak or bellow like mating deer, he won’t hear you. Not because there’s something wrong with his ears, but because people’s voices mean nothing to him. And why should they?”

“Why should they?” said Natalia with a start. “Then whose voices mean something?”

“The Angels’!” The bearded lunatic licked his lips and laughed even louder. “Last fall the old man started hearing angels singing in the wind howling through the reeds...”

“And the devils? What about them?” said Natalia with a quiet laugh. “Doesn’t he hear them?”

Pantelia's answer that a person hears what he wants to hear almost stunned Natalia. Her mother, Simka Galičanka, had heard moles rooting under the ground. Stevan said that he heard the numerous souls inside him quarreling and making up. Even she, Natalia, seemed to have heard Petrana when she was in Vienna or Paris. Why shouldn't old Dojčin hear angels? Pantelia's answer seemed more reasonable than her question, so she bowed her head in shame.

"All right!" she said. "What do you eat?"

"Whatever we can!" mumbled the lad.

Since his reply included everything and nothing, Natalia fell silent again. Stevan certainly would not be staying at the Farm forever. She was more troubled by Petar's mysterious silence, sudden departures, the revolver she had not seen before, the pamphlets and books he kept in the house that were punished by firing squad. She could not get the orders, plastered all over Karanovo, out of her head day or night.

Whoever endangers the life of a German citizen in any way – WILL BE EXECUTED!

Whoever is found in possession of prohibited weapons – WILL BE EXECUTED!

Saboteurs and black marketeers – WILL BE EXECUTED!

Whoever is found in possession of prohibited books and pamphlets – WILL BE EXECUTED!

Whoever is found on the street after curfew – WILL BE EXECUTED!

"What does it mean to 'be executed'?" asked Little Rusty, hearing the list of forbidden things. Did that list include the books that Petar had hidden behind the beam in the attic and under his father's bed? He wanted to ask, but checked his curiosity when his mother answered his question by telling him not to ask foolish questions. Petar kept quiet this time too. Whether it was because Stevan had abandoned his soldiers to their fate or Luka Aratsky had vanished in smoke and flames, Veta could not tell.

* * *

Luka Aratsky's garden flourished with roses and dahlias. Before the war started, Little Rusty would toddle between them, like going through an enchanted forest, dazzled

by the fragrance of violets and verbenas, but also the tiny blue flower that Luka Aratsky had also managed to grow around the Farm among the reeds.

Had his soul come back hidden in that tiny blue strong-scented flower? Or, transformed into a small white egret, was it following him while golden-eyed marsh fairies flew out of the giant water lilies? Did he know that his redheaded grandson would remember his whole life long how Luka Aratsky had flown into the sky in a deafening roar and flames?

* * *

Afterward it was said around Karanovo that Dr. Luka Aratsky's gray hair had fluttered in the wind. But Natalia and Danilo knew that was not true. Luka Aratsky had thick, gray hair, but cut very short. If anything was fluttering in Karanovo right then, it was the white flags raised as a sign of surrender.

In two days of neither war nor peace, when the Germans left Karanovo only to come back three days later, *a legend was already growing around Luka Aratsky*: some had seen a grenade in the hand of the warrior who hated wars; others saw Archangel Michael, standing behind Luka Aratsky, as he raised a flaming sword and transformed the tank and those inside it into an incandescent ball, which bewildered the Germans and drove them out of Karanovo for several days.

The aureole that the citizens of Karanovo saw glowing around the old man's head as he rose into the sky was so real for the peasants in the area that they decided to build a church over his grave to prevail upon Luka Aratsky's soul to reside there and help them after death, just as he had when alive, quietly, without a lot of words.

Even many years later, Danilo Aratsky never found out whether the peasants had built that church. But there was a note in the *Karanovo Chronicles* that saints do not need a church built for them. "Even without a church, they live on in people and in their works, in the stories that are remembered and passed down orally or in writing!"

* * *

One such story made Danilo Aratsky laugh so hard he cried. He found it in the *Karanovo Chronicles*, discovering that as far as beggars were concerned, he and Luka Aratsky were the same! They were infuriated when beggars pleaded, confirming the humiliating fact that some had more than they needed and others did not have enough

even to buy bread. According to the *Karanovo Chronicles*, one hot summer day Luka figured out how to help without demeaning either the beggar or himself.

That sultry July day, said the *Karanovo Chronicles*, only two people were awake: Dr. Luka Aratsky, leaning on a cane with a lion's head handle, and a glazier loaded down with tools and glass. The former had received an urgent call and was headed to see a patient who was on his deathbed. The latter, crushed by the heat, was urging the citizens to have him replace their broken windows – in three days he had not earned a penny, for three days his children had gone hungry.

“Are you that bad a glazier?” smiled Dr. Aratsky. “You mean there isn’t a single broken window in Karanovo?”

“No, sir, there isn’t!” said the glazier. Bewildered and humbled before this old man wearing a light summer suit, the beggar pulled his head into his shoulders and grumbled that no one in this damned world seemed to break windows or doors, no one gave him a chance to work... earn at least enough for bread...

“You’ll earn it!”

The *Chronicles* wrote that Luka Aratsky then stopped in front of the house with the most windows in Karanovo, the Aratsky house, raised his cane with the silver lion’s head and broke window panes, one after the other. The tinkling glass woke not only Petrana but half of Karanovo, dazed by the heat and sound sleep. Windows were opened one after the other and Karanovo heard Petrana, the beautufl, ask her husband if he had lost his mind, what was he doing?

“I’m helping a man feed his children, go back to sleep!”

Then, as though negotiating a deal, he asked the glazier how much it would cost to replace the panes and how many days he would need to put things back the way they were. The poor man uttered some paltry sum, saying it would take him two or three days to finish the job.

“Then double that amount!” said Luka Aratsky. He broke the rest of the windows and gave the man double the amount of the estimated damage.

The glazier’s whistling around the Aratsky house and the quiet whispers that Dr. Aratsky had lost his mind lasted five days. Who in their right mind would break all the windows on his own house so some fool could earn a bit of money?

And finally, what normal person would tell the richest landowner in Bačka not to waste his money: he had an illness that no one could cure.

“I’ll turn over half my estate to you, Doctor!” The servants passed on the sick man’s offer to the doctor and Dr. Luka Aratsky’s refusal to take the money because it was not possible to cure him.

“All that’s left will take place between you and God. Call the priest!” wrote the chronicler in the *Karanovo Chronicles*, adding that the doctor “wiped the sweat, perhaps tears, from the dying man’s face. Then he gave him medicine to ease the pain and facilitate crossing the threshold to the other world, said goodbye to the lady of the house and left, refusing compensation for the medicine and his trouble.”

The story of Dr. Luka Aratsky’s deeds reached Petrana even before he got home.

“Is it true?” she greeted him, swearing like a trooper, convinced that she really was dealing with a lunatic. In reply to his quiet yes, it’s true, she said as much to him, wondering why she had borne the fool a son, because he certainly would not be better than his father, oh woe! Madness is like measles! “Stevan will break out with it too!” Her words stung him in the face. “It will poison him and his children as long as Aratskys are born... Only a fool would refuse such wealth... something even worse than a fool.”

Something she could not find the right word to describe.

There was so much anger and scorn in Petrana’s voice that Luka Aratsky did not have the strength to say one single word. That night he got drunk, for the first and only time in his life.

* * *

*We are here one morn,
gone the next.
We are the ties that connect
the dead to the unborn...*

Stevan Raičković

Moving memories in his head like chess pieces, Danilo Aratsky remembered Marta’s face when she learned that her husband had turned down a socially-owned apartment to the benefit of some scrofulous orderly with six children. They had been

waiting for that apartment for years, and for years Danilo had justified himself, saying that the one room they were in was enough for them until Damian grew up.

“What now? Does Danilo Aratsky think that someone will turn down an apartment to his benefit? Hand it to him on a silver plate? Good Lord, what a lunatic! What a fool!” said Marta, repeating Petrana’s words retained in the *Karanovo Chronicles*. Then, after six hours of scolding, tears and sighs, she stopped, concluding that her husband was not a doctor who treated lunatics, but an unmitigated lunatic himself, and this fact would come out one day. You could not hide lunacy forever under a mask of disinterest in money and climbing up the social ladder.

Petrana’s wrath pouring down on Luka Aratsky when he refused the wealthiest man in Bačka’s offer suddenly crossed Danilo’s mind and he laughed out loud.

“Well, the lunacy has finally erupted!” said Marta, leaving the room and slamming the door after her, adding, “Pray God that’s the end of it...”

But it was not. At length, in the darkness, malevolence grew into intolerance and hatred for everyone and everything that was different in any way. Danilo realized it more and more: the eye of God was all-seeing, but sometimes it closed for a while, and darkness smothered the sparks of clemency and compassion for those that fate had treated unmercifully, taking away at birth their sight, hearing, or strength to resist those who were stronger and ruthless. There was no sense in explaining that to Marta or to Petrana – her husband had turned down all the honors and officer insignia, just as Danilo had the apartment and career advances.

“Only a lunatic could do that!” they had both said. Except that afterward Petrana went to Vienna and then Paris, leaving an untouched glass of wine and a yellow rose on the table.

She never revealed the secret of the yellow rose to anyone, convinced that every living being has the right to a secret; even if they did not understand it, they kept it tenaciously, conscious of the fact that it guided not only their actions but their fate.

What was Marta’s secret and how she managed to turn his life completely around the very first time they met was something Dr. Danilo Aratsky never figured out, even though at the very beginning of their relationship he sensed the flash of some inner

coldness that grew into fear, binding him with invisible strings to that woman of incomprehensible doggedness and strength.

Petrana's destructive actions were justified by her unearthly beauty. What justified Marta's contempt for everyone who did not belong to her victorious caste? Her belonging to that caste? Perhaps.

* * *

In the room on 17th floor of the New York hotel lighted by crossing cascades of light, Danilo Aratsky seemed to see his wife again, her eyes rigid in sudden anger, her mouth puffy from crying, her strong and ugly hands.

After the fierce quarrel about the apartment, he noted little sparks of contempt in her eyes and realized that he had been discarded, that he no longer had any place in Marta's bed or in Belgrade, or in Serbia. Hadn't he been foolhardy enough with that eardrum and those four poor crazy women, she asked; to top it all off, did he have to deprive his only son of a roof over his head?

He did not know what to reply. All those from her circle, who came out of the war as winners, had soon forgotten the story about equality and provided their offspring with a comfortable life. Why hadn't his Aratskys done that for him, for her and their child?

"Because they are no longer! They are just voices in the wind. Nothing!" he had snapped back after some stupid argument, not wanting to explain anything. Finally, what was there to explain? That he couldn't buy an apartment with his salary? That a sick man with six children was more in need of an apartment? What else? Breakup was looming on the horizon, but he had not seen it. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to? Or had he wanted to keep only memories from the first months of their life together: she, winded from running under Kalemegdan fortress, he, happy that he finished medical school and fulfilled his famous grandfather's wish for the lineage of doctors and healers to continue in the Aratsky clan... but also his need to heal.

Now they were trying to take that away from him.

"And you support their efforts..." he had mustered the strength to tell her on the last day of their marriage. "Why?"

"Because you don't understand anything. You're the one undermining yourself with 'eardrums' and all the rest. If three reputable psychiatrists signed that N. M. was

mentally ill, where did you find the courage to announce that the man wasn't crazy but drunk?" No, her son would not bear the stigma of shame. Nor would she continue living with a man who was capable of assaulting someone's dignity!

"Here you are! Here you are!" she said, throwing copies of the reports in his face. "It wasn't just one poor woman who accused you, but *four*! Have you ever heard anything like it?" she said, shouting and crying by turns. "Has anyone?"

"And you believe it?" he said, rebelling for the first time in their life together. "Do you think a man could do that in less than 30 minutes? In a room that people entered all the time? Without one of them screaming?"

"Well, they didn't! Your brother Petar must have been thinking like you and see where he ended up. It couldn't have been any other way. There are people you can trust and there are people who have to be removed as soon as possible, whatever it costs ..." Marta stopped for a moment and anger erupted inside Danilo.

"So I had to be removed too, whatever it cost?" he thought, "like that poor soul who swore at the head of state..." Did that mean she knew more about Petar than she wanted to say? Removed. Not accused, not condemned, not imprisoned, but removed... she did not want Damian to take that path one day, like his uncle... Rubbish! The war ended long ago, the one with the Germans and the internecine ones. Who was foolish enough to go to war? And yet!

Danilo Aratsky felt a shudder go through his entire body and his ears rang with the terrified voice of Simka Galičanka, his maternal grandmother, whose every word came true sooner or later. *All the Aratskys that are still living, and some who are yet to be born, will go through several wars, until only three of them are left.* What three? Was Damian condemned to go through the horrors that all the Aratskys had gone through from generation to generation? If he survived? If his young, smooth-skinned face was not gnawed clean by dogs and rats in some cornfield?

Danilo Aratsky stared into Marta's wide-open, wild eyes. She had betrayed him. Disowned him. Let him sink to please her father, who sent those like Petar to the rocky hell of Goli Otok Concentration camp, until they renounced themselves or ended up under a heap of rocks, without a judge or judgment, without any written trace of their guilt, if there was any guilt. Or maybe there was only punishment?

What did Marta know about Petar? And why had she let him search for his missing brother for years? He had found no trace of him either awake or asleep, which gave rise to the secret hope that Petar was still alive. If Petar was dead, he would be following Danilo like the others, reminding him of the Farm in the marsh and the day they parted in Jasenak, never to meet again. Marta must know where he was and what happened to him. But it would do no good to ask. She would not say. For her, and for her father, there was no middle ground: someone was either with them or against them! And only those who had been cleared, and cleared on a high level, could be with them, those who were not against anything and took no one under their protection. The ideologically correct.

“And you’re not one! And you have no place among them!” he whispered to himself. “But Damian’s place is not among them either...” A pain stronger than a pin prick pierced Danilo’s heart. What if Damian rejected him? What if he believed that Danilo was not his father, as Marta claimed when in a rage, not convincing anyone because the boy had red hair, like none of her relatives. She could not deny that, even in the most heated argument. The red hair on Damian’s head was Danilo’s gift. Some distant, unknown Aratsky had given Danilo that gift and Danilo had given it to Damian.

What might turn up if he went down the family tree to the dark forests of Zakarpattia? If he investigated the paths and inclinations of all those who, like the first Aratskys, wandered those paths, warring, looting and raping, from the Celts, Huns, Turks and Slavs to forgotten forefathers, both maternal and paternal. What would he find in their lives and inclinations, what would he fail to find? Secret criminals or saints? What?

In his long line of ancestors, would he find at least one without mixed blood coursing through their veins? He was not even sure that he had no concealed Avar or Jewish blood. Petrana had been Jewish on her mother’s side. Sabra. Who knows what Toma or Mihailo were? He laughed at Marta’s boasting that pure Slavic blood coursed through her veins. Nonsense! All she had to do was look in the mirror just once to see the high cheekbones and slanted eyes of the Mongols who thundered across the Pannonian Plain long ago.

What he had received and from whom – he could not tell.

He had certainly received from Simka Galičanka, his maternal grandmother, the ability to find comforting words for a patient that everyone else had abandoned. But who had been prone to tugging their hair and biting their nails when upset or frightened? Who had given him his fear of water? Whose was the flaming hair on his head? Whose was the pettiness and inability to resist tyrannical Marta's intention if she felt the sudden urge to drive him underground, proclaim him a monster and weakling ready to abandon everything that made life worth living – which she had finally succeeded in doing...

Danilo's one true fear was that his son might reject him one day, although he felt at the bottom of his heart that no one could break the blood ties between them: *the eye of God is all-seeing*, and His Light shines on the souls of the sinners and the souls of the righteous... *unless it had closed from all the horror it saw and the world was slowly sinking into darkness.*

With the determination of Natalia Aratsky, Danilo rejected this darkness around him and inside him, and did not allow it to defeat him. There was always a way out; he remembered the ancient Hasidic idea, it had to exist.

* * *

As the stars faded in the sky, dissolving in the reflected light wandering over from the East River, the ghosts of the Aratskys faded as well, doggedly trying to get close to him. Down below, New York howled like an insatiable beast, and the unknown woman in the bed groaned as she let off waves of heat.

Had his life been a dream? Danilo Aratsky suddenly felt his mouth go dry as his body poured with sweat, like the night he had gone down Balkanska Street and instead of blossoming lindens smelled the carnivorous orchid, Marta's odor; it had not left him as he fled from her, from the horror of Guberevac, from himself, sensing that it was impossible to escape.

Marta's smell followed him along with the memory of the women in black from the very beginning of the Second World War, on a long-ago night when they kept vigil over the earthly remains of Luka Aratsky by candlelight, convinced they were safeguarding the relics of a saint. Curled up in the farthest corner of the room, Danilo had watched their shadows swaying on the wall and overheard his mother whisper: "Lord, our God, thou who art all-seeing and all-knowing, receive thy servant Luka Aratsky and take

him to thy heavenly place, for he lived honorably and never hurt a fly..." She stopped for a moment, confused by Veta's voice and her remark that God could not be fooled.

"Did you forget that Grandfather blew up a tank, tank crew and himself a few hours ago, and maybe even a fly along the way..." Veta suddenly started laughing, astonished at people's short memory, and then slowly and solemnly covered the mirror with a black scarf so that the soul of the departed, should it return home, would not be frightened.

Neither Natalia nor Veta doubted that Luka Aratsky would return. The souls of the dead did not leave their earthly residence for forty days. Why would Luka Aratsky be any different?

Natalia Aratsky lighted several more candles then started to pray, paying no attention to the current of air that twisted the flames and made frightful shadows of the women in black.

Petrified with fear, Little Rusty waited to see which one of them would turn into a witch and fly out the window. The only thing that stopped him from screaming in terror was shame and Natalia's drowsy murmuring that commended the soul of Luka Aratsky to the angels in heaven; she was determined to bury what was left of her father-in-law in the garden among the roses and verbenas.

The only thing that stopped her from doing it was the priest's fierce resistance.

"The place of a Christian soul is in a cemetery!" said the priest and the horde of women in black repeated his words. Natalia agreed with them and was seen crying for the first time in her life as she leaned on Veta, whose green eyes sparkled like ice on a lake, emphasizing the transparent beauty of her skin and hair that was blacker than a raven's wing.

At that moment, like a flash of lightning, Natalia Aratsky perceived her daughter's beauty and was filled with fear. "Petrana is inside her," she thought, but dismissed the idea immediately: at first glance, Veta did look like Petrana, not only her face, something unearthly in her eyes and smile, but the way she walked. Nevertheless, Veta *was not* Petrana. Her withdrawn, solitary soul had been born and raised together with Petar who, many years later, like the mythical Sisyphus, would carry rocks from one

pile to another on a rocky Adriatic island that did not even have a name until the camp inmates called it Goli Otok.

Although that story had never been confirmed.

The returnees who survived the horrors of Goli Otok mentioned someone named Petar, but by all judgments it was not Petar Aratsky. The man was not missing his right leg and was not tall and blond. There was a place called “Petar’s Hole” that became legendary – but it could not be linked to Danilo’s missing brother.

Nevertheless, Danilo believed that he would find him, just as Petar long ago had found him in the Home for War Orphans in Jasenak. When he grew up, he first started making inquiries and then followed the paths that Petar, according to the stories, had walked long ago.

But the years passed and there was no sign of Petar. Danilo combed through all available lists of the accused, indicted and condemned in all the prisons in Yugoslavia and Europe, to no avail. He made the rounds of the cemeteries and morgues, to no avail. He searched through asylums for the mentally disturbed, displaced persons and exiled, to no avail. When he finished one round he started another: he addressed the Red Cross and institutions that kept records of the dead and missing, trying to relieve the consequences of war. But he did not find him anywhere and still remained convinced that a human being could not disappear just like that. All the dead and living exist somewhere, on some list; you just needed to be patient. In Petar’s case, however, patience did no good, Petar was not among the living or the dead.

“You’ve been looking in the wrong places!” he said, reproaching himself, and decided to go to Goli Otok- concentracion camp, even if it meant locking horns with the devil.

Nevertheless, quite a lot of time had to pass before he stepped onto the rocky shores of Goli Otok concentracion camp. Many things had to change and he himself had to change, driven by the need to find his missing brother, before he went to that rocky hell whose name the inmates did not have the courage to pronounce. Yes, Petar Crnogorac had been on Goli Otok, and his bravery and suffering had been woven into legend. But that Petar could not have been the Petar he was looking for. That Petar had a name and origin, and the hole he had been thrown into.

Danilo had lost Petar once again.

Buffeted by the icy breath of a northeaster from the foot of Mt. Velebit, Danilo Aratsky barely mustered the strength to look at the rocky wasteland around him. Rocks sprouted out of the entrails of the earth as far as the eye could see, like dragon's teeth, with tufts of sharp, dry grass on them here and there. Birds could be heard rustling in the bushes and lizards scuttled from rock to rock. But there was not a single human voice. Only the waves beating against the shore and a sound like a howl.

A gust of wind almost blew Danilo into the sea, so he pulled himself together and asked his escort to help him get into the boat. Then, wrapped in a thick rubber raincoat, he signaled to the sailor to take him as quickly and as far as possible from this hell where every stone, even after so many years, reeked of death.

The stories of Petar's time on Goli Otok had just been talk. He knew that now. Petar had not been on Goli Otok, although for a moment Danilo seemed to feel his brother's breath in the smell of salt and sage. Unless he was just rejecting the possibility that a man's life could disappear like mist over the sea, and that Petar had entered oblivion, nonexistence.

* * *

“No, it is not certain that we lived!
Our days passed like clouds, like smoke,
Now we are only ships fleeing the shore,
Sparkles in the water, a voice in the wind...”

S. M. N.

Luka Aratsky's death was and remained for Karanovo and Little Rusty irrefutable proof that a person could go up in flames but not disappear for all time. Because just a few days after the coffin with Luka's remains was lowered into the grave, a yellow rose sprouted on the mound and its fragrance, like the fragrance of Petrana's yellow rose, filled Karanovo and dispelled fear and disease, and even the routed occupying forces: they rarely stopped by Karanovo until the summer heat had passed that faded the dahlias and verbenas, but not the clump of yellow roses.

At the time they did not know that the clump of yellow roses would bloom with the same radiance and ardor in October and January, when all the other plants were shackled by snow and ice, they would bloom without letup, year in, year out, withstanding time and oblivion.

First Natalia, and then everyone else, connected the yellow rose on Luka Aratsky's grave with Petrana's yellow rose, convinced that Petrana's soul had come back to Karanovo along with the flower that defied both the snows and the years. Would it stay there or lose itself again in the world? They could not agree, although the discussion lasted at length as to whether Petrana or Archangel Michael, the protector of the Aratsky clan, had come with the yellow rose.

Only Luka Aratsky's redhead grandson knew that his grandfather had come back and would never leave again.

* * *

In the semi-darkness, next to the unknown woman, as advertisements flashed on and off on the surrounding buildings: "Save a Fortune Shopping at Mace's", "Discounts Everyday", and New York panted like a bone-weary beast, Danilo wondered whether his father knew about Luka Aratsky's death in the train that was taking him north along with his soldiers.

If Natalia had not told him before they left for the Farm, and she probably had not, he could not have heard it from Pantelia and Dojčin. The word *war* meant nothing to them. No one visited them from Karanovo and they did not go to visit anyone. They lived under the reed roof, where the pigeons hatched eggs like crazy, giving them enough little birds for soup and stew, and kept no track of time. And what would it mean to them to know that Monday, Tuesday or Friday had dawned, when Monday flowed into Tuesday, Tuesday into Wednesday, Wednesday into Thursday, and so on to Sunday, without end.

Dojčin did not even want to hear what day or month it was; he only heard and listened to the voices of the angels in the reeds, in the wind, unconcerned about anything, including himself.

Unlike Dojčin, Pantelia marveled at the story of the world created by God in seven days, separating the light from the darkness and the water from the land, populating

the water with fish, the air with birds, the land with beasts and humans, although He could have left them out.

What excited the lad was the pike he caught in the silt, wild ducks, and a goat. Stevan never managed to find out its name, because from his arrival on the Farm until he left the marsh, Pantelia hid it on a tiny island created by a rotten tree and drifting branches. Pantelia would take the boat that Stevan sometimes used to look for wild duck nests, leaving in the early evening and returning before dawn when Stevan, Dojčin, Veta and Danilo, and sometimes Natalia with the twins, were still fast asleep.

“Are you afraid I’ll take your goat away?” asked Stevan, watching Pantelia get a bunch of locust leaves ready for his beauty. He laughed out loud and woke the sleeping beast inside the lad.

“Don’t make fun of me, sir!” said Pantelia, cutting him off with a menacing voice. “I don’t like it when someone laughs at me!”

“Hey, he’s not that crazy,” mumbled Stevan, falling silent as he remembered a long succession of women trailing after him, as submissive and impetuous as bitches in heat. “Nor harmless!” Several wrathful husbands and fiancés leaped before his eyes. He had not laughed at them and murderous sparks sometimes flashed in their eyes, the same that sparked in Pantelia’s eyes as he hastened to put the bunch of leaves in the boat. He started rowing toward the island with the goat and called out:

“Starting today I will hunt the ducks and fish, Mr. Aratsky. I don’t want to see you in this boat anymore!” He rowed off into the marsh to the sound of croaking frogs. Mother-of-pearl dragonfly wings fluttered above the water lilies, going from pale blue to purple.

“Those must be the wings of the marsh fairies!” thought Little Rusty, his hair burning with flashes of sun, and Stevan was taken aback. “Who does this child resemble?” he wondered as he stared at the boy’s red hair. None of the Aratskys had such hair and no one on Natalia’s side either, if what she said was true? She did not remember her father and Simka Galičanka never told her who he was or what he was like. Natalia had her mother’s last name, which meant that whoever created her had disappeared from Simka’s life before Natalia was born. A lonely little girl, a lonely young woman, Natalia

must have wondered whether her father was alive and if so, where was he? Did she have anything of him inside her?

She had inherited her iris-colored eyes from Simka Galičanka along with the ability to find medicinal herbs. Her white hair was the result of something terrible that she never spoke about – had she pushed what happened so much to the back of her mind that she could no longer remember what color her hair had been before it went white overnight? What did she have of her father? Had several links in the hereditary chain been skipped so that Danilo's face showed the gray eyes of some distant ancestor and the red hair of a redhead clan that thundered along the Danube and Tisa basins? The author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* mentioned “the existence of redhead Celtic warriors, who disappeared long ago in time and memory”. Had they disappeared altogether?

* * *

The Pannonian Sea used to be where the marsh now stood and then it disappeared. So why couldn't her father disappear the same way? *In the glowing dawn, the world appeared before Natalia as a place of beginnings and ends, birth and death.* Duration. The fear that she would never meet her father vanished, because as long as she lived, everything was possible, even recognizing the eyes of her missing father through the eyes of her son. Was he missing? Or lost for some time? In the Balkans, at the beginning of the 20th century and even later, old states collapsed and gave rise to new ones, and the clans and peoples that were relocated to guard the borders of the new states were sometimes greeted by the locals with knives and bullets.

Natalia did not know how Simka's family had reached the southern border of the newly formed Kingdom. Simka had said nothing about the nightmare that greeted them. But many years later, as Danilo searched for his lost brother in archives in Vienna, Budapest, Istanbul, Berlin and Moscow, following the paths of the Aratsky, he came across a note about the possible fate of Natalia's father, discovering at the same time the reason for the intense sorrow in Simka Galičanka's deep blue eyes.

The report about the settlers from Northern Dalmatia was the same in the Viennese and Berlin archives, and so was the statement that the residents of Kadrifakovo village had greeted the newcomers with hatred and knives. Then, when everything seemed to calm down, in the course of one night the villagers burned the settlers' houses

and killed them all, except for one young woman who had not been in the village, and a little girl whose hair turned white overnight.

When the child was questioned by soldiers who reached Kadrifakovo just before dawn to save what they could, she remained silent as though unable to hear or understand their questions, and when their backs were turned, she sneaked off into the forest and disappeared. They did not remember her until three days later, after they managed to bury the slain and mark the graves of entire families with the names of their elders.

Kadrifakovo was renamed Kalinićevo after the family name of most of the houses, where 27 members were burned, and went by that name between the First and Second World War, and then went back to Kadrifakovo again. Frightened by what had happened, the residents of rocky Dalmatia refused to settle the southern border anymore.

The soldiers were unable to find Kadrifakovo's sole survivor, a girl with violet eyes, even though they searched for two weeks. Finally, since the child was the only living witness to the slaughter and had not been found after a long search, the case of Kadrifakovo village near Štip was put *ad acta* and forgotten.

Other villages burned after that, and hunters and woodcutters here and there came across the little girl with white hair and deep blue eyes: she spoke a language they did not understand, but had the gift to heal and find medicinal herbs and water. It was enough for her to touch a sick child for the lesions or fever to disappear. But she never stayed anywhere for more than three days, or the time needed to help the sick or afflicted. They would see her on cliffs, next to rivers, or deep in the forest as she gathered medicinal herbs and then she would disappear in the mist, only to reappear and disappear in some other place, elusive and nameless, which is why even the oldest inhabitants of the villages and hamlets believed that she was not a little girl but a fairy.

* * *

Bending over the archive reports, Danilo Aratsky shuddered: Simka Galičanka, like his mother Natalia Aratsky, had white hair and deep blue eyes. Which one of them was mentioned in the stories as living in Fairyland, a miracle worker? Which one of them was the last living inhabitant of the burned village where houses, livestock and people burned all night? The report in the Viennese archive was unclear and there were no reliable witnesses. Perhaps Stevan Aratsky knew something, but kept it to himself, just as

Natalia Aratsky kept that night to herself, sealed inside her as a her terrible secret, to her death.

* * *

“Who was Natalia’s father and what was he like?” wondered Danilo Aratsky on the 17th floor of a New York hotel, just as Stevan Aratsky had wondered, sitting under the reed eaves of the Farm in the marsh, staring at his son’s red hair: whose hair and eyes had Little Rusty inherited?

The marsh waters were ablaze in the sunset, reeds all around were rustling in the breeze accompanied by buzzing mosquitoes. Eyes closed, old Dojčin was talking to the elves that only he could see as they hovered on the backs of dragonflies above the sparkling marsh water.

“No, he’s no chess opponent for me!” mumbled Stevan, elbows on the rickety little table. He opened the chessboard with the ebony and ivory pieces, imagined Natalia as his opponent and gave her the black pieces. He moved the first white pawn toward her knight, but suddenly lost the will to play, aware of the fact that Natalia would play a winning game this time too, would turn the game to her advantage: regardless of whether she had the black or white chess pieces, she was the winner.

Stupefied by the marsh smells, the buzzing mosquitoes and croaking frogs, Stevan could not remember if Natalia had been the winner when the two of them really played chess. Had they ever played? His usual opponent was Veta – she would be winning in the beginning and then start to make wrong moves, and lose, deeply happy inside at the sudden flash of joy on her father’s face. It had been contorted by fear and humiliation ever since he appeared at the door of his house in Karanovo, the only one to avoid his company’s fate.

The game of chess for Stevan was equal to the game of life.

But he had never played the game with Petar and Petrana, not because he didn’t want to but because neither one of them knew the rules of the game and stubbornly insisted that he was either wrong or cheating, as though it was not about chess but some card trick. Luka Aratsky had been an excellent player, but he was more attracted to plants and children than chess.

Natalia considered chess a useless waste of time, and Stevan could not stop wondering why of all the women he had slept with in hayfields, double and single beds, he had chosen Natalia. He barely knew her by sight and had been unable to remember what she looked like when he met her at the entrance to the church, small and homely, barely taller than the ten-year-old runny-nosed girl standing next to her, waiting for the older people to enter first. All he knew was that from then on, he never took his eyes off her, astounded by the tranquility of her narrow little face dominated by enormous deep blue eyes that took away the breath and thoughts of anyone who gazed into them. Those eyes had not even a hint of feminine coquettishness that spurred him to chase after a skirt, and yet!

Natalia had stood calmly in the church, staring absentmindedly at the candles and angels on the walls, intoxicated by the smell of incense and the voices of the two priests who were chanting “Christ has Risen”. But she did not cross herself or bow her head, as did the other women and even the little girl next to her who resembled Natalia so much that at one moment he thought he was seeing double. Unless he had imagined the little girl and meeting her in church, in the middle of the glowing candles for the living and the dead, in honor of Christ the Savior, son of a virgin?

After the wedding, few people saw Natalia go to church. She had barely agreed to have the children baptized and greatly avoided priests for some reason Stevan never found out, although she believed in God and the story of Christ’s suffering. But she did not kneel in church or kiss the cross when the priest brought it to her lips along with the wafer, his hand on her white hair.

Stevan did not understand what was behind her resistance, either then or later. But he was surprised to see her flinch at the touch of the priest’s hand...

* * *

An entire eternity had to pass from the day Stevan noted with surprise that Natalia avoided the priest’s touch for a gap to open between her and faith in divine providence that nothing could bridge.

The water lilies in the marsh blossomed early those days, giving birth to the marsh fairies that flew straight into the sky. Little Rusty firmly believed this, although the exact

moment they flew out of the flowers eluded him. At times he would seem to see a tiny, shining little creature fluttering above the water lilies.

“Do you see them too?” he asked Veta.

“Who?”

“The marsh fairies coming out of the water lilies.”

“Oh, Little Rusty!” said Veta with a compassionate smile. “Maybe I didn’t look hard enough...”

Veta jumped at the sound of twigs breaking under someone’s feet. Was that Petar coming back? It was not Petar, but Natalia, anxious because of Petar’s two-day absence. Various armies were wandering around, intermittent shooting was heard here and there, and from Karanovo, weighed down by some treacherous lull, came rumors of silkworms and German orders to all the schools to take special care of the worms, because they were not ordinary worms but *future parachutes* blossoming over London, Paris, Moscow and Warsaw. “It’s a good thing we didn’t stay in Karanovo,” whispered Natalia, relieved that the children were with her. The schools stopped working when silkworms were moved into all the classrooms, covering every available inch of space. The schoolchildren were released from multiplication tables, sines and cosines, and assigned to feed the silkworms. They laid waste to all the mulberry trees in the area, happy to able to climb them without being scolded and prohibited by their parents. Grammar rules, equations and homework were forgotten. “Silkworms are the number one assignment, and it’s an easy one!” wrote the author of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, amazed, as he recorded the story of the silkworms. The area around Karanovo and even the streets on the edge of town had plenty of mulberries, but as time passed there were fewer and fewer leaves: the fat, white and voracious silkworms gobbled them up at an impossible speed.

When Petar finally came back, muddy and hungry, Natalia asked no questions, but was determined not to let him and Veta go to Karanovo until the silkworm sensation was over. So they all stayed at the Farm and kept away from the approaching horror, which is why they were not mentioned by the author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* in his description of the incident called “No bread today from the Supply Office”. He noted that “what had at first been a game for the Karanovo boys soon turned into a nightmare – the silkworms

were increasingly voracious, they started forming cocoons and it was harder and harder to find leaves.”

“Whoever fails to complete their assignment and harms the silkworms and the

“Thousand-year Reich’ will be punished!” The German officer’s order was succinct.

“The silkworms must not be allowed to go hungry.”

“And what about the children?” asked one of the teachers. “Should the children be allowed to go hungry?” She wiped her hand across her sweaty brow and disappeared that same evening from Karanovo for asking a question that should not be asked. This should have been a word of warning, but the citizens of Karanovo, worried about the cancelled rations of cornbread, did not understand. With the notice “No bread today from the Supply Office”, the residents of Karanovo were left without their one piece of cornbread a day, to starve. Then “No bread today from the Supply Office” was repeated the next day and the day after, to an indefinite future.

Fainting from hunger, the children had trouble climbing the mulberry trees and brought the silkworms fewer and fewer leaves.

“The silkworms must not go hungry!” repeated the German officer.

“And the children? Why shouldn’t the silkworms starve since our children are starving?” someone muttered and the next day, instead of leaves, the note “”No bread today from the Supply Office!” appeared on all the school desks with silkworms. The next day there was not a single mulberry leaf. The silkworms, already starting to wrap themselves in their silk cocoons, were dying of hunger. In a few days they would have been cocoons and then parachutes. Someone had intentionally sabotaged them. Who? The German officer in charge of investigating what happened wrote in his report that the “barbarians” did not understand anything. The teacher’s disappearance should have been a word of warning. But the barbarians were unable to understand anything. More than half the cocooned silkworms were no longer moving. In their cocoons, like transparent little coffins, the silkworms were perched among the mulberry twigs. Dead.

The order appeared in all the classrooms that whoever was behind the hostile notes had to be found and properly punished. They had until noon the next day to turn themselves in.

The next day was Good Friday, the day of Christ's suffering on the cross to save all human souls. By order of the school authorities, all the children and teachers came to school, and said not a word.

"Someone did it, didn't they?" said the German officer, raising his hand in a black glove and the soldiers aimed their rifles. "Who? We have no time to waste. You over there!" The hand in the glove pointed at Milan from IVb. "You must know who did it. Speak up!"

"I don't know!" said the boy, shaking his head.

The hand in the glove pointed at Dušan.

"You?"

"I don't know!"

"Ten minutes are left. If the guilty party is not found, every tenth one will be shot. Empty your schoolbags, let's see who has red ink. All the notes with 'No bread today from the Supply Office!' were written in red ink!"

Eyes wide-open in fear, the children emptied their schoolbags and out came bits of chalk, slingshots, marbles, buttons, love letters, but not a single note with "No bread today from the Supply Office!" Unbelievable! The hand in the glove went up. Someone would have to say who devised the dastardly killing of the silkworms because the Supply Office stopped their bread rations. Not even tons of leaves would save the silkworms anymore.

The officer's hand was raised in the air, six minutes were left.

And God raised his hand and said: Let there be light! And there was light. The first day!
Five minutes were left.

God said: Let the land be separated from the water! And it was so! The second day!
The soldiers cocked their guns, but still did not shoot. The hand in the glove gave no signal. It was extended and calm. Four minutes passed, the wheat separated from the chaff.

Let the waters gather together! said God. And it was so. The third day.

The German officer's hand was still in the air, *and God said: Let there be lights in the sky. And it was so! The fourth day.*

“Has anyone remembered who wrote ‘No bread today from the Supply Office’ and condemned the silkworms to starvation and death?” The interpreter passed on the officer’s question. “You?” he said, pointing at Nenad. “What do you know?” “No-no-thing,” stammered the boy.

The *Karanovo Chronicles* noted that “the officer raised his hand again.”

And God said: Let God’s creatures appear under the sun, fish in the water and birds in the air, let them swim, let them crawl, let them fly, populate the earth and increase in number! And it was so! The fifth day! And let no one kill them, because the birds in the air and the caterpillars in the grass are God’s creatures.

“On that bright spring day,” said the *Karanovo Chronicles*, “the terror in the children’s eyes, the officer’s metallic voice and the rifles in the soldier’s hands seemed almost surreal. They could not possibly shoot at children!”

For God said: Let us make man in our image and let him rule over the birds in the air and the animals in the forest. And it was so! The sixth day!

The fear in the children’s eyes shifted to their bodies and they started shaking like a poplar in the wind. On the seventh day God rested. “But the soldiers did not rest.” The author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* wrote that “the officer said something and the soldiers started to shoot, although reluctantly; several small bodies fell. In the screaming, running and commotion no one could count how many bullets hit their target.”

The author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* stopped at that point and a spot appeared on the page, perhaps an ink smudge, perhaps the chronicler’s tear. Natalia never found out. But then she spotted almost transparent white birds above the marsh for the first time and knew that *the souls of the killed children* were flying around Karanovo. She kneeled and crossed herself, whispering: “*You are not righteous, my Lord!* Because if you were, you would have protected the little ones, scorched the faces of the evildoers and left them to wander the world, blind and lost, finding no peace or tranquility! Let no one speak to me of your wisdom and righteousness, for you are not righteous, my Lord, *I no longer acknowledge your acts!*”

Before Natalia’s eyes appeared an image of the underfed, bloody Karanovo children, the hand in the glove and the raised hand of the Lord, who should not have allowed it to

happen. Let no one tell her anymore that the Ear of God hears everything, the Eye of God sees everything.

Why did He not hear the children shrieking?

Or see the terror in the children's eyes?

If the Eye of God ever existed, it had closed.

That was why it was dark. Natalia Aratsky sighed and got up. The decision to fight for her children's lives flooded her soul like strong morning light.

* * *

"After this, the world will be a different place, Father!" said Veta, concerned about her father as though he was her child or younger brother. "When the war is over, the prisoners will come back and everything will be different!" She took away the bottle and tried to pull him out of the lethargy that had increased its hold on him ever since autumn started taking over the marsh. "It will be a new, different world..." she said, interrupting Stevan's conversation with his second or third soul, but Stevan no longer believed that anything would be like it was. Even Little Rusty hardly believed in that new, better world, although he periodically noticed that everything around him was changing: tadpoles were becoming frogs, the little white egret's wings were growing, the reeds were turning yellow...

"We'll have to go back to Karanovo with the first frost! Don't lie to your father, Veta! The world will not become better and nothing will be like it was before the war. That's the truth! Get him ready for that truth..." said Natalia, losing her temper, and Veta asked her with sorrow in her voice:

"What good is that truth to him, Mother?"

Natalia bowed her head in shame. She was no longer able to distinguish truth from falsehood. After the incident with the silkworms and her virulent debate with God, Natalia felt that she too was no longer the same. The ground underneath her seemed to cave in and she was sinking, conscious of the fact that she dare not go under.

Veta sensed a change in her mother, but did not know how to help her. "Perhaps I could rely on Father," she thought at one moment, but waved her hand dismissively: Stevan could not even help himself, although in some obscure way he felt that Natalia and Petar were up to something. "Does Veta know," he wondered, and found no reply

because, if she did know, Veta would not tell him, convinced that he did not need new upheavals. There was no sense asking Pantelia and Dojčin. They were gathering hazelnuts, edible mushrooms and roots before the onset of winter, living the life of the hamster, squirrel, mole and field mouse. Dojčin heard the voices of the angels less and less often, and Pantelia went to visit the goat.

“What’s this?” said Stevan in amazement, spotting diaphanous white birds above the marsh.

“The souls of the Karanovo children!” said old Dojčin, surprising Natalia. “Can’t you see their escort, the souls of the silkworms turned into mayflies?”

Stevan did not see them, but in his drunken stupor he saw more and more white mice squealing among the reeds, and little human heads lurking in the attic, getting smaller and smaller until they finally disappeared somewhere in the gloom.

“Good Lord, what’s happening to Father,” murmured Petar. From time to time he disappeared from the Farm for several days and upon his return would sometimes shake several cans of food out of his rucksack, until Natalia shrieked:

“I don’t need stolen food, sonny! The Aratskys were all kinds of things, but never killers and thieves...”

“It’s war booty, Mother!” said Petar, turning pale. “The Aratskys have a right to it too...” he smiled, and she realized where the rifles hidden under the reeds in the roof came from, and why, when Petar was absent, German munitions depots were blown up. What he was taking part in was justified by the children who died in the “No bread today from the Supply Office” incident, but Natalia still felt her insides go cold at the thought that Petar might be blown up along with the munitions depots, just like his grandfather when the first tanks entered Karanovo.

She stopped questioning him and he stopped talking.

Autumn entered the marsh slowly and festively. On the eastern front, the Germans lost battle after battle.

* * *

The author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* did not mention whether Karanovo knew about it. Whether this was because he was fed up with war or for a personal reason, not even Danilo Aratsky, in the thinning darkness on the 17th floor of a New York hotel,

could remember. But he could not get the dragonflies and little white frog in the flooded cellar out of his head. Unless Veta had made up that story about the white frog just to get him to go into the cellar where the darkness frightened him more than a pin prick or fire.

“Come on, Little Rusty!” laughed Petar. “White frogs don’t exist!” Then he had gone into the cellar and shouted, “Yes, they do! But cowards won’t go down to see them.”

“I’m not a coward!” Danilo Aratsky could see himself, small and trembling, as he went down the slippery steps to the cellar, overcoming his first childhood fear. All kinds of things lived in the cellar: horned, tailed, hairy and naked, slimy like snails, icy like snakes, incredible like white frogs. No, Veta had not lied to him. Smaller than other common tree frogs, there it stood on the first step, a white frog. If it really was a frog and not a princess turned into a frog, an enchanted little girl, a fairy? Happy that he had dared to go down into the dark cellar, Little Rusty let Petar put the white frog on the palm of his hand, so light that it seemed not to be there.

“Now, put it back in the water!” said Petar, putting his arm around his brother’s shoulders. “You proved that you’re not a coward. Aratskys have never been cowards or tyrants. When the war is over, we’ll build new cities...” Petar smiled tenderly and Little Rusty felt his whole body tremble with joy. He had overcome his fear and proved he was not a coward, but he would not build new cities. *He would follow in the footsteps of Dr. Luka Aratsky, he with the yellow rose branching and fragrant above him. He would heal.*

* * *

Bewildered, more drunk than sober, Stevan fought with the angry voices of his souls. The fear inside him was rising, growing more intense with the arrival of autumn. Convinced that the stars had crossed at the worst possible angle at his birth, Stevan moved back and forth between going and staying, until the scales tipped: he would stay at the Farm through winter. He would wait, even if it meant living with two lunatics.

As Stevan talked things over with his second and third soul, he became more and more frightened, tipsy or not. The forthcoming liberation would not be freedom for him unless at least one of his soldiers returned. Veta felt her father’s fear and shame with every bone in her body, but she would not tell anyone, afraid of distressing her father and infuriating her mother – who saw Stevan’s raving about the stars and souls as his way of

getting out of all his obligations, from civic to parental and marital. Birds had frozen in the air last winter. What would this one be like?

“What shall we do with Danilo and the twins, Stevan? If they don’t die of sickness, they’ll die of the cold and hunger...” For the first time ever, Natalia felt powerless before life and what it held for her. Stevan was silent. He had lost weight and was somehow smaller. He advised her to sell something, not believing that everything of value had been sold long ago or exchanged for food.

He did not believe her. The rich and powerful Aratskys did not accept the word “nothing” but this time that was simply how it was: nothing, nothing, nothing! Elbows leaning on the table, Stevan spent the evening staring at the burning candle, its light reminding him of his boyhood and summer holidays on one of Grandfather Mihailo Aratsky’s farms, until the farms and everything else went into someone else’s hands. Jovial, large, blue-eyed (is that where Petar got his eyes?), Mihailo spread joy wherever he went. It was hard to believe that taciturn Luka Aratsky was his son, his flesh and blood: Luka had scorned everything that was important to Mihailo and chosen to heal the poor instead of expand his empire.

* * *

They lived out their lives as in a dream, without knowing who they were or what they were...

Jorge Luis Borges

The author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* clearly admired Mihailo, whose paths proceeded from Karanovo to Vienna and beyond. Stevan fostered those same feelings for Mihailo. Always a little uncomfortable with his father, he would quiver with joy whenever he saw his grandfather on one of his racehorses, its only role being to display him, and Stevan too, many years later. Why, Stevan was not even seven when Mihailo gave him a white colt, despite Luka’s disapproval.

“Look, a Snowflake!” shouted the boy, inadvertently christening the horse that would be his greatest joy for years, when the Aratsky home was already going to ruin.

Stevan was barely sixteen when they brought Mihailo Aratsky home in a black trunk, stabbed 27 times with a knife in a Vienna gambling house on one of his countless trips.

The author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* did not report on everything that Mihailo bought and sold around the world or his pursuits, dazzled by his ability to charm women and increase his fields, orchards and farms to such an extent that soon not even he knew what he had and where,

“*Only the earth is lasting, the wind sweeps everything else away...*” he said, sparing neither money nor himself.

Staring at the candle flame, Stevan tried to remember Mihailo’s face, but all that came to mind were his laughing blue eyes and tall upright frame. Nevertheless, he did remember his grandfather’s statement that he was born under a lucky star.

At the last, most difficult minute, Mihailo’s lucky star changed course, went to the other side and betrayed him. Mihailo, like his grandson Stevan later, believed in the power of the stars, but also their inconstancy at the very moment when everything was on the line to be won or lost.

* * *

Stevan Aratsky suddenly remembered the bright blue star above the cattle car, traveling north just like his company, that dropped quite low at dawn and was the last to disappear from view – just as the sun started to rise. Had Mihailo Aratsky seen it as well before darkness towered above him with a knife flashing in it?

Stevan Aratsky never found out, taking it as God’s last favor to the departed. *Would the same thing happen when his time came? A flash and darkness. The end.* Stevan Aratsky shuddered and that moment, above the marsh, in the flaming candle, he saw Mihailo’s face, laughing and vivacious, as though an entire lifetime had not passed between this moment on the Farm in the marsh and his death...

* * *

And then the black trunk appeared before Stevan’s eyes. Closed.

Perhaps that was why he could not remember his grandfather’s dead face: he had not seen it. The funeral, as expected, was magnificent. Mihailo’s third wife Anika, Dr. Luka Aratsky’s second step-mother, and beautiful Petrana knew perfectly well that

Karanovo would count every wreath, every ducat given to the poor and the professional mourners, every candle lighted so the soul of the departed could find its way to heaven, and the number of priests that came to send off the most powerful man in Karanovo, Bačka, Srem and Banat to the other world.

And so Mihailo Aratsky was remembered as the sole inhabitant of Karanovo ever to be buried with the chanting of seven priests who came to lend solemnity to the departure of a man who knew how to produce ducats and turn them into fields, houses and crazy nights on the town, from Karanovo to Vienna. The Aratsky family did not talk about the latter, although just as many stories grew about the number of beauties Mihailo Aratsky had tumbled in Sombor, Szeged or Vienna.

And those stories lasted longer than the property that Mihailo Aratsky acquired effortlessly, without even wanting to acquire it – making room for one more legend: instead of an ordinary bloody placenta, Mihailo Aratsky was born in a golden placenta that he carried with him always, concealed, as he did business about Europe, throwing away money on women and gambling. Tall, handsome and magnificently dressed, he attracted every woman's attention to such a point that there might have been some truth in the rumors that he did not pay the women he debauched. They paid him.

Karanovo was particularly surprised by one of those stories having to do with the wife of a Szeged count. Mihailo Aratsky had won her at cards since her husband, gambling away his wealth, had pledged his wife, dog and horse. And lost.

“Certainly she must be hideous?” said Mahilo, winning the game. But everyone knew that he was pretending; many people had seen him with the woman even before that fateful card game.

Mihailo went to Vienna with that willful, beautiful and haughty woman, and he came back from Vienna with 27 knife wounds. In a trunk.

Stevan never found out what happened to the golden placenta. Luka did not even try, but Anika and beautiful Petrana searched for it at length. In the end they agreed that the Szeged countess had stolen it and thrown it into the river out of ignorance or malice. Mihailo's manservant maintained he knew nothing about a golden placenta, not even whether it existed – he swore on all the living and dead, but Anika and Petrana did not believe him.

“Perhaps Mihailo was born with a Midas touch?” thought Stevan, since everything he touched turned to gold, something that was never to happen again in the Aratsky family.

* * *

In the room dappled with light from the neighboring buildings, Danilo Aratsky remembered a passage from the *Karanovo Chronicles* explaining how, after his death, “Mihailo’s wealth started to crumble like devils were eating away at it”. In spite of all Anika’s efforts, horses and coaches disappeared, farms and vineyards, fields and meadows were sold or taken to repay debts, until all that remained was the house in Karanovo and the Farm forgotten between two by-channels of the stagnant Tisa River.

The last stories about Mihailo’s hidden fortune faded away just when Mihailo’s only son came back from Vienna with a medical diploma in his pocket and a calm and dignified expression on his face. Tall and fair-haired, Dr. Luka Aratsky inherited Mihailo’s manly good looks, but softened, pensive, melancholy. As though father and son had split into fire and water: Mihailo tamed women and horses, multiplied ducats and fields, Luka avoided being paid for his work and was silent, demonstrating a refined disinterest in money and everything money stands for.

* * *

“Did those two ever understand each other?”

Following the recurring themes of the Aratsky family’s fate through the *Karanovo Chronicles*, Danilo Aratsky realized that fathers and sons were rarely close. Grandfathers were close with grandsons much more often, as though one link in the chain had to be skipped for there to be intimacy. “Will that happen to Damian and me?” he wondered.

Mihailo had no time to ask questions, but nevertheless he could not understand his son. He had bought property for him from Karanovo to Vienna, convinced that money was man’s great fallacy. In the end, only land was left and what you planted on it. He was puzzled when people took paper, banknotes, nothing, in exchange for vineyards, horses, fields, everything that was productive and enabled man to find the reason for his existence on earth. Uncultivated, abandoned fields infuriated Mihailo to the point of madness. Deep down inside, fertile fields and fertile women were what he enjoyed the

most; he was unhappy that after his wife Bojana gave birth to Luka she fell ill, lost hope that she would ever conceive again and quietly, as though stealing away, left this world.

Mihailo married beautiful Anika, and Mara before Anika, not because he needed a wife, but in the hope of filling the Aratsky house with children's voices and laughter; neither one even gave birth to as much as a mouse.

Embittered, Mihailo understood it as fate's revenge – always giving something and taking something away; like the curse of the cuckolded husbands whose wives jumped into his bed like frogs into water, then gave birth to big blue-eyed children. Their fathers soon realized that the children's real father was someone else.

In order to mollify God, the devil, whoever, whenever one of Mihailo's servants had their first child, he would give them a house and garden plot. He sent first Mara and then Anika to spas, hoping that medicinal waters would help; he brought in doctors and faith healers, to no avail. There was no one but his uncommunicative son Luka looking at blades of grass and bugs in the yard that Mihailo had imagined full of high-spirited children.

"I'll marry him to the prettiest girl from a house as full of children as a pomegranate with seeds!" vowed Mihailo Aratsky and was incautious enough to let that vow reach Luka Aratsky's ears.

"I'll marry whoever I want, but not until I finish medical school in Vienna. And maybe I won't even get married!" said Luka Aratsky, going against his father's wishes for the first time in his life.

To everyone's amazement, Mihailo uttered not a word. Terrified that his son might make good on his threat, he remembered Luka's statement that every man hides at least one devil inside him, and every woman a whole horde that never rests.

Perhaps that was why Mihailo Aratsky accepted Petrana without resisting and grumbling. He was happy that Luka had chosen the prettiest of all women, but horrified at the fact that she, the prettiest, was the last scion of a family that gave birth to cripples that soon died. Even the distant relatives of Petrana's parents had no children, but number of mentally disturbed and suicides was impressive.

"If you have children," he said to his son before the wedding, "you'll have to raise them like chicks from a golden egg so that no sickness or trouble touches them!"

Luka Aratsky just laughed quietly and said not a word to Petrana about his father's doubts, afraid that being the way she was, she would refuse to have children. But beautiful Petrana quickly dispelled her father-in-laws doubts: she gave birth to Stevan, almost five and a half kilograms, thereby becoming the uncrowned queen of Karanovo.

Mihailo fulfilled her every wish, regardless of the trouble it took to get just what she wanted.

After Stevan's birth, the Aratsky house received another floor, formal front steps, a piano, Persian rugs and furniture from a Viennese manor whose owner had stumbled and been forced sell the manor and everything in it. Mihailo Aratsky had been ready to buy the manor too and move it to Karanovo, stone by stone, provided that Petrana bear another child.

“You can buy me all of Vienna!” said Petrana. “I will have no more children!”

Mihailo realized by her contorted face that his daughter-in-law would keep her promise, but this did not stop him from showering her with gorgeous dresses and hats, unlike those of any other woman in Karanovo. He was proud of her beauty and even prouder of the fact that she had given him a grandson whose strength, intelligence and good looks were the talk of all of Austro-Hungary when Mihailo started taking Stevan with him on his mysterious trips.

* * *

So when judge-to-be Stevan Aratsky was sixteen, he was introduced to gambling houses, places where things were bought and sold, the theater, but also bordellos in Szeged, Budapest and Vienna. He realized that the world was a wonder of all wonders and also that women were the most inexplicable and greatest of all wonders on earth. He was in Karanovo when Mihailo died, because school was not yet out. Mihailo took him on his trips only during summer vacation, taking advantage of the chance to show him not only licentious European cities but also farms, taverns, colts mating with fillies and the life of village kids, stained with black mulberries from ear to ear.

“If you've set your mind on being a judge, you should know that everyone will come to you to arbitrate right from wrong!” said Mihailo, who pitied Luka Aratsky in a way. He already saw his grandson Stevan as a supreme court judge, a man who turned

every woman's head, and wanted to prepare him for his future position in life: he reminded him of famous lawyers, judges and senators from the Aratsky family.

When Mihailo came home from Vienna in a black trunk with knife wounds all over his face and body, it was Stevan who cried for him the most. Anika and Petrana did not have time to cry since creditors were flocking from all around and the entire burden of the funeral fell on their shoulders. Dr. Luka Aratsky was worried to the bottom of his heart that his son would follow in Mihailo's footsteps and spent night and day at the hospital.

"And yet, he got Stevan to vow never to buy or sell anything!" wrote the author of the *Karanovo Chronicles*. And when they returned from the cemetery after burying Mihailo with the chanting of seven priests, he repeated his vow. For no reason! Stevan was not a businessman and never would be.

"Swear anyway!" said Luka Aratsky. "And know that a devil hides in gold, and in the devil hides a knife or poison. Remember that, Stevan..." He repeated his entreaty, making Petrana laugh out loud. She was deeply convinced that Stevan would never buy or sell anything, not because he didn't want to, but because he did not know how.

Anika looked at her in surprise and Petrana stopped laughing, because until Natalia came into the house, Anika was the only person whose opinion meant anything to Petrana.

When Natalia crossed its threshold, the Aratsky house had neither the splendor nor the importance that had spurred beautiful Petrana to marry Dr. Luka Aratsky, even though the moment she set eyes on him she knew he would not be able to fulfill all her wishes and needs.

"Even if you were not born in a golden placenta, swear!" said Luka Aratsky, embracing his son, and made him repeat the vow that he would neither buy nor sell anything, surprised at his mysterious silence. "Does he have the Midas touch too?" he wondered, and laughed at himself.

* * *

Staring at the candle flame, Stevan Aratsky started imagining gold powder sparkling on Little Rusty's fingers, powder that is sometimes seen on the fingers of those born in a golden placenta. Nonsense! Little Rusty was born like all other children, but

Mihailo Aratsky's Midas touch could have jumped two generations and taken up quarters in Danilo. That was why his hair was so flaming! Unless it was announcing new fires?

* * *

The footsteps of Hans Miller or some other German paced regularly under the windows of the Aratsky house in Karanovo that Third year of war: seven forward, seven back, and then again... But the war was clearly drawing to a close. Hidden in the small attic room in the house in Karanovo, Stevan flinched unexpectedly and trusted that all was not lost. When the war was over, his soldiers would return, if anyone was alive – and one must be, at least one of them had to be alive – to confirm that Stevan Aratsky had not betrayed anyone, but just rolled to freedom when two trains passed each other. If life in a room 2.5 by 3.5 meters counted as freedom. Since his return from the Farm, with a shudder in his bones, he had been counting the steps of the German soldier: seven forward, seven back, waiting for his knock on the door... terrified of Hans Miller's lustful eyes fixed on Veta...

* * *

For the other members of the Aratsky family, forthcoming freedom was a dream they had awakened from long ago. Natalia left the house less and less, feeling the eyes of neighbors and friends as questions: "How long will Judge Stevan Aratsky stay hiding? Why? It's all right if he's hiding from the Germans and informers, he's a deserter, an escaped prisoner. But why is he hiding from his relatives and neighbors if he isn't guilty?"

"And he is guilty! He led smooth-faced lads into war and let the Germans capture them without a single bullet being fired. Then he escaped, eluding the camp, or execution. He alone. Captains are the last to leave a sinking ship. And he fled first!"

Natalia, Petar and Veta felt the eyes and unspoken accusations like drops of molten lead tumbling on their heads. But it was future doctor Danilo Aratsky who seemed to have the hardest time putting up with those drops of lead: when he returned from the Farm in the marsh he got out of everyone's way, even his own.

* * *

Listening to the water dripping from Veta's hair, wet for all time, on the 17th floor of a New York hotel, Danilo inadvertently entered the third year of war and saw himself,

small, a cap hiding his hair so its fiery color would not attract lightning and devils, standing next to the fence of the Aratsky house, staring at the sky where snowflakes were twirling, as exuberant as little butterflies or tiny snow fairies.

The frost that forced them to leave the Farm for Karanovo had arrived extremely early that year, heralding snow that would bury streets and houses. The citizens of Karanovo awaited it in dread. Everyone. Except the children who had gotten their sleds and ice skates ready, and Danilo Aratsky, who remembered that winter as a nightmare.

The wind in the deep blue sky chased the first snowflakes that struck passers-by sharply in the face, capricious.

Before people's eyes, the wild gusts of wind transformed into brandishing devils' tails in the sky. When the tails tangled, lightning flew out with a poisonous breath. Whomever that breath touched turned black and burned, and their soul flew straight to hell where they were condemned to be tortured until the ninth sun came out from behind the cloud.

"What does that sun look like?" Little Rusty asked his mother, Natalia. She admonished him not to talk nonsense. "There is no ninth sun."

Veta ran her fingers through his hair and reassured him that the ninth sun was not important. The intensity of just one forced the fish and frogs on the Farm to get out of its way, and killed butterflies and mosquitoes.

"When it disappeared, we left!" said Little Rusty, pensive. "What happened to the birds and dragonflies, Dojčin and Pantelia? Will they eat the cat when they get hungry? Will they eat each other?"

"Oh, Little Rusty, what stupidity crosses your mind! Let's go inside, it's getting colder!" Veta took his elbow, but the boy pulled away and leaned on the railing again, puzzled that none of the boys playing at the bottom of the street was paying any attention to him.

That's what had happened the day before and the day before that, and all the long days going back to when they returned from the Farm, as soon as the word spread that Captain Stevan Aratsky was back, leaving the captured soldiers to their fate.

Little Rusty felt that only a miracle could change their behavior. Only a miracle could make them play with him. Perhaps a devil's tail in the sky could be that miracle?

Little Rusty turned his head dejectedly toward his house and caught sight of a shadow moving behind the window. When his grandfather talked about death, he had asked the boy not to be sad, later, when they covered him with earth. He would still be by his side, invisible; when he least expected it, he would see him as sunlight reflected on a wall or a blurry shadow at a window. Was this him, had he come back? Little Rusty wanted to run and see if he was right, but he also wanted to join the boys in their game.

New games appeared in Karanovo that third year of war. One of them was the game called slaves. There were as many slaves as there were players, except for the judge and two guards. But the guards were subordinate to the judge, the same as the slaves. Only the judge was all-powerful and inviolable: whoever refused to obey him was thrown out of the game and became a *renegade*. Any of the players had the right to push, spit at or throw stones at a renegade until he deserved to be taken back in the game by swearing to be obedient and doing twice the penance. But even after he rejoined the game, the shadow of contempt followed him for a long time afterward. This is why there were few renegades even though the game continued day after day, month after month.

Each player was represented by a stone with his name on it, placed upright. The stones were placed in a circle around the judge who kept a keen eye on the players' movements and what happened when the ball was thrown. Every player had the right to throw the ball *once*, and every toppled stone meant slavery for whoever's name was on it. When all the players had their turn throwing the ball, the one whose stone no one had managed to topple became the judge, the former judge became a guard, and then a slave after the next throw. The rules of the game were harshly clear. Penance depended on the winner, but even so there were no rebels or deserters, and depending on their luck or skill, every slave could become the judge and every judge a slave.

The game started at sunrise and ended at the beginning of curfew. Guards, slaves and judges alternated in an almost endless circle.

Leaning on the window, Natalia Aratsky saw Danilo head for the bottom of the street, small and slender, wearing a cap that hid his flaming hair lest he attract misfortune. She saw the stones placed in a circle and part of the low gray sky buttressed by bare branches where crows perched, their cawing announcing a long and hungry winter. Natalia sighed. Danilo had left the house hungry. He would return to it even hungrier.

Only Petar could bring salvation; he had broken the ice that was already forming on the river near the shore and was trying to catch fish or a wild duck.

* * *

There was no sense counting on Stevan – since returning from the swamp he still saw nothing but the bottom of a brandy glass and white mice turning into guards that would climb into the attic and take him to the place of no return. The maps of the stars that he had studied at the Farm in the marsh – lied. The paths of the stars at his birth crossed ominously – Stevan did not see his death in the angles at which the stars crossed, but sensed it in the reproachful eyes of his relatives and neighbors. If at least one of the soldiers had jumped out of the stinking cattle car with him, he would have a witness to the fact that his escape was a pure, lucky accident, not betrayal.

But none of them had jumped, none of them had returned, none of them had contacted their family or friends. That was why the eyes of all the residents of Karanovo asked: Where are our brothers, our sons, our fathers, husbands? Why were you the *only one* to return?

In the long run, he had been better off on the Farm, among the reeds, than he was in Karanovo with the pacing German guard under his window: seven forward, seven back. Then again! But Stevan Aratsky noticed neither at the Farm nor in Karanovo that Little Rusty was rapidly turning into a shadow of himself, hungry and driven crazy by his father's reproofs that no one understood anything: they should not have returned to Karanovo from the Farm, and maybe he should not have escaped from that stinking car.

The stars determined the fate of the world, the course of history, and all this madness that they had been stupidly thrown into ...

Stevan screamed in his sleep. Little Rusty put out his hand to defend himself from that scream and dreamed of bloated human bodies gliding down the Tisa River, a blue fly as large and hairy as a sheep, and two of Stevan's angry little stars shouting: "You took my angle! What angle! There are only seven steps forward, seven back, then again! Calm down!"

* * *

Mists swirled around the marsh and Karanovo, and then in that terrible third year of the war snow buried the Farm and they returned to Karanovo.

* * *

On the 17th floor of a New York hotel, Danilo felt a shudder, surrounded by the heavy odors of the unknown woman. No, they had not left! In the corner, behind Veta's back, he sensed his mother's tiny body and next to her was an airy ghost that must have been Luka Aratsky. After the explosion and flash, all that was left of him was smoke, but even so he could not fail to return.

* * *

"The dead always go back to those they loved!" Little Rusty knew that back when he was leaning on the fence, watching the boys play at the bottom of the street. One of the players shouted, "Look who's come!" but no one really looked at him. No, they did not even need him to pick up the stones, he should get lost, they had no room for him, son of Stevan.

Like a double exposure, Danilo Aratsky saw himself as he currently was and as a boy in gym shoes, leaning on the fence that radiated coldness. That same shadow was still hovering behind the window in the Aratsky house. Had Grandfather come back after all? The thin little son of Natalia Aratsky felt tears streaming down his cheeks. Natalia's face was pressed against the window pane: she saw the boys playing as usual, Danilo watching them. What was wrong with him, why was he so shriveled up?

One of the older players stretched his arm out all the way and threw the ball. The vein on his neck bulged and he held his breath. Danilo could feel that breath in his chest as the circle denoted *prison camp* for disobedient players, losers, seemed to close around him.

The players' eyes were tense and shining: if the thrower made a mistake, all the other players would be forced to hit him as hard as possible with a switch. There could be no shirking. Whoever gave a soft blow would receive ten hard ones. So the players hit as hard as they could, no slave ventured not to carry out an order. The player throwing the ball probably had this in mind as he took aim, etching a groove between his eyebrows.

Danilo saw him stand there for a long moment, utterly motionless, and then he leaned forward as though throwing with his whole body. The players' faces were gray in the deep blue air, concentrated on the ball's flight: it will hit, it won't hit, maybe it won't hit *my* stone...

The thrower, however, failed to hit the target and the tension was broken by a sigh of relief. Each of the players took a switch leaning against the wall. The player who missed stood in the middle of the circle denoted as the punishment spot and received the blows with bowed head. As though in a fever, Little Rusty watched the punished player cover his face with his hands, stand in front of the judge and say:

“I can’t take anymore...”

“Then get out of the game!” said the judge sternly. “And don’t come back ...”

* * *

Danilo saw himself, young and as small as a sparrow, trembling all over, as he stood in the punishment circle and said:

“Take me!”

The shouts and whacks at the previous player suddenly stopped. All eyes were turned on Danilo, son of Stevan, and in silence found only in the grave, he heard the judge say, as he handed him a stone:

“Remember that he asked for this himself, *Danilo, son of Stevan!*” said the judge somewhat solemnly. Then he wrote Danilo’s name on a stone. “*I am not responsible for whatever happens...*”

What did he mean by that? Danilo felt his heart in his throat and then his knees turned to jelly. He thought: I’d better run; but only cowards run.

Out of the corner of his eye, Danilo caught sight of a sparrow, perched on a fence turned black from the damp, as it shook its wet feathers. “If the sparrow flies away, my stone won’t fall,” he thought. And what if it didn’t fly away? It did, flying up into the heavy, cold sky, smaller and smaller, farther and farther until it disappeared. “The boy throwing the ball will miss,” he thought. “Only two stones are still upright in the circle. One of them is mine. The thrower will miss because the sparrow flew away – if it was a sparrow and not the devil in disguise. All the devil has to do is wave his hand and the ball will be directed at my stone and turn me into a slave. Devils can do everything and are everywhere. Maybe there’s a devil crouching inside the ball, they just haven’t found it yet. They killed the devil they saw in the neighbor’s dog when they killed the dog.”

“But how do you kill all the devils?”

* * *

The former child in Danilo Aratsky shuddered and he felt the little boy with gray eyes and red hair, just like him, tremble in fear staring at the ball's trajectory. Just a little bit more and it would hit the target. Bull's-eye! It hit one of the stones. He did not even have to look at what was written on the stone. The circle of panting players started closing in on him, pushing him, in dead silence, to the punishment circle, without a word. They also started hitting him, without a word. The judge did not speak until he fell down:

“You asked for it, Danilo, son of Stevan! We will all be your judge. Dušan, what punishment do you propose for Danilo? Stevan Aratsky led your brother off to war. Your brother did not come back.”

“Let’s spit at the slime bag and let him go!” said Danilo’s next-door neighbor, turning red.

“You heard Dušan!” The judge spoke slowly, hesitating, pretending not to know the person being punished. “And you, Đorđe, what punishment do you propose for Danilo, son of Stevan? Your father was a soldier in Stevan Aratsky’s company. Your father did not come back.”

“Let him kneel, Danilo, son of Stevan, and let him go home on all fours, like a dog...”

“You heard Dušan and Đorđe!” The judge raised his hand in the air. “What do you propose, Borivoje? Your father did not come back. He was killed while trying to escape and Stevan is still alive. What is your punishment for Danilo, son of Stevan?”

“Let him walk on all fours and shout: ‘My father is a traitor, my father is a killer, my father is a rat!’ Let him shout that!” said Borivoje all in one breath as tears rolled down his cheeks.

Danilo started shaking, the judge grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him to the ground, shouting:

“Did you hear that, Danilo, son of Stevan? What are you waiting for?”

“I’m not a dog and I won’t walk like a dog!” said Danilo, barely audible, trying to stand up, but someone’s fist knocked him to his knees and then to the ground. Then stones flew at him and the world suddenly turned red and swaying. He tried to get up, without success: red earth wedged into his mouth, red sky hit him in the face; he heard himself scream at the top of his lungs.

* * *

That scream burst from his throat, like an ulcer, as he stood on the edge of Goli Otok Island wondering *which* pile of stones Peter had moved from one place to another, as he ran through a gauntlet of inmates with switches because he had not repented enough or disclosed the names of the “enemies of the people” he had been seeing or admitted that he was guilty.

In the dusk falling on the rocks and the sea, on the terrible emptiness of God’s world, Danilo Aratsky saw everything he loved and believed turn into dust and lies. God’s eye had gone out. If Petar reached Goli Otok, without a leg, he did not make it through the gauntlet alive.

Buffeted by the wind from the Velebit foothills bringing the smell of salt and the shrieking of gulls, in the emptiness inhabited by apparitions, Danilo Aratsky thought he saw his brother stumble and fall in the dusk, just as he himself had fallen in the game of slaves, but not admit the fabricated guilt or lick the hands of the one who hit him as hard as he could. Petar believed what he had been taught and would believe it as long as there was breath in him. Not a single Aratsky had renounced Archangel Michael, saint and protector, even under the greatest torture. And he would not renounce the First Man of Socialism either. Petar’s faith was firm and Petar was firm.

Danilo stood on the cliff where his missing brother might have stood and then disappeared among the fish and crabs, never knowing that the man whose name was on the dying lips of the Goli Otok inmates was the first to spread camps like this from Kazakhstan to Kolyma.

Whipped by the icy wind that penetrated to the core, Danilo Aratsky felt his chest inflate and for the first time since the “slave game” in Karanovo, heard himself scream at the top of his lungs, frightening the fisherman that had secretly brought him to Goli.

* * *

*Our dead do not live on this earth,
they left on a trip long ago.*

Adam Zagajewski

The third scream was wrenched from Danilo when he jumped onto the step of the train for Germany, running away from himself, Marta and the conspiracy being woven around him at the hospital, before it was wiped off the face of the earth by a sudden fire, taking with it the musty rooms with bars on the windows and the horror they instilled in both patients and staff.

Before his psychiatry exam, Danilo Aratsky went with a group of students through the labyrinth of the former Prince's stables turned into an asylum for the mentally ill, convinced that hell was just purgatory compared to asylum Guberevac and Toponica.

In just a few days at Toponica that long sultry summer, dealing primarily with schizophrenics and paranoids, Dr. Danily Aratsky met saviors of the world, prophets, kings and queens without kingdoms, Lenin, several famous soccer players, Stalin and three of Stalin's doubles – owing to those doubles not a single attempt to assassinate the world leader of socialism succeeded: the bombs and Molotov cocktails killed only his doubles.

Was illness hell or some sort of consolation? Danilo could not tell. Nevertheless, those three summer days among imaginary princesses, military leaders, emperors, Nobel prizewinners, sons and daughters of famous actors, stayed in his memory for all time, along with his encounter with Ruža Rašula, and a young man whose illness he never discovered, its treatment very painful.

Toponica changed over time. The iron pegs pounded into cement disappeared along with the chains and straitjackets. The queens, Stalins and Stalin's doubles faded away and the number increased of those claiming that the secret service was eavesdropping on them through barbed wire and even cactus barbs, entering their dreams, stealing their words, eating away at their hearts and intestines. They were rotting.

As he left Toponica and Guberevac, he realized that the patients had not changed and the illness was the same, only the numbers had increased with the years that had flown like the pages of an old tattered book. “Is that my life?” The question he had heard spoken somewhere, sometime, came fluttering to Danilo Aratsky. “*Is that my life?*” *asked the young man, almost a boy. At one moment, between two doctor's visits, he had set eyes on all his ancestors like gold dust sprinkled about the sky, then heard their voices*

in the wind and realized that that was all that was left of them, all that would be left of him. Forever!

* * *

“Perhaps that lad wasn’t crazy. Perhaps we are all dust in the sky, voices in the wind?”

On the 17th floor of a New York hotel, Veta’s voice hit him like a bullet between the eyes. “Think about it...”

“I have!” he wanted to tell her. But, tiptoeing on the floor that was wet from her luxuriant, dripping hair, Veta suddenly disappeared to where she could not hear his voice, like those he wanted to help in the hospital sometimes disappeared. He was experienced enough to know that taking them back to their former surroundings and reminding them of what they once were or could have been did not have to make them happy. This was why he was less inclined to take them back to the time before they entered the hospital, a time that probably caused them to end up where they did.

* * *

The young man who asked, “Is that my life?” reversed Danilo Aratsky’s understanding that we live from remembering, not forgetting. Ruža Rašula’s memory loss had instilled in him a greater fear of forgetting than his fear of death.

So Danilo was shaken all the more by the young man’s comment that remembering was the equivalent of venom that killed faster than snakebite. He had been brought to the hospital for attacking young women in a park.

Yes, at the very end of business hours a policeman brought the young man to the hospital. He had been accused of trying to put his hand under two girls’ skirts in the park, asking naively: “Do you remember me? I think we know each other.”

The girls had jumped with a scream and called the police. “Fools!” said the young man. He had not put a snake under their skirts but the little, the smallest finger of his brother Toma, who was just playing. Only those silly girls had not understood and had run off, leaving heel imprints in the soft asphalt, which he probably had done too as he tried to catch up to them, numbers gamboling through his head. What do you get when you subtract the left column from the right column? Why couldn’t he remember? He used to know and now had forgotten. He had forgotten because of the heat. At noon on a long,

long street, insensate from the heat, even St. Peter would forget the key to the pearly gates, so why shouldn't he forget columns of numbers, although they weren't numbers but a flock of sheep with a boy following them. Why look, he was that boy wearing the shoes of a grownup man.

Staring at the shoes, he had not notice a crowd of people gathering around him, causing the flock of sheep to suddenly disappear. He was alone again. Leaning against a wall, his eyes opened wide in wonder as he watched the fingers of his left hand gently stroke the fingers of his right hand. Then he realized that what his left hand was trying to caress was not the fingers of his right hand but the little heads of his brothers; when they had been blown up by a bomb along with the sheep, they were little boys in hemp shirts. Is that why their eyes were so childishly pure, bright, and moving in different directions like a lizard's?

Followed by the dubious looks of the passers-by, he brought his right hand to his eyes and then quickly removed it.

The man sitting on the bench across the way winced warily. But he and his brothers paid no attention to him; Toma understood this as permission to go under girls' skirts. His laughter, as free as the wind, warmed their hearts, even though the wary guy was staring at them. And then his middle brother went out to scout, self-confidently winking like a gangster all the time, until the girl screamed and jumped away so suddenly that everyone in the park flocked around them. Goodness me, who would have thought there were so many people in the park. They swooped down, shouting, spitting at him, while his brothers closed their eyes in fear, terrified that they might be forced to go to that horrible mountain where an entire village was blown up and there weren't even any bones left to collect.

Then a white car came with a wailing siren and they threw them into it like a sack of potatoes. Slowly and carefully, he put his brothers back into his pocket, into the darkness that swallowed them up many years ago when they were blown up by a bomb in the forest along with a flock of sheep, leaving him to hide them and protect them, because – if people did not see something, they could not take it away from him.

The police in white doctor coats had not been able to steal his brothers, but they did manage to get under the skin on his skull and find out what he was feeling, thinking.

“You’re a crafty fellow!” said one of the doctors, looking him in the face, unaware how right he was. In order to protect his brothers, he was silent. And what was there to say? He spent his days between four white walls with bars on the window where all he saw was the tops of the poplars and sparrows on the windowsill. There were no women. But once one came into the room carrying needles that the guy in the white coat stuck into him to find out why he was hiding his hands in his pockets.

“The left hand saved us,” he whispered, gently stroking the right, where the face of their mother appeared with mournful eyes on the palm. You had to be a fool not to see her fingers gently falling on the brothers’ heads and then she caressed their cheeks. Gently. Gently.

From the touch of those fingers, the young man thought he was dissolving, but nothing hurt. *There were a lot of people on that long, long street in the middle of town, at noon, but he no longer needed anyone, just like he did not need anyone in that locked room with the bars.* His world was as full and fragrant as an apple. The only thing that bothered him was the fact that the doctors, or policemen disguised as doctors, kept on coming in, whispering, looking for something, going out. Protected by silence like a shell, he and his brothers withstood their curiosity. Was that why they frowned? But they had no right! Why should he tell them why he was hiding his hands? They deliberated angrily and took him to a room where screams were sometimes heard. Then they attached wires to his head and turned on the power, causing pain that made him lose consciousness.

He could not remember how long that lasted. *He floated along the darkness of little death, lighter than a splinter.* When he woke up, he noticed that his mother’s face was gone from his palm and his brothers’ eyes were dying. Only Toma was resisting! Blinking, he tried to say something and then disappeared, and the world plunged into darkness.

“Now you’re all right!” said Dr. Aratsky proudly “You no longer rave about your brothers and the bomb that killed them, you don’t mention your mother’s face on the palm of your right hand. You are cured and can go home...”

“What home, doctor?” said the young man, tears quivering in his voice. “My house burned down. I have nowhere to go and nothing to lose! My mother is gone... and my brothers...”

There were many people on the long, long road. Only it was no longer summer and women did not leave heel prints in the asphalt. He was cured and could go up to each one and say, “I think we know each other...”

Some frowned, some laughed, but Toma could no longer stick his hand under their skirt, winking. Toma was gone!

“I’m gone too, Doctor!” said the young man, bowing his head. Danilo Aratsky put his hand on his shoulder, wondering whether he had helped him or brought him distress.

The tears that rolled down the patient’s face followed him constantly from that sick room in Guberevac, to Hamburg, New York, Hickory Hill... on all the long, long streets, in the heat of the sun, at noon...

* * *

Danilo Aratsky never again saw the young man whose tears had touched him, causing disquiet and making him wonder whether bringing the sick back to reality was also bringing them back to loneliness and sorrow. He did not run into Ruža Rašula either, but held onto her fear of losing words, losing herself, and turned it into the fear that he was searching for Petar in vain.

If Petar was dead, he would be among the ghosts that followed him. If he was alive, Petar would have found him, just as he had in the Jasenak Home for War Orphans, when Danilo had already forgotten him. Just as Danilo had forgotten the homes he passed through, because they all looked the same, and those who lived there were all the same, not only their gray clothes, short hair, scabs and mange, but something much more essential that gushed from the depths of the children’s eyes and set them apart from other children, making them immediately recognizable and classifiable as former residents of children’s homes.

* * *

Many years later, Danilo Aratsky found that “something” in the eyes of the unfortunate people living in nursing homes, refugee centers and psychiatric institutions.

But it took him a long time to name that “something” or find a common word for the sorrow, loneliness, rejection – if such a word existed!

* * *

He remembered the Home in Jasenak. Petar had found Little Rusty in Jasenak as he made the rounds of all the homes for war orphans with the help of Red Cross volunteers who had found children lost in the general confusion in forests, ruined buildings, cellars and attics, as somewhat earlier, Sara Cohen’s relative found that lost little Jewish girl who was afraid to fall asleep lest the rats bite off her ears.

Children reached the Jasenak Home, on the shores of the stagnant Tisa River turned into a marsh, barefoot, with runny noses and lice, not knowing who they were or where they were from. Little Rusty knew his name, knew he was from Karanovo, but he did not know what happened to his father, mother, sister and the twins. No one was able to confirm whether Natalia had gotten out of the cellar of the Aratsky house alive or whether she went into it at all. *When the ruins were cleared, Natalia and the twins were not found. Not alive. Not dead. But sometimes she came to him in his dreams, and was silent.*

His stuttering and his red hair set him apart from the others, but all of them whimpered in their sleep, and were afraid of the dark and hunger. Nevertheless, he alone was told that he was “the son of Stevan Aratsky, enemy of the people, found hanged on a willow, where judgment had been passed by others or himself, for something that was never proved”. The *Karanovo Chronicles* noted that “No one knew what happened and where he was buried!” Or “whether he was thrown into the river later on...”

In Danilo’s nightmares, Stevan was constantly swinging on the tallest willow as a threat and a warning, withstanding floods and winds. Then he started following him along with Luka Aratsky, Veta, Natalia and a crowd of ancestors whose names he did not remember.

* * *

There is nothing within us that could justify the existence of paradise. The most that could be done for man –

*was to give him the dream of
paradise.*

Ivo Andrić

The secret of his father's death, however, bothered Danilo less than his brother's disappearance. He never stopped hoping. Particularly in the early evening when campfires burned on the edge of the marsh and the crowd of tattered lice-ridden children sang "*Paradise on earth awaits us*". Deeply believing that the "red flower will bloom" in that new, socialist paradise, he thought that he heard the footsteps of his missing brother, caught a glimpse of him in the twilight.

He sang the song at the top of his lungs as sparks sputtered all around and stars fell into the black marsh water, blinding him so he could not see very clearly: were the fairies really flying there, on the other side of the water? The jovial cook at the Home, who came from a Slovakian village, had told them the story. She also remembered the legend of the count's naked, white daughter riding a black horse on the Island, thereby inhabiting the dreams of Danilo Aratsky and the other boys in Jasenak where they were being raised to become decent people, the new people of a new society where fraternity and equality would reign. That was why someone's name, religion and ethnic group were not important. There was no god so why should someone's religion be important? But then there were no devils or angels either, thought Danilo, and this came into conflict with his grandfather Luka Aratsky's assertion that everyone was born with an angel on their left shoulder and a devil on their right shoulder. And God's eye was all-seeing and great was His mercy.

"Do you think so?" asked the little blond-haired Jew, Sara Cohen, taking him aside, shaking her head dubiously as skepticism grew in her dappled eyes.

She had been brought from another home. Although younger than many, Sara knew her name, who her parents were, and that they were no more, and her brother Eleazar was also gone because the rats in the cellar where they were hiding ate his ears and toes, which is why she never saw him again.

She never saw her parents again either, they were taken to Jasenovac and no one ever came back from there. Or her maternal grandfather who was called Eleazar like

Sara's little brother and collected clocks. The rats ran around like crazy when the clocks chimed the hour and she had been afraid that they would bite off her ears or little fingers. Her toes were protected by white patent leather shoes but she was still afraid to fall asleep because the rats did not sleep at night. Their red eyes followed her every move. That was why she did not sleep now either, and if she fell asleep she woke up screaming.

Little Rusty tried in vain to convince her that the war was over, the survivors would exterminate the rats, her parents would come back, so it made no difference whether or not rats sleep at night.

"That day will never come!" whimpered the little girl. "Some rats will survive, some always survive..."

Little and skinny, freckled and blond, Sara repeated that "rats don't sleep at night" and followed Danilo like a shadow, sobbing as soon as the lights went out in the dormitory, unaware that Little Rusty felt every one of her sobs like the stab of a knife.

"That's because you're in love with Sara Cohen, just like she's in love with you..." teased Aaron Levi, the only little Jewish boy in Jasenak and Danilo's only friend. Was he related to Sara Cohen? Danilo was unable to find out. "In love? What does it mean to be in love? Probably nothing important," mumbled Little Rusty. "Veta was in love with Petar's friend Boško, and then forgot him."

Little Rusty's heart quivered when Sara Cohen sneaked into his bed. Frightened that the rats would bite off her ears, she put a pebble under his pillow – to remember her if she disappeared one day, if someone came to get her.

And that's what happened. When the trains started running again, a tall, thin man followed the Red Cross lists and came from somewhere abroad, looked at the number on Sara's forearm and, claiming he was her father's brother, took her away from Jasenak.

No one from Jasenak ever saw her again or found out whether or not rats sleep at night. Whining like an abandoned puppy, Danilo grieved for Sara at length, but was careful that Aaron or any of the social workers never noticed that his pillow was wet with tears every dawn.

Sara's uncle found her by the number on her arm. Most of them did not have a number on their arm and did not know their real name, because they were given names by the people who brought them to the homes for war orphans, the social workers, or

personnel. It was only when their parents or relatives found them that they would learn their name and where they were from. And some never found out.

Aaron Levi, Danilo's friend and protector, was one such case. He had doubted for years that it was his real name, although he was certain he was Jewish. He had been found in the attic of a destroyed building in Belgrade. Both boys were freckled, both had red hair, they were different from all the other children and protected each other. They included Gojko Garača in their small circle; like them he had no one of his own.

* * *

Many years later, Danilo Aratsky read in a holy book that "each man will be like a shelter from the wind", but he did not believe it. When they took Aaron away, he had no one left as a shelter or friend. Groups of children replaced each other at Jasenak, he was left alone... Considerable time had to pass before Petar found him in the Home in Jasenak, on his way back from training in Russia.

"Hey, Little Rusty," he said with a hug, but Danilo did not recognize him. He saw the tall young man in a tight leather coat, *without a leg*, as a stern officer who was driven in a military jeep, not his quiet brother who had defended him from the little street hooligans and hunted wild ducks and fished for carp.

It was not until he put his officer's cap on Danilo's head and pulled the visor down that he realized it really was Petar: he had done the same thing before with his high school cap.

Danilo could tell from the administrator's and social workers' behavior that Petar had become something big. Voices were hushed in his presence as they praised Danilo's progress in school and his hard work on the Home estate, unusual at that age. Such a dear, sweet boy! That's what Danilo was! They repeated their praise until Danilo turned red and Petar said:

"You shouldn't exaggerate, comrades! He still has a lot to learn!"

"If Comrade Commissar thinks so..." agreed the administrator ingratiatingly as he escorted Petar out of the Home.

Commissar? What's a commissar? That word confused Danilo. No one in the Home was a commissar. No one had a jeep and a driver. A commissar must certainly be something big. Was he good as well? The administrator, social workers and even the

cleaning ladies seemed to be afraid of Petar. Why? He was tall and blond. Come on, how many tall blond men were there in the world! Why should Petar be something special? He blew up railroads and munitions depots, but others did too...During one of his visits, Danilo tried to find out if the legends about Petar really were true.

“They are!” said Petar tersely. “They had to be!” he said frowning, and fell silent.

As of that moment Danilo thought he saw a halo of splendor and glory around the head of the young winner without a leg. *Then he started dreaming about him, not as a lad with serious blue eyes, but as a giant that moved mountains and ordered the sun to shine.*

When Danilo woke up, the sparks of Petar’s nighttime splendor inadvertently rubbed off on him and he got used to the fact that, next to Petar, all his sins would be forgiven and every commendation would be deserved, simply because Petar existed.

“They’ve spoiled you, buddy!” said Petar during one of his visits to Jasenak. “I’d better take you to Belgrade before you turn into a monster...”

Danilo barely slept that night from the excitement. He was bothered by the croaking frogs, buzzing mosquitoes, voices of the fishermen after catfish where there used to be fields of grain until someone, who knows who, decided to open the water gates, flood the fields and plant rice that gave three crops a year. What crops!

Fighting with the ooze and leeches, the citizens of Jasenak planted rice and sent a report to the Party District Committee that the plan had been exceeded 280%. Then they waited impatiently to celebrate Rice Day as they carefully supervised the planted areas that were turning, day by day, into a reed-covered marsh.

Even though everyone realized that nothing would come of the rice, Rice Day was triumphantly celebrated. After an opulent lunch, the high-level guests did not even mention rice: the venison in red wine was enough to make them forget something even bigger than rice, which would have nothing to do with the bottom of the Pannonian Sea. Or the former sea would have nothing to do with rice, so there was too much sun one year and not enough water the next. The only thing in rich abundance was curses from the farmers whose fields had been turned into a huge pond inhabited by marsh birds and frogs.

* * *

Curled up in his little bed in a room packed with another three dozen wooden cots, Danilo tried in vain to sleep: moonlight was crawling through the middle of the room like a silver snake and little Garača whined in his sleep.

Then, fully awake, as hard as he tried he could not imagine Belgrade. Was it bigger than Karanovo, he asked his brother, who laughed and said that the number of houses in the city and the number of people in the houses could not be established. But Danilo would have a room of his own and go to a school where foreign languages were taught. Oh, oh, all the things that Little Rusty would have to learn to become an engineer or doctor, like Luka Aratsky. Or maybe something even greater! You never knew what the future held for a little lad with gray eyes and red hair.

It was best to forget Karanovo and everything that happened in Karanovo. He would have lots of friends in Belgrade and would not whine after Sara Cohen. And he might even run into her! If he could see giraffes in Belgrade, why couldn't he see little freckled Sara Cohen? Danilo was to get ready: Petar would come for him in a week...

But weeks passed, three months passed, and there was no sign or word from Petar. Danilo felt fear growing imperceptibly inside him. What had happened to Petar? And why was he no longer greeted with smiles when he entered the cafeteria or went to choir practice? He soon realized that his life had turned upside down, no one was satisfied with what he did anymore. His plate, which had been next to the oldest social worker's plate until then, slid to the bottom of the table. His bed was moved from a room facing south to a dark outbuilding with a cellar full of mildew and rotten potatoes. And then his place in the classroom was changed. Instead of the first row, he was put in the last row, by himself.

What had he done to make them all avoid him? And why wasn't Petar there? At night, lying with open eyes, he thought praying to God could save him, but prayers were forbidden in the Home. People who prayed were either fools or enemies of the people, they had been told. Nevertheless, Danilo could not forget his grandfather's words that God was everywhere and in everything: in the grass, the stars, the little marsh fairies, cats, flowers, children, shells. He should not listen to foolish people chattering about his red hair bringing bad luck. Having such hair was the same as having a crown.

In the Home near Jasenak, Danilo Aratsky thought he could see his grandfather walking straight to him on a path made of moonlight, saying, “The Eye of God is all-seeing. The only thing it cannot see is women’s souls. Made out of mud and evil, women carry two devils in their souls. Not even they know when one of them will wake up. A woman hiding an angel in her soul is rarer than a dog that doesn’t bark and a cat that doesn’t meow. Even then, a devil is always somewhere close, crouching and waiting. You’ll discover that one day...”

* * *

“Has a Horned One moved inside me?” Danilo wondered, waking up.

“Devils are prepared for anything. They don’t choose the moment they enter a man’s soul and turn him into a monster ready to kill tiny, unborn children that don’t know what a flower is because they’ve never smelled one, don’t know what the sun is because they’ve never seen it!” said Luka Aratsky, caressing his redhead grandson. He bowed his head and fell silent, just as he had fallen silent and stayed silent for a long time when Petrana got into a car that was driven by a black man, leaving on the table a glass of red wine and a yellow rose whose fragrance killed the butterflies.

* * *

*They will do great harm while
saying: this is for your own good.*

Novica Tadić

Places surrounded by water are full of frogs and devils. Danilo remembered his grandfather’s words as he watched the children’s home in Jasenak, surrounded by the flowing and stagnant Tisa, turn into a marsh – more and more like the one with the Aratskys’ forgotten Farm on its edge – inhabited by wild ducks, turtles and water snakes. But mostly frogs and devils disguised as wild boars, which is why the Home guard kept a rifle next to the head of his bed.

When Danilo went deep into the marsh to fish for pike and carp, he expected to see devils and a white deer with dragonflies flying around it. He did not catch sight of any devils. They might not have been there and they might have been invisible like the one inside of him, which was why any damage done in the Home was ascribed to him:

regardless of whether he was present or not, he was guilty, and he would be guilty to his last breath!

“Petar is an enemy of the people...” he heard the social workers whispering as they followed Danilo’s every move, and being an enemy of the people was terrible, worse than being a devil. That was why the boys in Karanovo had looked not at him, but through him, ordering: “Let Danilo, son of Stevan, kneel and walk like a dog!” And Stevan was an enemy of the people too, and it was a lie to say he escaped. He had been released, only him, and everyone knows who they released.

Everyone except for Aaron and little Gojko Garača, who idolized Danilo, maintained that Petar was an enemy of the people, the most hardened. One of those that should be beaten to death like a sewer rat. Curled up in bed, barely holding back a scream, Danilo felt sweat trickling down his spine. Stalin was Satan and something even worse than Satan. That was why his picture had been taken off all the walls and burned on a pyre; the Home children danced around it until dawn when the moon appeared in the sky, large and as yellow as a huge melon. Didn’t Petar understand that? Where was he?

There were places to reeducate people like Petar, somewhere on mountaintops in eternal ice and snow. There were also dungeons, but no one knew where they were. From the allusions and interrupted conversations whenever they caught sight of him, Danilo Aratsky realized that he too was that “enemy of the people”. It could not be any other way since his father was Judge Stevan Aratsky, his grandfather had been a colonel in the Royal Army and his brother was Petar Aratsky. Mice gave birth to mice, snakes to snakes, the devil spawned devils, and enemies of the people – enemies of the people.

Knowing that he was one froze him to the core.

You could get rid of the devil with herbs and magic. But nothing could get rid of an enemy of the people! That was why they were not forgiven even when they were dead. Didn’t Bela Roža hang for days in the middle of Jasenak because of the high school kids who were pushed under the ice, until he started smelling so bad that even the dogs gave him a wide berth? Someone had nevertheless managed to take off his shoes and shirt, so Bela Roža swung naked and barefoot for years in the dreams of the Jasenak children. Did Aaron and Gojko Garača remember him like that, wondered Danilo, feeling their presence like a shield even in his worst nightmares.

“Forget Bela Roža, buddy!” cautioned Petar on his second or third visit to Jasenak. “And forget everything you saw in and remember about Karanovo.”

But that was easier said than done.

The high school kids who had been pushed under the ice appeared when he was awake and asleep, just like Veta, who disappeared under the ice in the third year of war.

Just when he thought they would not be coming anymore, they would return and, together with Veta, stand next to his bed, wet and shivering, with hoarfrost in their hair and eyelashes.

He wanted to tell Petar about it. Tell him that rice would not grow because the farmers whose fields were flooded had cursed it, but Petar wasn’t there and the Home children were quickly getting ready to hunt frogs in the marsh that had turned into frog paradise instead of a rice paddy.

“Finally getting some use out of the frogs!” said the administrator, jumping for joy when a letter came from the Party District Committee saying that the Home for War Orphans in Jasenak was being included in the hunt for frogs, to be exported to Italy.

After one of the children resisted, and was punished, no one had any more questions, so the great frog hunt formally started with music, drums, the children’s delighted squeals, the farmers’ dubious looks, and campfires. Again there was “paradise on earth awaits us”, again the “red flower will bloom”, again Danilo sang with the others, stammering, determined to show his loyalty in the hunt. He was fast and not afraid of leeches or water snakes. He had lost his fear of them on the Aratsky Farm in the marsh. Pantelia hunted them skillfully, made stew out of them, and sometimes roasted them on sticks. Stevan was the only one of the Aratskys who would even taste them. And yet, there were people who loved frog legs...

As he wove little baskets out of willow switches to hold the frogs until they were put in barrels and then on train cars for Italy, Danilo thought happily that the Committee had not ordered something impossible. Twenty barrels of frogs, perhaps a bit more...

“Tsk, what’s that!” said the administrator. “There are over three hundred boys and girls in the Home, it’s located on the edge of a marsh, and there are more frogs in the marsh than stars in the sky.” And then, the children were excited and ready to make a name for themselves by hunting frogs. The administrator could already hear the

approving voices of the Party Committee members and the roaring trains taking the frogs to Italy. His predecessor had received the Order for Services to the Nation and not a single stalk of rice ripened. Now frogs would repair the damage! They sure would!

And then came the critical moment. Equipped with baskets and lanterns, the children headed out to hunt. They did not ask Danilo to go with them. But they did not make him scrub pots with the cooks either. Slowly, like a lone dog, he went after the delighted children, armed with a net and a basket, paying no attention to the ooze, mosquitoes and leeches.

In the silence broken by croaking frogs, the only sounds were splashing feet, rustling reeds and the Home children's joyful shouts. They were thrilled by the frog foolishness and the increasingly heavy baskets. Lanterns passed through the reeds like fireflies as the night birds called. The social workers did not have to rush the children. The hunt proceeded with an excited uproar and hopes aflame. It was not until the first rays of sunlight that the frogs' foul play became apparent: fleeing through the cross-bars of the baskets, they had all gone back to the ooze, and disappeared in the reeds.

The entire catch consisted of several perch, a carp and two wild ducks that somehow flew into a basket, along with several frogs. Seeing this, the administrator swore gruffly and ordered those several frogs thrown back in the river along with the fish and ducks. His ears were ringing, the frogs were croaking at him derisively and the cars with empty barrels were waiting on the track. Along with the morning marsh mists, the Order for Services to the Nation disappeared and so did hopes that the plan would be surpassed and the frogs on their way to Italy. How could he justify such a shortfall to the Party Committee? How could he give up? How could he expose the social workers and children to the mosquitoes and leeches again? And yet!

"We will catch the frogs," he said succinctly, "or that will be the end of us! Let the children catch up on their sleep today!" He made a decision: "We'll think up something to replace the baskets and wipe out that gang of frogs!"

"M-m-maybe we c-c-could use onion and p-p-potato bags?" proposed Little Rusty.

His proposal was accepted, but no one said "thank you!" And why should they? Maybe it was his splashing that had dispersed the frogs? The enemy never rests! The

administrator gave Danilo a probing look, making him turn pale, then red. The name did not even have to be spoken to him. He and the administrator and all the others knew what was going on... He would always be guilty for everything and there would be no forgiveness.

“Maybe running away is the solution,” thought Danilo in alarm. “It’s better to disappear among the willows and water lilies.” At least he would not be blamed without reason, and something would grow out of him. Nothing disappears completely. Irises grew on the place where he had buried the dead hedgehog, Petrana’s yellow rose grew on Dr. Luka Aratsky’s grave. The next evening when the children went out to hunt frogs, he would run away!

Where would he go? He did not know. It was his first escape!

* * *

Where did all those years disappear?

Who will remember them when we are gone?

Czeslaw Milosz

“Well, did you run away?” Danilo heard Veta’s mocking voice in the gloom of a New York hotel. “And can anyone ever run away from the judgment they received?” Water dripped off Veta’s thick dark hair, making a little puddle in the room on the 17th floor.

The woman in bed next to him mumbled in her sleep. Veta waited as immobile as a statue and the puddle at her feet spread out. Back when she had fallen through the ice as she ran to the river, she had been wearing winter shoes, maybe ankle boots. Why was she now barefoot? The sound of water dripping from her hair got louder. Drip-drip! How long would that sound go on? Good Lord, how long had she been in the water if the river managed to pull the boots off her feet? Or was he just imagining that she was barefoot?

Danilo Aratsky bent down and stared at her small foot, dark-blue and bare. Barefoot indeed. “And when the ice underneath her broke, she was wearing shoes!” was written on page 133 of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, with the additional note by the “Whisperer from the Lord’s Dream” that “as she wandered through eternity, cold and the sound of dripping water were her constant companions...”

That sound would follow Little Rusty wherever he went, along with the questions: “If Karanovo remembered that beautiful Veta, frightened to death, fled through the misty twilight from the soldier who was on guard in front of the Aratsky house, seven steps forward, seven back, then again, why hadn’t anyone tried to save her? Why hadn’t anyone stretched out their hand when her bloody fingers tried to hold onto some thicker ice near the bank? If there were any eye-witnesses at all?”

It was noted in the *Karanovo Chronicles* that Private Hans Miller, stumbling, drunk, had run after Veta. His body was not discovered until spring, tangled in the willow roots, and was identified by a metal tag “stating, along with his first and last name, that he was born in Lübeck less than 18 years ago”. Sent to the front to save the honor and glory of the Fatherland...

Following the winding path of his fate, during his third escape, on the way to see Aaron, Danilo reached Lübeck, the city of Thomas Mann and Private Hans Miller, whose madness had driven the prettiest girl in Karanovo to her death, green-eyed, ethereal Veta with the face of beautiful Petrana and the soul of a dove.

Dazed by the gusts of Baltic wind on the shore of the turbulent, mysterious sea, Danilo Aratsky tried to imagine what Hans Miller would look like if he had returned to Lübeck. Young boys his age on the Baltic wore dark-blue, double-breasted pea coats with gold metal buttons and caps with earflaps just like their Hanseatic ancestors, blond and tall. Hans Miller certainly would not look like he did when he went under the ice. The bright color of his eyes would be gone and so would his slender figure, and he would have the wrinkles of a middle-aged man.

Why did Danilo only remember him as an eighteen-year-old with an immature face? He heard him pacing seven steps forward, seven back, then again... *He must have aged after all these years...*

* * *

“*No, he didn’t!*” Danilo Aratsky heard Veta’s hushed voice in the crowd of ghosts on the 17th floor of a New York hotel. “*The dead don’t age! I will be sixteen forever! I will never have wrinkles. Or gray hair. I will never lose my luxuriant hair!*” Veta laughed somewhat childishly, shook her locks of hair and sprinkled Danilo’s face. “*I will stay the way I was forever, while you grow old, Little Rusty...*” Veta’s voice faded and the woman

behind Danilo's back wriggled in her sleep. Afraid that she would wake up and dispel the Aratsky ghosts, Danilo quieted down. But the woman only stuck her head under the pillow and kept on snoring, drowning out the sound of people and cars down in the street.

Veta was now standing right next to the head of Danilo's bed, stock-still. Next to her was Luka Aratsky, then someone whose face he could not make out, then Stevan and Petrana, Natalia with the twins, and on her left side was Simka Galičanka and a whole horde of men and women, young and old, whose faces he could not recognize from family pictures and even less remember their names. Mihailo and Petar were not in the crowd of Aratskys. Mihailo always got there last. Petar never got there at all!

* * *

"Just look at how many of you there are!" said Danilo Aratsky in amazement, watching the sky over the East River turn a copper color (was it the reflection of a fire?). "Aren't you enough for each other?" he choked and the woman pulled her head out from under the pillow, snuffling like a strangled cat! But she did not wake up this time either.

The Aratsky ghosts came closer and then moved away.

"Where's Stevan holing up? He was here a minute ago..."

"So what?" said Veta, interrupting him. "Everyone doesn't necessarily have to hear what he's saying to his seventeenth soul..."

As usual, Veta was protecting her father.

"Good Lord, do the dead protect each other too?" said Danilo, chuckling softly. "Do you think he's drunk again?" He turned toward his mother and Natalia took a step backward, saying sharply:

"What good would it do me to think?"

Danilo Aratsky felt a shudder go through him. In the marsh and later, Stevan only talked to his souls when he was dead drunk. He might have changed his habits in death, or was he still drunk? If the dead did not age, if they stayed the same as they were when they passed, why wouldn't they stay sober or drunk? *Probably drunk and probably arguing with one of his immortal souls, Stevan reached the willow. Was he aware that it was the last stop where he would get off forever?*

Looking at his mother, Danilo smiled inadvertently. Small and thin, even in death she did not accept the fact that Veta died hungry, Little Rusty was taken to a home for

war orphans, and Petar disappeared on one of the intricate ways of the Lord... perhaps in his heart still attached to Nega who ran Luka Aratsky's household and after his death stayed to take care of Stevan, Natalia and their children.

Plump, warm, ready to listen, Nega was Petar's sole confidant. Under no circumstances would she say what the two of them talked about for hours or whether Petar had a girlfriend and where he went every night. Stevan teased Natalia about it, saying his son preferred Nega to his own mother.

When everything in the Aratsky house had been sold or exchanged for food, Natalia expected Nega to go back to her family in the village. But Nega kept on coming, bringing milk for the twins, cheese and bacon for His Honor the Judge, cooked corn for Danilo and Veta, everything she could think of for Natalia, leaving out Petar because he would not take anything he could not reimburse, even though from an early age he loved her more than his father and mother. Nega knew this and so did Natalia – who was more jealous of Nega than anyone else in the world, but her attempts to get rid of Nega, saying that there was not much work in the house so her help was not needed, failed.

"There's always work in big houses like this!" replied Nega kindly. "There's so much work just with the twins and His Honor, goodness me!" Nega held her ground, pretending not to hear that they had nothing to pay for her services. As though she didn't know that! Several generations of her family had worked for the Aratskys. She had worked for Dr. Luka Aratsky her whole life, so the Aratsky house, in a way, was her home. When you work for your home, does anyone ask whether or not you are paid?

Gazing into Nega's large, brown eyes, Natalia did not know what to reply. Nega smiled: her discussion with Natalia Aratsky was finished once and for all, and she stayed with her during all those terrible times, pitying Natalia, and Stevan even more. With a chill in her heart, Nega followed his conversations with the souls that only he could see and hear, not understanding what that handsome, kind man had gone through that made him lose himself as though committing suicide, piling up souls like a curse.

* * *

Natalia linked each one of Stevan's new souls to another adulterous affair, not accepting his explanation that when it came to women, a man was simply unable to control his actions. The position of the stars at his birth had crossed the sign of Scorpio, a

sign of passion and glory on the fields of love and war, which was why he could not resist a single woman. And it was a known fact that women were a pox and Scorpio strongly affected the distractions of love.

So whenever Stevan Aratsky tried a case, the courtroom was full of women of all ages and professions. It made no difference whether the trial was for parricide, gambling debts, infanticide, a plowed up furrow, a stolen rooster or a crime of passion caused by jealousy; women thronged to see and hear how Judge Stevan Aratsky would try and sentence the case.

* * *

Curled up in his mother's arms, even though Danilo was young he felt Natalia trembling with love and hate, mixed inside her like salt and vinegar. Over time, she stopped trying to distinguish which of the two feelings prevailed, but she kept going to Stevan's trials regularly, amazed by the women's folly and her own inconsistency – she swore every evening next to a lighted icon candle that the courtroom had seen the last of her, and then entered it nevertheless among the first, loathing herself and the women around her: civil servants, teachers, nurses, housewives, young girls, little girls, and even ladies well along in their years.

After the trial she sobbed in her sleep, but not a word of reproach or jealousy crossed her lips.

"A trial is a trial!" she would reply whenever Stevan asked her what she thought about the accused, the sentence or the pardon.

Little Rusty had the vague feeling that his father was actually asking about himself, about the audience's enthusiasm. Natalia's declining to give him even one word of praise was a kind of spite that Danilo was unable to understand, both then and later.

* * *

And war was almost at the door, even though everyone said it would not break out. There had been enough wars. In the last one, the Great War, one-third of the population had died. So who needed it? Natalia consoled herself with the thought that at least this time the Aratskys would avoid getting killed: Petar was still a boy, Luka Aratsky was an old man, Stevan was a judge as well as a reserve captain, he would get out of it somehow, although Luka maintained that war could not be avoided: men were

incorrigible fools... That was what he said, and nonetheless he was the first to catch the hand grenade and run under the tank.

Whether it was to save the children targeted by the grenade or to clear the name of his son Stevan and Karanovo – no one could say for sure...

* * *

It was not until much later, on the Aratsky Farm in the marsh, in a clear-headed moment, that Stevan Aratsky realized the magnificence of his father's action. Tears rolled down his cheeks for the first time for a father he barely thought about while he was alive. His father certainly had not been happy with Petrana, but he never spoke a word of reproach or looked for happiness with another woman. Recognition meant less to him than a verbena flower or shoot on an oak tree. So what had led him to die like a soldier in a war that was spreading like the plague across Europe? Despite all his efforts, Stevan could not understand that. What had burned in the old man, bravery, compassion, a sense of honor, what?

Upright and silent, blond and tall, Petar was the spitting image of Luka Aratsky, but he did not have the pure goodness of the old man. Because of his youth or Petrana's tainted blood that flowed, through Stevan, into the veins of Petar, Veta, the twins and Little Rusty. Where did he get his red hair? No one in the Aratsky family had red hair, from the first ancestor who fled the forests of Zakarpattia and stopped on the banks of a powerful Pannonian river. The origin of Danilo's red hair tormented Stevan for a long time. It was not until he read a crazy book that said every child carries several tens of thousands of ancestors inside them that he realized why there was no pure blood: neither Russian nor Turkish nor Hungarian nor Serbian. At the thought of the hordes of different clans that had thundered through the Pannonian Plain, warring and raping, pride in the pure blood of the Aratskys waned in Stevan for all time.

And who could keep their “pure blood” when Karanovo had been destroyed and rebuilt several times every century? Who said: “This child is of my seed”? Hadn’t Mihailo and he, Stevan, fathered a dozen children? But none of them had red hair, not one the ability to turn invisible as they followed those they loved like a shadow...

* * *

Natalia did not follow anyone, Petrana even less. They were their own person and lived for themselves in a world of their own without letting anyone in, whether out of fear or pride, Danilo did not know. Petar and Veta were similar to them. They did not become attached to people or things and even less to flowers and animals, like Little Rusty (who was followed by tortoises, dogs and cats, as was Luka Aratsky).

For a while, Stevan Aratsky thought that Danilo was the only human being who never fell asleep without a dog or cat on guard next to his bed or under his bed. At the Farm in the marsh it was a hedgehog and white rabbit with red eyes, which was why Danilo refused to eat anything with even a tiny bit of meat.

Surrounded by reeds and frogs, Stevan did not know this at the time, and it would not have helped even if he did. He had to hide because disbanded armies had started wandering around the marsh, killing whoever they found...

They were the infamous black *troika*, leaving corpses, fear and terror behind them. Natalia did not know whether crazy Pantelia belonged to one of them and would not allow herself to admit it, although stories were circulating in Karanovo and the surrounding villages about a young man with light hair, a long beard and goose-like pale blue eyes who was ruthlessly killing people for no reason, but would not let anyone who wandered into the marsh kill a frog or a sparrow, because they too were “God’s creatures”.

The description given by those who had seen him fit Pantelia, and the man’s concern for “God’s creatures” fit Pantelia’s preaching about the structure of God’s world in which lizards, goats and humans have the same meaning.

“If Pantelia is doing the killing,” said Natalia in horror, “there is no God, no light illuminating man’s soul!” Laughing derisively at herself, she remembered how she had believed that the little souls of children who left this world before they had a chance to know fear and sin lived in Pantelia’s gentle heart.

* * *

One cool autumn morning, when Dojčin, the dog and boat disappeared in the white mist of noxious fumes, as though swallowed up by the *darkness*, fear started to worm its way into Natalia. Was Pantelia that darkness? Footprints of goat hooves and enormous male feet were found in the mud around the Farm. That day, Natalia was

frightened to death for the first time, and she trembled. Those impressions could only belong to the Prince of Darkness or Pantelia and his goat. If he had rowed off somewhere with Dojčin and his dog, what was stopping him from doing the same with Veta, Stevan and Danilo? And then slaughter them like chickens. Not right away. But certainly in three weeks. There was *always a three-week interval* between the crimes proliferating around Karanovo.

Danilo and Veta understood from Natalia's hurry to gather together the more valuable things from the Farm that they would soon be going back to Karanovo, not knowing that they were in a tight spot between starving in Karanovo and Pantelia's knife in the marsh.

* * *

Stevan sensed that something was happening and when he was *told* that everything might still be all right, the pendulum of hope stopped somewhere between fear and joy. The album with postage stamps was once again in front of Danilo and Stevan. Eager, without money and tickets, they traveled throughout the world, stopping for a while in Venice, then India and Australia among the kangaroos and koala bears. The pyramids of ancient Egypt and glass towers of New York stirred Little Rusty's hopes that he would see them one day. What excited him the most was the carnivorous orchid from South America, the blue Russian cat that came with a stamp from some country or another, and a pygmy that everyone claimed did not exist until Luka Aratsky said:

"Why wouldn't it exist? The earth is full of wonders."

Serene. Resigned to life and his numerous souls, Stevan described to Little Rusty the cities he had seen in his early youth: Budapest, Prague, Vienna and Paris, but also cities that he still intended to see. Many years later Danilo, would get to know them while searching for his missing brother.

Suddenly, late autumn reached the Farm. The rustling of the reeds grew louder and louder in the wind, bringing the voices of the Aratskys who had come there long ago to hunt wild ducks, as a thin crust of ice formed among the yellowed reeds, and fern frost covered the windows.

* * *

In the long New York night, Danilo Aratsky saw the Farm again and the frost-flowers on the window panes; before his eyes rose the stamp album that for some reason he had packed along with his stethoscope, the *Karanovo Chronicles*, family photographs and Damian's white rabbit. Where he would stop and whether a place existed where he would be received without suspicions he did not know. He had not known it back then either when he tried to run away from the Home in Jasenak on the night of the Great Frog Hunt. He was caught on the other side of the Tisa and placed in the former stables of a count transformed into a center for refugees, the homeless, drunks and children "without parental care". He ran away again several weeks later and thus began his relocations from one home to another.

Finally, he stopped in one of them on the banks of the Tisa, afraid that even if Petar was released, he would not find him. The scream he let out when he heard his home in Karanovo was gone did not summon his missing brother. But when Danilo no longer saw Petar's face even in his dreams, Aaron Levi appeared on the doorstep of the home near Tisa and the world shone with all the colors of the rainbow.

"Do you know how long I've been looking for you?" Aaron asked when they went out to light the campfires. "In the end I thought I'd never find you..."

"Well, it's not me you found!" whispered Little Rusty. "I'm not the same anymore..."

"None of us is the way we used to be. Or ever will be..."

* * *

Staring at the spectral tops of the New York towers with cars gliding beneath them, Danilo Aratsky tried to forget Marta's voice and Rašeta's viperous eyes full of hatred – not only of young doctors and orderlies, but also patients whose parents or relatives brought them in for attempted suicide. "If they wanted to kill themselves, why didn't you let them do it? As it is, they're good for nothing..." The younger the patient, the more venomous were Rašeta's comments.

Parents and relatives were amazed at his words and wondered just where they had brought their sons and daughters, and what would become of them. The shrewder ones whisked their near and dear away immediately; others, tired of everything, left the young suicides to the mercy of fate and crossed themselves.

Filled with disgust, Dr. Danilo Aratsky followed Rašeta's increasing conflicts with the patients. Why had the man chosen a profession he hated and how had he managed to become director after working at the Clinic for just a few months? Danilo still did not know people advanced in certain systems.

The two of them had to come into conflict. And they did. First because of the eardrum; then because of the patient that disappeared without a trace; then there were the reports from those four unfortunate women. The final conflict broke out because of a young man who was brought to the hospital after trying to poison himself with antipsychotics.

Shy and frightened, the young man was silent most of the time; he slipped under the covers and waited there without moving until the lights went out. When he thought that everyone was asleep, he could be heard whispering to someone. Who was it? And what was he saying? For a long time he would not even tell Dr. Aratsky, although he accepted the doctor's advice and medicine. Was the young man perhaps a cohort of the patient on a "long, long street" looking for a familiar face, the patient who was cured and became more miserable than he had ever been before?

Careful not to repeat his mistake, Dr. Danilo Aratsky waited for the young man to seek help and say what he was hiding in the little cardboard box. But he remained stubbornly silent until, finally, one of the orderlies discovered that he was hiding a tame white mouse in the box: he got up with it in the morning, went to bed with it at night, poured milk for it in a chipped saucer.

The story of the white mouse reached Rašeta in a flash.

"Oh, wretched fellow!" said the director derisively. "Hand over the mouse!"

Calm and introverted until then, the young man jumped up and raised his fist menacingly, saying he would not turn over his best friend even if he were dead. And as far as being wretched was concerned, there was no greater, more pathetic wretch than Dr. Rašeta!

"Anyway, what do you want with my mouse? You don't have room for a mouse in your head or your heart or your pants..." The young man stopped to catch his breath and hid behind Dr. Danilo Aratsky's back, giving Rašeta the chance to accuse Danilo of

raising a rebellion among the patients, and speed up his departure from the hospital, Belgrade and the country.

The next day neither the young man nor the white mouse was there – not in the hospital compound or in the hospital. Whether he had fled or been transferred to another institution in the middle of the night, Danilo Aratsky never found out, and he did not know what to say to the boy's father when he came several days later to take his son home, saying "*Love for a white mouse is the same as all other loves. When there is no love, when the soul is sealed and empty, that alone is terrible.*"

* * *

On the nights after the argument with Marta and the hatred that Director Rašeta was disseminating throughout the Clinic, Danilo increasingly felt that there was no clearly drawn boundary between the world of the mentally disturbed and the world of the mentally healthy. Sleepless nights and doubts accompanied him wherever he went, just like the guilt and shame that had accompanied him from one home for war orphans to another.

“You’re guilty because you’re an Aratsky. Property like that doesn’t come from being honest!” said one of the social workers at the Home in Jasenak. Danilo could not remember why, but he remembered the man’s words. “Your offspring will be guilty too, to the ninth generation, and so will your dust, mixed in the earth with the roots of grass...”

“Is that right?” said Danilo, starting when he noticed the Aratsky ghosts pressing together on the 17th floor of a New York hotel, and Luka Aratsky’s voice came from somewhere in the corner, maintaining that Little Rusty was not guilty. He had neither deceived anyone nor harmed anyone. And the fact that he thought he was guilty was because they had been brainwashing him over the long years, starting the moment he was taken to Jasenak.

“They’ve been brainwashing you that you’re guilty your whole life, Danilo! Now let some god or devil release you from it, if possible ...” Luka Aratsky fell silent and Danilo inadvertently remembered reading a report with a list of enemies of the people, both from the left and the right: those who were guilty of pulling back, hindering the angel wings of the future from flying; those who were conscious of their guilt and those

who were not and in some roundabout way were guilty because their left eye was wall-eyed and their hair was longer than prescribed; they were guilty regardless of whether their guilt had a solid foundation or had been inserted in their head like “Our Father”, or the multiplication table; they were guilty because of the shape of their hand or the distribution of the stars at birth. They were guilty.

* * *

It did not take Danilo long to realize that he was not the only one weighed down by guilt. In the ward assigned to him, he quickly noted a drop in the number of kings without kingdoms from week to week, prophets and wizards were disappearing, and *the number of scapegoats was on the rise for all possible sins of this world, for all the evil that had been committed or not committed in the past.*

Danilo recognized Gojko Garača the moment he set eyes on him, although a good twenty years had passed between Gojko’s arrival at Jasenak, wrapped in an army blanket, thin and full of lice, and his entrance into the Psychiatric Ward, with former Little Rusty in charge. Dr. Danilo Aratsky had found out from the Home children he ran into here and there that Gojko Garača worked for the police, wore wooden-soled shoes that he refused to exchange for any other shoes, just like in the Home, and remembered the names of all the kids from Jasenak and many residents of other homes from Kanjiža to Belgrade.

During Dr. Danilo Aratsky’s first meeting with Gojko Garača, he thought he had a new Ruža Rašula before him, lost for good, even from himself. But it was not like that! Just as he had bravely put up with the children’s teasing at Jasenak and then cried in his sleep, Gojko calmly answered every question in the Ward, but ended every conversation with:

“I’m guilty! I’m to blame for Jela’s death and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to bring her back...”

Gojko saw the Home in Jasenak, the hospital and everything that surrounded him as a central point. The whole world was concentrated around it, all the villages, towns, missed meetings, deaths and births. It would be enough for one town, one river, one flower, one human being to disappear for the world to cease to exist. Time might be left, time in which a person was born or died, but that time would have no purpose or meaning, because every moment contained eternity, and the persons in that eternity were

just grains of sand. Jela Garača, known for her beauty and elegance, which was unusual for this region, was a somewhat brighter grain of sand. Gojko had met her in prison where he was a guard for so long that he forgot who was a convict and who was a guard. Prisoners came and went, and he stayed to guard the newer and newer lowlifes. Then suddenly, after he captured a fugitive on the lam for years, he became a major and was highly esteemed in the secret service.

Nevertheless, he never stopped loathing the commission of an offence, be it murder or petty theft. Nothing was petty. Taking money from a cash register could not go unpunished, regardless of the amount. That was why he never believed that Jela was not a thief: all right, she was proven to be wrongfully blamed, but out of three cashiers, why had they only suspected her? Particularly since there was a troublemaker lurking in every person. When it would appear was only a matter of time.

Quiet and gentle, Jela greeted him with a smile their first years of marriage, but her smile began to fade when she caught his probing look and the shadow of doubt crossing his face.

“You still don’t believe me?” she murmured once at the end of their second or third year of marriage.

“Why wouldn’t I believe you?” he asked, still deeply convinced that all those who had been behind bars wore their invisible trace.

She no longer dared to open her mouth; his silence punished her for not bearing children, for washing her hair (who was she washing it for?), for wanting to find a job, for the smile she greeted him with when he got home from work, for crying just before dawn, which he pretended not to hear, just as he pretended not to see her face light up at dusk.

For him, Jela was a shining light that contained all beginnings and all ends. Why hadn’t he believed her when she thanked him for saving her? Did there have to be a reason? Who knew what reason forced her to jump out an eighth-floor window. Leaving behind only a bloodstain, although the coroner’s report said that the injuries were internal, invisible to the human eye.

“Hah! Invisible, but fatal!”

When, without anyone asking, he announced that he was to blame for her death, everyone thought he had lost his mind. He was taken to a hospital where there were bars on the windows as well. At one moment he thought he saw Jela's eyes between the bars, blossoming in a dark-blue light, perfection free of shape or color. Good Lord, why do such eyes come into the world! So brilliant! Now extinguished, because she had spilled herself out an eighth-floor window, without a single word, as though spilling a glass of water. She left behind her the open window, fluttering curtains and *three* plates set for dinner.

The neighbors who broke into the apartment and the inspectors later on were perplexed by the *third* plate. Gojko and Jela did not have children, or relatives, or friends, because Gojko shunned any get-togethers except with the former children from the Home. Who was the *third* plate for?

The doctors, including Dr. Danilo Aratsky, wondered the same thing. They could not link Garača's stories about crystals with Jela Garača's death.

For him, Jela was the most sparkling crystal, and she had shattered just like that! "Both beauty and evil have a purpose!" she had said once, he forgot when. "What was the purpose of the children's death in Jasenovac, where my brothers and parents died?" he said, losing his temper.

For Gojko Garača, only petty crimes had any reason. The aggravated ones belonged to the realm of the unfathomable. Once, taken aback by the mild expression on the face of a young man who had killed his mother and father in the most brutal way, he asked the lad why he had done it, why he had needed to do it. The young man was silent at first and then looked at him in disbelief, somehow painfully surprised.

"I didn't need to!" he replied. "I had to..."

Turning toward Danilo, Gojko Garača smiled triumphantly and said: "I didn't need the *third* plate either, Danilo Aratsky. But I *had* to punish her! Are you being treated here too?"

"No, Gojko! I'm the one treating others here. Why did you have to punish her? She was extremely beautiful and she loved you. All the neighbors claim she'd been a good wife to you..."

“Maybe she was. But I had to punish her. No, not even punish her. Give her a *first warning*. Do you remember the first warnings in Jasenak?”

Danilo Aratsky could not remember and was amazed at how much Gojko Garača did, mixing the stories of the crystals with the frogs, the names of the convicts with the names of the social workers, shocked at the years that had passed in constant fear that one of the convicts would escape.

“Like the way the frogs escaped, remember? You see, I remember, just like I remember when the light in Jela’s eyes went cold. There was a reason, after all. Nothing happens by accident, neither guilt nor punishment.”

When he found Jela with a lover, he did not lose control, did not hit her, did not reproach her for anything, did not even laugh, although he could have. That bastard was twice Gojko’s age, ugly, married, without an arm. All the man did was get out of her bed like a sheepish dog and leave the room without a backward look, without a word, and never called again. So that’s how much he loved her! And Jela? Where had she found him? At the market? At the garbage dump? Gojko could have asked if he wanted to humiliate her, but he did not ask a thing, not that day or the next day, never. All he did was hand her a plate, as though in passing, “for that bum who disappeared” and order her to put this *third* plate next to their two at every meal, every day, unconditionally. Jela had not uttered a word. She just thinned her lips and looked to the side, as though not having the nerve to look at him. And he knew: she had the nerve, she did, but she did not *want* to look at him. *Those seemingly gentle types are inclined to all kinds of despicable things.* He had seen such women in prison. You would say they would not hurt a fly, and they were the inciters and executors of the most appalling crimes – poisoning, parricide, infanticide.

“Until *that one* comes back, you’ll set a place for him!” he said to her in a soft, even voice, and noted that she was shaking. He knew, just like she did, that *that one* would not return.

The dark-blue sparkle of crystals twinkled in her eyes for just a moment and then went out. If she repented, she might be able to become shining and untainted. The plate for *that one* would be a warning that she *had not*, although she was clearly becoming

more and more diaphanous and quiet with each day. Ah, the witch! Who was she trying to trick with her angelic face?

Satisfied and exultant at first, he noted that the *third plate* was gleaming at the head of the table next to their two plates. He sat at the table and ate, pretending not to understand why Jela was not eating, and then realized in horror that he almost wanted *that one* to come back and put an end to all this. Had he loved her so little? If he could, Gojko would have forced him to kneel and beg her forgiveness.

Gojko Garača had to eat humble pie. That other guy had robbed him without even needing what he took. His invisible presence in the Garača household was a thin, barely visible crack that could break a human heart.

Hating himself, he noticed that as soon as he entered the house he looked for the *third plate*. Good! She had not forgotten to set it, there it was! He took off his coat, sheepskin hat, his belt and revolver, sat at the table and opened the newspaper. But the white gleam of the *third plate* inserted itself between what he was trying to read and his eyes. Jela sat on the other side of the table, silent, as though a stationary partition lay them. *Not until the third month did he realize that the third plate was that partition.* Sometimes he thought the plate was not an object but an unwanted, stern observer. In order for conversation to flow between them, that observer had to be removed, and asking her to do it would be the same as admitting defeat.

Their eyes sometimes met over the *third plate*, giving rise to an ominous silence that Gojko Garača found more and more difficult to take. Except for Jela, he had never had anyone of his own for as long as he could remember. Had she ever been his?

“Why, she’s punishing *me!*” he thought when he noticed Jela watching him out of the corner of her eye with malicious curiosity. “What’s she looking at?” He turned toward the mirror and was shocked. Was that his face? Dark, inflamed eyes, wrinkled cheeks. No, that couldn’t be his face. A person doesn’t age that fast! And yet!

He went to work and came back just before midnight. He found his wife curled up asleep. Her body had become so light that the bed barely sagged. One hand had slid down the side of the bed, childishly helpless. He stopped, hesitated, and looked closely at her face, then stepped back in defeat: that face, those bones covered with skin, no longer belonged to this world.

That night it took him a long time to fall asleep. But when he did just before dawn, his dream was merciful. In it the table, as always – was set. There was a plate in front of her and another plate where he sat. There was no *third* plate. Everything was like before and he felt an indescribable joy flowing through him.

He went on a business trip that morning. When he got back, the whiteness of the *third* plate gleamed at him like a knife blade. “Getting your revenge, witch!” he thought and was confused to see all his shirts ironed and folded for the trip he would take that same night. He promised himself that when he got back he would throw that *third* plate out the window and bring back peace for her and himself.

He left town feeling eased and light. When he got back, the *third* plate would disappear and everything would resolve itself. Life would pick up from where it left off. As he got out of the car, he smiled involuntarily.

The hope of ending the war of the *third* plate, however, was thwarted. Fragile and quiet, Jela had nevertheless seen through his plans. And pre-empted him. He realized it at once, as soon as he saw the open window and blood on the sidewalk. Her body was already at the morgue and her soul was trying to find another world without betrayal or hatred or revenge.

The policemen who carried out the on-site investigation could not understand Gojko’s statement that he was to blame for his wife’s death. He had been on a trip, for heaven’s sake! When he got back Jela was already at the morgue. Why did Major Garača blame himself when everyone knew he wouldn’t hurt a fly? His wife jumped out the window. *All that was left of her was a bloodstain on the sidewalk and the table set for dinner. With three plates. Why? No one ever visited them. Where did the third plate come from?* The investigators shook their heads in wonder and then left it up to the psychiatrists to find out why Garača maintained he was guilty.

The neighbors had no explanation for what happened. Jela Garača’s elfin beauty attracted many men’s eyes. But she loved only Gojko, just as he loved her. The secret of the *third* plate was unresolved, although Officer Garača, former resident of the Home in Jasenak, noted in his letter to Dr. Danilo Aratsky: “The doctors figured me out. *The third plate killed Jela, but that plate had my face on it...*”

* * *

Gojko Garača disappeared from the hospital several months later. Why? No one was able to find out, even though his raving about crystals, the blue light of Jela's eyes and plate that killed never stopped. And the Guberevac Psychiatric Hospital staff's curiosity never waned about the policeman everyone tried to convince was not to blame for the death of a beautiful woman who, one day, for some reason, jumped out the window. Was he to blame because he married her?

Whether Gojko came to terms with his terrible memories or the *third* plate continued to haunt him was something Danilo never found out while he was in Belgrade.

Two years after Garača's disappearance, Danilo Aratsky received a carefully wrapped package addressed to him from New Zealand containing a police file with the unredacted names of informers, many of them unknown to him, many vaguely familiar, and many erased from his memory. But there were also names that made him wish he had died before Gojko Garača, as a sign of gratitude, sent him the carefully organized informer reports from friends, colleagues, casual acquaintances, women he loved but who obviously did not love him...

* * *

Of all the reports, those signed by Marta hurt him the most. Was it possible that she hated him that much? That her entire family hated him? And if that was true, why had she married him? Why have a child and deny it was his, even though the color of the boy's eyes and hair revealed his fatherhood more than all the birth certificates in the world? The questions multiplied, boiling down to one: Was it possible that during his life so many people had spied on him, hated him, despised him, and tried to destroy him, fire him from his job, take away his right to treat patients, his right to love, to live?

The longer he looked at it, the more the file resembled a precise anatomical atlas of his soul. It contained so many trivial, distant, half-forgotten and forgotten meetings, acquaintances, incidental women, false friends, ridiculous decisions, superfluous conversations, promises, denials, recurring dreams that brought back the memory of faces and voices whose nocturnal visits made his face glow the next day. But there were also recurring dreams that froze the blood in his veins, most often linked to the magnificent Aratsky house placed between city hall and the courthouse. After the last Allied

bombing, only a large hole was left filled with water, a dead pig floating on it. In his dreams someone was pushing him toward that hole as though wanting to topple him into the widening abyss. He did not see who was pushing him because every time he tried to turn around, the person behind his back disappeared, leaving him standing there, terrified, on the brink of the abyss with giant black birds flying out of it.

Then everything repeated. He had seen the hole where the powerful Aratsky house collapsed only once, briefly, because someone's hand pulled him to the side just as an older woman murmured:

"Hey, folks! Is that all that's left of the Aratskys?"

Little Rusty did not understand the meaning of her words until that terrible huge hole started appearing in his dreams, each time deeper and different, surrounded by mangled walnut branches, tongues of flame and a dreadful, incomprehensible silence.

But the pig at the bottom of the hole was always white and blown up like a balloon. "Where did that pig come from?" he wondered, until someone explained that the explosion had brought it from somewhere and thrown it into the hole of the former Aratsky house.

The "story of the white pig" was repeated several times in the *Karanovo Chronicles*, along with the question: "What happened to Natalia and the twins?" When the ruins were cleared, the rescuers managed to pull out several dead bodies buried under the beams and plaster, and Veta's calico cat, alive. "Natalia and the twins were not found, nor was anything found that would indicate they had been in the cellar when Karanovo was blown up." This instilled hope in the writer of the *Karanovo Chronicles* that Natalia Aratsky and the twins were still alive. Hadn't many people returned after long years of absence, when everyone thought that they would never see them again?

* * *

Many years later, when Danilo Aratsky's son Damian discovered his father's *Journal*, he realized that the former Little Rusty, along with many people in Karanovo, believed that one day, when least expected, he would see his mother's face.

Not until Natalia appeared in the procession of dead Aratskys, quiet and ethereal, did Danilo accept the fact that she was no longer among the living. The former Little Rusty, however, had no way of knowing when and where she disappeared from this

world until Gojko Garača, again from New Zealand, sent file no. 2 on citizen Danilo Aratsky. It contained information about the Jasenak Home children, where they were and what they were doing, and the unconfirmed report that a woman with violet eyes had died when two trains collided near Manheim. None of the survivors was able to identify her; nevertheless, passengers from the former Yugoslavia maintained that she got on the train in Belgrade, or maybe in Zagreb, with two children. When the train wreckage was cleared, the children were not found and neither were the dead woman's documents. Since no one was looking for her, she was buried as Unknown somewhere in Germany.

Gojko Garača did not seem to know if it was Natalia Aratsky and the twins. But he knew quite a lot about Aaron and Sara Cohen, despite the fact that both of them left Yugoslavia in the wave of mass departures and settled in Germany or America, God alone knew where! Whether they moved for better-paid jobs, because of saber rattling here and there, or perhaps from the need to forget their fear, hunger, loneliness, rejection – neither file no. 1 nor file no. 2 addressed to Dr. Danilo Aratsky gave a definite answer.

But as some sort of compensation, guilty conscience or whatever, along with file no. 2 was a list of the names, professions and addresses of the former Home children, giving some indication that the surviving little lice-ridden group had stuck together, helped each other and woven a solid web of contacts. They had become a scattered but well-connected family, mysterious and powerful, ready to help at any time and any place, from Yugoslavia to Australia.

Was Gojko Garača the main link in that chain ex officio or because he needed to create a large, enduring family, since all his relatives had been slain in the war?

Before or after the third plate?

Whether this happened before or after Jela, who left nothing behind her but a bloodstain on a Belgrade sidewalk – could not be seen from the files, nor did they give any indication as to what Gojko was doing in New Zealand. But the connection between Gojko and Danilo got stronger, despite all of Danilo's zigzagging across the world searching for Petar, whose name did not appear in the first package containing the *Danilo Aratsky File*. Was Petar mentioned in the second part where some paragraphs were redacted and some pages torn out? Was this to protect Petar, if he was still alive, or remove Danilo Aratsky's brand of "enemy of the people", which had followed him from

Jasenak to the Psychiatric Hospital in Guberevac where his path and Garača's crossed again? *After that, the designation "enemy of the people" no longer appeared with the name Danilo Aratsky nor did the mark "unsuitable" appear in his "character reference" drawn up in Jasenak.*

The former Little Rusty never found out how Gojko Garača managed to do Danilo Aratsky the biggest favor in his life. How and by what means the author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* found this out remained a secret. His notes on the *Danilo Aratsky File* sparingly state that "certain discrepancies exist" between the first and second parts, but that it was "best to consign some things to oblivion".

Perhaps!

* * *

In the thin gloom, the words "forget" and "remember" turned over and over in Danilo Aratsky's consciousness. Which one did Aaron Levi have in mind when he sent word that Danilo should settle his "family problems" and come to Hamburg.

They had grown up together in the Home for War Orphans and gone to Belgrade together where Aaron found a distant relative and Danilo was taken in by Nega's daughter who had married a bargeman. They enrolled in Medical School together. They chose psychiatry together.

Then their paths parted for a while. Aaron left with the first wave of "gastarbeiter" for Germany; Danilo, already married, stayed in Belgrade. What did Aaron have in mind when he advised him to think about what needed to be remembered and what needed to be forgotten? Gojko Garača would help him with the visa, but Danilo was not to come into any conflict with Marta and Rašeta.

Gojko Garača? What was going on between the former Home residents who were so different from each other? Why was Aaron thinking about Gojko Garača? Wasn't Garača in the United States? They hadn't been close in Jasenak or later in Belgrade, although Aaron Levi once told him, seemingly in passing, that there were people who knew more about the two of them than they knew about themselves. Had he been thinking of Gojko Garača? Or the files growing wildly like poisonous mushrooms in the Secret service basements? Until Gojko Garača became a major, he would not have had easy access to files, and nevertheless he sent Danilo those two volumes from New

Zealand full of malice, slander Rashedas's poisoned, fabrications, envy and evil written by the hands of people who barely knew him. What was he doing there, for the love of God, and how had he gotten there? The advice not to come into conflict with Rašeta and Marta was wise, but had come too late. The hospital director needed something terrible to happen on Dr. Danilo Aratsky's ward, so terrible that he would lose the right to cross the threshold of any hospital. Forever.

But Police Inspector Toma Bambur had looked at the incident with the patients with greater circumspection. The accused was a young man, a doctor, esteemed by both his patients and colleagues until he had come into conflict with the director. It would be hard for someone like that to attack four seriously ill women for no reason at all, and do what he was accused of doing in half an hour, between 11:00 and 11:30

"Hey, man!" said the policeman, looking at Danilo like an apparition. "There are women all over the place, why'd you need four crazy grannies!" Toma Bambur put the reports aside, stunned at the sudden, appalling laughter that erupted out of Danilo like a volcano. He waited for the convulsive laugh to stop, and then asked: "Did you or didn't you do it? Any man would have a hard time handling four grannies in such a short time..." The inspector's voice went back and forth from hot to cold, and he concluded that the best thing would be for Danilo to go on vacation, get out of the way somewhere until things calmed down.

"Where should I go?" wondered Danilo Aratsky.

* * *

"And yet you knew that you would run away!" He heard the admonishing voice of Luka Aratsky mixed with the sounds of the city that was waking up, stretching like a giant, terrifying beast. "They're back!" flashed through his mind. Memories of his first night in New York returned, when the bodies of the suicides slid down the walls of the Atherton Hotel. And now the circle had closed with his returning to New York, to a hotel, next to a woman whose loud breathing in her sleep was dispelling the Aratsky ghosts. He could not remember who she was. Maybe Aaron knew her, they had been at some drinking party together. The woman had probably brought him to the hotel from there, or had he brought her? He would see when it got lighter. The Aratsky clan would disperse by then in the light of the rising sun. Danilo Aratsky sighed. He had a difficult day ahead

of him, similar to the one when he had made up his mind to leave everything that constituted his life and headed down Balkanska Street; instead of the fragrance of the linden, his nose filled with the odor of the carnivorous orchid odor, Marta's odor.

"No, I'm not running away!" he had thought, trying to reassure himself. He was just getting out of the way for a short while, to organize his thoughts. But he suspected that he was deluding himself. "I will return", he repeated to himself, already on the step of the train for Dortmund. The train clattered as it rocked, dirty, with grimy windows and torn seats. Who knew where it had started, since most of the passengers were asleep. Their faces were tired and gray in the bluish light, moonlight streamed on the other side of the pane and in it sailed cornfields, sparse groves and villages squatting around church towers piercing the sky. And then out of the mist emerged a city illuminated by millions of lights, factory smokestacks, a river, a bridge over the river. The landscape turned alien and caused a shudder he was unable to explain until he suddenly realized that his father Stevan Aratsky had also fled, convinced that he was fleeing to freedom, and ended up on a willow branch.

* * *

What instrument are we two spanned upon?

What player holds us in his hand?

Rainer Maria Rilke

Where to? Where to? Where to? clattered the train wheels. Why? Why? Why? There were two more train changes in Hamburg, where on Jungfraustrasse, Aaron Levi discussed the dreams of elderly ladies twice a week... The other, real patients were on the other side of town in a gray building with bars on the windows. Many of them no longer knew who or where they were, or how long they had been where Dr. Aaron Levi spent five days a week trying to pull them out of the nightmare they had fallen into or perhaps been born with it?

When he stood in the corridor of the train, Danilo felt its clattering with all his body and was ready to jump out and roll to Karanovo, just like Stevan Aratsky had done long ago, conscious of the fact that he was fleeing without knowing where he was going or how his flight would end. Where to? Where to? Where to? It rang in his ears. And

why? Did changing places change anything in a person's life? Aaron Levi maintained that it did. Perhaps. It was another two hours to Hamburg. Good Lord, he was really running away! Was he running away or dreaming he was running away? When he woke up, everything would be like it was before. No. Nothing would be the same!

Gliding through the night, the train pulled villages and towns behind it. The colors and smells of the south were disappearing, the world he knew and loved was disappearing, and he dimly sensed that he would remember the moment he realized this when he had forgotten everything else linked to his departure from Belgrade.

Drizzling, gray rain started in Sežana, streaming relentlessly down the window pane as though it would never stop. Nevertheless, it stopped in Munich. Tickets and documents were checked, the little trunk was placed in the overhead net. He could stretch out. All the passengers from the seats facing him had gotten off right after Munich. He was alone.

“Do you think so?” He jolted at Veta’s voice and someone’s ghost seemed to fly in through the window. “So, they’ve come?” he murmured to himself. “Or maybe they never left me?” For a moment he thought that everything around him, including himself, was just part of a dream like the kind he heard from a patient in Guberevac, a dream where he was flying. He entered some deserted town eerily lighted by tongues of flame shooting up from the ground and down from the sky, swallowing house after house until the flier reached the last one and recognized his own home. Both he and the flaming fire stopped in front of it. “Maybe there’s someone in the house?” thought the flier, going up to the door, convinced that he would be saved if the door opened. He turned the doorknob and the same moment there was an explosion that destroyed the house. *“Run! As fast and as far as you can. Run as fast as your legs can carry you!” With his last ounce of strength he ran as though carried by the wind, realizing that it was actually the patient running who had lost both his legs on the Slavonian front The man was obsessed with dreams of flying and a bullet looking for his head.*

Danilo Aratsky realized in horror that when he nodded off for a moment *he had entered someone else’s dream* and could not get out of it. He started, rubbed his eyes. But it was not just a dream! He was on a train, the clattering train was taking him north. He

wished with his whole being that everything that was happening – the train on the way to Hamburg, him on that train... was truly a dream.

Only a door was left of the house. Everything else was in ruins, in the mist. Like a flash of lightning, he realized that he was that house, in ruins, in the mist, but he could still jump off the train at a station along the way and catch the first train for Belgrade where the lindens were in flower, making their stand against the gas fumes. Good heavens, did the tree still exist that Ruža Rašula pressed her face against, terrified that when the last words flew out of her, she would forget who she was?

In the clattering of the train, Dr. Danilo Aratsky heard her voice again, saw her almost childlike face framed by red hair, felt her fear that when the last words flew out of her memory like frightened birds – she would cease to exist; anyone might turn into Ruža Rašula, Scatterbrained, Lost Ruža. *In Karanovo and later on, he saw how easily those we love cease to exist: they get blown up, slide under the ice, swing on a branch or simply disappear – like Petar and Natalia Aratsky with the twins. Or that a small bloody mark on the forehead, like Simka Galičanka's, opened the door to the other world. She could hear grass sprouting under the earth and air bubbles popping in rising dough, and instead of turning this gift over to Petar, as Natalia had expected, she gave it to Veta, along with a voice that held the sound of the wind in the clouds and the fluttering of angel wings in the sky.*

According to the testimony of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, Simka Galičanka did not pass on anything to Little Rusty. But that was not true: Little Rusty inherited from Simka Galičanka the ability to open the door to human souls, and to heal with his voice and touch.

“Will my gift mean anything under the gray northern sky?” he wondered as the clattering train entered the Hamburg station. Soaked with fear like a sponge with water, he saw Aaron under the window of his car and, not knowing why, concluded that he would have to forget and remember both Karanovo and Belgrade, simultaneously.

* * *

Each man will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.

Isaiah 32:2

“I knew I’d see you here one day!” said Aaron Levi, opening his arms, his face beaming like a little light had turned on inside him. “Are the Belgrade lindens in blossom?” he asked with a smile, leading Danilo toward the exit.

“Both the lindens and the girls are in blossom! They fill the streets with their cheerful voices, not suspecting that someone is secretly devising new horrors...” Danilo suddenly fell silent, detecting fear in Aaron’s eyes that corpses would start floating down the Danube again. Aaron did not believe it, and all other respects he and Danilo were the same, disregarding the fact that Danilo was trying to forget his dead and Aaron was trying to remember his. He could hardly remember himself from those terrible years of war.

At first the social workers in Jasenak did not know what the numbers tattooed on Sara’s and Aaron’s forearms meant. Aaron remembered his number –14.838 – his whole life, realizing that he was no longer a boy, but a number: 14.383! A number that nothing could erase! One of the social workers gave number 14.383 the name Miloš. It was a heroic name of short duration, because the Red Cross in Belgrade soon received a letter requesting that the numbers on the Jewish children’s forearms be submitted to the Red Cross in Geneva. Thus, through the Red Cross in Geneva, Aaron found out his name and the fate of his parents, brothers and sisters who were turned into a cloud of smoke over Auschwitz. No one knew what happened to his cousin Rebecca and to Sara, the youngest child in the Levi family. And no one knew why the Levi family left Zagreb when the Second World War broke out and headed for Belgrade, where they were quickly hunted down like rabbits and sent to Auschwitz, which would also have happened in Zagreb.

Stopping on the stairs, Aaron had felt someone's large hand squeeze his shoulder and pull him away from the SS officer who was trying to put him with the others.

"The boy is my son!" said a peasant woman who brought cheese to the neighbors, risking the execution squad.

Aaron never found out who the woman was or where she was from. In the battles to liberate Belgrade, people lost even their own children in the general confusion, but that woman did not lose him: she held him firmly by the hand and took him to her relative's house in Voždovac, then headed back to her village alone.

No one knows whether she reached her family. Aaron never found out her name or the name of her village. The house she provided with cheese was leveled to the ground in one of the last bombings of Belgrade. There were no survivors and the tenants in the neighboring houses did not know her name. So for the rest of his life, Aaron remembered only the clasp of her hand and the sentence: "The boy is my son!" *He knew that he would recognize her by the clasp of her hand and her voice, even in the other world.*

* * *

In the milky gloom on the 17th floor of a New York hotel, next to a woman who was sound asleep, conscious of the fact that the next day would be a turning point in his life, Danilo Aratsky tried to remember how the name Sara Cohen cropped up in his conversation with Aaron just after they met. Had Aaron mentioned her first? No! Danilo Aratsky had, asking hesitantly:

"What about Sara Cohen? Is Sara Cohen actually Sara Levi?

"No!" replied Aaron with a smile, taking Danilo by the arm. "Hey, man, don't be absurd! Sara is the most common Jewish girl's name, and that little freckled Sara Cohen is currently somewhere in America. Married, I think. Boy, did you talk about her all the time in your sleep!" Aaron laughed, showing that he knew about Danilo's first love, convinced that Danilo was a Jew too: Serbian boys were not circumcised...

"Oh, th-th-that!" Danilo Aratsky stuttered. Because that little skin was frequently inflamed, his grandfather Dr. Luka Aratsky had taken it off in three minutes. They never mentioned it again. No, he was not a Jew, but you never knew. Petranja Aratsky, his paternal grandmother, had Jewish blood...

"Your brother Petar looked like one of my cousins! Is he alive?"

Aaron was bewildered by Danilo's reply that he did not know.

He was even more bewildered by Danilo's remark that he would know if Petar were dead – the dead Aratskys followed him in herd, everyone but Petar. Petar was not among the living or the dead, and he was not on the Red Cross lists or in reports on the executed, displaced, refugees, expulsed, missing.

"I've been to all the archives, prisons, cemeteries, psychiatric hospitals, collective housing – and didn't find him anywhere..."

"Did you ever ask Garača about your brother? His service is the all-seeing, all-knowing eye of God..." Aaron suddenly fell silent. If Garača knew anything, he would have informed Danilo without being asked. Or maybe not? He had sent Danilo a file from New Zealand and then a second part of the file. What was he doing in New Zealand? They had learned Russian in Jasenak. When had he managed to learn English? Throughout his childhood Garača had been fascinated by books about Indians. Aaron was not sure when and where Garača told him that a blond-haired man, an immigrant from Yugoslavia or Poland, had been seen among the Meskwaki Indians and Amish in Iowa – although he was not sure that the man was still in the American Midwest, or what his name was. Different people had seen him in different places, as though he were looking for something, or running away from something...

The story of the Blond Man among the Indians ended there. Garača no longer mentioned him in his conversations and letters to Aaron, and *time was passing...*

* * *

Gojko Garača disappeared from the Jasenak children's lives for some time, although both Aaron and Danilo felt his invisible, protective shadow following them. Perhaps it was the shadow of his network of former war orphans scattered throughout the world, from Germany to Australia. Had Aaron been thinking of Garača when he warned Danilo that there were people who knew more about him, and about Aaron, than they knew about themselves? The Service Garača worked for knew a lot. Danilo Aratsky had to understand: if there was something Garača had not told him, he certainly had a good reason for it. Aaron mentioned this for the first time during their visit to the Regensburg

“Krankenhaus”. At that time, Yugoslav ships sailed to Regensburg after being loaded with different kinds of cargo in Kladovo; they also took on passengers who spoke Serbian, Bulgarian, Russian, and Wallachian, but were still able to understand each other and exchanged things hidden below deck, sometimes even women and children.

Because of these exchanges, Garača’s secret service kept a watchful eye on the ships and shippers. But not only because of the bartering. The hunt for people with different political ideas started as the passengers were boarding, although some were let through in order to discover spy networks, or what the Service considered to be spy networks.

Garača was extremely cautious in this regard.

“The place where you’re going to work,” he warned Aaron as soon as he got to Regensburg, “is an enemy hotbed! Although maybe it isn’t?” he added, shedding doubt on the reports that entire governments in exile were hiding in the Regensburg hospital, waiting for their moment to return to their countries and overthrow the legitimate government...

Aaron found the hospital the strangest place he had ever worked, not so much for the equipment and therapy as the patients themselves: they were of every imaginable profession and age.

Those who formed the “hotbed”, according to Garača’s reports, were ill-fated people from all the countries of Europe who had not chosen the right side in the Second World War, or believed that the vows they made to their dead leaders still obliged them to be faithful to their word. Most of them were surviving prisoners of war who were not at liberty to return to their own country: Poles, Ukrainians, Serbs, Croat, Lithuanians; they had *all* organized their ministries on the third floor of the Regensburg “Krankenhaus” and elected governments headed by future presidents, prime ministers, ministers of the army, and even ministers without portfolio.

Bearing in mind the service he worked for, Garača should have hated them. But he did not hate them! He could not hate them. They were old, powerless, sick, mostly confined to wheelchairs, half-blind, blind, lost in time and in themselves. He felt sorry for them and in doing so somehow felt sorry for himself, remembering how he had reached Jasenak in wooden shoes that he refused to take off, wrapped in an army blanket that he

would not part with for years. Just like the poor man from the third floor, proclaimed minister of the army, would not part with a clod of the homeland's dirt that some shipper had brought from his former vineyard.

Hearing that story, Garača asked Aaron to help these "ill-fated people" as much as he could. They were still hoping to see their birthplace, "and time was passing and there were fewer and fewer of them..."

German doctors were unable to understand these dregs of wartime destruction and madness.

That is why they could not treat them.

Aaron knew most of the languages used by the "Displaced People" and quickly realized that he had nothing to treat, at least not there on the third floor of the Regensburg hospital. It was more of an asylum for the mentally disturbed, the bedridden and those lost in nighttime and daytime nightmares, than a hospital.

Treading on the slippery ground of old men fighting each other for power in some future life, at first Dr. Aaron Levi had the impression that an unusual theater piece was playing out before him in which former bitter opponents were vehemently helping each other to win the war against their common adversaries, those with a red star on their forehead.

* * *

Danilo never understood why Aaron chose Hamburg. Was it because of green-eyed Erika Lech he met at a medical seminar, or the black and white swans on the Alster?

Which one had a hand in it, God or the devil, neither Aaron nor Danilo could figure out until one gray December day when they were in a funeral procession, escorting a nurse who died in a traffic accident to her eternal home.

"Why, Monika was Jewish!" said Aaron, stopping in amazement when they entered the Jewish part of the cemetery. Why hadn't she ever told him? He stood there surrounded by the tombstones of Alkalay, Davicho, Lev, Cohn, Baruch, wondering why Monika had hidden who and what she was for so many years. Judging by the tombstones, many Jews had settled in Hamburg. Levi was the most frequent last name, but there were also some Spinozas, Singers and Demajos lying here and there. Aaron shuddered when Danilo squeezed his arm gently and led him out of the cemetery. Drizzling rain was

falling on the gravel paths and tombstones. Aaron was silent all the way to Jungfraustrasse 58 and remained silent for the next few days, declining Erika's suggestion that he go to a church or synagogue, which made no sense to her. Danilo understood Aaron's resistance better than anyone: convinced that there was no god, the children from the Jasenak Home did not accept his existence even as adults, regardless of whether he was Christ, Jehovah or Allah. Their god was a man in a marshal's uniform or white admiral's suit whose eyes followed them from every room in the Home, as the social workers repeated their warning to stay away from "enemies of the people". Enemies were everywhere: where they were to be expected and where you never dreamed they would be. External or internal enemies, it made no difference. They had to be crushed like venomous snakes! "Socialism must be guarded like the apple of your eye!" The social workers repeated that day in, day out, during lunch and around the blazing campfires, warning them that there could be no mercy for the enemy, even if they were your near and dear.

Danilo had the vague feeling that the social workers' warnings referred directly to him, and decided to run away from Jasenak: "there is no mercy or forgiveness for enemies of the people". Once he had been proclaimed an enemy, Petar remained one for all time, dead or alive... And Danilo Aratsky, as Petar's brother, was also an enemy. Why didn't Aaron understand?

* * *

Now no one knows any more

Who is who or where.

It's all an ugly dream of dust...

Vasko Popa.

Half-asleep, on his last trip to New York, Danilo realized that Aaron understood his fear of rejection. It shadowed people declared "enemies of the people", their children, relatives, friends.

"You'll bear the mark of Cain on your forehead! You and Damian and Damian's son, if he has one," Marta lashed out at him during an argument several days before Danilo jumped onto the train for Dortmund, furious that his reply to all her insults was

silence, as though he neither saw nor heard her. Fool! What was the point of quarreling about a madman's eardrum unless he was just as mad? That dream he had about jumping into a car rushing down a steep slope without a driver, powerless to do anything, was not the dream of a healthy man. And then all those notes about Petar! Why couldn't he get it through his head that Petar no longer existed?

Later, when Aaron was already in Hamburg, he remembered that there had been cripples without arms and legs among the "Displaced Persons" accommodated in a reception center. They were registered under someone else's name and did not know who and where they were. But they had been older men. Aaron would have recognized Petar. He had seen him in Jasenak, until he stopped coming.

"Are you still looking for your brother?" Aaron asked, his voice so full of compassion that Danilo felt his whole body tremble. "I have no one to look for..." He looked at Danilo intently and then fell silent as though knowing why Danilo Aratsky had left Belgrade, his son and wife, and that now Danilo had only him...

And he did know! Before Danilo even got to Hamburg, Marta had called and threatened Danilo, through Aaron, that she would put out a wanted circular. But Aaron did not have Danilo's fear of Marta and, unlike Danilo, he knew about her affair with Rašeta. Everyone in the hospital knew, except Danilo. Just like they all knew about the pierced eardrum. They knew and kept their mouths shut. Rightfully so. *Once you're unsuitable, you're always unsuitable.* What Rašeta needed was not a saint among the lunatics, but a doctor who would do what his superior said... Or else, very quickly, he would not treat patients at all. When it came down to it, what person in their right mind believed that those on Ward K could be treated and cured?

Rašeta had stopped believing that long ago, convinced that public funds were wasted on patients like that and angry at doctors who felt there was hope for such people, there was a cure.

Danilo would have had a hard time stopping the torrent of Marta's words. But all Aaron had to do was mention Garača's name and Marta fell silent, and he realized that Garača's star was rising. At the top of the police ranks, devastatingly severe and strict, Garača was clearly much more than what Danilo and Aaron suspected.

“Marta won’t be calling you anymore!” said Aaron with a smile. “And you can forget those four reports! Those four unlucky women forgot them long ago.”

From Aaron’s smile, Danilo realized that he knew more about the state of affairs than he did himself, just as he realized that enemies of the people were enemies of the people even after they died – like Stevan Aratsky, like Petar who was never seen or heard in the crowd of dead Aratskys. And according to Garača’s report, somewhere in America was an Aratsky whose name was spoken with high regard among the Indians and the immigrants from Eastern Europe. Could it be Petar? Aratsky was an uncommon last name. Nevertheless, he could not associate a bear and fox hunter with the blond young man without a leg who visited him in Jasenak until he disappeared like a shadow, like smoke.

* * *

When the story stops, time no longer flows...

Plotinus

When the icy north winds brought the first snowflakes and the Alster waters started to freeze, the swans were removed to their winter quarters and the homeless were taken to a reception center behind the magnificent Hamburg harbor that was filled with boats from all four corners of the world.

Snow-covered Hamburg would soon be hushed and white. And the cries of wild geese would no longer break through the clouds. “Holy Father,” said Danilo, crossing himself furtively, “is it possible that I reached Hamburg when the lindens were flowering in Belgrade? That I’ve been in Germany for half a year already?” Time was flying at a speed that bewildered and horrified him. Years could pass like that without him noticing them. Damian had grown into a young man, into a soldier too?

* * *

“There’s talk of wars again!” he said, turning to Aaron. “Has too little blood been shed? Who would fight and with whom?”

“A free-for-all! Don’t you see, Danilo? Unless I missed something? Forgot something? Remember how Garača whimpered in his sleep and when he was awake he was scared to death that he’d forget a face, the name of a Home child or a relative from

Kozara who died in Jasenovac? If he forgot one single name – he would forget all the others.”

Whether it was because of the wars or something else – Danilo Aratsky sensed a shadow of fear in Aaron’s eyes, and Aaron in Danilo’s, because they both knew what war meant. And they were afraid. Aaron’s contract at the Hamburg hospital would expire in a few months. Danilo was just beginning. He had a validated diploma just like Aaron. They would have no trouble finding work in New York or in a hospital in the Midwest through Garača’s little “chain links”. Nevertheless, they did not feel like leaving Europe. Because of Damian, Erika Lech, and the Polish girl from Krakow Danilo met in Hamburg.

Like a pendulum swinging between Europe and America, they hesitated for a while. Then they made a decision: Aaron and Erika would go first, Danilo would go when he finalized his divorce from Marta and saw Damian. He would not leave until he saw his son.

The vague hope of finding Petar in America facilitated Danilo’s decision to leave Yugoslavia and Germany. He was convinced he would return, even though he knew Marta would not stop hounding him even when he was six feet under. She had his *Journal*. It contained everything that had happened or was happening. Everything he dreamed. All his intentions. She would not miss the opportunity to use it, drag him to court and shame him for all time. She would turn him into a criminal and lunatic who chose to treat lunatics in order to hide his depravity.

Then he would have to say goodbye to everything he had wanted to do in life, the reason for studying from morning to midnight... And who knew what else she was capable of doing to him...

“If you let her!” said Aaron as though reading his thoughts. “No one can destroy a man unless he lets them!” He smiled as though taking a load off Danilo’s back.
“Everyone has the right to their life...”

“Come on, Aaron!” said Danilo, wincing. “What about the ‘dog cemeteries’? Don’t tell me you forgot what they did to the farmers in Jasenak if they didn’t deliver the required amount of grain?

“The authorities called it ‘farm surplus appropriation’ and the Commissars in leather coats called it ‘God’s enforced collection’. How could you forget? And if

someone hadn't come up with the idea of flooding the grain fields and planting rice, there would have been grain. But no one had the courage to say so, except the teacher who then disappeared one misty dawn..."

"Hey, Danilo!" said Aaron with a sigh. "It's better to forget some things..."

"Maybe so," said Danilo. "If forgetting wasn't contagious. I still see Ruža Rašula in my dreams."

"Ruža from Jasenak? No, not Ruža! Sara Cohen... Maybe we'll run into her in America..." Aaron laughed softly as he gazed at Danilo's bewildered face. "Will she remember the frogs? You ran away from those frogs and almost disappeared in the marsh..."

"She ran away from rats! And you see, I still don't know if rats sleep at night. Does Sara remember them?"

* * *

The *Karanovo Chronicles* did not mention when and how Danilo Aratsky went to America, although the chronicler noted several times that the redhead grandson of Luka Aratsky crossed the Atlantic "several years after Aaron left". It is hard to say what kept him in Germany. Did he want to be close to Damian? Did Marta put off the divorce proceedings? Was he afraid to start a new life abroad? No one knows. The bargeman married to Nega's daughter mentioned a Polish girl he had seen him with once in Hamburg and twice in Regensburg. She had green eyes and black hair like Danilo's sister Veta who disappeared under the ice of the Tisa; Nega spoke about her tearfully until her death.

Dr. Aaron Levi headed off into the world with a bitter taste in his mouth because of the ill-fated hospital inmates who were melting like snowballs, although there were still enough of them on the third floor to compose their phantom governments, convinced that their hour would come one day. But time was passing and that hour did not come. Then they stopped hoping and died like flies in autumn, without a sound or resistance, losing their last battle.

"Does the self-proclaimed minister of the army in exile still have a dirt clod from a vineyard near Smederevo?" Aaron asked Danilo to check. Probably to pass on to Garača who was deeply touched by the old man's loyalty to his native soil.

“Someone who loves his homeland that much cannot be a traitor!” said Garača to Aaron, determined to help the old men return to Serbia.

This did not happen: either the old warriors had no one to go home to or they were afraid of going back and possible reprisals. In some cases death was faster. When Danilo Aratsky reached Regensburg, the minister of the army without an army and the admiral without a fleet were earth to earth. The dirt clod from the Smederevo vineyard stayed with them, in a foreign land.

* * *

Is that the moment Dr. Danilo Aratsky decided not to leave Petar in a foreign land either dead or alive? Or had he had enough of Germany? Or perhaps his relationship with the beautiful Polish girl was waning? He heard her whispering “Poland! Poland!” in her sleep more and more often, sensing the breakup was near.

Did he whisper “Damian, Serbia!” in his sleep? There was no trace of that in either his *Journal* or the *Karanovo Chronicles*, although both of them had a slightly altered version of the same dream that repeated night after night.

“In every new dream the hallways were longer and longer, his confusion greater and greater!” noted the author of the *Karanovo Chronicles*. *“And so the son of Stevan and grandson of Luka Aratsky realized that the time for indecision had run out: he had to move on or disappear in the jumble of hallways and voices...”*

* * *

This recurring dream told Danilo Aratsky that the time had come to leave. Nevertheless, he was still waiting to see Damian, unable to understand the mix-up with Damian’s visa, until it dawned on him that Marta and her politically correct, powerful family were hindering that visa, like a leash that would restrain him. Finally, probably due to Garača’s efforts, Damian reached Hamburg with the first spring winds: tall, redhead, gray eyes, confused. From the stories of his mother’s parents and relatives, he had imagined his father differently. And here he was gazing at an older copy of himself. *“Are our souls the same too?”* he wondered, but had no time to find out: his anatomy test was not far off and he had been granted only a ten-day visa. If he stayed any longer he would become a DP – displaced person – who would evoke the homeland until his death, not knowing that Danilo Aratsky would not wish that fate on his worst enemy.

The Regensburg “Krankenhaus” presented Damian a vivid example of what he should not become, even by accident.

* * *

“Who do you talk to at night?” asked Damian, his voice a mixture of wonder and bewilderment.

He had come across briefs notes in the *Karanovo Chronicles* and Danilo’s *Journal* that “they have come back”, although he found no explanation of who “they” were, who they were visiting and why. And if they had come, why couldn’t he, Damian, see or hear them as they rolled into Hamburg, following his father.

Danilo Aratsky’s answer to all of Damian’s questions was silence. The lad was too young to understand, his father concluded, just as Luka Aratsky had concluded once long ago. But Little Rusty had not only understood what happened, he remembered it too, horrified that people existed who thought of turning other people into soap. Danilo was unable to say even to himself just how much children could understand and what they remembered for all time...

Scattered about other people’s lives were enduring memories of a face, a smell, a sound, the copper color of the marsh before sunset, the cry of the marsh birds, the thud of human bodies on the cement in front of the Atherton, the first, third, one-hundred-and-third time, the thud that was not in Danilo’s memory in Hamburg because he had not yet had his first New York night that was marked by bodies sliding down the window pane, moving to eternity with a scream or only a dull sound.

Of all the light in the world gathered in the eyes of Garača’s wife, all he had left was a stain on the sidewalk trampled by people’s feet, the feeling of guilt and the defeat need, once he got out of the hospital, to create a big family out of the Home children. Perhaps Aaron was the only one who knew Garača’s whereabouts right then, and if he did not know, he would find out. If Sara Cohen was alive, where was she?

* * *

When Damian returned to Belgrade – and passed his anatomy test and everything that went along with it, from physiology to forensic medicine – to follow in the footsteps of his great-grandfather Luka Aratsky and his father Danilo Aratsky, but also all the physicians and surgeons produced by the Aratsky family, *Danilo Aratsky saw the faces of*

the dead flickering in the stardust, traveling through space from eternity to eternity, accompanied by the voices of the birds, humans and beasts that once existed and will exist again, transformed into a new shape, never the same as the one that once was, because there are no two identical shapes, two identical souls in the great universe. Nevertheless, Damian and Danilo were two halves of the same apple, radiance and reflection on water, resonance and echo.

“No, you must not let him go off to some stupid war and die,” said Danilo to himself. “And then again, you must not keep him and turn him into a refugee, a man without a home and homeland...” The icy north wind was forcing its way through the partly open window and the lindens again were flowering in Belgrade, just like when he had decided to leave and jumped onto the step of the train for Dortmund. Damian would take that same train back to Belgrade, carrying in his heart his father’s anxious look and questions: Who did his father talk to secretly at night? Where did they come from? Where did they go?

Two days after Damian left, Danilo boarded a plane for New York without informing Aaron he was coming or where he would be staying. New York was full of hotels. He would call Aaron once he had caught up on his sleep, and then would look for one of Garača’s “chain links” if there was no place in Aaron’s clinic. His dead relatives could not find him in New York, he assured himself. He sat in the first taxi, surprised that the New York taxis were yellow, like the Hamburg underground, and the taxi driver barely spoke English. Nevertheless, the man knew some inexpensive hotels. “You will be satisfied, sir!” he said, stopping in front of the Atherton. He handed Danilo a business card and disappeared, not knowing that the hotel with peeling walls would become a festering wound in Danilo Aratsky’s soul and that he, along with Aaron, would become Danilo’s best friend.

The business card said “Aleksey Smirnov, surgeon”. “Smirnoff” like the vodka? Or “Smirnov” like the famous Muscovite family? Danilo smiled and entered the hotel. There was time, he would find out. First he had to get a good night’s sleep.

* * *

Although he was exhausted by the trip, he still could not sleep. Somewhere, up on the higher floors, the suicides’ bodies had started to fall, with interruptions, landing on

the sidewalk with a dull thud. It took him two hours to verify that this was really happening, pick up his unpacked bags and, bathed in the icy wind off the East River, get into the first taxi at dawn. He headed for Park Avenue South, the return address on Aaron's letters in recent months. When he got there, he rang the bell for a long time but no one answered. Was Aaron on a trip? Or at the hospital? Bewildered, Danilo stood in front of Aaron's door and wondered why in the world he had turned up in New York unannounced and spent the whole night awake, listening to human bodies falling on concrete. Unless it was a dream whose meaning eluded him? A dream in which his Aratskys did not appear for the first time. Danilo received no answers to his questions, but the door finally opened and Aaron appeared, surprised and smiling.

"I wanted to s-s-surprise you..." Danilo stammered.

"Well, you sure succeeded!" Aaron turned around and picked up a child hidden behind his back. "And I also succeeded in not writing about some of the changes in my life. Daniel is one of those changes..." Aaron took one of Danilo's bags and brought him into an apartment furnished exactly like the one in Hamburg. Was he still with Erika and was the boy her son?

He was hers. Green-eyed, like her, there could be no doubt. Danilo Aratsky looked around inquisitively, surprised that Erika was not there to take charge of the boy so Aaron could sit him down somewhere. He should have told him he was coming. No woman likes to have an uninvited guest turn up unannounced.

"I'm sorry if I woke you up... Erika must still be sleeping."

"Maybe!" said Aaron with a sad smile. "But not in this house..."

"For heaven's sake, man, what happened to you two?"

"She found someone else. It happens all the time in New York. Danny and I make do. Either one of the nurses from the ward takes care of him or I take him to day care and sometimes to the hospital..."

"The right place for a two-year-old..." said Danilo, laughing out loud. "Maybe New York is just a roomier insane asylum? I spent the night in a little hotel whose residents fell out the window all night long like overripe apples in Jasenak."

“The Atherton? Hey man! There’s not a single person in New York who doesn’t know about the Atherton suicides. How the devil did you get there anyway? You’d have to have lots of luck and miscalculate everything else ...”

“‘You will be satisfied, sir’ is what the taxi driver said and then dropped me off in front of the Atherton...”

“That’s great!” said Aaron and suddenly fell silent. “You wanted to surprise me. You surprised me, but it would have been a nicer surprise if you’d given the taxi driver my address...”

“It wouldn’t have worked. The man barely spoke English and yet he managed to tell me that he’d been the chief surgeon in Murmansk. Without taking specialized tests he couldn’t find work in New York. He walked dogs for a while, washed dishes in a pizzeria, then washed Petri dishes in a research center where his only company was white mice in one department and Wistar rats in another...He had a white mouse in a little cage on the passenger seat next to him and talked to it en route ... Do you remember the young man in Guberevac who hid a mouse from Rašeta? He was submissive and confused and never got upset when they locked him in or took him to the electroshock room, but when Rašeta tried to take away his mouse he went berserk. ‘That mouse is my only friend!’ he shouted.”

The orderlies had barely managed to save Rašeta, and at dawn the next day the patient with the mouse was not in the hospital. Danilo could not even imagine what the top surgeon from Murmansk would have done, remembering his hands that were certainly capable of knocking down a bear.

* * *

“Why would you have to imagine?” asked a male voice from his horde of dead relatives several months later, when Danilo already felt at home in New York. “A friend is a friend, even if it’s a mouse! Didn’t you make friends with the surgeon from Murmansk and his little friend when the loneliness became unbearable in New York? Hey, you were ready to make friends even with a cockroach when Aaron went to Belgrade to finish up some business and landed in the nightmare of civil wars...” The anonymous Aratsky fell silent and took shelter behind someone’s broad back, probably Stevan’s.

“They found me again!” murmured Danilo, amazed at how determined his dead relatives were to follow him. “Why couldn’t they pass him by somewhere, leave him alone just once!”

“Do you think so? You don’t know how terribly lonely it is when you cross the threshold to the other world! You’ll find out one day and realize why we can’t leave you alone...”

“Yes, you can, because I don’t know *you...*”

“But our blood that flows in your veins knows you! You’re running away in vain, Danilo” said the anonymous Aratsky, laughing softly in the gloom, and then started to evaporate like mist above a river, leaving Danilo in a quandary as to who this fellow clansman could be and from what time. Mihailo? Toma? Someone before Toma? Someone whose name he had not had time to remember, but they still managed to find him on the other side of the world.

If Petar had gotten out of Goli Otok Island alive, he would have looked for him, he could not have forgotten Little Rusty from Jasenak, Danilo Aratsky from Belgrade, Hamburg, New York and the American Midwest. Everything was written down somewhere. If Petar had looked for him, he would have found him. Rubbish! Why hadn’t he found Petar?

The mystery of Danilo Aratsky’s missing brother never ceased to torment him, more forcefully in New York than ever before. Was it because of the secret hope that he would find him in New York or somewhere in the Midwest and go back to Belgrade with him? The thought of going back increased his disappointment in the fact that the *American dream*, imprinted on Europeans’ awareness for so many years, was actually a wood-framed house bought on credit with a mandatory swing on the porch and flowers in front, and a lawn with dwarves and American flags scattered about it where the grass could grow to a certain height but not one iota higher.

During those first months in New York, Danilo had not known that fact about grass or that this was one of “Georgie West’s ten golden rules” that she followed more rigorously than believers followed the Ten Commandments. Mop-headed, dapple-eyed Georgie West would not become part of Danilo’s world until later, in the Midwest, when he was already far from New York and the American dream, and far from Yugoslavia

where hints of future wars filled newspapers' Letters to the Editor column, and the half-crazy story of necklaces made of children's fingers quickly reached the front page of the tabloids, but also of serious newspapers and magazines – announcing the horrors that were to come.

"When the *wars* pass, all that will be left of the extended Aratsky family will be *three* males and fish peering through the windows." The prophetic words of Simka Galičanka came back to Danilo with increasing frequency. And then Simka with a red stain on her forehead and fish swimming through the streets of Karanovo with sunglasses attached to their fins would not leave his dreams. "What's the meaning of those fish in my dreams?" he wondered, dismissing the dream like a tedious fly. If only he could dismiss parts of the real world, like Aaron did when difficult situations arose that he was unable to resolve or accept.

* * *

Erika Lech was the only one Aaron could not figure out. Perhaps because she could not figure out what to do with herself. The man she had chosen disappeared from her life one frosty night when he went out to buy a bottle of liquor and did not come back that night or any of the following. Erika had stayed in the apartment with his two children from earlier marriages, a cat and a dog that would not budge from her bed. She waited. He had left. He would be back. For heaven's sake, why wouldn't he come back? Daniel was in safe hands with Aaron. At least she did not have to worry about him. But what was she to do with Bill's two children when she did not know who or where their mothers were? "Crazy America!" she heard Aaron grumble, irritated by the hospital administrator, the screaming fire trucks that never stopped because something was always burning somewhere, mad at himself. "Why in the world did I leave Hamburg?" he said, trying to understand. "Why in the world did she leave with me?" In a quandary, Erika Lech opened the window and quickly shut it, struck by the icy wind from the Hudson River. America certainly was not what she had dreamed it was, but Hamburg was not the winning lottery ticket of her life either, nor was Aaron.

Nevertheless, she had been surprised by the change she felt in Aaron after Monika Silber's funeral. Only later did she remember that Silber was Aaron's mother's maiden name.

Monika Silber, just a little older than Aaron, might have been related to Aaron's mother. They had the same color of eyes and hair, and the same habit of biting their lower lip when they were puzzled or did not know what to do at a specific moment. By a twist of fate, Aaron and everyone around him did not realize this until Monika left this world. None of the nurses she worked with knew whether any of her family had survived. Monika kept her mouth firmly shut, just like Aaron, hoping deep down inside that she might run into a missing brother or sister one day. There were numerous tombstones around Monika's grave with the name Silber on them. As Aaron left the cemetery with Danilo, he noticed that there were even more Levis, and that no one visited either family.

And then one day, Aaron saw several pebbles on Monika Silber's tombstone. Did she have relatives after all? Or children that she had hidden along with everything else?

Aaron's search for Monika Silber's relatives ended with renewed bitterness. A loner in life, Monika stayed that way in death. Aaron decided to accept a job in New York, convinced that, far from everything that weighed him down, he would be able to shake off both hopes and memories. Erika Lech hesitated for some time and then left with him. Going back would be admitting failure. "America is what my relatives and friends will envy!" she said to herself, quickly realizing that without knowing English and without a validated diploma, America could be pure hell. "Only fools go abroad like a chicken without a head!" she whispered, remembering Hamburg and the Alster swans. "Well, Hamburg was a foreign country too and none of my family is left in Novi Sad!" She was calmed for a while at the thought of her relatives scattered throughout the world. "America is America after all!" She decided to get a job, learn the language, and kept her eye on the ads. She went to job interviews and realized that she was not the only person looking for work, but was one of the few who did not know the language and did not have a validated diploma.

The fall of the Berlin wall had only increased the number of refugees. The surgeon from Murmansk was no longer an exceptional case. Atomic physicists, lawyers, economists and prominent experts from the countries of Eastern Europe were now washing dishes in pizzerias, mowing lawns, taking care of children and the elderly, walking dogs...

Erika considered Daniel's birth to be Aaron's ultimate act of malice. In her position, she did not need a baby. Aaron wanted one, so let him have it! Erika left with some incidental good-for-nothing, abandoning her husband and child. She left. Came back. Left again and came back again. Aaron kept his mouth shut and accepted her departures and arrivals without a word.

Long ago in Karanovo, Petrana had left and come back like that, and Luka Aratsky had held his tongue, angering and puzzling his relatives and friends, until Petrana left for all time, leaving behind an untouched glass of red wine.

One night Erika came to Aaron's door with two children, frantic. Danilo looked at her in amazement. Aaron silently put glasses of milk in front of the children and a glass of wine in front of Erika. Danilo wondered, did he really have to cross the Atlantic for a bygone scene from Karanovo to repeat?

* * *

Half-asleep, Danilo Aratsky once again saw Erika's frantic face and the untouched glass of red wine, the children, himself, Aaron's gloomy face... realizing that the picture was incomplete, something was missing. What? Dr. Luka Aratsky's silence? No. Aaron was silent too. All that was missing was the cascade of moonlight and Petrana's yellow rose. He would not understand this until many years later when he came across the passage in the *Karanovo Chronicles* about "beautiful Petrana's yellow rose that managed to outlive the floods and droughts and wars, growing in a cluster on Luka Aratsky's grave! Whether as a sign of love or hatred, none of the Karanovo towns people could say..." The note about the yellow rose broke off on that spot and then several pages later came the statement that "the yellow rose had a lasting fragrance". Natalia Aratsky was right when she said that "all roses can fade, but not this one, not this one!" The author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* had clearly indicated the indestructible nature of the yellow rose, stronger than both love and hate. Eternal. The legend of its endurance was linked not only to Luka Aratsky but to all the Aratskys, in times past and times to come. "Difficult times!" he underscored.

When Erika Lech turned up on Aaron's doorstep, she heralded such times. They could neither circumvent them nor acknowledge them.

“Maybe it would be better if you waited for Bill in his house?” Aaron Levi proposed several days later, tired of squealing children, Erika’s curses and accusations. Why the hell had he dragged her to “this crazy country” where mothers left their children in someone else’s care and fathers went out to buy a bottle of liquor and not even New York’s Finest could find them. Day after day with increasing vehemence, Erika attacked “foolish mothers spreading children around the world,” forgetting that she had done the same thing when she abandoned Danny.

Aaron was already prepared to accept Erika as she was, but could not believe his eyes when she took better care of Bill’s children than Danny, who got out of the way as soon as he saw her. Then Danny stopped eating and whined more and more in his sleep. Danilo wondered whether it was possible that Aaron could not see the bruises on his little arms and legs.

“What’s going on with the kid?” Danilo asked Aaron one day when he saw a bruise on Danny’s cheek. “Ask Erika what she does with him when we go to work.”

“What do you think I do?” said Erika, furious. “Children fall all the time at that age...”

“Why don’t Bill’s fall?”

“They’re older and not clumsy like Danny...” Erika blinked and both Aaron and Danilo sensed she was lying...

Returning home early from work one day, Aaron found the door to Danny’s room locked, Bill’s kids playing TV video games, and Erika in bed with the young man who sometimes took care of Danny.

“So that’s it?” said Aaron, knocking Danny’s door open with his shoulder. He found the boy tied to his bed, crying. “You’ve got half an hour to pack your bags!” he said to his wife, barely stopping himself from throwing her against the wall. Then he untied Danny and wiped the tears off his cheeks with kisses, not noticing when the young man got dressed and sneaked out the open door. “Get packed!”

“If you think I’m leaving just like that, you’re mistaken! Where would I go?” Erika slammed her fists on the table, screeching that she knew her rights. America was not Aaron’s shitty Belgrade. She knew her rights! She knew that he had to pay her rent and food, not only in New York but even in Novi Sad if she decided to go back...

So, she knew her rights, how nice! She had taken off with the wrong man and he left her in the street with his children from his first or second marriage, or who knew which one! For the first time in his life, Aaron was seething with such anger that his chin trembled and his jaw stiffened.

“You’ve got half an hour, and where you go is none of my concern!” said Aaron, beside himself with rage and humiliation. He took out the clothes she had left behind when she ran off with Bill Wilson and threw them on the bed. “Remember, half an hour!” Erika saw a chasm deepening in his eyes such as she had only seen in the eyes of a murderer from Hamburg placed in Aaron’s ward, and she started packing a suitcase bought long ago in Novi Sad.

* * *

“Well, it’s over!” said Aaron as he tidied up the apartment, pale, not resembling the Aaron that Danilo Aratsky knew. “I hope we never see Erika again!”

Danilo did not find out what happened until much later when he testified at Aaron’s divorce proceedings, and even then not everything: Aaron did not reply to most of Erika’s accusations, agreeing to everything just so he could keep Danny, although she had not even sought his custody. When Erika started talking, Dr. Danilo Aratsky realized for the first time that a human being could contain more poison than a heap of snakes. She demanded to be paid for agreeing to marry a lunatic, for bearing his child and for breaking off other relationships several times, trying to carry on a marriage that should never have begun.

The divorce was to Aaron’s detriment, but neither Erika nor the judge realized that he accepted the verdict as a divine blessing. He was employed, he had an income, he agreed to the alimony, but did not want to see her ever again, dead or alive.

“A mother should have visiting rights with her child...” said the judge, interrupting him, surprised that Erika had refused that item of the agreement: it was enough to know that the accused would take care of the child... She had worries of her own!

The litigation ended to mutual satisfaction. Aaron Levi received custody of the child, Erika one-third of his total income. Peace filled Aaron’s soul such as he had not felt in Jasenak, Belgrade, Regensburg or Hamburg. Not anywhere. But he was

periodically troubled by the thought that his country, the only one he had and loved, was going to fall to pieces like a worn-out dress.

Danilo Aratsky did not talk about his fears, but even in the “Red Ram” where they occasionally went for a beer, Aaron felt that Danilo’s fear was about to erupt like lava.

What was happening to him? Aaron was puzzled, but did not venture to ask. Everything with Damian was fine. There was no word from Marta. Danilo’s behavior said that the beautiful Polish girl was a thing of the past. It was just as well, because misunderstandings and hatred in the old country brought hatred and misunderstandings among their children scattered about the world. Was that why Danilo had dreamed three nights in a row about a waving knife, while wars broke out like boils on the homeland’s body, reinforcing the idea inside him that “every war is depraved”. Judging by the *Karanovo Chronicles*, this was what Dr. Luka Aratsky said when he threw his colonel’s uniform into the furnace, which no one in Karanovo could understand.

“Marta would not understand Damian either if he refused to go to war!” thought Danilo Aratsky. Maybe the girl whose name kept cropping up in Damian’s letters would not understand either.

“Is that why Damian has stopped talking about coming to America, Aaron?” said Danilo, his voice a mixture of dejection and sadness. “And why should he come, anyway? Who could he treat when not even our madness is the same!” Danilo stopped eating dinner, which he never did. Shocked, Aaron asked him what he meant. “What I said! *Not even our madness is the same...*” In the heavy air of the “Red Ram”, Danilo’s voice sounded like it came from under the ground. He had not had anything to drink, but his eyes were cloudy just the same. What was happening to him?

As though reading Aaron’s thoughts, Danilo said, “Nothing! I’m trying to cure patients and I know that none of the medication helps. Ruža Rašula, Aaron! Scatterbrained, lost Ruža Rašula is no longer an isolated case.”

“*But you’re not God, Danilo! Not even God would be able to save Dick Dodes.* We are merely doctors at a hospital for the poor and for lost cases. *Accept that fact and realize that by doing what you can, you’re doing a lot.* The situation in our homeland will calm down!” replied Aaron, not believing what he said. Once set in motion, a pendulum

was difficult to stop. None of the negotiations had succeeded because the negotiators did not want them too.

During a chance meeting at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, Aaron Levi saw fear in Gojko Garača's eyes for the first time, but was unable to find out what the situation was among the quarreling brothers in the homeland.

"I'll stay in touch! Say hello to Danilo!" Garača called out as he got on a plane heading somewhere. Its name slipped Aaron's mind.

It was only later, when Danilo mentioned Hickory Hill in Iowa, that he remembered the name of the little town surrounded by cornfields, reeds and the languid waters of a river, resembling the one in Jasenak...

"*It's like coming full circle!*" said Danilo, interrupting the silence, surprised that Garača had not made contact in so long, and no one knew where he was. What was going on in the "old country" if he did not even have the strength to call, if he was alive?

* * *

"What a question, why wouldn't he be alive?" A cold stream of air from the East River materialized in the diffuse darkness on the 17th floor of a New York hotel along with Veta's voice and dripping water. That same cold breath had touched his face in the "Red Ram" when he wondered why there was no sign of Gojko Garača, if he was alive. How did Veta know that? Could she have been in the "Red Ram" that night too? Of course she was!

Next to the woman whose name he did not know, if he ever heard it, by the twinkling of tiny, dim stars, Danilo Aratsky, half-asleep, thought he saw a procession of Aratskys escorting him from Karanovo to Jasenak, Belgrade and then to New York, staggered that this had not occurred to him before, and that it would stay like that until he too became a ghost in the procession, one of them.

"Why," he grumbled. "Why wouldn't Gojko Garača be alive?"

"Because there are lots of ways for a person to no longer exist," said Veta with a tinge of sadness. "*Have you forgotten how we disappeared in fire, water, on the branch of a willow?* You can disappear under the wheels of a train, in a traffic or airplane accident... And then there are bombs, knives, ropes, poisons, axes, bullets! Hundreds of options to leave this world, driven to death by someone else's hand or your own, which

does not have to be the most dreadful way. Memory loss hurts more!” Veta’s voice disappeared in the wind howling up high and Danilo started. He was in the “Red Ram” with Aaron. So the hotel and Veta were the reflection of a dream. Danilo raised his mug of beer and smiled. The air in the “Red Ram” sagged from the weight of human bodies packed around the bar. The light bulb on the ceiling trembled, turning into an enormous black butterfly, then into an exotic tropical plant, then into a dancer or a sailor ready to pinch the bottom of the first girl he came across.

* * *

Someone whose face was hidden behind a philodendron flowerpot spoke about the Balkan wars. Fool! Danilo laughed out loud, smashed by the alcohol he was not in the habit of drinking. Those wars were at the beginning of the 20th century. This was the end of the 20th century.

Danilo Aratsky suddenly felt sweat gushing out of every pore on his skin, and his feet became heavier than lead.

“What wars is he talking about?” he asked Aaron, who looked at him, dumbfounded, and then waved his hand dismissively.

“Let’s get out of here! You’re on duty tomorrow and this stuff we’re drinking is worse than Romanian beer and our rot gut …”

Later, Danilo could not remember how and when they left the “Red Ram”, or that he had gone behind Aaron repeating over and over “rats don’t sleep at night, freckled Sara Cohen can confirm that”. Rats had chewed her brother’s toes and ears, maybe his nose too, but she had not seen it because someone had covered his head with a black kerchief. Rats never sleep, if it was indeed about rats and not evil turned into a story about the possibility of paradise when the war was over.

“Do you believe that paradise exists, Aaron? In Jasenak we sang ‘Paradise on earth awaits us’. Where? Does anything await us, man! Hey, not even our madness is the same...”

* * *

Aaron found out what was going on. Not from Danilo, but from Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov, top surgeon from Murmansk, who had taken Danilo (by mistake?

on purpose?) to the Atherton Hotel when he got to New York. Then when Aleksey failed to pass the test to validate his diploma for the third time, he went back to driving a taxi.

Aaron could not understand the bond between those two men who were so different. Aleksey Semyonovich often met up with Danilo in the “Red Ram” and Greenwich Village pubs, although neither of them drank anything but juice and coffee. They talked for hours about the snows of Murmansk, about Belgrade, refusing to confide in each other why they had come to the other side of the world in order to dream about what they left behind: Karanovo, Belgrade and Damian for Danilo, friends in Murmansk for Aleksey and a son who got married after he came to America and settled in San Diego. Vasya’s mother, Aleksey’s wife, had died several months after Vasya left.

The last thing she mentioned was the snows of Murmansk.

“Chort minya suda prinyos!” grumbled Aleksey Semyonovich, remembering his wife, convinced that Taisa would still be alive if they had stayed in Murmansk. Vasya might still be with them, chort vazmi, to hell with it!

He had not seen his son in several years and his granddaughter Masha was nothing but the photograph of a blond little girl with buckteeth like a squirrel. If they were in Murmansk he would see her every day, teach her to ski in winter, take her mushroom hunting and take her fishing where he met up with his childhood friends most often.

Their voices still echoed in his ears, although an entire eternity had passed since the day they pledged their loyalty to each other. They had “sdyerzhali slovo”, kept their word, but he had taken the first opportunity to run off to a world he was unable to understand or accept.

Ultimately, how could he understand these people? As soon as they got settled, acquired a home and friends, they left their parents, friends and home for a somewhat larger salary and headed to the West Coast from the East Coast like tumbleweeds in the Mohave Desert that disengaged from their roots for some reason and left one place for another one that was just the same.

And then, all the highways, factories, supermarkets, motels, parking lots, swimming pools, gas stations, *all* the houses – were the same. The houses had the same lawn and were made with a wooden frame to be one generation’s nest for 20-30 years,

since children left their parents' home after high school, becoming accustomed to the solitude and transience of the world around them.

According to Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov, *transience* was America's key word. Transient housing, jobs, interpersonal relations that were quickly struck up and broken off even faster, like in some virtual reality, turning the "melting pot" into stronger people or future inmates of institutions where Danilo and Aaron had to fix whatever went awry long ago...

"Except that most often we don't succeed!" said Danilo, interrupting Aleksey's lamentation. "We don't, Alyosha, although Aaron won't admit it, and he might not know that even our madness is not the *same!*"

"Nu, Danila! Ne veryu: sumashedshiey vezde te adinakovie..." said Aleksey Semyonovich in agreement, speaking Russian as usual when he got excited, and his eyes turned dark-blue. What was happening to Danilo? He had a good job, a loyal son, Aaron as a loyal friend. What did he want?

"To give God back the ticket to paradise, like Ivan Karamazov. The price is too high. There's a war going on down there again!"

As though watching a slide show, Danilo seemed to perceive the tall bony figure of Luka Aratsky, a man who hated wars more than spotted typhus and the plague together, catch a grenade thrown into a crowd of children who had run out to see the tanks, and disappear in the fire and smoke, as the residents of Karanovo watched a shining crown form around his gray head.

* * *

At that very moment, the legend of Luka Aratsky the hero and saint began to take root and grow. But which of the two he was, not even the author of the Karanovo Chronicles knew. He recorded events but expressed no opinion. His only remark was that "in spite of all the old colonel's resistance to wars, he died like a soldier."

Did the young man also die like a soldier who refused to shoot at the enemy because he knew that several of his cousins on his mother's side were in the cornfield, in a company of enemy soldiers? He had grown up with them and was simply unable to see them as enemies.

He could not make his way through the corn and join them: half of the soldiers in the company he had been attached to were cousins on his father's side. Shooting at them would be the same as shooting as his father!

“What should I do?”

Questions tangled into knots inside him: who should he join, who should he shoot at? Both sides had the same language, sang the same songs, played the same games. The only thing that separated them was their faith, although many no longer believed in anything.

Confused, tormented by sleepless nights and suspicions, not knowing which side to choose, the young soldier with peach fuzz on his cheeks *left the formation one morning, stood between the two warring sides and shot himself in the temple...*

Danilo's entire body trembled as he listened to the story about the soldier on the radio and he understood what Luka Aratsky meant when he said that all wars were horrifying, but “nothing is more horrifying than civil war...”

“So it's started in Belgrade?” asked Aleksey Semyonovich. Half of his relatives died in conflicts between the “Whites” and the “Reds” and the other half later, in the Second World War. Danilo remembered at least some of his relatives. All of Aleksey's and Aaron's families had been killed, and now it had started in Belgrade...

“No, not yet in Belgrade, but you never know what's going to happen when you let a beast out of its cage...” said Danilo Aratsky, head bowed, fingers drumming nervously on the table. It was still peaceful in Belgrade. But how long would that peace last?

“Hi Kathy,” he would say to the duty nurse when he entered the ward. She would reply, “Hi Dr. Aratsky! How are you?” “Fine!” he would say, because she did not expect him to say anything else, she was not interested in how he really was. “Fine! Fine!” They would pass each other like ships in the fog. “Fine!”

After all, why would she be interested in the health of a doctor who came from some Balkan madhouse where adversities happened all the time?

Hadn't they spent the entire 20th century in bloodshed and hatred? Kathy didn't need idle conversation.

Listening to the voices in the “Red Ram”, Danilo dimly realized that Aleksey Semyonovich was right: one piece of furniture can be replaced by another, a smaller house by a larger one, *but life cannot be replaced, just as there was no going back to the taiga where wild strawberries grow, fishing in one's spare time, eating “selyodka” and playing chess.*

“I don't see why you shouldn't go back, Alyosha,” said Danilo in astonishment.

“I do!” replied Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov. “Other people are there now...”

“Here too!” said Danilo, putting his hand gently on Alyosha's shoulder. “And we have nothing in common. Not even our madness is the same...”

Reluctantly, Danilo confided to Aleksey about the case of Dick Dodges who was in his ward after attempting suicide. His patient history could mean anything or nothing – the kind written by Rašeta who despised suicides, particularly when they were young and good-looking: “After they swallowed a bunch of pills, why didn't they slit their wrists too? It would have been a successful attempt. They'd be young and good-looking corpses!” he had said with a hatred that Danilo Aratsky could not understand, much less accept. Rašeta should have regretted the young and good-looking corpses, but he despised them instead and nothing could be done about it...

In the stupefying heat of the “Red Ram”, Danilo Aratsky once again saw clean and white Dick Dodges being brought to his ward.

“What's wrong with this one?” said Danilo to the head of the ward, his voice filled with surprise, and realized the same moment it was a mistake. A doctor was expected to heal and not be surprised. Diseases are diseases, but there is only one life. Life was running away from Dodges for no reason. The young man was around Damian's age, a junior bank clerk who had overlooked two zeros and caused a shortage in the account.

“How did it happen?” they asked him. Stammering, he tried to explain how the mistake crept in, but his superiors had no understanding for such or any other mistake. Either Dodges did not have the cash to make up for the shortage, or his supervisor had not accepted such a solution, and he was fired without the right to object and delay the decision. Thunderstruck, Dodges rushed into the street shouting that he was a nobody. A zero. A human zero. He unzipped his pants on the corner of Washington and Oak streets

and started urinating on the passers-by, and then, without resistance, let them throw him into a hospital where he swallowed a handful of pills and asked that he not be wakened.

“We must pay for our mistakes!” he repeated, speaking of the shortage as though it were a crime. He thanked the doctors, but did not deserve anyone’s mercy. He was a zero. A human zero. Without any money, without a place in society, what else would he be but a zero? A human zero!

“In that case, we’re all zeroes!” said Danilo Aratsky, stepping back from the young man’s protruding eyes and bloodless lips that whispered what the doctor said was not true.

“Other zeroes have a bank account!” said Dick Dodges, then fell silent as though having nothing more to say. Zeroes with bank accounts were not zeroes!

Danilo Aratsky felt his palms turn cold and clammy from the fear that had completely engulfed him, unable to understand it or remove it. The young man lying on the bed was a patient: this could be seen by his eyes, the color of his face, the restlessness causing his hands and lips to contort, and yet – the missing money could not be behind his illness. Unless that dark shadow was just a warning that he would never be able to understand the laws of the world where he lived. Not even our madness is the same...

If, instead of Dick Dodges, one of “ours” had unzipped his pants in the middle of Knez Mihailova Street in Belgrade, he would not say about himself that he was a zero or consent to be shoved into a nut house. “This world is a zero! What do the idiots who call themselves doctors think, that I just came down out of the trees? Let the doctors stick a needle into their own asses, not mine!”

Dr. Danilo Aratsky smiled involuntarily. He would have been able to pull the little hooligan from the streets of Belgrade out of his cosmic rebellion. But he could not understand this young American. Long, white and clean, Dick Dodges did not move from his bed, like a large white fish caught by a whirlwind and thrown onto the shore. Danilo wiped the sweat from the young man’s forehead and then washed his hands. A large, white, shattered fish lay before him. He did not understand the whirlwind that shattered it and was unable to help. For a moment it seemed that he himself was lying there dazed by drugs instead of Dick Dodges. Then he shuddered. If Danilo asked to be moved to laboratory work, Dr. Walker would say that he was just having a little crisis. Crises come

and go. There was not much choice in the laboratory: he would dissect rats or frogs. Rats don't sleep at night. He would choose frogs without a moment's hesitation. In the end, frogs were also God's sweet creatures, and not even our madness is the same.

Eyes wide open, Aleksey Semyonovich tried to decipher what Danilo meant by "God's sweet creatures", to no avail. It was only when he talked to Aaron that Danilo's dilemma became clearer.

"If he doesn't forget Dodges, Danilo will look for another job!" said Aaron. "He might try to run away again. All of us are actually constantly on the run..." Aleksey's face turned pale and he stopped in mid-sentence.

Darkness was setting in on the other side of the window.

A new day was probably dawning in Belgrade, and in Murmansk...

"What's it now in Murmansk?" he said, turning to Aleksey Semyonovich. "Day or night? What's shining on the other side of the window in Murmansk?"

"It's snowing..." said Aleksey absently. "It's probably snowing! Why would Danilo look for a new job?"

"I don't know! But he will, it's more than certain..."

* * *

"Only it won't be a new job, but new trouble!" Danilo heard the voice of Luka Aratsky in the darkness streaked with lights from the surrounding high-rises on the 17th floor of a New York hotel, and started! How did he know? He hadn't even told Aaron that he was going to Hickory Hill for a few days to a seminar on early onset Alzheimer's. Aaron had heard it from someone in hospital administration, or from Aleksey Semyonovich, although he did not remember having said anything to Aaron about Danilo's upcoming trip to the Midwest.

"Ruža Rašula? Eh?" Aaron smiled, gently pulling Danilo toward the empty canteen, it was not yet lunchtime.

Aaron stared fixedly into Danilo's eyes and almost screamed. "What's happening to you...? Didn't you claim way back in Jasenak that some things are better to forget than remember? There have been patients in all countries and all times who've lost their hold on reality, with just a speck of memory here and there, while..."

“While... what? Memory loss does not erase everything? It leaves a void with crumbs of memories about someone’s little freckled nose, a frog croaking in Jasenak, shadows moving down the floors of the Atherton. Come on, Aaron! You still don’t get it, we’re the wrong people in the wrong place. Who knows what’s happening in Serbia! And we simply took the cowardly way out and ran off as soon as it started... And, well, here we are...”

“You’re wrong, buddy! We ran off before the bedlam began in Yugoslavia, if it every really stopped. Garača wasn’t the only one who cried in his sleep, Marko Vukota sobbed too. His family ended up in one of the bottomless pits near Gacko; he survived by a miracle and was convinced that nothing was over. The pit with the bones of his parents, brothers and sisters was waiting, and knives were being sharpened again. They tried to calm him down, to in vain. There had been a war and it ended. There would be no more wars. Marko Vukota didn’t believe anyone. “The wound can’t be seen,” he said, “and the pain is growing!” And everything was just repeating. “It’s enough to lean over one of those pits in the fall when the trees are bare and the wind is howling; the squealing voices of those killed long ago can be heard in that whistling wind. The pits are waiting, they’re waiting.”

“Stop the nonsense, Marko Vukota! What voices?” said the social workers, trying to calm boy down. To no avail. He was only calm on the lap of the Slovakian cook and when the campfires were lighted and the children danced around them singing: *“Paradise on earth awaits us...”*

“What paradise, Aaron? Where?” asked Danilo. “‘I’m giving God back the ticket,’ said one of the Karamazov brothers, “if the ticket to paradise is paid with even one child’s tear.’ And the paradise we were promised was paid with a river of tears. Why did they lie to us that there would be no more wars? Everything will sort itself out, they said. What’s sorted out? Damian might be drawn into a new war tomorrow, and in a few years, Danny too... There must be a reason for Garača silence. Ask him what’s going on.”

“I’d ask if I knew where he was, don’t panic! Some things did get sorted out, Danilo!”

“Do you think so? Well, you see, I don’t think so, Aaron! Nothing is sorted out, except that ‘the wound can’t be seen and the pain is growing’, imperceptibly, perfidiously pushing us into nonexistence, into the darkness. Because when words leave us and parts of reality go with them, where are we? Do we exist?”

“Emptiness hurts less, Danilo! I’m not thinking about just the ‘happy lunatics’ walking through the streets not knowing who or where they are...”

“Who are you thinking about then, man? Is there anything worse than a life where you don’t know if you’re alive?”

“It’s still about Ruža Rašula! Get hold of yourself! She’s gone...”

“Perhaps, but the numbers like her are increasing. Just this week we received seven new cases. My God, ‘cases’! It’s cruel to call them ‘cases’ but then again, what do you call someone who doesn’t even remember their own name. An invisible wave is sweeping them away like the sea does a grain of sand, drawing them into the emptiness. That might have already happened to Petar.”

Aaron glimpsed a shadow of fear in Danilo’s eyes that had not been there ever before. Perhaps it would be good for him to go away for some time, go to the seminar in Hickory Hill, change his surroundings, learn something more about the disease that obsessed him. Aaron felt the rupture in his friend’s soul widening. No, not friend! Brother...

* * *

Danilo and Aaron had expected a lot from the seminar in Hickory Hill, but it took place without any momentous revelations, or that is what Danilo thought at first. The author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* did not mention one word of it and neither did Danilo in his *Journal*. Was that because he thought that something crucial would happen in snowswept Iowa? Or it did happen, only Aaron and Aleksey Semyonovich were unable to decipher it.

And time was flying, showering them with new events in the old country and New York. Accounts were being settled in the homeland with such fierceness that it took even unruffled Aaron’s breath away. Even so, he still hoped the madness would pass so he could take Danny to Belgrade one day. A nightmare like that could not possibly last for long.

And yet it lasted! And became more and more sickening.

Aleksey Semyonovich, Aaron and Danny were expecting Danilo to call or turn up. Danny sometimes saw him in his dreams, and then started getting attached to Aleksey Semyonovich, replacing the Russian's granddaughter with blond braids and buckteeth.

"Danny speaks Russian better than Serbian and English!" Aaron wrote to Danilo Aratsky. "How long will you be staying in Hickory Hill? The American Midwest is not the most exciting place in the world..."

Danilo was silent. The Iowa River, slow and lethargic, was reminiscent of the Tisa. Just before sunset it became a smooth copper plate overgrown with reeds, but without the silverish-green willow groves and butterflies whose lives lasted from sunup to sundown. "What's come over Danilo, why doesn't he write," wondered Aaron. Unless he was looking for Petar again, it must be a woman. Bearing in mind his experience with Marta, however, Danilo avoided serious relationships...

* * *

Russian experts had registered for the seminar on Alzheimer's, but they did not attend. Instead, they sent reports on shaman techniques that most of the seminar participants considered cock-and-bull stories. Shamans did not even have instruments to determine blood type, they had never seen a scanner. How could they say anything about such a complex disease? Nevertheless, data about the onset and development of the disease indicated exceptional familiarity with instances of mysterious loss of speech.

All of this reminded Danilo Aratsky of his grandmother Simka Galičanka noting changes in a patient's irises, facial color, skin, hair, nails and behavior to conclude which balm to use or let things run their course if a specific medicine might worsen the patient's condition.

And then there was something else! In order to determine what to do, Simka Galičanka monitored the patient's breathing and the odor given off by their skin; based on the odor of their skin and breath, she determined whether there were hopes for recovery. Natalia Aratsky had inherited this gift from her mother, and Little Rusty from her. Dr. Luka Aratsky noticed this for the first time when he saw the boy wrinkle his little nose when he pressed his pet cat against his cheek.

“Watch out, cats can scratch!” said Petar with a smile, and Little Rusty had snapped back that Mitska would not be scratching anyone anymore because she would not live to see another day: her breath was short as though she were afraid, or running away...

Everyone laughed at Little Rusty’s words.

Nega was the only one in the house who believed him. She hugged him and put him to bed along with the cat, determined to spend the night with Little Rusty and see what happened to Mitska. But sleep got the better of her just before dawn. When she woke up, the cat, usually dozing at Danilo’s feet, was gone. They searched in vain for her all over the house.

“No one can ever find her again, and it’s better that way!” wailed Little Rusty, wiping his tears. “You didn’t love her anyway... You won’t find her!”

They did not find her and could not lessen the boy’s sorrow by promising him a white kitten.

“Only Mitska knew where it hurt me and put her little paws on that very place,” he whispered through his tears as he fell asleep. “I don’t need a white kitten!” he sobbed. “It won’t live long either.”

“How do you know?” asked Dr. Luka Aratsky several days later, amazed by Little Rusty’s claim that the smell of the sick one’s breath and skin revealed when they would die, not only for cats but people too...

“Simka Galičanka!” thought Luka Aratsky, determined not to ask anything more, terrified that Little Rusty might say something no one in the Aratsky house or Karanovo wanted to hear.

* * *

Nevertheless, the *Karanovo Chronicles* contained a trace of Little Rusty’s statement that “the smell of someone’s breath or skin lets you know whether they are soon to die or can be cured”.

Not a single medical textbook or report mentions the “smell of death”.

The fact that oncoming death can be foretold by the smell of one’s breath or skin did not appear until Georgie West’s Report on her experience with the healers of some

Indian tribes (Meskwaki, Sioux, Cherokee) that place the “*forgetting disease*” in the distant past along with the “smell of death”.

“Meskwaki Indians live in Iowa and so do the Amish. I’ll try to meet them,” wrote Danilo at the bottom of his letter to Aaron, as though an aside, along with the request that Aleksey Semyonovich look into what Russian sources had to say about the “smell of death”.

He would see how the Meskwaki Indians interpreted it through Georgie West, Alyosha should take a look at what the Russians had to say.

Aaron could not remember whether Aleksey Semyonovich found out anything about the shaman interpretation of the “smell of death”, but he well remembered that this was the first time the name Georgie West and the Meskwaki Indian tribe appeared in their correspondence. He had heard of the Amish back in Hamburg as the remnant of some sect wandering about the Midwestern prairies. He had never heard of the Meskwaki tribe. And even less of Georgie West, whose name was to appear frequently in Danilo’s letters, along with the possibility of smelling the approach of death through the odor of someone’s breath or skin, something that both Aaron and Aleksey Semyonovich found hard to believe.

If that were true, Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov and his colleagues at the hospital in Murmansk would not have started a fair amount of their operations. The “smell of death” would have warned them in time that they would just be “opening” and “closing” the patient, who had just a few days left to live.

With cats, leaving the Indians out of the picture, it was another matter. Taisa’s tiger-striped tomcat had been impeccable at finding the painful spots on her body and would lie next to her for hours as though spellbound, listening to the coursing of her blood and the movements of the residents in the apartment above theirs, touching Taisa’s face from time to time with his paws.

“What’s he feeling?” wondered Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov, laughing at Taisa’s statement that *her doctor knew what other’s knew nothing about. Right there where he touched her neck, she felt a hard and painful nodule.* “He knows!” she whispered, looking at him with large, damp eyes. “Don’t laugh! He knows!”

Aleksey found out what he knew when his son left for California and Taisa, seemingly healthy, *left this world: refusing to eat; the tiger-striped tomcat left soon after her. They found the same hard, painful nodules in him that Taisa had...*

They usually do not appear in cats.

Frightened to death, sensing that invisible connections existed among everything, Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov resolved never to bring another cat into his and Taisa's home, neither tiger-striped nor white! None at all. Instead, he bought a mouse that cruised around New York with him on the front passenger seat.

Loneliness must be terrible in a city with millions of people moving around and no one is anyone's friend or brother, thought Danilo...

* * *

He remembered this thought later when he remarked to Aleksey that a friend – was a friend, even if it was a mouse or a cockroach.

The winter that Aleksey Semyonovich buried Taisa and her cat, it snowed in Murmansk and New York. And yet Aleksey Semyonovich dreamed about the snowing in Murmansk, just like Danilo, in Hickory Hill, dreamed about the Tisa. He was giving some thought to starting a different life in Iowa, sensing Georgie West behind the idea, her magnificent bosom, her dappled eyes, her mouth, her laugh that made Ruža Rašula's face disappear like a whisp of vapor.

Pure, white snow covered the streets and pedestrians in New York. Only the skyscrapers eluded it, reflecting the clouds and the neighboring buildings, while the colors on them went from gray to purple, blue in spring, dark-blue in fall, blackish-yellow in winter. They changed colors so much during the day that people thought they were passing through the streets of different cities.

These changes, the lights scattered in the crazy city's sky, were the only thing that Taisa had loved and Aleksey Semyonovich learned to love them from her, although nothing could replace the snows of Murmansk and never-ending Siberia. "*To cry aloud, to cry aloud in the wilderness,*" a sentence came to him from Miguel de Unamuno, "*but though men hear not, the wilderness hears.* Did Siberia hear too?" he wondered.

New York was a desert in a way, so densely populated that no one saw anyone, no one heard anyone. No one needed anyone, no one was anyone's relative!

Winds were howling over New York and Murmansk, perhaps over Belgrade too. How many men, women and children had been saved thanks to Aleksey's knotty hands? How many had been born? How many had died? Staring at his enormous hands that skillfully set bone to bone, bringing back to life those given up for lost, Aleksey inadvertently wondered what Danilo Aratsky was doing, when would he be back?

"He left for three months!" said Aaron softly, as though answering Aleksey's unspoken question. "Don't worry, he'll be back."

* * *

The snow falling over Hickory Hill was softer and fluffier than it was over New York, Murmansk and Belgrade, and the white wooden houses could no longer be distinguished from their surroundings, so it was not clear whether the houses were sinking in the snow or the snow was simply burying them. Infrequent passers-by and lights above front porches gave evidence that life had not come to a standstill. Snowflakes swirled in the turbid sky along with black birds resembling those that had seen Danilo off from Hamburg.

Suddenly, without knowing why, he thought that this small place lost in the cornfields in summer and snow in winter might be his future home; hidden, cozy, safe from all the troubles of this world, from Marta and the sudden and increasingly frequent visits from his dead relatives. He could not be completely sure of this, however: they came and went, without prior notification, convinced even more than in New York that he had not chosen a place that would give his life any purpose.

What purpose? He had not found Petar and he heard less and less from Damian. The seminar in Hickory Hill had brought nothing new, except for the lecture on how the Meskwaki Indians healed and discovered diseases, the same methods used by Simka Galičanka in Karanovo and later by his mother Natalia Aratsky, and to some extent by him in Guberevac before he left for Hamburg. Danilo felt that his path had not led him by chance to Hickory Hill among the Amish and the Indians, but also among doctors who were geneticists, biophysicists, inquisitive people of all kinds. "No, not chance!" he whispered, half-asleep, feeling that he was not alone in that snowbound house on the other side of the world from Karanovo and Belgrade.

“You came all the way here and you could have forgotten me for a while. A vast amount of days, weeks and years have passed...”

“You’re talking rubbish, Danilo!” said Veta, her voice cracking. “*Time means nothing where we are...*” He thought he saw Veta’s face in the pale light through the snow-covered window and then he heard a dripping sound. Did that mean they were there? He did not have the strength to move. A glittering puddle started spreading in the corner where Veta stood. The others could barely be discerned in the whiteness of the snow that penetrated through the curtains. But they were there. Pressed together. Immobile. In the crowd of ghosts he thought he saw someone who had not come before. “Petar?” he thought.

“No, not Petar!” said his sister softly, and he noted the pack of ghosts moving, fading. “Petar is waiting for you in another place and another form...”

The ghosts disappeared as suddenly as they had appeared, but when a cascade of moonlight flooded the room, Danilo again saw the glittering puddle in the corner and heard Veta’s distant voice with the message that he should finally settle down somewhere. They were tired of going after him. Could he possibly have forgotten how terrible it was to walk in the snow, barefoot and wet?

Veta’s voice was lost in the howling wind beyond the window where fern frost was growing on the panes. Had he dreamed it all? No, he hadn’t! *Dreams don’t leave puddles on the floor.* The lad from Lübeck who pushed her in a frenzy into a crack in the ice was from a blond-haired clan raised to be lords of the world, and he had disappeared, tangled in the roots of a willow, in the water, like Veta, like some sort of spectral escort.

Had he been buried in Lübeck? Was he remembered? Forgotten? An entire eternity had passed in no time, why wouldn’t he be forgotten? People forget what they ate the day before, whom they met, whom they avoided meeting.

* * *

I am because someone dreams me.

Giovanni Papini

Half-asleep, eyes focussed on the whiteness beyond the window, Danilo Aratsky saw someone’s ethereal shade accompanied by a flock of snowflakes. They stopped and

leaned against a tree trunk, then disappeared. Into the tree trunk? The whiteness of the snow? Who could say?

He recognized her by her red hair. Ruža Rašula. Lost. And yet, present in his memory. Now he knew: he would have to see Georgie West. Perhaps the Meskwakis, whose customs she was studying, knew more than Simka Galičanka?

* * *

The snow, however, kept falling, covering the town with sparkling white powder that made the tree branches and roofs sag. White and luminous, Hickory Hill became part of Danilo's dream about an elf that he kept dreaming and forgetting. Long ago the snows were like that in Karanovo. Perhaps he had not come by chance to Hickory Hill to the meeting devoted to "memory loss diseases". Perhaps nothing in life was accidental: everything that exists, that is born, that sprouts, develops with a purpose. His intention to stay in Hickory Hill until he visited the Meskwaki Indian reservation no longer seemed odd, let alone accidental. *Not even the fluttering of a butterfly's wings is accidental.* Somewhere it raises a tempest, scatters the clouds. Nothing exists just for itself.

Danilo Aratsky waited impatiently for their departure to the hidden residence of a miracle worker who healed by laying his hands, using snake venom, his eyes and medicinal herbs.

"We'll go when it stops snowing!" promised Georgie West. But it kept on snowing, burying bushes and trees, roads and houses. Armfulls of snow steadily broke away from the low, turbid sky and stuck to eyelashes and hair.

"This will never stop!" grumbled Danilo, arguing with the snow, sky, God, himself.

Nevertheless, one day it stopped and gave way to a bright, sunny morning.

"Maybe we could go today?" thought Danilo, jumping over the snowdrift in front of Georgie's house, surprised that the snow had not been cleaned in front of her door like the other houses.

"Hi, Georgie!" he called out from the front door.

"Hi!" came a weak whisper from the bedroom.

Hale and hearty her whole life, Georgie was burning with fever, her cheeks were bright red and her eyes erupted with heat. Is that why she had not been at the seminar for

three days? Danilo walked to the sickbed and was surprised. Two pairs of children's eyes stared at him from behind the head of Georgie's bed, and then suddenly disappeared under the covers.

"My sons..." said Georgie with a smile and tried to get up. Without success. Her legs did not hold her even when she tried to prepare the boys some sort of breakfast with her last ounce of strength.

"Tell me what they eat and I'll fix it!" said Danilo Aratsky with a smile, putting her back in bed. His experience taking care of Damian and Danny now came in handy. The boys gobbled down their food without chewing, put on their coats and ran out into the snow. He must have done that too in the past, but had forgotten.

"When is their father coming back from work?" he asked, trying to schedule his time and bring the boys back inside before their father came home.

"He's not coming back!" murmured Georgie, coughing. "He's in Seattle with another woman, another child. Don and Robbie have only me and from time to time one of John's sisters who live on the other side of Hickory Hill..." Georgie West's dappled eyes emitted sparks, ejecting the fire from her body, and a shiver went down Danilo's spine before those eyes: her irises went from dark-blue to gold to a violet that he remembered from the eyes of Simka Galičanka and his mother, Natalie Aratsky.

"Are you all right?" asked Georgie West anxiously and he started. He was fine. Just tell him where to find the food and dishes so he could make lunch for the boys. Antibiotics were not needed for a cold, he would make her some linden tea with honey.

* * *

"*So, is that how it started?*" asked Aaron and Aleksey Semyonovich, staring curiously at Danilo's gaunt face. "Why don't you say something?"

"There's nothing to say!" replied Danilo, waving his hand dismissively, lying to himself. There was! He knew in his heart there was, but how could he tell them something that was puzzling even to himself. Who was Georgie West, whose name repeated in all his letters from Hickory Hill? Indeed, who was Georgie West, whose family tree went back to intertwining Celtic roots, mixing with German and who knew what other blood? Somewhere deep down, the mixture of what she carried in her blood merged with the Slavic, and who knew what other heritage that *he* also carried. *This was*

the old story that repeated identically in relations between men and women, although a little hazily this time. Indeed, who was Georgie West? Danilo Aratsky repeated Aaron's question to himself. A doctor? Yes? But also a passionate collector of the remnants of an old culture, a speaker of several Indian languages.

Studying the healing methods of the Zuni, Sioux and Meskwaki Indians was a secondary concern in her diverse range of interests. Languages were the key: magic words against the evil eye, and the names of herbs and minerals when healing the "forgetting disease" had brought her to Alzheimer's and the seminar in Hickory Hill.

Danilo Aratsky smiled silently.

In snowswept Hickory Hill, as though in a waking dream, he saw maps of the paths his clan had taken, with the names of former towns and villages whose residents had disappeared in wars, floods, migrations, or relocated about the world, from Germany France, Austria to New Zealand and Canada, leaving the names of Prizren, Lipljan, Srbica, Istok, Peć, Gračanica to watch over the dwellings of those who disappeared, temporarily or for all time. No, no, never for all time. *Language remembers! Through the names of the rivers, mountains and lakes, descendants remember where they came from and who they are. Language watches over the borders of the homeland, its customs, its future...*

Georgie West's *Anthology of Indian Poetry and Prose* cited numerous examples confirming the link between language and mental health. Danilo replied with examples from the "Kosovo Cycle" of his clan: *thanks to oral poetry, they had managed to preserve the memories of themselves and their history through five centuries of slavery.*

"That's impossible!" said Georgie West.

"It is possible!" replied Danilo. "At certain moments poetry and history intertwine, enabling the people they are about to survive."

"Does she understand that or not?" wondered Danilo, gazing at her exhausted face. Tea with honey was not helping. Georgie had trouble getting up and walked unsteadily as fear grew in her boys' eyes.

"Everything will be fine, boys!" said Georgie reassuringly, smiling at Danilo. She was touched by this peculiar Balkan's concern for her and her sons. She could not even find his country on a map.

* * *

“Once upon a time there was a country!” laughed Danilo. “It multiplied like an amoeba into several tiny states...” he added bitterly. “So no one knows who and what they are anymore...”

The gratitude in Georgie West’s eyes gave way to concern and compassion. He must have loved that country that fell apart like a rotten fish. She wanted to ask him something, but Danilo put his finger to his lips, cutting off any questions. There would be time to talk, he said. The boys would soon be going back to school, and on the other side of the world his son would be taking the surgery test, self-confident, assured – unlike his father who had never been like that. Damian glided through the agonies of school and through life like a knife through butter. Would he still be like that if they stuck him in a field hospital to take out bullets while planes flew overhead, dropping their monstrous loads on bridges, schools, hospitals, railroads? (This would actually happen later, but then, in Hickory Hill, he did not know it, although he sensed it as he watched the snowflakes flying outside the window.)

Danilo closed his eyes for a moment and beneath his eyelids flashed the huge hole on the spot where the magnificent Aratsky house once stood.

* * *

“What did Georgie West want to ask?” Danilo Aratsky speculated. “There would be time to talk!” he had said, interrupting her, lying to her and himself. There would be no time if he followed the rules of the society in which he lived. And he would have all the time in the world if he accepted the Meskwaki Indian’s belief that every living being contains infinity and eternity...

As soon as Georgie was on her feet and a relative came from Chicago to take care of the boys, they went to the reservation. Danilo quickly realized that the tribe settle in the prairie was in no hurry to get anywhere and never competed with anyone. The entire landscape was covered with snow and silvery moonbeams, but under the thick cover of snow the prairie was getting ready for new life: grains and grass would germinate, the thud of wild horses would be heard along with the Indians’ war cries.

“Everything that once lived here,” whispered Georgie dreamily, “is waiting for its moment to awake!”

Georgie thought, just like Luka Aratsky long ago, that all the plants, stars, grasses, waters and water dwellers – from fish to shellfish, from fairies to elves – were part of a chain of existence as living proof that nothing that ever existed can disappear once and for all.

“I knew someone who thought just like that!” said Danilo, his face radiant with a smile that Georgie had never seen before. They were close to a Meskwaki village located on a gentle slope overgrown with bush. A tall, upright old man with long hair was on his way to greet them. Calm and quiet, he had no feathers in his hair, as Danilo had seen in all the cowboy movies. He had been waiting for them rather a long time, ever since Georgie called to say they were coming. The old man looked sideways at Danilo in surprise. “Now he’s going to ask her if I’m her ‘new’ man!” whispered Danilo Aratsky to himself. But the old man was silent, smiling. A group of boys on a rise jostled each other until they all slid down the slope, all but one who stood with his arms wide open as though embracing the whole world.

“He is, too!” said the old man, as though reading Danilo’s mind. “Now he’s ‘king of the mountain’.”

“When will he start to punish them?” said Danilo, remembering the “slave game” in Karanovo and the fierceness with which the judge determined the punishment for whoever’s stone had fallen.

“Why should he punish or reward? Or think he is better than the others? They are not competing, they’re playing...” Georgie’s friend looked Danilo straight in the face skeptically, eyes fixed on him for a long time as though searching for something. “Next time someone else will be ‘king of the mountain’ and this current one will try the strength not to slide downhill in the new game... Your face is somehow familiar to me...”

Surprised, Danilo shook the snow off his coat and went with the old man into a room that must have been a common dining hall: grasses and roots were drying in the corners. How could his face be familiar to a Meskwaki Indian? This was the first time they had seen each other... Danilo gazed at the plants an old woman was setting on a table and was amazed. Some of the herbs were similar to those that Simka Galičanka brought back from her mysterious excursion into the forest across the river.

Georgie looked at him in astonishment. How could Danilo, who came from the other side of the world, know the parable about warriors wandering in an underground world where sharp stones crunched under their feet. A mysterious voice came out of the darkness saying: “If you take one – you will be sorry! If you do not take one – you will be sorry.”

“Well, if we’re going to be sorry, why take anything...” said some and did not take a thing!

Others thought, “Let’s see what this is all about,” and took one or two...

And when they came out of the World of Perpetual Darkness, the former were sorry they had not taken anything and the latter were sorry they had not taken more, because the stones underfoot were *precious* stones...¹

Along with the dried fish, edible seeds and blueberries, the Meskwakis slowly told Danilo several of the legends that were already included in Georgie West’s *Anthology of Indian Prose and Poetry*². Everyone listened very attentively.

Then an old woman spoke; most of the group had not heard or seen her before and did not know where she came from. When she spoke, the word “I” was equated with the word “you”.

“A Cherokee Indian!” whispered Georgie West. “‘I’ and ‘you’ in the Cherokee tribe are denoted by the same word... If ‘you’ disappears then ‘I’ is lost at the same time, like the loss of an individual in the tribe heralds the disappearance of the tribe itself.”

First the woman looked in wonder at the face of the foreign doctor and said, just like the old man before her, that his face was somehow familiar. Georgie, who had not been to the reservation in several years, shrugged her shoulders: Dr. Aratsky had never been to Hickory Hill before or even to the Midwest, his face could not be familiar to them.

Puzzlement and trepidation pierced Danilo’s heart. Perhaps someone similar to him in some previous life had sat in the twilight listening to the legend of the twins and forgetting. Rubbish! Danilo smiled. Some redhead cowboy must have passed through the reservation and the old folks imagined they were seeing him again.

¹ *Tamni Vilajet*, (World of Perpetual Darkness), a Serbian folktale.

² *The Winged Serpent, Anthology of Indian Prose and Poetry*, Margot Astrov, Capricorn Books, New York, 1946.

It was not until the third day when some hunters, including several boys, returned from hunting that Danilo Aratsky realized why the old folks were looking at him so strangely.

“Look at that little one wearing a coonskin cap...” said Georgie West, turning Danilo’s attention to a boy going inside with the group of hunters, followed by a swirl of snowflakes. “If I didn’t know this was your first time in the Midwest, I’d think that he was your son or relative. There are no redheads among the Indians, and the boy seems to have inherited your hair. Look, his eyes are gray too... Hey, you must have looked like that in childhood...”

Danilo could not remember what he looked like in childhood, because beautiful Petrana had banished all mirrors from the Aratsky house so she would not see her famous face age, change, and lose its elfin look. All he remembered was his red hair that caused fires, which was why he hid it with whatever he got hold of, to no avail. Fires blazed and it was only in his dreams that he could be invisible – until he reached New York where masses of pedesrians rolled through the streats, invisible to each other, wave after wave without letup.

“You’re not made of glass!” Danilo, half-awake, thought he heard the voice of one of the social workers in Jasenak. “You fell down, got up, scraped your knee, so what?” Of course he was not made of glass.

* * *

The Cherokee Indian woman said something in the language of her tribe, turning repeatedly toward Georgie West and Danilo.

Then Georgie said something in an Indian language that Danilo could not understand. One of the women went up to him and took him to the visitors’ room, showed him the bed and went out, letting him sleep.

The dream he dreamed kept recurring – somewhat different every time. The ladder he was climbing in the dream was swaying and slippery, but he did not give up, even though he could not see where all his efforts were leading him. The upper part of the ladder broke through the clouds and disappeared somewhere up above. In paradise or hell, he could not tell. It became harder and harder to climb the rungs because the closer

the ladder got to the crowd of disembodied spirits whirling in the clouds, the more it swayed.

“Why, those are Aratskys, if I’m not mistaken?” he thought, “but what are they doing up in the clouds?”

“And what are you doing on a ladder?” said Veta angrily, waking him up, but as soon as her voice faded, Danilo went back to sleep and started climbing again.

* * *

It took several days before Danilo Aratsky realized why the Meskwaki Indians looked at him in amazement and then turned to look at the redhead boy with a raccoon tail swinging on his cap.

When the old man, Gray Wolf, spoke about how to prevent the “forgetting disease”, he said nothing new, or at least nothing newer than what Georgie West had said at the seminar in her lecture on Alzheimer’s. He listened to the Indian attentively, nevertheless, particularly when Georgie translated the parts where Gray Wolf mixed his mother tongue with English. This is why Danilo did not notice when the redhead boy left with the hunters again. It was time for him to leave too...

* * *

The sky echoed with the cries of migrating birds in the midst of silent whirling snowflakes, but the smell of spring was already in the air. Danilo closed his eyes for a moment and under his eyelids seemed to see Ruža Rašula walking along a snow-covered path. Then she disappeared into a tree trunk. Birch? Wild cherry? It was a tree he knew, but had forgotten its name. Suddenly, like a clap of thunder, he grasped why he was so afraid of losing words and thereby losing reality, and untimely himself. Aaron had not been able to understand. He had not had a Ruža Rašula...

“There are more interesting things than Alzheimer’s in what we’re treating. Get hold of yourself, man!” said Aaron Levi when they parted, shaking him as though waking him up. “It’s time you came back!” he reminded him periodically, saying that Danny and Aleksey Semyonovich kept asking what the hell was keeping him in the snows of Hickory Hill. “Someone wearing a skirt,” Aaron had replied with a smile. And he was not far from the truth, except that Georgie, like most American women, did not wear skirts and, along with God’s Ten Commandments, firmly held to her own Ten Commandments,

never missing a chance to remark: have fun, take naps, gossip about the neighbors or simply hang out on the weekend – it's OK! God had his day of rest too. But if you do it on a workday, it's a crime against yourself and society.

Georgie had a very clear idea of what was right and wrong. Rule number two had an air of right-mindedness and forbid interfering in someone else's life even in cases when such interference meant saving them. Close relations with others always smelled a little like future trouble that should be avoided at all cost.

Drinking at cocktail parties and “on the house” parties was all right, because it was a part of social life. Drinking outside of parties – was a pure waste of money!

Never underrate your living conditions. If you cannot have a larger house and car than your neighbor, you must at least have the same.

The conjugal bed exists to create offspring. A man who thinks that beds were invented because of sex is greatly mistaken. Sex is sweetest in someone else's house or on a desk at the office.

Marriage is not only the joining of two human beings. Marriage is an institution. Those who do not respect institutions run the risk of becoming renegades.

Knowledge and having your nose stuck in a book is all right if it has practical application. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is a sign of decadence, or insanity.

Going unshaven or neglecting the front lawn is a sin against yourself and society. How long a beard and the grass are allowed to grow is common knowledge!

Georgie West found grass almost mystic – no wonder she was so careful about how grass should look and how long it was allowed to grow.

Danilo couldn't care less. But considerable time had to pass before he realized that they were worlds apart. He agreed to shave, all right. He agreed to attend Catholic mass with her, went on exhausting shopping trips and visits – but he did not agree to lie to her and himself that he liked it. He had not held it against Marta, back then, when she ran to Party meetings, but he had not let her turn him into a politically correct Party member, ready to accept every foolish thing as a wise solution. If someone was drunk, you had to wait for them to sober up; everything else was a crime, the antidepressants and electroshocks. Finally, Marta had her Party and after the divorce, Rašeta. Georgie had her

church and the Indians. He had his Aratskys, alive and dead. And the hope that the “forgetting disease” would not reach him until he found freckled Sara Cohen and Petar...

Aaron’s meeting with Gojko Garača and what Garača said to him renewed a dying ray of hope in Danilo Aratsky: a blond-haired man hunting wild geese and fishing salmon had been seen among the Alaskan Indians. He would not shoot the snow foxes and seals for anything in the world. The description could have fit Petar – blue-eyed and tall, from an Eastern European country, mumbling periodically in a strange language. But no one remembered that he was missing a leg. This fact made Danilo realize that it had been another futile hope.

He was nonetheless pleased to hear that Garača was alive, that he remembered him, and that he had found the trail of little freckled Sara Cohen who still cried in her sleep, afraid of rats.

“Do rats sleep at night?” Danilo asked Georgie to question the laboratory technician in charge of the Wistar rats.

“Some sleep, some don’t!” said Georgie with a smile. “It’s not important for the experiments...”

“It’s important for Sara Cohen from Jasenak. Otherwise she would not be sobbing in her sleep after all these years...

* * *

He did not say that he too sometimes whined in his sleep like an abandoned puppy. “Every woman has a devil inside her. The pretty ones have more than one. If something is not for their ears, it had better not reach them!” said Luka Aratsky to his son Stevan, and the unknown author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* noted that “Petar remembered the old man’s advice, maybe Little Rusty too.” Stevan measured the angles at which the stars crossed, determining the fate of all living creatures on earth.

Considering his attitude toward the stars, Stevan could have been the offspring of any Indian tribe – if it were not for the women who attracted him like a moth to candlelight.

The stars could not be seen the first two nights on the Meskwaki reservation, or else Danilo, confused by Gray Wolf ‘s doubts and the inquisitive looks of the other

Indians, failed to see them, failed to follow them like that Chippewa Indian who declared in verse that “he walks through the sky following a star!”

* * *

“Whose star, Georgie?”

“His own! The Meskwakis believe that their souls live on stars before they decide to enter their earthly form. And then when their time on earth runs out, they go back. That is why they have no fear of death: it is the stars that decide man’s fate, there is no reason for fear.”

Surprised, Danilo did not ask any more questions. His father Stevan had believed in the role played by the stars in man’s life, as had Stevan’s grandfatherfather Mihailo, who came back from Vienna in a black trunk with 27 knife wounds. Nevertheless, the fear inside them was vivid. More vivid than Little Rusty’s when his legendary grandfather was blown up, fear that was then turned into the fear of forgetting connected to Ruža Rašula.

Although the author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* did not understand what was “so important” about the girl, he did not fail to mention her several times and wondered “how long will Dr. Danilo Aratsky keep going back to his encounter with Ruža Rašula and the fear it conveyed to his soul, as though the fact that she forgot something was special. How many people forget the names of their near and dear, the names of streets, towns, objects, plants and animals, and no one turns it into a world-class issue.”

The “Whisperer from the Lord’s Dream” wrote on the margin of Danilo’s *Journal* that Aaron Levi, “clearly does not understand what is at the heart of Danilo’s fear of the ‘forgetting disease’, not Ruža Rašula but himself, because the little island of memory loss was expanding, words were being lost, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it!”

The Meskwaki custom of bestowing the “blue flower” surprised Danilo more than anything else he heard, and brought back the voice of his maternal grandmother, white-haired Simka Galičanka, from the time when Veta was choking from a cough. Instead of the usual herbs, she put her hand on the girl’s forehead and began to recite a poem that none of the Aratskys had ever heard before. It sounded like beseeching, cursing, making a pact with death.

“Go, affliction, back to where you came from, to the forest where the sun does not heat, where the moon does not shine, where the birds do not sing. Go, and do not come back again!” Simka took a “blue flower” out of somewhere and sang:

This blue flower I will give,

If you let my Veta live!

Simka Galičanka repeated the poem until she felt the fever drop on Veta’s forehead and the sick girl fell asleep. Then she fell silent and stayed with her the whole night.

Danilo simply could not believe his ears when he heard the Meskwaki healer repeat Simka Galičanka’s magic words slowly, so Georgie could write them down, brought from the south somewhere, or maybe from Homolje in Serbia!

And then absentmindedly, paying no attention to anyone, he started singing the “blue flower” magic words softly in his mother tongue, not noticing the evening shadows sliding down the walls of the room and that a group of hunters, shaking snow off their clothes, had entered it, including the redhead little boy wearing a coonskin cap.

Bewildered, the boy stood by the door for some time. Then he went up to Danilo and listened, turning pale.

“Wh-wh-what language are you speaking?” he asked in English, stuttering, staring at Danilo in awe.

“Why do you ask?”

Danilo almost jumped onto his chair when the boy said that his father spoke that language, and all his father’s tribe that resided on the banks of a powerful river in a plain, flowing along the bottom of the Pannonian Sea that disappeared into another sea, along with the fish, the fairies and elves. The boy could not remember what else his father said in his strange language. He had mentioned the names Beli Grad and Karanovo, maybe something else. He didn’t know! Had he remembered the names of those two cities correctly? He had been small, he could not even remember his father’s name...

* * *

In the gloom, fully awake, Danilo Aratsky tried to remember the expression on Georgie’s face when the redhead boy came up to his chair and asked him what language he was speaking. But all he could remember was the boy with gray eyes and a

coonskin cap. He might have been eleven or twelve years old, but looked older and was taller than all the boys his age in the tribe. The story about the powerful river in the plain was the story of the Aratskys. Who had told it to him? His father, he said! Had anyone else? And had that someone spoken the Meskwaki language, or did they have trouble speaking it? Questions whirled through Danilo's head but he could not find the strength to say a single word.

"Who are this boy's parents? What is he doing among the Indians?" he said at last, turning to Georgie West, puzzled that she could not answer his questions. What could she tell him? She had started visiting the Meskwakis just a few years ago. She had not seen the boy then. If she had, she certainly would have remembered him. She did not know who the boy's parents were.

"No one in the tribe knows either!" sighed Gray Wolf. "He was found several years ago in a fissure above the river, buried in the snow, half-frozen, struck dumb from fear or the memory of what happened to him. His parents were nowhere to be seen for miles around. A tame wolf was guarding him.

"The boy was silent for several months, and when he spoke it was in Meskwaki. Either because one of his parents was from our tribe or because he had learned our language living among us..." Gray Wolf fell silent and noted that the redhead boy had listened to him attentively, staring at "Georgie West's man" as though searching his face for answers to questions that had been troubling him for years: Who am I? Who are my parents? The Meskwakis were unable to tell him. His mother appeared to have been an Indian. His father certainly was not. "Petar? Could it be Petar?" thought Danilo, intuition hitting his heart like an electric shock. At one time Garača had mentioned a blond man from an Eastern European country wandering among the Indians. No, it couldn't be! Danilo well remembered Petar's face from his final visits in Jasenak. The boy did not look like Petar and did not even remember his father, or else he did not want to remember him.

The information that Georgie West managed to get out of the boy in Meskwaki was extremely bewildering. The boy remembered magic words, tongue twisters, legends, but not his parents' names.

But the word “abush” came to him when asleep and awake. He did not know who it referred to (father, mother, the white wolf) or what it meant, until he realized that it might be his own name.

Danilo Aratsky also wondered: Why? What secret is hidden in that name? Whose is it? Abush! Abush! Abush! It echoed in Danilo all night long through his dreams. From his experience as a psychoanalyst, he knew that every word that repeats in a dream must have a special meaning. What was it? In his dream that repeated night after night, abush, abush was heard in the humming voices.... And then the humming softened and the creatures making the sound started shrinking, and he was shrinking too, changing from one form to another, while the room got bigger and bigger.

“Remember what you were at the beginning!” someone’s voice cautioned him. “Then follow the sequence of changes until the end, so that you can go back the same way to where your tasks are still not finished...” “What tasks?” he wondered. Who was he talking to? And what did that voice want, growing as loud as thunder? Whose was it? The Aratskys had not been around for a while, although he did not believe they had lost his trail: Hickory Hill was not very far from the Meskwaki reservation. *Deep down inside he felt that he missed them, that he was incomplete without them, nonexistent...* The only other time he had felt like that was when Veta slipped under the ice; he had whimpered day after day, hour after hour, looking for her where she might be and where she had never been, running as fast as his legs could carry him.

Perhaps that was why Veta appeared to him more often than the others, reminding him to remember what he had been at the beginning. Of what? His dream? Life? Probably his dream.

Danilo Aratsky felt all the muscles in his body tighten. What had he been? A bear? A man? A fox? A white wolf? Rubbish! White wolves might not even exist. Indians often named their children after an animal, a plant, a mountain, a river, a star.

Recurring dreams usually have a special meaning. What kept coming back to him, however, was not just one dream, but a whole sequence of dreams. Each time he was in a room that was growing larger while he was growing smaller. In the center of the room was a bed and human faces were painted on the walls: angry, calm, threatening, smiling. They were different every time, because a gigantic hand would erase them, but they kept

coming back, somewhat changed. Among them were the faces of the Aratskys from one of the family photographs taken just before the war. Which war? Back in the homeland, wars sprouted like mushrooms. How could he be sure which one it was and when it broke out? The Aratskys from the family photograph were no longer among the living. What were they? Stardust in the sky? Voices in the wind? What?

Whose voice was cautioning him: “Remember what you were at the beginning!” Indeed, what had he been when he started to change and get smaller? The room was too small for a bear to move around in it. Even so, going step by step backward, he realized that he actually had been a bear first, then a deer, a wild boar, a badger, a wolf, a fox, a squirrel, a lizard, a frog, a tadpole and then something tiny: a gnat, an ant in a heap of ants on which someone was pouring hot water, threatening to drown them. To the last one! What is the use of ants in this world? They should be drowned. All of them!

“Great! Now you’re an ant!” Danilo laughed at himself in his dream, conscious of the fact that it was just a dream and he would wake up as a man, although he was not quite sure. What if he did not remember what he had been at the beginning? Abush! Abush!

Danilo Aratsky felt his insides go cold at the question about what he had been at the beginning. An angel? A devil? God? *Only God creates himself anew.*

Slowly he began to remember, terrified that he would make a mistake somewhere and stay a lizard or ant for all time. If only he had a mirror to see what he was, he thought, but quickly rejected the thought, as a fly. See what? Himself suspended in a day that stretched out to eternity? Something wondrous? Something dreadful?

“You’re overdoing it, Little Rusty! Everything’s not that terrible!” Just when he thought that his Aratskys had forgotten him, Veta’s voice reached him from a flock of snowflakes. “You’re not an ant and you’re not alone, don’t you forget it!” The light of a new day shimmered in the thinning darkness. He heard dripping water and someone’s voice calling: Abush! Abush!

* * *

*Instead of real life, he built himself
another reality composed of stories...*

Ivo Andrić

“Danilo never quite understood what was happening to him in his dreams about shrinking!” noted the “Whisperer from the Lord’s Dream” on page 167 of the *Karanovo Chronicles*. “His last day among the Meskwakis he discovered that his ‘fear of forgetting’ was subsiding, yielding to hope that the loss of words and reality could be stopped to some degree, if not eliminated!”

Watching stealthily, the redhead little boy with a coonskin cap kept his eye on Danilo and listened attentively to what he said in English during the day and that strange language during the night; some of the words seemed familiar, although he did not know their meaning. When he was awake, “Georgie’s man” spoke only in English and asked the boy if he had another name. His mother had called him Little Cloud, all right. She was an Indian. What had his father called him? What was written in the registry of births?

“The Meskwakis do not have a registry of births, if the boy belongs to their tribe,” said Georgie, frightened by Danilo’s nightmares where only a few words of English were spoken and he woke up bathing in sweat. “Do you know that you shouted in your sleep? And cried now and then, too?”

“Of course I know,” he laughed. “In my dream I was an ant that any fool could squash. It’s a good that you don’t know my mother tongue, I must have cursed to high heaven, starting with ‘od sunca žarkog’ ...”

Danilo started inadvertently and fell silent as Little Cloud, turning pale, whispered, “Say it again! Say it once more...”

“What?” said Danilo, pulling the raccoon tail teasingly with a smile. “What should I repeat?”

“The last thing you said! Little Cloud seems to think he recognizes the last two or three words...” said Georgie.

“Come on, Georgie! That’s just one of our everyday curses. Why would he remember that of all things? Who among the Meskwakis could have said it?”

“Well, he did hear it!” said Georgie, “and remembered it.”

“He could have remembered his father’s name too. Ask him what his father’s name was in Meskwaki, what his mother’s name was.”

She did not have to ask. If the son was Little Cloud, it was more than certain that the father was Big Cloud. No one in the tribe remembered his mother’s name: some itinerants had taken her with them when she was a very little girl.

When she grew up, she searched for her tribe at great length. No one could confirm that they were actually the Meskwakis and no one could say for sure that her real name was Fleeing Cloud. None of her facial features resembled the members of the tribe and no family had acknowledged her as their lost child, even though she stayed in the tribe quite a long time. Then she spent some time in Chicago and came back with Little Cloud’s father, who certainly could not have belonged to any Indian tribe. He was tall, blue-eyed and blond. In addition to English he spoke a strange language and a Meskwaki dialect that was mixed with other Indian languages of the American Midwest. Little Cloud might have been five or six when he got lost in a snowstorm along with his parents, whom he never saw again. The hunters who found him half-frozen and dumbstruck from the harrowing experience took him to their reservation and then searched for his parents a while. Then stopped searching and adopted him as one of their own.

“Was that the little ‘task’ the Aratskys considered unfinished?” Danilo Aratsky felt his throat tighten as a profusion of stories about Petar passed through his head: Petar missing on Goli Otok Island, then seen among the Alaskan Indians, in a Bavarian beer hall, in the cornfields of the American Midwest. What was the connection between these stories and the redhead little boy living with the Meskwakis? Petar was blond and blue-eyed and tall! The boy was neither blond nor blue-eyed. Nevertheless, Little Cloud could have been Petar’s son, the third redhead in the Aratsky family. He looked like Danilo, who did not look like any other Aratsky. But, no! Neither Little Cloud nor any of the Indians remembered that the boy’s father was missing a leg. Someone would have remembered it and this would have brought back the hope that Petar was still alive somewhere.

Danilo Aratsky shuddered. The door that had opened a crack was now closed. When he asked Georgie and the Indians if Little Cloud's father had *both legs*, all they did was inquire in amazement:

“If he hadn't, how could he have crossed the Rocky Mountains?”

No one recognized the redhead boy's father on the family portrait. It would have been impossible. The photograph had yellowed with age and Petar was just a boy barely older than Little Cloud. All the stories about Petar dissolved and vanished like mist over a river. And yet, when Georgie took off the boy's cap to caress his hair as it emitted sparks the color of old gold, Danilo shouted softly: Little Cloud had a tuft of white hair on the top of his head, just like the one that waved on Damian's head, and had on his as well in early adolescence. Little Cloud was indeed Petar's son, the descendant of a distant Aratsky who had wandered from Zakarpattia to the Danube and Tisa river basins. All the similarities could not be pure coincidence. But in like manner, Petar could not have grown a new leg to replace the one he lost...

“You fool!” said Danilo to himself. “There are artificial legs! But also *people made of dreams, seen in dreams and lost in dreams!* And you yearn so much for Petar that you'd search the mist to see if it was hiding the one you've been looking for your whole life ...” It hit him like a bolt of lightning that he had found Petar in the strangest possible place and most unbelievable form.

“No, not Petar!” He could hear Veta's low voice, as though answering his question in Hickory Hill about the unknown ghost being Petar. “Petar is waiting for you in another place and another form...”

Why not: and is looking for you? Petar had found Danilo in the Jasenak Home for War Orphans even though the times were troubled and parents and children, brothers and sisters would look for and find each other, or lose each other scattered about the world. He was not the only one searching. There were hundreds of thousands like him and like those who sobbed in their sleep, forgot their parents' names, where they were from and their own name. Then new wars brought new relocations, and not only wars. Who knew where Petar had gone after Goli Otok and where he was now? Garača had mentioned a blond man among the American Indians in the Midwest, but that blond man certainly was

not Petar. Garača remembered him, but had gone to the Indians because of a long-ago childhood dream, not Petar.

Did Gojko Garača still collect books about Indians? And where was he? Aaron had not seen him in quite a long time, but had learned through him that freckled Sara Cohen had not disappeared in the mists of New York. She was alive and somewhere in Albany, the capital of New York state. Aaron was waiting for Danilo so they could look for her together. “What the hell are you doing in Hickory Hill?” asked Aaron in one of his letters. “If a woman is involved, bring her with you. There’s not a woman who wouldn’t exchange Hickory Hill for New York. Spring is on its way, albeit without the Midwest’s luxuriant greenery, but also without the icy winds from the Hudson and East rivers. Aleksey Semyonovich and Danny can barely wait to see you. Alyosha’s white mouse is fine, but doesn’t cruise the streets of New York in his cage on the passenger seat very much. Danny has adopted him along with Alyosha. Who is the redhead boy living with the Meskwakis? There are no blue-eyed and redhead Indians. Who is that boy?”

* * *

On the 17th floor of a New York hotel, next to an unidentified naked woman, for many time Danilo Aratsky asked himself the same question as Aaron. It had been constantly present from the moment he set eyes on the child: Who was he and what was a Little red haired boy doing among the Indians? Who the hell was playing tricks on him? He had been looking for Petar for years and found nothing of him among the living or the dead. Nowhere! And his trail seemed to be everywhere. “What if Little Cloud is Petar’s son?” wrote the tireless author of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, and so did Danilo in his *Journal* when he thought the redhead boy might be all that was left of Petar. *The third of the three males in the Aratsky family, all that was left after the wars.* The fulfillment of Simka Galičanka’s prophetic words.

Rubbish! Little Cloud had nothing of Petar’s features or movements. But the way he walked, his smile, his voice, his red hair and gray eyes – made him Damian’s double, just as Damian was the spitting image of Danilo Aratsky.

Petar had a large black mole under his left shoulder blade in the shape of a blackberry. Did Little Cloud have one? Damian? Danilo had one in the same place, the same shape. He could touch it with his hand but could not see it in the mirror... unless he

was imagining the whole thing? He tried to touch it with his fingers, without Georgie seeing; if he found it, he would check whether Little Cloud had one too.

“Did something bite you?” said Georgie teasingly, caressing his cheek. “We have mosquitoes here, but not at this time of the year. Let me see!” Georgie slipped her hand slowly under his t-shirt and smiled. “You really do have something under your shoulder blade ...”

“What about Little Cloud?” asked Danilo, getting goose bumps. “Does he have a blackberry-like mole...? Could you take a look?”

He did and did not want for the boy with a coonskin cap to have the mark, like some royal seal confirming that he belonged to the Aratsky clan. Danilo was afraid to discover that he had been chasing lost hopes again. And what if he hadn’t? He remembered the prediction he made in the game called “slaves”: if the sparrow flies away... if the sparrow does not fly away... He could not remember whether or not it had flown away. A lot of things had been slipping his memory in recent months. That was why he had come to the reservation, and there he was mulling over moles. It was a good thing he had not asked whether the boy had a bit of webbing between his toes. Most of the Aratskys did. “The boy would be devastated,” he thought. And was mistaken. When they started talking about peculiarities, Little Cloud proudly announced that he had something that none of the Meskwakis had, something that helped him swim faster than anyone else in the tribe. Something that otters had and some kinds of birds.

“A bit of webbing between your toes?” It flew out of Danilo’s mouth all by itself and the boy started.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“I just know!” replied Danilo, surprising everyone. “Did your father have it too?”

Little Cloud said he didn’t know. His father had not undressed in front of him, so how could he know whether or not he had webbed toes that everyone in the tribe so admired? Why, he did not even remember the English name that Big Cloud called him when he was happy or sad, remembering the old country where he wanted to take Little Cloud when he reached school age.

* * *

From the boy's story, Danilo could not figure out what his father meant by "old country". Little Cloud did not know the name of that "old country" or the name of the city above two rivers where a statue had been erected to a monkey that ran away...

The boy fell silent for a moment and in Danilo's head came the cry of the crowd encouraging the monkey that escaped from the zoo not to come down off the roof of the building he had climbed, running away from the guards. The crowd of people got bigger and bigger, shouting: *Don't give up, Sammy! Run!*

Sammy flew from roof to roof, tree to tree, as though he had wings. In the end he came down by himself, calm, oblivious to the fact that he had driven the guards crazy for three days and two nights with his fight for freedom, a fight that the crowd felt he had won for them. A monument was soon erected in honor of Sammy, the monkey that would not accept a cage.

* * *

Later, in New York, Danilo Aratsky wondered what his life would have been like if, drawn by his interest in the "forgetting disease", he had not gone first to Hickory Hill and then to visit the Meskwaki Indians.

If someone had told him that he would become the uncrowned king of the Meskwaki reservation owing to Sammy's longing for freedom, Danilo would have thought they were out of their mind.

But that's what happened!

Eyes shining brightly in the translucent darkness imbued with the whiteness of snow, Little Cloud and all the others thought they could see the monkey jumping from roof to roof, from the top of one poplar to another, as though Sammy's three days of freedom were taking place right there in front of them, lifting them up to the stars that guarded the souls of the dead and those yet to be born. As though transfixed, they silently gazed at Danilo in awe, as though he was the one jumping over roofs and treetops. Slowly, step by step, Little Cloud drew closer to Danilo and laid his head on his shoulder, whispering something barely audible, by turns in Meskwaki and English. "Good Lord, is the boy Petar's son?" thought Danilo as warmth and tenderness washed over him. If it was blood that made the identification, he could be. And what if it wasn't?

Several words repeated in the boy's whispering, but Danilo did not know what they meant. The boy clearly wanted something.

"What does he want, Georgie?" said Danilo, asking for help.

"He wants to see the monkey that ran away!"

"A child can't be taken from one country to another, and who knows whether Sammy is still alive after everything ... It's not a matter of money: one of my three 'Blue Mauritius' stamps would buy an apartment in Manhattan, let alone pay for a trip to Yugoslavia."

"Former!" said Georgie, smiling. "Get used to that idea, Danilo. And stay here where you were welcomed from the very start... where you have friends and a job..."

"What job, Georgie! Lunatics are everywhere. The problem is just that our madness is not the same..."

The way he said it and the awkwardness in his voice made Georgie realize that his heart had already set out for that country torn into several small states, and she fell silent. It was his decision to make. Georgie shrugged her shoulders. If he could show that he was the Little redhaired boy's kin, he would be able to add him to his passport, if Little Cloud really wanted it. The Meskwakis would not go against the boy's wishes. Was "Georgie's new man" really the boy's relative? They were as alike as two peas in a pod and the boy was alone in the world. If his parents were alive, they would have come for him long ago. Fate seemed to have sent Georgie's redhead and connected him to the boy through several foreign words. Language remembers. It was enough to look at the names of former settlements, provinces and towns to know who had lived there from time immemorial, what they did, what they were like... "The migrations of a people can be monitored by these names, and so can the paths of an individual!" wrote the anonymous author of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, returning to the misplaced paths of the Aratsky family, not quite sure that what was recorded would be preserved.

How Danilo got the boy to agree to leave with him was not noted in Danilo's *Journal*. The *Karanovo Chronicles* only said that "Danilo Aratsky, having finished his research on how the Indians treat the 'forgetting disease', stayed in Hickory Hill for some time with Georgie West and the redheaded boy, convinced that he must hold onto what was left of his missing brother."

The residents of Hickory Hill looked in amazement at the redheaded little boy brought from the Indian reservation and the tame wolf that followed him wherever he went...

Except it was not a wolf but a blue-eyed Siberian husky, rarely seen in the American Midwest. Danilo could not tell whether the color of the dog's eyes was a secret message from Petar or just a coincidence.

* * *

But when Aaron came to investigate what had happened to Danilo in Hickory Hill, everything was clear to him at once. The dog had blue eyes and Little Cloud had Danilo's face from the Jasenak Home for War Orphans, Danilo's movements, Danilo's voice.

"Veta was not wrong after all!" thought Danilo. He might have found Petar where he was not looking for him, changed in a way he never dreamed ... And yet, Petar did not come to him in the crowd of dead Aratskys, which could mean that he was alive, or that his soul was living in the body of Little Cloud.

"Just like our souls live through you, Little Rusty..." His very first night back in Hickory Hill, Veta appeared in his dream with a crowd of ghosts. Again he heard the sound of water dripping from her hair and her quiet, soothing voice that consoled him in Karanovo whenever he slipped and fell or was afraid of something. Aaron, who was sleeping in the same room as Danilo, heard neither the dripping water nor Veta's voice, nor the ghosts of the Aratskys as they gathered, following Little Rusty from one end of the world to another.

But Little Cloud saw what Aaron did not see or hear.

"Who is the green-eyed girl with dark hair that keeps dripping water, Danilo? Why didn't you make her stay?" he asked, still drowsy and confused. "My father would have made her stay because it's cold outside and her feet were bare and blue from the cold, he certainly would have made her stay ..." "

"No he wouldn't, child! You cannot make ghosts stay! Why didn't you make your parents stay? They were probably already ghosts when you were found, half-frozen, buried in the snow, thanks to the howling dog that tried to pull you out from under the avalanche... Do you see them, even as ghosts? Do you talk to them in your sleep?"

Danilo pulled the boy to him and turned his coonskin cap backward. That's when he was shocked by the child's sudden tears. "Why are you crying? What's wrong?"

* * *

*...a wind that passes
and does not return.*

Psalms 78:39

Danilo tried to find out, to no avail. The secret of the boy's tears remained a mystery until one moment, in the future, when he turned the coonskin cap backward once again and heard the boy whisper:

"Hey, Doctor, what's going on? Only my father turned my cap around, no one else..."

Only his father? Like a flash of lightning, Danilo saw Petar in Jasenak turning his cap backward the same way! The blond one-legged giant who moved mountains in Little Rusty's dreams. And then disappeared. In Munich? On rocky Goli Otok Island? Among the Midwestern American Indians, if Gojko Garača's reports were credible, and they probably were not! Petar had never been crazy about Indians and did not talk about them like Garača. And yet! Petar had not been crazy about wars either, considering them a curse, like his legendary grandfather, and even so he blew up railroads and ammunition depots, horrified with what wars brought, regardless of who was fighting and why.

How and where Petar lost his leg was something Danilo did not find out during his visits to Jasenak, crowned with the victor's glory.,

Afterward, he did not even venture to ask. One does not ask about an "enemy of the people". They are buried alive, tossed into oblivion, into nonexistence.

And so Petar disappeared in heavy, leaden silence, and then so did all the other Aratskys.

Perhaps? Perhaps not! A giant tree grows strong shoots...

Danilo's conviction that Little Cloud was missing Petar's son grew stronger day by day. The boy had been found in the snow thanks to the blue-eyed dog whose name the Little radhaired boy did not remember, as he did not remember his own.

Danilo tried to find out what happened to the boy's parents through Georgie and the Meskwaki Indians, to no avail! They had found the remains of leather clothing half a day's walk from the Meskwaki settlement, but not their owner. That was impossible, too much time had passed. If anything had been left of Little Cloud's parents, torrents would have swept it away, animals would have torn it apart...

In spite of everything, the story of the redhead boy with a coonskin cap continued to travel among the Midwestern Indians, transformed into the legend of a child that had wandered this way from the Red Star that heralded wars and fires.

Danilo Aratsky did not believe that story. Who it was that first mentioned the boy's father sometimes called him Marko, or what the word *abush* meant from his dream, he never found out and decided to let time either contradict or corroborate his suspicions.

The name Marko appeared several times in the Aratsky family tree. Danilo doubted that Petar was thinking of any of them. It was more likely that Little Cloud was named after some Petar's childhood friend.

"Does the name Marko mean anything to you?" he asked the boy and was surprised at his reply: it was a nice name and might be his, but he could not remember anyone calling him that. Nevertheless, he accepted the name and going away to New York and Belgrade – if he could take Jimmy with him, the dog that had brought him back among the living from the threshold of the other world.

That was the first time Danilo heard the blue-eyed dog's name. Little Cloud, surprised as well, realized that the memory of what had happened to him and his parents was knocking on the door of his consciousness, bringing back pieces of his former life and the hope that he would find out who he was.

* * *

*...snow falling faintly through the universe
and faintly falling, like the descent of their
last end, upon all the living and the dead...*

James Joyce

In snow-swept Hickory Hill, the ghosts of the Aratskys followed Danilo less and less often. And spring was imminent, bringing a restlessness that filled the redhead

little boy and his dog, the constant companion of Little Cloud and Georgie's sons. "It's time to go to the river," thought Danilo and so he took the little company of boys fishing. When they got there he discovered that he knew less about fishing than Georgie's boys and Little Cloud, who was called Marko in Hickory Hill. He still was not used to the name, unlike the blue-eyed husky that happily responded to "Jimmy" as he jumped over patches of snow in the grass that had sprouted all around.

"Hey, it's spring in New York too!" said Aaron, urging him to come back. Danilo realized that it was time to return, but did not have the strength to get going, unable to say what was keeping him in Hickory Hill.

* * *

"You know what it is, you know!" came Veta's voice out of the darkness. "But, you're afraid to take responsibility for the Little redhaired boy who might be Petar's son, but your double as well. Time's flying, Little Rusty! You can't hesitate forever..." Veta's voice faded as suddenly as it appeared.

"You haven't told me anything new, big sister!" whispered Danilo Aratsky and put the pillow over his head, determined not to see or hear anything else. Things were complicated and nothing was being resolved. He had not discovered the secret of the "forgetting disease" or the secret of Little Cloud, renamed Marko. Georgie had not succeeded in getting custody of the boys even though their father did not support them or come to see them.

And stories were circulating around the world again that Belgrade might be bombed. Damian did not want to move from Belgrade, awaiting the birth of his child. What could Danilo say to him, and did he have the right to say anything? When he left Marta, in some way he left his son too, although he never forgot him, day or night. What would Damian say when he saw the Little redhaired boy who was so similar to himself? Would he believe that the boy was Petar's son and not his, Danilo's? The questions accumulated and not one had an answer.

* * *

For thousands of years, armies and insignias had passed through Belgrade: the cross, crescent, Star of David, Red Star, hammer and sickle, and then the tricolored flag

with a two-headed eagle. In these constant changes, Belgrade had been destroyed and rebuilt dozens of times. Sometimes on the East, sometimes on the West. Everywhere and nowhere! First the Celtic Singidunum, then Alba Greka, and finally Belgrade, a city exposed to sandstorms from the dried up Pannonian Sea and the whistling, icy winds of Siberia that freeze you to the bone.

Were the stories that Belgrade might be bombed just stories? Wide awake, Danilo Aratsky consoled himself. Countless such stories had passed through his days and nights, and nothing had happened, or did it just seem so. He no longer knew how many unknown doubles he carried inside him; he was unprepared to confront the people around him and those inside him, as his memory faded and crumbled, leaving behind emptiness without signs or sounds.

* * *

I believe the memory is our soul.

Without it, we cannot survive.

Umberto Eco

“Danilo Aratsky’s encounter with the girl looking for her lost soul in tree trunks took on mammoth proportions, like a flood, like a fire. The fear that something similar might happen to him seized him periodically, and then more and more frequently,” wrote the “Whisperer from the Lord’s Dream” on page 73 of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, surprised that someone whose job dealt with nightmares could not overcome his own fear. “Luka Aratsky was able to, as were most of the Aratskys!” he added.

“Perhaps the circumstances were different?” thought Danilo, coming across the Belgrade journal *Engrami* devoted to research on posttraumatic stress at the Institute of Psychiatry. It was known by the inmates as “*the house where time stands still*” because they could not forget their wartime experiences and could not accept the present or the future.

The brief article stated that of the four million displaced persons, refugees, dead, wounded and those without limbs, an enormous number of survivors have mild or serious psychological disorders. The statistics did not say how many of them would be able to fit

into their environment and accept themselves, and how many would carry a dark stain in their heart for all time.

“I don’t want to see anything anymore! Or remember anything...” Out of the depths of time, a long-ago deserter from the battlefield surfaced in Danilo’s nightmare. How could you understand that, Doctor? You will never know what it means to be ‘*imprisoned inside yourself!*’

Shriveled on the bed, like a fetus in a womb, the soldier looked to the side. What reality was the doctor talking about? Children’s blown apart bodies and screaming women – that was his reality. There was no other, except for the bloody children’s heads coming out of cracks in the walls and someone’s voice threatening to blow up the hospital and patients. The lot.

Danilo never found out whose voice it was. Not then. Not afterward. Never! Just as he never found out how the former soldier, without legs, managed to escape and disappear in the waters of the Danube or Sava.

The body of the soldier “imprisoned inside himself” was never found. If anyone was even looking for it.

* * *

Many years later, Danilo Aratsky met a lot of unfortunate men who returned from the battlefields “*imprisoned inside themselves*”. He wondered whether that *first* one ever got rid of his dreams of burning houses. Then, instead of an answer to his question, he came across Jung’s strange idea that even “*God has a shadow*”, that there is no pure light to shine on the world, nor can there be: Satan is always there, behind the door...

“Like a circkling knife,” wrote the “Whisperer from the Lord’s Dream” as he described Danilo’s nightmare that stretched from Jasenak to Hickory Hill, confirming that “the lives of people far from each other in space and time can for a moment be reduced to the same fate, same pain, that repeats in specific intervals of time”.

Whose fate? Whose pain? Who did the note on “a circking knife. Some earlier Aratsky? Toma? Or someone before Toma. The dream of “a circkling knife” kept repeating in Hickory Hill, obscure, extremely unreliable, heralded by a voice that warned, “Many things change in the lives of nations and individuals, but *the knife never stops circkling.*” Whether it heralded general or personal misfortune, he could not tell.

In the dream he woke from wet and shattered, Danilo saw the shining blade of a knife, the hand that held it, but not the face of the one holding it or the one the knife was aimed at. Then the dream changed: the hand holding the knife changed, not even the knife was the same as in the first dreams. Death, however, was the same. Danilo could not see who was running away from it in his dream until in the blink of an eye he saw Garača's terrified face. He jumped out of bed, wide awake faster than ever before in his life, and warned Garača through Aaron to watch out: the "knife that never stops cirkling" was aimed at him...

"How does Danilo know that Garača is in danger?" wondered Aaron.

Garača's answer to all his questions was silence. Then he said:

"Danilo is right, but I don't understand how he knows that on the other side of America! And he knows, it's clear, he knows!"

* * *

*Everything that is important,
tremendous and great lies inside us...*

James Joyce

Danilo could not explain even to himself what and how much he knew, and how he knew it, but he felt time was slipping away. Damian was silent. The Meskwakis were silent about the "forgetting disease". Georgie was silent about any possible departure from Hickory Hill, uncertain what to do. In the end, her husband agreed to let her have custody of their sons and take them – where? To a land where wars broke out all the time, where she did not know a living soul. When it came down to it, she did not know Danilo well enough to leave everything behind and head into the mist. Maybe they should wait a little longer, she proposed. Had Danilo forgotten that Aaron had set up a meeting with little freckled Sara Cohen? Although he should not expect too much from that meeting. Sara was now a mature woman, and in his recollections he saw her as a blond little girl with freckles, teary-eyed, inquiring whether rats sleep at night.

"Is that true?" wondered Georgie West. "Do they sleep at night?"

"They might. And you might be right about postponing our departure from Hickory Hill..."

“Sometime things work themselves out on their own!” she said consolingly.

“Do you think so?” said Danilo Aratsky, shrugging his shoulders, those four words summing up all his dilemma quandaries – ranging from the trip he might take with Aaron to visit Sara Cohen, to discovering that Little Cloud had his same blood type, which did not have to mean the boy was Petar’s son, although everything seemed to point in that direction.

“So what if he isn’t?” said Danilo, arguing with himself, refusing any more tests, happy that the boy was getting attached to him and the idea that somewhere far away was his unknown redhead brother with webbed feet, who would soon become a doctor and father. “Will my redhead brother love me and what will I be to the child who’s about to be born?” wondered Little Cloud.

“His uncle!” said Danilo, smiling. “That’s what I am to you, Marko!”

“And what if it’s a girl?” said the former Little Cloud, having trouble getting used to his new name.

“You’ll still be her uncle! Don’t worry! It’s nice to be an uncle, Marko! I didn’t have an uncle! I had a brother...”

“I didn’t!” The boy with a coonskin cap bowed his head, confused. “None of the Meskwakis had red hair...”

“Damian does, don’t worry! Your big brother Damian does and he will protect you like Petar protected me until he...”

“Until he... what?”

“Disappeared on a rocky island in the Adriatic Sea...” Danilo suddenly fell silent, seeing the boy’s face turn pale and lips start to tremble. “What’s wrong, kiddo? A lot of people disappeared there, my brother was not the only one! What’s wrong? It was so long ago that it should be forgotten...”

“But it isn’t! Some things cannot and should not be forgotten, that’s what my father said. A lot of people stayed on that rocky island, he could not forget them...” Suddenly, like a spring shower, tears streamed down the boy’s face. “And you see, I forgot him...” he mumbled, ashamed. “I don’t even remember his name...”

“Are names important, kiddo?” Danilo pressed the boy’s trembling body against his chest. “The moon and stars would be what they are regardless of the name they were given. You are the same person – as Little Cloud and Marko! Aren’t you?”

He had nothing more to ask, so he did not ask anything. Veta was right! His missing brother had returned. Indeed, not as a blue-eyed giant who moved mountains in Little Rusty’s dreams. But he had returned. With tenderness and sorrow, Danilo caressed the boy’s hair, and smiled.

In the dusk descending over the roofs of Hickory Hill, sluggish and overflowing Iowa River, and the Institute in the Midwestern backwoods where numerous geneticists, microbiologists, neurologists, psychiatrists, biochemists and all other types of scientists were trying to discover the secret of the “forgetting disease”, Dr. Danilo Aratsky thought he saw Kalemegdan fortress materialize on the very edge of the sky and with it the streets of Belgrade, lively and noisy both day and night.

“What has happened to Karanovo,” he wondered. “Is there still a hole with a little lake on the bottom where the magnificent Aratsky house once stood, or has the pit been filled in and the dead white pig floats only in my dreams?”

* * *

Who can I talk to today, my silly soul?

Egypt, 15th century B.C.

On the 17th floor of a New York hotel, Danilo Aratsky noticed that the beams of light on the building across the way were mixing with flickers of lightning on the eastern edge of the sky and realized that a thunderstorm was about to hit the city. Its streets were surging with crowds of pedestrians “imprisoned inside themselves”, unable to squeeze through the crack that leads to a different, brighter world.

“If such a world exists, Little Rusty!” Danilo saw the Aratsky deads moving at the bottom of the room and heard water dripping from Veta’s hair. “They’re still here?” he thought.

“Where else would we be?” came the voice of his legendary grandfather, muffled by coughing. “It must be clear to you by now that we need each other...” Luka Aratsky’s voice faded. It was pouring rain outside ...

“Maybe?” mumbled Danilo to himself, realizing in less than the blink of an eye that his life was taking place on several time planes and countless locations, none of them the real one. Or did it just seem so? He had to drop anchor somewhere and create a new home. When all was said and done, it was family and land that endured, that was what silent Luka Aratsky believed, and so did Mihailo and Toma before Mihailo, and who knew how many before Mihailo and Toma, rebuilding what had been destroyed, hoping that what they were building would last this time.

In the noise that rose from down in the street, Danilo felt the dreams of millions of New Yorkers hovering over the city that never slept, fluttery, nightmarish, terrible, woven into a dense fabric of insecurity over losing their job and the roof over their head.

At St. Peter’s Hospice there was no fear of losing your job, but also no hope that the patients in it would stay more than a few weeks. Aaron, who had come for several days to see what had happened to Danilo, realized this in the two hours it took to visit the hospice. Danilo did not realize where he was until the third floor where children from age five to fifteen were accommodated, their shriveled little bodies barely discernable under the covers.

“What can I do here?” said Danilo, turning to Dr. Murphy whose recommendation had brought him to St. Peter’s Hospice, located on the periphery of Hickory Hill. He was confused by Georgie’s sudden pregnancy and Little Cloud’s devotion, following him around like Danilo once followed Luka Aratsky, impatient to see the monkey that escaped to freedom.

“This is not a hospital, Danilo, but a place to die!” said Aaron, wanting from the bottom of his heart to slap his friend, no not friend, brother, and bring him back to reality and back to New York, and then to Belgrade. But he refrained. If Danilo wanted to spend some time at St. Peter’s Hospice, let him! He, Aaron, did not have the right to stop him, but he had to point out what Danilo still did not see, or did not want to see. “Don’t you get it, Danilo? Don’t you realize that *not a single child* on this floor will live to see summer?”

“I know! But I also know that leaving them to die without a single word of consolation – is a crime... The Meskwakis are right: *Words heal. But we have forgotten the healing words or never learned them in the first place...*” Danilo bowed his head in shame, wondering what happened to the words that Simka Galičanka used to ease pain, wondering what happened to the shiny creatures that jumped out of the trunk of the walnut tree on nights of the full moon, laughing and singing? The walnut tree in the yard of the former Aratsky house had survived all the bombings and fires. Perhaps dwarfs still came out of its trunk and entered the dreams of the former Little Rusty...

Ruža Rašula had looked in tree trunks for her lost soul and the words that had abandoned her, pushing her into forgetfulness and darkness.

The fear of losing words tightened Danilo’s throat. Nevertheless, he decided not to let down Dr. Murphy and the children whose eyes followed him wherever he went, begging for help.

Lunch was distributed in the ward and then it was rest time...

* * *

*Every person is one letter
in the Heavenly Book.*

Anonymous

Long ago in another time, when it was time for the Aratsky family’s children to have a rest, Simka Galičanka would start a story called “The Silver-Winged Gull” or “The Swindler”.

Of all Simka’s stories, Veta liked “The Swindler” best, unlike Danilo who usually asked to hear the story of the puny gull that exercised doggedly and became the fastest flier on “Gull Rock” and took off for the Moon; on bright summer evenings, the shadow of the gull’s wings can still be seen on its face.

“He took off because he wanted to fly more than anything!” said Grandfather Luka Aratsky. “Just like sick people get well if they want to from the bottom of their heart!” thought Danilo, although the pointed little faces of the moribund children brought to St. Peter’s Hospice to spend their last days did not offer much hope.

Danilo could not explain even many years later why it was these very children he started telling the story of the puny gull that was first ridiculed and then admired by everyone. Nor could he explain the changes that the story brought to the ward with the most critically ill.

The children's hubbub and shining eyes amazed not only Dr. Murphy and the Hospice staff, but Dr. Danilo Aratsky as well.

"What medicine has he given them?" wondered Dr. Murphy when his third-floor patients suddenly started to eat and sleep better. Only a miracle could bring such a change. Danilo marveled at that miracle too, and in his spare time continued to tell the children one of Simka Galičanka's stories. She, like the Meskwaki Indians, had believed that words can heal.

"Maybe they do heal?" said Danilo to Dr. Murphy, proposing that he introduce additional healing at St. Peter's Hospice. With words.

Surprised, Dr. Murphy shrugged his shoulders. There was no hope for the children anyway, why not try? Maybe the Balkan doctor would succeed where others had failed.

Encouraged, as Simka's words came back to him, Danilo Aratsky started spending every free moment on the third floor of St. Peter's telling the children new stories or repeating one that the children had forgotten. Except there were none such: occasionally he would forget what the Swindler had done, who and how he had cheated someone so he could give what he got to children and the poor.

"That's not how it was!" said the little listeners, taking him back to the beginning of the story! "White Snake didn't cheat the Swindler, the Swindler cheated White Snake..."

Then, unable to remember all the details, he started making up stories. He was happy if he brought joy to the third floor for even a moment, aware of the fact that each child identified with what they heard in a different way. Through the stories and drawings he discovered what was troubling the patients and whether there was hope for some sort of recovery, small, infinitesimal, and still recovery.

"What on earth is Danilo doing in Hickory Hill?" wondered Aaron, sending word that it was time for him to come back. Healing through archetypes and dreams was not

new. Ayurveda had been using it for several thousand years, and they were not alone. There might be some point in trying what he was doing at St. Peter's with psychological diseases. But the children on the third floor were not neurotic, they had leukemia and lung cancer. He should not fool himself... The story of the "Heavenly Book" was wonderful as a parable of the meaning of man's existence. Was it suitable for children? Could they understand it? Maybe they could! After all, most diseases are psychosomatic...

Instead of sending him back to New York, Aaron's objection strengthened Danilo's conviction that "it's possible to heal with words". Later, when everything changed in his life, he would do it too.

* * *

In the flickering light on the 17th floor of a New York hotel, as though dreaming, Danilo saw himself surrounded by dying children at St. Peter's. After the stories of the Silver Gull and the Swindler who cheated with a smile and wandered about the world young, handsome and irrepressible, their aged, gray little faces became brighter each day.

"You see, Little Rusty, I'm not the only one who loved the Swindler! The children in Hickory Hill love him too..." Danilo heard Veta's voice again in the gloom of the New York room, and wondered how she knew in New York what he had been thinking at St. Peter's.

And she knew!

Just as she knew he would not be leaving Hickory Hill soon, as he had promised Aaron, Danny and Aleksey Semyonovich before he heard Georgie's worried voice as she huddled over the phone, telling someone that she was pregnant, the fetus had already entered the third month but she did not intend to keep it. "It would be insane to add more chaos to an already chaotic life. The boys are fine. Danilo too! He's obsessed with the idea of introducing a new kind of treatment at St. Peter's Hospice. The redhead little boy who looks so much like Danilo that everyone takes him for his son is doing fine in school: he's caught up with most of his classmates and even gone beyond them in mathematics, history and writing, but still won't give up his Indian name, Little Cloud..." Georgie suddenly fell silent and Danilo shuddered.

He did not have the strength to tell her what he heard. Even less to let her kill the fetus in her womb. Out of forty million sperm cells, only one succeeds in starting a new life. But how could he force Georgie to bear a child she did not want? Between preventing her from destroying the fetus and forcing her to have the baby was the dense weave of Danilo's nightmares where he struggled like a butterfly in a spider web. Night after night he dreamed he saw himself walking through the empty rooms of the once magnificent Aratsky house. Mihailo Aratsky had added another floor in honor of Petrana's elfin beauty so she could fill the huge house with a gang of just as beautiful children, realizing too late that only one child would walk through the labyrinth of rooms, Luka Aratsky...

* * *

On page 133 of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, the “Whisperer from the Lord’s Dream” doubted that Petrana had been unable to have another child. “She didn’t want another one!” he concluded. Danilo had added “With good reason!” in the margin.

Eventually, Petrana said so herself, defeating her future father-in-law and future husband by admitting that she did not want to extend a line of monsters and lunatics, which was essentially correct. In every generation of her family there had been at least one lunatic or monster.

This was not the case with Georgie, although she could not be entirely sure. Her family tree barely went back two generations on her father’s side. Georgie did not know her mother’s genealogy because she disappeared from her life before she was four. Georgie had grown up in different families after losing her father under mysterious circumstances when she was eleven and so she never found out whether her mother had children with her second husband.

Danilo did not know who Georgie had told she was pregnant before she informed him, or why. He knew very little about Georgie, but he liked her smile, her bountiful shaggy hair, her eyes that changed color.

After all, if he lived with her for a hundred years, he might not know more than he knew now. What does a man know about a woman? She had received him inside her like parched soil does drenching rain, she had accepted the redheaded child lost among the

Meskwaki Indians without question, just as she had agreed to separate rooms without question. Wasn't that enough?

Nevertheless, the thought was ever present that killing a fetus was the equivalent of a crime, and when he heard that she was pregnant but did not want to have the baby, he started having a recurring dream.

It was the same dream night after night, slightly changed. He was walking through the intertwining hallways of a building, followed by a cloud of white mayflies.

* * *

In the bluish darkness of a New York hotel, Danilo *thought he saw the mayflies he had dreamed in Hickory Hill, sometimes as mayflies, sometimes as children with cricket-like voices*, just before he left for Albany where he was to meet up with Aaron and little freckled Sara Cohen.

Except that Sara was no longer little or freckled. She was tall, slender and blue-eyed. Her terrified eyes, ready to shed tears, were all that remained of her from Jasenak; her fear from the cellar had clearly grown up with her.

“Rats don’t sleep at night!” was the first thing she said. “And New York is full of rats. That’s why I fled to Albany...”

“It wasn’t just because of the rats, Sara!” said Aaron with a laugh. “If the stories of the Home children from the old country are true, someone came to Albany because of Gabriel Demajo and is still in Albany because of Gabriel Demajo, eh?” Aaron finally got Sara Cohen to give a flicker of a smile, although she shook her head at the mention of Gabriel’s name. She only cheered up when Aaron started reminding her of different social workers in Jasenak, the frogs, campfires and the fat Slovakian cook who sang along with the children: “Paradise on earth awaits us...”

And when the fires went out, in the night full of stars, croaking frogs and mosquitoes, in their little beds, most of the children sobbed in their sleep, calling to their lost parents, brothers and sisters.

“You didn’t find yours, Aaron, and I never saw my brothers and sisters. All of them, like all of yours, were turned into smoke that flew into the sky over Auschwitz; the fields around it still glisten with the phosphorus of burned human bones. You two are

now my only brothers. You and Garača, who I see most often. I don't know what happened to the little girl who slept next to me in Jasenak..."

"Well, well!" said Aaron, smiling. "Garača did you say? Whose bed did you hide in when you ran away from the rats?"

"Listen, Aaron! Don't tease her..." said Danilo, bringing the former crybaby back from the brink of tears. "It's important to remember those who gave us a hand in the most difficult moments, even if they are now *hohokam* (those who have gone) in Little Cloud's language..."

"You mean Petar's son? Garača told me that you found your brother through the little boy, Danilo..."

"Partially!" said Aaron, smiling. "Because the boy looks more like Danilo from Jasenak than Petar. When Garača mentioned Hickory Hill and the Meskwaki Indians, he must have known something... And maybe he didn't! Danilo's going to the seminar in Hickory Hill might have been a pure coincidence..."

"Maybe?" Danilo shook his head in doubt. "I don't know and whether or not I know doesn't matter any longer. Rats sleep at night, Sara! Rid yourself of them once and for all. Who is Gabriel?"

"Someone who meant a lot to me for a while and currently means nothing!"

"Because of Garača?" said Aaron, confused, watching the muscles twitch on her face. He fell silent, happy for Sara, himself, Danilo and all of Garača's "links" that he had turned into a family over the years. The only one he ever had, something he would later say with pride, without explaining why he did not go to Albany when the two of them were waiting for him with Sara.

"Maybe something came up..." said Aaron, coming to his defense.

"Maybe?" mumbled Danilo, hurt as usual when someone promised something and did not keep their promise.

Gazing out the window of Sara's room at the intermittent passers-by, Danilo watched evening settle over Albany and the streetlights go on. The sun was rising over Belgrade and fog hovered over Hamburg. Sara was silent, happy that they had met after so many years. And the next year, when she had her sabbatical from the university where she taught European history, they would meet in Belgrade. Maybe they would go to

Karanovo and Jasenak with Damian, Danny and Petar's little boy? She did not mention Georgie's sons. Inadvertently? On purpose? Who could say?

* * *

"If..." said Sara, wanting to say something else when they parted, but bowed her head instead and fell silent.

"If what?" They tried to get it out of her, in vain. Perhaps not even she knew that disease was eating away at her, like rats on her brother's toes, the same disease whose key Ruža Rašula had tried to find in tree trunks and Danilo in Indian legends. Danilo was glad that he had not run away from St. Peter's Hospice the first day; that between doing *nothing* and trying *something*, the pendulum inside him had chosen *something*, to Dr. Murphy's delight; that he had remembered Simka Galičanka who was convinced it was possible to "heal with words". And cure too? He was not certain. The bright eyes of the children on the third floor encouraged him to continue working there until the white mayflies entered his dreams again, as though just waiting for him to return so they could flutter after him wherever he went.

Hickory Hill was full of them and more and more kept coming. What message did they bring? That one of them contained the soul of Georgie's just-conceived child and she was cutting off its path to the world of the living ... What else? He could not tell. And it would not have done any good if he could!

The Iowa River was "blooming" like the Tisa used to in Karanovo and Jasenak. Millions of translucent mayflies were rising from the silt on the bottom to carry out their mating flight and sink again into the water and silt.

He liked to watch them and had marveled at them first in Karanovo and then Jasenak, until the fat Slovakian cook sighed and murmured that they were the "fluttering little souls of children slain before their birth".

"That left a deep gash in his soul", wrote the anonymous author of the *Karanovo Chronicles*, adding that many years earlier Danilo had "heard something similar from Pantelia and Dojčin on the Aratsky Farm", although it had not been about mayflies but luminous white birds – Karanovo saw them as the souls of the children who had been shot.

Danilo had neither the strength nor the courage to tell Georgie West any of this, even though he, like his famous grandfather, considered the destruction of immature human fetuses a type of crime.

“Not ‘type’! A crime!” came Veta’s voice out of the night filled with fluttering white mayflies. “Remember!” The Aratsky ghosts disappeared in the dreamy flickering of the stars and Veta’s hushed voice faded before Danilo had time to ask her how she knew, she who had never been touched by a man’s lips? Or was she merely repeating the words of Luka Aratsky, or perhaps Mihailo, or perhaps someone before Mihailo?

* * *

The diligent author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* did not mention whether Danilo tried to change Georgie’s mind or whether things took a course of their own, because he did not mention Georgie West’s pregnancy or Danilo’s departure from Hickory Hill and St. Peter’s Hospice. But in several places he mentioned Danilo’s dream about the invasion of white mayflies that were invisible and inaudible to everyone except Danilo Aratsky and the redhead boy raised by the Meskwaki Indians.

And then Danilo’s recurring dream broke off – the white mayflies disappeared. In his dream he was no longer in Hickory Hill, but a room without doors or windows that smelled like mildew and humidity. He heard dripping water and someone’s hoarse voice repeating:

“It’s useless to look for the door, Danilo Aratsky. There is no way out !”

Whose voice could that be? Where was he? In a storeroom? A cave? He could not tell, but he was convinced that whoever was intimidating him was wrong: there was always a way out...

Danilo suddenly remembered the thin little petty official from Hamburg whose dreams had both entertained and frightened him. “There is and there isn’t hope!” repeated Claus Stoud after his repeated suicide attempt. Help usually appeared when he thought he was beyond help, because the room was shrinking around him and the walls threatened to crush him as they approached each other at an inconceivable speed.

Suddenly, Danilo felt them like armor on his body.

“Hey, I fell into the dream of that poor guy from Hamburg!” said Danilo, flinching as the room around him shrank faster and faster along with people, trees,

houses, dogs, hallways, the hospital and hospital beds and the orderlies. The petty official whose dream he was dreaming was also shrinking and was already barely larger than an ear of corn, and kept shrinking, soon he would be smaller than a hand, than an index finger.

“Nice dream, Doctor!” laughed Claus Stoud, whose dream he was dreaming. “Soon the whole hospital will be able to fit in a small chest, what do you think about that? When I improve the shrinking mechanism, not only the hospital but all of Hamburg will fit into a boat. All you have to do is launch it downriver and come with us. It’s never boring with lunatics, that’s what you said to Dr. Aaron before you left for New York. I remember that day because that was the first time I saw shrunken people, *a funny shrunken world*. Don’t tell me I’m making it up. All around us are people-midgets in their tiny houses. You are a midget too, Dr. Aratsky! I drew you real small, and I can erase you if I want to!

“It’s your own fault. By entering my dream, you chose a world of dubious reality, even though the one you were in was no great shakes. Make-believe towns, happenings and people are always interesting.”

Danilo did not have a chance to find out whether or not they were. Claus Stoud was not make-believe. One day he simply disappeared from the hospital without prior notice, without a trace. Whether he got on a boat or went in the hold of a ship to South America or Australia, no one ever found out. People have different reasons to live and die. For the people around him, Claus Stoud chose death, which no one could have imagined, listening to him repeat that he was “a little man who wouldn’t hurt a fly...”

Everyone had pitied him. Poor man! Fate had played with him unfairly: he had been brought into the world hunchbacked and terrified, with no family anywhere, in godless Leipzig. Many years before the fall of the Berlin wall, he left it for Hamburg and, after several suicide attempts, ended up in the Psychiatric Ward. And then he disappeared as though he never existed. His body was never found. No one even looked for it until a wanted notice came from Leipzig for a certain Heinrich M. who had fled to Hamburg under a false name 18 years ago and often changed addresses, names and jobs.

In the hospital where all trace of him was lost, he had been admitted under the name Claus Stoud after yet another suicide attempt. The woman he lived with

disappeared several months before he was admitted to the Institute for the Mentally Ill.

Since then his eyes were constantly full of tears. Who could have suspected him?

According to his statement, his wife had gone out of the apartment at dusk to buy some bread and never came back. Not that night or any other, never... The little man kept repeating that same sentence, sobbing, and time was flying. They were tearing down old houses and replacing them with new ones.

In the cellar of one of the old houses they found a trunk full of rotting papers with the names of people who had been accused of betraying the German Socialist Republic, embezzlement, pedophilia, stealing socially owned property, selling drugs... people who were later sentenced to long years in prison or death, all thanks to the diligence and reports of the "little man who would not hurt a fly", Heinrich M., alias Claus Stoud, who no one ever suspected was an informer. The poor man was afraid of his own shadow, no, no, he wouldn't... how could he...

At the bottom of the trunk, among the reports about his neighbors, relatives, tenants, random visitors, and discharge slips from various psychiatric institutions, there were several false passports and some letters that had not been posted. One was signed by Stoud's wife, addressed to her brother in Berlin, full of fear and cries for help. One single word had been added under his wife's signature: "Rubbish!" in Stoud's handwriting. No investigation had been launched. The first suspicions did not appear until later, when Heinrich M., i.e. Claus Stoud disappeared.

"I didn't descend into the abyss, the abyss lived inside me!" were Stoud's last words.

Neither Aaron, Danilo, the doctors, nor the investigators discovered what that abyss was like, even though Stoud did not eat or sleep for several weeks before he disappeared, driven crazy by dreams in which he was a midget or a three-eyed toad.

Many years later, a little hunchback appeared in an Argentine insane asylum with documents made out in several different names bearing the stamp of the city of Hamburg. No one ever found out which was his real name. The man claimed he was a midget and would not be disconcerted. What did the doctors and orderlies want? Couldn't they see he was a three-eyed toad? He put his head under the pillow and croaked, and then disappeared just as he had long ago in Hamburg.

At the bottom of the longest list of names reported for the worst crimes, the inspector from Leipzig could not believe his eyes when he saw the name of the man that no one ever suspected, underlined twice. The name of Claus Stoud had been written in the same handwriting as all those before it.

* * *

Danilo could not imagine why Claus Stoud had added his own name to the list of accused. Was it a sign of remorse, self-accusation, guilty conscience, outbreak of madness? Perhaps everything together, before or after a failed suicide attempt. The puny man from Leipzig remained a mystery for Danilo and Aaron that defied all human reasoning, a mystery they could not solve. Not then. Or later. Never.

* * *

And ancestors whispering inside...

Arundhati Roy

On the 17th floor of a New York hotel, the Aratsky ghosts came quietly that first day of spring, surprised that after several sunny days, the rain had suddenly turned to snow. Danilo could never tell what season it was, perhaps because of the glistening sky over New York. And this sleepless night of his was lasting so long, longer than eternity, next to a woman whose breath fluttered the curtains, where the whispering Aratskys behind them were buffeted by the icy East River wind. Petar was still not with them.

“He’s alive, he’s alive,” Danilo repeated softly, convinced that no one was listening. “He’s alive in Little Cloud!” he whispered, listening to the woman next to him mumble in an unknown language.

“Of course!” came Veta’s voice and the sound of dripping water. “And Georgie’s future child is alive too! That’s why the invasion of white mayflies stopped...”

“Or they got tired of following you, like us...” Danilo heard the soft and halting voice of the legendary old man slipping through from another reality. “You can’t run forever, Little Rusty! Running from crazy directors, women, your own self. America is not Homolje where the sick are cured with stories and magic words...”

“And yet, it worked at St. Peter’s Hospice...”

“With children! And not for long, don’t forget, and don’t go back there...”

The old man's advice hit Danilo like a whip lashing him in the face. He himself was not certain whether he wanted to go back to Hickory Hill, to St. Peter's Hospice, or where else to go. When the wars were over in the old country, only three males would be left of the numerous Aratsky clan, all three redheads, if Simka Galičanka was not mistaken. With Damian's child that everyone said would be a boy, that made four males, and if Georgie kept her baby, five...

"Perhaps?" Imagining a yard full of children, Danilo gazed at the diaphanous Aratsky ghosts and smiled. Along with all the other questions were those he could not answer: "when" and "how" would the wars end, would Georgie be able to adapt? Aaron would be right at home and there should not be any problem with the children: they could hardly wait to set off on a trip that would take them to Sammy at the other end... If they set off at all, if something unexpected did not happen...

In the alternating streams of light, Danilo saw the faces of his ancestors flickering in the sky, between the buildings. Then the first glint of dawn appeared on the edge of the eastern sky and Danilo felt his eyes closing.

"It's about time, Little Rusty! How many sleepless nights have you had..." Veta's soft and tender voice came undulating to him.

He fell asleep.

* * *

In the afternoon, Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov would be waiting for him in Greenwich Village with an ardent collector of the rarest and most expensive postage stamps. As the Aratskys collected them long ago, did they know that one of their descendants would use them to try and bring back the Aratskys' old glory... That the "Blue Mauritius" would be the number one stamp? As though watching a slide show in his dream, stamps appeared in Danilo's mind with cities, flowers, dwarfs, birds and rulers, taking him back to the time when he and his famous grandfather sorted them by color, size and date. Then he saw the flower of the carnivorous orchid and trembled in his sleep, sensing that Marta's face would appear right after the stamp. And it did appear, along with Rašeta and those four unfortunate women, only to be quickly replaced by the thundering train for Hamburg, Aaron's beaming face and Claus Stoud with liquidation

lists, his own name at the bottom of the longest list. What devil had brought Claus Stoud over here? There was no time to wonder. He was falling asleep faster and faster, accompanied by the woman's noisy breathing that fluttered the curtains on the window, dimly convinced that everything he had pondered with fear would work out in a few days, perhaps a few hours.

"Do you think so?" Behind the curtains he heard Veta's voice, far off as though coming from a cloud.

From the bottom of the street rose the voices of passers-by, streetwalkers and drunks, frozen by the icy wind of the East River, lighted by the first rays of dawn that did not reach him. Sound sleep, Danilo saw Belgrade in the noontime sun. He did not know what time of day it was in Murmansk. Morning was advancing on Hickory Hill.

* * *

As he fell asleep on the 17th floor of a New York hotel, Danilo Aratsky's whole life passed before him like a slide show, jumbled in space and time, together with the lives of his ancestors and people whose lives he had entered by accident, as they had entered his. The habit of staring into other people's lighted windows did not go away in his sleep, even though he was afraid those lighted windows might suddenly open and out would pour the faces of the poor little children from St. Peter's, and Jasenak, the faces of his ancestors, the face of Ruža Rašula, Lost Ruža Rašula, convinced that there was a tree somewhere that had stolen her name ...

"Suddenly, just like Ruža Rašula looking for her name, in his sleep Danilo began to look for the door to another happier, brighter world!" wrote the "Whisperer from the Lord's Dream". *"What that world was like – he did not know! And he did not know whether it existed..."* added the author of the *Karanovo Chronicle* as a second thought.

Danilo did not mention "the door to a different world" in his *Journal* and his letter to Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov, but the question "what can I do here?" asked of Dr. Murphy at St. Peter's never ceased to repeat, along with Dr. Murphy's reply that he would "have to find it himself"!

"Well, you did find it..." He seemed to hear the voice of Luka Aratsky, weak and unclear, as though coming from under the earth. "You taught them to see the splendor of a sunbeam reflected in the water, you gave the children the greatest thing that can be

given to those who still want to stay on that side... You'll understand when you wake up..."

When he woke up? Why, he was talking to himself in his sleep, like the time he walked out of himself and flew.

"On subsequent nights I'll fly to the clouds, to the stars," he vowed, knowing it was a recurring dream.

And he was wrong!

The dream of flying did not reappear the following night. Instead, in an altered dream, he heard what other people could not: shrews walking underground, the wind whistling in the clouds, and realized that he was dreaming something that only Veta could dream, because Veta was the only one who heard what no one else could hear, except Simka Galičanka, who had the gift of hearing the grass sprout and passed it on to Veta, calling her the "child of sounds".

"Did Danilo Aratsky inherit what was meant for his sister?" wondered the skeptical author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* as he noted Danilo's horror, while flying, when he entered a room where everything was unfamiliar: people crowded around an enormous table, pictures of distant ancestors, icons of saints with light pouring out of their eyes, illuminating a room similar to a stone boat. The door was closed, there was no keyhole, and a thin line of light was visible underneath it.

Beyond that line shined another world, perhaps the one he had been dreaming of for years? "Look, the light on the icons and the faces of long-dead Aratskys is the same as the light pouring out of a crack on the door." Circling above the people, their mouths making no sound, Danilo saw the crack widen and the light get stronger. If he continued to fly, he might fly into the light that awaited him.

"No, not you!" Out of the crack in the wall came Veta's warning, muffled by dripping water. "It's early..."

Blinded by bright, flickering light, Danilo realized that the sun was coming up. He turned his head toward the pillow next to him, but there was no woman in his bed. Her dress was gone too, he had seen it glistening in the gloom, thrown over a chair. Had that woman been a dream?

For a moment, the question had no answer. Who was the woman whose breath had fluttered the curtains on the window, why hadn't he managed to see her face? Perhaps because there had been no lamp in his dream? Look, there wasn't any lamp now either. Or bedside table, or woman. Perhaps he had only imagined that woman, entering her like a sun-drenched river?

One glance at his suitcase with the albums and papers scattered about was enough to shatter the thought that the half-asleep woman he had had was some sort of dream. Fully awake, Danilo got out of bed and crouched next to the overturned contents of his suitcase, now quite certain that he had spent the night with a young, unknown woman who had taken money and everything of the slightest value before she left. All that remained were the albums with rare postage stamps and family photographs, things considered worthless. Actually, they were the most precious things he ever had.

Somewhere deep inside he was thankful to her, even though he knew she had left them because she did not know what to do with them, or perhaps something had frightened her and she left the room faster than planned? The slightly open door supported this thought, causing a draft that made the curtains billow like a sail in the wind. Most of the Aratskys were no longer by the curtains. A little pool of water shimmered where dripping Veta had stood, but she was gone as well. The bright, cold wind blowing from the East River cooled the beads of sweat on his forehead.

Some of the Aratskys had probably already left for the old country. The rest were in the stream of wind, waiting to go with him and the redhead boy whose big redhead brother was waiting for him in a city where the inhabitants had erected a statue, like nowhere else, to a monkey that escaped to freedom... Danilo Aratsky closed the door carefully and then went back under the covers with the suitcase, quickly falling asleep. The meeting with Aleksey Semyonovich and the rare stamp admirer was scheduled for the afternoon. He would have enough time to catch up on his sleep, without the woman who snuffled into his neck, and the Aratskys whose tightly packed ghosts were heading after him again. Where to? He could not say that even to himself.

* * *

All things fall and are built again...

W. B. Yeats

Whether the thought of returning to the old country crossed Danilo's mind first or the secret of the "foggy mirrors", the author of the *Karanovo Chronicles* could not tell, although he noted in several places in the *Chronicles* that after spending the night with several generations of Aratskys on the 17th floor of a New York hotel, Danilo felt the need to change his life completely. For the better or the worse, it didn't matter!

"Stay in Hickory Hill or leave it, what about New York?" The "Whisperer from the Lord's Dream" noted Danilo's quandary in a number of places: where should he go, where should he stay? On that endless night next to an unknown woman, Danilo realized that America was not what he thought it was. But his country was no longer what it used to be either.

"What's stopping Damian from pushing off to another, brighter world?" wondered Danilo, not understanding what was keeping Damian where he was.

"The same thing that kept you in Karanovo and Belgrade!" Veta's voice reached Danilo with a wave of freshness from the East River. "How long did it take you to push off?"

"I'll know that when I start counting my 'heavenly years'... and understand the secret of the 'interwined mirrors', perhaps?"

"Perhaps!" He heard Veta's laughter in the distance. "But you should have been able to understand that by now. When Garača sent you your 'file', he showed you how many 'murky mirrors' surround you, how all those mirrors see you and transmit your real or distorted image. And you were surprised that Marta and Rašeta saw you as a monster that should be crucified. Hey, Little Rusty, come to your senses! Everyone you lived with and worked with saw you differently. *In the "murky mirrors" of their eyes, you saw yourself differently too*, sometimes satisfied with what you saw, sometimes horrified, unable to accept yourself and the times that were coming." "Damian is right, Little Rusty!" thought the "Whisperer from the Lord's Dream", foreseeing one of the worst bombings in the coming times. "You can build a house again, restore bridges and

railroads, but what can you do with children who have cancer before they are even born? With a two-headed calf, a three-eyed kitten? What can you do with crippled souls for which there are no crutches?"

"Nothing!" whispered Danilo, half asleep, surprised that both Veta and the "Whisperer from the Lord's Dream" could see what would happen only later, and he vowed to rebuild the Aratsky house. With one "Blue Mauritius" he could build a home for children without parents as well as a home for the Aratskys, where a pack of blue-eyed, blond children would run through the yard, as seen by Mihailo Aratsky in his dreams. And yet he lived to see only one silent, sad child walking through the intertwining hallways and rooms of the most magnificent house in Karanovo.

* * *

There, half-asleep, did Danilo Aratsky see the house he would build, "its size, layout of the rooms, oak tree in the middle of the yard and view of the river almost identical to the Aratsky house that disappeared in the bombing just before the end of the war?" In any case, not in Karanovo where all that remained was the cemetery with its yellow rose on a rise and the intention to turn the destroyed town into a lake where fish would peep through the windows among the flooded streets on its bottom, when only three males would be left of the powerful Aratsky family, fulfilling the prophecy of Simka Galičanka... about the fish and males, redhead males, since the Aratskys were tall, blue-eyed and blond. What would Damian's child be like? They had impatiently awaited the arrival of little boy and a little girl was born instead, sturdy, with blond hair and blue eyes, surprising both doctors and midwives.

"The little girl's birth confused the Aratskys, who were expecting a boy," wrote the "Whisperer from the Lord's Dream". Then the notes about the Aratskys broke off suddenly and without explanation, without mentioning the little girl's name. The correspondence between Damian and Aaron contained many details about the construction of the Orphanage in Belgrade and mentioned Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov, Georgie West, Danny and the redhead little boy with a coonskin cap, but not Danilo.

And time was passing. Aleksey, who had been the last one to see Danilo when they exchanged the "Blue Mauritius" for a pile of money, vaguely remembered Danilo

mentioning a woman on the 17th floor of a hotel in Manhattan, but not why he failed to turn up at Aaron's place at the time they agreed, where everyone, including Garača, waited for him at length, until they lost hope. Everyone except the little boy found among the Indians.

"Danilo will come back just as suddenly as he left!" repeated Little Cloud. "Life is a great secret. Man did not create the 'fabric of life', he is one single thread in that fabric..."

And that one single thread contains the soul, and in it everything that ever existed, exists or will exist. Even though, according to the measurements of scientists from several prominent research institutes, the soul weighs only 21 grams... Little Cloud was not completely convinced, and yet...

* * *

Twenty-one grams!

And those twenty-one grams hold everything that exists. Everything that existed and will exist! And God! And the devil! And man!

* * *

Run over by a drunk taxi driver two streets from the "Red Ram" just after saying goodbye to Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov and handing him the bag with the money and albums for safekeeping, Danilo felt himself sinking into the darkness, as though unexpected death was hideously sneaking up on him behind the door.

"In the blink of an eye, Danilo saw all his ancestors and descendants as stardust in the sky and heard voices in the wind. This was all that remained of them, and all that would remain of him!" wrote the anonymous author of the *Karanovo Chronicles*.

Then a silence arose and several of Danilo's months sank into it, as the hell of hatred and hopelessness roared in the homeland. Nevertheless, Danilo did a lot for homeless children without even knowing it, as Garača had once done by hooking up the "links". Injuring his head when he hit the sidewalk, he was no longer in his own story. But as he lay in the type of hospital where he once used to work, he slowly started to remember the Aratskys, Ruža Rašula and several inmates from the hospitals in Belgrade, Hamburg and New York.

He did not know about the plane that fell into the Atlantic, nor did he know the day, month or year.

Convinced that Danilo had disappeared along with several dozen other passengers blown up by a bomb on a New York-London-Belgrade flight, Damian, Aaron and Aleksey Semyonovich Smirnov stopped looking for him. Construction continued on the orphanage, the first of its kind in what was now a tiny, rump Yugoslavia. The Aratsky house, built before the orphanage, faced the Pannonian Plain and seemed to be waiting for Danilo to return, although only Little Cloud and Georgie West believed he would come back, for different reasons.

“Life is a miracle!” Little Cloud kept repeating.

A number of passengers from the missing plane were found dead, without their baggage and identification papers. Could Danilo Aratsky be one of them? In Little Cloud’s dream, which he told no one, he saw Danilo walking toward the newly built Aratsky house. Alone. Without Veta, Natalia, Luka, without any of the long-gone Aratskys.

“Danilo is alive!” said Little Cloud to Aaron. “Don’t ask how I know… He’s alive and will return when he remembers who he is and where he should return…”

“Ruža Rašula!” said Aaron Levi. “Did Danilo ever mention Ruža Rašula?”

“In my dream, when Danilo opened the door, illuminated by a great light, he mumured someone’s name. Maybe that was it…” Little Cloud began to monitor his dreams carefully, not knowing that doctors in a New York hospital were trying to bring back the memory of a man without any identification who had lost consciousness and forgotten who he was when his head hit the sidewalk.

He did not know who had hit him and where. All he remembered was that a yellow taxi crashed into him and swept him off the sidewalk, and that he had been in a hospital for a long time, without talking, which was why the doctors and orderlies thought he was deaf and dumb, until at one point he said a woman’s name. He said it and fell silent, stammering “Ru-u-ža Ra-a-šula” and then fell asleep. There is no trace of when and how he came out of that sleep in the *Karanovo Chronnicles* or in the “files” of Garača’s secret service, or in Damian’s letters.

Nowhere!

And yet, Little Cloud was right! When everyone had already forgotten him, Danilo came back, and his Aratskys came with him. Was it to help him remember who he was or help him complete the task he had devised long ago, convinced that language remembers and words heal.

The “Whisperer from the Lord’s Dream” doubted that he completed his task, although it is mentioned in the *Karanovo Chronicles* as an undertaking worthy of attention.