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Magical realism : master or servant?

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Magical Realism: Master or Servant?

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Bangor University

Abstract

This study seeks to show the process of development by which my writing of this series of short stories has responded to my relationship to a welcoming, albeit alien, culture; namely: a small mountain village in south west Bulgaria. It also explores my responses to living and working within that culture, and the ways in which my studies of the folk culture, history and the impact of western culture on existing cultural beliefs and values have also affected both my writing and my own rather ambiguous cultural background (see introduction p. 1).

The core of the thesis is a collection of eighteen short stories, written to be performed, and consequently written in storyteller's style.

All of the stories, excluding the first and the eighteenth, were written during my two year stay in Bulgaria, and linked using the conceit of the fictional storyteller, Ivan Levsky, and all were written in response either to historical events, cultural events or local incidents or characters. It also seeks to illustrate the way in which my work became increasingly reliant on the freedom that Magical Realism allows.

It was this freedom that led me to write this collection in the style in which it is written, and led me to the final conclusion that I had no other option of saying what I wished to say in the way in which it was said; hence the rather ambiguous title: *Magical Realism; Master or Servant?*

The literary background is explored through critical reflections in the final chapters. Where appropriate I have explained the genesis of each work and, where appropriate, the influences of the work of other writers upon my writing; in particular the works of Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter. I have also included short critical explorations of the major works of both of these writers.

As the stories contain Bulgarian and Turkish words which may not be familiar to some readers I have also included a glossary. For the same reason I have included a brief historical time line relevant to each story.

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Introduction

I was born in England to Welsh parents, both of whom, though in particular my father, raised myself and my siblings to think of ourselves as Welsh, and to take particular pride in our own unique culture. As a consequence of this I grew up in England, through school and into maturity in the belief that I was living in an alien culture, surrounded by people who were unaware of my ethnic roots. Four years living in North Africa, in my mid-twenties, did little to make me doubt my Welsh heritage. However, on moving to Wales I found that people's perception of me was that I was English; I spoke with an English accent: ergo I was English.

This led me to thinking about the importance of cultural background, and then onto thinking what would happen to artistic output if the artist were removed completely from his or her social, cultural and ethnic milieu to a completely alien environment.

I decided to try this as an exercise, and in 2005 moved to the south west corner of Bulgaria. I realised that moving to one of the major cities or towns would not be taxing enough: life in the larger conurbations was more sophisticated with many of the residents having at least a basic understanding of the rudiments of the English language. I did not want this, what I wanted was to immerse myself completely in the culture in an area that had, as yet, avoided the worst excesses of Western European culture. I chose a small village named Dolno Draglishte. This village of less than a thousand souls was situated in the foothills between the Pirin and Rhodope mountain ranges.

The residents were mostly middle aged or elderly, the majority of the young having left in order to find work in the larger cities or in foreign climes. I had no means of conversing with the populace. I did not speak Bulgarian and they did not speak English, I had nothing apart from sign language and a phrase book. It was perfect, and at first slightly disconcerting.

Chapter one of this thesis contains the sixteen short stories written during my twenty month stay in the village, and related by the fictional oral storyteller, Ivan Levsky; plus a further two, the first and the eighteenth, written after my return to Britain. These final two will be discussed more fully in chapter four. As will my reasons for including them both in the collection.

The sixteen stories composed in Bulgaria are an eclectic mix inspired by my experiences in the village, and by my study and growing interest in Bulgarian history, culture and folk traditions, including the strong oral convention still prevalent in remote villages. They also reflect a change in my attitude toward faith and belief: as a convinced atheist I found myself facing what can only be described as a crisis of lack of faith, and was drawn to the possibility of my believing, like Hamlet, that 'there are more things in heaven and earth -- than are dreamt of in our philosophy.'¹ Several of the stories therefore reflect that concern.

Chapter Two explores my understanding of the term Magic Realism, its influence on my own writing and posits the question: do writers choose to write in that particular style, or does, because of circumstance, be they political, cultural or gender based, mean that the style chooses them?

Chapter three discusses the influence of two writers, Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter, on the writing of this collection. It also takes a critical overview of their major works.

Chapter four contains critical reflections on the nineteen works, and discusses their inspirational genesis; it also suggests possible influences.

The remaining sections contain a bibliography of all works cited or consulted; a glossary of all Bulgarian, Turkish or Roma words or phrases used within the text, a short historical time line relevant to each of the short stories and disc copies of the interviews conducted with Michael Petrov, history graduate, and the folklorists Yane Kamenarov and Elena Georgiava Kamenarova.

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by T. J. B. Spencer (London: Penguin, 1980), p.96. L. 166-167

PART ONE

The Tales of Ivan Levsky

Farewell Ivan Levsky

(An Introduction)

I first met Ivan Levsky one evening in February 2007. A Bulgarian friend, knowing of my interest in the oral tradition still prevalent in the Balkans, suggested I accompany him through the snow to an evening of storytelling. 'This man,' my friend told me 'is very special; in my opinion the finest storyteller in the whole of the region.' I was intrigued as my friend, unlike the average Bulgarian, did not suffer from hyperbole, and so that evening I agreed to join him in the local *Mehana* where the event was to be hosted.

I had been to several of these events during my sojourn in the country, and this one started off in much the same vein as the others; if you have ever attended an open mike poetry evening in Britain you'll pretty much get the picture: some good, some not so good and some downright bloody dire. However, as usual the wine flowed freely; the food was good and the company amusing and welcoming. That being said, there was nothing that really grabbed my attention, or inspired me, and but for my friend's insistence that I stay 'to listen to Ivan,' I may well have left at the interval. I am thankful to my friend for insisting, because what I witnessed that night, not only thrilled and astounded me, but also changed the direction of my whole artistic project.

At first sight there was nothing special about Ivan Levsky. He was of medium height and build, had long dark hair tied in a pony tail and was of indeterminate age; I guessed at late thirties early forties. However, looks have little to do with the ability to mesmerise an audience, and mesmerise the audience he did.

It was the eyes that did it: dark, almost coal black and piercing. He walked onto the stage, seated himself and took in the audience with those eyes. He allowed a moment or two for the audience to applaud, and then silenced them by just raising his hand. The silence was almost shocking so immediate was it. He then fixed his audience with another gaze for a few more seconds before launching into the following introduction:

My name is Ivan Levsky, and I am the reciter of rhymes and teller of tales

Some old

Some new

Some fable

Some true

Some hard to believe

Some told to deceive

But I beg you believe

If you don't receive

A tale that excites you

Enthrals you and thrills you

Then I, Ivan Levsky, reciter of rhymes and teller of tales, will hang up my sack of stories, speak no more, cut out my tongue and feed it to the street dogs.

Once he had finished the audience applauded enthusiastically, and Ivan once more silenced the crowd by raising his hand. He then paused and began his performance.

The tales were simply told, but with such power that the audience were held throughout. I had thought his opening ditty a little risky; challenging the crowd as he did, but I need not have worried as he did as promised: excited, enthralled and thrilled.

That evening he told three stories, and left the gallery of listeners begging for more, which in my opinion is just as it should be – one should never risk outstaying welcome.

Once the crowd had left for their homes my friend led me over to introduce me to the star of the evening. I liked the man immediately – a rare thing for me – and the feeling appeared to be mutual. Two hours later we were still talking, drinking wine and discussing the philosophy of storytelling.

At this point, fuelled by alcoholic courage, I asked if I might record his next performance as an aid to my studies. He threw his head back and laughed out loud:

'What for my English friend? Do you intend to plagiarise my work?' he said this with a smile, but I feared that perhaps I had over-stepped the mark.

'No, no,' I replied 'I just want to record, and at most become inspired.'

Again he laughed, tears running down his face. When he'd recovered his composure he poured us both another drink, drank a mouthful and began to speak:

'Don't be so serious, of course you may record, I consider it an honour that you should want to. As to plagiarism, feel free.' I once again tried to deny the intention, but he raised his hand to silence me.

'Come, come, my new found friend, there is nothing wrong with a bit of honest plagiarism. I do it all the time, not blatantly, but where do you think these stories come from: some god or muse in the sky? No, no, no, they come from watching, and listening and observing: a half heard snatch of conversation can lead to a story; a pair of lovers surreptitiously meeting one another, or maybe something as simple as a man running to catch a train. All can inspire a tale or two. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if you popped up at some time or another.'

'Me?' I replied smiling 'What on earth would you find to write about me, I lead a fairly boring life, nothing much to excite the imagination there.'

'That is where you are wrong, my friend. Come now, you a writer, surely you realise that everyone is interesting. We all have a story. We may think we don't, because to us our life is normal, but when we look at others we see something different. Let's consider ourselves: you look at me and see a man who has no home, who appears to spend his life travelling around from town to town telling stories; a man who lives an itinerant life, with no possessions, no family and no close ties. You find me strange, exotic even, because my life is so different to your own. But my life is not strange to me; I don't find it romantic or especially interesting. Oh I enjoy what I do, and probably would miss it if I ever had to stop, but to me my life is mundane, ordinary, and normal. You, however, I find interesting, and I'm sure you'll pop up in a story or two over the next few months. You see, you do something that I could never envisage doing: you commit your stories to the page; your stories will live after you. I envy you that. When I die, then I fear I will take my little sack of stories with me to the grave; so, my interesting friend, record away, I shall consider it an honour; let it be my epitaph.'

Six months on, just after what happened happened, I look back on those five prophetic words with a great sadness. Spoken, as they were, in half jest they are now remembered as horribly prescient, and I can't help but wonder if Ivan was not only a teller

of tales, but also some sort of male Cassandra. Could he have known? If he had then why did he do nothing about it? Why did he not just cancel his booking, and stay at home? These are questions I cannot answer, much as I would like too. All I know for certain is that what happened did happen, and all I can do is to give you the facts as to what actually occurred.

Dragan Aga was happily singing along with the radio as he entered the town of Samakov late in the afternoon of the third Wednesday of August; only another thirty kilometres to the warehouse in Sofia; a quick off load of the kitchen supplies and then on to spend the evening, and for the first time since he had met her, the whole night with the lovely Sophia; the beautiful Sophia from Sofia.

Sophia was older than Dragan's 26 years. He wasn't certain how much older, and didn't much care, but when he thought about it, which wasn't often, he guessed at late thirties, or perhaps a well preserved early forties.

They had first met in a bar in central Sofia on his first trip to the city. Since then they had met every third Wednesday in the month. She was married, but her husband was away much of the time, and, as she told Dragan, could not satisfy her sexual needs. He had never met a woman like her. She did things to him, and asked him to do things to her, that he had only ever dreamed of. Admittedly, his experience was limited, consisting mainly of a few abortive fumbles with his long standing girlfriend, Nadia, who could talk of nothing else but marriage, babies and setting up home – he knew she was going to have to go at some time, because none of those things really interested him.

The thought of Nadia depressed him momentarily, but he soon brushed away the grey cloud that crossed his mind, and thought again of Sophia: a whole night of passion. She had told him the last time they had met that her husband would be away in Serbia on business leaving them free to spend the time together – life was good – very good indeed.

As the road leaves the small town of Samakov to start the descent into Sofia it veers sharply to the right. At the apex of this bend there is an adverse camber, which can catch the careless driver unawares. However, Dragan knew the road well and so slowed down to allow for the hazard. What he didn't realise was that a nail he had picked up as he crossed the

border from Turkey that morning had chosen this moment to work its way through the offside tyre and through the protective canvas.

The resultant blow-out caused the vehicle to swerve violently into the oncoming lane where Dragan brought it to a stop.

Traffic was light, so there the incident may well have ended there with no more damage than a flat tyre and a red face. However, before Dragan could move the vehicle onto the verge a yellow Lada came from the opposite direction and collided with the front of the lorry. The impact did not feel great; the Lada motor car is not noted for its speed, so Dragan's first thought was of the inconvenience and the possible ruining of his evening with Sophia. Sighing he clambered down from his cab, lit a cigarette and wandered round to inspect for any damage.

He could not believe the sight that met his eyes. The impact had appeared so light; he'd heard it and seen it, but had barely felt the collision. This was beyond all imagination, for the whole front to the car had concertinaed pushing the engine block into the interior and trapping the driver.

As Dragan watched the blood that was spouting from the driver's neck slowed to a trickle, and he knew instinctively that the man was dead. He dropped his cigarette, vomited violently into the hedge, then pulled out his mobile and with a sigh of resignation phoned the emergency services.

What Dragan did not know was that the man lying dead in the yellow Lada was Ivan Levsky reciter of rhymes and teller of tales, and that the good people of Pazardzhik would that evening wait in vain for their famous visitor.

A few days later I attended the funeral along with hundreds of others, and I mourned the loss of the man I'd known for just six months, barely knew, but liked immensely. All I had left were the recordings I'd made at various venues, and I wondered what to do with them. He had no relatives, so I couldn't bequeath them. Any thought of using the content as possible inspiration seemed now to be highly inappropriate. So, what to do? Then I remembered his half jest from all those months ago: 'Let it be my epitaph.' and so there was my answer, I would transcribe, verbatim, Ivan's stories. What follows are faithful transcriptions, and all that is left of the tales of Ivan Levsky's. They may not be his best, they may not be his worst, but they are a selection and they are my way of paying tribute to the man.

Recorded 1st March 2007: Plovdiv.

The Martenitsa

The colours had faded now: the vibrant red to earth brown, white to grey. But he would forever see them as they were, and she would remember. Remember the day he had tenderly tied it to her wrist, her handsome *Voivoda*; her *Haidut*. Remember how they had walked and talked and finally made love, there in the high pasture among the early spring grasses. Remember their final parting, he in his bright uniform, sabre in hand, leaping from rock to rock, before turning one last time to kiss the locket she had given him and disappearing wraith like into the late evening mist, she, standing, smiling and waving whilst her tears flowed. All this she remembered as she surveyed the frozen strands swaying from the Linden tree, and the blossom buds blighted by the late spring frost. A shiver ran through her, though she did not feel the cold, and at that moment she knew with the startling clarity of absolute certainty.

Placing her hand lovingly on her belly, she turned and retraced her steps slowly back down the path to her village.

Late evening, and already the village appears to slumber. Shutters closed, doors barred and bolted, and the *Mehana* deserted. The villagers huddle round their fires for warmth, security and human comfort. The children, wide-eyed are hushed and fearful. Nothing stirs, not even the street dogs, most of whom have long since sloped low-bellied into darkened alleys to hide. They are coming, they are coming, and the village waits holding its breath in anticipation.

A little towards midnight they ride in, the *Spahi*. At their head, *Yatagan* in hand, rides their leader, a tall cavalry lieutenant. There is not one ray of welcoming light to greet them, for the moon, as if in sympathy with the frightened villagers, hides her face behind the clouds. No sound, no human voice greets them, just the cold shuttered eye-less-buildings lit only by the occasional spark from the horses hooves on cobbles, and the music of their weapons and harness.

On they ride, through the village to the gates of the barracks. Here passwords are exchanged, the gates opened, and the horsemen ride in. Once in, the gates close, and the men can finally relax; they have arrived safely to this little oasis in a foreign land.

She had fought them, the four soldiers, but they had eventually overpowered her. One was bleeding where her nails had gouged his cheek, whilst a second massaged his bruised crotch. Two of them now held her spread-eagled on the barn floor, while a third slowly unbuttoned his tunic. She closed her eyes to them, shut out their taunts of '*Giaour* bitch,' tried in her mind to take herself to another place: to their linden tree; tried to ignore the soldier smell, a mixture of gunpowder, tobacco, leather and male sweat, imagining instead the sweet heady smell of the blossom that filled the valley through early summer.

The first she knew of the lieutenant's arrival was his angry command. She opened her eyes to see him beating the soldiers with the flat of his *Yatagan*, and instinctively tried to cover her modesty with the remains of her torn clothing.

He turned from the cowering soldiers and walked towards her removing his great-coat as he came. She felt sick, but was resolved not to show her fear. He said nothing, but gently draped his coat around her, it was warm, and she instinctively knew he presented no threat. The danger over, the adrenalin rush that had sustained her through her ordeal subsided, and she felt light-headed. Though she fought against it, and felt ashamed to show weakness before, this lieutenant, this hated enemy, her mind was not strong enough to fight off her physical weakness. Her head was in a whirl, and if he had not caught her as she staggered, she would surely have fallen to the floor in a dead faint.

The mother opened the door, and he carried her daughter in, laid her on the bed and explained as best he could what had happened. He apologized for his men and assured her they would be punished severely.

The girl had woken by the time he was ready to leave, and she thanked him, the enemy, for saving her. She knew that the laws of gratitude demanded that she offer hospitality, but she could not bring herself to speak it, and the young lieutenant left the warmth of the home to walk the darkened street, alone and friendless, to his austere rooms in the barracks.

The rest of the *Cheti* were gathered round the fire, smoking, drinking Rakia and exchanging patriotic songs and stories. He sat apart, reading and thinking of her. Occasionally his hand would stray to the locket; it always gave him strength, and always served as a link to her. Sighing he opened it, kissed the enclosed likeness, snapped it shut and returned it to his tunic. He rose, called his men to readiness. There was work to do, dangerous work. Men would die tonight, maybe them, maybe the Turk, but certainly someone would keep an appointment with death. Crossing himself, he shook the hand of each of his comrades, turned and led them out of the cave, down the mountainside and towards the sleeping village.

The lieutenant returned on the following day. He told the women the men had been punished:

‘Flogged,’ he had said, and the mother offered him food and wine to show her gratitude. Food and wine that was his by right, but food and wine that he now accepted as a gift with grace.

He talked late into the night, always addressing the mother, but thinking of the girl, who remained silent in the corner, her eyes downcast. He told them of his home, a small coastal village to the east of Constantinople. He told them of his widowed mother, and of his two young sisters. He spoke of all these things with great affection, which greatly impressed the mother, who had never before conversed with the invader; apart from the occasional curse or insult.

It was late when he finally left having received permission from the mother to call again. The girl merely inclined her head when he looked towards her, and remained silent; as silent and as cold as the ever watchful village.

Not one comrade injured; rations and weapons seized; two of the hated Turk dead or wounded; a complete success. Why then could he not bring himself to join his *Cheti* in their celebration? Why could he not sing, and smoke, and dance like the others? And why did he feel so unclean, so ashamed? Excusing himself he left the men to their carousing, picked up his book and reached in his tunic for the locket.

The boy child was born on *Badni Vecher*, exactly nine months after she had waved goodbye to her *Haidut*. A good luck omen the mother thought; a blessing from God. The child was strong and sturdy just like his father, but with the girl's eyes and beauty. They named him Todor - in acknowledgement of his paternity.

It was well laid, the ambush. The *Spahi* had chased the *Cheti* up the valley straight onto the guns of the waiting *Bashibazouks*. They were pinned down by rifle fire, and he knew it was only a matter of time before the only escape route left open to them was cut off. At first they refused to leave. They wanted to stay with him; to fight to the death. But eventually he persuaded them to go, promising to hold off the attacking troops, and then follow them up the goat track to freedom.

He took the first bullet in his left shoulder. The second shattered his right leg just below the knee. The third was fired point blank into his forehead by a smiling *Bashibazouk*, who complained bitterly when the *Spahi* officer confiscated the locket torn from the dead man's throat.

He said nothing when he gave her the trinket. Neither did she, but glancing first at the locket, then at him, she turned and placed it in the case along with other family treasures. He knew she realized the significance, but could not bring himself to utter a pointless apology, or to explain the circumstances.

A month had passed before he called again. The visit was to tell them he had been newly promoted to Captain and posted to HQ in Plovdiv. He explained that he could no longer guarantee his protection, though he would, of course, speak to his replacement before leaving. He begged her to join him; told her that her mother and her son would be welcome; said that all three would be well cared for by him and his family. The girl made no reply, and he told her he would return the next day for her answer.

When he returned to the house the following evening she had reached a decision. Together they walked the path to the high pasture, he talking to her, his voice quiet and sincere, she

remaining silent. He told her that his mother and sisters would accept his choice. Told her that he would treat the boy child as his own; bring him up as his son. Told her she would be treated with respect. Still she remained silent. They paused at the foot of the linden tree, and it was here that he told her he loved her; told her he had loved her since the first day they had met when he rescued her from the soldiers. Still she did not speak, but remained motionless; her eyes lowered and fixed firmly on the ground. Gently he cupped her chin in his hands, raised her face until she was forced to make eye contact. He paused, and then slowly leaned forward to kiss her tenderly on the lips.

He felt no pain as the knitting needle, newly sharpened the night before, pierced his tunic, passed between the fourth and fifth ribs, entered the left ventricle and finally broached the pulmonary artery. Death came in seconds, he had no time to pray to his god, or to think of his mother, or of his two sisters, or of his home in a distant country.

She was surprised how easy it had been. Surprised how quickly the light had gone from his eyes; surprised how little blood there had been. She remained silent for a moment, and then purposefully removed her scarf.

The search party set out from the village around midnight. Walking single file, their torches diffused by patches of mist, they resembled a giant glow-worm as they wended their way up the mountain side. None spoke, each seemingly trapped within their own little circle of light. Each man, breath clouding in the frosted air, lost in his own thoughts and fears.

They found them early in the morning. Their bodies white with frost. Gently they cut her down from the linden tree, and started the journey back down to her home, leaving his body lying where it had fallen.

It is spring, eighteen summers have come and gone, and the boy is now a man. Tall and strong and proudly wearing the uniform of a *Haidut*, he walks with his sweetheart to the linden tree. Few visit the place now, for they say it is haunted. Cursed, they say, for the tree has not blossomed since the tragedy, and the villagers avoid using the path, preferring instead, where possible, to use a different route. He though fears nothing, he has the invulnerability of youth, and he wishes to visit the place where the mother he never really knew had died. So together they climb to the place. It is early spring, and impossible for the young to be sad. He is moved beyond utterance to find the linden tree healthy, and

covered in buds, swollen and full of promise. They embrace, crying with joy. Then kissing, make love, there in the meadow among the new growth in the place of his conception.

Afterwards, as a tribute to his mother, and to their love for each other, they remove the amulet from her wrist, and tie it to the tree. Then with one final kiss they part, he up the mountain to join the *Cheti*, she to her home to wait and wonder.

That night the wind changes to the east, bringing weather from the steppes of Siberia. Fires are lit, extra blankets placed on beds and animals brought into stables. The villagers sit cold and shivering at their fire-sides exchanging tales of past weather catastrophes, of ruined crops, and of the hunger that followed. Of one thing they are certain: this cold is sure to blight the blossom.

‘Yes,’ they all agree ‘the valley will not enjoy the scent of linden this year, it is a curse!’

Khristo was drunk! No, to be strictly accurate Khristo was very drunk, very, very drunk indeed. Now there was nothing unusual in this, in fact if Khristo had been sober, or even nearly sober, then that would have been considered unusual by all who knew him. What was unusual on this late winter morning was his demeanour.

Khristo had always been a happy drunk, voluble, excitable and given to expansive arm movement in order to get his point across - many a passing stranger, not used to Khristo's spectacularly physical method of oration, had been forced to duck in order to avoid the accidental blow - but, that aside, none the less a happy drunk.

This morning though, as he sat beside the pot-bellied stove that heated his shed, the half empty bottle of *Rakia* - delivered two hours earlier by his Roma friend Jambo - by his side, idly tossing his wood chip bombs on the fire - whoosh! He was maudlin, sad and unhappy in the extreme. Even the *Rakia*, home brewed and, as Jambo had assured him, 'of three months vintage,' had failed to raise his spirits. Wearily he raised the bottle, took another large swig, threw another bomb on the fire, whoosh! and contemplated the earlier confrontation.

How could she have spoken to him like that, his Rosa, his woman? Had he not always been a good husband? Had he not always been a good provider? So he took the occasional drink, was it not a man's privilege; his right as head of the household? He sighed, took another swig from the fast emptying bottle and threw another bomb on the fire, whoosh!

Why had she been so angry? It made perfect sense to him that they should both go. As a woman she should be pleased to be chaperoned; especially in a foreign country, and especially if that foreign country happened to be America. He had read about California, that most decadent of states. She would definitely need him there to look after her. So why had she been so negative when he'd made his offer? And to suggest it was his fault that Nadia was there in the first place, well that was beyond belief. So what if he had been a strict father? It was only out of love. Nadia was a beautiful young girl (though towards the end she had always insisted she was a woman) as such it was his duty to protect her from unscrupulous males - which in Khristo's case meant every young man in the village. When she finally left it was to go to a new job, not because of him. Anyway was it his fault that their daughter had ignored his order not to go? Was it his fault that he was never mentioned in her weekly letter home? Of course it wasn't, he, Khristo, was without blame. However, despite his irrefutable argument, and despite his desperate arm movements, Rosa remained obdurate in her refusal to see reason. Arguing that the money she had saved, and the money sent by Nadia was barely enough to buy one air flight (she omitted telling Khristo at this point that it was to be a one way flight) let alone the price of two. Here she had ended all further

discussion by leaving the house.

Khristo had spent the rest of the morning pondering on this dilemma, and was now convinced that this problem could be solved by money. With money he could buy the extra ticket and surprise his Rosa. Is it not true, he reasoned, that all women enjoy surprises? Does it not keep love alive? Is it not the way to a woman's heart? Yes, that's what he would do. He would get the money, buy the ticket and enjoy the look of joy and surprise on his Rosa's face when he broke the news. But how? That was the question. Air tickets cost many *Leva*, and Khristo did not have many *Leva*. It was this lack of *Leva* which had turned Khristo into this morning's unhappy drunk. The problem appeared to be insoluble, and Khristo was not fond of insoluble problems. Truth be known, Khristo was not fond of soluble problems, so it comes as no surprise to find insoluble problems leaving him in his current state.

Khristo's answer to all of life's problems lay at the very bottom of a *Rakia* bottle. The larger the problem, the larger the bottle, and this was indeed a very large problem. But the answer was there, lying in the bottom, waiting. He raised the bottle, took a final swig, threw a further bomb on the fire, whoosh! And promptly passed out.

It was the cold that finally wakened Khristo from his stupor. The temperature had fallen to minus 14 degrees, the *Rakia* bottle was empty, the fire out and his head felt like a thousand blacksmiths were at work. Despite this Khristo was euphoric. It had come to him, the solution to his problem, at the moment of waking. If he had been a religious man he might have claimed divine intervention. As it was he just put it down to his natural talent for problem solving. He laughed to himself, why had he not thought of this before? It was so obvious, and he was sure that Mitko would agree to a trade - might even pay him to take it away. It was perfect, his plan could not fail, his Rosa would be overwhelmed with joy and would have to admit that he, Khristo, was truly the solver of all problems. He would be magnanimous though; he would not demand an apology; her smile and gratitude would be reward enough. Yes, he would do it today. With this he staggered to his feet, pulled on his ex-army greatcoat and began the eight kilometre journey to the next village and the home of Mitko the trader.

By the time Khristo had woven his drunken and unsteady way, the eight kilometres had become nearer to twelve, but he had sobered up sufficiently to rap on the correct door. It was five thirty in the morning, and Mitko was a little shocked to hear his door unceremoniously hammered at such an early and unwelcome hour. He was less shocked when he realized who his visitor was. Khristo was well known in the valley, and Mitko, like many others, tolerated, and even liked the local drunk.

Once inside Khristo breathlessly explained the purpose of his visit, and despite the untimely hour demanded to see it, to check it over properly prior to a possible agreement being reached. Mitko smiled, shrugged and led him to the yard at the back, pointing him over to an area at the rear. There she was: the answer to all his problems, beautiful, neglected and waiting patiently to be rescued. Khristo gazed in adoration; it was a meeting of two kindred souls. He, Khristo, would simultaneously rescue this unloved beauty and fulfil his promise to Rosa. He breathed deeply, savouring her scent, a heady mixture of petrol, engine oil and rusting metal. Not for him the much clichéd 'love at first sight', oh no, for him it was love at first smell, he and the GAZ Vietnamka, eight cylinder, 2000 cc, all wheel drive, go anywhere vehicle. She was beautiful, a little tired, somewhat long in the tooth, but beautiful none the less. He, Khristo, resolved there and then to lavish his care and expertise and to lovingly restore her to her former glory. The irony that he would ultimately sell her to the highest bidder for the price of two air fares to America was for the moment pushed to the back of his mind. This was to be a labour of love in every sense of the word.

After much haggling, though Khristo's love of the vehicle, and his need to impress Rosa, put him at a severe disadvantage in negotiations, a price of two hundred *Leva* was agreed upon; this price to include a large box of spares; buyer to collect. Khristo reasoned that restored this vehicle would fetch one thousand, maybe even one thousand five hundred *Leva*; enough profit to pay for two tickets to America

The deal immediately presented Khristo with two problems: the first was transportation, how to get said Vietnamka from Mitko's yard to Khristo's shed. This was easily solved by Mitko allowing time in his yard to get the vehicle running ready for the drive back home. The second problem, however, was not so easily solved. Now, two hundred *Leva* is not a large amount, and truth be known was a fair price for the vehicle. However, when one does not have two hundred *Leva*, or the means of acquiring two hundred *Leva*, the sum instantly becomes immense. Needless to say Khristo did not have the two hundred *Leva*, but was confident of solving that small problem. Was he not, after all, the consummate solver of problems?

For years after, opinion in the village was divided. Some swore that Khristo had stolen Rosa's nest egg, whilst others tended to believe that Khristo had merely reinvested her savings for her. Khristo himself swore on oath that the latter was the case. Had he not always been honest? Could anyone in the village remember him having stolen anything from anyone? Of course not, he had, he argued, merely exercised his right as head of the house to take financial charge. Whatever the truth of the matter, and I do not wish to stand in moral judgment here, the fact remains that Khristo came home from Mitko's house that day, waited till Rosa had left the house, crept to her hiding place - a loose

brick in the summer kitchen - and removed the five hundred *Leva* lying there. He then returned to Mitko's yard, paid the two hundred *Leva*, contacted Jambo the gypsy to arrange a *Rakia* delivery and set to work on starting the vehicle.

First he pumped up the tyres. To his delight they all remained inflated; better yet three still had tread. Next he made an attempt to turn the starter. The vehicle had been standing in Mitko's yard for nearly five years, so it came as no surprise to find the battery dead. A new battery, eight new spark plugs and an ignition contact set were purchased from Mitko for a further fifty *Leva*. These were fitted and the carburettor primed with a mixture of fresh fuel and *Rakia* (the latter for luck and blessing) and Khristo was ready to try again.

At first the starter had great difficulty turning the eight cylinder Leviathan of an engine. The pistons had not moved since the vehicle had been abandoned and dumped in the yard, the oil in the sump was old, dirty and cold. Years of neglect, and lack of service had left a residue of half burned oil and gases caked hard on the cylinder sleeves. However, the Vietnamka is a renowned work horse. For many decades used by the Eastern Bloc military forces it now responded to its new orders, coughed three times, backfired a salute then burst into life, disappeared in a cloud of black smoke and was ready once again for the oft promised invasion of the West. It was a symphonic masterpiece to Khristo's ears. Was he, Khristo, truly not the best mechanic in the valley?

Once the smoke had cleared, and the machine had warmed, then the engine settled down to a healthy distinctive burble. Khristo thought he had never heard a sweeter sound, a little noisy with the exhaust long rusted away, but sweet and tuneful none the less; a princess among engines. With these thoughts in mind, he eased off the handbrake, engaged first gear and drove out of the yard towards home. Tomorrow he would begin work on the restoration. He would hammer out the dent in the front bumper, red lead the rust and repaint his beauty in her original military black and olive green colours; today though he would celebrate his success. Jambo would be there with the *Rakia* to greet him when he drove in triumph back through the village. This day's work would bring him much respect in the community. Perhaps they may even ask him to be mayor, he liked the idea. Khristo, the mayor, yes, that had a ring to it. It was in this pleasant dreamlike state that he concluded the uneventful journey home - uneventful that is apart from several irate cart drivers whose donkeys had been spooked by the noise of the passing Vietnamka - and parked safely next to his shed.

The vehicle was treated like a visiting princess by both Khristo and Jambo. She was féted, admired

and caressed. She was promised love, care and attention. Then finally, back in Khristo's shed, the fire blazing, her health was toasted on many occasions with *Rakia*. By the time Jambo left for home, with fifty *Leva* of Rosa's investment fund, given in order to purchase paint, brushes and red lead, Khristo was in a happy, if somewhat befuddled state.

Khristo was not a man given to self doubt; he had no need to worry. What on earth could possibly go wrong? He, Khristo, would triumph. His plans were foolproof. Of this he was sure. But somewhere in the back of his alcohol soaked brain a little worry began to niggle, and as it niggled so it grew, and it grew, and it grew. Try as he may he couldn't fight back the fear that Rosa might discover her loss before his plan had come together. Might go one day to the brick to check, or count. If she did, then questions would be asked. Questions asked of him. Would he tell her the truth? Or would he lie? He could, perhaps, suggest a thief had broken in - although it was not in his nature to lie, especially to his Rosa. But what alternative did he have? To confess prior to the sale of the Vietnamka would leave him open to possible accusations of theft. He knew he was innocent, but the shame of such an accusation began to haunt him. No, he must work fast to finish the project, and trust to luck that Rosa would not be tempted to look behind the brick before he had done so. He relaxed back in his chair momentarily at ease with himself. But the niggle returned, that awful 'what if?' that haunts us all from time to time. Sighing he reached for the bottle, drank another toast to his beauty and threw a bomb on the fire, whoosh!

When Jambo arrived early the next morning armed with paint, brushes and all the paraphernalia needed for the project, Khristo dismissed all the dismal thoughts of the previous evening and chased the niggle to the back of his mind, where it remained, festering and waiting for the night to return. Khristo and his Roma friend set to with wire brush, hammer and emery paper to straighten out the worst of the dents and remove the rust ready for priming. They worked quickly but methodically, so that by lunch time the Vietnamka was ready for its coating of red lead. This they started after a mostly liquid lunch, so that by the time the light began to fail the rust was removed, or disguised, and their treasure ready for her new clothes.

Three days later Khristo stood back and admired his handiwork. She was pristine; her bumpers matt black, and almost straight. The olive green paint, brushed lovingly on to her coach work, gleamed in the morning sun. Yes, he, Khristo, had truly worked a small miracle, restored her to her former beauty. Tomorrow, he was certain, would see the culmination of his dreams. Todor, the builder, had already expressed an interest in buying, and this without first seeing her. Better still he had not

flinched when Khristo mentioned a possible asking price of seventeen hundred *Leva*. Of course they would haggle the price, but Khristo was confident that he, the consummate haggler, would end up with at least fifteen hundred, maybe even sixteen hundred *Leva*. How could the builder resist this little beauty? Yes, tomorrow all his troubles would be over. The money would be returned, Rosa would never know of his investment, and would surely be overjoyed at the thought of them both going to America. Life was indeed good, very good.

Despite his impending triumph Khristo still felt slightly down. He had enjoyed these last few days with his new love. But he could not help but feel a sense of loss at having to part with her. Oh, he knew they would have to part, he had always known that, but that knowledge did not make it any easier, and he sighed as he gazed at her; one last fling, a chance for them to bid a suitable goodbye. Is this not the way with all lovers? Of course it is. He, Khristo, would take his beautiful Vietnamka for one last memorable ride doing just what she was built to do. He climbed into the cab, caressed her starter, and listened in ecstasy as her eight cylinders purred into life. He could feel her throbbing beneath him, sensed her urgent need to go. Gently, but firmly, he selected first gear, released the handbrake and eased out the clutch. As the vehicle moved forward Khristo took a deep breath, turned the steering wheel and headed up the track towards the forest. One last time together, to smell the pine, man and machine making music in perfect harmony.

It was a memorable goodbye, and one that Khristo, despite the events that followed, would treasure for the rest of his life. They returned after an hour tired, but happy. Khristo eased himself out of the driver's seat. Stroked her bonnet, and walked away towards his shed. Before entering he turned, took one last look as the dying rays of the sun glinted off her windows, blew her a fond lover's kiss and walked in. He smiled to himself as he made himself comfortable next to the fire. Yes, tomorrow all would be well. He reached for the bottle, took a long celebratory swig and threw another bomb on the fire, whoosh!

What happened next cannot in all honesty be blamed on Khristo. Though that didn't stop many, including his own wife Rosa, from subsequently doing so, but unbiased observers have to admit to an element of bad luck and even Kismet. Yes, for those of us who believe in such things, someone somewhere had thrown a pebble in the pond of fate, the ripples from which were about to reach the troubled shores of Khristo's life. To learn about that pebble, and about the thrower, we must travel back three decades in time, and move a thousand miles east to the small Russian village of Verminsk, home to Igor Karenkov.

It was Friday, five minutes to the end of the afternoon shift on the assembly line at the giant GAZ automotive plant and young Igor Karenkov was in a dilemma. What should he do? He knew he should report the matter to the line supervisor and under normal circumstances would have done just that, for under normal circumstances Igor was a conscientious worker. However, these were not normal circumstances, hence the dilemma.

The wiring loom he was fitting required the upgraded Mk II version insulation sleeve. Unfortunately, what was in his box was the Mk I version. This was stores again, mistakes; always mistakes. Easy enough to put right, but if he did he would be late from work, and tonight of all nights he could not afford to be late. For tonight he was going to propose. Propose to Natasha, Natasha Neraskaya, the most beautiful girl in the village. Blue eyes, blonde hair, rosebud lips and soft voluptuous breasts - he had been allowed to touch the left one once, through her tunic of course, but it was enough to convince him of future promise. It was the thought of this promise that made him eventually decide. Use the Mk I. There was no danger; in fact to look at them with the naked eye they appeared identical. No one would notice. Anyway the upgrade had only been carried out to satisfy some vague requirement for use by the military. Bureaucratic nonsense from some stuck up civil servant. No, the decision was made, his Natasha would take precedence. Just this once, for her, he would bend the rules. Looking around first for watching eyes, he furtively fitted the Mk I sleeve, closed his box and went to change ready for home and his momentous meeting with Natasha.

We are not here to judge Igor's actions that afternoon. Who amongst us, if faced with a similar decision, would not have done the same thing? Blonde hair, blue eyes, rosebud lips and soft voluptuous breasts have led many a man to commit far worse crimes than fitting a Mk I insulation sleeve instead of a Mk II. No, we cannot blame him for that. Nor should it concern us that later that fateful evening Natasha laughingly refused his proposal. Or that she subsequently married Boris Geransky the local butcher who beat her regularly, and gave her five children. No, Igor's only place in this story is that he, as the instrument of whatever god decides our fates, threw the metaphorical pebble, the ripples from which then arrived in the life of Khristo. Therefore it is here we must leave Igor, for his is another story yet to be told, and return the thousand miles and three decades to our hero and his lovely Vietnamka.

We cannot know for certain exactly what happened next: whether three decades of neglect, or the power surge from the new battery, or that final exhilarating ride through the forest, caused the problem, or, as is more likely, a combination of all three. What is certain is that at some stage that day the Mk. I insulation sleeve became dislodged, leaving the wires bare. What is also certain is

that two of the wires began to arc, the sparks from which caused a small electrical fire in the loom itself. Initially the fire remained confined to that area, and, who knows, may have just burned itself out, but for a small leak from the carburettor. When troubles visit, as the bard tells us, they come not in single numbers, and sad to say this was to be the case. For when the petrol fumes from the carburettor drifted towards the arcing wires the resultant marriage of elements was explosively inevitable.

That night many of the villagers, including Khristo, slept through the resultant conflagration. Those who did see it chose to ignore it, assuming that a shepherd or a drunken Khristo had lit a bonfire to ward off the cold. By morning all that was left was the smoking skeleton of the newly restored Vietnamka. Her return to glory, like love in autumn, had been poignant, unexpected and brief. Khristo's truck, along with his hopes and dreams, were now reduced to a charred and blackened wreck.

When Khristo awoke the following morning, stretched, re-kindled the fire and stepped out into clear frosted air, his spirits were high. Today was the day. He, Khristo, would show them all. Regain the respect of the villagers, and of his Rosa. Yes, he had solved the problem, they were going to America. Breathing in the mountain air he turned his gaze towards his beloved truck.

There were no tears, they would come later, he was too shocked for tears, and for some moments stood rooted there by shock. Finally he walked towards her, placed his hand on her still warm bonnet as if to bid her goodbye, sighed and returned to the haven of his shed.

Here was a problem that even he could not solve. There was no *Rakia* bottle deep enough for this one. Not even he, Khristo, with all of his problem solving expertise could fathom an answer. For a moment he sat, head in hands, knowing that he would have to tell his Rosa. She would understand; he knew that. After all no one could blame him. No, it was just a stroke of bad luck. Yes, she would forgive him, she always had, so why not this time? She would have to, especially once he had worked out a solution to the problem. And find one he would, of course he would, but not now, later, now he needed a drink. He reached for the bottle, raised it to his lips, downed a large gulp and threw another bomb on the fire, whoosh!

The Next Emperor of Bulgaria.

High in the Rhodope mountain range, in a small insignificant village, the name of which is unimportant, there once lived a peasant named Boris Shavov. To the casual visitor to the village there was nothing unusual to be noted on first sighting Boris. He was, it has to be said, as small and as insignificant looking as the village in which he had spent his life. He dressed as the other villagers dressed, ate what the other villagers ate, drank what they drank and lived in a similar sized home. He owned one donkey, one pig, three chickens and a goat. He was married, but childless, farmed approximately three hectares of land, got drunk no more than once a week, went to church regularly and in effect was a model citizen and a typical villager. Typical that is, but for one major difference, a major difference that set him apart from his fellows, and caused him to be the subject of much speculation, expectation and gossip.

The difference was that Boris Shavov had a destiny, a destiny much envied by his fellow villagers. It could be argued, of course, by those that believe in such things, that we all have a destiny of sorts, though in most cases a slightly more humble one than our hero. However, whatever truth there may or may not be in that statement has no bearing on Boris Shavov's little tale. Suffice to say that Boris was as certain of his own destiny, as were his neighbours, friends and relatives. The certainty that Boris Shavov, owner of three hectares of land, one donkey, one pig, three chickens and a goat, was destined to become the next Emperor of Bulgaria was never disputed by anyone within that little community - least of all by Boris himself. It was a fact that had been accepted, and remained unchallenged for nearly five decades of village history. Established when Boris was not yet five years old, and proven beyond doubt in the ensuing passage of time, his destiny was as much a part of village folklore as were the *Lamia*, *Zmey* and *Vampiri* that dwelt further up the mountain in the dense forests.

As a very young child Boris was much given to flights of fancy, and would often awaken his parents with tales of his nightmares. His mother, a kindly woman, would soothe the troubled child back to sleep with ancient lullabies, and so, as Boris grew, so his nightmares tended to lessen in frequency and intensity, until by the time he was four years and six months old they had almost disappeared completely. It was at this time that the *Samodiva* visited him, or so he told his parents over breakfast the following morning. The father, upon hearing his son's story, was somewhat sceptical, and laughingly teased the boy. The mother though, who believed in the existence of *Samodivi* and other such creatures, questioned her son further about the visitation, and was overjoyed to hear of the *Samodiva's* prophesy. Her son, her darling boy, her first born, was destined to be the next Emperor

of Bulgaria. She could not wait for the evening to tell his father, and rushed to where he was working in the fields.

‘Husband!’ she cried breathlessly, ‘our son, our little Boris, he is destined for true greatness. He is to be Emperor. The *Samodiva* told him.’

‘Woman,’ he said, ‘what is this nonsense you talk? The boy has had another nightmare; that is all. You should not encourage him in his fancies; he will grow up weak, like a woman. Now, off home with you, and let’s hear no more of “Emperors” “*Samodivi*” and the like.’

With that the man spun on his heel, spat on the ground and continued with his ploughing, whilst the mother, much chagrined, returned to her chores in the home.

It was there, at that point, that the story may well have ended, for the mother was a good and dutiful wife and, as is the case with all good and dutiful wives, as a rule generally obeyed her husband’s wishes. And there is no doubt she would have done so in this case had it not been for the sign of the eggs.

Boris had been playing peacefully with the small tabby kitten for most of the morning, and had apparently forgotten all about the *Samodiva*’s visit. The mother, who had been pottering, was now ready to prepare a mid-day break for her husband. Eggs, she thought, I will give him eggs, he has worked hard and he enjoys his eggs. With that, she rose, walked to the basket, picked up three: brown, speckled and freshly laid that morning. She then broke all three into the bowl. Glancing down at her task, she froze momentarily, shrieked, threw up her hands in wonder and staggered back in amazement towards the door, there colliding with her husband as he entered the room.

‘Wife!’ he shouted, staggering from the impact, ‘what has got into you this morning? Have you become possessed?’

‘Look, Husband, look!’ she replied, dragging him to the table. ‘Is that not a sign Husband? Have you ever seen the like of that before?’

He gazed down into the bowl, shook his head in wonder, looked at his wife and shook his head again.

‘No, Wife, never have I seen the like, not in all my life.’

‘Is it not a sign, Husband? this and the boy’s dream, the *Samovida*?’

He thought for a while, looked in the bowl again, drew a deep breath and continued.

‘Yes, Wife, it is a sign, it must be. One double yoke is a sign of good fortune; we know this, but three - and all with double yokes? It is beyond my understanding.’

‘But the boy’s dream, what about that? They must surely be connected.’

‘I don’t know, Wife, we must seek advice. Tonight, after work, we will go to see Baba Chevenko, she will know what to.’

‘Yes, Husband, Baba Chevenko will know.’

That being said she set about beating the eggs, and prepared them all an omelette.

No one knew Baba Chevenko’s true age, not even Baba Chevenko herself. All anyone knew was that she was the oldest woman in the village, a much feared *Veshititsa* and therefore the wisest of souls, and that any villager with problems, especially those relating to omens, portents, evil spells and the like, need look no further than Baba Chevenko’s hearth. It was at this hearth that Boris and his family found themselves seated that evening.

Boris was a little frightened by Baba Chevenko. He had never seen someone this old, not even his own *Baba* who was very old indeed. She was bent and wizened, and her brown wrinkled face reminded him of the fresh walnuts his *Dyado* brought every autumn. She smelled funny too, and he cringed as she leaned over to kiss his cheek and wished he was at home with the kitten.

Baba Chevenko waited patiently while the parents had explained about the *Samodiva*, the dream and the three double yoked eggs. She said nothing once they had finished their story, but sat gazing trance-like into the fire for several minutes. No one spoke, and the only sound was the ticking of the clock, and the occasional crackle from the fire. Boris looked from his parents to Baba Chevenko and then back to his parents again, stifled a yawn and tried not to fidget. Finally Baba Chevenko rose creakily from her chair, passed wind, walked over to the dresser, opened a drawer and removed five small river stones and a wooden cup. She then slowly walked back to her chair, sat down, passed wind again and gazed at her audience. She placed the river stones in the cup, shook them, took one last look at her audience and rolled the stones onto the earth floor at her feet. She raised her right hand as if to silence the room, though no one, least of all Boris dared speak, and watched as the stones came to rest amid the dust.

She sat for a while, stroking the whiskers on her chin and studying the stones. She then closed her eyes and began to softly chant, swaying her head from side to side in rhythm as if mesmerised. The parents were enthralled and Boris wished even more to be at home with the kitten. Finally a damp log in the fire exploded, lighting up the room, and startling all, including Baba Chevenko, who opened her eyes wide, ceased chanting and looked around as if surprised to find she had company.

It was the mother who broke the spell, and the silence.

‘The stones, Baba Chevenko, what did they tell you?’

Baba Chevenko sighed stroked the whiskers on her chin again and looked thoughtfully down at the stones. Boris hoped that the strange old lady would not start to chant again. He had found it odd, and a little frightening. Very much like the priest in church every Sunday, he thought. He need not have worried though for Baba Chevenko did not chant again, instead she smiled, first at the parents, then directly at Boris himself.

‘The boy is blessed,’ she said, ‘see how the stones have left regular marks in the dust? See the pattern of the stones themselves?’ The parents nodded sagely. Again no one spoke, and again it was the mother who broke the silence that followed these remarks:

‘In what way “blessed” Baba Chevenko?’

‘What?’ said Baba Chevenko, who appeared to have fallen asleep.

‘Our boy, Boris, you said he was “blessed?”’

‘Did I?’ said Baba Chevenko. ‘Ah, yes, the boy. The dream, the *Samodiva*, the eggs. All true, the stones never lie. The boy is most definitely destined to be the next Emperor of Bulgaria.’

With that Baba Chevenko coughed, spat in the fire, passed wind again, promptly fell asleep and began snoring very loudly.

The news spread rapidly through the village. Baba Chevenko had read the stones, and pronounced a verdict. The visitation and the sign were definitely connected, and the villagers could now safely bathe in the reflected glory. This news would earn the village great respect. They, the villagers, were sharing a home with the next Emperor of Bulgaria, and they had great pride in this.

Now, the fact that there had never before been an Emperor of Bulgaria, which in effect made it impossible for Boris, or anyone else for that matter, to become the next Emperor of Bulgaria, either did not register, or was ignored by all but the most cynical of villagers. And these few doubters were soon to be silenced two weeks later when Ivan Shetlikov’s goat gave birth to a two headed kid. Here was proof positive, if proof were needed, another sign confirming young Boris’ destiny.

Thus it was that the legend, for that is what it was to become, started. And as the years progressed so the legend grew with further signs. If there was a good harvest, it was a sign. If there was a bad harvest, it was a sign. If the storks returned early, it was a sign, and so too if they returned late.

It mattered little to the villagers that as Boris grew he showed no outward signs of future greatness. His smallness of stature was ignored, after all, they argued, emperors must come in a variety of sizes, they just happened to have acquired a rather short one. Nor was his lack of intellectual ability ever queried. He was by no means a stupid child, but neither was he particularly adept at his school

work, still, they reasoned, as Emperor he would have advisers, he could surround himself with clever men, so what need had he of book learning? No, they decided, he did not have to be clever, or tall, or especially handsome to be Emperor, all he needed was a destiny, and this he had in abundance.

Time passed and Boris left school to start work in the fields with his father. Many admired his humility - a future Emperor working in the fields like a common peasant, was truly a wondrous thing. It made him more approachable, less forbidding, almost like one of their own, though of course not quite.

When he was twenty years of age Boris married his sweetheart, Marinka. There were those who questioned her suitability to be a future Empress. 'A little too plump,' some said; others 'A little too plain.' Some, unkindly, for it was not her fault, drew attention to her pronounced squint and facial hair. But none of this bothered Boris, for as the poets say 'love is blind,' and Boris imagined himself to be in love, and like many another young man before him bowed to the inevitable and so became married.

The couple soon settled down to the humdrum of married life in the parents' home, and the union proved a successful, albeit, an unproductive one. They never quarrelled, which was not surprising since they rarely spoke. The passion, what little existed to start with, soon subsided, and as if by mutual consent, soon disappeared completely from their lives. This may seem a little sad to some, but it suited Boris and Marinka, who had both found the physical act vaguely disturbing, and were relieved when neither of them felt the urge to make any further efforts in that direction.

Two years after the wedding the father died. Three months after that the mother too crossed the road to join her husband in the village cemetery. This left Boris an inheritance - the aforesaid three hectares. He now not only had a destiny, but was also a man of some wealth and substance. Surely, it must happen now the villagers reasoned. This inheritance was yet another sign, and without doubt it would not be long before he was called to fulfil his long promised destiny.

For several weeks the village held its collective breath in anticipation while Boris continued to plod to the fields every morning, and return to his home every night just as he had always done. Nothing appeared to change, and as the weeks grew into months, the villagers gradually resigned themselves to patience, the anticipation died down and the slow steady beat of village life returned to normal. It would happen, they reasoned, when the time was right. Events of this magnitude cannot be rushed, and they must do what peasants have always done over the centuries - wait and endure. And wait and endure they did, while the months turned to years, and the years into decades.

One year, following a bad harvest - a sign - and after the storks had departed early from the church steeple - another sign - the snow came before *Nikulden* - yet another sign. It was, they

decided, to be a hard and cruel winter, and the village prepared itself for a long siege. Shutters were barred, animals sheltered in barns and the smell of wood smoke and winter permeated every corner and recess of every room in every house.

No-one quite knew why Boris went up the mountain on that morning in late January. Marinka, when questioned after raising the alarm with the villagers that evening, could only tell them the little she knew. Boris had risen from his bed at four, got dressed, picked up his crook and walked out of the door. No, he had not said where he was going, or why - in fact he had not said anything at all, and anyway Marinka had apparently fallen back to sleep before he left the house. Yes, he had dressed for the cold. No, he had never been late home for their evening meal before, and yes, she was worried, very worried indeed.

At first light the following morning, when Boris had still not returned, the men folk of the village set out to search the mountain side. The mood was not optimistic. The mountain was a dangerous place at the best of times, but in the middle of a hard winter - some said the worst in living memory - a man would have to have more than his fair share of luck to survive, even a man with such a destiny as Boris. It was not just the cold; there were the wolves to contend with. Food was scarce and the hungrier they got, the bolder they got. Already they had been sighted near the village, and each villager kept his livestock well protected in the barn. No one voiced their fears, especially in front of Marinka. It was not considered wise to entice destiny. But each man knew, and each man came to the search party heavily armed.

By nightfall the searchers were driven back empty handed by the dark and by a fresh fall of snow. The following morning they set out again up the mountain side. Again no man voiced what each knew to be a near certainty, and they climbed in silence to the point where they had been forced to abandon the previous day's effort. Splitting into small teams they restarted the search, climbing ever higher their breath freezing in the air and on their beards.

They found his body around midday, huddled in a crevice and frozen solid. Some said it was a miracle the wolves had left the body untouched; others that the wolves had known instinctively of Boris' destiny, and had been too afraid to approach. There was also a suspicion, though never voiced, that the *Samodiva* had returned to claim him for their own, and the *Pop* silently resolved to return to the spot in the spring with sweetened water, bread and honey as a peace offering.

Gently they tied the body to a makeshift stretcher, then taking it in turns to bear the burden of the precious cargo, carried their future Emperor back down to the village. There were some who were not afraid to shed a tear or two on the way back down, but most kept their grief stoically under

control. They were no strangers to death, these villagers, and Boris was by no means the first neighbour to be claimed by the mountain. It was, however, the first time the mountain had claimed a future Emperor.

The funeral, though the best Marinka and the villagers could afford, was a simple affair ill-befitting a future Emperor. Nevertheless they buried him with as much pomp, dignity and ceremony as they could manage, and there he lies to this day, in a secluded well tended corner of the grave yard, beneath a headstone, bought at great expense from money collected in the village, on which is written:

'Here lies the body of Boris Shavov, Future Emperor of all Bulgaria.'

Recorded 2cnd April 2007: Yambol

The Small Miracle at Dolno Draglishte

The fact that Yane Cherberkov was a Misanthrope is indisputable. He lived his life, for the most part, devoid of human contact in a large house on the outskirts of the village, and tended to his small flock of sheep unaided. He lived the simple life of a shepherd, and was largely self sufficient. On his rare visits to the village shop he never spoke, preferring instead to point at the few items he needed, then, paying from his small roll of tattered bank notes, would retreat in silence, and in shadow, back to his refuge.

If spoken to directly, and few who knew him now bothered, he would answer with a scowl for the men, a frown for the women and a growl for any child brave enough to approach.

He was not a large man, but his demeanour, and bizarre appearance – he never shaved, cut his hair or repaired his clothes; years spent working in the sun had burned his face, already of a saturnine complexion, to the colour, and texture of a walnut which, allied to a beetle brow, gave him an air of undefined menace – meant that few felt brave enough to approach, or offer a hand in friendship.

Thus it was that Yane Cherberkov lived his life. He was not actively despised or reviled by his fellow villagers – as he probably would have been in the larger towns and cities – for that is not the way of village life. They respected his need for solitude, and whilst they could not understand his misanthropy, were always willing to tolerate the foibles of others providing those foibles did not upset the beat of their communal lives, and no one could ever accuse Yane Cherberkov of doing that. He never stole anything, never got drunk, never fought with anyone, and, apart from being antisocial and never attending church, was a good member of the community, who, if not actually liked, was tolerated and generally accepted for all of his life. He also had redeeming features; those little seeds of good, that exist in all of us which, if nurtured carefully, can turn bad men into good, and good men into saints. In Yane's case his redeeming features numbered two. The first was an affinity with the animal kingdom. Any dislike he may have had for humankind was compensated by his love for all other creatures, especially those who were injured, hungry or in need of help. His flock of sheep were the best tended in the valley, and he shared his small home with a variety of sick, wounded and recovering creatures. Cats, dogs various birds and the occasional orphaned lamb were frequent visitors to the hearth of Yane Cherberkov. Small wounded animals and birds, found by the children, would be left at his door by the finder – or rather by those brave enough to risk being growled at. He also appeared to sense whenever there was a need of his skills, and would invariably turn up uninvited at the home of some sick animal, the owners of which, having exhausted the extent of their own healing powers, were at a loss to know what to do, and take over the nursing care. He never spoke to the owners, nor they to him, he just proceeded to tend to the animal until such times as it was either cured, or succumbed to its affliction. Any offer of thanks, or of remuneration, would be

met by a scowl, a frown or a growl, and the villagers soon learned to accept that Yane did what he could, not for the owners, but out of love for the animal. It was said of him that he had ‘healing hands,’ and that ‘there was magic in his fingers.’ In truth there probably was magic in his fingers, and it was that magic which resulted in Yane’s second redeeming feature: his ability with that most traditional of shepherd’s instruments, the *Kaval*. In his hands this deceptively simple instrument was transformed. His fingers would drift over the eight holes, producing music of such exquisite beauty that the villagers were often moved to remark on: ‘Yane’s honeyed *Kaval*.’ Not that he ever played for the villagers; it was not in his nature to do so. When he played it was for his flock. On most days he would seat himself on a rock, or down by the river in the shade of his favourite tree, and play: tunes as old as the mountains themselves, tunes full of the hope, joy and the indescribable sorrow of the Balkans, and as he played the village would hold its breath and listen. Children, momentarily forgetting their fear, would creep into the field in order to be a little closer to the sound and feel of the music. All were agreed that Yane Cherberkov was indeed the best player of the *Kaval* in the valley, and probably the best player in all of Bulgaria.

All of this is fact and as indisputable as his misanthropy. Why then, a decade after his mysterious death, is his grave the most well tended in a graveyard full of well tended graves? And why is that same grave visited regularly every Sunday by a girl, now grown to a beautiful woman? And why do the villagers still unofficially celebrate every 30th of September as ‘Yane’s Day,’ (some even say as ‘St Yane’s Day,’)? To answer these questions we must go back ten years to the end of August, and to the first sightings of the visitors to the valley.

‘Sightings,’ is perhaps not the word to use here; for as we all know these creatures rarely reveal themselves to humankind. No, signs, or evidence, would probably be the better term. A series of little tricks were the first hint the villagers had of their arrival: despite him having locked the gate, as he always did Boris Chevsky’s goat mysteriously strayed into Baba Minsky’s garden where it proceeded to devour all her late autumn vegetables. Then Todor Yerkov’s normally placid horse suddenly shied at nothing in particular overturning a large pail of milk onto the floor of the yard. The children complained of their journey to school being interrupted by strange noises, saucy winds and rain when there were no clouds in the sky. All these incidents were a sure sign that they, the villagers, had visitors in the valley. Moreover, capricious visitors, who, though not malicious to mankind, were nonetheless known to enjoy the odd practical joke at the expense of humans.

As the late summer of August turned into the early autumn of September so other signs began to appear: over night, close to the river bank, a large crop of multicoloured toadstools sprang up – it

was well known that these were often used as picnic tables by the supposed visitors. Soon after this, keen-eared villagers reported hearing music and laughter coming from that same river bank, and others said they had seen lights flickering among the willows.

By mid-September, with all this evidence, it became obvious to all but the most sceptical of the villagers that their valley had indeed become host to some questionable guests. ‘Yes,’ they all agreed, ‘the *Samodivi* were back.’ and action would be required to avoid any unpleasant clashes. It was obvious that the area along the river bank was now best avoided - if some villager were to inadvertently step onto one of their tables, or worse still, stray onto *Samodivi* territory, it was known that the trespasser would suffer a mild stroke, or in some cases even die. No, they decided, the area was best avoided, but the *Samodivi* must not be made to feel unwelcome or ostracised, it doesn’t do to upset the *Samodivi*. A simple welcoming gift was decided of bread, sweetened water – the *Samodivi* never drink wine, you understand – and honey. But who could they ask to take it? A child, they thought, the *Samodivi* would never harm a child, but which child? Little Olga, little crippled Olga, she will do it, ‘yes,’ they agreed ‘Olga is the best choice, always smiling, never complaining, and a favourite of us all, we will ask her to go.’

There were those who were against sending a seven year old crippled girl on such a perilous mission, but it was argued that the *Samodivi* had never been known to harm a child, let alone a crippled child, and so the dissenters finally agreed on sending the girl, providing, of course, she, and more importantly her father, were willing for her to fulfil the quest, and so off they set to consult with little Olga and her parent.

Olga was a small child for her age. Crippled in one leg from birth, she was used to using the crutch, always lovingly crafted by her carpenter father, and a project that required regular updates as the child grew. What she lacked in girth and height the gods appeared to make up for with a sweetness of nature. She had a smile that would melt the iciest of hearts, and her generosity of spirit ensured she was a favourite with all her peers.

They found Olga and her father in his workshop, he busy with work, she seated at the end of his bench watching. They spent hours like this, for, motherless from birth, the bond between father and daughter had, by necessity and desire, grown close over the years, and they delighted in the

company of each other.

When the villagers put their suggestion to him the father refused point blank, calling them cowards and growing angry, he said:

‘She is a child, how can you expect her to go where none of you dare? I will not allow it – I will go in her stead.’

But they would not let him, and the discussion grew more heated.

It was little Olga who finally settled matters between them all.

‘I will go father,’ she said ‘they will not harm me, not if I take presents, and anyway I wish to ask a favour of them.’

‘A favour child?’ asked the father, ‘What favour?’

‘I want to dance father, like my friends.’ she replied simply. ‘I shall ask the *Samodivi* to mend my leg.’

The father was moved, and had to turn away to hide a tear. He had never before heard his daughter make such a request, and he had learned from her stoicism to accept his child’s disability almost as bravely as she.

‘But child, what if they refuse, what will you do?’ he asked, knowing in his heart that he had already lost the argument.

‘Then, father, I shall do what I have always done and accept the will of God. But they will not refuse; I have faith in the *Samodivi*. Please let me go.’

The villagers all marvelled at such a wise head on such young shoulders.

Faced with his daughter’s unshakable faith the father could do no other than agree, and turning to the villagers nodded his acquiescence, but it was with a much troubled heart. He knew the *Samovidi* would not harm his child, but he did not share her conviction about their ability or willingness to help her, and he was sad at the thought of her hopes being dashed. However, he helped the other villagers prepare the gifts, and damp-eyed watched his daughter disappear into the evening mist rising from the river.

They waited in silence for her return, each deep in thought, and each unable to meet his neighbour’s eye for fear of what they might see there.

They did not have long to wait before the familiar figure of little Olga limped towards them out of the ever thickening mist. She went straight to her father, who lifted her wordlessly into his arms and walked away back to the safety of their home. Not one of the villagers dared to ask how she had fared; one look at the father’s face was enough to convince all there how ill-advised that

would be. But they all noted that the present of bread, sweetened water and honey had not been returned. All they could do now was to wait, hope and give thanks to God that the child had been returned safely to them.

The father, meanwhile, felt unable to question his daughter until they were safely home and seated by the fire. He was gentle with her, fearing that her faith in the *Samodivi* had been severely tested and avoided the question that plagued him for as long as he was able. Finally, he could stand it no longer and began what was for him the most difficult speech of his life.

‘Daughter,’ he said, stroking her hair while he gazed down at her by the flickering light of the fire, ‘you have been very brave, and you deserve better, but you must understand that even the *Samodivi* cannot go against the will of God.’

At this the child looked up at him, smiled, but remained silent. He thought for a while before continuing.

‘I’m certain, daughter, they would grant your wish if they could, I’m sure they would love to see you dance with your friends.’

Again little Olga smiled at him, and he felt a great sadness. Under his breath he cursed an unfair God.

‘But they cannot. Only God can do this. Don’t be sad, tomorrow we will measure you, and start on your new crutch. We will do it together.’

Olga continued smiling as she reached up to brush the tear from her father’s cheek.

‘Don’t be sad, father, have faith. she told me, “be patient,” she said “and you will dance,” so you see, father, you need not cry, or feel sorry for me, or measure me for a new crutch, for I am to be made well; the *Samodiva* told me so, and I know she wouldn’t lie to me. She was very beautiful father, the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, more beautiful than the angels painted on the monastery wall in Plovdiv.’ With that she gave a contented sigh and fell fast asleep in his arms.

Over the next few days it became apparent that the present had been accepted, and the plan had worked. There were no more tricks, or practical jokes played, and life in the village returned to normal. Well, as normal as was possible given the presence of the visitors. It was still thought wise by most to avoid contact for fear that they may inadvertently do something to upset their guests, and so the fields by the river became unofficially out of bounds. The very old and the children openly admitted to their fears, as did the younger women. The young men though, as is usually the case with young men, found other excuses for avoiding the river bank: ‘it’s too muddy.’ or ‘not today, I’m busy.’ or ‘it’s too hot.’ or ‘it’s too cold.’ or ‘it’s not the season for fishing.’ All these excuses,

and others, were trotted out rather than admit to the truth, so, that by the end of the last week in September, even on a Friday, fish had completely disappeared from the village menu, and the river bank was avoided by everyone. Everyone, that is, but for Yane Cherberkov.

Yane Cherberkov's land stretched down to the river bank, and Yane Cherberkov did not intend to allow the mere presence of the *Samodivi* to stop him tending to his flock. He reasoned that if he did not interfere with them, and he had no intention of doing so, then why would they interfere with him? Also, Yane Cherberkov was afraid of no creature on God's earth – apart from the human animal that is, and we would perhaps all fare better if we were to follow his example in this. Thus it was that on the morning of the 29th of September Yane Cherberkov, having first made himself comfortable beneath his favourite willow tree, pulled his *Kaval* out of his pocket and began to play.

He sensed her presence long before he saw her, a prickling at the back of the neck, a sense of being watched, and then out of the mist, as if by magic, she appeared. She was the most graceful and lovely creature he had ever set eyes on. Tall and slim with hair the colour of gold, she was dressed in a cloak of feathers. She was unmistakably of human form, but a light appeared to radiate from within and around her, causing her shape to tremble and shimmer like leaves in a summer breeze. The creature did not inspire fear in him, more a sense of wonder allied to another feeling, a feeling unknown to him, but instantly recognisable, a kind of contentment, of well-being. She glided slowly toward him – for though she walked, so light was her step that to him her feet seemed not to touch the ground – he ceased playing, and rested the *Kaval* in his lap.

For a few seconds they stared at one another each saying nothing, then smiling she spoke: 'You play your instrument well, Yane,' she said, 'play some more for me. Play my music, I will teach you our tunes, the music of my people, the *Samodivi*.' With that she leaned forward and gently touched his forehead.

In an instant his whole being seemed to fill with new notes, rhythms and cadences, alien, but at the same time familiar like half forgotten remembrances. He felt a surge of warmth running through him, and though he had never experienced the feeling before, recognised it as pure joy. Lifting his *Kaval* to his lips he began to play as he had never played before, and as he played so she began to dance, slowly and gracefully in perfect time to the music, and as she danced, so tears of joyous rapture ran down his cheeks, and for the first time in his life he felt complete: a whole man. How long he played for is not known, it could have been minutes, it could have been hours, even weeks for all he knew, because for him time momentarily ceased to exist. When he finally finished playing, though, and rested the *Kaval* back on his lap, the light was fading toward night, and he felt tired, but content and fulfilled. He turned to the *Samodiva*, and she smiled at him and said: 'Sleep now, Yane, I have a favour to ask of you on the morrow, and you will need all your strength.'

With that she once again leaned forward, whispered her request in his ear and touched his eyelids, at which he fell instantly into a deep and dreamless sleep.

He was woken the following morning by the warmth of the sun on his cheek. He felt refreshed, but hungry. Lying beside him on the ground he found bread, salt, sweetened water and cheese, and he took his fill. The bread and salt were the finest he had ever tasted, the water like nectar and the cheese beyond perfection. Once he had breakfasted he recalled the *Samodiva's* whispered words, and he knew what he must do. Seating himself on his usual rock, he lifted the *Kaval* to his lips and once again began to play the music of the *Samodivi*. As the notes drifted across the fields to the village all the children heard, and as they listened so they started to walk, slowly at first, but with growing purpose, and all in the direction of Yane, the music and the river.

From all parts of the village they came, the very young being led by the hand by the elder children, hypnotised by the ethereal beauty of the *Samodivi* music. In twos and threes they arrived at Yane's rock forming into a seated circle around him. Little Olga was the last to appear, but she, ignoring the circle, moved through and sat on the grass next to Yane. As she sat, as if by some unheard command, the remaining children rose in unison, joined hands, and began to dance the *Horo*. Slowly at first, in simple 2/4 time, but gradually as the tempo increased the rhythms became irregular, 5/8, then 9/16, then 11/16, but still the children danced, faster and faster, in a frenzy of dance, music and sheer unadulterated joy, until finally the music stopped and they collapsed to the ground laughing and clapping their hands.

Once the laughter had subsided, the children sat up, and realising where they were, and who they were with, grew silent and apprehensive. No one spoke, and no one moved for fear of what would happen, and a tension started to build. Again it was little Olga who finally broke the spell when she tugged at Yane's coat and said:

'Please play some more, *Chicho*, please, I want to dance.'

The children gave a collective gasp at Olga's reckless daring, and they feared the worst. Yane made no reply, but reaching down took hold of the girl and lifted her onto his lap. There was another gasp of horror from the assembled audience; surely Olga's fate was sealed. Some thought she must at least be growled at, or worse still beaten for her audacity. Others, possessed of more vivid imaginations, thought she would surely be eaten in one bite by Yane. However, none of these

things came to pass: she was not growled at, or beaten, neither, for that matter, was she eaten. All that occurred after little Olga was lifted up was that she nestled closely into Yane's chest, while he lifted the *Kaval* to his lips and began to play once more.

Exactly what happened next may never be known for certain. The only witnesses to events were the children, and the only accounts were the excited reports given to the parents after the children returned home. Questioning those same children ten years later has helped, but memory plays tricks on us all, especially when remembering incidents from our youth. However, in all reports there are elements that are consistently agreed on by all who were present, and what follows is an account based on those elements, which may well be as near to the truth as we are ever likely to get.

Yane Cherberkov, with little Olga still seated on his lap, played the *Kaval* for several minutes, while the children listened in awe and wonder. They had never heard the like, and swore later the music must surely have soared up to heaven and pleased God. This time, though, they did not dance, but instinctively stood and joined hands in a show of collective strength and faith.

When he had finished playing, and placed the instrument in his pocket, he reached down, took hold of the crutch and spoke:

‘You won’t be needing this anymore, my child.’ he said as he gently lifted her down. ‘Don’t be afraid little one; join your friends and dance, dance for me, dance for old Yane.’ So saying he reached for the *Kaval* and began to play once more, and Olga, tentatively at first, joined her friends in readiness to dance her first *Horo*.

None of this shocked the children in the same way it would have an adult. Children are inured against miracles. For them every day is a new miracle of discovery, and Olga joining them in dance was as miraculous, and as acceptable, as would be a first sunrise, or a frosted cobweb. Only as adults do we start to demand explanations of what is sometimes inexplicable.

Once Yane had finished playing, and the children reluctantly departed for home, he walked the short distance to his house – though this time he walked in the sunshine, and did not seek the shadows – and made his simple meal. He then fed and watered the animals, ensuring they had enough provision to last until they were found, and walked back down to the river bank. His task was completed, and he settled down to wait for the *Samodiva*, and once more began to play.

Little Olga’s father, meanwhile, was amazed, euphoric and humbled: humbled by his daughter’s unquestioning faith, and humbled by his own lack of belief. By the time he had recovered from the initial shock of seeing his daughter walk into the house for the first time unaided, and listened to her excited version of events, it was too late to visit Yane Cherberkov. But he vowed that in the morning he would go and give thanks, albeit thanks that may well be greeted with a scowl, nevertheless he would not let it rest until he had thanked the man properly.

After the story of the miracle – for miracle they both agreed it was – had been retold several times, and after much laughter and tears, they both retired to their beds exhausted by the day's happenings.

She came this time with two attendants, gliding through the mist as Yane continued to play. As they drew near, he ceased playing, and rested the *Kaval* in his lap. All three smiled at him and the chief *Samodiva* spoke:

‘You have done well, Yane, but your work here is finished, it is time for you to come with us.’ So saying they took him by the hand and led him gently away, down to the river bank, across the water, and on toward the lands of the *Samodivi*.

It was Olga's father who found the body that morning; down by the river. He had first gone to the house, determined to give thanks. Finding his quarry already gone he had searched the fields, and discovered Yane's body fairly quickly.

The villagers were all agreed, there was no denying the body; it was definitely the body of Yane Cherberkov. But a Yane Cherberkov they had never seen before. His hair and beard, usually unkempt and full of rats-tails, were newly washed, trimmed and combed. His clothes were the same clothes he had always worn, but cleaned, pressed and with the tears and rents mended with stitching so fine it was barely visible to the human eye. What really amazed, though, was his face, for he was smiling, and it was a smile of pure joy. Oh some cynics would later say that it was the rectus-grin of death, but the majority agreed that Yane Cherberkov had died in a state of grace, and that, though they did not realise until that moment, they had had a saint living amongst them. The only mystery for them was: where was Yane's *Kaval*? He always carried it with him. It was either at his lips being played, or in his pocket waiting to be played. But search though they may it was never found, and the carpenter willingly carved a new one to be buried with the body saying:

‘Yane cannot go to the grave without a *Kaval*, he will surely be asked to play for the angels.’

So there you have it ‘the miracle at Dolno Draglishte,’. All this happened ten years ago, but the villagers have never forgotten, and celebrate his life and death every 30th of September. The church steadfastly refuses to recognise it as a miracle, but the villagers know the truth, and privately treat him like a saint.

Little Olga has now grown into a beautiful woman, and it is rumoured that she is likely to marry soon: a young man of good standing from the next village. If she does he will have to be tolerant of losing her every Sunday. Because Sunday, for her, will always belong to Yane, she has vowed that

as long as she lives his grave will always have fresh flowers blooming, and be free of weeds. The carpenter and the rest of the villagers soon returned to normal, and quickly became used to seeing Olga without her crutch – though this was never thrown away, and by mutual consent, now graces the wall above the fireplace in the carpenter's home.

From that day to now the *Samodivi* were never seen again by anyone in the valley, though some say, if you listen carefully on still autumn nights you can hear faintly the sounds of laughter, song and the notes of Yane's *Kaval*. This may very well be true, then again it may just be the sound of the breeze in the willows, or the river making music on the pebbles, but who of us can ever be really sure?

Recorded 2cnd April 2007: Yambol

The Cats of Thassos

Visitors to the Greek island of Thassos will be struck first by the beauty of the place, then by its tranquillity, and finally by the large number of cats living there; cats of all shapes, colours

and sizes: short haired cats, long haired cats; fat cats and thin cats; cats with amber eyes, cats with green eyes; cats of every type and breed imaginable.

As is the way with all cats they while away the daylight hours sleeping, and dreaming their pussy heaven dreams. There, in the warmth of the sun, they lie luxuriating until it is time to feed. Then, as if by magic, they appear at the feet of the visiting diners. In every café, restaurant and taverna the tourist will be sure to have feline company; they live well do the cats of Thassos.

They are tolerated, these creatures, one could almost say they are revered. They are never chased, kicked or driven out by the locals. If a tourist objects, and there are those who do – that strange cat hating minority - then the owner, or waiter, will entice the animal away with meat or fish to a more tolerant table – they are particularly fond of sardines are the cats of Thassos.

After a while the visitor can't help but notice that these well favoured felines appear to have a certain status, for instance: local drivers, who would never dream of swerving or slowing down for pedestrians, will stop their car and wait patiently while a cat nonchalantly crosses the road. If a cat is accidentally killed, then the body is not thrown into the gutter, or tossed out for the garbage collector, but buried with care, and with a certain reverence not afforded to other animals.

If the visitor is puzzled by this - and who but the most jaded of us would not be? - and if the visitor is curious enough, and asks the right questions, and are fortunate enough to put those questions to the right people, then they will hear the strange, but none the less true, story of the cats of Thassos.

Many, many years ago, when the world was still very young, there existed a great and powerful kingdom called Macedonia. The realm of this kingdom stretched from the shores of the Aegean Sea in the south up to the banks of the Danube in the north. At the southernmost tip of the realm, a short distance out to sea lies the island of Thassos. At that time the island was ruled by a young prince whose name was Phillipi. Though still very

young, Phillipi was a benign and wise ruler. He was tall in stature, strong and blessed with a mane of red hair – an unusual colour in those parts. Under his stewardship the island prospered, growing rich from harvests gathered from the sea and the land, and his people were happy and loved their prince dearly. Then, as now, the island was a place of great beauty. Kissed by the sun, cooled by the sea breeze and with fertile soil, it was a little piece

of heaven on earth; a jewel of an island, set in the Aegean; like a pearl set in green amber. This pearl, however, had a flaw; its perfection was marred by a blemish, and this 'blemish' rankled and itched like a grain of sand in the eye, until it threatened the very peace and stability of the principedom.

This flaw manifested itself in the shape of mice, not just several mice, but a plague of mice. They were everywhere, in the houses attacking the food store, in the granaries despoiling the corn, in the bakeries stealing the bread; there was no place on the island safe from this furry invasion, and the islanders despaired, and thought they would surely starve to death. 'We must go to the prince,' they said, 'he is wise, he will know what to do.' And so they came to the prince, and they told him of the mice – though he must have surely known, for he was a wise prince. They asked him what they should do, and begged for his help, which he willingly gave, saying:

'You have no need to beg of your prince, my people. Your troubles are my troubles, you are my children, it is my duty to help and advise. I will summon the great council of elders. Fear not, between us we will find a way to rid you of this plague.' So saying, he immediately sent word to the twelve villages summoning the elder from each to a council of war; for he was certain that this was a war; a war against the mice.

As soon as the elders received word of the prince's summons they hurried to the palace, and were soon seated, six on either side of the prince, at the long table in the great hall. They talked long and hard well into the night, and when morning broke were no nearer to a solution than when they first started. They were at a loss; for this was a different enemy to any they had ever known; an enemy that could hide in small holes; an enemy they could not challenge on the field of battle as they had done so often in the past. No, this was an enemy they could not reach by any means at their disposal, and they did not know what to do.

Finally, the prince rose from his throne, and addressed the elders, saying:

'My, friends, you are correct in your deliberations, we cannot defeat this enemy by any means known to us. Therefore, if we cannot defeat it by human means, we must turn to others; we needs must ask for non-human help in this matter. I will send word to the great

Veshtitsa of the north; I will ask her for help.' The elders were stunned, and they said:

'Sire, you cannot mean Baba Vishto? She has been known to cast evil spells. What if she refuses us, or takes a dislike to us, what then?'

'We will pay her handsomely for her help.' the prince replied, smiling at the assembled council, 'why would she refuse, or take offence? No, my friends, if this matter is to be

resolved, it requires stern measures. I will send riders out for Baba Vishto this very day.’ So saying he bade the elders farewell, summoned his fastest messengers and bid them bring the great *Veshtitsa* of the north to his palace.

For several weeks the islanders waited, holding their collective breath in anticipation. There were many who feared the great *Veshtitsa* of the north; they had heard of her great powers, and were worried. However, their prince had spoken, and they trusted in his wisdom. As weeks progressed into a month they grew impatient. The journey was a long and arduous one, this they knew, but none the less they began to fret, for all this time the mice were multiplying and the people were beginning to go hungry. Mothers complained of the mice stealing the food from the very mouths of their children.

Finally, after six weeks, and three days the riders returned bringing with them Baba Vishto, and, much to everyone’s surprise, her cat Kostadinka. The cat was as beautiful as Baba Vishto was ugly. Pure black, apart from a small star shaped patch of white on her forehead, amber eyes and a coat so smooth that it shone like velvet under the lights of the palace. The prince could not take his eyes off her, her golden amber eyes appeared to glow and almost hypnotise him, and he thought her the most graceful creature he had ever seen. It was several moments before he could bring himself to avert his gaze to Baba Vishto.

After the beauty of Kostadinka, her ugliness came as such a shock, that he almost forgot his manners, and nearly recoiled in revulsion and horror. She was old, bent and withered like the twisted root of an olive tree. Her long grey hair hung down in greasy strands partially covering her brown, age wrinkled face, and at the end of her long curved beak of a nose sat a large black wart. Her chin, covered in wiry hair, curved upwards at such an angle, that when she opened her toothless mouth to speak it appeared to be in grave danger of meeting her nose. In her left hand she held a wooden staff, as old, withered and twisted as herself. The most frightening aspect though was her eyes: small, bright and ebony black, they gazed out at the world with an intelligent malevolence. The prince got the impression that she could see into the very hearts of men, and he feared her power. He soon recovered,

though, and explained to Baba Vishto the problem of the mice.

‘Can you help us, Baba Vishto?’ he asked. ‘You will be amply rewarded.’

‘I cannot help you, prince,’ she said, and laughed, a nasty croaking frog-like sound, at the look of disappointment on his face, ‘I cannot, but my familiar, Kostadinka, she can; she can rid you of these mice.’

‘A cat, Baba Vishto? We already have cats, but they are overwhelmed. How can just one ordinary cat succeed where so many have failed?’

With this the great *Veshtitsa* of the north grew angry, and with her eyes glittering like polished ebony spoke:

‘You are a fool, prince, if you mistake Kostadinka for an “ordinary cat”. Can you not see she is “extraordinary”? Have you no faith in my word? Have you brought me here on some fool’s errand? You say you want to rid yourself of these accursed mice. I tell you Kostadinka can do this. Now, do you wish me to ask her, or do we both return to our home in the north?’

The prince was not used to being spoken to in this manner, but was wise enough to see the error of his ways, and apologised saying:

‘I am sorry if I caused offence, Baba Vishto, I assure you no offence was intended.’ With this he turned his gaze to the cat, and spoke:

‘I apologise to you too, Kostadinka, I was foolish; to compare you to other cats was wrong, you’re extraordinary.’

The cat made no reply, and reluctantly the prince returned his gaze to Baba Vishto.

‘You are fortunate, prince,’ said Baba Vishto. ‘Kostadinka appears to like you, and I too like you; your mice will be dealt with. But what are you willing to pay prince? What is this boon I offer worth to you?’

‘Baba Vishto, I will give you this year’s crop of olives. It is a good crop, it will be valuable.’

‘Not enough, my young prince, I will return tomorrow. Make a better offer.’ So saying she turned on her heel, and with Kostadinka following, left the palace.

Once again the prince summoned the elders, and once again they held urgent council. It was agreed they should offer the great *Veshtitsa* of the north a greater reward. If the mice were not stopped then they would have nothing; they would be forced to flee the island. It was decided that whatever her price, whatever she demanded, it should be granted, and they left

the prince to negotiate.

As promised Baba Vishto and Kostadinka returned on the following morning and the prince increased the offer saying:

‘Baba Vishto, we offer not only the olive harvest, but the wine harvest also. Surely now you

will rid us of these mice.’

‘Not enough, prince, I will return again tomorrow.’ And before the prince could reply, she turned and left.

On the third day Baba Vishto refused the prince’s offer of the olive harvest, the wine harvest and twelve of his best horses, fully equipped and ready to ride. On the fourth day she refused the olive harvest, the wine harvest, the horses and a bushel of silver. On the fifth the prince added jewels to the offer, and still the great *Veshitisa* of the north refused. On the sixth day, when Baba Vishto and Kostadinka arrived, the prince rose to his feet and spoke to them sternly saying:

‘This is our final offer, Baba Vishto, we have nothing more to offer but the following: the olive harvest, the wine harvest, twelve of my best horses fully equipped and ready to ride, a bushel of silver, this casket of jewels, plus your own weight in gold. It is all we have, Baba Vishto, we have nothing else. Will you not now accept our offer and rid us of these mice?’

‘No, prince, it is still not enough, it is not what I seek.’

‘Then tell me, Baba Vishto, tell me what it is you desire? If it is in my power to grant, then I will grant it. Speak, Baba Vishto, tell us your price?’

‘My price, prince, is yours to give. I do not need earthly possessions; I have no use for olives, wine, horses, silver, jewels and gold, I do not desire such gewgaws. No, what I desire is what all desire, it is simple, prince, I desire your love, and I desire it to be given freely; I desire that you marry me.’

The prince was dumbfounded, and gazed at the old woman in mute horror.

‘What is the matter, prince, you grow pale. Can it be the price is too high? Am I too ugly? I can make myself more beautiful if you wish; I can transform into any shape you desire. So, prince, what is your answer? Are we to be wed?’

The prince was nonplussed at this suggestion, and knew not how to answer. On the one hand there was the need for desperate measures, but this was simply too much to ask of him. He was a good prince, and would sacrifice much for his people, but this? No, he could

not, she was dreadfully ugly, and he knew instinctively that this ugliness was not only on the outside, and the thought of being wed to such a creature disgusted him. I must be diplomatic, he thought, and replied to her saying:

‘Baba Vishto, before I give you my answer, I must consult with the council. Come tomorrow for their decision.’ With that he bowed to her, watched her leave and once again summoned

the elders.

‘No, Sire, we cannot allow this, it goes against nature.’ thus spoke the chief elder. ‘We have discussed Baba Vishto’s demand, and it is not reasonable; we cannot expect it of you.’ So saying he turned to the twelfth elder, Todor Yenkov, and said:

‘Todor Yenkov, you must meet with Baba Vishto, tell her, her demand cannot be met, and offer again the olives, wine, horses, silver, jewels and gold. Convince her, Todor,, make her accept our offer. Say we will all meet with her at the palace tomorrow morning.’

Todor Yenkov was not a bad man, but neither was he a brave or particularly honest one. What he did possess in high degree though was a crafty animal cunning, it had helped him in the past to gain his present position on the council, and he saw no reason why it should not help him now. He was scared of delivering this ultimatum to Baba Vishto. Worried about what she might do to the deliverer of such a message, and, to be fair to the man, a little worried about the fate of the island should she again refuse the offer. Therefore he resolved to trick her, and delivered the following message:

‘Baba Vishto, we have decided to pay your price. However, you must first completely clear the island of all mice. If, after you have completed your task, we discover a single mouse, living or dead, then you will forfeit your fee.’ Smiling to herself, Baba Vishko accepted the challenge, called for Kostadinka, and told the elder to expect her at the palace four days hence.

Todor Yenkov was pleased with himself; one cat, all those mice, in four days? Impossible! Yes, he thought, I, Todor Yenkov, have saved the day, saved the prince and, if I’m not mistaken, will also save the olives, wine, horses, silver, jewels and gold. I will be the hero of the hour, the saviour of the island. He had not, however, reckoned with Kostadinka who set about her task with passion.

For three days and three nights the island resounded with the squeaks, screeches and squeals of terrified mice. There was nowhere for them to hide from the sharp-clawed fury of Kostadinka. She hunted and harried them, chasing them from the houses, evicting them from the granaries and throwing them out of the bakeries. Nowhere was safe, no nook, no

cranny, no hole or hedgerow gave shelter from the voracious cat. Until finally, on the third day, the remaining mice were herded by the tireless Kostadinka to the brink of the highest cliff on the island where, in despair and terror, they leapt, lemming-like, into the sea, and the island was finally free of the plague.

On the fourth day Baba Vishto and her faithful Kostadinka presented themselves at the court. The prince and council members, as yet unaware of Todor Yenkov's trickery, greeted them with great ceremony and praised Kostadinka's efforts.

'Baba Vishto,' said the prince, 'I thank you on behalf of my people, and have pleasure in sealing our bargain. I have ordered my servants to load the olives, wine, silver, jewels and gold onto the horses ready for your trip home; my riders will escort you, and keep you safe from harm.' At this point Baba Vishto raised her staff, and pointing to the skulking figure of Todor Yenkov, revealed to the court the extent of his treachery. She then turned to the prince and said:

'Prince, your elder promised in your name. I have kept my part of the bargain; there are no more mice, living or dead, on this island, I ask that you now fulfil yours and wed me.'

'Madam,' the prince replied. 'this man has tricked us both, and will be punished for his act of treachery. He will be banished from our community, and no door will be open to him, and no one will befriend him or give succour. But I cannot, and will not marry you. I beg you accept what is on offer, and let us part as friends.'

'Prince,' said Baba Vishto, her eyes narrowing with anger. 'a promise is a promise; I demand you wed me, or be prepared to take the consequences.'

At this the prince rose from his throne and replied, saying:

'Baba Vishto, I made no such promise, I cannot, and I will not wed you. You are old, you are ugly and I would rather marry Kostadinka than wed and bed you.'

On hearing this Baba Vishto broke into a fearsome rage, and started to recite in a language strange to their ears. While she recited she started to turn, slowly at first, but speeding up until she was spinning so fast that her hair stood out straight from her head.

Suddenly the spinning stopped, and lifting her staff she broke it in two, and threw the pieces on the floor in front of the astonished prince. The instant the broken staff hit the floor there came a clap of thunder so loud that the court was deafened, followed by a flash of lightning so fierce that they were forced to cover their eyes and fall to their knees in terror. When the bravest among them finally plucked up the courage to open one eye and peer around, it was

discovered that both the prince and Baba Vishto had disappeared completely. Kostadinka, however, was still there, but seated now on the throne. And on the throne next to her was another cat, a large red cat, not a tabby red, but completely red; completely, that is, except for a ring of white fur between the ears, like a crown.

One of the elders, incensed by the cat's effrontery, drew his sword, rushed forward, and would surely have smote them both a mortal blow had he not been stopped by the words of the senior elder:

'Stop, my friend! Do you not see? Look at them, look at Kostadinka's new found mate, can you not recognise the crown? It is our beloved prince, we dare not kill him, or her; our prince now has a princess. See how they are together, can you not recognise true love when you see it?' And they all looked, and they all saw, and they all marvelled, and from that day to this no cats have ever been harmed on the Island of Thassos.

So, my friends, if you should ever find yourself in that part of the world, and if you are honoured by the presence of cats at your table, which you undoubtedly will be, be sure to treat them kindly; especially if one of them is black with a white star on her forehead, and the other ginger with a white crown on his head, for you will be in the company of royalty, and should therefore show proper respect. Bow to them, feed them well, and remember, they are especially fond of sardines are the cats of Thassos.

Recorded 2cnd April 2007: Yambol

Brussels, Jambo The Gypsy and Vera The Horse.

It was said by one and all that you could 'set your watch to Jambo the gypsy.' He was a man of regular and precise habits, a man firmly set in the routine pattern of his life.

For every Thursday, for as long as anyone could remember, as regular as clockwork, at

precisely eight o'clock in the morning he would start the journey from his home in Banya. With his cart ready, loaded the previous evening with provisions, vegetables, firewood or any other saleable item, he would hitch it to his horse, a pretty, high stepping bay mare named Vera, turn from his gate and head the six kilometres to the town of Bansko. The journey was the highlight of his week, and, truth be known, the highlight of Vera's week too. She was a willing little mare, and pulled the humble gypsy cart with as much pride as if it had been a Thracian war chariot, and Jambo the gypsy a warrior king.

Thus it was on that fateful spring morning early in march they were to be found trotting up the cobbled street that leads to the main square and the thursday market. It was a beautiful morning, and Vera's sleek coat glistened with health and vitality. It was as if she knew how pretty she was, for she whinnied and tossed her mane when the tourists, and there were many of them, paused to photograph her. Jambo the gypsy smiled to himself at the irony of him and Vera becoming a tourist attraction. He was well used to the phenomenon by now, but it never ceased to amuse and he couldn't help but grin.

They were halfway up the street when police Sergeant Stokov stepped out, hand raised, from the pavement to stop them.

As policemen go, Sergeant Stokov was not a bad man, and for the most part turned a blind eye to all but the most serious of misdemeanours. Therefore, Jambo the gypsy was not unduly worried at being pulled over that morning, and greeted him jokingly:

'Trying to get yourself run over, Sergeant? Lucky for you Vera's got good brakes. Problem?'

'Not now, Jambo, but there will be next week; take a look at the sign.'

Jambo the gypsy looked, it was new, and certainly not there last week. He studied it for a while, it was round, had a white background with a red circle round the perimeter. In the centre was what looked like a depiction of a horse and cart through which was drawn a red line.

'Mmmmm!' said Jambo, scratching his chin thoughtfully, 'very pretty, but what does it mean?'

'It means, Jambo, no entry for horse drawn carts. It means that after next monday – it comes into force next monday – after then, after monday, I will have to turn you, Vera and anybody else with a horse drawn vehicle away, and before you say anything you may regret, I happen to think it's a stupid law as well, but I can't do other than enforce it; it's my job.'

'Mmmmm!' repeated Jambo, climbing down from the cart, 'have you told the others?'

‘No, Jambo, you’re always the first in.’

‘Mmmmm! They’re not going to like it you know.’

‘I know that, Jambo, neither do I. It’s all to do with Brussels, health and safety, and EU, regulations. Apparently they don’t want tourists stepping in horse shit. You’ll all have to buy cars, bring your stuff in on a trailer.’

‘Health and safety? A bit of horse shit’s not going to kill anyone, is it? Besides, what will the good ladies of the town put on their roses? Are you telling me Brussels thinks that cars are healthier than horse shit? Have they never smelt a Lada exhaust? It’s a load of nonsense.’

‘I agree, Jambo, but my hands are tied, it’s EU regulations, I have to enforce them.’

‘Mmmmm! EU regulations, what do you think my lovely?’ he asked, fondling Vera behind her ears, ‘what’s your opinion of Brussels and EU regulations eh?’

Vera shook her head, whinnied, lifted her tail and deposited a large dollop of EU critique on the road, where it sat steaming in the morning sun in readiness to manure the roses of Bansko. The sergeant laughed, and patted Vera on the neck, saying:

‘Well spoken, Vera, exactly my thoughts on the matter. Seriously though, Jambo, try to reason with the others will you? I really don’t want trouble. See what you can do eh? They listen to you.’

‘I’ll do my best, Sergeant, but this affects our livelihoods you know, it’s a serious matter. I’ll give it some thought and call a gypsy council; it’s the best I can do.’

With that he climbed back on the cart, nodded a farewell to the sergeant, clicked his tongue as a signal to Vera and wearily proceeded up the street. Things were changing, changing fast, and he feared that this may be the last trip into town that he and Vera would enjoy together.

A gypsy council is always a noisy affair; the gypsies, recognising no one as leader, generally made council decisions based only on the decibel level which followed a particular proposal, and the council that evening was proving to be no exception. The discussion was heated, angry and threatening to deteriorate into a near riot. Many were in favour of ignoring the new edict, and of overwhelming Sergeant Stokov and his road block by sheer force of numbers; others suggested going in early before he had a chance to even mount the road block, and some, though these were few, mumbled darkly of murdering the man.

Back and forth the arguments went growing ever more furious and loud, but as the evening drew on they had still not found a resolution to their problem, and turned to Jambo, who until

then had remained seated quietly in the corner, and asked him what they should do. Jambo rose to his feet, the audience grew quiet, and he began to speak:

‘My friends, you are right to be angry, I share that anger. You are right to be afraid for your livelihoods, I too share that fear. You are right when you say we must do something, I agree, we must act, or we all go down and our families starve. But, my friends, we must act within the law.’

Here he raised his hand to silence the murmurs of dissent before continuing:

‘Let us look at this logically. If we ignore the law, if we push our way through Sergeant Stokov’s barrier, what will we achieve? I’ll tell you what we will achieve, we will achieve three things: firstly, we will be doing what everyone thinks we will do; it’s what the authorities want; you know they expect us gypsies to break the law; if we do so then we play into their hands, and we’re beaten before we start. Secondly, we will alienate the sergeant, and he’s not a bad man. At least we can reason with him, he’s sympathetic to our needs and our culture, which is more than could be said for most policemen. Thirdly, if we go in, then the Chief of Police in Razlog will have no option other than to send in reinforcements, and they will be armed, and they will take great pleasure in using their batons on us – do we want that? Will it solve our problem? No, of course it won’t. We have to use the law to defeat the law. It is the only way to ensure our future and our safety. This law is a stupid law, but it is the law, and we must obey. We must show the authorities that we gypsies are willing to abide by their laws, no matter how stupid or unfair those laws may be. We, we gypsies, will stick to the law; the letter of the law; the true interpretation of the law. I have a plan; it is simple, within the law and will work. It is, my friends, what is known as a “compromise”.’ With that Jambo the gypsy told them of his plan, and bid them all be ready for the journey into town on the following Thursday.

‘You were right in one respect, my friends’ he continued, ‘we must show a united front. Be ready to leave at eight o’clock; we must all arrive together; in convoy. Good

luck, my friends, and remember, eight o’clock on the dot.’

The sergeant did not like Gorgi Gastrinski, had never liked him, had not liked him when they first met at the police academy and liked him even less now he was newly promoted to Chief of Police. In the sergeant’s opinion he was pompous, overweight, corrupt and promoted beyond his abilities; this was an opinion shared by many others, in fact it was an opinion shared by most others. However, like it or not, the sergeant was now uncomfortably stood to

attention in front Gorgi Gastrinski's desk receiving instructions on the implementation of the new EU rules.

'No exceptions, Stokov! As far as I'm concerned gypsies are a bloody nuisance. If I had my way I'd drive them from the valley. It would halve the crime rate; bloody criminals to a man. No, Stokov, come Thursday, no horse drawn carts in the square. Block the road if you have to, it's your problem, so sort it, but if I hear of the law being violated, it'll be your head on the block, not mine. Now go and do your job.'

The tirade over, and his position as Chief of Police established, Gorgi Gastrinski softened slightly, or perhaps simply noticed the gleam of anger in the sergeant's eye, but whatever it was, he adopted a more conciliatory tone:

'Are you sure you don't need help? I could send a few of my lads; they'd break a few heads, teach them respect for the law. What do you say?'

'I'd say, sir, that it was the worst possible thing we could do. I have a good rapport with the gypsies. I've already had a word; there won't be any trouble.'

The moment he said the words the sergeant knew he had perhaps made the biggest mistake of his life. Gorgi Gastrinski was not a man to cross, he was known to be vindictive, and would not take kindly to the implied criticism. If Jambo the gypsy could not persuade his friends to see reason, if there was any hint of trouble, then the sergeant knew that the Chief would take great pleasure in heaping the blame on him. It would almost certainly mean demotion, possibly even dismissal from the service. He could only wait, and hope that by thursday Jambo had come up with some resolution, but, it has to be said, he did not hold out much hope, and it was a despondent Sergeant Stokov who drove wearily back to his office in Bansko that afternoon.

Thursday morning arrived, and Sergeant Stokov, his best uniform newly pressed, and with boots shone to a reflective pride, took up his position by the recently erected signs. He made

an impressive sight that morning. Six feet tall and muscular he wore his uniform well, and inspired respect for the law. He had rarely needed more than his sheer physical presence to persuade wrongdoers of the error of their ways, but today he knew he may need more. He was no coward, and had resolved that if he were to go down to defeat, then it would be a battle hard won. But it was not a fight he was looking forward to. He genuinely sympathised with the plight of the gypsies; knew that they had been left with no option. He also knew that he had been left with no option either; they had to be stopped.

Eight thirty, Jambo's expected time of arrival, came and went, and the sergeant's hopes started to rise. By a quarter to nine there was still no sign of Jambo or the other gypsies.

The sergeant should have felt elated, but he didn't, he knew how important the market was to gypsy economy, and the thought of families starving left a bad taste in his mouth.

At five minutes to nine, just as he was about to pack up and return to his office, he glimpsed in the distance a dust cloud, as the cloud drew closer, and turned into the main street, he could just make out the line of carts. They had come after all; all together, in a show of solidarity. It was with a mixture of emotions that the sergeant took up position in the centre of the street. Pleased that they had the courage, but saddened that he would have to stop them, and for the first time in his career he regretted his decision to become a policeman.

Slowly the line of carts approached on the lone figure of Sergeant Stokov, who stood, sentinel like, arms crossed and legs akimbo, in the centre of the street. Still the carts proceeded, and still the sergeant remained, like Colossus guarding Rhodes, impassive, and resolute.

As the procession drew closer, so the sergeant began to pick out the details. Jambo the gypsy was in the lead cart, but something was missing, something was different, something was very different. As they drew ever closer the sergeant suddenly realised exactly what it was that was so different, and as he checked the other carts, so a smile began to cross his lips, and the smile soon became a grin, a grin which then developed into gales of laughter, until he was holding his sides from the pain of it. It was so simple, such an obvious compromise, but it had taken the mind of Jambo the gypsy to think of it.

'*Dobró útro, Jambo!*' said the sergeant as the convoy came to rest. 'Nice morning. Nice looking ox.'

'Yes, Sergeant, thought I'd give him an outing – just to comply with EU regulations

you understand.'

'Yes, Jambo, I fully understand, we must all obey the regulations. Is that a donkey your brother in law has?'

'Indeed it is, Sergeant. You'll find several of those, and two asses, and one rather unwilling cow. What you won't find is a horse, bit disappointing for Vera, but I have explained matters to her, and the sign does state "no horse and carts allowed."'

'Indeed it does, Jambo, and as I see no "horse and carts" you are free to proceed; *léka rábota!*'

'You also, Sergeant.'

‘Oh, and Jambo: thank you.’

‘No problem, Sergeant, when it comes to the EU we are all Bulgarians first, are we not?’

‘We are indeed, my philosopher friend, we are indeed.’

With that the sergeant stepped to one side, and the convoy moved forward into the market square to begin the day’s work.

About two o’clock the following morning some of the good residents of Bansko were awakened from their sleep by the noise of sawing. They thought it strange that someone should be working this late, but did not feel it necessary to investigate, and soon fell back into their slumbers.

It was a street cleaner who first discovered the cause of the noise, and immediately reported the crime to Sergeant Stokov. He, in his turn, strolled round to the scene, and surveyed the damage. After taking down all the details he wrote in his report the loss of two prohibitive road signs:

‘Recently erected prohibitive “no horse and cart signs.” My investigations show that in the early hours of the morning the signs were cut down at the base, and stolen. There are no clues as to the perpetrators of this crime, and the matter remains under investigation.’

The town council, on hearing of the theft, refused to replace the stolen items, saying that they had insufficient funds. So the signs were never replaced, and after a couple of weeks Jambo the gypsy and his horse Vera reappeared in the market square of Bansko, and life returned to the normal slow and easy pace.

The mystery of the missing signs was never solved. Most people blamed the gypsies for the desecration, just as they always blamed the gypsies, but the curious fact of the matter was that the signs had been cut down using a powered hacksaw, and no gypsy in the valley had ever owned such a tool. In fact, as far as can be ascertained, only one person in the whole of the valley owned such a tool, and that person was none other than Sergeant Stokov, but, of course, as an officer of the law he was above suspicion.

Recorded 30th April 2007: Batak

On this particular evening in early spring Ivan started the performance by informing the audience that for the first story of the night he would be adopting the persona of the Samodiva; a conceit the audience appeared only too happy to accept.

Samodiva

Hey Ho Fiddly Dee! Here he comes, on his toes, chasing rainbows I suppose: the village Lothario. Third one he's brought to my river bank this week, he's certainly a one for the outdoors, this lad; a regular alfresco Romeo, the little rascal, and who's that with him? No, no, I don't believe it, Vera the schoolmistress? Little Miss Prim and Proper; the resident village virgin. Now this should be very interesting, must tune in; listen to what they're

thinking. Oh, did you not know we could do that? Yes, I assure you, we most definitely can, and very revealing it can be too. We know all your secrets: your little jealousies, your hates, your loves, your petty little vendettas, we know them all, know all there is to know about you.

We find it all rather amusing, you know, you are such strange creatures you humans, you so rarely say what you actually mean; most curious. We do, you see, we always say what we think; we are unable to do otherwise, and fail to see what good it would do if we did possess the ability. But I digress. Oh! Oh! She's sitting with him on the bank; he's a quick and crafty worker this one; good looking too in a human kind of way, but let me just tune in; have a quick trawl through their frontal lobes. Her first I think; the female's thoughts are always much more interesting, and judging from the bulge in young Lochinvar's trousers I think I can easily guess exactly what's going through his mind – very predictable the male of the species you know.

I don't think so my dear, he's not so easily caught. Goodness me Vera, it's lucky I'm not easily shocked, and you a schoolmistress too.

I'm sorry, I keep forgetting you can't hear can you? Very remiss of me; I do apologise. Mind you I'm not so sure I ought to be sharing this with you; ethics, confidentiality, that sort of thing; still, we *Samodivi* have no ethics, and as for confidentiality, if you have a problem then stop up your ears, don't listen. Ha! Thought so, can't resist, can you? OK, this is how it is, or as far as I can work it out – for a schoolmistress she has very muddled thinking, makes you worry about the state of education doesn't it? Anyway, little miss Iron Knickers is in a bit of a quandary, I told you the women were more interesting didn't I? Her mind is all over the place, she is wondering just what it would be like – you know the 'beast with two backs' thing you humans seem so obsessed with – but her conscience – another thing we *Samodivi* have no time for – tells her not to do it; poor dear. On top of this – and please don't laugh, though God knows I have great difficulty keeping a straight face myself – the silly wench imagines herself in love, and, wait for it, actually thinks she can trap him into marriage – now that's very cruel, I said not to laugh; though it is funny isn't it? Oh, wait a minute, the little rascal - well played sir! That's her top button undone; you know I don't think she even noticed. He really is rather good isn't he? Oops! How wrong can one be? She has noticed, the little hussy – she's craftier than I thought. What? Oh, Sorry, I'm doing it again aren't I? She had noticed his little move, you see, she just pretended not to notice. Good ploy isn't it? Wonder how many buttons she's going to 'not notice' before she starts resisting – or should I say pretending to resist. What do you

think? Care for a side bet? I reckon she's brave enough to risk three – any more leaves him hand access to the mammary area, and I reckon he'll need to make some pretty big concessions before she grants entry into that forbidden garden of pleasure. What do you say then, less than three you win, more than three you win, and coming to think of it so does he? No? You're probably wise – we *Samodivi* can predict the future, so you would have been on a loser. Don't look like that, all's fair in love and war.

Whoops! Risky move, my fair Vera, lying down like that, and look, she's put her hands behind her head! How provocative is that? She's gone up in my estimation; I love it when you humans take risks, such fun to watch.

Here we go button number two. Oh, yes very clever Vera, did you see that? The little minx! What a coquette; notice enough to let him know you've noticed, but still pretend not to notice; now that is clever. Yes, very clever indeed, he's now going to have to risk an 'I love you,' move this early in the game just to secure the third button; this is getting really exciting. You know, I was in half a mind to intervene, nothing too serious you know, just a little visit to the back of his mind, upset his little apple-cart for him, you know the sort of thing: mess about with his libido; imagine, if you can: he manages to get in Vera's knickers only to find the old pecker won't function, or Vera looks strangely like his sister, or better still, his mother; that would stop his gallop wouldn't it? Don't look down your nose at me, I only said I had half a mind to, not that I was going to, I could though, and some of my colleagues have. But not me, personally I think that sort of behaviour is what gives us *Samodivi* a bad name. I don't hold with it, and would never stoop that low, not without good cause, as was the case with the widow Stravski. Don't suppose you remember her do you? Before your time; might tell you about her later; an interesting little case, and one I'm still (justifiably I think) quite proud of.

Told you so, the 'I love you' card is being played, and the hand is moving to the third button, no, no, no, wait a minute, she's stopping him – she doesn't want to stop him, of course, but she can't let him know that can she? Ah, now she's relenting slightly, probably waiting for the second 'I love you', will he? Won't he? Yes, he has. Well done Vera, a perfectly timed and executed move; now wasn't that a hard-won button?

No, no, it had nothing to do with me; I just listen in. Yes, of course I could interfere, but only if they wanted me to. You're looking very puzzled, let me explain.

Yes, you're right we *Samodivi* do have great power over you humans, or rather it appears so. We can read your minds; we can also go into the back of your minds and alter your thought patterns. And, yes, we can perform tricks, call it magic, call it miracles, call it what you will.

We can do all of these things. We can do great good, cure the sick, and we can do great evil. But we do not hold power over you, it is you humans who hold power over us; you could make me disappear in a trice if you wished; I and my fellow *Samodivi* exist only on a whim. Would you like to know why that is? Would you like to know how you hold such power? And would you like to know why you will never be able to exercise it? Well you'll have to wait, because look, our love sick swain has changed his game plan, and the hand moves down to the skirt area; personally I think he's pushing his luck, far too early in the campaign to try that; a very high risk strategy, and one that's liable to lose him the battle. I don't think it will, because she's not ready to leave the field just yet; the double 'I love you' victory has given her great confidence. Oh very neat; she's removed his hand from the danger zone, but only to kiss it. Now that is very astute; in one defensive move she's parried his thrust (no pun intended) whilst at the same time ensuring he feels he's winning – I think this boy is in more trouble than he realises; if she's half the girl I'm beginning to think she is she is going to extract a further two 'I love yous' and at least a half proposal before he gets anywhere near her skirt, and as for getting in her knickers, well I think we know what that will cost, don't we?

Now where were we? Power, yes, your power over us; that surprise you does it? Well, truth is, it all stems from your need to give explanation to the unexplainable. You're looking puzzled, let me enlighten you.

You humans simply cannot just accept things as they are; you have this insatiable curiosity; this great need to know. You are also blessed – or cursed some might say – with the power to imagine. It is the combination of these two factors that spawns our existence. We exist only in your minds; yes, that's right, we're mere figments of your imagination; a product of your collective faith in the fabulous; we rely on that faith to keep us alive; to give us form and function – now, how scary is that?

Every fanciful creature in the world: Unicorns, *Lamia*, us *Samodivi* and *Samovili* (we are one and the same you know), *Zmey*, *Vampiri*, Werewolves, Witches, Warlocks, God in his (or her, or its) various incarnations; are all figments of this human need to explain. It's as if you humans lead two lives: the one you inhabit; the life of realism; and the one you dream of inhabiting; the one that allows us existence. And you are the same the world over; you give us different names, but we serve the same purpose in all cultures. We are totally reliant on your absolute faith. We may have the appearance of power over you, and arouse fear in some cultures, but it is you who have the ability to wipe us out; not the other way round. However, all the time you need us, we remain safe. Oh there are those that suppose they

have no further need of us; those that deny our existence; that swear to a form of atheism, but sooner or later the awfulness of realism descends on them and they unwillingly invite us back into their lives; it's rather like owning a raincoat: no need to don it in the sunshine, but come the storm, and, quick as a flash, on it goes.

Hello? Who's this shuffling along the bank, skulking in the shadow, spying on our young lovers? None other than naughty Ivan, the village peeping tom - yuck! You really would not want to know what he's thinking. My god, if that's what's going on in the front of his brain I'd hate to visit the back. 'By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.' Another thing we *Samodivi* have no conscience about – a bit of honest plagiarism, especially from him. Now there was a man well gifted in the trouser department. The tales I could tell you, you would not believe, how he ever found the strength to lift his quill, let alone write with it, I'll never know. But I'm going off track again, aren't I? Back to the matter of naughty Ivan: dilemma time: do I intervene, and put a stop to his little game, or do I just observe what happens? Tell you what, you decide, what's it to be? Shall we watch, or shall we take an active judgemental role? Difficult isn't it: interfere, or sit back? While you're trying to make up your mind, let me help by telling the story of the widow; you remember, the widow Stravski; I told you about her earlier; the one I made an exception of? Before I start though, let me explain one very important thing.

We *Samodivi* cannot make you do anything you don't want to, you may think we can, but we can't. What we can do is access the back of your mind, and there discover your innermost thoughts: dark desires; fantasies you never knew you had, or were too scared, or inhibited, to ever fulfil, or even admit to. We can access these, and we can release you from

your fear and inhibitions enabling you to visit your true self; we are, if you like, the key to the secret door to your true nature. What happened to the widow Stravski, therefore, only happened because deep down she wished for it to happen; it is important that you be absolutely clear on that point before I proceed, OK? Right, you asked for it, so here we go. Mrs Stavski was widowed young; a mere thirty two years of age. She was a strikingly handsome woman, despite the fact that the attractive down that had decorated her lips in her twenties, was fast turning into moustache in her thirties. This slight blemish aside, though, she was still considered an attractive woman by the (admittedly low) standards of the village. The fact that her husband's conveniently early demise had left her the sole owner of a house, five hectares of good arable land, two cows, ten sheep, fourteen goats and an assortment of hens and geese, only adding to her attractiveness. It would indeed have taken a whole forest

of facial hair to have deterred the stream of hopeful suitors who, after a suitable period of mourning, flocked to the door of widow Stravski to pay court. The widow, however, was having none of it. Oh, she delighted in all the attention; what woman would not? But, despite the fact that by the end of the year nearly every eligible (and some not so eligible) man in the village had called on her to avow their undying love, she continued to spurn all advances.

Now, had she just stuck to that, then I may never have become involved, and she would have continued in her rejections until such times as age, or the increase in facial forestry reached a level at which they outweighed the undeniable attraction of a house, five hectares of good arable land, two cows, ten sheep, fourteen goats and an assortment of hens and geese, thus stopping forever the stream (though by now the stream had become more akin to a river) of suitors that regularly flooded to the widow's door. But she did not stick to that.

Flattered by all the attention she was receiving, she grew proud and haughty, treating her suitors with disdain, accepting their attentions, and gifts, but giving nothing in return. She used her power over them cruelly, allowing them to continue to think they had some chance, when in fact they had none at all. Something had to be done, not just for the sake of the men, but for the widow as well, and I resolved to pay a visit to the back of the widow's mind. What I found there was a complete revelation, for by now I had assumed the widow to be one of those humans who lacked the ability to give either spiritual or physical love; how wrong I was you shall see.

It took me a couple of days to discover what I eventually discovered, for the widow had hidden her true self so far back in her mind, that it took some skilful rummaging on my

part before the truth was revealed. We have to be very careful, you see, some people notice when we enter their heads, and the deeper we delve the more noticeable we become. The widow was particularly perceptive, and she experienced some pretty frightening and uncomfortable moments whilst I was searching, I can tell you. Anyway, I persevered, and eventually I uncovered it; there, buried at the back of her mind, like some family heirloom forgotten in the attic, was her true nature.

Far from being a cold and frigid woman, I discovered that not only was she capable of accepting and returning love, she was desperate to find it; she was, if I may use your rather crude vernacular: 'well up for it'. Her problem was one of uncertainty – a problem experienced more by the rich than by the poor. She was plagued by the question: did they love her for her beauty (facial hair excepted), or was it the attraction of the house, five

hectares of good arable land, two cows, ten sheep, fourteen goats and an assortment of hens and geese, that attracted them in droves to her door? It was a dilemma that had worried her to such an extent that she had become bitter and cynical of all men. Now, she may well have been correct in her assessment of at least some of the men, but rightly or wrongly I decided to put aside her fears, remove all inhibitions and allow her to make her judgement. By doing this, I reasoned, she would at least have some chance of future happiness – see, we're not as bad as we're painted are we?

I believe you humans have a saying that is appropriate to what happened next, it goes something like this: 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions.' or words to that effect. I have to admit to a slight error of omission here, because in my desire to help, and my enthusiasm for my plan, I completely forgot to check the widow's diary. It was a bad mistake, and I am forced to hold my hand up in complete admission to this failure on my part. It was an unforgivable error on my behalf, and the fact that matters turned out well in the end does not excuse me from my mistake. The fact that 'all's well that ends well' (I'm at it again; good old Will) does not exonerate me, either fully or in part, from my lack of forethought; neither does the fact that the widow enjoyed every minute of the results of my oversight free me from my guilt in this matter; and now, having made that fact quite clear, I shall continue to the denouement of this little drama.

One minute though – what's naughty Ivan up to now? Oh, I see, making himself comfortable in the bushes – hoping for a good show are you Ivan? Well dream on, I really don't think Vera's going to capitulate that fully, not today, much as she'd like to. Oh, yes, you can take it from me our little schoolmistress is as keen as our poor young love sick

swain. Anyway, let's leave that little 'mess of potage' bubbling away and return to our soon to be very merry widow.

What happened was this: due to my oversight, I'd gone ahead and arranged for the widow to lose her inhibitions, and throw all caution to the wind, without realising that not only had she double booked her assignations, she had in fact treble booked; she was to be visited that night by no less than three hopeful suitors. Well, I won't go into all the sordid details, but suffice to say by dawn the following morning there were three somewhat surprised, but nonetheless smug, males, plus one very tired, but nonetheless extremely satisfied, widow.

Had the matter gone no further than that, then the incident would probably have gone unreported, and eventually have faded into a pleasant memory for the four participants.

However, men being men, and village life being village life, that was not to be the case; for

each of the men, convinced that they were the only one to have won the fair widow's love (lust), could not resist boasting of his conquest to anyone remotely interested enough to listen. Such a story, if related in town or city, would have aroused little or no interest, but here, in the village, the news spread like wildfire, and the once proud and haughty widow was overnight branded as shop soiled, and therefore unmarriageable goods.

I have always found the male of your species strangely hypocritical in their views on womanhood. Despite the majority fantasising about meeting a nymphomaniac, they run like frightened rabbits when confronted by one exhibiting a libido as large, or worse still even larger, than their own. Why is that, I wonder? Are they afraid of not keeping up? Do they feel intimidated; their manhood threatened? Such strange creatures, I almost feel sorry for them.

But back to the poor widow; one incident, or if you wish to be pedantic, three incidents rolled into one, had seen her situation completely reversed. She had been transformed from eligible widow into a pariah, shunned by women, ignored by men and completely ostracised from society. I felt obliged to do something. It was my fault, after all, my mistake, my interference and therefore up to me to rectify the matter.

Boris the carpenter was not an ugly man, but then neither was he a handsome one. On the day when God was handing out facial features Boris must have been at the end of a very long queue, because nothing appeared to match. His nose was slightly too large, his chin slightly too small, his forehead just a little too high, his eyes a smidgen too close together and his ears a touch too protruding. Taken in isolation, each of these facial peculiarities would not have been any more of a problem than the widow's burgeoning moustache. But put together, all in the one face, they amounted to a physiognomy that was - how can I put this kindly? - Decidedly odd. It was a face that Boris had grown used to over the years. It was a face he had learned to live with; a face he accepted as his own, but a face, that he knew, given the sum of its parts, would never win prizes in a beauty contest.

A shy man by nature, he withdrew from society whenever possible, but his natural kindness always meant that people could go to him when in need of a favour. This made him a popular, if slightly remote, member of the village community; it also made him the only man in the village not to have courted the fair widow.

This gave me an idea, and the more romantically minded among you may very well think they can guess at what that idea was. Well, you're probably half right, but bear in mind my recent attempt at interference had been somewhat less than successful, so I was loath to try

again. However, I did risk tuning into Boris the carpenter, and what I learned from a very short visit, I think, fully justifies the actions I took; but you shall judge.

I think it safe to say that the visit to the front of Boris' brain proved somewhat more edifying than my recent visit to naughty Ivan's. I was very impressed with his thought patterns, and overjoyed to find that he had secretly harboured a desire for the widow for many years; in fact it is safe to say that the man was head over heels in love with her. Moreover his love had nothing to do with her being the inheritor of a house, five hectares of good arable land etc. etc. etc. In fact her inheritance, in his mind, had put her even further from his reach than before; he had, as we know now, correctly surmised what her thoughts had been on the subject, and had resigned himself to an unspoken and unrequited love.

Even before the widow was a widow he had loved from afar, and even found her top lip attractive – some men like a bit of hair, you know. Anyway, Boris' problem now, as it always had been, was a total lack of self confidence. He would look in the mirror every morning and think to himself, what woman could possibly love a face like that? What he didn't see, and what no mirror ever shows, was the man behind the face. I liked him for that, and other things, and that's unusual for a *Samodivi* to actually like a human being. So with no further ado I tweaked him a little, just enough, you understand, to give him the courage to speak to the widow, but no more; I had done with arranging. The rest would be down to him, the widow and fate; and as things turned out it was fate that took a hand. Fate in the shape of a particularly strong southerly wind that damaged the widow's barn, which in turn required the skills of a carpenter to mend; enter Boris stage left in the unlikely role of knight in shining armour.

I shall not go into detail here, just suffice to say that the widow's heart was soon won by Boris' self effacing charm, and by his evident lack of interest in the aforementioned inheritance. His suit was helped in no small measure by a certain physical characteristic less visible to the public gaze than his facial features. Now, how can I put this delicately? Let us just say that Boris may well have been well down the queue when facial features were handed out, but nature, often compensates for deficiencies in one area by an over abundance in other parts, and this was the case with Boris, much to the delight of the widow who came to learn - if I may wax poetical here – that:

Boris was a prince in every way

For in the dark all cats are grey.

So it was that everything turned out well in the end. The couple were married within six months of the barn being damaged, the incident of the over booked schedule was never mentioned and by all accounts they remained faithful and true to one another: she falling in love with his imperfect features, whilst he grew ever more enraptured of her increasingly noticeable top lip. In fact I can state quite categorically that they both lived happily ever after.

Now back to naughty Ivan; what are we to do? Shall we let him spy on our Tristran and his Isolde, or shall we intervene and teach him a little lesson? Intervene? I thought you might say that. But how; that is the question? I certainly do not fancy a visit to the darkest regions of that one's mind thank you. No, I think what's called for here is a little use of kinetic energy.

Of course we can do that; it's a basic *Samodivi* skill. Let's see now, ah yes, that'll work. Do you see that thicket he's hiding in? Good. Do you see the branch he's straddling? Right, now watch this. Just let me concentrate. Here we go, just carefully bend it down, that's it, flat on the ground. Now, when I release the energy, what's going to happen to the branch? Exactly! Poetic justice wouldn't you say. Now, on the count of three – if you're squeamish now would be a good time to turn away – one, two, three and, bingo! Bull's-eye! Bang on target! Bet that brought the tears to his eyes. Doubt he'll be hiding out in any more thickets for a while, do you?

Now then, back to our loving couple. I don't know about you, but I'm starting to get a bit bored. They're at stale mate, naughty Ivan's limping off home and I'm just about ready to disappear. I think it's about time they retired from the field of battle, don't you – live to fight another day and all that.

Do you see that big black cloud? How about I dampen their ardour? What do you think? Yes or no? Tell you what, hold your hands out - that's right fingers outstretched - left for damp, right for dry. Ok? Ready? Right:

Eeny meeny miny mo
Catch a Gypsy by his toe
If he hollers let him go
Eeny – meeny – miny – mo!

Whoops! Looks like rain again doesn't it? Night, night Ivan.

Recorded 24th May 2007: Veliko Turnovo

Shipka

He pushed the boulder and watched as it bounced down the mountain side towards the backs of the retreating *Bashibazouks*. Watched as it gathered momentum, watched as it bounced into the legs of a retreating soldier, heard the nauseatingly awful noise of splintered bone, heard the scream of pain, and watched as his comrades carried him away. He felt empty, voided of all compassion, drained of pity, and lacking in the ability to feel. He looked down at his uniform tunic, the uniform he had once been so proud to don, looked at the accusatory stains of blood, and sweat, and bits of other men's flesh, and vomited.

It had been a week and three days now, and he remembered his old life, just over a week, just

ten days, but it felt like a life time, and now, two days before his nineteenth birthday, he felt old, used and drained of life.

As the smoke and stench of battle drifted away in the gentle Balkan breeze he thought back to that day in the market; was it really only a little over a week ago? He thought of his mother; he thought of his two sisters, and of his young brother left to run the farm; he thought of his music – it was said of him that he had the finest tenor voice on the Balkan Plain – and wondered whether he would live to sing in the church once more; but most of all he thought of the Russian troops, their saviour, *Dyado Ivan*, marching into the square to the cheers and hurrahs of the crowd and of the speech given in the square by their leader, General Stoletov, an irresistible call to arms. He thought of that speech, and he recalled it word for heroic word:

‘My friends! My comrades! My brothers in arms! We Russians and you Bulgarians are like kin, we are brothers, brothers in conflict, blood brothers. Your enemies are our enemies, and ours yours.

‘We two peace loving nations have been forced to fight, but we fight a common cause, a christian cause, a just and honourable cause, a cause that will rid us, once and for all, of our hated enemy the Turk.’

He’d paused here, dramatically, sabre held high and glinting in the morning sun, while the crowd cheered in ecstatic agreement, before continuing:

‘I call on you, all you young men, to join us, to join us here, to join us now. With your help we can defeat our enemy and drive him from your lands forever. It will not be

easy, the Turk is a ferocious fighter, and he fears defeat more than he fears death. But together, shoulder to shoulder we Russians and you Bulgarians, we can, we will and we must prevail.

‘I will not lie to you, men. As you know we are holding the Turks here in the north besieged in Pleven, and our brave troops have taken, and still hold, the mountain pass. But, my comrades, we are in grave danger of losing our advantage, and without your help, the war will almost certainly be lost, and your country once again returned to the living death of slavery.

‘The Turks have been reinforced. Suleiman Pasha, with the help of the accursed English and their ships, has arrived in the south with an army of forty thousand seasoned *Bashibazouks* from the Montenegrin front. Already he has retaken Stara Zagora, burned it to the ground, massacred, raped and mutilated your brethren. He is now on the march to confront us, and

he is only two days journey from the pass.

‘Our task is simple, comrades, we need to defend that pass. It is his only way through to the north. He needs to break through before the snows come. We, on the other hand, need to stop him. It will not be easy. We will be heavily outnumbered and outgunned, but he has to be stopped, and we can do it, men, together, as comrades, we Russians and you our brave brothers: the Bulgarians.

‘I ask you now to join us and fight, fight to defend your sisters, wives and mothers from being raped; fight to stop your homes, villages, towns and cities from being razed to the ground; fight to save your children from a life of slavery, but most of all fight to rid yourselves of centuries of Turkish domination.

‘Are you with me, lads? Are you ready to show these Turks your true mettle? Are you ready to don the uniform of a free Bulgaria? Give me your voice now; tell me we are to be friends, brothers and comrades in this great venture.’

With that the crowd erupted into tumult with loud hurrahs, cries of ‘freedom!’ clapping, weeping and hats thrown into the air.

He remembered being swept along in a flood of exuberance and patriotism; remembered making his mark at the desk of the grizzled old colour sergeant; remembered receiving instructions to report the following morning and remembered the tears of his mother and sisters when he told them the news. He remembered how on the following day, having been shown how to salute, point, aim and fire a rifle and issued with an ill fitting uniform, he, along with his fellow villagers, had been marched to the foot of the pass, where they bivouacked for the night. All of these things came flooding back to him as he stood there listening to the silence that had descended on the scene; a silence broken only by the clink of weapons being stored and cleaned and the occasional whimper, or groan from the wounded or dying.

‘Giorgi?’ he turned to the speaker, his comrade, Yane -little Yane, who seven days ago had lied about his age in order to sign up, little Yane, not yet turned fourteen, who now sat trembling in a uniform several sizes too large, little Yane who looked up to Giorgi as a father figure - he placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder and replied:

‘Yane?’

‘Will they come again tonight, Giorgi?’ he asked.

‘No, Yane, not tonight, first light tomorrow, that’s when they’ll come. Try to get some sleep lad.’

They remained like that for some minutes, Giorgi’s hand still resting on the boy’s shoulder, in

comradely silence. They had seen and experienced much over the past seven days, but up until now had never discussed the events.

‘Giorgi?’

‘What is it, Yane?’

‘I will try again tomorrow, Giorgi, I will try to be brave.’

‘Don’t be silly, lad, you were brave. You’re still here aren’t you? You didn’t turn tail and run like some, did you?’

‘I wanted to though, Giorgi, I was frightened, I wanted to run, and that makes me a coward doesn’t it?’

‘Yane, if being frightened, and wanting to run made cowards of us, then nearly every man up here on the ridge, and that includes me, would be a coward. Men who know no fear are either mad, or have given up on life completely. It’s natural to be afraid, Yane, it would be inhuman not to be. Bravery’s about conquering that fear, fear is the biggest enemy, and overcoming that is more important than beating the Turk. Just remember, Yane, the *Bashibazouks* that charge up that hill tomorrow are just as frightened of you and me as we are of them. They may look fearsome, but they are just as scared as we are, and I don’t blame them. You may only be young, Yane, but a cartridge from your rifle can do as much damage as any man’s here.’

‘But, Giorgi, we don’t have any cartridges left, how can we fight them without ammunition?’

‘We do the same as we did today, lad, we use whatever we have, rocks, tree stumps, and, yes, the bodies of our dead comrades. We cannot let them pass, Yane, we must prevail. Anyway, lad, we’ll have supplies by the morning. Our officers won’t let us down. The general, Old Greybeard, he’ll make sure we’re ready.’

‘You’re right there, soldier,’ the two comrades leapt to attention as the impressive figure of General Stoletov emerged from the shadows, ‘sit down, lads, we’re all comrades in arms here tonight, no need for formalities. And you were right, soldier, help is on the way, and not just supplies, General Radetsky is coming with more men. He set out from Gabrovo at first light this morning; he’ll be here before dawn. The Turk is in for a big surprise tomorrow, and an even bloodier nose than the one you gave him today.’

With that he sat down on a rock, pulled out a pipe from his tunic pocket, and turned his head towards Yane and Giorgi who had remained standing to attention. He smiled a cracked creased world weary smile and continued:

‘I said sit down, lads. Mind if a rather tired old soldier joins you?’ He patted his tunic

pockets, sighed and cursed. ‘Damnation, no tobacco! You couldn’t spare an old comrade a fill could you, lad? He asked, turning to Giorgi.

‘I don’t smoke, sir, sorry.’

‘I have some, sir.’ said Yane, pulling back his oversized cuff to reach into his pocket: ‘Home grown and cured by my father - last year’s crop - you’re welcome to try that sir.’ He passed him the pouch; the general smiled his thanks, filled his pipe, lit it with an ember from the small camp fire, drew deeply and exhaled the smoke through his nostrils.

‘Ah, thanks, lad. Tell your father when you get home that that is the finest smoke I’ve tasted in years.’

‘You’re welcome, sir. My father will be pleased to hear you enjoyed it, I shall be sure to tell him, sir. That is if – if – well if I do get home, sir.’

‘Yane, of course you’ll get home.’ said Giorgi, placing a comforting arm round the boy’s shoulder. ‘You heard the general, more men, more ammunition; they won’t know what’s hit them. We’ll beat them, Yane; we’ll beat them, and then we’ll both go home. That’s right isn’t it, sir?’

‘Aye, lad, that’s right. God’s teeth! Listen to that noise in the valley! Bloody Turks! Bloody heathens! It sickens me to hear their wailing. Do they think they can intimidate us with their racket? Sounds like a cat being castrated.’

‘I think you’ll find, sir, that’s their Mullah calling them to prayer. I don’t think it’s being done to intimidate.’

‘I stand corrected, lad.’ The general laughed, when Giorgi started to apologise for his reproof. ‘Don’t apologise, lad, I know it’s the Mullah, and I should show more respect for my enemies’ beliefs. It’s just me getting old and crabby. Normally my men would be singing their own tunes, drowning out the noise, but they are strangely quiet tonight. Fatigue I suppose. But I need to hear some music; I need to hear a civilised tune or two, if only to remind me that I’m human. Do either of you lads sing? You must do, you Bulgarians are famed for your singing voices.’

‘Giorgi does, sir, Giorgi has the finest voice in the village, voice of an Angel, sir; finest singer on the Balkan plain. He sings for the church, sir, and the bishop has asked him to sing in the cathedral at Easter. You tell him, Giorgi, tell him how good you are.’ The general burst out laughing at Yane’s excited and fulsome praise, and at Giorgi’s obvious embarrassment.

‘You appear to have a fan, young man. Is he right? Can you sing? I have a great longing to hear a Bulgarian folk song. Will you grant an old comrade’s wish? Will you sing for us, Giorgi? It’ll raise the men’s spirits. Can you do it for us?’

‘I will sing, sir, if young Yane here will play his *Kaval*.’ He turned and smiled questioningly at the boy, who shyly pulled the instrument from his back pack.

‘Yane? “*Chiji beshe taja moma?*”’

‘Yes, Giorgi, “*Chiji beshe taja moma.*”’ With that he raised the *Kaval* to his lips and began to play the opening chords. Three bars in and Giorgi started to sing the old love song. At first he sang alone, the finest tenor voice in the whole of the plain echoing out into the stillness of the Balkan evening, but then he was joined by other voices as one by one his comrades joined in the chorus, so that soon the whole valley resounded in praise of the young girl dressed in her white *Saya*, with her golden belt and her red silk *Kavrak* covering her head.

Down on the plain, outside the entrance to his tent, Asan Hodja, a junior officer in Suleiman Pasha’s army, was just rolling his prayer mat up following evening devotion, when the notes of the music drifted down from the pass. His servant, Mohammed, a stunted, un-smiling, dwarf like creature from the slums of Constantinople, belched loudly from within the tented quarters, mumbled a curse about ‘Bulgarian mule-shit singers,’ and returned to the task of polishing his master’s tunic buttons – one must always look one’s finest when going out to kill.

The young officer sighed. He felt strangely moved by the almost celestial beauty of the music, and momentarily wished it were heaven inspired. He sighed again, then, turning on his heel, walked back into the tent, seated himself at the table, drew his ornately decorated *Yatagan* from its scabbard and began to lovingly hone the already sharp edge of the blade. He took great comfort in this task. The weapon had belonged to his father, and before that, his grandfather. It was a family heirloom; a prized possession and was never trusted to the careless hands of Mohammed the servant. It had spilled much blood, and tomorrow would no doubt spill more.

Asan knew that tomorrow they would have to take the pass. He also knew it would not be easy. Today of all days had proved that. It should have been over today; the battle won; the enemy defeated, but they had fought on; no ammunition; outnumbered and still they would not concede; still they fought, with fists, with rocks, with trees and eventually with dead bodies. His men had been demoralised and forced to retreat in the face of such determined ferocity. Tomorrow though would be different; tomorrow they would show that they too could be determined; they too could fight hand to bloody hand for what they knew was right. He, Asan Hodja, would lead them; he would be first up to the rocky ramparts of the Eagle’s

Nest; he would drive them back with his gleaming *Yatagan*. But, as he honed, and as he listened to the notes he wondered what kind of men could, on the same day, be so bloody and so beautiful; was it really in all humans to be capable of great good and great evil? It was a puzzle to him, and it occupied his mind until his reverie was broken by a loud fart from Mohammed, who considered himself a bit of a music critic. Asan closed his eyes, sighed again, tried not to breathe in too deeply, and resumed honing the edge of his *Yatagan*; tomorrow would be a long, long day.

They came at first light the following morning, the *Bashibazouks*, emerging silently from the early morning mist like wraiths in a grave yard searching for death. The defenders, newly armed and reinforced, were waiting in readiness, and the silence was shattered by an opening volley of rifle and cannon shot. The slaughter was terrible, but still the *Bashibazouks*, with Asan at their head, advanced; a mighty and seemingly unstoppable force. Inch by inch the Turkish troops advanced up the slope, returning bloody fire with bloody fire, until by late that afternoon they had reached the outer ramparts of the citadel where the battle raged with knife, sword and bayonet. Closer and closer they came until by sheer weight of numbers the *Bashibazouks* breached the defence and were among the defenders. Still the Bulgarians fought, unwilling to give an inch of their precious soil; man against man the battle raged, each reducing the other to more desperate atrocities to gain the upper hand. Shoulder to shoulder Giorgi and the boy stood firm, and inch by inch Asan fought his way forward until after killing yet another Bulgarian volunteer he came face to face with the rifle barrel of Giorgi. Both men froze, their eyes meeting in a kind of recognition; Giorgi, unable to squeeze the trigger; Asan, unable to swing his *Yatagan*. For the smallest part of a micro second the battle had ceased for these two; they were oblivious to all; for that moment only they existed; they were alone in their own little universe of self recognition, and knew that neither wished to take the life of the other. The spell, for spell it must have been, was broken by a terrified cry from Yane:

‘Giorgi!’ he screamed. Giorgi turned to see a *Bashibazouk* about to bayonet his young friend, turned and fired point blank into the face of the Turk, time resumed and the battle continued.

History will record this moment as a turning point in the battle for Shipka Pass, for at this moment a detachment of Russian infantry arrived to help stem the tide of *Bashibazouks* pouring through the breached defences. Together the Bulgarian defenders and their Russian

cousins drove the Turks back from the natural redoubt, back down the mountain and forcing them to once more retreat to the relative safety of their encampment.

It was to be the final assault, for such was the loss of life during the ten day attempt to retake the pass, ten thousand dead or wounded, that Suleiman Pasha was forced to concede defeat, and to cease any further attempt to break through. The pass thus remained intact until the winter snows came and nature once more laid claim and made it impassable to all.

Giorgi would never know of the eventual Russian victories in the north over the armies of Mehmet Ali Pasha, or of the eventual surrender of Plevna by Osman Pasha. Neither would he hear of the liberation of Sophia and Plovdiv by General Gurko. He would never celebrate the ignominious evacuation of the Turks from the Ports of Varna and Burgas. Never drink a toast with his comrades to the Turkish defeat in the Caucasus or to the sinking of their fleet in the Bosphorus. He would not follow his comrade of the night, General Stoletov, as he and General Gurko drove the Turks back to the tiny village of San Stephano, a mere seven miles from the gates of Constantinople. He would not be there on the 3rd March 1878 when, under pressure from Western Europe, who feared the downfall of the Ottoman Empire and the instability that that would cause, Russia unwillingly signed an armistice and the Peace Treaty of San Stephano. He had fought for, but would never enjoy, freedom for his country. None of this was witnessed by Giorgi, because as he physically turned - along with the great events of history - to save his friend, Asan swung his *Yatagan* and at precisely 5.33pm sliced through the throat larynx and vocal chords of the finest tenor on the Balkan plain, and Giorgi fell and was dead before he struck the ground.

History has moved on now and silence reigns supreme over the site that once resounded to cries screams and groans of men locked in mortal combat. The only sounds that now break the peace of this place are the cries of crows, rooks and the occasional eagle. Wild flowers now bloom from earth fertilised by the blood of man, and the only thing to remind one of the past is the monument inscribed: 'Here Dawned Bulgaria's Freedom!' but climb the eight hundred and ninety four steps that lead to the summit, especially at dawn, or in the fading light of a summer evening, close your eyes, listen carefully and you may just hear, faintly on the breeze, the haunting notes of Yane's *Kaval* and Giorgi's voice: the finest tenor that ever lived on the Balkan plain.

Recorded 24th May 2007: Veliko Turnovo

Progress

No one who knew him before the 1st of January 2007 could accuse Giorgi Bratov of disliking change; he was a farmer, and farmers are used to change. It is in the nature of things to change, it is natural. What he did not like, and what was driving him now to distraction, was change he did not understand.

He had always been pragmatic about changes in government, and changes in policy, and changes in economy, because these things made little impact on him; he did not need to understand them, because his way of life remained the same, un-shifting and unaltered. Now though, change was impacting on him, change he did not understand, change that affected the way he lived, change that was altering the traditions, customs and cultures he had grown up with, and which were part of his very being. These changes angered him; angered him with

their speed and with their multiplicity, they made him furious, and it was a fury and an anger which he was unable to articulate; he did not have the vocabulary; he did not understand.

Everywhere he looked he could see the evidence: young people sitting in the cafés and *Mehanas* texting friends on the next table while the flat screen TV blared out western pop, and American actors spoke Bulgarian with their lips out of synchronisation. It was as if the whole world had gone mad, and he, Giorgi, the only one in it to have remained sane.

He had long since withdrawn from his neighbours, and they from him. He ceased to wash himself or his clothes, shave or cut or comb his hair. He carried with him the stench of despair and disillusion, and his fury and confusion festered in his gut, bubbling like some gigantic still and creating a great balloon of anger in his head which threatened at any moment to burst out through his ears, eyes and mouth and engulf the village in a great tidal wave of unvoiced fury.

He would come each day to the café where he would sit hunched over his coffee, protected from his fellow man by his self-made-moat-of-malodour, muttering imprecations to a world indifferent to his distress, and deaf to his voice. They in turn would offer up mantras to the new rapacious gods of capitalism: 'European funding,' 'Objective One status,' 'Sustainability,' 'Ethical capitalism,' 'Green tourism,' and on and on and on they went, chanting, and chanting, and chanting and feeding the balloon of Giorgi's anger until he felt sure that his head must surely explode with the pressure of it. At which point he would put his head in his hands as if to stop it from erupting volcano-like, rise from his seat and run from the café into the street, there to be assailed by the noises, and smells and dust of progress.

Everywhere he looked he saw evidence of the new gods: old buildings renovated; new-build spreading and covering the hillside like some great cancerous scar, stretching, grasping, unstoppable, ever upward towards the forest. It was as if the new order were chasing the old up the mountain and into the depths of the great greenness of the primal woods. The noise of machines filled the air, singing their discordant diesel hymns on noxious breath, as they raped the earth and filled the void with cubic metre after cubic metre of concrete. And everywhere the dust: dust in his eyes; dust in his ears; dust in his mouth, hair, teeth, skin and his very soul. It permeated everything, was inescapable, a creeping, insidious mixture of ravished earth, cement and sand, that ravaged his senses and concretised his fury.

On this day he staggered, his senses outraged, his brain on fire, into the middle of the street, where the BMW's, Audis, Mercedes and assorted ATV's skidded, hooted and hand-brake-

turned their way around him in a great triumphant dance of celebration to the death of the old gods.

Giorgi reached up to the heavens to a god made deaf by noise, blind by dust and mute by indifference, screamed a silent scream, turned and ran from the village. He ran taking with him his stench of despair, his confusion, his loss of faith and his great balloon of anger. Up he ran, faster and faster, up past the cancerous scars, up past the hymn-singing-machines, up and up, and into the forbidding green welcome of the forest. Up. Up, away from the dust, away from the fumes, away from the mantra-chanting crowds, the waltzing-hooting-handbrake-turning-vehicles, the raped earth and the power of the new gods. Away, and into the welcoming arms of the ancient, primal, fecund-smelling arms of the great forest.

Up he went, ever higher, until all sight, sound and smell of the village was lost and only then did he slow his pace and begin to listen to the silent sad sound of the forest: the sound of trees; the sound of crows and woodpeckers; the sound of growing things and animals and the sound of the great wood as it began to speak to him: the rustling whisper of the leaves; the tap, tap, tap of the woodpecker as it Morse-coded its message to the world and the slow mournful primordial tune of the dead and dying as the fallen vegetation slowly recycled itself into the earth.

Still he continued up, and as he climbed so the foliage grew denser until it completely blocked out the sky and he entered into a world of green light. As the trees continued to speak, so the pressure in his balloon of anger appeared to lessen and he felt that he was at last coming home, and the forest accepted him and wrapped its branches, twigs and leaves around him in a vegetative womb-like embrace.

Giorgi had never seen a *Zmey* before, but he recognised it instantly from the stories his *Baba* had told him as a child. At first sight it resembled a scaly snake, but had arms, wings, a fish-like tail and a human face of amazing beauty. It was seated on a rock, and was sobbing its heart out. The tears which ran down its face were green, and had formed large puddles on the ground beneath the rock from which several small creatures of the woods were drinking. Giorgi was deeply moved by the creature's sorrow, which appeared so profound in its sadness that Giorgi felt his heart would surely fracture out of compassion, and, forgetting for a moment, his stench of despair, his confusion, his loss of hope and his great balloon of anger, he leaned forward to comfort the creature in its grief, saying:

'*Zmey*, what troubles you so greatly? You must stop crying before you drown in your own tears. Tell me, please, is there anything I can do to ease your sadness?' The creature smiled

sadly through its green lachrymal veil - Giorgi thought it a beautiful smile, like a ray of sun escaping through storm clouds – before replying thus:

‘I cry because my time is at an end; I am going to die. Already I have lost the power of flight, and my strength weakens day to day. I can no longer defend your village as I have done for centuries, and it is this knowledge that grieves me the most. Already the forces of evil, the *Lamia* and the *Hala*, sensing my weakness, plot to overthrow me and leave the way open for the new gods to invade. Only their fear of *St Iliya*’s wrath has held them at bay this long. Listen out for the thunder of *St Iliya*’s chariot wheels, for they will herald the beginning of the end. It will be a long and bloody battle, for *St Iliya* is strong, resolute and fearless. But without my help I fear his power will not prove sufficient, and the battle will be lost, and your world will fall prey to the new order. Be warned: a new yoke more terrible than the last is about to be placed on the shoulders of mankind, and those of you too weak to withstand the awful weight will perish and fall by the wayside. That, my friend, is why I cry.’

‘But why, *Zmey*; how came you to lose your power? Were you robbed? Are you ill? Is there no way to win back your strength?’ At this the *Zmey* let forth a terrible wail of anguish so powerful that it set the trees trembling and caused the wolves and the bears - who, having grown curious by this discourse between man and beast, had moved closer to the strange pair - to retreat back into the safety and cover of the forest.

‘Was I robbed?’ cried the *Zmey*, ‘Yes, I was, robbed by humanity. Robbed by a people who starved me of that which I feed on: faith; yes, my friend, faith. If humans cease to believe in us, then we die; our reason for living is gone, and we can no longer exist. You people have been tempted away from us by new gods. You, whose belief in us helped you to survive Alexander, the Roman Empire and five hundred years under the Ottoman yoke have finally succumbed to a new power. You, who survived terror, torture and death, now meekly surrender to a false smile, a promise of a better life and an open cheque book. Your people have been seduced, my friend, they have sold their heritage, their minds and their souls for ‘things,’ exchanged their freedom for laptops, mobile phones and BMW motor cars. It is a poor exchange, the commoditisation of a nation and it is also the death of me and mine.’

‘But I have not sold out, *Zmey*, I loathe the new gods; their presence drives me out of my mind, and I do not understand. I don’t want you and yours to die, is there nothing you can do to save yourselves? Is there nothing I can do? Is not my faith in you enough? There must be others; others who still believe in the old ways. Surely there is enough faith left to feed you, to save you. If I can, *Zmey*, let me help save you.’ The *Zmey* smiled his sad smile,

sighed deeply, leaned forward on his rock and beckoned Giorgi forward saying:

‘I am touched, my friend, by you, and others like you, who retain your faith in us, but it is not enough, and daily your numbers dwindle, charmed, enticed and corrupted by the temptation of material wealth and pretty gewgaws. There is nothing you can do. But wait, maybe? Yes, just maybe, there may well be something you can do. Yes, my friend, I think there may very well be something you can do to help. Let me think for a moment.’ The *Zmey* paused for several minutes, his face stern and thoughtful, before smiling, clapping its hands and fluttering its wings. ‘That’s it, yes, there is definitely something you can do, or rather I should say: some things that you can do, in fact there are twelve things, twelve tasks, for you to complete, one for each day. If you agree, you must complete each task separately, and you must report back to me at the end of each day, but, be warned, if you fail to fulfil any of the tasks, or if you fail to report back to me at the end of each day, then all will be lost.’ Giorgi nodded his agreement and with that the *Zmey* leaned forward, whispered his instructions and promptly disappeared. Poof! Just like that, leaving no trace other than the fast disappearing green puddle of its tears.

As Giorgi made his way back down the hillside and the forest started to thin out, so the noise and the smell and the taste of the village rose up to greet him, and as it did, so his balloon of anger swelled back up to its normal size and he became more and more determined to complete his task. He went straight to his home, cleaned his hunting rifle, honed his trapper’s knife to razor like sharpness and awaited the coming night’s dark coat.

That night the thunder came, great booming rumbles the like of which the villagers had never heard before or since. Dogs and people took shelter in their homes frightened by the violence of the storm; it was a storm that was to return every night for the next twelve nights, and the villagers wondered at its freakish behaviour. Not Giorgi though, he knew what was happening, he knew that the war had finally started in earnest, and he recognised the terrible noise of *St Iliya’s* chariot wheels and smiled. Perhaps, just perhaps, he thought, with my help we shall be victorious, save the *Zmey* and drive the devils (for devils he felt sure they were) from the valley once and forever.

Shrouded by the witch-black night, his dark deed muffled by the noise of the storm, he completed his task, and early the following morning, long before the machines had woken to start their chorus of destruction, he set off into the newly awakening forest, in search of the *Zmey*.

The morning was bright and clear, and apart from fallen leaves, twigs and branches, there was little evidence of the violence of the previous night's storm. It was peaceful, and once again Giorgi felt soothed by the forest's green embrace.

The *Zmey* was seated on the same rock, in the same position as when Giorgi had first met him, but this time, though he still looked sad, he was not crying. He smiled, and beckoned Giorgi forward before greeting him:

'You did well, my human friend, I think in you *St Iliya* has found a true and trusted ally. The war has now started, your help is much needed, are you ready for the second task; can we rely on you?' Again Giorgi nodded his agreement, and again the *Zmey* leaned forward, whispered the instructions and promptly disappeared. Poof!

Ten more times Giorgi made his trip up into the forest, ten more times he completed his task and ten more times made his way back down into the dust, noise and ever changing smell of the village.

As the nights progressed, so the storms grew in their terrible violence, and as the storm grew, so too did Giorgi's balloon of anger, until, on the morning of the twelfth day, following the completion of his final task, his head was near to bursting as he made his final trip up into the forest: past the hymn-singing machines; beyond the cancer scars; away from the dust, noise and smell, and entered for the last time into the all-enveloping maternal arm of the forest.

A mist had invaded the mountain side by the time Giorgi had climbed to his usual meeting place; an all-encompassing mist that wreathed itself, shroud like, around and through the forest, dampening and distorting outlines into dripping ghost like images that loomed threateningly down on the lone figure; a mist that deadened the murmurings of the forest to tomb-like silence. No creature moved; not a leaf dared whisper or bird sing. It was as if the forest had become timeless and was holding its breath in anticipation of something unspeakable.

On he walked, up and up, for he felt no fear of this place. Up and up, through the ever thickening mist, through the dampened, dripping foliage, up, through the silent, expectant forest until finally he reached his destination.

At first he felt sure that the mist had been playing tricks with his eyes, but as he drew closer to the seated figure he saw to his horror he was not mistaken. There was no doubt that this

creature with its lizard like body, its four feet and its three dog's heads, their canine teeth exposed and dripping green blood was a *Lamia*. Giorgi recognised all this in an instant. He also saw the remains of his friend, the *Zmey*, his throat ripped out, and his beautiful human face contorted in a look of pain and horror, lying there at the foot of the rock. The *Lamia*, seeing Giorgi's sorrow, started to laugh; with all three heads, and Giorgi, raising his face to the heavens, began to scream, fell to his knees, lifted his hunting rifle, aimed and fired.

The villagers remembered the day of the great mist well, for it preceded a drought that was to last for forty days and forty nights before being broken by the worst hail storm in living memory. It also coincided with the mysterious disappearance of Giorgi, and with the end of the twelve day crime wave; a crime wave that increased each day in severity, starting with graffiti, working up to slashed tyres and hydraulic cables (a crime which had silenced the excavator chorus for three days) and culminated in arson and finally the murder of the most important foreign investor in the valley. It was a crime wave unprecedented in this peaceful place, and a crime wave that warranted the intervention of security police from the city of Blagoevgrad.

Many also recalled the strange unearthly silence that came with the mist, and some said they thought the silence was shattered once by what appeared to be an animal screaming from high in the forest, but that was disputed by those with less acute hearing. Some also remembered that it was three days before Giorgi was missed, and all recalled, though it was never mentioned for they all felt a certain burden of shame, that it was a further three days before a search party set out to look for him.

When they finally found his remains – he was identified only by his hunting rifle and knife – there was little else left. The creatures of the forest had stripped his bones clean of all flesh, and the remnants of his clothes were scattered about the area. He had, it appeared, been absorbed into the forest, his flesh eaten, digested and defecated; he had been recycled and was now fertilizing the new growth.

It may have been hunger, or just coincidence; who knows? But all those in the rescue party remembered, for the rest of their lives, the mournful wolf chorus that accompanied them as they carried the remains down the mountainside to the village, and many wondered, though none dared to voice their conjecture for fear of being thought old-fashioned, that the wolves were singing an elegy to Giorgi and the lost gods.

The coroner, a kindly man at heart, said there was insufficient evidence to warrant a ‘death by suicide’ verdict (though the rifle barrel had been discovered in what was left of the corpse’s mouth) and returned, instead, ‘death by misadventure,’ thus allowing the remains to be buried in consecrated ground – though most believed the spirit of Giorgi remained where it belonged: in the viridian temple of the great forest

The crimes were never solved, though there were some, as is the way of the world, who, putting two and two together, came up with four, five, and occasionally six, who thought they knew who the culprit might be; but the suspicions were never given voice, and after a suitable period of mourning, the village settled back to its new life, and progress progressed ever onward.

Recorded 24th May 2007: Veliko Turnovo

The Man with One Head Too Many

As a storyteller and spinner of tall tales, I shall not be surprised if there are those among you who doubt the veracity of my next little offering. But let me say right now that we fabulists bear you disbelievers, you sceptics, you doubting Thomases no ill will at all for your lack of faith. Quite the contrary, in fact we welcome your agnosticism as a kind of whetstone on which to sharpen our skills. Without you, my friends, there would be no point to our art, and the words would dry on our tongues and disappear like summer mist in the morning sun.

That point being made, I now move on to the subject of my little tale; a tale, I might add, that absolutely true in every aspect, but, which like many tales which are said to be true, does tend to stretch the credibility. For that reason I beg your indulgence, and ask that if you find that you truly cannot believe in my little yarn, to at least willingly suspend your disbelief

for the duration of the telling. So there you have it: I am ready to start, and you, I hope, are ready to listen. So without further ado I shall begin in the time honoured manner of all true stories: once upon a time there lived a man who had two heads.

Yes, that's right, two heads, it's true, let God be my judge – and let me say right now, I have much else to be judged on, so I do not swear this oath lightly – two heads.

This man, whose name is not important, was totally unaware of his two-headedness until he reached his twentieth year - let me just explain here, for those of you who are puzzled by the fact that he appeared to have missed so obvious an appendage for so long. The fact is, he failed to notice, as did those around him, because nature had contrived to give him his two heads in the one package. This, of course, gave him the appearance of normality – if indeed there is such a thing as normal – and allowed him to go about his business without the curious stares that the ownership of two noses, four ears, two chins and a twin pair of eyebrows would surely have engendered. Thus it was that this man, whose name, as I've already said, is unimportant, lived a relatively normal life until his twentieth year. But then came the fateful day of the football match. What on earth does a football match have to do with a story about a man with two heads? I hear you cry: well patience my little children and all will be revealed.

Football, as you are no doubt aware, is a game that can reawaken the primitive tribal instinct that still slumbers in modern man; our hero was one such man, though in fairness, he had, up to this point, maintained a fairly neutral attitude, tribally speaking, preferring instead to enjoy the spectacle of the game for its own sake. However, all that was about to change, and with it his life.

It was a Saturday afternoon nearing the end of the season, and the two local teams – the names of which, like the name of the two headed man, are of no real importance, but we shall, for ease of storytelling, refer to them as: Team A and Team B – were meeting in a match to decide who would end the season at the top of the league.

At half time the score was even at one goal each, and at the point, when the referee blew his whistle, at that very moment, for the first time in his life, the man became aware of his two heads, for they began to argue showing a certain dichotomy of team support: one head supporting team A, the other team B. The man, much to his embarrassment, found himself cheering, and booing, both teams at the same time. It was the start of his troubles, and would

escalate over time and was, moreover, destined to end in tragedy.

Those of you unfortunate – or stupid - enough to have found themselves stranded, alone and wearing the wrong supporter’s scarf, in the middle of a fiercely partisan football crowd will perhaps understand this man’s predicament. For try as he may he was unable to exercise any control over the rival heads – for rivals they had become, and rivals they were to remain until the whole matter was eventually resolved – and as the game wore on so their individual war cries became more heated and vehement. The crowd, thinking the man lacking in respect for the ‘beautiful game’ began to turn violent towards him and his strange behaviour, until the police, thinking him a rabble-rouser, intervened, arrested him and thus saved him from a possible beating.

The man was then forced to spend an uncomfortable night in the cells – he would have been allowed out earlier with just a caution, had not his two heads noisily continued their soccer debate whilst the burly desk sergeant was attempting to take a statement – and was let out the following morning, by which time his two heads had grown quiet and refused to speak to one another.

Now, usually, friends, married couples, siblings or any one forced by desire or circumstance to live together in close proximity, arrive at some sort of compromise, which allows for harmonious co-existence for most of the time. Admittedly, this generally means one or other of the parties involved giving way more often than the other, but that being said, it usually works its way out to the general satisfaction of all those concerned. This, however, was not the case for the man with two pates. He found himself, from that moment on, living in what can only be described as a battle zone, for neither of the heads - and here I have a problem: what to call the heads without appearing to show bias? I wish to be non-judgemental you see. If, like the football team I call them head A and head B then you, my audience, could possibly be mistaken into thinking I favoured A over B. The same thing could happen if I were to call them head one and head two. You see my dilemma? I’m sure you do, and therefore I have no option, for sake of strict neutrality, other than to refer to them as This and That - anyway, as I was saying: neither of the heads appeared able to forgive, forget or compromise in any way whatsoever. In fact both heads, This and That, seemed intent on disagreeing with the other at every opportunity, no matter how trivial or unimportant the decision, the heads - sorry I mean, of course, This and That - would obstinately take up the opposing view. Let me relate, as an example: the shaving incident.

Following the football debacle, the man was able to spend a relatively quiet week, because This and That had both descended into a deep sulk mode, and neither was willing to lose face – forgive the pun – by uttering the first word. However, matters changed one morning in front of the bathroom mirror, a Thursday morning I seem to recall, when This, or it may have been That, decided to grow a beard. Immediately, That, or possibly This, insisted on staying clean shaven. A heated argument ensued, during which voices were raised, items thrown and the mirror shattered. The neighbours, fearing a murder was in progress, called the police who sprang into action arriving at the man's house just before lunch. On their arrival they were greeted by a strange sight for the man had completely shaved half of his face – the left – including one eyebrow and the hair on his head. He also appeared to be having a heated debate with himself over the possibility of having in fact shaved the wrong side. The police, finding there was no law against the shaving of only half one's face, diplomatically beat the man into silence, and let him off with a warning not to disturb the peace.

The townsfolk, as is the case with townsfolk the world over, were used to a certain eccentricity among their fellows, and so the man's half-shaven appearance was soon accepted and ignored by all. All, that is, bar the owners of the bank where he was employed as a cashier, who, though sympathetic, nonetheless immediately placed his name at the top of the list of that week's redundancies, so that by the following Monday he was not only two-headed, half-hairless and bemused, but also totally jobless.

At first this part shaven compromise appeared to satisfy the honour of both This and That, as a consequence of which the man spent a relatively quiet, if unemployed, few days. The days then turned to peaceful weeks, the peaceful weeks to peaceful months and spring had started to bud and blossom into summer before anything further untoward happened.

It was a morning in late May and the man rose from his bed to discover the sun already high and hot in the clear blue sky of early summer. He rose, washed, shaved half his face and late breakfasted in his dressing gown. He felt good, more relaxed than he had been since the onset of his problem. He opened the window, breathed deeply and luxuriated in the feel of the warm air on his one naked cheek. Time for summer clothes, he thought, and that is the very moment when the peace ended and the trouble began again.

This, or maybe That, decided that shorts, sandals and Hawaiian shirt would be just the thing. That, or maybe This, on the other hand argued that, as there was still a chill in the air, and that as anyone with an ounce of common sense would not dream of 'casting a clout till May be out' it would be far wiser to remain in winter clothes until at least the middle of June.

The ensuing argument was long, and heated (again no pun intended). Neither This nor That was willing to compromise or give ground. For over an hour they shouted, harangued and threatened each other, until finally resorting to physical violence. Chairs were thrown, tables overturned, pictures smashed and crockery broken, before the neighbours once more summoned the police. Again the police could find no law against either the wearing of summer clothes, or of the wearing of winter clothes, or of the wearing of a mixture of the both, so once again the man was diplomatically beaten into quiescence, and once again warned against breaching the peace.

That afternoon the townsfolk witnessed the curious sight of the half shaved man strolling - or rather limping, for the police had been rather more diplomatically severe than on their previous visit - along the high street dressed in a blue serge suit the left leg and arm of which had been cut off just below the knee and elbow leaving his two left side limbs exposed to the rays of the Summer sun. On his head he wore half a trilby hat, held in place by means of a piece of twine looped round and under his chin, whilst on his feet he sported one highly polished black brogue shoe on the right and a brown thong type sandal on the left; the sandaled foot being sock-less – it not being considered fashionable to wear socks with sandals, or to be more accurate a sock with a sandal. It was obvious, though not to the bemused and slightly shocked townspeople, that another compromise had been reached, and that the anger of the warring heads was once more assuaged, and that the man (or men) was enjoying (or were enjoying) another period of uneasy truce. This time, however, the truce would be short lived, and the resumption of hostilities more violent, horrible and bloody than ever before.

If we are to be honest with ourselves - and I apologise to any of you whose feelings might be hurt by what I say here - then I'm sure that most of us have, if only for a fleeting moment, been a little unsure of our sexuality. Asked ourselves some or all of the more obvious questions: Am I heterosexual? Am I bi-sexual? Am I homosexual? Transsexual? Am I attracted to bestiality? Flagellation? Masochism? Sadism? Sado-masochism? The list of things we can do with and to each other - or do to ourselves for that matter - in the pursuit of sexual fulfilment, is endless. This uncertainty about our true feelings; this ambiguity of sexual desire is puzzling enough to those of us with only one mind to make up. Imagine then, if you will, the bewilderment of our hero when faced with the dilemma of having to make up two minds on the subject; two minds, moreover, that - and I'm sure I don't have to

remind you of this - were by now honour bound to take opposing views.

The trouble started the night the young man, fired by boredom, youth and a surfeit of testosterone, walked into a night club 'The Purple Love Machine' intent on - to use the vernacular - getting laid.

The problems were bad enough at the start of the evening: which to choose: blonde, brunette, dark-hair or mousy-hair? Would she be tall, or short, slim or plump? This and That retreated to a corner where they quarrelled and bickered, swore and cursed, and, on one occasion – all over a petite brunette, I think - very nearly came to blows. The fact that the sight of a half shaven, strangely garbed, wild eyed man, who appeared to be talking heatedly to himself, would have almost certainly ruined any chance of making a favourable impression on any of the proposed beauties, did not appear to have crossed the collective minds of This, That or the young man – not that the latter had much say in the matter by this time. As I have already said, the problems were bad enough to start with, but they were now about to escalate out of control, because This or That suddenly made a momentous, and possibly life

changing, decision:

'I'm gay and proud of it,' he shouted across the crowded dance floor, and before That or This had time to dispute the matter pointed at one of the dancers and continued thus: 'furthermore I fancy the pants off of you, big boy.'

Now, had the aforesaid 'big boy,' been either a liberal, of that sexual persuasion, or possessed of a sense of humour, then the incident may well have just been passed off as a bit of banter; a harmless eccentric getting over excited and letting off steam. However, the victim – though at six feet three and built like a brick out-house it's hard to imagine him as a victim – was none of the above, he was, in effect, the complete opposite. He was in fact a Gay hating bigot, who was politically right of the Bulgarian National Front Party, had no sense of humour whatsoever and who now took the young man's harmless proposition as a personal affront to his, up until then, undisputed heterosexual manhood.

Out of deference to those of a nervous disposition I shall draw a diplomatic veil over the events that immediately followed this incident. If I were to describe the bloodied nose, the blackened eyes, the ear half torn off, the relentless beating, the kicking senseless and the baying crowd, I would merely be appealing to an audience whose staple diet consists solely of gratuitous sex and violence, and I'm sure that none of you can be accused of having that weakness. No, I shall not fall into the trap of revealing the full extent of the young man's

humiliating treatment by the Gay-hating-rightwing-fascist-bully, or of the conduct of the blood-lusted crowd who egged him on. Nor shall I describe the conduct of the police who, having once again been summoned to deal with the young man's eccentricity, dealt him a further persuasive beating before locking him away in the cells for the night. I will not relate his subsequent treatment when he made his half-shaved appearance in court charged with causing a breach of the peace. There is no need for me to tell you of the two hundred pound fine, or of the six months suspended sentence imposed, subject to psychiatric reports, because none of this has any bearing on the tale I have to tell, and, as a storyteller, I must always be aware of how much, or how little, to reveal to my audience. So for this reason, and for the reasons already given, I refrain from giving any of the details immediately following the young man's unfortunate brush with his alternate sexualities. Suffice to say that from that day to this the young man never again visited 'The Purple Love Machine' never again made sexual approaches to woman, man, beast or child and, indeed, never again felt the need to. What he did do, or, to be strictly accurate, what This, or possibly That, did do, was to find

God. Needless to say this created the, by now, not usual problem of disagreement: This, or possibly That, becoming a devotee of Roman Catholicism, whilst That, or possibly This, denied the very existence of a God and revelled in his atheism.

Now, I do not wish to make any judgements of the rights and wrongs in this curious case; the existence, or non-existence, of a divine being is not what this story is about. No, the fact that I view the possibility of there being a God along with the possibility of there being fairies, or of a politician keeping a promise - unlikely, but you never know - has no bearing whatsoever on the matter. What is important, and what was to eventually lead to the sad dénouement of our little yarn, was the fact that This, or possibly That, did believe, and that it was that unalterable belief that led the young man into the confessional box on the afternoon of the fateful day.

I do not know what sin, or supposed sin, drove the young man to seek out the priest and confessional box on that day, and even if I did, it would be unprofessional of me to reveal secrets which are sacrosanct. Suffice to say that on a windy Thursday afternoon in late May the young man was to be found in the confessional box of St Mary's All Saints about to bare his soul to Father Seamus Docherty, resident foreign priest, part-time celibate and full-time alcoholic.

Things had been going along fine; confession had been made, absolution granted and father Docherty was about to present the young man with a penance of an unknown quantity of Hail Marys – unknown that is, because before the good priest was able to announce the exact amount he was interrupted by an irate yell from either This or That. Apparently the two had entered into a debate on the pros and cons of Creationism versus Darwinism, to which neither was willing to give ground; a debate into which the two warring parties were now daring Father Docherty to intercede.

As with the case of the ‘big boy’ in the incident at ‘The Purple Love Machine’ the unfortunate young man could not have chosen a worse person than Father Docherty with whom to discuss this most vexed of questions. Nor could he have chosen a worse day on which to ask it.

In the main Father Docherty had managed, over the years, with the help of various brands of imported Irish Whisky, to come to terms with his own crisis of faith. He had learned that one does not necessarily have to fully accept the existence of God in order to fulfil the duties of a priest. This compromise on his part was helped by his innate ineptitude to face facts and make a much needed career change; he was, like many of us, a weak willed coward, and was willing, again not unlike many of us, to live a compromised life.

This was fine for most of the time, but every now and again – usually on the odd occasion of sobriety – he would look in the mirror and detest the face that stared back, and today was one such day.

The day had begun badly when he had drained his next to last bottle of Bushmills for breakfast. This was closely followed by a visit from an angry husband of a parishioner who had been in receipt of Father Docherty’s special brand of extreme unction and had, rather stupidly in my opinion, confessed the whole sordid matter to her less than understanding spouse. On top of this, he had hardly finished lying his way out of harm’s way at the hands of the injured husband, when the phone rang. It was his Bishop demanding to know the truth behind a complaint received from three outraged ladies about an incident involving him that, allegedly, happened whilst they were busy bending over to arrange the vestments in the sacristy.

As you can probably guess these misfortunes coming like some invading army did nothing for the mood of our good priest, so that when his confessional box was suddenly assailed by this extremely odd young man who, not content with wasting his time with real or imagined sin, now appeared intent on discussing issues on which the priest no longer held a view, or indeed, had any interest in. It was, for the priest, the final straw, and sad to relate – though

he repented of his actions later – he resorted to violence. A fight broke out in which a rosary was broken, holy water spilt and the confessional box reduced to match wood.

The police were called by a member of the public who had heard the disturbance whilst out walking his dog - a Dalmatian bitch by the name of Spot. When the forces of law and order arrived a puzzling sight greeted their eyes. There, amongst the carnage, sat Father Docherty, his left arm around the young man's shoulder, his right clutching an empty bottle of Bushmills, singing 'Danny Boy,' in Gaelic, whilst the man debated with himself about Creationism and the veracity of Darwin's theory.

There were some policemen there that day who suspected that the Father had been drinking, but none voiced the suspicion, and the majority put his curious behaviour down to the stress of the moment. The young man though was arrested, but on this occasion not diplomatically beaten. It was thought that this method had proved so unsuccessful in the past as to render the practise pointless in his case. So it was that the medical authorities were summoned, doctors consulted, legal advice sought and the young man sectioned and taken to a secure unit where he resides to this day, and where his two heads argue constantly about whether to take the medication, or whether to refuse.

It is, in my view, a sad ending to our little story – if indeed it is an ending, because, what is a story, other than a single event within a larger and far more complex story? It has a beginning, middle and an end, but the characters remain; they had a life before, and their life continues after. It could be argued that the story only ends at the death of the character. But then, of course, those of us who believe in an afterlife would argue death is only the beginning of yet another story. Anyway, putting these philosophical questions aside, we come to the end of the true tale of the man with one head too many.

As to the question of whether or not our hero lived happily ever after, I'm afraid I have to confess my ignorance. What I can tell you, though, is that the young man, whose name is still unimportant, now has a number and an address: patient 257, State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Sophia. Perhaps you may like to pop along and ask him yourselves, but be warned though; you may well find him in two minds on the subject.

Recorded 24th May 2007: Yambol

Letters Home

Many years ago I moved into a property just on the outskirts of Yambol. It was an old house, and had been unoccupied for several years. Much work was needed, but before I started I first had to clear the rooms of all the old furniture and detritus left by the former owners. In the basement, among the broken toys, furniture and general rubbish I came across an old attaché case, it was locked. I was tempted to just throw it away along with all the other items, but my curiosity got the better of me, and so I took the time to break the lock, open the case and search the contents. Inside I found a gold locket and a series of letters, all written in the same hand, and all dating back to the period of the Yoke. These letters told a sad tale of love and loss.

These letters told such a sad and personal story that for some time I wondered if I should share them, or if the story should remain untold; another sad little secret kept from the world.

Eventually, and after much soul searching, I thought Yane's story should be told, and so, with all due respect, I now share Yane's letters with you.

The Sultan's Palace

Constantinople

3rd July 1837

My dearest Sonja,

I am now returned home in barracks at the Sultan's palace, along with my fellow triumphant *Janissaries*. This battle, this terrible war, is over for the moment, and I have survived. Survived physically that is - unlike some of my former colleagues - in as much as I still have all my limbs, I can see, hear and speak. I draw breath as I used to, have the same appetites for food, tobacco, *Rakia* and women - oh, yes I confess, to you, my sister, an appetite for all of these things - ergo, I am alive; alive, that is, in the physical sense. But in other ways, inside of me, I am dead. I go through the motions of 'living' but I died on that day as surely as he did, and to be truthful, sister, I envy him his real death, envy him the peace of the grave. I do not ask you for your pity. I do not ask you for your forgiveness - how could I possibly expect it of you, when I cannot find it in my own heart to forgive myself? What I do ask - and I realise that even this is probably too much to expect of you - is that you try to understand.

I admit to committing a crime, a sin, the most heinous sin a man can commit. I know we do not share the same faith, my sister, and have not done since I was a young boy, but the Koran is as clear on this as is the Bible. Allah will punish me as surely as would your own god. I am sure that allowing me to survive, and live with the horror of what I have done, is all part of my punishment. So certain am I of this that it is only that knowledge that keeps me from taking my own life - I cannot usurp the will of Allah, no matter how much I may wish it.

One day I know it will end, for Allah is merciful, and I will only suffer for as long as he wills it, one day, my sister, one day, a glorious oblivion. I only hope when he calls me it is on the field of battle, for that is where I have lived my life, and that, therefore, is a fitting place in which to conclude it.

Life here is much the same as always, we train hard every day, and I find some peace in this. Pushing the body to its limits stops me from thinking too much on tricks of fate, and physical

exhaustion ensures sleep, however troubled the conscience might be.

Tomorrow I start a three week tour of duty as part of the Sultan's personal bodyguard. We all have to do this from time to time, and with things as they are the duty has become more than just ceremony. The Sultan has become unpopular, and is in real danger. The populace has grown weary of paying for his excesses while many of them starve. Even here in the barracks there have been murmurings, something I myself would not countenance, fellow *Janissaries*, men like myself, sworn to uphold the will of Allah in his chosen emissary the Sultan, are talking rebellion. They talk openly of the unspeakable: of overthrowing the Sultan himself. Every day they grow bolder, and I confess, dear sister, if the time comes, as it surely must, then it will be a blood bath, and the thought of that frightens me more than I can say.

I must sign off now, my dearest sister. Look after our parents, I send them my love, though I doubt they now acknowledge me as their son, and please try to find it in your heart to reply, I miss your letters, and grieve the loss of your sisterly love more than words can say.

Your love, and your letters, were all that I had to remind me of my other life.

Without those to sustain me I know not how I shall survive.

I send you all my filial love.

Your loving brother

Yane.

The Sultan's Palace

Constantinople.

12th October 1837

My dearest Sonja,

Three months have passed since last I wrote. Three long months, three months in which each day brought fresh hope of a letter from you, dear sister, and three months in which each day brought renewed disappointment when one did not arrive.

Every new day I listen for the hooves of the courier galloping into the yard with fresh hope,

and with each passing day that hope is dashed by a mail sack empty of the longed for reply. I endure torture every morning watching my brother *Janissaries* opening letters from parents and sweethearts, while I stand idly by empty handed. I know I deserve to be punished, dear sister, and I know how hard it must be for you and my parents to forgive what I have done. But I do not ask you to condone my sin; I cannot expect that, neither would I wish it. I ask merely that you understand, or try to understand, and that you try to make our parents understand also. For them this must be like living a nightmare; I know it is for me, but, sister, ask yourself this question: if the roles had been reversed, if he had triumphed and was writing to you, would you answer, or would you disown him as you have me? Ask our parents the same question; I would be interested to know the answer. And, sister, while you are asking questions, ask them these: Why, as Christians did they rigidly obey the Moslem Sheriat? Why, when *Ispendzh* became due, did they not hide me from the Turk as other families did? And why do they now blame me for becoming the person they chose to make me? I'm sorry if I sound bitter, sister dear, or if I sound disrespectful of our parents, but I was barely nine years old when they sent me away; a child, I had no say in the matter, no choice, it was my duty; just as it was my duty to do what I did on the battlefield. What I did that day in the heat of battle can be traced back to our parents original decision to pay *Ispendzh*, and send me away. I have no wish to be cruel, but it was their decision. How

different our lives would have been had our parents, like others in the village, claimed to have fever in the house and painted a red cross on the door.

I know all these things do not absolve me from my crime, but consider, sister: am I wholly to blame? Can you not see that fate has played a trick on us all? Our parents saw their decision as an opportunity for their eldest son to better himself; they did what they did out of love, because they wanted the best for me, and it was. Until that fateful day I was proud to be a *Janissary*, I loved the life, I enjoyed defending the faith, and would not have changed a thing, but all that has changed, and now I await for fate to have the final laugh at my death; it is, dear sister, Kismet.

As always we *Janissaries* are readying ourselves for war. It is constant now, this threat to our borders, our culture and our faith, and sometimes I grow weary of this never ending battle. But I endure, beloved sister, because I know that I fight on the side of a righteous cause. When I spill blood, which is all too often, I spill it in the name of Allah, it is justified, and I bear no burden of shame.

You will notice, my sister, when I now speak of these matters I speak of Allah, not of his

shadow on earth the Sultan. Don't get me wrong, I would still defend him with my life; I have not yet fallen so far as to forget my sworn duty, though there are many of my comrades who have. No, it has not yet come to that, but, sister, I hear and see such things, things that are wrong, things that offend the will of Allah. I hate to sound disrespectful but I fear our Sultan's mind has been tainted by some evil force. Day by day his appetites grow ever more debased, and not just for food, wine and luxury. He was always of an excessively carnal nature, but no longer does he just confine his pleasure to the harem; he now has taken to kidnapping any citizens who take his fancy. He uses us, the once proud corps of *Janissaries*, to do his evil work. Thus far I have managed to avoid this onerous task, but it is only a matter of time before I am put to the test, and to be honest I know not what I shall do. The people of the city walk in fear of him, no one is safe, and I mean no one: man, woman or child. Of late, and it grieves me, sister, to have to tell you this, he has developed a taste for the young; the very young. Children, male and female, some as young as nine or ten years, are regularly abducted and taken to him. The very thought of this sickens me to the heart, dear sister, for I know it to be wrong, and against the will of Allah, but I am helpless, and unable to do anything about it.

I am not the only one who feels this injustice. My fellow *Janissaries* grow weary of it, and openly threaten an uprising. We *Janissaries* are inured to brutality, it is our work, we

have been brought up from an early age to fight, and have all but lost the ability to feel compassion; but children? Who but the most inhuman could harm a child in this way? It is wrong, sister, and I fear there must come a time when I must choose between doing my sworn duty, or doing what I know in my heart to be the right thing.

Write to me, my dear sister, give me the wisdom of your advice; tell me what to do. I miss your good sense, and need your counsel more now than I have ever done.

As always I send my love to you and our parents.

Your loving brother.

Yane

The Sultan's Palace

Constantinople

30th November 1837

My dearest sister Sonja,

Still no news from you, my sister, but that is not why I write. I write to bid farewell, for the chances of my surviving tomorrow are remote. Decisions have been made by myself and others, and I fear this may well be my last letter to you. If that proves to be the case, please find it in your heart to think fondly of me, and to persuade our parents to do the same.

The mark of Cain is on me sister – how strange that I should use a Christian image here; me a devout Moslem. Please believe I did not know he was my brother when I struck the fatal blow, and I pray to Allah that he did not know me either, we were both victims on that day. I never really knew him you know; he was seven years old when I was sent away, so how could I? If I die tomorrow, it will be a happy release, so do not feel the need to grieve my passing, I will have gone to a far better place.

Tomorrow is the day, my sister, a coup d' état has been planned. There is to be an attempt on the Sultan's life. If this should happen, and despite my own revulsion at this man's deeds, I shall defend his person with my life. It is my duty, dear sister, I swore an oath

to Allah to protect his representative on earth; I must now honour that oath, whatever the circumstances. It is not for me to sit in judgement. What the Sultan has done, his cruelty, his depravity, are an anathema to me. But I must still defend him; it is for Allah to judge the deeds of men, not we *Janissaries*. There may well be some higher purpose to this, some reason why Allah has allowed these terrible things to happen, and I cannot bring myself to question the will of Allah. Therefore, sister, tomorrow I must fight again. Fight my fellow *Janissaries*, my comrades in arms, my brothers.

There is a certain irony in all this, and I take comfort in the fact that Allah has decreed that I, the killer of my own brother, should now meet my end at the hands of my comrade brothers; Allah is truly merciful in his dealings.

Dear sister I hope this letter does not make you sad. My departure from this world is, for me, a welcome release. I shall die, as I have always lived, doing my duty as a servant of Allah, a true believer and a *Janissary*. Pray for me sister, pray to your Christian god, pray for my soul.

I must leave you now to prepare for tomorrow. The end will be swift, but I will not go

without a fight; I will give my comrades something to remember me by. Think kindly of me and remember you and our parents have the love of one who always tried to do what was good and just.

Yours forever in filial love

Yane

Officer Commanding The Sultan's Guard
The Sultan's Palace
Constantinople.

2cnd December 1837.

Dear Miss Samotov,

I am afraid this letter brings grave news of your brother, and there is no way to lessen the sadness of that news. I am sorry to have to tell you, Miss Samotov, that your brother died in combat yesterday.

I hope you will forgive the bluntness of this letter, but I am a soldier, and have but a small armoury of words, none of which I fear would provide suitable salve to the wounds my news will undoubtedly inflict.

If it is of any comfort your brother died bravely; died defending the Sultan. He chose to take a blow aimed at the Sultan himself, and in doing so saved the Sultan's life. You will no doubt be pleased to hear that the perpetrators of this terrible outrage have been arrested, and face execution tomorrow morning.

As Yane's commanding officer it is my sorrowful duty to break this news to you. It is never easy to lose one's comrades, and in the case of Yane it has been especially hard for me personally. He was a man who stood out as special, a very good and honourable soldier. We of the '*Corps of Janissaries*,' have lost a valued colleague and friend, and I would like you to know we share in the grief you must now be feeling.

As you know when men join the '*Corps of Janissaries*' they are encouraged to forget their

other life and concentrate on becoming good soldiers and defenders of Islam. To help in this they are not allowed to keep any token which may hinder that process. However, this rule, though strictly enforced by some, is one in which I tend to turn a blind eye. I allow my recruits to retain one item precious to them, providing it does not deter them from their duties. Yane took advantage of this relaxation of the rules, and retained a small locket. He kept this about his person wherever he went, and it hung around his neck in every battle he ever fought, and there were many of those. He told me once it was his talisman and kept him safe. I now return this locket to you. I assume the image contained therein to be yours, and feel that its return is what Yane would have wanted.

I once again apologise for the grief my letter will have caused you and your family, and ask that you take what small comfort you can from the knowledge that your brother died valiantly, and in defence of a true and noble cause.

I am your faithful servant madam

Boris Yentov. Col.

Recorded 16th June 2007: Velingrad

Fate and the Life and Death of Chudomir Daev

No one noticed anything unusual in Chudomir Daev's behaviour that morning. He dressed in the same dark suit, with the same sombre tie and the same white shirt as he always had. He breakfasted at precisely 8.15, and on the stroke of 8.45 kissed both of his daughters and his wife on the cheek before walking down the street to work just as he always had. At exactly 8.55 he arrived at the bank, wished the doorman good day, smiled at the two pretty cashiers and walked into his office, just as he always had. Once in his office he hung his suit jacket neatly on the hanger, adjusted his tie and seated himself at his desk, just as he had always done; it was 8.59.

He remained motionless in his seat watching until the clock hands reached 9.00 precisely, then, smiled, wrote a short note, which he placed in the centre of his blotter, tidied the envelopes in his in-tray, opened the left hand draw of his desk, pulled out the revolver, pointed it at his head and fired, which was not as he had always done. The note read as

follows:

Sorry, if I missed. My apologies to all concerned. I promise to do better next time.

Yours truly

Chudomir Daev

Manager, National Bank, Razlog Branch.

The incident was taken by his employers as a cry for help, and Chudomir was sent home on indefinite sick leave; or until such times as the hole in the wall of his office was mended. The following morning Chudomir Daev rose from his bed, dressed in the same dark suit, with the same sombre tie and the same white shirt as he always had. He breakfasted at precisely 8.15, and on the stroke of 8.45 kissed both of his daughters and his wife on the cheek before walking down the street to work just as he always had.

No one knows for certain what made him change his routine that morning, but eye witnesses all agree on one thing. They all said that he suddenly stopped mid stride, turned towards the church on the opposite side of the street, then dashed out into the street straight under the wheels of a horse and cart driven by a drunken gypsy. When questioned, all the witnesses agreed that Chudomir's fateful dash under the cart wheels was accidental, a case of thoughtlessness, rather than a deliberate act. Death was instantaneous, and the coroner duly returned a verdict of accidental death, allowing the widow and two daughters to live comfortably on the insurance and generous widow's pension they received from the bank.

There are two useful little lessons to be learned from this sad little tale, the first: never trust that famously fickle mistress fate, for although your name may not be on the bullet, it could well be on the wheel of a passing vehicle. The second: it is extremely unwise to be inebriated whilst driving a horse and cart.

Recorded 16th June 2007: Velingrad

Khan Isperih's Gift

Visit this place once the Storks have returned from their winter sojourn on the Nile. Watch as they take up residency on towers, chimneys, steeples, telegraph poles and any other high place that affords them space, security and vision. Watch as they rebuild last year's nest, raise their young and prepare for their long journey back to their winter quarters in warmer climes. Watch and wonder, for it would appear that these creatures bring with them a kind of magic. Almost overnight, from the first sightings, a strange fruit is seen to grow on the trees and bushes; a fruit that has no business being there; a fruit that owes its existence, not to the natural pollination of blossom, but to superstition and the hand of man. There they hang, swaying gently as the soft breezes of spring breathe life into the coming season. Little amulets of red and white strands decorated with blue beads, coins, iron rings, cloves of garlic, snail shells, cornelian buds and wooden spoons without handles. They are tied there to bear testament to the hopes of man for a fruitful season, and are a cause of puzzlement to the more curious visitors to the region.

When questioned on the subject of this strange fruit, the locals will give a varied selection of answers: some will say it dates back to Thracian times, some to the Slavs, some will tell you it goes back even further pre-dating written history itself and some will be honest enough to say that they just don't know. Others, though, if you are among the lucky few to ask the right question of the right person, may tell you the curious and sad tale of the great Khan Isperih's gift.

Many, many years ago, when the world was still very young and fresh, high in the Tibetan mountains there lived a great and good leader: Khan Isperih, leader of all the proto-Bulgarians. A peace loving man, he lived happily in his palace with his mother and his beautiful sister, Kalina, both of whom he loved dearly. He defended his kingdom bravely whenever a threat arose, but never attacked, or coveted, his neighbours' lands. He was content with what he had, and saw no reason to expand the kingdom beyond his borders. One day, following a particularly hard winter, and a late unproductive spring, his council of advisers came to him saying:

'Great Khan, the crops have failed, your people are starving and if we do not take action now, we fear the worse. You must seek more fertile lands, or your people will surely perish.'

'But, my friends,' replied the Khan, 'where shall we go? Our neighbours are our friends, and their lands are as sparse, and have suffered the same harsh winter as we, I will not, and cannot, go to war with them.'

'We know that, great Khan, and we agree, but we have heard word of a grand and fertile country beyond the steppes. Travellers speak of this land beyond the great Blue River as the most beautiful place on earth, and the people, sire, friendly, welcoming and in great need of a good, strong and fair leader. Go, great Khan, go and seek out this land, save your people. Do not let them starve.'

So it was that Khan Isperih, having bidden his mother and his sister, the fair Kalina, a fond farewell, set out with one hundred of his best warriors in search of this Promised Land.

They rode for many days, until the days turned to weeks, the weeks to months and spring blossomed into summer. On they rode, across the great steppes, through deserts, where they were plagued by sand storms, thirst and hunger, through mountain ranges and across raging rivers, until finally early one September afternoon they caught their first glimpse of the great Blue River, and marvelled at its beauty as it sparkled in the bright sunlight.

By the early evening they had reached the banks of the river, and here they set their tents for the night, slaughtered and roasted four goats and settled down to celebrate their safe arrival. There was music and food a plenty, wine by the barrel and music and dancing, and they all sojourned joyfully into the night and early morning. All, that is, apart from the great Khan who felt a great sadness at the thought of being so far from his beloved mother and sister. Also, for such are the worries of leadership, he fretted about the following day: a great river to cross; and to what welcome? Would he be greeted as a friend, or would he be forced to fight? The problems and his homesickness stayed with him all night, and robbed him of his sleep.

When the sun finally rose on the following morn it revealed a scene beyond their wildest dreams. Across the blue of the river they could clearly see a rich and fertile plain, which stretched as far as the eye could see to the foot hills of a far off snow capped mountain range. Even from this distance they could see that it was a land of stunning beauty, and they gasped at the wonder of it, and knew they had found their new home.

As they mounted their steeds in preparation for the crossing they spotted several women working in the fields. The women were waving, and beckoning them to ride further downstream, to cross over. There were those in the group that suspected this to be a trap, but the great Khan reasoned there would be no harm in looking – if an ambush was planned, then he would meet it head on with his one hundred warriors, if it was not, and the women proved true, then it would solve the problem of finding a crossing.

The Khan and his one hundred warriors travelled for three leagues along the river bank, keeping pace with the ever growing band of women on the far side, until they were signalled to stop. By now the women had been joined by the men and children from the nearby villages, and they all began calling and pointing to a spot in the river, beckoning them to cross. Sure enough it was a ford, and the Khan led his men (for in those days leaders rode at the front of their men) into the waters, and, though in the middle the waters rose well above the horses withers, the crossing proved safe and the group arrived on the far bank; they had come at last to their new home.

After they had emerged safely from the waters a great cheer went up from the villagers, various foods and wines and fruits from that blessed land were brought and piled high upon tables hastily erected on the river bank. Leaders from each of the villages came forward to greet the Khan for the gods had long predicted his coming, and they were overjoyed to see him.

After greetings were exchanged, introductions made and friendships forged, the proto-

Bulgarians and the Slavs joined hands and began to dance, feast and make merry. All were pleased and happy: the Slavs, because their prayers had been answered; the proto-Bulgarians because they had succeeded in their quest of a new land and home. Only the great Khan remained sad, and took himself off to the river bank, there to dream, and to mourn for his missing mother and sister, the fair Kalina.

He had not been seated long, the tears rolling down his cheeks, when he noticed a small dove perched on a twig, and observing him with her dark intelligent eyes. The Khan politely greeted the dove, felt in his pockets for some crumbs and invited the bird to dine. The dove thanked him in a human voice (a not unusual occurrence in those days, for man had not yet grown apart from nature, and could still converse with the animals) then flew over and perched on his shoulder. The Khan had never seen such a beautiful bird: pure white, slim and with feathers like the purist silk, and he knew this was no ordinary dove, but a dove of great standing, and he was not surprised when the bird spoke again with a human voice saying:

‘What ails thee, great and gentle Khan? Why so sad? Why do you shed such tears of grief when you have completed such a long and arduous journey, conquered many hardships and come at last to this, your land of plenty?’

So the Khan told the dove, told her about his home in the Tibetan mountains, told her about his mother and told her about his love for his sister and about how he missed them and how he longed to see them both. Then he told her of his greatest fear: the fear that he might die and never see them again, or live to tell them of his triumph or to hear the sweet music of his sister’s voice.

‘Fear not, Khan, I will fly to your sister and mother, and I will tell them of your triumph, and will bring back news. I am swift, and will fly straight as an arrow from one of your archer’s bows. It will not take me long, good Khan. Dry your tears; join your men and share their celebrations with them. Fear not, I shall be back long before the winter snow storms arrive. The Khan thanked the little bird for her kindness and bravery, watched as, true to her word, she flew swiftly from sight then, turning on his heel, strode back to his men a happier man.

The little bird flew stopping only to take food, water and rest. Back over the raging torrents of the rivers, back high over the mountains, back riding thermals through the desert, back across the seemingly endless steppes, until finally she reached the high Tibetan slopes and the gates of the great Khan’s palace. In through the window she flew and alighted, exhausted,

on Kalina's shoulder.

Kalina's eyes brimmed with tears as the little bird told her of her brother's love, his epic journey and of the beauty of their new land. She cried because she loved her brother as much as he loved her, and she cried because she knew that she would never see his sweet face again, or visit the new lands, or hear him tell her tales of his great adventure. She wept because she knew that before the winter had turned again to spring both she and her beloved mother would be taken and laid to rest in the family tomb. All of these things she explained to the patient little dove saying:

'You see, little bird, I and my people are starving, weak from hunger. Only the fittest will be able to make the journey to the new lands. The rest, including my mother and me, must accept our fate and wait patiently for death. Rest now little one, regain your strength for I have a boon to ask of you later.' With that, she kissed the little dove, marvelling at the softness of her feathers, and placed her gently on a silk cushion where she fell instantly into a deep and peaceful sleep.

The following morning the little bird awoke fully refreshed and ate from the golden plate of corn and drank from the goblet of honey sweetened water, all of which had been placed there overnight by Kalina, who had watched over the dove all through the dark hours while she slept. Having eaten and drunk her fill the little bird stretched her neck, preened her feathers and hopped onto Kalina's shoulder.

'You mentioned a boon, fair princess, what is it you desire of me?'

'Rest some more, sweet dove, you have covered much distance, and now you must regain your strength.'

'I am rested, princess, and my strength will not fail me. I am not like the others of my species; I am no ordinary dove.'

'I know you are not ordinary, little bird, I know you to be extraordinary; a goddess of birds.'

'Then, if you believe that is true, princess, ask your boon; for I am ready to serve both you and our Khan.'

'My boon is this, my princess among doves: that you lead my people back to their Khan and that you take with you my undying love, and that of my mother, and with it this amulet. It is a token of our love for him. We wove it from the finest white silk in all the land, and attached corn seed, so he and our people would never starve; a gold coin so that they would never be poor; a pip from our choicest grape vine so they would never know thirst and a sprig of *Zdravets*, so they would never suffer illness or plague. Tell him to wear it until he

receives a sign, he will recognise it when he sees it. He will know what to do when he sees the sign, for he is a wise Khan and brother, and listens to the gods.' So saying she kissed the dove one last time, and bid her people ready themselves for the long journey home.

The following morning, when the dew was still damp on the ground, the little dove set out leading the proto-Bulgarians on their journey to their new life and land. Progress was slow, for the pace was set by the slowest in the party. But eventually the long column, with the little dove at their head, cleared the foothills and started to cross the vast steppes.

They had been travelling for one month and one day when the blizzard struck. Over night the wind turned to the east transforming the late gentle autumn into a vicious, mind numbingly cold winter. On they trudged, the snow freezing on the little dove's wings and the clothes and faces of the proto-Bulgarians. For three long days and nights they suffered, battered by the winds, blinded by the snow and exhausted by the cold, with the little bird determined to carry on and not drop the precious amulet, until on the morning of the fourth day, as quickly as it had started, the wind changed back to the south, the snow stopped and the sun came out to warm their backs and lift their spirits.

On they walked, pausing only to sleep, eat and tend to the animals. The little bird knew that this false winter had been just a warning, a mere foretaste of what they could expect when the true winter eventually caught them up. They had need to get as near to their destination as was possible before the full force of the season finally overtook them and forced them to wait for the spring.

Soon the soft tundra of the steppes gave way to the rock strewn sands of the desert, and the progress of the column slowed down, food began to run short and water and fodder for the animals increasingly hard to find. Still they moved onwards, driven by necessity and the overwhelming desire to see their new lands and be reunited with their leader, the great Khan. Eventually, just as many were despairing of ever reaching their new home alive and safe, the little dove spied the mountains. There they were, their snow crowned peaks glinting pink in the morning sun, the last but one barrier; formidable, but nonetheless a welcome sight to all there. There was urgency now, for they all knew that they must clear the peaks before the true winter caught them up. To be overtaken up there would almost certainly mean death to every man woman and child in the party; it was to be a race against time and the forces of nature. Each man knew the danger, but not one allowed his fear to alter, or sway their firm resolve, and on they went until finally they reached the foothills. Pausing only to look upwards to where their journey would take them, and to wonder how far beyond the cloud

base the summit was, they began the long arduous climb. They were in the hands of the gods now, and each knew that winter could arrive at any moment, and each knew that if it did, then they would all surely perish and lie forgotten forever on the bleak mountain side.

The great Khan, meanwhile, continued to fret and pine for his mother and his sister, and as the time grew ever closer to winter, and the leaves turned, fell and lay decaying on the ground, so he grew more concerned for the safety of his little dove. He knew that if she did not return by winter, then he, the great Khan of all the proto-Bulgarian's, would be responsible for having sent her to almost certain death. Each morning he would go down to the banks of the great Blue River, and there he would sit all day until the light failed scanning the horizon for signs of her return, only to return each evening sadder and with slightly less hope in his heart. With each passing day he grew more and more unhappy, until his men felt sure he would go mad with his grief and loss of hope, and tried to comfort him. But no matter how they tried he would not be consoled and continued his daily vigils at the riverbank long after reason had dictated he should give up all hope of her safe return.

The climb was long, arduous and fraught with many dangers: falling rocks, precipitous cliffs and, as they climbed higher, ice and the threat of avalanche. Still they climbed ever higher, through the cloud base, up and up they went, until finally they emerged into dazzling sunlight and started on up the final treacherous snow clad climb to the summit.

Eventually they arrived at the top most peak, gasping for breath, for the air was rarefied at these altitudes. As they rested, readying themselves for the descent, they looked back to the way they had come, and saw in the far distance the black clouds of approaching winter racing toward them; they knew that they had tempted fate to the utmost and gave thanks to the gods for sparing them.

The storm hit with vengeance just after they had cleared the summit and entered into the comparative safety of the southern slopes. Despite being in the shelter of the lee the storm was wild in its ferocity; almost as if it were angry at its loss of prey.

The weather lasted for five days, and there were times when they thought that it would still get the better of them. But they persevered, helped in no small part by the example of the little dove who had shown such stoicism for so small and delicate a creature.

After the storm had subsided the little dove and her charges made more speedy progress, but it still took a further ten days for them to negotiate the foothills that led them onto the plain

and the mighty rivers. Here they held a council, and it was agreed that at their current pace they would be fortunate to arrive before winter turned to spring. The little dove grew worried, knowing that the great Khan was waiting for her message, but to fly on ahead would mean deserting the proto-Bulgarians, and that she could not, and would not do. She resolved to do her duty, and guide them as safely as she could to the crossing on the great Blue River. Once that was in sight, then, and only then would she fly to her Khan, deliver his sister's message and the amulet.

The journey took as long as they thought: the mighty rivers were swollen, difficult to cross and many perished in the raging winter waters. The rain and the snow turned the ground into quagmire, so that every step became an increasing effort on their already tired limbs.

Provisions were running low; there was little to be found in the hedgerows, the local people were loath to sell produce that they themselves needed to see them through the long winter and the migrant travellers were soon forced to ration what little stores they had left.

By the time winter began to slowly loosen its grip, and the first glimmers of spring started to appear, the proto-Bulgarians had been reduced to eking out their meagre rations by digging in the ground like pigs for tubers and soft roots. They were facing starvation and the end of their nation, and many began to lose hope and feel that their desperate venture was all but lost. But the little dove flew round them, urging them on and giving them new courage by her example.

Finally, just when even the little bird was losing faith, *Todorovden* day gave way to *Martouvane* day, and there, on the horizon, glinting blue in the clear light of the early spring morning, like a glittering jewel of hope, the little dove spied the waters of the great blue river. She swooped down, told her charges the joyful news, bid them make haste for the river bank and set off in search of her beloved Khan.

The Khan had risen early that morning and resolved that this would be his last pilgrimage to the river bank. Spring was coming and there was much work to be done: fields to till, seeds to sow and cattle to be loosed back onto the spring pasture. The people looked to him for leadership, and though his heart was near to breaking, his duty to his subjects outweighed any personal grief and woes.

Taking up his usual spot on the bank, he knelt, closed his eyes and offered up a final prayer to the gods. This being done he rose wearily to his feet, and turning his back on the river for the last time before returning to the people, took one long final look at the far horizon and thought of the little dove, his mother and his beloved sister.

At first he thought it must be a trick of the light, or a fleck of mist reflecting the sunlight, but as he stared it grew in size. And as it grew in size, so he stared in a mixture of wonder, half-hope and disbelief. Onward it sped, fast and straight as an arrow and as it drew ever nearer, so his disbelief gave way to hope, and his hope to belief, and his belief to certainty. It was her, it was her, his little bird had returned. Forgetting his dignity as a great Khan he called, and waved and wept great tears of pure joy. The little dove for her part swooped down circling his head joyfully, then soared and swooped and jiggled and jagged in an exuberant aerial dance of sheer delight at finding him.

Neither of them spotted the hawk until it was too late. It came plummeting out of the sun, and though the Khan quickly loosed an arrow which pierced its cruel heart, such was its speed that it collided with the little dove, shattering her beautiful wings and staining her feathers with blood. Down she fell, down and down, to be caught in the strong waiting arms of the great Khan.

His tears of joy now turned to tears of sorrow as he cradled the dying bird in his arms, and as his tears fell so they mixed with her blood and streaked the white silk of the amulet red. With her dying breath she told the Khan the sad message and bid him tie the amulet on his wrist and await the sign as instructed by his sister.

Still cradling the dead bird he walked back to the village, summoned his men and rode forth across the river to lead his people home.

The joy of the people, and of the Khan, at being reunited was tinged with sadness at the death of the little bird, for they all knew that they owed much to the courage, fortitude and loyalty of the dove, and that without her to guide and advise them they would never have survived their exodus.

The Khan decreed a gold burial casket be made, as was the due of all heroes. Then, on the bank of the great Blue River, in the exact spot where he had spent his long waiting vigil, he built a tomb, the size and decoration of which matched that of past great Khans. He gently placed the body of the dove in the casket, and then with great ceremony, and much weeping of the people, interred her in the tomb, planted willows all around and swore death to anyone who ever disturbed her resting place.

In the weeks that followed the Khan found that his grief for the bird, his sister and his mother was, in part, assuaged by work. Though the sadness was always with him, it was tempered

by the joy he increasingly saw in his people as they worked the land along side their new comrades the Slavs.

He visited the river bank, and the tomb as often as his duties would allow, partly in order to pray and to pay homage, and partly in hope of seeing the promised sign. He did not know what he was looking for, but he had faith in his sister's message that 'he would recognise it when he saw it,' and so continued to patiently wait and watch.

One day, when the warm spring sun was tempting the buds to burst forth into blossom, he happened to be gazing out across the river, as he had done so often before, when he saw it, the sun glinting off of its massive wings, its beak bearing twigs and straw to repair last year's nest, full of the promise of new life and the coming summer. They had returned, the storks were back from their winter quarters, and the Khan smiled for the first time since the death of the little dove, and he knew what his sister had meant, knew what he had to do.

That night he ordered the elders to prepare a large feast and have the people attend ready for a celebration. 'Tell them,' he said 'the time for grieving is over. Tell them their Khan has received a sign and tell them their Khan has great news and a gift for them. Tell them this and bring them to celebrate, to eat, drink, dance and give thanks to the gods for our new life.' Having listened to their Khan, the elders went and told the people, and they rejoiced to hear the Khan's words, made themselves ready, dressing their women in white, and assembled themselves before the great Khan who began to speak thus:

'My, good people, we have all suffered much over the past year. We all grieve for those who we left behind: your relatives, your friends, my mother and sister and our saviour the little dove who died leading you all to safety. We have all lost some one, and it is right that we should grieve. But there comes a time when we must shake off that grief and look to the future. It is what they would have wanted and expected of us, and we should not disappoint them in that expectation. It is spring, my people, and the earth demands that we look forward to future harvest. Let us then join hands with our Slav brothers and sisters and move forward to our new and prosperous life.

'Before she died in my arms the little dove delivered a gift from my sister, this amulet, now stained with the sacrificial blood of our little dove, ensured that I would never again starve, never again thirst, never know poverty and never be visited by sickness, or ill health. This morning I received a sign which told me to bequeath this gift to you, my people, and this I now willingly do.' So saying, he removed the amulet from his wrist, tied it to the branch of a cherry tree and stood back to face the crowd. The crowd gave a collective gasp of amazement, because the instant the Khan knotted the amulet onto the branch, the tree began

to bloom in a great explosion of blossom, the scent from which filled the air with perfume, and their hearts with hope and their souls with joy.

So it was that the custom of exchanging the *Martenitsi* came about, and from that day to this these simple little amulets are gifted throughout the land to friends, relatives and loved ones as a good luck token on *Martouvane* day and worn religiously until the first stork is spotted winging its way back to its summer home and heralding the spring.

Recorded 17th July 2007: Pleven

Reflection

Once upon a time in a far away country there lived a handsome young prince – no, no, no, that won't do; I need another opening. 'Once upon a time' gives completely the wrong impression. Fables and fairy stories begin 'Once upon a time,' and my little tale is no fairy story, and for that matter, Yanko, the hero of my little offering, is no prince, neither is he very handsome or very young. No, 'Once upon a time' will definitely not do, not for a story that is based entirely on fact. For me to begin what is essentially a realist work in such a way would be to mislead the reader completely, and that would be unforgivable. Mind you, having said that, there are some elements of the story that do have a definite feel of myth, magic and fable about them: the action is set in a small mountain village in the south west of a far away East European country, moreover, a country in which to this day the boundaries between fact, fiction and fable are blurred to western eyes, and although Yanko may not be everyone's idea of 'a handsome young prince' his loss of something which we all take for granted could not exactly be described as an everyday occurrence, and would, indeed, be considered strange, and possibly magical by most normal thinking people. But I'm getting a little ahead of myself here; giving too much information, too many clues, don't want to reveal the end before I've even worked out how best to start do I? That would ruin it for everyone, but you do see my predicament about the use of the 'Once upon a time' openings don't you? Not that I should be boring you with my problems as a storyteller, that's of no interest to you,

what you want is the meat and bones of the story, you need me to get on with the yarn, and stop banging on about how to start the wretched thing, so without further ado I shall start – feel free to ignore this first paragraph if you wish – are you sitting comfortably? Good, then I'll begin.

Once upon a time in a small mountain village in the south eastern corner of a far away east European country – I know, I know I said I wouldn't, but I've explained everything and now you know what not to expect, so that gives me the freedom to use whatever opening I choose, and I choose to use 'Once upon a time' as my opening line. So, once upon a time there lived a man called Yanko.

Let me continue by telling you a little bit about our hero, Yanko. I use the term hero here in its loosest sense, because Yanko could not be described in dictionary terms as a 'man of superhuman qualities' or as a man 'favoured by the gods', quite the opposite in fact. No,

Yanko is simply 'the chief male character' in our little tale.

Physically there was nothing that would make him stand out in a crowd: he was not overly tall, but then neither was he overly short. He was not heavily built, nor was he slight of build. His hair was somewhere between dark brown and greying in colour, and his eyes, which were neither dull nor sparkling bright, were a muddy green in hue.

His relationship with his fellow villagers is probably best described in the following terms: he was liked (though not loved) by a few; disliked (though not hated) by a few and tolerated (though at times with reservations) by the majority.

He was not quick of wit, but nor was he slow. He was unmarried, though when the opportunity arose (though these opportunities, it has to be said, were a fairly rare occurrence) was sexually active. He was mildly famous for his pear-based home-brewed *Rakia*, a thrice distilled spirit so potent in strength that it had been known to have felled the majority of the valley's most hardened drinkers at some time or another, and, rumour has it, though I have no proof of this, blinded several others.

He grew, dried and smoked his own tobacco; got drunk twice a week (though never on a Sunday); worked hard on the land (for most of the time); pickled his home grown vegetables in the autumn; gossiped with his neighbours; criticised the mismanagement of the various governments (though he had never once voted at an election in his life); regularly went to church every Sunday where he prayed to a god in whom his lack of imagination had never allowed him to either believe, or disbelieve in (though in times of stress he had been known to cross himself in a kind of just-in-case-devoutness).

He had a similar ambiguous-imagination-less-driven-belief-system when it came to other myths and legends, and there are many of those in this corner of the world. He knew all about the *Samolivi*, the *Vurkolak*, The *Lamia* and the *Zmey*. He had been weaned on stories of *St Ilya's* battle with the forces of evil, knew about *Vampiri* and of the dangers of stepping onto an *Obrochishte* site without candles or sacrificial food. All of these things he knew of, and by the simple fact of living among believers half assimilated them into his beliefs; a kind of osmosis of semi-belief in which fact seeped into myth and, myth and legend into seeming-reality.

He was then, when you add all of these attributes (or lack of attributes) together, a fairly average and typical male resident of this tiny Bulgarian mountain village; not a man, you could argue, likely to ever become the hero of my true (though admittedly rather strange) story, but he is, and it all started one morning when he was seated in front of his mirror.

For an everyday object (there are few homes that do not possess at least one) the mirror is a strange object. Day after day it sits there reflecting back light and images of absolute purity, but we humans rarely see all there is to see – or, if we are to be honest with ourselves, wish to see all there is to see. We tend instead to project our own self-image of ourselves into the reflection seeing only what we think we see; a sort of image based lie we fool ourselves with, until one day we look, and we see, and we are shocked by what we see. Suddenly, as if by magic, we discover that we have grown old, time has transformed us, and we no longer recognise the face that stares back at us. The bright eyes of memory have dulled and become rheumy and bloodshot, the hair thin and greying and the laughter lines of our imagination finally revealed as the creases of old age. It is a terrifying moment of reality, and one which we are all destined to experience at some moment during our life. What could be more frightening than that sudden glimpse of the awful-reality of the-ticking-time-bomb that is life? What could conceivably be worse than that first glimpse at reflected truth? Can you imagine anything more mind-numbing, more humiliating or more damaging to one's self esteem than the mind-searing undiluted-realism that is the first glance at our true reflection? I can't, or rather I couldn't, until I heard what Yanko had seen on that fateful morning.

But before I tell you what it was he saw (here I use the verb, to see, in a rather loose way; as you will note as the story unfolds) I would like to share my thoughts with you on the matter of truth, or to be more accurate authorial veracity.

I am first and foremost a maker of fiction, a storyteller, a purveyor of dreams. I wish to

make this point quite clear before we go any further. As such, I deal in imagination; I mix fact and fiction in an attempt to entertain an audience of readers. There exists a kind of contract between myself, the teller, and you, my audience; you, the listeners, agree to suspend your disbelief for as long as I, the storyteller, remain convincing. It's a fine line we orators tread, for if we are too cautious we run the risk of boring our audience, whereas, if we go too far then we are in danger of insulting our listener's' intelligence, losing their interest, and hearing that noise most feared by all storytellers; the thunderous ego-shattering sound of a metaphorical book being slammed shut in total disbelief.

These rules apply to fiction of all kinds, including many biographies and autobiographies; the latter, more often than not, being little more than a highly sanitised, or sensationalised version of the truth. However, we should not apply these rules to this little offering, because everything about Yanko's story, however incredible it may appear at first

sight, is fact, it is all true and related by me, to the best of my ability, without bias or distortion. I will not coat the pill for you in any way, but promise to deliver the plain truth as I know it. I will try to avoid the use of the all seeing, all knowing, omnipotent third person narrator's voice so beloved of the Nineteenth Century Novelists, because I am not all seeing, or all knowing, and I can find no reasonable explanation for what happened to our hero, and will not insult my audience by trying to invent one. Instead, I shall just give you the facts as they occurred, and leave you to draw your own conclusions.

So, having made that point as clear as I can, the time has now come for me to reveal exactly what it was that confronted Yanko in the mirror that morning; what it was that so upset him, and what it was that would change his life forever, and what it was that would alter his view of himself (no pun intended) for the rest of his life.

It was nothing as simple as no longer recognising the face in the mirror; for, as I have already mentioned he lacked imagination, and his lack of imagination had bred in him a kind of pragmatism; an acceptance of 'the-ticking-time-bomb' of his life. The rheumy bloodshot eyes, the greying hair and the creases, that frighten most of us, appeared as natural to him as the changes in the seasons from spring, to summer, to autumn and eventually to winter. No, it was not the face that stared back at him that morning that scared him, but the face that did not. The plain truth of the matter was there was no reflection. Oh, he could see the wall behind, he could see the framed photograph of his mother, and he could see the icon which hung next to it to commemorate her death two years previously. He could see the brown stain near the floor where, in a drunken rage (he could not remember what he had been angry

about, just that he had been angry) he had thrown a half bottle of *Rakia* which had shattered, staining the wall and the bare floorboards. All of these things he could see, but as to his own reflection there was no sign; it was as if the mirror was ignoring his presence and looking straight through him to what was behind, yes, it's true, there in the void where his image should have been, there was nothing but the reflection of the room behind. Perhaps now you can understand my desire to start this story in traditional 'Once upon a time' style. What other opening could there be? Yanko's loss of his reflection defies logic and all the laws of physics, ergo, it must be magic, for how else are we humans to explain the inexplicable? And if this is a tale about magic then I think it is my duty as a writer to give you some hint as to that fact, and the largest hint I can give is to start with 'Once upon a time.' But that's enough of these digressions, and it is time for us to return to Yanko, his mirror and his mysteriously disappeared reflection.

We can only imagine what his thoughts must have been, and as to his actions, well, I have no idea. I imagine at first he would have been shocked, frightened even. Indeed, who among us, faced with such a loss, would not have been? But what did he do then? Did he stare in disbelief? Did he reach forward to touch and test the mirror? Did he, I wonder, walk round and look at the back of the mirror to see if, just like Alice, he had somehow passed through the looking glass? And if he did was he disappointed to discover simply a long lost sock, several spiders and the dust and detritus of his mother's two year absence from the household chores? None of this we shall ever know, and were I to say any more on the subject it would only be pure supposition on my part, so I will move swiftly on to the known what-happened-next-facts of the story.

The first recorded event happened five days after our hero's loss (or possible theft, though there is no reason for me to suspect this possibility) of reflection.

It was late in the evening of that fifth day when a, wild eyed, slightly drunk and with hair dishevelled, Yanko (hard to comb one's hair with no reflection) presented himself at the door of the home of Baba Chevenko, oldest woman in the village, famous faller-asleep-in-the-middle-of-sentences-conversationalist, inveterate farter and weaver of magic charms. He was convinced, he explained, that his loss could only be attributed to the fact that he had overnight turned into a Vampire.

Before I go any further, and risk misleading you, let me explain this Vampire business more fully. The Vampire in this part of the world differs greatly from Bram Stoker's Dracula

so well known to the West and beloved of Hollywood. The Balkan conception of the Vampire is of a rather shapeless, jelly-like bag of blood, which is devoid of bones and which can sneak in and out of the smallest holes and cracks. Whilst superstition has it that Vampires (Balkan not Western) are afraid of water (he cannot cross, he must be carried), salt, the iron plate on which salt is broken up, hawthorn, garlic, tar, Christian symbols (such as ikons, crosses, incense and holy water) there is no mention of their reflection not being seen in the mirror – this was simply a literary device used by Bram Stoker. How Yanko came to learn of this I do not know. I doubt he would have read the book. There is a possibility he may have seen one of the many films, but we cannot be certain. All that we know is that by the time he stumbled, babbling incoherently into Baba Chevenko's home he had become convinced that he had somehow been transformed into an un-dead creature, and that his only hope of salvation lay in the expertise of the village's resident somnolent, flatulent, weaver of spells.

I hope this has explained matters for you thus far, and please let me state quite clearly here that my own view on the existence, or non-existence, of Vampires is not important. What matters is, is that Yanko, through his unpleasant experience in front of the mirror, had changed from his habitual pragmatic approach to the matter, to one of absolute belief. It is wonderful, is it not? How trauma can instantly convert the most devout of disbelievers into trembling, genuflecting, prayer offering converts. One has to wonder how many atheists aboard the Titanic finally drowned as convinced Christians. But, yet again I digress; we are not here to discuss a tragedy in the mid Atlantic. Icebergs, liners and that fatal final kiss of the two are part of another story and have nothing to do with our hero's dilemma, so without further ado I shall stop this shilly-shallying and return to the story.

Baba Chevenko's response to Yanko's panic stricken outburst was to nod-off half way through his tirade, awaken, pass wind (loudly) and proceed to explain some salient facts about *Vampiri*, their habits and why Yanko could not possibly be a Vampire:

'Yanko, how can you be a Vampire? You are alive, dear boy, you are not afraid to go out in the daylight, and judging by the state of your trousers you have just walked through the ford; if you were a Vampire you wouldn't be able to do that I can tell you. Anyway, I've known you since you were a baby; you're not a thief, a murderer, a drunkard, a lecher or a whore-monger, so even if you do die it's unlikely that you'd be a Vampire. No, Yanko it has to be something else, something, or maybe someone, has put a spell on you; stolen your reflection. I must think on this, work out a spell and force whatever it is to return what is

rightfully yours. Come again tomorrow and I'll see what I can do. Oh, and by the way bring a bottle or two of your *Rakia*, we could be in for a long and arduous night. Sleep well, Yanko.' With that she passed wind once more, threw a log on the fire and fell fast asleep.

Yanko made his way home, checked the mirror just in case, sighed and took himself to bed. He did not, however, as Baba Chevenko had suggested, sleep well, and he was haunted by dreams and nightmares as his little used powers of imagination finally started to work.

By the following morning Yanko's conversion to a true believer of all things impossible was complete, and the rumours, half-beliefs and dogma that he had lived with for all of his life became concretised into a fully fledged creed that now admitted to all the myths, legends and stories that he had been weaned on from childhood.

With the fear of his being changed into a Vampire removed, his thoughts turned to other possibilities for his strange loss: Werewolf? Panic-stricken, and momentarily forgetful of his loss, he rushed to the mirror. Oh, horror, still the wall looked back at him, the photo, the icon and the stain, but still no reflection and he thought he saw the eyes of his mother staring back at him – was that pity he saw, or was she mocking him?

'No, no, no! This will not do, and I am forced to ask for your forgiveness. Ignore that last paragraph, well the bit about the Mother's photo that is, that was just my storyteller's imagination kicking in. Force of habit you see; can't resist the temptation to embellish, to dramatise, to entertain. Which is fine with fiction, you, the audience, expects it of us, but I have set myself the task of telling, as they say in court, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. So, back to the story, now where were we? Ah yes, Werewolves, and Yanko reflection-less in front of the mirror.

He felt his face: stubbly, yes (I think you'll agree it's rather difficult to shave with no reflection to guide one) but definitely not hairy. He felt his canine teeth: exactly as he remembered them. He had not experienced any depraved thoughts, nor had his voice changed, so it appeared, much to his relief, that lycanthropy was out of the question. But if he had not been transformed into a Vampire, or into a Werewolf then what was the explanation for his inexplicable condition? Had he sinned in some way? Had he inadvertently upset someone? Or had the *Samodivi* decided to make him the butt of one of their jokes? Yes, that could be it; it was well known that they enjoyed playing practical jokes on humans: curdling the milk in the pail; frightening the carter's horse into bolting cart and all, all manner of cruel tricks. The more he thought about it the more convinced he became

that this was the case, and he set about wondering what he could have done to attract the attentions of these capricious creatures. Had he accidentally strayed onto their territory? Had he trodden on one of their mushroom tables? Or did they suspect him of spying on them while they bathed? He knew this wasn't true, but he had walked home last Wednesday by the river, so it was possible that they had spotted him, and drawn the wrong conclusions. It was a puzzle, and a puzzle of which he could make little sense, and he worried and fretted all day, until, by the time he arrived at Baba Chevenko's house he was exhausted and had developed a nervous tic in his left eye.

She opened the door, took the two bottles of *Rakia*, poured two large measures in two non-too-clean glasses, passed wind and bid him sit down. Once he was seated and she had drained her glass and re-filled it to the brim, she fixed him with a slightly unsteady gaze and

began to speak:

'Yanko, I have given the matter some considerable thought since we last spoke.' she broke off here, took another swig and stared off into space. Yanko waited, and he waited, and he waited. Eventually, thinking that Baba had drifted off into a trance, he cleared his throat. She started, looked at him in surprise and took another swig.

'You were saying, Baba, you'd given it some thought?'

'Given what some thought?'

'My problem' he said, 'you'd said "you'd given the matter some considerable thought since we last spoke."'

'Did I? Then I must have. Remind me, what was the problem again?'

Yanko sighed, and while she finished the first bottle, passed wind and closed her eyes, repeated all he had told her the night before, including his own thoughts and fears regarding lycanthropy and the *Samodivi*.

After he had finished speaking Baba Chevenko remained silent. He thought for a moment she had fallen asleep again, but when he coughed she raised her hand to bid him wait. She remained like that for some minutes, the silence only broken by the slow tick-tick-tocking of the clock, the crackling of the fire and the creaking of the rafters as they moved in the heat. Finally, she sat up, so quickly, and with her eyes so wide and staring that Yanko thought for a moment she must surely be having some kind of seizure. However, before he could react the old lady rose from her chair, waddled across to the ancient chest that stood in the far corner, opened the top drawer, and removed five small river-stones. Yanko had heard of the power of these stones, but until this day had never seen, or wished to see them. She turned,

waddled back to her seat and settled back down.

She did not say a word to Yanko, but clasping the stones to her forehead she began to chant in a language he had never heard, and as she chanted, so she began to sway. Gradually the swaying and the chanting became louder and faster, and the rhythm was such that Yanko found it hypnotic, and he too began to sway. Faster and faster they swayed and louder and louder the old lady chanted, until finally she stopped, abruptly, and threw the stones to the floor where they lay in the dust.

Still she did not speak, but reaching behind her picked up a thin kindling stick, and leaning forward, proceeded to draw lines in the dust linking each stone until she had formed a kind of crude pentagram. This being done she dipped her finger in the chimney soot and carefully copied the pentagram onto a sheet of white paper. She then folded the paper until it

formed a precise pentagon. Only when this was complete did she turn to Yanko and begin to speak:

‘Yanko, you must take this down to the river tonight. Go to the spot by the pollarded willows, and on the stroke of midnight - be precise, not a minute before, or minute after, but on the twelfth stroke - lift the largest river stone you can find and place this spell beneath it. Take some sweetened water, some bread and some honey, and leave that by the stone. Then go home and wait for seven days. On the seventh day return at midnight, and on the stroke of twelve lift the stone – again you must be precise. If the spell has gone, then your apology has been accepted and your reflection will be returned.’

‘But will this really work, Baba Chevenko, will it truly work?’ Baba Chevenko laughed, or rather she cackled what passed for laugh, before replying:

‘Only if you have faith, Yanko; all things are possible if you have faith. Go now, and remember, be precise, it must be done on the stroke of midnight.’

With that she drained the last of the *Rakia*, passed wind again and fell into a deep slumber.

I’m afraid I have a problem now, let me explain. As you already know I have promised you the truth. I have also explained my reasons for choosing the ‘Once upon a time’ opening to the tale. All of this you already know, so I shall not waste valuable storytelling time by reiterating the facts. However, having decided to start in fairy tale manner with ‘Once upon a time’ I am now more or less obliged to end with the stock fairy tale ending ‘and he lived happily ever after.’ The problem is I’m not so sure that he did live happily ever after, but I’ll leave you to judge, and quickly return, without further interruptions, to the denouement of our little saga.

That night Yanko went to the river, and, just as Baba Chevenko had instructed, on the precise stroke of midnight, in the spot by the pollarded willows, he placed the spell under the largest river stone he could find, left the sweetened water, the loaf and the honey and made his way back to his home, where he waited impatiently for the seven days to pass.

On the evening of the sixth day it began to rain, so that by the time Yanko made his way down to the river on the seventh night the river had swollen to a point where it was in danger of bursting its banks. Undeterred, Yanko made his way down to the spot by the pollarded willows, and precisely on the stroke of midnight lifted the stone, peered through the rain and the gloom and let out a cry of triumph. Imagine, if you can, his joy to find the spell gone. Imagine, if you can, his relief at finding his apology (he was by now convinced of his,

albeit accidental, guilt) accepted. Imagine, if you can, the little dance of release he danced there on the river bank, and imagine, if you can, his foot slipping on the sodden bank, and his headlong fall into the river, and his unsuccessful struggle to avoid drowning in the tumultuous torrent. Imagine all this, and ask yourself the question: Could you, after hearing all the facts, accept my finishing this tale 'and he lived happily ever after,?' You do see my problem, don't you?

I think I have a resolution though. Bearing in mind that I have kept my promise to give you the undiluted truth, but that in doing so I have presented myself with a problem; allow me then, just this once, the liberty of using my storyteller's imagination to give this story, and poor Yanko, something approaching a happy end.

I would like to think that Yanko, in his moment of triumph, just before he slipped and fell, had found faith. I would also like to think -and bear with me here - that perhaps, maybe as he came up for the third time, just perhaps, his last view of the world, there on the surface of the water, was of his own reflection. If that was the case then I think we can safely bring this to a close by saying: and he lived happily ever after, and died a happy man.

Recorded 17th July 2007:

Stefan Popovitch and the Great 'What If?'

If we are honest with ourselves there can't be many among us who have not at one time or another asked ourselves the great 'what if?' question. What if we hadn't made this or that decision? What if we had not taken that turn, crossed that road, married that woman or slept with that man's wife? What would have happened? Would we be better off, or would we have regrets? It is these imponderables that at times worry us and rob us of our sleep. It is not unnatural for us humans to do this, and is all part of taking stock of life. Admittedly, the amount of time we spend engaged in this pursuit varies from individual to individual: some rarely do it, usually those who are content, or lack the imagination to be discontented, whilst others spend nearly all of their lives inhabiting the magical world of 'what if?' dreaming and wondering on alternative life stories.

It would be safe to say that before the chance meeting beside the river Stefan Popovitch would have fallen into the former category. A contented man of twenty eight summers, he was unmarried, earned his living on the land, had few vices and even fewer pleasures. The highlight of his week was his Wednesday night out. Every Wednesday night, for as long as his neighbours could remember, Stefan Popovitch would walk the two kilometres of road from his home in Dolno Draglishte to the next village of Gorno Draglishte. There he would spend the evening drinking and conversing until, a little worse for drink, and at a fairly late hour, he would stagger the same route back to his home and the comfort of his bed. It was a routine, and no one knows why Stefan chose to alter that routine, but in the first week of a warm June alter it he did, and with curious and devastatingly life changing

results.

In the weeks, months and years following his change of routine there must have been many occasions when Stefan asked himself the great ‘what if?’ question: what if he had not changed his evening out from Wednesday to Tuesday? What if he had followed his usual route instead of walking the path by the river? And more importantly, what would have happened if he had subsequently listened to his *Baba’s* advice? Unfortunately, as we all know, no matter how often one questions and wonders the facts always remain the same. And thus it was for Stefan for, and for reasons best known to himself, he did go out on that first Tuesday in June, and he did walk the path by the river instead of his usual route on the road, and following the strange events by the bank that evening he did not take heed of his *Baba’s* advice. But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves here – putting the cart before the donkey as it were. Perhaps I had better start at the beginning, and follow Stefan’s journey on that fateful night.

As I have already said we do not know why Stefan changed the habit of a lifetime on that first Tuesday in June. Perhaps it was fate, if you believe in that sort of thing, or perhaps just a whim, who knows? What we do know, is that late in the evening of that Tuesday, just as the sun was sinking below the horizon, Stefan stepped from his home, headed towards the river and set off along the path towards the village of Gorno Draglishte.

The evening was pleasant with just a gentle breeze and the murmur of the river, as it flowed its quiet way down the valley, to distract his thoughts. He was about halfway to his destination when he heard the notes. At first he thought it was just a trick of the waters, playfully playing tunes on the rocky bed. But gradually it dawned on him that this music came from a different source; moreover, it was music so strange, so exquisitely simple and so beautiful, that he felt almost moved to tears. He moved quietly along the bank, for he feared that whoever was playing may well stop if they sensed an audience. As he drew closer to the sound he realised that this music did not come from an instrument; it was the sound of song, but in a language that Stefan had never heard, but which sounded strangely familiar, like a half forgotten memory that reminded him of something he could not quite recall, and filled him with an infinite feeling of both joy and melancholy. As he approached he became aware of a glow as though the area was illuminated by a thousand and one tiny fireflies, invisible but for their glow. He was not afraid, for some inner sense told him he had nothing to fear. He thought at first that she had spotted him, for as he gazed in wonder from his spot in the willow break; she raised her head, and, like a frightened hind, appeared to sniff the air. He stood still, hardly daring to breathe. He had never seen such beauty: her hair was like golden

silk, and hung down to below her waist; her eyes, large and emerald green; her skin glowed like polished marble in the moonlight. She was naked and seated on a rock in the middle of the river. Her clothes were piled on the bank, and it was obvious that he had disturbed her whilst she bathed. He stood in the willows, not daring to move, and trying hard to breathe as silently as possible. Eventually she appeared to relax, and returned to her ablutions. Still he watched, mesmerised by the sheer perfection of the creature, and as he watched, so he resolved to have this woman for his own. He, Stefan Popovitch, for the first time in his life had fallen in love. There, on the river bank, before he had even spoken to her, or she to him, he surrendered his heart. But how to win her, that was the question? He was ill at ease with women at the best of times and his limited experience at attempted wooing of the village maidens had always ended in utter humiliation. It was as though, when confronted with a woman, his tongue would swell to twice its size and his brain shrink to about a quarter of its capacity. The result was he either did not speak at all, or if he did he would sound like the village idiot, and the woman, depending on her compassion, or lack of, would either laugh in his face, walk away or back off with some feeble attempt at an excuse. He was well aware of his shortcomings, and knew that with something as important as his first and last love (yes, he was that certain) he was in need of help and advice. He knew exactly where to go to get that help and advice; the house where he always went whenever he was troubled, or in need. Yes, she would know what to do. He would go to her house, he would go and tell her of his love, and she would advise him what to do, for his *Baba* was the wisest woman in the village, and his *Baba* never laughed at him, or sent him away, or made excuses. His *Baba* loved him unreservedly, and would be pleased for him. His *Baba* also had the sharpest tongue, the hardest hand, when called upon to use it, and probably the softest heart in the village.

‘Are you mad child?’ his *Baba* still insisted on calling him ‘child’ in spite of his age and the fact that he towered head and shoulders above her. ‘What do you know of love you stupid boy?’ Don’t you realise the danger you are in just looking at her? You could be transformed. She could turn you into a sheep – though god knows you’d be too foolish for a sheep. My god! You could end roasted at Easter – we could all feast on your carcass. In love? Marriage? Huh!’ With that she spat in the fire, took a long puff at her pipe and blew the smoke into a large ring. ‘In love! Huh! That’s what love is child.’ She said pointing her middle finger suggestively through the smoke ring. ‘Can’t wait to wet your pecker can you child? All the same, you men, all sex and no sense.’

Stefan was amazed, he had never seen his *Baba* so incensed, so angry. Oh, there had been many times when he had had to endure a tongue lashing, even the odd thrashing, but never had he seen her show this amount of anger, and he could not understand.

‘But, *Baba*, it’s not like that, I really do –’

‘But me no buts, Stefan Popovitch, I’ve been on this earth too long to listen to buts. What you are proposing is not only stupid, it’s unnatural. These people may look human, but they are not, and what is more they hate us, child; hate us with a vengeance. Marry one of these – these things, and you will live to regret it, but you will not live long, of that you can be certain.’ she sighed, and when she saw the effect her words were having, softened her tone slightly. ‘Come here, child, sit here next to me, just as you used to as a boy. That’s it, make yourself comfortable, and listen carefully to your old *Baba*.’ Stefan did as he was bidden, sat crossed legged on the floor next to his *Baba*’s chair and gazed into the fire. His *Baba* sighed, stroked his hair and began again to speak:

‘I know what it’s like, child, I know how important all this is to you. I know what it’s like to be in love.’ and she laughed at the look of incredulity her Stefan gave her. ‘What do you think you’re the only one ever to make a fool of themselves over love? Think your old *Baba* incapable? I wasn’t always this old and ugly you know, oh no, once I was considered quite a beauty, and once I too fell in love. Surprised are you child? Well it’s true, I once loved, and I once lost, and I got over it; I’m still here, I didn’t die of a broken heart, though god knows there were times when I thought, and wished, that I might, but I didn’t, I survived, and so, my child, will you.’

‘But, *Baba*, you married my *Dyado*, you married the man you loved.’ At this his *Baba* gave a sad little laugh, and continued:

‘Yes, child, I did marry your *Dyado*, and yes I grew to love and respect him, but, and I have never confessed this before to a living soul, I did not marry the man I was in love with; that was impossible, but I have never forgotten him, or stopped loving him. When I married your *Dyado* it was a compromise, and that, my child, is something we must all do from time to time. It is what you must do. Forget these silly notions and marry a local girl; marry Viara, she’s young and, judging from the looks she gives you, though you appear too blind to notice, she’d snap you up. There, child, that’s my advice, marry Viara.’

‘Marry Viara? *Baba*, she’s over thirty, fat and has a harelip, no one in his right mind would marry Viara.’

‘Come, come, child, she’s not that bad. Forget her minor imperfections, and look at her assets. She’s sweet natured, her parents own thirty three hectares of land, she’s an only child,

so if she marries the husband inherits and she's hardly likely to be unfaithful. As for the harelip, why, it's hardly noticeable, just remember to turn the lights out at bed time and that in the dark all cats are grey; and as for the weight? Well, more for you to cuddle up to on long winter nights, something substantial to get hold of. Yes, child, the more I think of it the more I'm convinced that Viara is the one you should marry. A pretty face is all well and good, but looks will fade, whereas thirty three hectares of good land will be there forever. So, what do you say, child, will you marry Viara, or are you too far gone in love to see sense?'

'*Baba*, I will not marry Viara, or any of the village girls. There is only one woman for me; why can't you understand that? I would like your blessing, *Baba*, and I would like your help and advice, but be sure, my mind is made up, there can be no other for me, and with, or without your blessing, help and advice, I am determined to try. I have no option, *Baba*, I have to try.'

'Oh, Stefan, my child, what am I to do with you? You are my only living relative, and your happiness and well-being are the most important things in the world to me; more important than my own life.' she sighed deeply, drew again on her pipe and once more blew a contemplative smoke ring into the room. She remained silent for a few minutes, deep in thought, while the clock ticked and the fire crackled, before sighing once more and continuing:

'You asked for my advice, child, I have given you my advice, and that advice does not change; to marry this – this *Samodiva* would be madness. You ask for my blessing, and for that same reason I cannot give it you; though God knows I find it hard to refuse you anything. But for me to give my blessing would be for me to be complicit in your eventual downfall, and I love you too much to do that. However, and I do this against my better judgement, and in the hope that God will forgive me, as you are so determined, and as you refuse my advice, I will help you. But only because without my help you would stand no chance; you stand little enough with it, but without you would be doomed to failure, and worse.'

'Oh, *Baba*, I knew you would help, knew you would know what do. Tell me, *Baba*, how do I woo her, how do I win her?'

'Not in the same way as you would Viara. She will not wait by the well for you to snatch her posy of *Zdravets* and Sweet Basil; nor will she allow you to drink from her pitcher. None of this will work with a *Samodiva*. You can never woo, or win these creatures; all you can do is to trick them, and that's not easy, for they are tricky little creatures themselves, and if you're not careful you could be the one who ends up being tricked.'

‘But not with your help, *Baba*. Tell me what to do.’

‘There are only two possible ways, and both are fraught with danger; are you sure you want to risk this?’

‘Never more sure of anything, *Baba*, just tell me what to do; I promise to be careful.’

‘Alright, alright, already! May God forgive me, I will tell you. The first way sounds simple, but is the most dangerous, and frankly my child I would not recommend you try; it’s not for you.’

‘Tell me, *Baba*, just tell me.’

‘You must trick her into looking at her reflection in a mirror.’

‘Reflection, how does that solve my problem? And how can that dangerous? I could do that easily, why do you say it’s not for me?’

‘Questions, questions, questions, always asking questions: a mirror will capture the soul of a *Samodiva*; it is dangerous because *Samodivi* are not stupid, and could trick you into seeing your own reflection, and thus capture your soul – it works both ways you see. As for it not being for you, child, well, to outwit a *Samodiva* takes brains, cunning and courage, and you, my child, are sadly lacking the first two. You would not stand a chance. No, your only hope is with the second way, and that can be risky too. But, yes, you might just manage the second way, now be a good lad and fetch your old *Baba* a glass of water. All this talking has quite parched my throat.’ Stefan hurried out to the pump, drew a large pitcher of cold water, collected a glass and took it all back to his *Baba*, where he re-seated himself, and waited as patiently as he was able while the old lady quenched her thirst.

‘Now, child,’ she continued, ‘where were we? Are yes, the second way. You say you saw her bathing?’

‘Yes, *Baba*, she was beautiful.’

‘Yes, child, so you said. Then this could very well be your best chance. Yes, if you were to catch her unawares while she bathes, and steal an item of clothing, or her comb, or any other piece of apparel.’

‘But, *Baba*, what good will that do?’

‘Oi, yoi, yoi, more questions. My child, you have to understand, the power of the *Samodivi* resides in their apparel, steal an item and you rob them of their power; they have to submit to your will. Not willingly; they would never do that, but they will submit.’

‘You mean, *Baba*, that if I demanded she would have to marry me; she would have to become my wife?’

‘Yes, Stefan, she would, but believe me it would not be a happy marriage. I have known of

two of these mixed marriages, and in both cases the man disappeared, and was never seen again. Be warned, my child, if you go through with this madness, ignore my advice, we may never see each other again. Think again, Stefan, if only for your old *Baba's* sake; you're all I have left in this world.'

'*Baba*, I must do this, but I promise, no matter what, you will see me again and when you do I will be smiling.' With that he rose to his feet, kissed the old woman on the cheek and strode out into the night.

She sat for a while after he had left, deep in thought and puffing on her pipe. After half an hour had passed, she rose from her chair, walked across to the old chest, opened the draw and removed five round stones. Returning to her place at the fire, she sat, closed her eyes and began mumbling incantations in a language not heard for centuries. The recitation finished, she blew three times on the stones then tossed them into the ashes in the hearth. She studied the pattern left by the pebbles, copied it onto a piece of parchment, which she then folded into a perfect pentacle. Holding the paper to her brow, she once more closed her eyes and began a further incantation. As soon as she had finished her strange conjuration, a sudden gust of wind blew the door open, snatched the parchment from her hand and hurtled it into the fire where it was instantly consumed. She smiled, sighed, closed the door and whispered: 'May the gods take care of you, my child, for now I have done all I can.'

For the next three days and nights storms raged through the mountains and Stefan was forced to stay in the shelter of his home. He longed for a break in the weather, and prayed that the storms might cease so that he could once again visit the river bank, and put his *Baba's* plan into action. Day after day, and night after night, he waited and he waited and he waited, until finally on the fourth day the morning dawned bright, clear and full of Balkan promise. He felt that at long last the fates were beginning to shine on him once more, and he vowed to walk the river path that night despite the waters being dangerously high and the banks treacherously muddy.

The day seemed to drag, and Stefan spent most of his time anxiously watching the skies for signs of the storms returning. The seconds appeared to him like minutes, the minutes like hours and the hours unending, but eventually the time passed, as time always will and the sun set, night came and with it a full Balkan moon which lit the landscape in an eerie silvered glow.

From his position at the window Stefan viewed the scene once more, then, turning, walked

out of his door into the still clear air and hurried down to the river, and towards his destiny.

The night was still, and the only noise: the roaring of the turbulent river, which played in violent counterpoint to the strange beauty of the moonlit landscape. Stefan felt no fear, though he several times came close to slipping on the muddy banks into the raging torrent. On he walked in a kind of dream, oblivious to both the danger and the powerful beauty of his surroundings. Walking, and walking, and walking, mesmerised by the dreadful music of the waters, and driven on by his obsession and his love.

We can only wonder what would have happened if Stefan had slipped that night? Or what would have happened if fear of the unknown had forced him to finally heed his *Baba's* warning, turn and head for home? Or, indeed, what would have happened if the *Samodiva* had not been at her usual spot on that night? But all of these 'what ifs?' are pure speculation, because he did not slip that night, neither did he succumb to fear and turn tail for home and the *Samodiva* was in her usual spot bathing, so what happened, happened, and all the 'what ifs?' in the world will cannot change that.

He heard her singing first before he saw her. Her voice, though soft, appeared to somehow dull the incessant roar of the waters until they faded from his hearing. Such was the beauty of the notes that Stefan became momentarily unable to move as tears ran down his cheeks. He finally forced himself to creep closer till finally he spotted her, seated on the same rock as she had been before, and looking even more lovely and spectral by the light of the moon. For a moment he found it impossible to tear his eyes away from her, and he feared that if he as much as breathed she would take fright like a hind startled by the hunter and flee the spot; he wanted the moment to last forever.

Eventually he managed to look away, and there on the bank he saw what he was looking for. There, in a neat pile, lay her gown, her belt, her slippers and a golden comb. He knew what he must do, but for a moment his conscience nagged him, sending doubts through his mind like the buzzing of persistent flies. If he did this thing it would be theft; moreover, not just common theft, but theft of another's soul – a crime worse than murder. For the first time since Stefan had first set eyes on her he began to doubt his decision, and for several minutes wrestled with his fears, his doubts and with his obsession. However, as a rule, obsession makes us all steadfast in our resolve, and Stefan was no exception to this rule. Silently, like the thief he was about to become, he stole forward, taking cover where he could, and

eventually crept to the spot, leaned forward and grasped hold of the golden comb.

The instant his fingers lay hold of the treasure the notes changed to a dirge so mournful that Stefan thought his heart would stop beating at the sound. Turning towards the river he faced the *Samodiva* in her despair. So touched was he by her sorrow, that he moved to place the comb back from where he taken it, but the *Samodiva* raised her hand to stop him. She then fixed him with a gaze so penetrating that he felt sure she must see right into his soul, smiled and beckoned him forward.

He felt no cold, discomfort or fear as he walked into the waters. It did not worry him that the current threatened to drag him down, or that the water was growing deeper and deeper, and as the torrent finally closed over his head he felt nothing more than a wonderful sense of calm, peace and overwhelming joy.

In the days, weeks and months that followed Stefan's mysterious disappearance speculation grew as to what could have happened to him. The various searches of local rivers, mountains and lakes revealed no clues as to his whereabouts, or fate. Most assumed that he must be dead, but were puzzled by the lack of remains. Some said he must have been eaten by wolves, bones and all. Others favoured bears to be the culprits, and some, those of a more superstitious turn of nature, murmured darkly about evil forces at work, but there were few of those for these were enlightened times, and most either did not believe, or wished others to think that they did not believe in such things.

The old lady, when questioned about her grandson's disappearance, made no mention of the *Samodiva*, of his visit to her, or of her part in the matter. But she felt the guilt, and felt the shame, and never stopped blaming herself.

The burden she bore of shame and of guilt did not diminish with time, and as the weeks turned into months and the months into years the burden grew heavier and she wished that she could die. Many were the times when she contemplated taking her own life, and, though she knew this act to be a sin, would have, but for one thing. Whenever she came close to committing the act she would recall Stefan's last words to her 'I promise, no matter what, you will see me again, and when you do I will be smiling' it was almost as if he were there in the room with her and speaking. She drew great strength from this, and had faith that this would one day come about, and she determined not to die before seeing her darling child once more.

It was two o'clock in the morning on the sixth anniversary of his disappearance when *Baba* had her dream. So vivid was it that she woke with a start convinced that she had heard his

voice calling out to her. She listened, but the only sound was the ticking of the clock, and the occasional creaking of the sleeping house. Restless, and knowing she would not sleep again that night, she rose from her bed, dressed, opened the door and stared out at the village as it slumbered in the moonlight. Not a creature was stirring. No breath of wind disturbed the trees, which stood silhouetted against the sky for all the world like skeletal sentinels guarding the quiet street.

As she stood, and in spite of the silence, she became aware of a strange alien music, not music that she could hear, and not music that she could recognise, it was as if she were feeling the notes, and not receiving them aurally. She found this curious, but felt no fear, for the music was bewitching, like the music of heaven.

Though the notes surrounded her, and gave no hint as to direction, she somehow sensed that they emanated from the river, and so, gently closing the door behind her, she made her way slowly down to the water's edge.

As she approached the river, the air appeared to grow subtly brighter and more silvery. At first she thought it a trick of the light reflecting back from the waters, but as she drew closer the light began to flicker and pulse in time with the music, and the closer she got to the bank the more pronounced this effect became, until finally she reached the edge, and stared at the far bank in disbelief and wonder.

She had never seen such beautiful creatures in her life, and she watched as they danced, their steps so light and graceful, that they appeared to float and drift across the ground like a morning mist in human form. She instinctively knew that they were not of this world, and was equally as certain that they meant her no harm. Just watching them made her feel great peace, and for the first time in six years she smiled and shed tears of joy. As the tears rolled from her cheeks into the waters, so the music ceased and the creatures turned towards her smiling.

As she watched, unable and unwilling to turn away, the group parted and four figures walked forward to the bank: a man, a woman and two young children. As they approached the man leaned down, whispered to the children, pointed across at her, waved and smiled his old familiar smile. She recognised him immediately, he had kept his promise; he had come back. He leaned down and spoke to the children once more, and they too waved their hands. He then linked arms with the woman and all four beckoned her across, and she strode without fear into the dark waters.

She was missed right away the following morning, for such is the way of village life, and the

alarm was raised. By midday search parties were sent once more to all the likely spots, but to no avail, and they were amazed that she appeared to have vanished into thin air in the same way as her grandson.

Some, if not all, felt a certain element of guilt; felt perhaps they should have kept more of an eye on the old lady. But time passed, and the guilt receded, and after a while they forgot, and soon no one mentioned, or asked themselves ‘could we have done more? Should we have watched her more closely?’ and, of course, ‘what if we had?’

Recorded 14th August 2007: Sofia

The Experiment

When you kill a man you become a thief as well as a murderer. You rob him of that gift which is most precious to him: you rob him of everything he is, everything he ever was and everything he may have one day become. Moreover, this theft cannot be undone; the stolen goods are non-returnable and no insurance company can replace that which is lost on a ‘new for old replacement policy’. It is gone forever, irreplaceable, disappeared from the face of the earth, and all that remains for the friends, relatives and loved ones left behind are memories, regrets and thoughts of what might have been.

A man who commits such a crime instantly becomes an outsider. Irrespective of whether his crime is discovered, or remains concealed, he puts himself beyond the pale, he changes inside, becomes a man who has broken a commandment, and in his own mind this sets him apart from his fellow human beings. He becomes a social leper, a man who is adrift, who lives in constant terror of discovery and who daily relives the events of his sin; such a man was Todor Bodovitch.

There are many and varied reasons why one human may resort to killing another. The list is almost endless: love, hate, envy, fear, greed, colour, creed, pleasure, all of these, and many more, have been used as excuses, or justification, to steal another’s life. But in this Todor Bodovitch differs from his fellow murderers, for when he killed he had none of these reasons, in fact when he buried his knife into his victim’s throat he barely knew the man’s name. He had no idea who his victim really was, where he came from and until that fateful night had never in his life spoken to the man before; In effect he murdered a total stranger, and for no

apparent reason. But of course there must have been a reason, however spurious, and there was, and to find that reason we need to go back in time, and look at an incident that occurred just three weeks after Todor Bodovitch's seventh birthday, an incident that was to change his life, colour his thinking and haunt his dreams for the rest of his existence.

Todor Bodovitch was an only child. By nature shy and reclusive, he found it hard to make friends and spent most of his time with his father whom he idolised as only lonely young boys can idolise a father. Todor's father, Todor senior, was the village butcher and the boy liked nothing better than to sit and watch his father at work. He was fascinated by the way his father efficiently and quickly dissected the dead animals. He thrilled to watch his parent wield cleaver, axe and the exquisitely sharp boning knife, and longed for the day, when he was fully grown to manhood, of following in his father's footsteps.

In those days it was common for the butcher to also slaughter the animals. The villagers would bring along their animals: pigs, lambs, goats and the occasional bull calf, and Todor senior would then dispatch the animal, bleed and joint the carcass. The young Todor was never allowed to witness the slaughter, his mother argued that he was too delicate, too young and that it was not a sight for the eyes of children. Todor senior, not a man to argue with his wife, allowed her to have her way despite protests from the young Todor who, much like any child, or adult for that matter, found himself yearning for that which was forbidden. This yearning blossomed into a near obsession until he could bear it no longer, and, knowing that Yanko, the village blacksmith, was due to bring in a lamb for slaughter the following morning, resolved to hide away and spy on his father.

That morning young Todor, having finished his breakfast, quietly left the room, crept into his father's shop, and hid himself in a small cupboard from which vantage point he could spy through a knot hole in the door; it was exactly three weeks after his seventh birthday, and he was about to witness his first sight of death.

He had been in his hiding place for over half an hour by the time his father and Yanko entered the building. Yanko was leading a medium size lamb by means of a string tied around its neck. Young Todor was immediately struck by the passive innocence of the beast, for it appeared totally oblivious as to its fate as it skipped merrily behind the two men, occasionally chewing playfully at the string.

He held his breath while his father and Yanko exchanged local gossip, argued over the fee

and arranged a time for picking up the jointed carcass. He was growing cramped in his tiny space, and as the minutes ticked by he became more and more uncomfortable, but he dared not move for fear of discovery. Not that his father would punish him, more that he felt ashamed at disobeying his mother, and, truth be known, was starting to feel apprehensive about the whole business, and beginning to question the wisdom of his decision. Finally, though, the business was completed, the two men shook hands and Yanko left the building leaving Todor senior and the lamb, which was still busy chewing the string, alone together. Young Todor watched in awe as his father reached for his boning knife, placed the lamb gently between his knees and with one deft movement slit its throat. There was no sound apart from the splashing of the blood as it spurting from the wound, and the lamb appeared to feel no pain. For a moment the sight and smell of the blood made him feel quite queasy, and he feared he might be sick and betray his presence, but then through the knot hole he caught sight of the lamb's eyes, they were less than a metre away, and what he saw in them was to affect him for the rest of his life. For in those few seconds between the slashing of the knife and final expiration he experienced in the eyes of the lamb that transition from the vibrancy of life to the finality of death. It excited him and he wondered and envied at the power his father had. From that moment on he knew that he wanted that power; he wanted the power of life or death. It was not a conscious thing with him, this desire to wield the knife, and to witness the death of a creature, and at the tender age of seven years, it manifested itself simply as a young boy's desire to follow in his father's footsteps, and was accepted by one and all as a perfectly natural and desirable state of affairs, and in some cases was the envy of other father's whose sons had chosen alternative trades.

Such was his perseverance about learning his father's craft as early as possible that he soon persuaded his parents to allow him to witness everything; including subsequent slaughtering. It never failed to thrill and excite him; it was the eyes, always the eyes, and he never tired of watching the exit of vital spirit.

Nobody suspected his pleasure, his father assumed that his rapt attention was just a product of his son's serious nature and of his desire to learn all there was to know about the trade. To a certain extent this was true, he was interested in all aspects, but the jointing, bleeding, curing and hanging was just work to him; slaughter was the true pleasure. However, from the very start he was careful to ensure that no one noticed his preference. Instinct told him that there would be those who would not understand, so he kept his thoughts to himself and never gave any hint of his now growing need.

As the years drew on the father allowed the son to try his hand with the killing knife, and was surprised by how quickly he picked up the knack. He was a little disturbed when the boy insisted on looking the animal in the eye, but the boy, who had grown crafty in concealing the truth, explained that he felt obliged out of respect to the animal to witness its death. The father felt humbled by the depth of his son's compassion, and was often heard to proudly boast about his boy's sensitivity.

When adolescence came to young Todor it brought a change, for he found that the act now sexually aroused him in a way that none of his female peers were ever able to do. This was to be the way of things now, for throughout the rest of his life he spurned the attentions of any female who showed an interest. Most people who knew him put this down to his natural shyness, and many women found his lack of response either charming, or saw it as a challenge. Whatever their response though, his was always the same: polite but cold and distant. For him the greatest sexual thrill was to look into the eyes of a dying animal as the light of life began to flicker and fade, and the more often he experienced it, the more often he wanted it, until it became a need that had to be satisfied; a growing ravenous hunger that never appeared to be fully sated and intensified as he grew older and entered into full maturity.

He was just three weeks away from his twentieth birthday when the idea first crept surreptitiously through the dark pathways of his mind. His father was by now semi-retired and young Todor had taken over the reins of the family business and now tended to all slaughtering. It was the last Tuesday in May, and he had just watched the dimming eyes of a young bull calf and was breathing in the warm metallic smell of freshly spilled blood with the same sense of sensual pleasure as that of a wine connoisseur savouring vintage Bordeaux, when it came to him, and he wondered: would it be the same? Would killing another human being be as pleasurable? Or would it be more so? He knew from his priest (for he was a devout man and regular church goer) that man differed from other animals in that man had the gift of reason, and more importantly, a soul. Would he, he pondered, be able to witness the departure of that soul through the eyes? Would it be different, could it be different? It was just a fleeting thought, which the young man dismissed almost immediately from his mind. However, the seed had been planted, moreover, it had been planted in fertile soil and in ideal conditions; after that it took little to nurture it into a fully grown plant that would

blossom and eventually bear fruit. It was as if every time young Todor slaughtered an animal the blood fed and watered the seed, germinating it into life, and then nursing its green shoots until finally it developed and matured and took hold with roots that would never be budged. With each successive kill the thought returned unbidden to his mind like a visiting ghost, and at each return it became a little stronger, and a little more compelling until the thought grew and became a desire, and the desire grew and became an obsession, and the obsession grew and became a certainty: he now knew that he would have to find out the answer to his question, and until he did that he would find no peace.

Do not think that this man did what he eventually did without giving some thought to the matter, because he did not. He wrestled long and hard with the rights and wrongs of the matter, and studied the words of the sixth commandment in great depth for he did not think himself a violent man by nature, and was deeply pious. However, he reasoned that he was not like other men, his job set him apart – other men paid him to kill, and thought highly of him for the compassionate way in which he carried out his work. No, he thought: if I were to kill a man, providing it was not done with malice, or for gain, and executed with as much efficiency, compassion and care as was possible, then how could that be sinful in the eyes of God? This process of reasoning was not for him a quick or an easy one. It was a decision made after much thought and self examination; it was a process that took years, not months or weeks, of careful self examination and cross examination. It was a decision forged in the fierce fires of conscience, Christian belief and a genuine desire not to sin; Once the decision was made though it was irrevocable. All that was needed now was a plan, an opportunity and, of course, a victim.

The latter of these three needs proved to be the most difficult, for when he thought of all his fellow villagers, he could not imagine himself dispatching (he always used the word ‘dispatch’, because he thought ‘murder’ inappropriate to his deed) anyone he knew. He worried that his knowledge of them might colour the experience, that he would inevitably be affected by preconceived ideas. No, he reasoned, the subject (he never considered using the word ‘victim,’) of the experiment (for ‘experiment’ is how he now perceived the deed) must be unknown to him; he, and it had to be a man, for his sensibility, for some unknown reason, balked at the idea of a female subject, would have to be a complete stranger. They would have to know absolutely nothing about one another. This created another problem, for, for this to happen, the experiment would have to be random; an act of the moment, and Todor knew that this would invalidate the experiment. No, he would have to choose his subject

first, observe his habits, his comings and goings, and plan very carefully. But how, that was the question? To find a stranger would mean leaving the village, and he had never set foot outside the village in his life, if he were to start going now people would ask questions, and the last thing he wanted was people asking questions.

No matter how hard he pondered on the problem he could find no answer to his dilemma, and was nearing to despair with the frustration of it all. With each passing day and with each successive slaughter so his obsession grew; he knew now that animals would never again sate his appetite as they had before; he needed a miracle, and in the early spring of that year the miracle arrived in the shape of an English business man by the name of Forbes.

Forbes was an astute business man willing to turn his hand to anything providing it gave an subsequent profit. He was in his early forties, fit, unmarried and with his eye fixed firmly on the tourist potential of this region. Along with three other associates they had plans to develop the whole of the valley and built four tournament standard golf courses. Over the preceding four years, since admission into the EU had first been mooted, the consortium had been surreptitiously buying up parcels of land. Now they owned most of the land west of the river, much of which had a perfect lie for golf. Now that EU membership had become a certainty it was time to start realising their investment.

Each of the four men was to stay in the country to oversee the individual development of the four courses. They were to be state of the art, with hotels, restaurants, apartments and shopping complexes. It was their aim to eventually compete with Spain and Portugal in providing golfing centres of excellence. It was a tall order, but they had confidence that they could do it, and had already attracted some very rich backers. The goodwill of the locals, though not essential, was, Forbes argued, highly desirable, and one of the first jobs would be to foster this goodwill; another good reason for moving to the country. Thus it was that Forbes came to Todor's part of the valley, moved into a large house on the outskirts of the village, bribed the mayor, employed a cook, maid and handyman and began his work, while at the same time Todor began his.

For three weeks Todor watched, looking for a pattern of habits, for he needed to know when and where his subject would be. It was not easy, Forbes was a worker, and had much to do. He started work early, and finished late, moreover, he had no set routine; he merely went when and where he was most needed. However, by the end of the three weeks Todor noticed that at the end of each day Forbes would eat his evening meal, stroll from his house, cross the

river and walk along the bank and back; it was Forbes' much needed constitutional, and Todor's much needed ideal opportunity.

Three nights later Todor was waiting on the river bank. It was a full moon, and he made no attempt to conceal himself. As Forbes drew near Todor strode towards him and as they drew level Forbes smiled and nodded in greeting.

It was all he had anticipated, and more. The look of surprise on the English stranger's face as the knife sliced through his throat and vocal chords, the fading light in the eyes as Todor gently eased him to the ground; and yes, he was sure he'd seen it - sure he'd seen the soul leave the body.

He stayed there for some minutes, kneeling beside the body, too physically, emotionally and sexually drained to move, before rising to his feet, turning, and without a backward glance, walking slowly back to the village and his home; no one had seen him leave or return.

The body was discovered the following morning by the village herdsman, who, after taking a long swig of Rakia to steady his nerves, ran back to report the matter to Sergeant Markov. The Sergeant was at a loss to know what to do, there had never been a murder in the village before, not in his lifetime anyhow, so he ran straight to the mayor to ask advice. The mayor was shocked, a murder in his village, and a foreigner too, there would be the devil to pay, decisive action was needed. Lifting the phone he dialled the number of the district Chief of Police and deftly passed the buck, it would be the Chief's problem now; that was, after all, what he was paid for.

The police were at a loss as to what to do. They were not equipped to deal with such a major crime. They rarely had much trouble in the valley: petty pilfering, traffic infractions, disputes between family or neighbours and the odd drunken fist fight, was about as exciting as it ever got, but now a murder; a murder of a powerful foreigner, a murder with no clues and a murder with apparently no motive. His well stocked wallet, expensive watch and gold chain were still on the body, so it was not robbery. The man did not covet other men's wives, so it was not jealousy. The man had only been with them about three weeks, and had already made himself popular with many of the locals: he was always friendly, always approachable. He had made a point of explaining, through the mayor, just what his plans were for the valley. There was no opposition to his proposals, quite the opposite, the projects would bring much needed work to the valley, and already people were benefiting from sale of land and new

jobs. On top of this, learning that the village school did not have a computer or TV facility, he donated both items out of his own pocket. In short Forbes had come determined to oil the wheels of commerce by winning the hearts and minds of the locals and had been successful. Whilst Todor, in determining to carry out his experiment, had by pure chance committed the perfect murder.

For several weeks following the crime the village was in an uproar. Hardly a day went by when they were not subjected to questioning from the police, visits from the media or edicts from politicians in central government demanding speedy action to catch the perpetrator. Eventually though it began to die down, the dog of media lost interest and found a tastier bone to chew on, the police lost what little heart they ever had, the politicians returned to the job of ingratiating themselves with the electorate and the village began to settle back down to its steady, slow rhythm of life. Normality gradually seeped back into everyday happenings, and the Englishman, Forbes, became a memory, not forgotten, but less and less spoken of, and was soon to become just another part of village folklore; a tale to be told from time to time, perhaps, whilst seated round the fire during long winter evenings to fright and delight the listeners.

Todor, meanwhile, was unaffected by the entire furore. He had been questioned once, but then so had every other male in the village, so there was nothing unusual in this. For him it was as if the hue and cry related to another crime – and indeed, in his own mind, he did not feel he had committed a crime at all. He continued in his work as though nothing had changed, which for him was true. If he remembered Forbes at all it was in a disembodied way – the way a scientist might remember a subject rat or mouse, but never as a human being, and never ever as a victim.

As the weeks turned into months Todor began to have doubts, he began to wonder if he had really seen the soul leave the body that night, and as his doubts grew, so too did his desire to repeat the experiment and he began to feel the need growing in him, a need that he knew would one day have to be satisfied; a ravenous appetite that would demand to be fed and over which he instinctively knew he was fast losing control. For the first time in his life Todor began to experience twinges of panicked conscience. It was shortly after this that Forbes made his first return visit.

It was five months after the incident on the river bank, and Todor had just finished jointing a

lamb carcass and was about to display it ready for sale when out of the corner of his eye he spotted him. Just a glimpse, you understand, there in shadows in the far corner. He gasped in terror stricken shock, spun on his heel, knife at the ready, but there was nothing there, just an old smock and his father's apron hanging from a hook. Trembling, his breath uneven and with the sweat beading on his forehead, he walked tentatively to the corner, and with the blade of the knife slowly moved the clothing to one side; there was still nothing there. He checked again; still nothing, and gradually he began to calm. Trick of the light he thought, I've been working too hard, yes, he reasoned, just a spot of silliness, and best forgotten. With that he returned to his table and resumed his work, but despite himself, and his reasoning, he could not stop himself from glancing every now and again at the shadows in the corner, and could not rid himself of the feeling that someone, or something was watching him.

For the next three nights he slept badly and was plagued with vague and terrifying nightmares, from which he awoke trembling, covered in sweat but with no distinct memory of what his dreams had been about.

On the fourth night he awoke in the same way, but this time he felt certain there was a presence in the room. Something was watching, and Todor felt his bowels loosen with fear. The room was flooded with light from the moon, and he forced himself to look around the room. He very nearly screamed in terror, for there in the far corner stood a familiar figure. There it stood stock still, its features illuminated ghostly white by the moon, there was no mistaking it: it was the Englishman, Forbes. Todor tried to speak, but the words would not come. Slowly the figure raised its right arm and extended an accusatory finger towards Todor; still it did not speak. They stayed like this, frozen statue-like, for several seconds, before Todor finally found his voice, screamed and switched on the light. There was nothing there, no figure, no trace of a figure; it had disappeared with the light.

Over the following few weeks the visitations became more frequent, and each time the figure remained silent, but for Todor the pointing finger proved eloquent enough. Forbes would appear at almost any time and in almost any place, but was never seen by anyone else but Todor, who had by now taken to speaking to the man. He pleaded to be left alone, but it was futile, and the visits increased in frequency. Todor lost the desire to eat, and was too afraid to sleep. The pressure was beginning to tell: he had lost weight; his eyes were rheumy, bloodshot and dark ringed, his work was starting to suffer and more worryingly he now wandered about the village muttering, and occasionally shouting to himself.

His fellow villagers were starting to worry that he was going mad, and there were dark

murmurings about ‘bewitchment’. Others remarked that he had the look of a man pursued by demons, and his parents suggested that he visit the priest; it was advice he did not take, and indeed how could he? All he could do was to wait and hope that Forbes would tire, or that the matter would find some other resolution. There had to be an end, for he knew that if there weren’t he would be driven out of his mind. He was correct, there was to be an end to it, and it came the following week while he was at work.

The local builder had just completed the building of a new house, and as was the tradition was holding a party for the new owners and his workmen. Again, as was the tradition, a whole goat kid was to be roasted as part of the feast, and it was this kid that Todor was about to put to the knife. A straight forward job and one he had completed many times before. This time though was to be different, very different indeed.

He had taken up his position in front of the kid, knife poised ready to complete the task, when the temperature in the room dropped suddenly and the hairs on the back of his neck started to rise. Fearfully he forced himself to turn and look in the corner where he had first seen Forbes, and was relieved to find it empty, but for the old smock and the apron. He breathed a sigh of relief, and turned his attention back to the kid.

As he was about to draw the knife across the beast’s throat something curious happened, for as he gazed into the creature’s eyes its face appeared to melt like hot wax on a candle. He watched mesmerised by this strange phenomenon, and as he watched so the face of the kid changed, until finally he found himself gazing, horror-struck, not into the eyes and face of the kid, but into the eyes and face of the Englishman, Forbes. What he saw there, as he gazed into those eyes, filled him with terror, for the eyes told him what he must do, and he knew he would have to obey; he had no option.

Knife in hand he walked trance-like from shop, back to his home. Once there he went into his bedroom, seated himself in front of the mirror, looked into his own eyes – it was the eyes, always the eyes - raised the knife and with precision and his usual efficiency sliced through his own throat.

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The Downfall and Subsequent Salvation of Todor Yenkov.

Once upon a time. No, no, no, no! There I go again, yet another fairy tale start. It's ridiculous; here we are in 2010, and here's me starting a story with 'Once upon a time' it really will not do. I apologize, I should know better. My only excuse is that this story does contain elements of the magical, but even so, it really is unforgivable. However, there is a story to be told, and I warn you now it is a strange little tale, so without further ado, and without resorting to any more once-upon-a-timing, or long-ago-in-a-far-away-placing or any other such stock fairy tale beginnings, and providing you are sitting comfortably, I shall begin the strange, but true, story of the downfall and salvation of Todor Yenkov.

Todor Yenkov was born and bred in a small mountain village in south west Bulgaria. There was nothing remarkable about his birth, nothing to mark him out as being in any way special. Indeed until the age of fourteen he lived the normal life of any child growing up in modern day Bulgaria: helping his parents in the fields, going to the local school, observing the saints days and regularly attending church. He was a thoughtful, introspective child, polite and quietly spoken (that is when he did speak for he was a shy and quiet boy) and respectful of his parents and elders. In other words, he was the perfect son and child, but that was all to change when, three weeks after his fourteenth birthday, the first English man arrived in the valley.

The arrival of Mr. David Brown in the valley caused great excitement, curiosity and speculation among the villagers. What, they wondered, could an important Englishman possibly want in their valley? Why, they wondered, had he rented a house on the outskirts

of the village? And when, they wondered, would his purpose be revealed? This yearning for information was quite normal – we humans are naturally curious of any strange or unexplained occurrence, and the sudden appearance of this stranger was both strange and unexplained, and would remain so until all was revealed.

The man appeared friendly enough, though he knew not a word of the two main languages: Bulgarian and Russian. However, in spite of this he made efforts to make contact by the use of simple signs, and gradually over the next few weeks became accepted as a welcome part of the little community. There still remained though, the puzzle as to why he had joined them, and as the days turned to weeks they resolved to solve the mystery. But how, that was the question, and it was a question that was finally answered by none other than our young hero Todor Yenkov.

Who amongst us has not, at some time or another, pondered on the vagaries of fate? Puzzled about that wondrous so called fickle finger that points at various times in our life – either for good or ill - at us all? Or marvelled at the strange course of events that lead us to unplanned and unheralded happenings? However, neither Todor, nor the mysterious Mr. Brown, were aware of afore mentioned finger pointing when, on the third Tuesday in the month of June, destiny threw them together. Throw is, perhaps, too strong a word to describe their meeting, but as the story unfolds I'm sure you'll come to agree that 'throw,' does sum up the eventual outcome.

I'm afraid I've now presented myself with a bit of a problem: all this talk about 'fickle fingers', 'elements of the magical', 'fairy tale beginnings' and the like, may well have led you to expect some fantastic happening, which, on the face of it, will not be immediately apparent. There is nothing fairy tale or magical in Mr. Brown spotting Todor Yenkov standing at the bus stop in Razlog, or fantastic in his stopping and picking up the aforesaid Todor. However, if we take into account the fact that Mr. Brown was only in Razlog because he had accidentally taken a wrong turn on the way back from Plovdiv, and the fact that Todor Yenkov, who normally visited Razlog on the third Wednesday in every month, and had merely changed that routine to this fateful Tuesday on a whim, then we can begin to understand the series of little 'what-if,s' and 'however's' that built into the synchronicity of their first meeting; but, enough of this shilly-shallying, iffing, butting and subordinate clauses, and back to the story.

Todor was pleased to accept the proffered lift when the large black BMW four-wheel-drive drew up at the bus stop, and the Englishman beckoned him to climb in. He readily accepted, not because it would save him the bus fare, and not because he had never ridden in such a motor car before – though both of these factors would have been reason enough for any young boy of his age to accept – but because it would give him an opportunity to speak English with a real Englishman.

‘Strange reason,’ I hear you cry, and yes it is a strange reason – strange to us that is, but not to Todor, for Todor had become infatuated with the English Language. Again I hear you cry ‘strange,’ but allow me to explain, and you will better understand this young man’s reasoning.

He, Todor that is, had been studying English at school for four years – as you probably know it had replaced Russian as the second compulsory language in all Bulgarian schools when our country rejected communism, embraced capitalism and turned her face toward the west.

Though he did not realize it at the time he was a natural linguist, and fell deeply in love with the language, almost to a point of obsession. In the first few months he quickly learned the new alphabet, devoured all the ‘early reader books’ supplied by the authorities and had left both teachers and fellow students struggling in the wake of his tidal wave of learning.

He satisfied his thirst to absorb more by the following methods: reading labels on tins, instruction manuals (when he could find them), watching American movies (while refusing to read the subtitles), and by buying the one English Language book he could afford: a second hand, dog eared copy of the ‘The Haynes Automotive Engineering for Beginner’s Manual.’ This book was his pride and joy, not because he was particularly interested in automotive engineering, but because the text was illustrated with pictures and diagrams which helped him identify and recognize words. Over the four years he had owned this book he had learned every word, devoured the manual cover to cover and with the aid of the American movies, developed a highly sophisticated, if somewhat odd, understanding of the language: a curious mixture of semi scientific pedantic with transatlantic verbal slang. What he had not done, and what he longed to do, was to use this new found skill in real conversation. Oh, he practised in front of the mirror; debating with himself on the finer points of automotive engineering, but it was not the same as the real thing, and he longed to temper the steel of his new found skill in the white hot furnace heat of a proper

conversation, with a proper English person. This offer of a lift, therefore, was, for him, the opportunity he had been praying for, a golden chance to try out his skills in oratory, and he could barely contain his joy as he settled down in the leather passenger seat, and began to speak.

‘Absolutely splendid automobile, mister sir’ he began, ‘Superb ergonomics’ he wasn’t absolutely sure of the meaning of ergonomics, but loved the sound it made. ‘my father is for driving an old Lada, bloody poor automobile – I will one day own a vehicle like this, for sure. How many horses power is this automobile owning, mister sir?’

‘Two point five litres – you understand two point five litres’

‘Fucking A, Mister Sir!’ Todor had watched ‘Pulp Fiction,’ three times the previous evening, and was most impressed with Bruce Willis’ grasp of the English language. ‘I learned English pretty good, no?’

Mr. Brown, a kindly man at heart, smiled before replying:

‘Your English is very good, young man. Where did you learn: school?’

‘I am learning some at school, yes, but my tutor she knows nothing – I learn her now. She no like me, think I a smart arse. I watch movies, all English, no read Bulgarian sub-title – pretty shit-hot, no? I have one English book with pictures; I learn many words from this book. Hey, mister sir, you have English books?’

‘I do indeed have some – I could lend you one or two if you wish.’

Todor could not believe his luck: this stranger, this foreigner, this Englishman was willing to loan him books? It was more than he had ever dreamed of.

‘Me, mister sir? Books? How much hire you charging? I no have much money.’

The English man laughed.

‘There’s no charge, you’ll just owe me the odd favour, OK? Tell you what, how about you help me? Bit of translation, that sort of thing. You could be my unofficial PA. In return you can borrow books, and if you wish, I’ll help with your English. How’s that sound?’

‘Fucking A! Mister Sir. We got a deal. When I start? I start today, yes?’ Pausing for a moment to draw breath, and for a sudden worrying thought, he continued. ‘Please, mister sir, what is duties of PA?’

We will never know how serious the Englishman’s original offer was: had he meant to genuinely offer Todor a job? Did he see in this shy young man some hidden talent? Or was

he merely politely passing the time, and offering the loan of books in exchange for some help out of the goodness of his heart; we'll never know. All we can be certain of is that he was so swept along with the enthusiasm of Todor's response that, even had he wanted to, which he did not, there would have been no backing down from the deal that was struck that day.

What we do now know, and what neither the Englishman nor Todor himself were aware of at the time, was that the Englishman had by chance found the man (or boy) most suited to the job. For no matter what the problem, Todor managed to solve it: he had, it appeared, a natural talent for finding out things. Thus it was that in the space of five weeks the Englishman's seemingly insoluble difficulties had been solved by the efforts of his new PA. All he had wanted to do was to buy some land, build a house and settle in his new found country. A simple enough thing to do you would think, would you not? But his efforts to do any of these things had, until his chance meeting with Todor, appeared destined to become strangled by numerous lengths of red tape. Five weeks after initially explaining his difficulties to a somewhat puzzled Todor – you have to understand that Todor knew nothing of the intricacies of house buying; how could he? He was, after all, only fourteen years old – the young budding PA had learned all there was to know about foreign nationals buying property in Bulgaria, and was seated in the Englishman's house explaining what needed to be done:

'This is what we are needing to do, Mr. Brown,' over the five weeks that led to this meeting, the Englishman had managed to wean Todor away from his 'mister sir' form of address, but failed, as yet, to persuade him into using the informal 'Davi.' he'd also persuaded him to use the term: 'that would be an excellent idea' instead of his usual: 'fucking a!' not that he was a prude, but he was thinking ahead to any possible meeting of his PA with his visiting English friends. 'we are needing for you to set up a Bulgarian company. Foreigners not able to own land in Bulgaria, but company can. You own company, company own land, you build. You understand?'

'Yes, but how. I don't want a company; I've no intention of working here.'

'No problem! Company just way round foreigner law. My uncle a lawyer in Razlog, he fix, no problem, no cost much. We see him this Friday, after school.'

'You've arranged a meeting already?'

'Yes: is problemo?'

'No, Todor. Can't do any harm to meet him.'

'Also, have found land, down by river: 3,000 square metre, very beautiful. Uncle say good price, but will need regulation before build. He fixes, no problemo.'

'Land as well? My, you have been busy. Best I see it first though, eh?'

'We go today. Have good builder: cousin of my mother. We see him Saturday, same time as architect. Architect very good: second cousin to my uncle.'

'My, my, Todor, you don't let the grass grow do you?'

'Grass grow? How you are meaning? I can't stop grass from growing. Lawyer, builder, architect these things I arrange, but grass? I no understand.'

The Englishman tried to explain to a much puzzled Todor the intricacies of the use of the 'English Saying' and 'cliché' but to no avail.

'Don't worry, Todor, you've done well, I'm very pleased. Now, let's go look at this land eh?'
So off they trotted, down to the river.

I would be obliged If I might be permitted to digress here, for I sense an air of disquiet in my audience, murmurings and mutterings of 'cheat' and 'fraud' among the groundlings, talk of 'promises unfulfilled.' 'Where is the promised "element of the magical" in all this?' I hear you cry. Well patience dear audience, and bear with me, for, as this little tale unfolds, the magical will arrive, your thirst for the 'strange' will be assuaged; your hunger for the 'mystical' fully satiated and your notions of what is real and what is magic tested to the extreme. So please stop tutt-tutting, pooh-pooing, settle down and let me finish my story in peace. Thank you. Now where were we? Are yes, I remember.

The land proved perfect, the lawyer helpful, the builder reasonably priced and the architect malleable to The Englishman's ideas. The upshot of all this being that six weeks later a party was given for the whole village (paid for by the Englishman) to bless the start of the new build. It was at this party that the Englishman presented Todor with a present: a Bulgarian/English dictionary inscribed with the following:

to my good friend, Todor, without whom none of this would have been possible. My home and library are always open to you. Best wishes. David Brown.

In the ensuing four months it took to complete the house Todor continued to act as the Englishman's translator and go between, negotiating with the various agencies involved in the project. His face became well known with officials, both municipal and private, and they quickly learned that, despite his tender years, he was a person they could trust to get the job done.

Finally the day came when the house was complete and ready for the Englishman to move in – time for another party (again paid for by the Englishman, and again attended by all the villagers). It was the day after this party that David Brown sat Todor down and delivered a lecture that was to change his life forever.

Let me state here quite categorically, hand on heart, that I do not believe that the Englishman's intentions in giving his advice on that day were anything other than altruistic. I'm firmly of the belief that his actions sprang from a genuine liking for Todor, and from a wish to help him along life's rock strewn pathways. He could not have known how matters would turn out, and could have had no idea of the flaw in the young man's character – the boy had not, up till then, manifested any signs - so when I relate the happenings that led up to what eventually happened, I shall not be pointing the accusatory finger of blame at the Englishman. No, in my opinion, he was just the innocent victim chosen by our fickle friend, fate, to trigger the mechanism that would light the fuse to explode the waiting time bomb that was Todor's fatal character flaw. Now, with that established it is time to move on to the aforesaid Lecture.

'Todor' he started, when they were both seated comfortably in the room that now served as the Englishman's library, 'you have put in an enormous amount of work for no pay.'

'But, Mr. Brown,' he interrupted – he had, as I've already mentioned, moved on from the 'mister sir' form of address, but had still, as yet, been unable to bring himself to use the informal 'David' as had been repeatedly suggested by the Englishman. 'I have the dictionary book, and use of your library; besides I am enjoying.'

'That's nice of you to say, Todor, and I'm glad you found it fun, but the fact remains you deserve to be recompensed for your efforts. Besides, I have a favour to ask, and a suggestion to put to you; are you interested?' Todor nodded in agreement.

'Right, we start with the favour: I have a couple of friends who are interested in building holiday homes here in the village. I have told them that they'd need help, and took the

liberty of telling them about you – I have already explained about your school commitments – may I get them to contact you?’ Again Todor nodded.

‘Good, now to my suggestion: I suggest that you put this on a commercial footing; in other words you charge a fee.’ Todor leaned forward to speak, but the Englishman silenced him with a raised hand. ‘Just hear me out, Todor. I’ve done some figures, they’re fair and reasonable; more importantly they reflect the work hours, expertise and commitment you’ve shown. I thought the fairest method of charging was a percentage scale.’ Todor looked puzzled. ‘I thought 5% would be about right; that would apply to initial land costs, and to eventual build costs.’ As to who pays for that 5%: well that’s up to you, it could be the customer, the land owner or the builder, it’s for you to decide. On top of that, you’d be within your rights to claim a small finder’s fee from lawyers, builders and any of the other service providers; you will, after all, be bringing them valuable new business.

‘You’re looking worried, Todor, no need to be, it’s all perfectly legal and above board. I’ve told my friends that these are your rates, and they are perfectly happy. You’ll just be doing for them what you did for me. The only difference being this time you’ll be paid up front. What do you think, are you up for the challenge? This is the sort of money you’ll be looking at.’ With this, the Englishman pushed forward a neatly packaged bundle of notes. ‘That, Todor, represents 5% of the land and build costs, you’ve earned it, and it’s yours by right, so no arguments.’

Truth be known Todor was not about argue, he was too shocked to consider such a thing. It was more money than he had ever seen in his young life; all his, crisp new notes, still neatly bound in official bank tape and waiting for him to lean forward and pick them up. It was a defining moment in his life and was to lead to the already mentioned ‘downfall and subsequent salvation.’

That night as, in the privacy of his bedroom, he counted and re-counted the notes, he became seduced: the feel of the notes, the smell of the notes, the weight and crispness of the notes, the thought of what power those notes gave, all contributed to his seduction. So that by the time he was ready for sleep he had fallen in love with notes; it was a love that would develop into an all consuming obsessive passion.

Stroking and kissing his little bundle of notes he gently laid them in their new bed: a special hiding place beneath the floorboard, replaced the plank, climbed into bed and drifted off into a sleep in which he dreamed of a blizzard of notes burying him and keeping him warm.

I will not bore you with what happened over the next four years. I will not tell you how successful his business became, or how many more notes were stored under his bedroom floor – for he found no pleasure in spending the money, his joy was the acquisition of notes, his love was to watch, caress and kiss the increasing pile of bank promissory notes. I will not tell you of how his obsession alienated him from his parents, or how he spurned all offers of friendship and love for fear that they may discover and covet his growing hoard. Neither will I tell you of his gradual rejection of all village life – how he no longer attended church, observed saints days or joined in with celebrations, or of his rejection of Zvetlana's shy approaches with these cruel words: 'No, Zvetlana, I have no time for walks by the river, village dances or church picnics. I know we've been friends since school, but I am a very busy man, so please don't bother me further.' No, I will not tell you any of this, suffice it to say, that by the time he approached his nineteenth birthday, Todor Yenkov was his own man, and had but one passion in his life: the acquisition of yet more notes.

Now before we make any judgements about this young man, and before I satisfy my audience by finally reaching the magical bit, let me first play devil's advocate. For, while our hero had undoubtedly developed some traits that we may find slightly distasteful, he had not, as yet, committed any crime, moral or legal; quite the opposite in fact, for his dealings were always straight forward and honest. No, he had become the man who formed the conduit between the land rich Bulgarians of the valley, and the increasing deluge of cash rich Westerners who were about to flood the area, and was known as 'a man you could trust to do business with.' He had never lied, or cheated or encouraged falsehood in others. This, however, was now in danger of changing, and it happened like this.

Yuri, the eldest of the Chevenko brothers, was negotiating the sale of a strip of prime building land jointly owned by all ten brothers. His duty as the older sibling was to get the best price, and divide the proceeds equally between the ten of them; Yuri had other ideas, and was about to put a proposition to Todor which would be of mutual benefit to them, but less so to the other nine brothers. We shall not dwell on the moral turpitude of his

proposition; that is for others to judge. No, as far as we are concerned our only interest is in how the proposition affected our hero Todor.

The land in question amounted to four thousand square metres, which, valued at thirty five Leva a square metre came to, one hundred and forty thousand Leva. Yuri's proposition ran as follows:

'If we tell my brothers that the land is only worth thirty leva a square metre – you will still have your five percent commission on the real price. That will leave nineteen thousand leva, half for you, half for me. What do you think, Todor? They'll never know, they trust me.'

We do not know what Todor thoughts on this were, nor do we know if he made any moral judgements, what we do know is, that he told Yuri he would go away and think about the proposition, and give him an answer the following day.

That night as he lay in bed he did think it over, and, in fairness to him, was still wrestling with his conscience when he finally slipped into a deep sleep.

Now, the time has come for me thank all of those patient enough to await the 'magical,' I do hope you won't be disappointed, for what happened next to our hero is truly 'magical,' and, moreover, magically true. Anyway, enough of this old nonsense, it's time to continue our little yarn to its conclusion.

He awoke to find his room bathed in a strange green light, and a feeling that someone, or something was studying him. He felt distinctly uneasy, and shaking his head to rid himself of sleep and to make sure he wasn't still asleep and dreaming, he pulled himself up into a sitting position. The clock by the side of his bed read three o'clock, and through the window he heard the vague silent noises of the night. The feeling that he was being watched grew more and more certain, and he was almost too afraid to look round the room. Finally, summoning up all his reserves of courage, he slowly began to search the room with his eyes: nothing by the washstand, nothing by the doorway or the window and nothing in the corner by the wardrobe. All clear so far, but the unease continued, and he turned his gaze to the darkest corner with growing trepidation. When he finally saw it his fear lifted, for he knew what this was, and though he no longer believed in such things, he knew that this creature would not, indeed could not, harm him.

'What do you want?' he asked. 'Are you real? Or am I dreaming?'

'Oh I'm real enough, young Todor, and it's refreshing to see you still believe in us *Zmey*, very refreshing.'

‘Believe? What makes you think I believe in you, or any of that old fashioned clap-trap. I think I’ll wake up tomorrow, and you’ll just be a bad dream.’

The *Zmey* laughed loudly, stretched its wings and fixed Todor with a knowing look.

‘I don’t ‘think,’ you believe, Todor, I know you do. You may not know it, you may not wish to admit it, but, believe me, deep in your subconscious you most definitely do believe. If you did not, you would not see me, and I would not be able to speak to you. The simple fact of the matter is: if you did not have faith, then I would not exist; ergo, you see, I speak, therefore I am.’

‘Alright, alright, spare me the clever talk, tell me what you want, then bugger off and let me get some sleep.’

‘Now, now, Todor, temper, temper, I’m here to help. No, it’s more than that, I’m here to save you, and in doing so save the village.’

‘What are you talking about? I don’t need saving, and as far as I know neither does the village. What danger am I in? Who is threatening me?’

‘You, Todor, you’re the danger, it is you who are threatening you.’

‘This is nonsense, how can I be a danger to myself?’

‘You are a danger, because you’re becoming corrupted, and your corruption puts the village in jeopardy. My job, as you know, is to protect this village, and the only way I can do this is by saving you.’

‘But, but, I don’t understand. What am I supposed to have done?’

‘You have to change your ways, Todor. If you do not, it spells disaster for both you and the village.’

‘But ---’

‘No more questions, Todor. I can only help if you listen and learn. I cannot make you change; I do not have that power. All I can do is to show you: things that have been, things that are and things that may yet come to pass.’

With that the *Zmey* rose from the corner, took Todor by the hand and transported him back in time; not far, you understand, but far enough.

He immediately recognized his own parlour, and his own parents – though, he had to admit, they looked somewhat younger than of late. They were nearing the end of what had been a heated debate, and Todor listened to his father’s closing speech:

‘No, wife, I am decided, I know that this is a wonderful offer from your uncle in Germany, and I know that it would change our lives forever. We would never want for food, money or the luxuries of life. We would have a bigger home, a better car – God knows it could hardly be worse – and everything that we have wished for. However, the answer must still be no; and why? Because the sacrifice is too big, we would be giving up a way of life that our families have led for years. I could bear this if it was only us, but we have to consider Todor. I do not want our son growing up away from his roots; never knowing his background; his traditions; his village. For us to do this thing, wife, would be selfish. No, we must stay working the land and preserving our son’s heritage.’ His mother nodded her assent, wiped away her tears and embraced his father.

‘You look puzzled, Todor,’ said the *Zmey*. ‘your parents never told you of their sacrifice; why would they? Sacrifice for the child is part of most parent’s make up; yours are no exception. But time to leave, there is much to do, and we have no need to dwell on the past. Our next stop is the here and now.’ And once again Todor was transported back to the present.

This time it was to a young woman’s bedroom. She was sitting up in bed, with tears streaming down her face and staring at a photograph. Todor recognized her, how could he not? Zvetlana, his childhood sweetheart and friend. She said nothing, sighed, dried her eyes and tore the photograph into tiny pieces. She displayed no anger in doing this, just a great sadness. Todor felt sorry for her and, as if by instinct, stepped forward to comfort her.

The *Zmey* held him back with these words, which mimicked exactly his own voice:

“no time,” Todor, remember you have “No time for walks by the river, village dances or church picnics.” Come, there is much to show you.’

Todor recognized the interior of the Doctor’s surgery, though he had had no cause visit since a bout of tonsillitis when he was aged seven. He also recognized his father as the man seated in front of the Doctor’s desk, and he listened in horror as the Doctor, grave of face, spoke:

‘The prognosis is not good, Yenko, you have to stop working the fields, otherwise - ? He stretched his arms out expressively.

‘But, Doctor, I can’t, Maria can’t manage on her own. How will I make a living?’

‘You have to, Yenko, if you don’t – and forgive me for being so brutally honest – if you don’t, Yenko, then in six months to a year you will surely die.’ His father made no reply, but Todor could clearly see the tears in his eyes. The Doctor leaned forward, placed a sympathetic hand on Yenko’s shoulder and continued:

‘Have you asked Todor? He’s young, he’s strong, surely he could be of help.’ His father looked sad, and without any hint of bitterness replied:

‘He’s too busy, Doctor, his business keeps him away most of the time. Anyway, I think he’d find working the land far too demeaning.’

Once more the *Zmey* stopped Todor from stepping forward to comfort his Father, saying:

‘No time, Todor, no time, we’re far too busy. Off we go!’

Yuri was seated at the head of the table explaining the deal he’d struck with Todor – well, his version of it anyway:

‘I had to argue hard with that, Todor, you know what a hard-nosed business man he is. He wanted to offer twenty five Leva, but I held out, “it’s a matter of honour.” I said. Not that he knows much about honour. “No,” I said, “I must get the best price for my brothers; duty demands it.” Well he argued a bit more, but I wouldn’t give way, not me, and in the end he gave in: Thirty Leva, not bad eh? See how your brother works for you?’ With that, the brother’s spontaneously raised their glasses and saluted their elder brother’s efforts.

Todor was indignant:

‘He can’t do that, I agreed to nothing.’

‘That’s true, Todor,’ replied the *Zmey*, smiling, ‘but neither did you disagree, so, you have to admit, the temptation was there. But enough of the present, Todor, I now wish to show you the future. I hope you enjoy what you see there, though I somehow doubt it.’

The mother was standing in front of three children who were cowering in the corner of what appeared to be a dilapidated living room. She was shielding them from a large brute of a man who was hurling abuse at her in his rage. He did not recognize the young children, or the man who was threatening them. He did, however, recognize the woman: she was much thinner than when he had known her before, her features grown gaunt, and with hair now prematurely grey, but, in spite of this, her beauty still shone through; it was Zvetlana.

Suddenly the man lashed out, hitting her full in the mouth with his fist; he did not pull his punch. Zvetlana gave a cry, staggered then collapsed to the floor, her mouth a mess of blood, mucus, tears and loose teeth.

‘You can do nothing, Todor,’ said the *Zmey*, stopping Todor From rushing forward in defence. ‘He’s her husband, she married him eighteen months after you spurned her; remember? You were “too busy,” to care then. Why do you now suddenly feel the urge to rush forward, now it’s too late? Come, there is still much for you to see.’

The brothers were seated around the table, but none of them spoke. Silently they raised their glasses, turned toward the two empty chairs, and saluted the absentees.

‘What has happened, *Zmey*, where is Yuri and his brother?’

‘A sad tale, Todor, but you need to hear it. You agreed to Yuri’s suggestion, and all went well. However, the truth – a dangerous commodity at the best of times – will eventually out, and that was the case here – I think Yuri’s excessive spending raised doubts in the brother’s mind. Anyway, the truth came out, and the brothers became estranged. One of the siblings was so incensed by his brother’s betrayal, that he got drunk and shot Yuri dead. He was arrested and charged with murder. The other brothers swore to employ the best lawyer money could buy to defend their brother. The upshot of all this was that the brother now languishes in jail, the lawyer grew rich and the remaining eight brothers are bankrupted. You, on the other hand, have still more bank notes. But enough of that, I have more to show you; come, no time to spare.’

They were in the local graveyard and the *Zmey* was pointing at a headstone.

‘Read Todor, read what the headstone tells you. Todor knelt, leaned forward and read out his father’s name.’

‘But *Zmey*, this date; my father has less than a year?’

‘Yes Todor, now read on.’ Todor read, and his head reeled.

‘My mother too, just six months after?’

‘Yes Todor, she died of grief and overwork. Still look on the bright side. You inherit; think of the value of that land; think of all those notes. But we must hurry now Todor, for night grows short, and I have one more thing to show you. Come now, hurry, hurry!’

They had gone to a deserted corner of the grave yard, neglected and overgrown with brambles and weeds. There in the centre stood a single gravestone, the freshly dug earth witnessing the newness of the grave. The Zmey wordlessly pointed Todor towards the grave. He hung back, for he feared what might be written on the stone.

‘Oh, Zmey, spare me this, please. I fear this stone more than anything I’ve seen tonight; must I?’ But the Zmey continued to point relentlessly toward the grave.

‘You must, Todor, you know you must.’ So he slowly advanced, knelt before the stone, and read what he already half knew would be there:

Here lie the mortal remains of Todor Yenkov who died on 14th day of May ----

He read the date, and then read once more with a growing sense of dread.

‘But, Zmey, I die when I’m just forty years old, how can that be?’

‘A combination of stress and shock, dear boy; you’d continued to work hard, and continued to store your money under the floorboards. One day you decided to remove all the money from its hiding place and place it safely in the bank; very wise, but guess what you found once you removed all your precious notes? I’ll tell you what you found, Todor, you found that the mice had beaten you to it; yes, the mice had made better use of your notes than you had, by chewing them up to make nests. Ironic, isn’t it? The shock of that, allied to the stress of your hard (though now fruitless) work, caused your heart to give out, and you died a lonely death on the floor of your home. No one missed you and your demise would have probably have gone completely unnoticed, had the smell not – after three long hot days – attracted the attention of a passing villager. Pretty ignominious end eh, Todor?’ By now Todor was on his knees, tearfully begging the Zmey to explain why he had shown him these sad sights.

‘What have I done that is so wrong, that you punish me like this?’

‘I do not punish you, Todor, on the contrary, I wish to save both you and the village.’

‘But Zmey, is it so wrong to make money, to be a success, to help the villagers to a richer and better life?’

‘No, Todor, it is not wrong to make money. What can be wrong is the use to which the money is put.’

‘But I have not put the money to any bad use, I have done nothing wrong.’

‘Precisely, Todor, you’ve done “nothing”, “Nothing” for your parents, “nothing” for your friends, “nothing” for the village and “nothing,” for yourself; in fact, dear boy, you are the very prince of nothingness.’

‘But why should I do anything? And if I did what good would it do? I can’t change anything; you have shown me the future.’

‘Ah, but that’s where you are wrong, young Todor, consider this: the past is gone, finished, it’s pointless brooding on what you might have done differently. The present though, that’s yours to command, you have a choice, search your conscience for what to do. Essentially, Todor, you are a good man, it’s just that you have become corrupted by riches – you’re not the first, and you won’t be the last – don’t allow the mere acquisition of wealth to rule your life, instead ask yourself what your wealth can do for others.’

‘You want me to give it away?’

‘No, no, no! All I ask is that you put it to work, do some good with it, not just for others, but for yourself as well; surely that’s better than providing the mice with nest materials. Let me make a suggestion: the house that is being built at the moment, the services, electricity, water and sewage, they’ll all run past the old people’s home; am I right?’

‘Yes, why?’

‘Well, the home does not have these facilities, how much would it cost to spur connections to them? Very little, I would argue. This cost to you would be tax deductible, the benefits to the home priceless and the kudos earned for both you and the owners immeasurable. What do you think?’

‘I hadn’t thought, but – but, where’s the profit?’ The *Zmey* laughed,

‘That’s the beauty of it, Todor, it does not appear on any balance sheet written by man; the profit, if you insist on there being one, is measured in good will, and your own self esteem. But, no more questions Todor, I have shown you what has been, what is and what will come to pass. The first one of these three cannot be changed. The last one can only be changed by you; you must look into your heart, change your ways, makes your precious notes work for you and for those you care for. Only you can change the future. There is good in you, Todor, search for it; act on it before it’s too late.

‘This is your only chance, I shall not return, and I can do nothing to make you change. The change, Todor, must come from you, from your heart and from your conscience. Farewell,

Todor, I wish you well.' So saying the *Zmey* raised the palm of his hand and blew gently across it, at which point Todor fell into a deep sleep.

When he awoke he was back in his own bed and the sun was streaming in at the window heralding a fine day for his meeting with Yuri. He got up, washed and shaved, went down for breakfast and pondered on the strange dream he had had. He wondered: had he really had a visitation, or was it all just a dream. He finished his breakfast, kissed his mother on the cheek, then, laughing at the thought of his even considering the possibility that it was anything other than a dream, set off for the meeting with Yuri.

Well, that's the magic bit dealt with, but I suppose the story would be incomplete if I we didn't reveal what happened next. Did Todor change his ways? And if he did, did that change the prophesied future?

The truth of the matter is we can't be sure. All we can do is to tell you the few facts that we know of, and allow you to judge for yourselves. These, then, are the few facts as known to us: Todor refused Yuri's offer, politely telling him that he could not condone his dishonest treatment of his brothers. He also started to court his childhood sweetheart, Zvetlana, much to the chagrin of the burly butcher from the next village. He started to help out on his parent's land, and also employed a local Roma to, as he put it to his parents 'ease the heavy load from your shoulders.' With all of his new customers he insisted that they make some contribution to village life – it was a rule that was readily accepted. And thus as Todor prospered, so did the village.

But did this change the *Zmey's* prophesy I hear your cry? Well, put it this way: Todor's father and mother lived to see their three grandchildren go to school – yes, Todor and Zvetlana married just eighteen months after the visitation. Yuri's family prospered, having invested their windfall wisely and the old people's home benefited greatly from having a connection to the services. So I suppose we could say, in the best traditions of all fairy stories: that they all lived happily ever after. And to a certain extent that would be true, but for two slightly worrying points: the first affected Todor, for as his fortieth birthday approached at an alarming rate, he couldn't help but wonder. The second affected Zvetlana, for though her husband was the most loving and dutiful of fathers and husbands, she could not help but ponder at his strange eccentricity: for, despite her protestations to the contrary,

he would insist on placing old newspapers under the floor boards. When questioned on this he would always smile and give the same answer:

'It's for them to build their nests with, my love, even mice deserve a proper home. Leave them be; let them share our happiness in peace.' With that the subject would be closed, so I suppose, the mice, also, could be said to have lived happily ever after.

PART TWO

Magical Realism: Master or Servant?

Since the 1980s the term ‘magic realism’ ‘magical realism’ and ‘marvellous realism’ have become highly fashionable, both with the general public, and in the corridors of most university English Departments. It is a term that is difficult to define, and a term which is in danger of becoming hackneyed; a point made by Maggie Ann Bowers:

The popularity of such writing with the reading public has never been higher, but writers and critics are concerned that the terms are being reduced to vague clichés.²

I have looked briefly at the term simply in order to define my own understanding of what this rather vague and ambiguous term means. However, my real interest is not in the what, but in the why: why do writers choose to use this particular form? Lois Parker Zamora and Wendy B. Faris suggest one possible reason:

Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, and their all-at-oneness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in post-colonial cultures and, increasingly, to women.³

The implication here being that, because of political or cultural reasons, the writer is left with no option other than to use magic realism in order to advance his/her viewpoint. In other words, because of the prevailing situation, magic realism chooses them, rather than the other way round. This may at first appear a slightly perverse stance to posit, but I shall seek in this chapter and subsequent chapters, by looking at my own work and the works of other writers using this style – in particular the works of Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter – to promulgate this possibility. I emphasize the word ‘possibility’ for it would be presumptuous of me to assume that when Salman Rushdie chose to ‘handcuff’ his hero, Saleem Sanai, to his country’s history he could not have written *Midnight’s Children* in any other style:

2. Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (Oxon, Routledge, 2005), p.1

3. *Magical Realism, Theory, History and Community*: Ed. By Lois Parker and Wendy B. Faris, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p.6

Because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.⁴

It would also be equally as presumptuous to say that Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum* in choosing to make his central character, Oscar Matzerath, a drum beating, glass shattering, dwarf, whose own manic life makes a fantastic counterpoint to the growing horror of Nazi Germany, did so because it was the only way in which to relate his story. Or that Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* could not have chosen to write in any other way. What I can say though, with some authority, is that in the case of my own collection of short stories, the answer to the question: could they have been written in any other style? Is a definite no, for the following reasons:

When I first made the decision to base myself in the south west of Bulgaria in the small mountain village of Dolno Draglishte in order to write the series of short stories that were to form the creative core of this thesis, I had no intention of writing in a magic realism style.

What I had decided to do was to study the country, its people, its history and its culture, and to see what creative inspiration came from that. In other words I had given myself a blank canvas on which to paint my tales.

I found that the culture, political and historical background to the country held a particular fascination for me, as did the folk customs and beliefs. I also found that my own presence as a 'strange westerner' was, in a small way, having an influence on them: I was, in essence, leaving a cultural footprint.

It soon became apparent to me that if I was to articulate all that I wished to say, then I would have to adopt a style that allowed me the freedom to do that. This left me writing stories, which as time went on, increasingly moved further from my normal literary voice. In discussion with my then supervisor we agreed that I was moving toward a 'Magical Realist' text. I have, therefore, purposely placed the stories in their chronological sequence, rather

4. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London, Vintage, 2006), p. 1.

than dividing them into specific genres: Historical, Pseudo-Fairy-Story or Folk Tale, in order to further illustrate the fact that, rather than consciously choosing to write in a particular style, I had, I would argue, been left with no other option than to adopt Magic Realism.

Ultimately the juxtapositioning of the two words, magic and realism, to create the oxymoronic term Magical Realism, should make for a strange, and near impossible, relationship. They do, on the face of it, make irreconcilable bed fellows. However, Maggie Ann Bowers argues that it is this irreconcilability of the two words that make the term so efficacious to the writer:

It is in fact the inherent inclusion of contradictory elements that has made and sustained the usefulness and popularity of the concepts to which the term refers.⁵

The dictionary definition for the adjectival word 'magical' is:

Of or relating to magic. Resembling magic; produced as if by magic. Wonderful, enchanting.⁶

For the noun 'realism' the dictionary definition is as follows:

The practice of regarding things in their true nature and dealing with them as they are. Fidelity to nature in representation; the showing of life etc. As it is in fact. [Philosophy] The doctrine that universals or abstract concepts have an objective existence. The belief that matter as an object of perception has real existence.⁷

The problem with both of these terms is that they mean different things to different people within the same culture, a point made by David Lodge when asking the rhetorical question: 'what is realism?':

5. Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (Oxon, Routledge, 2005), p. 1

6. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*: Ed. R.E. Allen (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 712

7. *Ibid.* P. 998

'Realism' (or realistic) is a problematic term as literature/literary, and for the same reasons. [Lodge here is referring back to previous chapters regarding 'realism' in George Orwell's *A Hanging* and Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Goal*] It is used sometimes as an evaluative term; the particular instances to which it is applied will vary from one period to another and from one person to another; and it is not exclusively aesthetic in application.⁸

If the term is, as Lodge suggests 'problematic', for people within the same culture, then I would suggest even more so to people from differing cultures. And that this problem of defining the term 'realism' can only be exacerbated by introducing the term 'magical' to form the oxymoron style title 'Magical Realism'.

Though I did not at first think of myself as such when I first arrived in Bulgaria, I was in effect an immigrant; I was living and working in what was an alien culture; the fact that I was made to feel welcome and that I was there by choice and, moreover, was completely at ease with the situation made no difference to the fundamental fact. I would argue that it is this feeling of otherness, of being in a society where I had no roots that led to my writing in a style, and on subject matters that heretofore had held no fascination for me. Salman Rushdie makes a similar point when he has the authorial voice say the following:

As for me: I, too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change. And to come back to the 'roots' idea, I should say that I haven't managed to shake myself free of it completely.⁹

Rushdie also makes the point that his second book *Midnight's Children* though viewed by Western eyes as a 'Magic Realist' text, would be viewed in India (the native country of his birth) as 'Realism':

8. David Lodge, *Modes of Modern Writing*, (London, Vintage, 1995), p. 22

9. Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London, Vintage, 1995), p. 87/8

In the West people tended to read *Midnight's Children* as a fantasy, while in India people thought it pretty realistic, almost a history book.¹⁰

Both of these statements had a particular resonance for me, and held the clue as to where my work was heading. I was finding that the, admittedly limited audience of those who were reading my offerings, were splitting into two camps: those from the West who found the stories strange, curious and other-worldly, and those from Bulgaria who found them similar to stories their parents or grandparents had told them. Michael Petrov, for instance, was particularly taken by those stories inspired by my brief study of the complicated and bloody history of Bulgaria and the Balkans region: 'Martenitsa', 'Shipska' and 'Letters Home' all of which will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis.

What then is a 'Magic Realist' text? And what gives me the right to define this collection of short stories as such?

Put simplistically novels and stories in the Magic Realism genre all share a strong narrative drive, allied to the inexplicable and unexpected. They often combine elements of mythology, fairy-story or dream-like qualities with the every day, thus forming a kaleidoscopic patchwork of recurrence and refraction so typical of the genre. I would argue that my collection contains some, though not all, of these elements in each individual story.

The term 'Magic Realism' was first coined by the German art historian, Franz Roh, in his work *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der Neuesten Europäischen Malerei* 1925. The work was written in response to a growing belief among leading critics and artists that 'Expressionism' was dead and had nothing more to say. Writing in his native German Franz Roh champions this new direction in art and in doing so spawns the term which, though almost instantly discarded by the art world for newer and more descriptive terms (see below), is now so widely used in the literary world:

To complicate matters, the child ['the child' here refers to the movement away from expressionism] was not given a simple name to connote its chronological place in art history, as Roger Fry had done with 'Post-Expressionism'. Rather, it was baptised twice in a very short time span – *Magischer Realismus* (Magic Realism) by the

10. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, (London, Vintage, 2006), p. xv

German art historian Franz Roh, and again *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) by the German museum director Gustav Hartlaub.¹¹

Irene Guenther later goes on to explain how the term faded from use by the art world until a revival of interest, early in 1960, in German art works from the era of the Weimar Republic:

Hautlaub's New Objectivity quickly eclipsed Roh's Magic Realism in the art world, in part because of the famous *Neue Objectivity* exhibition of 1925. Roh's term did not reappear until a new interest in the Weimar Republic and German art at the time gave rise to a flurry of publications and exhibitions beginning in the 1960s.¹²

The term was used again in the art world in 1943 when it was employed to describe an exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition included works by Charles Sheeler (1883-1965) and Edward Hopper (1882-1967) and was entitled *American Realists and Magic Realists*. Subsequent to this the term began to be used to describe the literary works of certain Latin American authors such as the following: Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) Argentinean by birth, born in Buenos Aires, but educated in Geneva. He is best known for his short stories, the first volume of which, *Historia Universal de la Infamia* 1935 (A Universal History of Infamy), is acclaimed as a land mark in the history of Latin American literature, and is still seen by many as the first work of Magic Realism – though this is arguable it is certainly the first work to be identified by that genre title. García Márquez (1928-) Columbian by birth, born in Aracataca, he received his education at a Jesuit college in Bogata. At the age of eighteen he started a career as a journalist, moving to Europe in 1955 while working for *El Espectador*. It was here that he began to write his novels the most famous of which, *Cien Años de Soledad* 1967 (One Hundred years of Solitude), mingles the ordinary, the miraculous, the supernatural and concrete realism in an incestuous and much intermarried Buedia family. It is a novel widely recognised as a classic of the Magic Realism genre.

11. Irene Guenther, 'Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and arts during the Weimar Republic' in *'Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community'*: Ed. By Lois Parker and Wendy B. Faris, 4th print 2003 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 33

12. Ibid. Guenther, p. 33/4

Elements of Magic Realism started to appear in the writings of certain European novelists, notable among these are the following: Günter Grass (1927-) whose long humorous experimental novels bordering on the Rabelasian include *Die Blechtrommel* 1959 (The Tin Drum); *Der Butt* 1977 (The Flounder) and *Treffen in Telgte* 1979 (The Meeting at Telgte). John Robert Fowles (1926-), whose novels *The Magus* (1966 revised 1977) in which the central character, the schoolmaster, Nicholas D'Urfe, experiences a series of mysterious apparitions, which despite being explained in a realistic way still endow the novel with a strange and magical feel, and *Mantissa* (1982) an extended erotic fantasy set in Devon, Oxford and the ruins of Palmyra, are both suggestive of 'Magic Realism'.

The genre was more fully explored in the 1970s and 1980s by several young British writers, the most original of whom include: Emma Tennant (1938 -) *The Bad Sister* (1978); *Two Women of London* (1989); *Faustine* (1992). Angela Carter (1940-1992) *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* (1972); *The Bloody Chamber* (1979); *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Salman Rushdie (1947-) *Midnight's Children* (1981); *Shame* (1983). It is this period of writing, and more specifically the two writers: Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie, that have most influenced my own work. As already stated a closer examination of some of their work will feature later in this thesis.

As already established: the literary term 'Magic Realism' is an oxymoron, and as such presents us with a problem: how did two words, magic and realism, which are in effect the opposite of each other come to be placed together to describe a genre of literary works? It is explained, and to a certain extent justified, by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris:

Ironically, the dichotomy encoded in the critical term 'Magic Realism' positions its users outside the world portrayed in the 'Magic Realist' texts we wish to enter, for the term implies a clearer opposition between magic and reality that exists within those texts. For the characters who inhabit the fictional world, and for the author who creates it, magic may be real, and reality magical; there is no need to label them as such¹³

13. *Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community*, Ed. by Lois Parker and Wendy B. Faris, 4th print 2003 (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 3

It is a very good point, and one that has particular relevance to some of my own work, for instance: when 'Little Olga' the crippled girl, in 'The Small Miracle At Dolno Draglishte' (see chapter one), is apparently cured by the supposed magic of the *Samodivi*. An English, or a Western European audience, might well consider the story to contain elements similar to the magic in fairy or folk stories. Whereas in the mountain village of Dolno Draglishte, where the story is set, there are residents, especially among the older generation, who would accept the events as realistic, and perfectly feasible; in other words a work firmly rooted in the 'Realist' genre. This brings us back to Salman Rushdie's point cited earlier in this chapter in which he puts his view of the different perspectives from which various cultures view what is magical and what is real.

The Bulgarian nation spent over five hundred years under Ottoman rule. It is a period of history which is to this day still referred to as 'The Yoke', and a period which fascinated me from the start of my stay.

The Turkish nation staged what was in effect a religious war; their main aim being the conversion to the Islamic faith of all the subjugated nations – including Bulgaria. The various measures taken to ensure conversion were Draconian in the extreme; as explained by Mercia Macdermott:

All Bulgarians who did not accept Islam were, like other Christians within the Turkish Empire, reduced to a single category, *The Raya*, i.e. non-Moslem or subject population. -----

Those Bulgarians who gave up their religion and embraced Islam *ipso facto* entered the ranks of the ruling class, since Turks made no division between race or nationality, but only between Moslem and non-Moslem. -----

No Moslem could become a slave, and it was thought degrading for a Moslem to pay taxes, consequently they were not expected to do so.¹⁴

Given that there were about eighty different types of taxes under *Sheriat* law including the following: a tithe on agricultural produce, a land tax, a tax on cattle, sheep and pigs, a poll tax and a levy of Christian children - this latter was perhaps the cruellest tax of all and was

14. Mercia Macdermott, *A History of Bulgaria 1393-1885*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1962), p.25

the inspiration for the short story 'Letters Home' – one would expect modern day Bulgaria to be a predominately Islamic state. The fact that it is not (only about 13% of the population) surprised and puzzled me. So much so that I questioned the Bulgarian Folk Lore specialists, Yane Kamenarov and Elena Georgiava-Kamenarova, as to how the Bulgarian nation had managed to survive as a predominately Christian culture and to maintain their national identity. I will quote *verbatim et litteratim* the excerpts from Elena's answer as it helped to colour many, if not all, of the stories written.

She explained that it is now understandably difficult for non-Bulgarians to understand why her nation clung so obstinately to their Christian beliefs:

'Now' she said 'Believe in God, it doesn't matter whether you are Christian or not.'¹⁵

She then went on to explain that at the time the vast majority of the population were illiterate:

'They couldn't read they couldn't write.'¹⁶

Because of the draconian nature of the occupation the Bulgarians were denied their basic rights, and therefore clung to what the oppressors could not take away:

'They couldn't have their churches' (unless they were suitably modest in size), 'couldn't have their schools. The only thing for them was the item' [Elena here means religious icons and family mementos] in their home.'¹⁷

'Going to 'the churches [the Turks turned a blind eye to places of worship, providing they did not display anything that was anti Islamic i.e. Christian crosses] there was printed the icons. This was a book for them; the picture was the book.'¹⁸

15. Elena Georgiava Kamenerova and Yane Kamenerov, *Recorded Interview with Trefor Stockwell*, 2007 Disc. 3

16. Ibid

17. Ibid

18. Ibid

Their belief became, in effect, the only way of expressing their individuality, and the icon came to represent not only their belief, but also their nationality:

‘It was the only one thing in their life, the work and the book.’¹⁹

Consequently religion became far more than just blind faith and dogma:

‘the most important thing was to believe in your religion --- belief was something more than their life.’²⁰

Elena argues that the Christian religion became their:

‘national soul, they can give their life for their belief.’²¹

These are strong words, and quite difficult for an atheist from Western Europe, such as myself, to comprehend. However, it does appear to have been the case, and though in modern day Bulgaria Christianity is no longer the force it was, it is still viewed with a reverence and respect not shown in the West; even in the more westernised and sophisticated areas such as the major cities of Sofia and Plovdiv this still applies.

Elena and Yane’s view of the importance of Christianity, the churches, the monasteries and the iconography displayed within their walls, is one that appears to be shared by Mercia Macdermott:

During this time [The ‘Turkish Yoke’] the monasteries, some of which had escaped destruction by reasons of their remoteness and others which were rebuilt, played an all important role in keeping Bulgarian culture alive. ----- In the monasteries old Bulgarian literature was preserved and carefully copied by the monks, the art of fresco and icon painting, woodcarving, etc., were kept alive, and in spite of the Greeks, during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries more than a hundred monasteries held their services in Slavonic with books imported from Russia.²²

19. Elena Georgiava Kamerova and Yane Kamerov, *Recorded interview with Trefor Stockwell*, 2007, Disc 3.

20. Ibid

21. Ibid

22. Mercia Macdermott, *A History of Bulgaria 1393-1885*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1962) p. 59/60

Elena also went on to explain how many of the old pre-Christian beliefs and customs became adopted into the Christian culture: of the eighty plus saint and celebratory days still recognised and celebrated in some form or other in modern day Bulgaria, a good percentage can be traced back to the pagan period of the Thracians and beyond.

This wealth of belief, custom, tradition, folk lore and mythical creatures provided me with a rich seam from which to plunder ideas and inspiration.

Although mythical beasts stray in and out of several of the stories, it was not my intention to write modern day fairy stories. What these creatures did allow me to do was to find a voice with which to articulate other ideas, for instance: in my short story 'Samodiva' I wanted to tell a story that revealed the frailty of human nature, and in particular that trait that exists in us all, to a lesser or greater degree: that of the inability to say exactly what we mean – especially when it comes to affairs of the heart. I had pondered on how exactly I was to manage this with such a thin story line, and came very close to shelving the idea, until I read Carter's short story *Puss in Boots*.

Carter said of this story that it was 'the first story that I wrote that was supposed to be really funny, out-and-out funny.'²³ It is most certainly that. Carter uses the cat, a witty master of the innuendo, as her first person narrator. His language, a vivid mixture of the elaborate and the coarse Anglo-Saxon, proceeds through the story by means of rhetorical questions and answers. This is Carter at her firecracker best, treating her reader to a high-speed-libidinous farce, and a good example of why Carter hated to hear her work described as 'a group of traditional fairy tales given a subversive feminist twist.'²⁴ This is something new, as Carter herself said:

23. Helen Simpson, quoting Angela Carter, introduction, *The Bloody Chamber* (London, Vintage, 2006), p. xv

24. Helen Simpson, introduction to, Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. xv

My intention was not to do “versions” or, as the American version book said, horribly: “adult” fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories.²⁵

Here then was the answer to my quandary: by giving the first person narrator, the *Samodiva*, the same freedom as Carter had given her cat.

The narrative voice addresses the audience directly, giving a running commentary on the pair of lovers and on the voyeur. She is witty, erudite and bawdy: ‘in one defensive move, she’s parried his thrust (no pun intended)²⁶ and openly admits to having ‘no ethics’.²⁷ She is able to read the human mind, and hints at the ability to control human thoughts and actions: ‘I was in half a mind to intervene, nothing too serious you know, just a little visit to the back of his mind, upset his little apple cart for him.’²⁸

The *Samodiva* voice also allowed me to revisit what was to become an increasingly recurring theme within the stories: that of our need as human beings to have some sort of faith; our need to explore spirituality beyond the concrete realities of everyday life, as the *Samodiva* puts it:

It’s as if you humans lead two lives: the one you inhabit: the life of reason and the one you dream of inhabiting; the one that allows us existence.²⁹

She goes on to observe, in her cynical half-mocking way, that humans will always turn to some kind of faith in moments of crisis:

25. Helen Simpson, quoting Angela Carter, introduction, *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. vii/viii

26. Trefor Stockwell, *Samodiva* (This Thesis) p. 56

27. Ibid. P. 54

28. Ibid. P. 55

29. Ibid p. 57

Sooner or later the awfulness of realism descends upon them and they unwillingly invite us. It's rather like owning a raincoat: no need to don it in the sunshine, but come the storm, and, on it goes.³⁰

The reference to Shakespeare (see page 57): 'By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes'³¹ was a deliberate ploy on my part to link my *Samodiva* to the English/British fairy tradition. I wanted my *Samodiva* to be neither malevolent nor benevolent, I wanted her as naughty as Shakespeare's Puck but without the restraining influence of an Oberon. I wanted to show where this lack of control might lead, as was illustrated in the tale within a tale of the widow Stravski (see pages 58/62).

This short story, as with many in the collection, is a mixture of the new and strange cultural beliefs in which I found myself writing, and the cultural beliefs and traditions of my own background in Wales/Britain embedded in my psyche since childhood. The longer I was there, the greater the influence of the new culture became, and the more pronounced the new (to me) voice which I found myself being forced to use.

Bowers makes the point when discussing Carpentier and his assertion that:

The multi-ethnic and multicultural mix of Latin America and the cultural practise such as voodoo that resulted from it, as providing the perfect raw material for a sense of the magic real in everyday life. He even provided a historical context for the development of Latin American realism, referring back to Hernando Corrés' impression that the experiences of Latin America from a European perspective were beyond words.³²

However, his ideas sparked a huge debate among critics of magical realist texts. Amaryll Chanady is particularly critical of Carpentier for his attempts to lay claim to Magical Realism in an attempt to promote the status of Latin America's literary tradition, claiming that a narrative mode – in this case Magical Realism – cannot be specific to any one culture.

30. Trefor Stockwell, *Samodiva* (This Thesis) p. 57

31. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*: Ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988) *Macbeth* p. 991 L. 61/2

32. Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (Oxon, Routledge, 2005), p. 90/1

In 1974 in a study of Carpentier's work by the Cuban literary critic, Roberto González Echevarría, identifies two forms of magic realist text: ontological and epistemological. He argued that ontological magic realism is a form of magic realism that relies on cultural beliefs and practises of the culture in which the texts are set for its source material – Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* could be said to fall into this category. Whilst epistemological magic realism is inspired by sources which are not necessarily in tune with the cultural context in which the text is written, or for that matter with that of the writer. I would argue that much of my own work falls into this last category: that of epistemological Magic Realism. For whilst many of the stories do include mythical creatures from the Balkan culture: *Zmey*, *Veshtitsa*, *Samovili* and the like, and though the stories are set in a Balkan/Bulgarian setting and peopled by people from that area, the fact remains that elements from my own cultural background do seep in. And, I would argue, underpin much, if not all, of the narratives. In 'The Cats of Thassos' for instance I have purposely given the prince twelve elders, one of whom, Todor Yenkov, later betrays him, in a deliberate attempt to reference the twelve apostles of Jesus in the bible. It is also no accident that at the Prince's first meeting with elders regarding the plague of mice – the use of the word 'plague' here could be said to mirror the 'plagues of Egypt' – they are portrayed as being 'six seated on either side of the prince, at the long table in the great hall'.³³ This, again, a deliberate cultural reference on my part, mirroring the Leonardo da Vinci's wall-painting in the refectory of the Monastery of Sta Maria dell Grazia Milan, *The Last Supper*. All of these images stemmed directly from my own cultural background and became amalgamated into my experiences of the foreign culture to form a *mélange* that demanded a new voice in order to express it.

Zoe Skoulding writes of how she became interested in how identity was formed within simultaneous relationships which do not necessarily exclude each other:

I am Welsh in some contexts, English in others. I am European. I can board a plane and be on the other side of the world in a few hours, where I might be defined less

33

Trefor Stockwell, *The Cats of Thassos*, (This Thesis), p. 40

by nationality than by distribution of global wealth. In a forest I am a creature perceived as a threat. In certain parts of a city I am likely to feel threatened.³⁴

This sums up precisely the position I found myself in during the writing of this collection: for much of the time living and experiencing life in a small insular Bulgarian village whilst at the same time, consciously and at times unconsciously, remaining true to my British roots. I found, much to my surprise, that by immersing myself in the culture, history and beliefs of the area I was, almost by accident, rediscovering my own cultural background. Little wonder then that as my stay in the country lengthened the stories grew increasingly more odd, dark and strange.

A dear friend of mine upon first reading 'The Cats of Thassos' asked me if I was re-writing Balkan folk stories, and was quite surprised to learn that, apart from 'Khan Isperih's Gift' which is loosely based on one of the many legends surrounding the origins of the *Martenitsa*, all the stories are original. She then went on to suggest that I was writing modern fairy stories that would be read by children – I hasten to add here that she had, up until then only read the one text, so I could understand what she meant. I then explained that many of the other stories in the collection contained adult themes: murder, rape, war and sexual deviancy, and were more my way of articulating the thoughts I had on modern day Bulgaria. She explained that she thought I might have been emulating Pierre Perault's *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé* and writing for children. In this too she was making a common mistake about that work, for, as Zipes points out:

Numerous critics have regarded Perrault's tales as written directly for children, but they overlook the fact that there was no children's literature *per se* at that time and that most writers of fairy tales were composing and reciting their tales for their peers in the literary salons. Certainly, if Perrault intended them to make a point in the 'quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns', then he obviously had an adult audience in mind that would understand his humour and the subtle manner in which he

34. Zoe Skoulding, *Geographies of the Self* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wales Bangor, 2005), p. 4

transformed folklore superstition to convey his position about the 'modern' development of French civility.³⁵

However, my friend had raised an interesting point when she labelled my collection a group of 'modern fairy stories' and it is perhaps worth stating here why I think that label does not apply. Bowers argues that 'fairy stories' cannot be classed as magical realist texts because:

Fairy tales are not 'Magic Realist', since the stories take place on another plane of reality from our own, we, as children, grow accustomed to understanding that these narratives can be related to our own reality at some interpretive level.³⁶

It is an argument I do not disagree with, but there is no denying that fairies and other mythological creatures do inhabit much of the work. However, they do not exist on another plane of reality from other characters in the narratives, but exist in parallel with. They are there, in most cases, to allow me to express views on the realities of modern Bulgarian life – especially as lived in a small isolated village community. Indeed, as already stated, it was for the most part the only way in which I could articulate those views.

These then are not stories about fairies, or mythological beasts, they are stories about humans and their interaction with imaginary (or imagined) creatures and seemingly magical happenings; for them the magic is a reality and part of their everyday life. As Zamora and Faris write:

For the characters who inhabit the fictional world, and for the author who creates it, magic may be real, reality magical.³⁷

35. *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*: Ed. by Jack Zipes, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 380

36. Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magi(cal) Realism* (Oxon, Routledge, 2005), p. 10

37. *Magical Realism, Theory, History and Community* : Ed. By Lois Parker and Wendy B. Faris, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 3

It is an argument that Alan Watts, philosopher, interpreter of Eastern philosophies and popular Twentieth Century Guru, would appear to agree with when posing the question: 'What is art?'

If the universe is nothing but a vast Rorschach blob upon which we project our collective measures and interpretations of life, and if past and future has no real existence, an illusionist is simply a creative artist who changes the collective interpretation of life, and even improves on it. Reality is mostly what a people or culture conceives it to be.³⁸

I shall now concentrate on the short story 'Progress' to illustrate my argument.

'Progress' was written fairly well on into my visit to the country, and following a visit to the Black Sea coastal area. What I saw and experienced there: the unabated sprawl of high-rise apartment blocks, Burger King Restaurants and pseudo English style pubs, served to concretise what had already become a source of growing concern: that of the effect of too speedy a transition, from a predominately agrarian society to one led by capitalist principles, on the culture and beliefs of the people of Bulgaria. I was not against progress *per se*, it was more concern that in their haste to adopt all things Western; and in their enthusiasm to embrace the seductive mistress that is consumerism, they were perhaps in danger of sacrificing something far more precious than mere artefacts. I fully accept that this view is unashamedly paternalistic and condescending, but it was, nonetheless, what I felt at the time. To make matters worse, as a newcomer to the country I saw myself as part of the problem – albeit a less than enthusiastic part – and was able to view the situation from both sides: seeing both the benefit of progress, whilst at the same time seeing the dangers.

I wanted to express my fears and reservations in the form of a short story, but did not wish to present a story that was totally biased for or against progress. In this I had given myself a problem: a problem which I solved through the central character of Giorgi Bratov.

Giorgi represents the extreme anti-progress view. For Giorgi progress of any sort is totally unacceptable, and, we find him driven to madness by the speed of change; progress has turned him into a sociopath:

38. Alan Watts, *The Essential Alan Watts* (Berkeley, California, Celestial Arts, 1977) p. 9

These changes angered him; angered him with their speed and with their multiplicity, they made him furious, and it was a fury and an anger which he was unable to articulate; he did not have the vocabulary; he did not understand.³⁹

By making my central figure such a dislikeable character; by surrounding him in a 'Self-made-moat-malodour'⁴⁰ and endowing him with 'a great balloon of anger'⁴¹, I was able to portray a less biased and more balanced approach to the opposite view – that of the pro-progress lobby – when seen through his embittered eyes:

Everywhere he looked he saw evidence of the new gods: old buildings renovated; new-build spreading and covering the hillside like some great cancerous scar, stretching, grasping, unstoppable, ever upwards towards the forest.⁴²

When Giorgi makes his retreat from the village to the forest I wanted the reader to be slightly unnerved; I wanted my forest to be a menacing place; to be like Carter's wood, a place of unreality and unspoken danger; a frightening place:

You step between the first trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the woods swallow you up.⁴³

As Giorgi retreats from the village and his own dystopian nightmare 'the great triumphant dance of celebration to the death of the old gods'⁴⁴ and into the reader's nightmare, the forest appears to have a life of its own:

39. Trefor Stockwell, *Progress*, this thesis, p. 72

40. Ibid. p. 72

41. Ibid. p. 72

42. Ibid. p. 73

43. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, (London, Vintage, 2006) P. 96

44. Trefor Stockwell, *Progress*, this thesis, p. 73

Up he went, ever higher, until all sight, sound and smell of the village was lost and only then did he slow his pace and begin to listen to the silent sad sound of the forest: the sound of the trees; the sound of the crows and woodpeckers; the sound of growing things and animals and the sound of the great wood as it begins to speak to him; the rustling whisper of the leaves; the tap, tap, tap of the woodpecker as it morse-coded its message to the world and the slow mournful primordial tune of the dead and dying fallen vegetation as it slowly recycled itself into the earth.⁴⁵

We are presented here with a dichotomy: two opposing views of the forest. The personification of the forest is disquieting for the reader, but not so for the central character, Giorgi, for him the 'forbidding green welcome of the forest'⁴⁶ (the juxtaposition here of 'forbidding' and 'welcome' is an intentional oxymoron on my part) is a joyous thing: the forest, viewed through his paranoid eyes, has become akin to the safety of the womb. His retreat from the reality of the modern world is complete; He has retreated 'away, and into the welcoming arms of the ancient, primal, fecund-smelling arms of the great forest.'⁴⁷ The same can be said of the mythological creatures: the *Zmey*, the *Lamia* and *St. Illiya*. These are all creatures viewed by the reader through the eyes of Giorgi. We, as the reader, know that these creatures do not exist, and the story makes no effort to persuade us otherwise: the heightened language used to describe them makes this plain. But in Giorgi's tortured mind they are very real. His mental state makes Carter's Dr. Hoffman principal 'everything it is possible to imagine can also exist'⁴⁸ work for him. To him they are a reality and not a delusional state brought on by an increasing tendency to schizophrenia. Not that this condition is ever mentioned in the story. The reason it is not mentioned is a deliberate attempt at ambiguity on my part; as is the fact that the crime wave is never deliberately attributed to Giorgi, or the possibility that his death may have been self inflicted. The

45. Trefor Stockwell, *Progress*, this thesis, p. 73/4

46. Ibid p. 73

47. Ibid p. 73

48. Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (London, Penguin, 1982), p.97

ambiguities here are there simply to allow the readers to draw their own conclusions about the wrong and rights of Giorgi's story.

The connections between these mythological creatures are well known to today's average Bulgarian. They would have been told the tales in their childhood – just as we in the West would have heard stories about fairies, elves, goblins and witches. Mercia Macdermott summarises the various connections in her work on Bulgarian customs:

Summer clouds could bring either life-giving rain or destructive hail. Thunder was thought to be caused by the rumble of St Ilya's chariot; or by the hooves of his horses: by God or St. Ilya rolling barrels about in the clouds; by the battle between St. Ilya and the *Lamia* causing the drought; or a battle between *Zmey* and a *Lamia*, or two *Zmeys* fighting each other. Lightning represented the fiery arrows which St. Ilya shot at the offending *Lamia*, or the sparks which flew as the two *Zmeys* fought.⁴⁹

The fictional character would have been weaned on these stories, and it is not too difficult for us to understand how, in his deteriorating mental condition, those stories became no longer the stuff of myth, magic and legend, but a concrete, and very real, reality.

49. Mercia Mac Dermott, *Bulgarian Folk Customs* (London, Jessica Kingsley, 1998), p. 64

PART THREE

Critical Reflections: Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie

From the publication of her first novel, *Shadow Dance* 1965, to the release of her final work, *Wise Children*, published to widespread acclaim in 1991 just prior to her death, aged 52, in February 1992, Angela Carter was fast becoming recognised as one of Britain's most original and, at times, disturbing writers.

Since her untimely demise her popularity has grown until now she is widely taught in most University English Departments. Any course on 'Magic Realist' text would be considered incomplete if her works were not included as required reading.

The writer herself, I would argue, might find this amusing as she, like Salman Rushdie, never pigeon-holed their work in this way. That apparent need to categorise the work was left to the critics and various University departments.

In a radio interview in 1991 Carter was asked by the interviewer, Paul Bailey the question:

How do you feel about the tag 'Magic Realism'.⁵⁰

Her answer is most revealing:

There's not really much I can say about it. It's got a very precise meaning in relation to Latin America, but no meaning whatsoever in relation to Britain. My friends say it's pretty *passé* in America.⁵¹

She appears to be quite dismissive of the term, treating the whole matter as some sort of joke. Her final remarks on the subject, though delivered in the same slightly off hand vein, are quite prophetic:

It's going to hang around me for ages and ages.⁵²

50. BBC, *Third Ear* Radio interview: Angela Carter, Paul Bailey, 25th June 1991

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid

Nights at the Circus 1984 is viewed by many as her finest work; it is certainly amongst the most accessible of her novels: her earlier ones being somewhat more stylised, for instance: in the opening chapter of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* we find that the narrator, Desiderio, 'a minor clerk in a government office'⁵³ despite being 'always a little bored yet perfectly content.'⁵⁴ Is the first to notice the Doctors activities:

But I think I must have been one of the first people in the city to notice how the shadows began to fall subtly awry and a curious sense of strangeness invaded everything.⁵⁵

Then again in *The Magic Toyshop* we find that Melanie the central character of the novel having 'discovered she was made of flesh and blood.'⁵⁶ Posing in front of the mirror

She was too thin for a Titian or a Renoir but she contrived a pale, smug Cranach Venus with a bit of net curtain wound round her head and the necklace of cultured pearls they gave her when she was confirmed at her throat. After she read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, secretly picked forget-me-nots and stuck them in her pubic hair.⁵⁷

In this latter novel we have Carter at her Gothic style best with the story of an adolescent girl's sexual awaking, and of her fear and pleasure at that awakening. This, as with much of her work, has a distinct feminine agenda, as she debunks fantasies surrounding this young girl's sexuality .For instance: later in the novel, and despite knowing 'he was going to kiss or to try to kiss her'⁵⁸ and after her shuddering on noticing 'his

53. Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 15

54. Ibid p.15

55. Ibid p. 15

56. Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London, Virago Press, 1981), p. 1

57. Ibid p. 2

58. Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London, Virago Press, 1981), p. 105

discoloured teeth'⁵⁹ she still allows the kiss to happen "Oh, get it over with, get it over with," she urged furiously under her breath.⁶⁰ After which Carter shares with her reader Melanie's true reaction:

She thought vaguely that they must look very striking, like a shot from a new wave British film, locked in an embrace beside the broken statue in this dead fun palace, with the November dusk swirling around them and Finn's hair so ginger, hers so black, spun together by the soft little hands of a tiny wind, yellow and black hairs tangled together. She wished someone was watching them, to appreciate them, or that she herself was watching them, Finn kissing this black-haired young girl, from a bush a hundred yards away. Then it would seem romantic.⁶¹

In comparison to her earlier works *Nights at The Circus* is a huge sprawl of a novel, a picaresque yarn of a Rabelaisian nature which takes the reader on a magical journey from London, to the soon to be destroyed St Petersburg and on to Siberia.

Carter gives her central character, Fevvers, the part-narrative voice. Fevvers is a larger than life 'Cockney Venus'⁶² the star *aerialiste exstraordinaire* of Colonel Kearney's circus and winged. Her slogan 'Is she fact or is she fiction'⁶³ is central to the novel as the veracity of her organs of flight are never revealed to either the reader, or to Jack Walser the American journalist who interviews her in a quest to reveal her true identity and in doing so falls in love and joins the circus.

Throughout the novel Carter endows her narrator character great freedom of language, her words swoop and sweep and plummet from the profound to the profane

59. Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London, Virago Press, 1981), p. 105

60. Ibid p. 105

61. Ibid p. 106

62. Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, (London, Vintage Books 2006) p. 3

63. Ibid p. 3

emulating her feats in the circus ring, for example, early on in the book she explains to Jack Walser at the start of their interview how her wings first became evident:

‘But all this was but the herald to the breaking out of my wings, you understand; although I did not know that, then. For as my titties swelled before, so these feathered appendages of mine swelled behind until, one morning in my fourteenth year, rising from my truckle bed in the attic as the friendly sound of Bow Bells came in through the window while the winter sun shone coolly down on that great city outside, which, had I but known it, would one day be at my feet –’

‘She spread’ said Lizzie.

‘I spread’ said Fevvers. ‘I had taken off my little white nightgown in order to perform my matutinal ablutions at my little dresser when there was a great ripping in the hind-quarters of my chemise and, unwilling by me, uncalled for, involuntarily, suddenly there broke forth my peculiar inheritance – these wings of mine! Still adolescent, as yet, not half their adult size, and moist, sticky, like freshly unfurled foliage on an April tree. But, all the same, wings.’⁶⁴

The novel abounds with strange and wonderful characters – rivalling Dickens in their uniqueness: Jack Walser, to whom Fevvers intermittently relates her story, is transformed from journalist to clown, what the Colonel refers to as ‘First-of-May’⁶⁵, then from clown to lunatic following the train crash where he is rescued by ‘a murderess who came and dug him up.’⁶⁶ From lunatic he changes into a piss-drinking-holy dreamer:

The Shaman introduced his foundling to the rest of the tribe: ‘Behold, this dreamer.’ They listened respectfully to Walser’s babblings and, when they did not understand him, took it as proof he was in a holy trance.⁶⁷

64. Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London, Vintage Books 2006), p. 23/4

65. Ibid p. 117

66. Ibid p. 245

67. Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, (London, Vintage Books, 2006), p. 301

Then finally, from holy-dreamer, at the end of the novel, to the sound of Fevver's laughter and an affirmation of life, back to himself, a 'reconstructed Walter'⁶⁸; Ma Nelson the 'one-eyed metaphysical-madam'⁶⁹ who never puts Fevvers 'to the trade while I was still in short petticoats'⁷⁰ and equips her with the 'gilt ceremonial sword'⁷¹ so important to the novel; Lizzie who first discovers her after she is 'hatched'⁷²:

And as I told you, who was it but my Lizzie over there who stumbled over the mewling scrap of life that then I was whilst she's assisting some customer off the premises and she brings me indoors and there I was reared by these kind women as if I was the common daughter of half-a-dozen mothers.⁷³

And remains with her throughout: part stepmother, part dresser, part conscience, part protector, she is as Fevvers puts it: her Sancho Panza:

Young as I am, it's been a picaresque life; will there be no end to it? Is it my fate to be a female Quixote, with Liz as my Sancho Panza? If so, what of the young American? Will he turn out to be the beautiful illusion, the Dulcinea of that sentimentality for which Liz upbraids me, telling me it's but the obverse to my enthusiasm for hard cash.⁷⁴

68. Ibid p. 345

69. Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, (London, Vintage Books, 2006), p. 29

70. Ibid p. 22

71. Ibid p. 40

72. Ibid p. 20

73. Ibid p. 20

74. Ibid p. 289

The analogy with Quixote is a valid one as the couple do indeed tilt at a few metaphorical windmills in the course of the novel: the rescued baby; the search for the lost, and now half mad, Jack Walser and their spying activities for 'the comrades in London'⁷⁵ It is also left to Lizzie upon discovering the mother and child, and after taking charge of the situation, who makes the feminist political argument:

'What the 'ell is going on?' demanded Fevvers as she did as she was bid..
'I'm sure I don't know,' said Lizzie. 'Unless this tableaux of a woman in bondage to her reproductive system, a woman tied hand and foot to that Nature which your physiology denies, Sophie, has been sent here on purpose to make you think twice about turning from a freak into a woman.'⁷⁶

There are similarities, structurally, with Carter's final novel *Wise Children* which tells the tale of the entangled lives and fortunes of two theatrical families, the Chances and the Hazards, as seen through the eyes of Dora Chance one of the Chance twins, Nora and Dora. The novel takes the reader on a bawdy romp in celebration of one hundred years of show business history.

As with *Nights At The Circus* We find the twins are rescued, and raised, by a woman who is not their mother, Grandma Chance. A clock is an important emblem in both novels: 'We boast the only castrato grandfather clock in London.'⁷⁷:

The French gilt clock that stood there in a glass case. This clock was, you might say, the sign, or signifier of Ma Nelson's little private realm. It was a figure of Father Time with a scythe in one hand and a skull in the other above a face on which the hands stood always at either midnight or noon, the minute hand and the hour hand folded perpetually together as if in prayer, for Ma Nelson said the clock in her reception room must show the dead centre of day or night, the shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour in the centre of the storm of time.⁷⁸

75. Ibid p. 276

76. Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, (London, Vintage Books, 2006), p. 336

77. Angela Carter, *Wise Children*, (London: Vintage Books, 2006) p. 4

78. Angela Carter, *Nights At The Circus*, (London: Vintage Books, 2006) p. 30

So too with the emblematic image of the world entering a new century, especially in relation to *Nights At The Circus: We're on the cusp my dear* (says Lizzie) 'tomorrow is another time scheme.'⁷⁹

In February 1992, when Carter finally succumbed to lung cancer, the literary world was robbed of a unique talent. Her determination to fearlessly lampoon what she perceived to be the long held cultural ideology surrounding sexuality, gender and class helped forward a political and social feminist agenda. She was also hugely supportive of the founding of the women's publishing house, Virago Press, in 1979.

She has been likened, in her fabular style, to that other great exponent of 'Magical Realism' Salman Rushdie. The major similarity for me is their uniqueness; the fact that their work defies categorisation, and is therefore labelled, by a literary world determined to hang labels on all works, 'Magic Realism'. They also share, as already noted in this thesis, a desire to distance themselves from any such labelling.

Time is a central motif in Salman Rushdie's second novel *Midnight's Children*. The novel is part biography, part history but mostly magic carpet ride and opens with the narrators birth on 17th of August 1947 on the stroke of midnight 'at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence'.⁸⁰ And in doing so is forever bound to time and history:

Because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I have been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.⁸¹

The premise of the novel is that the central protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is telepathically connected to the other one thousand children born during the birth of India's independence: the other 'midnight's children'. Along with his telepathic powers he also

79. Ibid p.337

80. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, (London, Vintage 2006), p 3

81. Ibid p. 3

possesses a large nose a 'proboscissimus'⁸² allied to an equally enlarged sense of smell, which we find enables him to sniff out trouble others do not even perceive.

His story, which mirrors the triumphs and tragedies of India's birth into modernity and independence from the Raj, is related to Padma, his partner in the pickle factory, who acts as a kind of aural amanuensis and sounding board, constantly questioning veracity and encouraging him to continue:

But here is Padma at my elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what happened next.⁸³

Padma, Nazeem's 'plump Padma'⁸⁴ his 'consolation for my last days'⁸⁵ and his 'bitch-in-the-manger'⁸⁶ is an essential literary device. It is she who, like Shahryar, awaits impatiently for the next offering from her Scheherazade. She acts as a kind of mortar with which Rushdie binds the various bricks of his story together. It is she who both encourages and complains; she is his greatest fan; a believer in all things fantastic, and his most ardent of critics:

Padma accepts this without blinking [Nazem Aziz eavesdropping on her daughter's dreams]; but what others will swallow as effortlessly as a laddoo, Padma may just as easily reject. No audience is without its idiosyncrasies of belief.⁸⁷

82. Ibid p, 9

83. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, (London, Vintage, 2006), p. 44

84. Ibid p. 24

85. Ibid p. 24

86. Ibid p. 24

87. Ibid p. 69

Rushdie openly admits to the influence of Dickens, and this is especially noticeable in *Midnight's Children* with its cast of strange and at times grotesque characters. His portrayal of Bombay as a city perpetually in danger of devouring itself is similar to Dickens' description of Victorian London. The same can be said of Rushdie's use of recurring motif: the 'large white bed sheet with a roughly circular hole'⁸⁸ being but one of many in the novel. The swapping of the two babies, Shiva and Saleem, by the nanny also has a distinct Dickensian flavour to it, and is another central motif in the work; as are the 'nose' of Saleem, the 'knees' of Shiva and the one thousand other midnight's children:

So: there we were knees and a nose, a nose and knees. In fact, all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents – the children of midnight were also the children *of the time*: fathered, you understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream.⁸⁹

In a BBC interview in 2003 with James Naughtie before an invited audience Rushdie was asked about the influence of Dickens on *Midnight's Children* and admits to being drawn to Dickens' portrayal of London and others as 'teeming rotting cities' and to what he terms as Dickens' 'level of absurdity' citing 'The Offices of Circumlocution' as an example.⁹⁰ Rushdie also writes in greater detail of influences on his writing in the introduction to *Midnight's Children*:

I have written and spoken elsewhere about my debt to the oral traditions of India: also to those great Indian novelists, Jane Austen and Charles Dickens – Austen for her portraits of brilliant women caged by the social convention of their time, women whose Indian counterparts I knew well; Dickens for his great, rotting, Bombay-like

88. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, (London, Vintage, 2006) p. 4

89. *Ibid* p159

90. BBC, *Modern Writers Interview with James Naughtie*, 2003

city, and his ability to root his larger-than-life characters and surrealist imagery in a sharply observed, almost hyper-realistic background.⁹¹

“To be born again,” sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, “first you have to die.”⁹² So opens *Satanic Verses* the novel which earned Rushdie a Fatwa and a certain unwanted and undeserved political notoriety. It also meant that certain safety orders had to be put in place.

The novel begins just after the explosion of a hijacked jumbo jet and portrays Gibreel Farishta, a star of the Bollywood movie industry, and Saladin Chamcha, bowler-hatted self-made Anglophile, as they tumble earthwards, embracing and singing rival songs.

They are miraculously the only survivors of the incident, and are eventually washed up on a snow covered English beach; the explanation of their survival? The following:

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and – potency, I’m making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed. Which was the miracle worker? Of what type – angelic, satanic – was Farishta’s song? Who am I? Let’s put it this way: who has the best tunes?⁹³

This ambiguity is at the heart of the novel, for when Gibreel acquires a halo and Saladin watches in dismay as his legs grow hairier, his feet turn into cloven hooves, and at his temple horn-like bumps are noticed questions begin to be asked about the eternal struggle between good and evil. But which is angel and which is demon? Or are they devils disguised as angels?

The Satanic Verses like *Midnight’s Children* is a great sprawl of a novel; a work which includes a cycle of tales of faith, betrayal, passion and love. Central to these, and novel, is

91. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, (London, Vintage, 2006) p. xii

92. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York, Viking Penguin, 1989) p. 3

93. Ibid p. 10

the story of the 'Prophet of Jahilia' Mamoud, and his vision in which satanic verses mingle with the divine.

The novel acts as an allegory in which Rushdie casts his two central protagonists, Gabreel and Saladin, as the angel Gabriel and Satan. This allegory is reinforced by Rushdie when he casts his authorial voice in the role of Salman the Persian, a religious scholar who scribes down the new scriptures. It is, I would suggest, this allegorical interpretation that brought about the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's decision to issue the Fatwa on Rushdie. As is the case with *Midnight's Children* in *The Satanic Verses* the magical aspects of the novel become essential to the narrative in order to portray both the plot and the allegory, which brings me back to the suggestion posited in chapter two of this thesis that: magic realism may choose the writer rather than the other way round.

Rushdie's first, and thus far, only attempt at writing a book for children, *Haroun And The Sea Of Stories* is, like all the best writing for children should be, equally enjoyed by the young and adults alike.

Haroun, the central protagonist, only child and son to Rhashid Khalifa, storyteller supreme, narrator of a 'never-ending stream of tall short and winding tales'⁹⁴ and nicknamed by his fans 'Rashid the Ocean of Notions'⁹⁵ and by his enemies the 'Shah of Blah'⁹⁶, is horrified to discover that:

Rhashid Khalifa, the legendary Ocean of Notions, the fabled Shah of Blah, stood up in front of a huge audience, opened his mouth, and found that he had run out of stories to tell.⁹⁷

Haroun is determined to recover his father's gift for tale telling, and so retreats from Alifbay the city of his birth, 'a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had

94. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun And The Sea Of Stories* (London, Puffin Books, 1993), p. 15

95. Ibid, p. 15

96. Ibid, p. 15

97. Ibid, p. 22

forgotten its name.⁹⁸ Astride a Hoopoe bird on a whirlwind picaresque search for the 'Sea of Stories'.

As with *Midnight's Children* time becomes important to the central protagonist. Following his mother Soraya's exit with her neighbour's husband, and his father's subsequent destruction of all the clocks, we find that Haroun is trapped by time 'the young master is stuck fast on his number eleven and cannot get to twelve.'⁹⁹ Haroun denies this possibility but:

But in his heart he feared he might be. Was he stuck in time like a broken clock?
Maybe the problem would never be solved unless and until Soraya returned to start
the clocks up once again.¹⁰⁰

The story ends, as perhaps all such stories should end, on a high note with the return of Soraya to the family bosom, with Haroun announcing 'Khattam Shut'¹⁰¹ and with the return of time:

He got up, dressed in his new clothes, and took a closer look at his new clock.
'Yes,' he nodded to himself, 'time is definitely on the move again around these parts.'
Outside, in the living room, his mother had begun to sing.¹⁰²

As both of these writers tend not to refer to themselves as 'magic realist' writers I will home in on what their treatment of what is real and what is magical does to the reader. Both writers share a love of words, and both writers seek to test the boundaries of their

98. Ibid, p. 15

99. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, (London, Puffin Books, 1993), p. 24

100. Ibid, p. 24

101. Ibid, p. 210

102. Ibid, p. 211

readers' perception of things possible or improbable. What they both always do is succeed in making us, if not actually believe in the possibility of magic, then to at least willingly suspend our disbelief and just enjoy the magic carpet ride. At their best, of course, we are left wondering: wondering if 'Fevvers' is a fraud, or if Saleem really does have telepathic powers. In other words they delight us, and at times make us doubt our own sense of reality, or as 'Fevvers' puts it at the end of her story: "To think I really fooled you!" she marvelled. "It just goes to show you there's nothing like confidence."¹⁰³

103. Angela Carter, *Nights At The Circus* (London, Vintage Books, 2006), p. 350

PART FOUR

Commentaries: Genesis, Inspiration and Influences

Critique: Farewell Ivan Levsky

This story was written some time after the original collection, and serves a dual purpose, for although the reason for the chronological order of the stories becomes apparent during the reading of the thesis, as does the 'oral tradition,' nature of the work, neither were immediately obvious. I therefore felt it necessary to make these points at the very beginning to avoid possible confusion for the reader

I also reasoned that if, at some time in the future, I were to divorce the stories from the thesis and publish them as a anthology in their own right then, to avoid the collection becoming a gallimaufry, I would need a way of tying them together in some cohesive way, and thus the 'Ivan Levsky,' conceit was born.

Critique: The Martinetsa

This, the first in the series of short stories forming the core of this thesis, was written after an initial brief study of Bulgarian history, culture and folklore, and following an interview with me by Michael Petrov, a student of Bulgarian politics past and present.¹⁰⁴

The history of the Bulgarian nation is complicated, tragic and bloody in the extreme, and presented me, as a writer, with many interesting subjects for creative story telling; as did the culture, people and folklore of this region. It also presented me with a very real problem: how to present a story loosely based on historical facts about a little known East European country to a Western European audience, the majority of whom, would know little or nothing about those historical facts. It became obvious to me that the only way around this problem, other than boring my audience with a lengthy history lesson, was to make the story more about the human condition, and to address universal truths recognisable to all cultures: the power of human love; the bestiality of war for both victim and aggressor and the cyclic nature of human frailty: our dreadful ability to allow history to repeat itself time after time. This gave me the freedom to avoid the trap of explaining to the reader the geography, history or ethos of the time.

It quickly became apparent, while writing, that using a method of giving the reader only enough information to heighten his or her interest in the characters, endowed the work with an aura of mystery which would in turn serve to draw the reader still further into the story.

This, being my first creative attempt for this project, and because I was determined to set myself challenges, experiment with the form and to push the boundaries of the short story genre, I deliberately challenged the traditional linear, beginning, middle and end construct of storytelling. While still using the form, I deliberately blurred the edges by borrowing from film and television methods of storytelling: making rapid scene changes in time, location and from character to character; thus allowing the audience to recreate the whole story from what appears, at first, to be a series of seemingly un-related incidents, by finding the connecting links and filling in the gaps with its own imagination.

In order to create a sense of another time, place and culture I purposely used a slightly archaic language form and, in places, an alien syntax. The juxtaposition of these elements with the more modern fashion of short sentences, episodic TV style framing, sparse writing and the use of foreign language words, would help, I felt, to give the piece a feeling of both familiarity and other-worldliness.

Technically speaking this short story belongs in the ‘Historical Romance,’ genre, and I would have no problem accepting that categorisation: the work is set in the five hundred year long period of the Ottoman occupation of Bulgaria. However, there are elements within the text which hint at ‘Magic Realism’: the failure of the linden tree to flower for the eighteen years following the tragedy, the subsequent blooming only to be killed by a freak frost, and the villagers’ acceptance of these events as a matter of course: ‘The valley will not enjoy the scent of linden this year; it is a curse!’¹⁰⁵ being among the more obvious elements.

Critique: Khristo's Truck

The central protagonist, Khristo, is inspired by one of the many colourful characters who inhabit the village of Dolno Draglishte. He does own a Vietnamka truck, which he has hand painted in military colours. He also has a wife called Rosa who intends visiting her daughter in America, a Roma friend, a shed with a pot belly stove and a great fondness for Rakia. The rest of the story is fictional, relying on that awful 'what if'.

The deliberate use of the ironic third person narrative in this work was an attempt to avoid distancing myself too much from the action. It enabled me to include Khristo's thought processes more subtly without resorting to direct speech, or to too much use of the 'he thought,' or 'he reasoned,' interludes. It also allowed me the freedom for the odd authorial philosophical aside.

As with the preceding short story 'The Martenitsa' I wanted to continue to explore, and challenge the linear story telling form, while at the same time avoiding the slightly episodic feel that, in some cases, that method can produce. I would argue that the success of this relies on two factors: the first being: the use of flash back to relate the tale within a tale of young Igor Karenkov's fateful decision to 'bend the rules,' and fit 'the Mk I. insulation sleeve.' The second factor: being the non-judgemental philosophical stance taken by the narrator. For instance: the introduction of the tale within a tale:

Yes, for those of us who believe in such things, someone somewhere had thrown a pebble in the pond of fate, the ripples from which were about to reach the troubled shores of Khristo's life.¹⁰⁶

And later in the tale within a tale, when we are asked not to judge, but to empathise with the actions of young Igor:

Who amongst us, if faced with a similar decision, would not have done the same? Blonde hair, blue eyes, rose bud lips and soft voluptuous breasts have led many a man to commit far worse crimes than fitting a Mk. I. insulation sleeve instead of a Mk. II.¹⁰⁷

106 This Thesis, p 19

107 Ibid, p. 20

None of these elements can be said to lay claim to this work being classed as ‘Magic Realism’. As with ‘The Martinetsa’ I make no such claims. However, again as with that work, there are elements which hint at that particular genre. For instance: the personification of the Vietnamka truck is quite deliberate; an attempt on my part to make the vehicle as much a character in the work as is Khristo or his Roma friend Jambo. From its very first appearance:

There she was, the answer to all his problems, beautiful, neglected and waiting patiently to be rescued. Khristo gazed in rapt adoration; it was a meeting of two kindred souls.¹⁰⁸

The machine is transformed into a Cinderella type heroine awaiting the Prince’s (Khristo’s) kiss to awaken her from her sleep. Khristo is described as wishing to ‘rescue this unloved beauty,’¹⁰⁹ and to ‘lovingly restore her to her former glory.’¹¹⁰ On their return to Khristo’s home she is seen to be ‘treated like a visiting princess,’¹¹¹ to be ‘fêted, admired and caressed,’¹¹² and to be ‘promised love, care and attention.’¹¹³ Then again later, before their final jaunt into the forest, when Khristo asks himself ‘Is this not the way with all lovers?’¹¹⁴ and is seen to ‘caress her starter,’¹¹⁵ and to ‘listen in ecstasy as her eight cylinders purred into life,’¹¹⁶ and to ‘feel her throbbing beneath him,’¹¹⁷ as he senses ‘her urgent need to go.’¹¹⁸ They are portrayed as lovers smelling the pine for one last time, and as ‘man and machine

108 This Thesis, p. 16

109 *Ibid*, p. 16

110 *Ibid*, p. 16

111 *Ibid*, p. 18

112 *Ibid*, p. 18

113 *Ibid*, p. 18

114 *Ibid*, p. 19

115 *Ibid*, p. 19

116 *Ibid*, p. 19

117 *Ibid*, p. 19

118 *Ibid*, p. 19

making music in perfect harmony.¹¹⁹ This personification continues when, on their return from the forest, we find he has ‘stroked her bonnet,’¹²⁰ before blowing her ‘a fond lover’s kiss.’¹²¹ I would argue that there is some justification for labelling this work as what Roberto González terms as ‘Epistemological Magic Realism’: a kind of magic realism that relies on aspects of knowledge rather than cultural belief. If we accept this argument about the personification of the Vietnamka truck, then it is not too difficult to view the shift in time, to the tale within a tale, the philosophical discussion on ‘fate’ and ‘Kismet’ and subsequent arcing from the Mk I insulation sleeve, to also err towards the strange; to be more magical than realistic.

119 *Ibid*, p. 19

120 *Ibid*, p. 19

121 This Thesis, p. 19

Critique: The Next Emperor of Bulgaria

Nestling high in the Bulgarian mountains there still exist small villages (even smaller than the one I used to live in) where time appears quite literally to have stood still. Many of these villages are inaccessible to all but mule and hardy foot travellers. ‘The Next Emperor of Bulgaria’ was partly inspired by a visit to such a village, and also by a growing fascination as to how fables and folk tales are born, adopted and survive despite all evidence to the contrary.

I have deliberately used the language of the ‘Fairy Story’ genre. The opening lines ‘High in the Rhodope mountain range, in a small insignificant village, the name of which is unimportant, there once lived a peasant named Boris Shavov’¹²² whilst avoiding the ‘once upon a time’ cliché, is one example. As are the highly stylised direct speech exchanges between the various characters. The patriarchal tone used by the husband would have been typical, and is still in common usage, especially in the remote highland villages of the Pirin and Rhodope mountains – many couples still use the archaic ‘husband/wife’ form of address.

‘Woman,’ he said, ‘what is all this nonsense you talk? The boy has had another nightmare; that is all. You should not encourage his fancies, he will grow weak, like a woman. Now off home with you, and let’s hear no more of “Emperors, Samodivi” and the like.’¹²³

Interestingly this piece was written organically. I had no idea when I started just where the story would go, or how I would resolve the problem of my central character either achieving, or not achieving, his destiny, and ended up just writing as the ideas came to me. All of the characters are fictional, though most villages have their own version of a ‘Baba Chevenko’

I would argue strongly that this work is the first in the series to fall firmly into the ‘Magic Realism’ genre; what Maggie Ann Bowers describes as a fiction that:

Brings together the seemingly opposed perspectives of a pragmatic, practical and tangible approach to reality and an acceptance of magic and superstition into the context of the same novel [For novel read short story].¹²⁴

122 This Thesis, p. 22

123 Ibid, p. 23

124 Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magical(al) Realism* (Oxon, Routledge, 2005), p.

The fact that nothing truly magical occurs during the story does not mean that we cannot view the work as a work of 'Magic Realism'. The fact that the central character, Boris Shavtov, never realises a magical fulfilment of his destiny does not matter. Neither does the fact that neither he, nor any of his fellow villagers are ever portrayed as living in anything other than the mundane reality of their everyday lives. What does matter, and what in my view places this work into the genre, is the villagers' attitude towards the prophesy. They had, we find, come to believe it as writ: 'It was a fact that had been accepted, and remained unchallenged for nearly five decades of village history.'¹²⁵ For Boris and his fellow villagers the prophesy had become a reality, which blurred their perceptions of what was real and what was unreal. For them his destiny, and the prophesy had become fact and over time become integrated into their belief systems:

Established when Boris was not yet five years old, and proven beyond doubt in the ensuing passage of time, his destiny was as much a part of village folklore as were the Lamia, Zmey and Vampiri that dwelt further up the mountain in the dense forest.¹²⁶

For the villagers their unquestioning acceptance, and faith in the established belief systems of their society make Boris' destiny a reality. This unquestioning faith in the unbelievable transforms the everyday realities of life into omens and portents that further go towards concretising that faith. The result of this is that when a truly unusual event happens such as the birth of a two headed goat, they are not amazed, as we might expect them to be, but accept it simply as a further sign: 'Here was proof positive, if proof were needed, another sign confirming young Boris' destiny.'¹²⁷ Even the normal event of life such 'good harvests' or 'bad harvests' or the 'Storks returning early' or late or if 'the snow came before Nikulden' are transformed into further omens and magical signs of the efficacy of the prophesy.

125 This Thesis, p. 22

126 Ibid, p. 22

127 Ibid, p. 22

To West European eyes this short work might, at first read, appear to be a simple story about everyday life in a small Bulgarian mountain village. However, if we read it from the point of view of Boris and his fellow villagers, we find that the borders between the realities and unrealities of their lives have become blurred: the seemingly impossible unreality becoming a proven possibility by the seemingly magical possibility of reality.

Critique: The Small Miracle at Dolno Draglishte.

This story draws on folk traditions from Bulgaria, and from my own cultural background in Britain. This was not a conscious decision on my part, rather, like many of the stories in this collection, it evolved from a simple idea sparked by a rather unusual incident that occurred during the fifth month of my stay.

We were approached, via an interpreter, by an old lady of the village who warned us quite seriously: ‘to avoid the river bank’ noises had been heard, things seen and unusual happenings taken place ‘it was’ she assured us ‘proof of a visitation’ and she was worried for our safety. The old lady was genuine in her concern and we listened to her warnings as seriously as we were able. It was from this little spark that the story evolved.

As with ‘The Next Emperor of Bulgaria’ this story reflects my growing interest in folk/fairy stories and in the power of absolute faith – in this case the collective belief of the villagers’ in their welcoming gift of ‘bread, sweetened wine – and honey’ and of the absolute faith of Olga who answers her father’s scepticism about the Samodivi’s ability to cure his daughter’s lameness, saying: ‘Then, father, I shall do what I have always done and accept the will of God. But they will not refuse; I have faith in the Samodivi’.¹²⁸

The two central characters in the story, Olga and Yane Cherberkov, represent the goodness in humanity; in Olga’s case the goodness is such that her character becomes two dimensional; almost a cipher for goodness. This was intentional on my part; I wanted her to be easily read. Yane, however, is an ambiguous character: he is a ‘Misanthrope’¹²⁹ of ‘bizarre appearance’.¹³⁰ A man who frightens both children and adults with his ‘air of undefined menace’¹³¹ who’s only redeeming features appear to be a talent for playing the Kaval and an affinity with animals – the obvious association with St Francis here being a deliberate attempt to introduce an illusion to Christian beliefs.

128. This Thesis, p. 32

129. Ibid, p. 29

130. Ibid, p. 29

131. Ibid, p. 29

Mercia MacDermott, when writing about common beliefs regarding the fairies of Bulgaria, *Samodivi* and *Somolivi*, points out that: 'They usually befriended heroes' 'Loved music and dancing' 'might ensnare, and capture unwary shepherds to play the *Kaval* for them'¹³² and 'Were thought to have the power to cure illnesses'.¹³³ All of these elements have been included in the story.

There could be an argument made for this short story to be classed as a Fairy Story, and it does contain many elements to support such an argument: Olga's lameness is miraculously cured when she sits on Yane's knee; the *Samodiva* appears in physical presence to Yane; the villagers all accept without question the arrival of the *Samodivi* in the valley and the hypnotic effect of Yane's *Kaval* on the children – a deliberate mirroring on my part of the Pied Piper of Hamlyn legend – all point to this as folk/fairy material. However, I would argue that the story and characters inhabit the real world of the Bulgarian mountain village and that happenings that appear strange and magical to Western ears are for them quite natural and very much a part of their everyday world and belief system.

132. Mercia MacDermott, *Bulgarian Folk Customs* (London, Jessica Kingsley, 1998), p. 68/69

133. Mercia MacDermott, *Bulgarian Folk Customs* (London, Jessica Kingsley, 1998), p. 69

Critique: The Cats of Thassos.

This story was inspired by a visit to the Greek island of Thassos. The journey by road and ferry, via the ruins of Phillipi, takes about two and a half hours from my home in Bulgaria. The cats are factual – the place is overrun with them – and they do appear to lead a charmed life. The rest of the story, though, is fiction; or as far as I know it is.

The original idea was to write a magical story to explain the presence of so many cats. I decided the best way to do this was to write the piece using the language and imagery of the Folk/Fairy story genre. I also decided that it might prove interesting to include some Biblical imagery – after all, it could be argued, that the bible represents what is possibly the greatest work of ‘Magic Realism’ known to the Western World.

I have purposely written the opening paragraphs, and the denouement, in a completely different style from the main story. It would be my contention that this mixing of genre languages gives the reader the impression that the ‘Fairy Story’ (‘Magic Realism’) section of the story is just part of a travelogue piece. The juxtaposition of modern beginning and denouement language, with the archaic, and at times biblical, language of the central sections, serves to further blur the edges between the real and the magical elements of the work.

Before discussing this work further it may prove useful to explain why I have included a short story based in Greece in a collection purporting to be inspired by my stay in south west Bulgaria:

The original kingdom of Macedonia, which reached its zenith in the 4th century BC under Philip II and Alexander the Great, included the following territories: all of modern day Macedonia; most of north east Greece, including Thessaloniki and Drama; a small area in western Albania; the southern end of Kosovo and Serbia and a large area of south west Bulgaria, including the Pirin mountain range and the valley in which I lived.

Although this kingdom now exists only as a kingdom of the mind, there are still those who cling on to the romantic notion of being Macedonian rather than Bulgarian. Many of the folk songs sung in the local *Mehanas* hark back to the days of the revolutionary Macedonian freedom movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Because of this it is near impossible to write about this part of Bulgaria without mentioning the Greek connection.

I will deal first with the Christian imagery: the mice which are the cause of all the trouble on the island are described not as an infestation of vermin, but as a plague; ‘plague’

having biblical connotations (as in the plagues inflicted on Egypt) and therefore, I would say, much more powerful a word to use in this context than ‘infestation’.

When the Prince summons his great council we find there are twelve elders; exactly the total of apostles chosen by Jesus. And it is no accident that they are then portrayed as being seated six on either hand, mimicking the last supper. Finally, the Prince is betrayed by one of his faithful followers, Todor Yenkov, in the same way as Judas betrays Jesus, who is then ‘banished’ from his community; in a passing reference to the eventual fate of Judas.

The folk figure of the witch ‘Veshtitsa of the north’ is common to most European folk cultures, as is the Witch’s familiar cat ‘Kostandinka’, and the Veshtitsa’s apparent ability to shape-shift with her promise to the prince is also common in many other folk cultures; especially so in Native American and African folk traditions.

What is the matter, prince, you grow pale? Can it be the price is too high? Am I too ugly? I can make myself more beautiful if you wish; I can transform into any shape you desire.’¹³⁴

There would be some justification for placing this piece in the ‘Folk/Fairy Tale’ genre, and indeed viewed through Western European eyes that is how it would, at first, appear. However, I feel that the already mentioned modern beginning and denouement lifts the work into something slightly different. That, allied to the central character’s unquestioning belief in the power of the Veshtitsa, and their acceptance of the final outcomes as a reality, places this firmly outside that genre.

Critique: Brussels Jambo the Gypsy and Vera The Horse.

Two weeks after my arrival in the village, and unbeknownst to me, my garden fork disappeared. The first I knew of this was when the mayor approached me accompanied by Jambo, who offered me my fork back along with a bottle of his home brewed spirit. He explained that the fork had been stolen by a member of his Gypsy community, and that both he and the other members of the community felt 'great shame' at this crime against a visitor. He asked that I not report the matter to the police as the culprit had already been punished. I relate this little tale as it marks the beginning of a friendship and the start of a growing interest in the Roma people; it also partly inspired the writing of this story.

It was Jambo's attitude to the crime and his complete rejection of *Gadjo* law that intrigued me and set me wondering what would happen to him and his way of life once Bulgaria was introduced into the EU. I need not have worried for as Isabel Fonseca writes:

In the international arena Gheoghe always emphasised what the Gypsies had to offer – not the spectre of the desperate Rom, the eternal victim, dependant and discriminated against. I knew it would have been easier the other way around. It was expected; human rights always describes human wrongs. And I knew he was right. They were good at everything – more enterprising and energetic, more imaginative and more good-humoured, than most of the people around them – when they got the chance. They were good at everything. Everything except representing themselves.¹³⁵

This story, based loosely on an actual event, is an attempt to describe a uniquely Bulgarian approach to any laws imposed by outside influence: the ability to say yes to all rules, whilst at the same time finding ways of flouting them. It is a technique honed to perfection after over five hundred years of draconian rule by the Ottoman Empire; a time during which Bulgarian society became devoid of social hierarchy:

135. Isabel Fonseca, *Bury Me Standing* (London, Vintage Books, 2006), p. 301

Bulgarians became a society quite unusual for Europe, which particularly impressed travellers centuries later – they were a people without leaders, a people amidst whom social equality was the rule.¹³⁶

Jambo is representative of this society, as is Sergeant Stokov; both of these characters finding their own solution to what they perceive to be a ridiculous law originating in Brussels. Vera the horse sums up their opinion perfectly when asked for her thoughts on the matter:

Vera shook her head, whinnied, lifted her tail and deposited a large dollop of EU critique on the road, where it sat steaming in the morning sun in readiness to manure the roses of Bansko.¹³⁷

As with *The Martenitsa* and *Khristo's Truck* this simple tale unfolds in linear form, and, it could be argued, falls into the genre of 'realist fiction'. However, it does contain elements that nod towards something non-realist. For instance: Vera the horse is given the status of a character: she is mentioned in the title, and is personified in the text: 'It was as if she knew how pretty she was.'¹³⁸; then again in the already quoted 'EU critique'; finally, towards the end when the carts have entered the town horse-less Jambo personifies her: 'Bit disappointing for Vera, but I have explained matters to her, and the sign does state "no horses and carts allowed"'.¹³⁹

136. Ivan Ilchev, *The Rose Of The Balkans* (Sofia, Colibri, 2005), p. 85/6

137. This Thesis, p. 48

138. Ibid, p. 47

139. Ibid, p. 52

Critique: Samodiva

In *Midnight's Children* Salman Rushdie addresses much of the work to 'our plump Padma'¹⁴⁰. It is his method of using a first person narrative, and involving the reader; albeit through the literary device of Padma. His method largely inspired the way in which the central character in 'Samodiva' tells her story. However, I did not wish to filter my story through a third party; I wanted to directly address the audience rather in the way that the actor on the stage may turn the audience with asides. I asked myself: was I taking too much of a risk? Was the Somodiva a suitable voice for story telling? I decided to give it a go, if only to see if it were possible.

I had just started the project, and, though quite pleased with the way it was shaping, still harboured doubts. I need not have worried for about a third of the way through I happened to be reading Angela Carter's collection *The Bloody Chamber* and came upon her rendition of the classic Fairy Tale *Puss-In-Boots*. In this story Carter uses the cat, Puss, as her first person narrator. The result is a mixture of Commedia dell'arte pantomime mixed with Anglo-Saxon bluntness as illustrated in the Balcony Scene when Puss is invited up by her master:

He leans out, in his nightshirt, offering encouragement as I swing succinctly up the facade, forepaws on a curly cherub's pate, hindpaws on a stucco wreath, bring them up to meet your forepaws while, first paw forward, hup! On to the stone nymph's tit; left paw down a bit, the satyr's bum should do the trick. Nothing to it, once you know how, rococo's no problem. Acrobatics? Born to them; Puss can perform a back somersault whilst holding a glass of vino in his right paw and never spill a drop.¹⁴¹

This work inspired me to continue with 'Samodiva' and gave me the freedom to attribute her with non-human traits: she can read minds; she has the power of invisibility and she purports not to have a conscience.

Mercia MacDermott states that in Bulgarian folklore there exists several types of fairies, Samodivi, Samolivi and Yudi, and goes on to explain:

140. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London, Vintage Books, 2006), p. 24

141. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (London, Vintage Books, 2006), p. 77

To some extent the difference between Samodivi and Samovili was that the former tended to be good fairies and the latter bad, but both were vengeful, capricious and liable to play tricks on mortals, although they befriended heroes.¹⁴²

I chose to ignore this and have my narrator claiming them be one entity: Samolivi and Samodivi (we are one and the same you know)¹⁴³ thus avoiding the possible necessity of differentiating in the story.

The story, such as it is, was not my main reason for writing this work. As a story line the attempted river side seduction is of little interest. For me the main focus was the narrator. The Samodiva voice provided me with a vehicle, albeit a comic one, with which to voice my own thoughts on my growing interest in the power of faith, belief and human frailty.

In one of her many asides The Samodiva speaks of the human power to make her kind disappear: 'You could make us disappear in a thrice if you wished; I and my fellow Samodivi exist only on a whim'¹⁴⁴. She then returns to the seduction narrative, before explaining why this is:

You humans simply cannot just accept things as they are: you have this insatiable curiosity; this great need to know. You are also blessed – or cursed some might say – with the power to imagine. It is a combination of these two factors that spawns our existence. We exist only in your minds; yes that's right, we're mere figments of your imagination; a product of your collective faith in the fabulous; we rely on that faith to keep us alive; to give us form and function – now, how scary is that?¹⁴⁵

She goes on to explain that all creatures of myth, including God, stem from this flaw – or strength – in the human character saying:

142. Mercia MacDermott, *Bulgarian Folk Customs* (London, Jessica Kingsley, 1998), p. 68

143. This Thesis, p. 56/7

144. Ibid, p. 56

145. Ibid, p. 56/7

It's as if you humans lead two lives: the one you inhabit; the life of realism; and the one you dream of inhabiting; the one that allows us our existence. And you are the same the world over; you give us different names, but we serve the same purpose in all cultures. We are totally reliant on your absolute faith. We have the appearance of power over you, and arouse fear in some cultures, but it is you who have the ability to wipe us out; not the other way round. However, all the time you need us, we remain safe. Oh there are those that vouchsafe our existence; that swear to a form of atheism, but sooner or later the awfulness of realism descends on them and they unwillingly invite us back into their lives; it's rather like owning a raincoat: no need to don it in the sunshine, but come the storm, and, quick as a flash, on it goes.¹⁴⁶

I excuse quoting this section in full, but it does illustrate my thinking at the time, and colours much of the later short stories. It also illustrates what this particular work is really about.

I would argue that this work also marks a distinct shift towards a wholly Magical Realist text: the narrator – despite being a magical creature – takes us into a realist world; she presents her story in a realist language that we can understand; she quotes from a playwright familiar to us all and treats us to a tale within a tale with the widow Stravski. Such are her story telling skills that we forget her magical status until she reminds us towards the end by demonstrating her kinetic skills.

146. This Thesis, p. 57

Critique: Shipka

In April 1877 Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman forces dug in the northern Bulgarian city of Pleven. To the south of the Balkan range the Russian army under general Gurko was forced back to the Shipka pass. Here, with the help of the newly formed Bulgarian militia, they held out against the Ottoman forces.

If the Ottoman force had broken through to relieve the siege at Pleven then the war would have had a very different outcome.

To the Bulgarian nation Shipka holds a place in the national psyche akin to our own Waterloo, Dunkirk or the battle of Britain. The site is now a memorial to both the Russian and Bulgarian troops, much visited by Bulgarians, and is on the list of 'must visit sites' for all Bulgarian school children.

I visited the site one late evening long after the crowds had disappeared, and was deeply moved by the atmosphere of the place. It is a very beautiful spot, and on that late evening eerily quiet. It inspired me to write *'Shipka'*.

I could not help but wonder what it must have been like for the peasantry, both Russian and Bulgarian, to have faced a force that was better equipped, better trained and who outnumbered them by five to one.

The central characters, Giorgi and Yane, are fictional, as are the two Turkish soldiers, Asan Hodja and Mohammed. However, the generals, Gurko and Stoletov, the Ottoman leaders, Mehmet Ali Pasha, Osman Pasha and Suleiman Pasha are all historical figures; the historical events, especially the summing up section at the end of the work, are also as accurate as I could make them.

I wanted to set my fictional characters within a realistic war setting, and to use actual events to show the futility and waste of war. When I portray Giorgi trying to comfort his comrade, Yane, over the lack of munitions saying: 'We do the same as we did today, lad, we use whatever we have, rocks, tree stumps, and, yes, the bodies of our dead comrades.'¹⁴⁷ I am utilising an event mentioned in all the many accounts I read or heard of the battle.

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This Thesis, p. 67

Though, like many historical accounts, it may be apocryphal. However, the war, its outcome and the treaty of San Stephano are all well documented historical facts.

Though this piece could not be described as Magical Realism, there does exist, I would argue, elements that hint in that direction: the strangeness, to western eyes, of the setting; Asan Hodjas' response on hearing the music: 'The young officer sighed. He felt strangely moved by the almost celestial beauty of the music, and momentarily wished it were heaven inspired.'¹⁴⁸ And the dénouement of the work: part of my reason for writing this particular work, as it is with '*The Martinitsa*' and '*Letters Home*' was to express my disquiet over the futility of war. With this work, though, it also expresses my thoughts on the evening of my visit to the site. I am not as a rule attracted to war sites, memorials or anything that commemorates war. With the Shipka Pass, though, I had read and heard so much about the place that it became imperative that I visit. So impressed was I by the atmosphere of the place I felt almost compelled to write the final paragraph which ends the piece:

Climb the eight hundred and ninety four steps that lead to the summit, especially at dawn, or in the fading light of a summer evening, close your eyes, listen carefully and you may just hear, faintly on the breeze, the haunting notes of Yane's Kaval and Giorgi's voice: the finest tenor that ever lived on the Balkan plain.'¹⁴⁹

148

This Thesis, p. 69

149

Ibid, p. 71

Critique: Progress

I was becoming increasingly aware of changes within Bulgarian society; more apparent in the larger cities, but still noticeable in the small villages. These were changes that had started some two decades earlier when Bulgaria first divorced herself from the Communist system, adopted a market economy and turned her face from the East towards the West. In the ensuing time these changes have accelerated; fuelled by European Union money, and images of Western European wealth - the locals all assumed Western Europeans to be millionaires – and yearned to attain that supposed level of wealth. What they didn't realise was that in striving to attain Western standards they were endangering their own, to my mind unique, way of life. I realised, of course, that my attitude could be seen as immensely patronising, but none the less I remained concerned. What 'Progress' attempts to do is voice those concerns.

What I wanted to achieve was a text that avoided a one sided diatribe for the reader; one that would be more acceptable and be able to give a balanced view, voicing both sides of the argument. However, having started I found that what came out was an argument that sounded more like a political speech, and I realised that, in a small way, I was part of the problem: as the only westerner in the village, and as one of only three in the valley, I had become a curiosity: one to watch, and perhaps even emulate. I had, in effect, in my own small way become part of the problem: no matter how I tried to avoid it, my being there left a cultural footprint. If I was to voice my concerns I needed a different approach; a way of showing both sides of the problem. My answer to the dilemma was to go to extremes: to make the argument so extreme that the reader would be forced to look at the alternative. Ambiguity and fanatical provided the answer.

Giorgi Bratov, the central character, is not a hero figure: he has 'ceased to wash himself'¹⁵⁰ and is protected from his neighbours by 'self-made-moat-of-malodour'.¹⁵¹ He obviously suffers from paranoia, and the story appears to chart his descent into madness and suicide. His madness is fuelled by the physical manifestation of progress. These signs of

150. This Thesis, p. 72

151. Ibid, p. 72

progress are portrayed in an equally extreme manner: the new build is seen by Giorgi as ‘some great cancerous scar’¹⁵² the vehicles in the street appear to him to be performing ‘a great triumphant dance of celebration to the death of the old gods.’¹⁵³

The same ambiguity and extremes apply to the forest scenes where I was striving to create a Carteresque feel – see Angela Carter’s: *Burning Your Boats* and *The Bloody Chamber*. In these sections I have used heightened language to create an air of menace as in the following section:

A mist had invaded the mountain side --- a mist that deadened the murmurings of the forest to the silence of the grave. No creature moved; not a leaf dared whisper or bird sing. It was as if the forest had become frozen in time and was holding its breath in anticipation of something unspeakable.¹⁵⁴

Again, as Giorgi flees the village, the juxtaposition of two oxymoronic words in the phrase ‘the forbidding green welcome of the forest’¹⁵⁵ are used as a device to engender a feeling of unease in the reader.

The already quoted remarks by Salman Rushdie (see p. 158 of this thesis) regarding the readers perception of what is real and what is magic is illustrated in this piece: For the reader the description of the villagers, the jay walking incident and the new build projects are all recognisably real – albeit couched in extreme terms – the forest is not. Even before Giorgi meets with the Zmey the reader is feeling uneasy; this is not a normal forest, it is a magical one. For Giorgi it is the opposite, for him the real world has become magical and frightening, it is what drives him to run ‘taking with him his stench of despair, his confusion,

152. This Thesis, p. 73

153. Ibid, p. 73

154. Ibid, p. 77

155. Ibid, p. 73

his loss of faith and his great balloon of anger'¹⁵⁶ and seek refuge in what has become to him the real reality, and to retreat into the 'vegetative womb-like embrace'¹⁵⁷ of the forest.

156. This Thesis, p. 73

157. Ibid, p. 74

Critique: The Man with One Head Too Many

As with 'Progress' this work also deals with mental illness. The difference being that, whereas 'Progress' uses the paranoia of the central character, Giorgi, as a vehicle to deliver the message of the story, in this piece the character's obvious schizoid behaviour is used for comic effect.

Whilst schizophrenia may not be considered by some to be a suitable subject for a comic piece I excuse myself by pointing out that this was never meant to be a serious study of the complaint, more an experiment in extremes.

Alan Watts, quoting from Bateman's theory of schizophrenia, suggests that 'schizophrenia may be at once a reaction against an impossible social context and a form of spontaneous therapy'¹⁵⁸. It was this quote that inspired the story- though what eventually happens to the central character could hardly be described as therapeutic. I would point out here that I make no claims to expertise in this field, and rely entirely on my own observation of human nature.

Socially speaking mental illness is perhaps the most difficult disability for the able bodied to deal with. As a consequence the sufferer can become isolated from society: we look the other way; cross the road or become embarrassed. Sufferers are quite often not treated as normal individuals, and suffer a loss of personal identity. It is to reflect this loss that I have chosen not to name the central character; the reader is told about this early on in the story 'this man, whose name is not important'¹⁵⁹ and thereafter he is referred to only as 'the man' until the dénouement when he becomes 'patient 257'.¹⁶⁰

The story is told in a sequence of comic vignettes: the football incident; the shaving incident; the clothing incident; the sexual orientation incident and the incident in the confessional. All of these incidents tell us more about the public's reaction to the exploits of

158. Alan Watts, *In My Own Way* (Novato, California, New World Books, 2001). P. 315

159. This Thesis, p. 79

160. Ibid. p. 87

the character than they do about the character; he remains, until the end a cipher, simply 'the man' or on occasion 'the young man'.

As with 'Samodiva' I have chosen an authorial voice that allows me to speak directly to the reader. From the start the reader is invited to partake; to be included in the writing process:

As a writer, storyteller and spinner of tall tales, I shall not be surprised if there are those among you who doubt the veracity of my next little offering.¹⁶¹

There is nothing new in this, by appealing to my audience in this way I am following in a literary tradition that goes back to Shakespeare. For instance in the prologue to *Henry V* the chorus appeals to the audience to suspend their disbelief and to allow 'us, ciphers to this great account, on your imaginary forces work.' And to 'cram within this wooden O the very casques that did affright the air at Agincourt.'¹⁶²

Using this method of storytelling allows me to break away from what is, essentially a simple story line told in linear form, and to make numerous philosophical asides to my audience. For me these asides are more important than the story. In other words the story has become a vehicle to carry the author's thoughts on various subjects.

161. This Thesis, p. 79

162. William Shakespeare, *Henry V* Ed. by A.R.Humphreys, (London. Penguin, 1968), p. 59

Critique: Letters Home

I return to the long and bloody history of Bulgaria as the inspiration for this short epistolary piece.

Under Ottoman rule non Muslims suffered draconian taxation. There were about eighty different taxes and obligations recognised by Moslem *Sheriat*. These ranged from taxes or tithes on agricultural produce, land, all farm animals and a poll tax on all persons over the age of fifteen. There was also a levy on children. This tax was the cruellest tax of all, and is central to the story.

Under this tax, known *as Ispendzh*, a certain number of the healthiest children were chosen, taken away from their parents and sent to Constantinople. Once there they were sold as slaves, house servants, or entered the households of the Sultan or the pashas. The fittest males entered the corps of *Janissaries*. Here they were indoctrinated into the Islamic faith and trained to become fanatical and fearless troops. These *Janissaries* were the elite of the Ottoman fighting forces, much feared by both friend and foe, and were often used to quell revolt amongst their own people. The horror of this system meant that the *Janissaries*, filled with new found passionate zeal, could easily be fighting old friends, family members, and, as is the case in 'Letters Home' their own brother.

The story unfolds in a series of letters from the brother to his sister. These letters are made the more poignant by the fact that they remain unanswered. The final letter underlines the fact that they will now remain unanswered for eternity.

The incidents revealed in the letters: the talk of mutiny against the Sultan; the talk of the excesses of the Sultan and the accusation against his parents, are all based in historical fact. Mercia MacDermott writing about the growing power of the Janissaries states:

Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries the Janissaries deposed six Sultans and placed five on the throne.¹⁶³

163. Mercia MacDermott *A History Of Bulgaria 1393-1885* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1962), p. 39

Ispendzh, also known as known as *devshirme*, or blood tax, was, unsurprisingly, universally hated. There were, however, some families who saw this as an opportunity for their children to better themselves, and this too is suggested within the work:

What I did that day in the heat of battle can be traced back to our parents original decision to pay *Ispendzh*, and send me away. ---- How different our lives would have been had our parents, like others in the village, claimed to have fever in the house and painted a red cross on the door.¹⁶⁴

The 'red cross' mentioned in the story refers to the traditional warning of plague in the house; a common ruse used by Bulgarian families at the time. Whilst it was undoubtedly known to be a possible ruse, it would have taken a very brave Turkish tax collector to check on its veracity.

164. This Thesis, p. 91/2

Critique: Fate and the Life and Death Of Chudomir Daev.

This short work is based on my own stultifying, mind numbing, routine-ruled life experience as a Civil Servant. I had often wondered what would have happened had I lacked the imagination to get out and stayed the course to the end.

I wanted to explore the possible result of such a life on a character who had chosen to stay; to imagine the extremes such a constrained and habit-led existence might have had. Chudomir Daev is such a man.

I had up to this juncture not set myself any boundaries with regard to word length; each story was allowed however many words, sentences and paragraphs the work demanded. With this piece, however, I wanted to somehow mimic the constraints of the main character within the text. I reasoned that the best way to do this was to constrain myself. To this I limited myself to no more than five hundred words; the word length is four hundred and ninety nine.

To further accentuate the feeling of a life lived and ruled by the clock, I precede all his actions with the exact time:

He breakfasted at precisely 8.15, and on the stroke of 8.45 kissed both of his daughters and his wife on the cheek before walking down the street to work just as he always had.¹⁶⁵

I wanted to evoke the feeling of living a life dominated by habit, rule and adherence to the demands of the clock: hence the emphasis on words and phrases such as 'exactly', 'precisely' or 'on the stroke of'.

His attempted suicide and subsequent questionable accident are emblematic of an unfulfilled and ultimately unbearable life.

165. This Thesis, p. 95

Critique: Khan Isperih's Gift.

The *Martenitsa* – the subject of the first story in this collection – is uniquely Bulgarian. Unlike many of the customs, beliefs and superstitions, the *Martenitsa* is not shared with any other area or country in the Balkan region, and is a custom fiercely observed and protected by Bulgarians young and old.

No one appeared able to tell me the origins of this strange custom, but all agreed that it preceded Christianity and probably arrived with the Proto- Bulgarians.

Khan Isperih's Gift is loosely based on one of the many fables and stories that surround the mystery that is the *Martenitsa*. As such it is the only story in the collection which is not original, and the only story that would be recognisably familiar to Bulgarians – especially to Bulgarian children, as it is a popular story with parents and schools.

The central figure in this story, Khan Isperih, is based on a documented character from history:

In AD 679 there arrived in the Balkans a small tribe of Proto-Bulgars under their khan, Asparukh. The Proto-Bulgars were a Turkic people from central Asia, who had migrated westwards, spending time in the Kuban and the Northern Caucasus. They were a nomadic, cattle-rearing people, skilled in military arts and led by an autocratic leader, who was at the same time their chief priest.¹⁶⁶

Whether or not he was a 'great and good leader' is probably debatable. However, whatever the truth of the matter the fact remains that there exists a legend that involves him, his sister and the little bird; a legend that no doubt grew up following the mass migration from central Asia westwards into the Balkans and to their eventual settlement and integration in Bulgaria.

As with 'The Cats of Thassos' I have chosen to open and finish the work in a travelogue style. I find that this juxtaposing of styles helps to place the work in context, and acts as an apology for the heightened language that makes up the main body of the work.

Again, similarly to 'The Cats of Thassos' I have chosen to use a heightened form of language common to the fairy tale genre:

166. Mercia MacDermott, *A History Of Bulgaria 1393-1885* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1962), p16

Many, many years ago, when the world was still young and fresh, high in the Tibetan mountains there lived a great and good leader.¹⁶⁷

This being a bowdlerization of the classic 'once upon a time' opening so common to us, evoking childhood memories and opening the door to what the German philosopher Ernst Bloch refers to as 'a more colourful or easier somewhere else'.¹⁶⁸

There is again a possible argument for classifying this as a 'Fairy Story' or at least the retelling of a classic Bulgarian folk story. However, I would suggest that to the Proto-Bulgarians who made that pilgrimage to a new land, all that happened, including the talking dove, would have appeared perfectly real, and part of their everyday lives

167. This Thesis, p. 97

168. *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*: Ed. by Maria Tatar, (New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 2004), p. ix

Critique: Reflection.

The general idea of the work was spawned following a mercifully short stay in a small hotel in Melnik South West Bulgaria; the hotel did not supply a bathroom mirror, and I began to wonder, as I attempted to shave from memory, what it would be like to exist in a world deprived of one's reflection. Hence the genesis of Yanko's sad little tale.

Inspired by Salman Rushdie's opening sentence in *Midnight's Children*: 'I was born in the city of Bombay....once upon a time'¹⁶⁹ and his subsequent rejection of such a start: 'No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th 1947.'¹⁷⁰ I decided to see what would happen if I were to expand on that classic 'fairy tale' opening to include other oft used phrases: 'there lived a handsome young prince'¹⁷¹ and at the denouement: 'and he lived happily ever after, and died a happy man.'¹⁷² whilst still maintaining a realist approach to the story.

I quickly found that this approach allowed me much freedom, and gave me the opportunity, yet again, to give my own thoughts on philosophy: 'the awful-reality of the-ticking-time-bomb that is life'¹⁷³; faith: 'Yanko's conversion to a true believer of all things impossible was complete.'¹⁷⁴ and the punishment for those storytellers who fail to connect with their audience: 'the thunderous ego-shattering sound of a metaphorical book being slammed shut in total disbelief.'¹⁷⁵

169. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London, Vintage Books, 2006) p. 3

170. Ibid, p. 3

171. This Thesis, p. 107

172. Ibid, p. 116

173. Ibid, p. 110

174. Ibid, p. 112

175. Ibid, p. 109

I also found that it gave me an opportunity to filter in elements from my own cultural background, for instance: the phrase 'are you sitting comfortably? Good, then I'll begin.'¹⁷⁶ will be instantly recognisable to any reader old enough to recall the BBC children's radio programme *Listen with Mother*, 1950-1982. Then again, in authorial mode, I make this very British promise: 'I will try to avoid the use of the all seeing, all knowing, and omnipotent third person narrator's voice so beloved of Nineteenth Century Novelists.'¹⁷⁷ Then finally I make direct reference to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*:

Did he, I wonder, walk round and look at the back of the mirror to see if, just like Alice, he had somehow passed through the looking glass?¹⁷⁸

I'm not quite sure as to my reasoning behind this inclusion, suffice to say it seemed like a good idea, and I found the end result quite pleasing.

176. This Thesis, p. 110

177. Ibid, p. 110

178. Ibid, p. 111

Critique: Stefan Popovitch And The Great What If.

Bulgarian folk culture is full of stories of humans being captured, kidnapped or transported by *Samodivi* or *Samovili*. There are also tales of humans turning the tables on these creatures. Mercia Macdermott explains how this was supposed to have been accomplished:

Their power [*Samodivi* and *Samovili*] was believed to reside in their garments, their girdles or their combs, and mortals could capture Samodivi by gaining possession of one of these things while the owner was bathing, and could even marry them, although such unions were seldom lasting.¹⁷⁹

It was from this extract that much of the inspiration for this particular work was derived. The 'great what if' of the title was my decision; an attempt to turn the rather dark history of such unions on its head by hinting at the possibility of there being a more optimistic outcome.

Just before starting this piece a very dear friend of mine contacted me having read the previous works, and her remarks are of some interest here for they raise an interesting point with regards to Magical Realism. She said that what she thought I had written was a set of 'modern fairy stories'. I could understand how she arrived at that conclusion as mythological creatures do wander in and out of some, though not all, of my tales. However, I would argue that she is mistaken for the following reasons: In very general terms the 'fairy story' usually inhabits an unreal world: magical events happen in magical forests and the like. Whereas Magical Realism inhabits the real world: In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* Salim's magical happenings take place in the recognisable geography of Bombay and recognisable history of India after partition.

They are also separated at psychological level: Jack Zipes, quoting Bruno Bettelheim's Freudian view of the Fairy Tale genre says:

Fairy tales communicate with the uneducated, preconscious, and unconscious minds of children and adults.¹⁸⁰

179. Mercia MacDermott, *Bulgarian Folk Customs* (London, Jessica Kingsley, 1998), p. 68

180. *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*: Ed. by Jack Zipes, (Oxon, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 19

He continues to expand on Bettelheim's thesis:

He also assumes a fundamental link between childhood and the fairy tale genre, the logic of which is circular: fairy tales contain symbolic images which reflect inner psychic processes in which, in so far as these processes are common to all children, enable children to externalize and work through their psychological problems.¹⁸¹

When these stories were written I was reacting to the reality of my surroundings: I was living, working and socialising in a village where mythological beasts were spoken of as a reality; the residents all either believed implicitly or at the very least accepted the possibility, it was not hard for me to imagine, that like Yanko in 'Reflection' it would not take much for even the most sceptical of the villagers to convert to a true believer:

It is wonderful, is it not? How trauma can instantly convert the most devout of disbelievers into trembling, genuflecting, prayer offering converts. One has to wonder how many atheists aboard the Titanic finally drowned as convinced Christians.¹⁸²

Surrounded by this level belief it is little wonder that my writing started to reflect a certain doubt of my own Atheism; a kind of crisis of lack of faith.

181. *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*: Ed. by Jack Zipes (Oxon, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 19

182. This Thesis, p. 112

Critique: The Experiment

Murder was a fairly rare occurrence away from the major towns and cities of modern day Bulgaria. So that when a young Roma man was found stabbed to death by the side of the river near the village it became the talk of the village and of the valley for the several days it took to catch the culprit. It transpired that it was a rather extreme result of a family dispute, and therefore a fairly easy case for the local police to solve.

This led me to thinking: what would happen if there were no motive for the police to follow? This led me, in turn, to ponder on why one human would kill another for no reason at all? This train of thought then eventually led me to the psychopath Todor Bodovitch. The first problem with writing this was the protagonist's reason for killing; what motivated him? What was it that made him step beyond the boundaries of normal human behaviour? I thought at first I would choose to have Todor just enjoying the process; rather in the same way that other men might go to watch a Saturday afternoon football match. However, I considered this too simplistic an answer, and opted for some experience in childhood that would dramatically change him; make him different from other men; with a different sense of values. That is how his life as the village butcher's son began to take shape.

The biblical imagery and ritualistic images evoked by the language used to describe the incident of the slaughter - my choice of a 'sacrificial lamb' was a conscious decision –was deliberate on my part:

Young Todor watched in awe as his father reached for his boning knife, placed the lamb gently between his knees and with one deft movement slit its throat.¹⁸³

I wanted the experience of death, and, more importantly, the transition into death to be the driving force behind the rest of the story:

183. This Thesis, p. 128

For in those few seconds between the slashing of the knife and final expiration he experienced in the eyes of the lamb that transition from the vibrancy of life to the finality of death.¹⁸⁴

For the ritual and for the joy of watching the spirit depart from the body to become more important than the act of killing:

It never failed to thrill and excite him; it was the eyes, always the eyes, and he never tired of watching the exit of vital spirit.¹⁸⁵

I also wanted to portray him as, in all other aspects, a normal man; to be fully accepted by his neighbours as normal, and to represent no threat. I wanted him to be the last person people would suspect of having such thoughts inhabiting the 'dark pathways of his mind.'¹⁸⁶ I also wanted him to have some sort of morality, albeit a somewhat perverse one, which would make him reason when choosing his subject to exclude women or villagers:

He could not imagine himself dispatching (he always used the word 'dispatch', because he thought 'murder' inappropriate to his deed) anyone he knew. ---- No, he reasoned, , the subject (he never considered the word 'victim') of the experiment (for experiment is how he perceived the deed) must be unknown to him; he, and it had to be a 'he', for his sensibility, for some unknown reason, balked at the idea of a female subject.¹⁸⁷

Although this is a strange little story I would class it as a realist work of fiction until the death of Forbes, the first appearance of the ghost, the villagers' suspicion that Todor is the

184. This Thesis, p. 129

185. Ibid, p. 129

186. Ibid, p. 130

187. Ibid, p. 131

victim of some sort of 'bewitchment'¹⁸⁸ and his subsequent ritual suicide, after which, I suggest, it slowly moves away from realism.

188. This Thesis, p. 135

Critique: The Downfall and Subsequent Salvation of Todor Yenkov

This final offering was written on my return to Britain. I wanted to see for myself whether the ‘master or servant’ question posited in the thesis was provable: could I sit down and consciously write a ‘magical realist text’ in which case my question would be answered in the negative, or would I find that on return to more familiar surroundings I would find it difficult or even impossible, in which case my thesis would be some way towards being answered in the affirmative. I found that it was indeed very difficult, and I was starting to think impossible. However, I reasoned that if I took some of the creative weight off my shoulders it might lessen the burden and allow me to at least place words on the page; my solution was to turn to Dickens for my inspiration.

I had returned to Britain two years after the world had plunged itself into financial disarray, and was becoming increasingly aware that, because the god Mammon was as ever the prime mover, the innocent majority were the ones that appeared to be paying the price for the guilty, or misguided, few. I wanted to make a statement about the dangers of loving wealth simply for wealth’s sake: who better to turn to for such an argument than Dickens, and what better vehicle than *A Christmas Carol*.

Readers will be hard pressed not to notice the similarities in the text: for ‘Scrooge’ read Todor Yenkov, for the ghosts of ‘Christmas Past, Present and Future’ read *Zmey*, and I make no apologies for this; I needed to carry out the experiment and this, for me, was the solution. How successful the project has been is for others to judge, all I can say is that it was the most difficult of all the works to write and to finish.

The story itself is told in linear form, and unfolds in a fairly realistic way; no hint of anything magical until about two thirds of the way through; a point I make as an authorial aside in the text:

Now, the time has come for me to thank all of those patient enough to await the ‘magical’; I do hope you won’t be disappointed, for what happened to our hero next is truly ‘magical’, and, moreover magically true.¹⁸⁹

189. This Thesis, p. 146

From here on the work is an adaptation of Dickens' famous Christmas story with little Bulgarian based embellishments. Many of the embellishments owe their genesis to actual events experienced during my stay, for instance when the *Zmey* suggests ways in which Todor might put his beloved notes to use:

'Let me make a suggestion. The house that is being built at the moment, the services, electricity, water and sewage, they run past the old peoples' home; am I right?'

'Yes, why?'

'Well, the home does not have these facilities, how much would it cost to spur connections to them? Very little, I would argue. This cost to you would be tax deductible, the benefits to the home priceless and the kudos earned by both you and the owners immeasurable. What do you think?'¹⁹⁰

This exchange is almost word for word an exchange I overheard between a developer and his land agent.

As an experiment I suppose this piece has worked in that I have managed to write a 'magical realist' work and turned the 'master or servant' question round. However, I did not feel at ease writing; it did not flow as organically as the other works in the collection had appeared to and of all the texts it is the one I least enjoyed writing. Quite what that says with regard to my thesis I'm not sure, but it obviously tells us something.

190. Ibid, p. 152

Appendices

Glossary of Bulgarian, Turkish and Roma Words and Phrases

Baba: Literally: Grandmother, though the term is generally used as a form of address, or title for elderly women.

Badni Večer: Christmas Eve.

Bashibazouks: Turkish irregular troops.

Bombs: these are made from chips of resin soaked pine: nature's fire lighters and much used in the mountain villages.

Cheti: an armed band of Bulgarian freedom fighters.

Chicho: uncle – commonly used by children to unrelated male adults.

Chiji Beshe Taja Moma: traditional Bulgarian folk song.

Dobur Oútro: good morning.

Dyado: Grandfather.

Dyado Ivan: in Bulgaria an affectionate nickname for the Russians

Gadjo: Roma for anyone who is not Roma

GAZ Vietnamka: a four wheeled drive vehicle, much favoured by the Eastern Bloc military. The name was given as a quite deliberate ironic reference to the West's exploits in Vietnam.

Giour: a highly derogatory Turkish slang word for non-Muslims – especially insulting to women.

Haidut: a patriotic Bulgarian freedom fighter.

Hala: a mythical creature associated with storms, wind and hail.

Horo: traditional village dance.

Ispendzh: Turkish tax, a levy on Christian children – usually the fittest males, or the most beautiful females.

Janissary: Turkish foot soldier, mostly pressed into service via the above tax.

Kaval: flute like instrument.

Kavrat: Type of traditional dress.

Lamia: the Lamia was imagined to be a lizard-like creature, scaly, about four feet long with a canine head (sometimes even three or nine heads) and a large mouth with sharp teeth for eating people. They were thought to live at the bottom of lakes, and would release water in return for human sacrifice. It is thought that St George's dragon was a Lamia; St George is a saint common to both Britain and Bulgaria.

Léka Rábota: enjoy your work.

Lev (Leva): Official Bulgarian monetary unit

Mehana: Restaurant, Inn or Tavern.

Martenitsa: An amulet traditionally made in the home of threaded red and white woollen strands and decorated with seeds, coins and brightly coloured beads. These are exchanged on the first of March (the traditional start to spring) and worn until the first Stork returns. They are then either buried under a stone, tied to a fruit tree or to the horns of farm animals. They represent good luck, fecundity in both animals and humans and carry hopes of a good harvest.

Martouvane: 1st March, officially the first day of spring.

Nazdrave i Dobūr Apitite: Cheers and good appetite.

Nikulden: St. Nicholas' day: he is the patron saint of water.

Obronicishte: holy ground, often the ruins of a church – thought to be pagan, dating back to the ancient Slavs and even the Thracians.

Pop: Priest.

Rakia: potent home brewed spirit.

Roma: East European ethnic gypsies.

Samodiva (plural: Samodivi) Samovila (Plural: Samovili): Fairies: generally thought to be young fair-haired females with wings and feathery clothes. It is supposed that their power resides in their apparel: girdles, combs, cloaks and the like. The Samodivi are considered capricious and fun-loving, but generally benign towards humans, unlike the Samolivi who are spiteful and vengeful to all human kind. To seek pardon of the Samodivi/Samolivi for any infraction one needed to sprinkle the ground (fairy territory: usually the banks of rivers and streams) with sweetened water and leave a gift of bread and honey.

Saya: Type of traditional head scarf.

Spahi: Turkish regular cavalry.

St Iliya: (Prophet Elijah) associated with thunder and lightning.

Todoroven: St. Todor's day, 28th February

Vampiri: Vampires - with regional variations the Vampire legend exists throughout Eastern Europe, not just in the Carpathian mountains of Romania as depicted by Bram Stoker.

Veshkitsa: A witch, generally old, female and vengeful. They were said to have supernatural powers – they are akin to our own folk belief in the witch. As with our own witches, the *Veshkitsa* are identifiable members of the community, usually spiteful old women, childless women or women born with some mark or defect. They are said to take their power from the moon and from water (hence the use of river stones in several of the stories), and were often sought out to help out with human problems. They were condemned by the church as

heretics, and there is a mural in the Rila Monastery depicting peasants taking their sick to the *Veshtitsa*, with devils hovering above, egging them on. However, unlike Western Europe, there were never any witch hunts, and the position of the *Veshtitsa* within Bulgarian folk lore remains an ambiguous one; they are often perceived to be a necessary evil.

Voivoda: leader of an armed band of Bulgarian freedom fighters.

Vurkolak: special kind of vampire originating from the blood of a robber.

Yatagan: A large sabre carried by the Turkish officer class.

Zdravets: scented cranesbill – considered to be lucky and health giving.

Zmey: *Zmey* are a mixture of man, snake and bird and have the ability to change shape.

They are generally perceived to be protective of human kind; each village would have its own invisible *Zmey* guardian which would fight off the *Lamia*. They are associated with lightning flashes, which are thought to be the fiery arrows used to ward off the offending *Lamia*. They are also associated with *St Illiya* – the thunder being the sound of *St Illiya*'s chariot wheels and hoof beats.

Bulgarian Historical Time-Line With Reference To the Collection

- 356 BC:** Phillip of Macedon defeats the Thracians taking the gold and silver mines in Southern Thrace. 'Cats of Thassos'.
- 681 AD:** Khan Asparuh (Khan Isperih) founds the Bulgarian state on the banks of the Danube. 'Khan Isperih's Gift'.
- 855 AD:** Slavonic alphabet created by St Cyril and St Methodius.
- 864 AD:** Bulgarians are converted to Christianity.
- 1396 AD:** Widely accepted as year in which medieval Bulgaria succumbed to the onslaught from the Ottoman Empire. 'Martenitsa'.
- 1651:** The first book to be published in Bulgarian, *Abagar*, was issued in Rome by the Bulgarian Catholic Bishop Phillip Stanislavov.
- 1860:** Bulgaria splits from the Greek Orthodox Church to form an autonomous Bulgarian Orthodox Church
- 1876:** A Bulgarian delegation is sent to France, Great Britain, Germany and Russia to demand autonomy for Bulgaria.
- 1877/8:** The Russo/Turkish War ending in the treaty of San Stefano. 'Shipka'.
- 1946:** Foundation of the Peoples Republic of Bulgaria.
- 1973:** There is unrest among Bulgarian Muslims at an attempt by the government to change their names to Christian ones.
- 1980:** Bulgaria faces West with an act for the establishment of joint ventures with foreign capital.
- 1985:** Marks the forcible name change of Bulgarian Muslims.
- 1995:** Bulgaria applies for membership of the European Union.

- 2004:** Bulgaria officially co-opted as a member of NATO.
- 2007:** Bulgaria and Rumania become part of the European Union.' Brussels, Jambo the Gypsy and Vera the Horse'.

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