

FACELESS MEN  
& OTHER MACEDONIAN  
STORIES

by  
Meto  
Jovanovski

EDITED WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION BY  
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## FACELESS MEN AND OTHER MACEDONIAN STORIES

Meto Jovanovski was born in 1928 in Braychino near the border of Greece and Yugoslavia. He has published seven novels and many short stories, among them 'The Man in the Blue Suit'. His novel *Cousins* has been translated into English by Sylvia Holton.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Writing of Meto Jovanovski*

As Milne Holton noted in *The Big horse and Other Stories of Modern Macedonia*, the modern history of literary Macedonian is a rather brief one. Despite efforts in the late nineteenth century by Grigor Prlicev and the Miladinov brothers to establish a literary language, only after the Second World War did Macedonia emerge as an independent Republic of Yugoslavia, and only then did Macedonian literature begin to establish itself. An early collection of poems by Koco Racin, Beli Mugri ('The Dawn'), appeared in 1939. After the war it was particularly the efforts of Blaze Koneski in creating an orthography for Macedonian, and in publishing poems and stories in the language, that began the literary movement which is evident today.

The generation immediately following the Second World War, including the important poet and prose writer Blaze Koneski, were much concerned with the establishment of Macedonian literary language and cultural identity. This concern is evident in the work of Meto Jovanovski, who has served as President of the Macedonian PEN Organization and has political concerns involving the issue of the status of Macedonian language and culture. What Milne Holton has termed the 'lyric regionalism' of the post-war generation is evident in many of Jovanovski's stories, which clearly demonstrate the author's concern for the survival of a particular way of life in Macedonia. However, it is also fair to suggest that his stories attain universality beyond what is normally connoted by 'regional.'

Meto Jovanovski has denied that his short stories are intended as 'historical fiction,' although certain of his novels such as 'Land and Toil' clearly are. Speaking of his short novel, *Cousins*, Jovanovski stated that 'at no moment was I writing a historical novel. As you can see from the content of the novel itself, I think that I've succeeded to suggest a message of a peaceful people ... What's important, for example for Srbin and Shishman in *Cousins*, is not whether they are Macedonians, Serbians or Bulgarians. They are concerned with their own lives, their own children, their village, the conditions in which they are living.' In the same interview Jovanovski explained 'the essential idea of the novel': There is a real web of allied forces which are imposed on our personal life. In fact, if there is a drama in the story, it shows the individuals fighting violent factors in order to survive. Not just to survive but to be human beings.'

Born on 18 October 1928 in Macedonia, Yugoslavia, Meto Jovanovski grew up in the impoverished mountain village of Braychino before attending the High Pedagogical Academy in Skopje, where he took a degree in

Yugoslavian literatures and in Macedonian language. If his early background is, as he sometimes says, that of a 'peasant' from the village, his adult experience is more cosmopolitan, including work in publishing and media since 1954, the holding of several national offices among writers' organizations, and travel abroad throughout Europe, North America, the Middle East and the Orient. He has been employed by one of the major publishing houses in Macedonia, Makedonska kniga, has edited literary journals including *Sovremenost* ('Present Day') and *Kulturen zivot* ('Cultural life'), has worked as Head of the Department for Foreign Programming for TV Skopje, and has served as Secretary and President of the Macedonian PEN Centre.

Outside of Yugoslavia, Jovanovski's work has been translated into sixteen languages. His 1967 novel *Slana vo cutot na bademite* ('Frost in the Almond Tree Blossom') was translated into four languages including Russian, while *Cousins*, translated by Sylvia Holton, was published in the United States in 1987. His short stories have been anthologized in collections published in the United States, the former Soviet Union, China, Israel, West Germany, Sweden, Poland, and other nations. In 1979-80 Jovanovski was named an Honorary Fellow in Writing at the University of Iowa.

Jovanovski is conscious of his indebtedness to other contemporary writers, particularly to those American writers who influenced the post-war generation throughout Europe. As he has stated: 'I would say that I'm educated in American writers — as I mentioned before, from the time I began to publish my first stories and ambitiously took part in editing periodicals, newspapers, reviews, at that time in Macedonia, it was the time of American writers, of Hemingway, Faulkner, Caldwell, the five or six great American writers. Of course, American literature is still quite present in Yugoslavia, and I think there is quite an awareness of the fact that the American fiction writing at the moment is the leading one.'

In addition to several collections of short stories, seven novels, and various children's books, Jovanovski has translated a range of works into Macedonian. These include an anthology of contemporary American poetry, *Edna druga Amerika* ('Another America') in 1978, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and major works of Oriental religion such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *I Ching*, *Nine Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Mahajharata*, and *Ramayana*. Jovanovski has also published translations from Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and Bulgarian.

In terms of their subject matter and theme there are some common features in the stories in this collection. A central concern is the sense of Macedonia as a new experiment. Certainly the writers of Jovanovski's generation capture the sense of excitement and potential of Macedonia as an independent republic. From the historical probing in his fiction, delving into the roots of Macedonian independence and its past of oppression and war, one gains a sense of Jovanovski's interest in the peculiar nature of survival of the Macedonian people. An important accomplishment of his fiction is the recording of the perseverance and humanity of the peasant culture in Macedonia.

The current social and economic realities of Macedonia enter the writing as well. Jovanovski lives in Skopje for much of the year, retreating to

his ancestral village of Braychino in the summer months. As with many Macedonians of his generation, he retains memories of the village life, and his moral vision is shaped to some extent by a traditionalism based on village mores. There is a dissatisfaction with the direction of 'modern' life and a longing to return to more meaningful relationships based on community and family. This is to suggest that Jovanovski does not entirely endorse the dream of consumerism and economic development widely felt in eastern Europe today. The peculiar 'richness' that he admires in the West resides in its freedom and diversity, not in consumerism: 'If I envy Americans, it's not the national income, the wealth, but the way of life, the freedom.'

'I was born in a small mountain village of a hundred families, a very poor village, and I am so familiar and so much connected with the village that although I have lived in Skopje for almost forty years I really long to go back to my village,' Jovanovski has said. 'I never became accustomed to the urban place. Of course I enjoy Skopje. I enjoy New York, San Francisco, et cetera, I would enjoy Paris, but I will always think of back here, of the village. It's a question of the roots.'

For the most part Jovanovski's characters are country people, although some of them have come to live in Skopje and seem indistinguishable from city dwellers. Although some of Jovanovski's finest stories are set in the city of Skopje, now a metropolis of over 600,000, always one senses that the village is not far removed.

'Part of my writing is like *Cousins*,' Jovanovski states, 'located recognizably in Macedonia, concerned with the problems of the Macedonians, and sometimes the reader may think that it is a historical novel, but it is never that. In short, a good half of my writing is rural by appearance but with an effort as much as possible to make it universal. The second part of my writing, especially in the short stories, is like "*The Man in the Blue Suit*." They can be equally located in any part of the world. You could say, it's the urban part of my fiction writing.'

Despite the fact that Skopje is a large and modern city, the third largest city in Yugoslavia, even in Skopje one is never far from the influence of the village. At the markets, at the train and bus stations, and on the streets one is in contact with a daily migration of villagers, and the peculiar quiet of Skopje weekends is explained by the exodus of city residents to the countryside. The jarring contrasts of Skopje, which has many of the problems of cities in the developing nations, are also apparent in Jovanovski's fiction. In this fictional world, as in the region of Macedonia itself, one is apt to encounter a peasant leading atop a donkey-cart side by side with an entrepreneur driving a Mercedes. The streets of Skopje consist of glass-and-concrete high rises occupied by a highly diverse ethnic and geographical population, and the sense of alienation from the modern city is deeply felt in a developing industrial society such as that of Macedonia. As an artist Jovanovski reflects this sense of anomie in stories such as '*The Man in the Blue Suit*': 'I was looking for a way to express the absoluteness of living nowadays. That's what I found in that story about the man who waits for the bus,' he states.

In conclusion, one can see that Meto Jovanovski's place in modern Macedonian literature is that of an author who looks back to the village and

the traditional culture of his region, but who also looks forward to the wider sphere of contemporary life. In bringing together such a range of experience, looking to the past and the future, Jovanovski accomplishes an impressive synthesis. His fiction compels our interest because of what it records about the Macedonian experience and about human experience in a universal sense. Jovanovski's meditation on this historical and human experience is marked by his natural curiosity and openness to ideas beyond those of his own culture. The stories presented in this collection are intended to serve as an introduction to the writing of this engaging and deeply committed artist.

*Jeffrey Folks*

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# THE STORIES

THE MAN IN THE BLUE SUIT  
*Translated by Milne Holton*

Everyone noticed his bright blue suit. He walked upright with steady steps and looked straight ahead and far in front of himself. The rhythms of the lines in the pavement passed beneath his feet, unrecorded.

When he came to the newspaper kiosk, he stopped, but didn't turn. Rigid as a mannequin, he put a hand into a pocket, withdrew a coin, and, after placing it on the counter, turned his head just a bit, only to see which paper he would take. Then he stretched his hand out, folded the newspaper which was given to him, and with one motion placed it under his arm and began walking as before, coldly upright, looking far ahead of his stride.

There was a bus stop on the corner, and when he approached it, he raised his eyes in the direction of the board on the post beside it. It was the action of a sensible man.

At the top of the board, above the smaller print, the number thirteen was written. The man in the blue suit stopped beneath it. He moved one leg slightly outward, took his newspaper in his hand, opened it, and began reading.

Meanwhile, the people passing up and down along the street were engaged living their own lives. Some of them cast an eye at the man in the blue suit, who continued standing just beneath the hoard which marked the bus stop.

From the dark entrance of the hospital came two peasants, each with a sack on his back. 'They walked, silent and bent, looking at the pavement, to the bus stop, where they stopped at the edge of the pavement and a little beyond the man in the blue suit. 'There they stood, but there was wonder in their eyes, for they were not at all sure whether it was right to wait or not.

The man in the blue suit looked at them, discreetly and questioningly. Then, without hiding his intolerance, he continued to read. 'The peasants continued to stand in their places, how almost dozing in the sun, their heads hanging loosely from their thin, hair-covered necks. But they stood together, and at a little distance from the man in the blue suit.

'Then the man in the blue suit cast another glance in the direction of the peasants, and this one was less discreet and more disapproving. Now even anger could be seen in his eyes. Now, keeping his newspaper in his right hand, he stretched out his left towards the nearest peasant. Rather squeamishly he touched him on the shoulder. When the peasant, aroused and

confused, turned towards him questioningly, the man in the blue suit said: 'Are you waiting for a bus?'

'Yes,' said the peasant. Now the other peasant began to be aware that something was happening. 'Then,' said the man in the blue suit, 'you should queue up in the line.'

They looked at him in wonder and then looked slightly downward. They did not want to accept what he had said. But they yielded. They moved slightly to stand beside one another.

'When people are waiting for a bus they stand one behind the other and not beside one another,' said the man in the blue suit.

The two peasants looked at each other and moved to form a proper queue, one behind the other behind the man in the blue suit. Then the man in the blue suit turned a page of his newspaper and went on with his reading.

The two men behind him stood unmoving but anxious in their impotence. It seemed that they would give anything only to be able to turn to one another, to look trustingly at one another; that would explain everything. But they didn't dare. They must be content to look upon the back of the man in the blue suit.

The man looked at his watch for a moment and then returned to his reading. But when a middle-aged man came to the bus stop, the man in the blue suit began to notice him.

He noticed how impatiently the newcomer walked up and down behind the three of them, how he glanced up the street, then out in front of himself, then thrust his hands in his pockets, and how confused he seemed in his importance and boredom. Then the newcomer turned towards the three in the queue and began to look them over. He moved his eyes from one to the other as if they were notes on a musical scale, until he met the eyes of the man in the blue suit. Then he turned again towards the street and, bending a little, thrust his hands into his pockets again and, bringing his two feet exactly together, began to observe the toes of his shoes. The two peasants, expectantly and in protest, looked first at the man and then at the man in the blue suit.

'Fellow,' they heard the voice of the man in the blue suit, and felt relieved and lively. 'The newcomer turned seriously around, not sure to whom the word was addressed. 'I think,' said the man in the blue suit, looking at him, 'that you should stand in line.'

The newcomer opened his mouth and looked at a point in space in front of the speaker. He was preparing his resistance. But when he met the look of the man in the blue suit, he said nothing but swallowed imperceptibly and moved unwillingly to take his place in the line. The man in the blue suit went on reading; he did not seem to be at all impatient.

After that a young man and a girl came. They were very interested in each other, so much so that they did not even notice the queue. 'They stopped somewhere near the two peasants, the young man listening, the girl chattering. The man in the blue suit paid them no attention. The man who now stood last in the queue looked around the peasants towards the man in the blue suit and appeared to notice the couple; he looked at the man at the end as if to tell him that he should take the matter in his own hands. But the

man at the end seemed nervous, so the man in the blue suit looked towards the couple and said, 'We hope you will observe the queue.'

The young man and the girl glanced at the queue and confronted four pairs of eyes and four silent rebukes. 'They were a little disturbed, for they wanted to be liked. Because of this, they moved to the end of the line, but there they stood beside one another. And they would have remained thus, had the man in front of them not continued to look back at them. The man in the blue suit turned another page of his newspaper and moved his eyes up and down its columns.

After that others who came to the bus stop and, out of habit, took random places alongside the others met the eyes of the men in front of the line and, finding the imperative of those eyes irresistible, finally lined up. Thus, a long line was formed.

But the bus did not come. The man in the blue suit again looked at his watch and then refolded his newspaper. Then he folded the paper again and put it in his pocket. Then he stood still, facing the street and waited for the bus.

According to the watch of the man in the blue suit, it should have arrived; but the bus did not appear. Then the man turned towards the line. The two peasants were beside him. He said, in a low voice, distinctly but to no one in particular, 'In a more cultured town this would never happen.'

Only the nearer peasant heard the words, but he turned to his companion and gave him a questioning look. The companion did not even understand that there was something to be understood. He was about to spit, yet somehow the blue sky at which he was staring prevented him from doing so.

Across the Street from the bus stop a young man, with a large black moustache and a necktie upon which was painted a palm tree and a naked woman, stopped and noticed the line of people, so neatly queued up to offer themselves as customers of the city's public transport system. The man in the blue suit noticed his mocking look. Then finally bus number thirteen could be seen approaching.

The people in the line turned to watch it and seemed to be on the verge of moving out of place. The man in the blue suit sensed that the line might shorten or even break now, so he cast his eyes along its length. He tried to meet each pair of eyes along the row. And the queue calmed.

The bus made its stop so that its entrance door opened just in front of the man in the blue suit. He was just about to step up when the young man from across the street appeared from around the rear of the bus, his mouth pursed, whistling. With eyes full of irony he stepped up, ahead of the man in the blue suit. For a moment it seemed that the young man would enter the bus first, but the man in the blue suit put his right arm up and his hand on the side of the rear door and thus blocked the young man's way.

Then the man in the blue suit turned his head towards the peasant beside him and said, 'You, please get on.' The peasant, amazed, hesitated, not knowing whether it was right to enter the bus or not. 'Please, please,' the man in the blue suit said to him.

So the peasant got on. Immediately, the other peasant followed. The young man from the other side of the street stopped whistling and stared at

this keeper of public order. He wanted to push his shoulder against the chest of the man in the blue suit, to force him backwards into the line of entering passengers. But he could not, there was a terrible warning in the man's eyes.

So the young man had to wait. It was very difficult for him to meet the eyes of those in line, all of whom were looking at him with undisguised contempt. So he looked away, and at the entrance of the hospital. He noticed two attendants coming towards him from its back door.

The people in the line slowly entered the bus. 'The last was a bent old man, whom the man in the blue suit assisted in his long step up. 'Then the man in the blue suit sent a final look, full of rebuke, at the young man, turned, and waited to get onto the bus behind the bent old man.

Then the young man noticed that the attendants were running and were much nearer than he expected. In fact, now they were just behind the man in the blue suit. One of his feet was already on the step when he also noticed them. 'Do you want me?' said the man in the blue suit.

Reaching for his arm which already grasped the vertical bar on the bus entrance, one attendant nodded his head.

'Yes ... '

'It was good of you to be on time,' said the man in the blue suit. I he removed his foot from the step.

'The young man looked mockingly at him as they turned him away, then he got on the bus.

'What a strange thing,' said one of the passengers who had stood in the line.

'He seemed so wise,' said another.

Then several of those who had been waiting in the line looked out of the window towards the hospital. There, entering by the dark door, were the two attendants, on either side of the man in the blue suit.

There was a silence among many on the bus. The conductor had not noticed anything, and when the last passenger had entered, he signaled for the driver to start.

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## EVENT

*Translated by Charles Simic*

The event about to take place was intended to be the final settling of accounts. Trpen was well aware of this, for he had been anxiously awaiting the event for a long time. Judging by his inner sense of resolution, he felt that he could win. The fact that the enemy strolled proudly ahead of him, oblivious of Trpen's existence, had an ambiguous meaning. Perhaps it meant that Trpen was escorting the enemy, perhaps that the enemy was not afraid of him at all.

They found themselves in a wide, flat meadow covered with colourful flowers of all kinds. The combination of colours was such that Trpen felt like shouting with joy. Still, he didn't shout or let himself go, for he remembered that this was no ordinary meadow. He knew that the meadow was something entirely different to his enemy. He knew this because of an overwhelming inner sense, his odd impression that he was now hearing the footsteps of a well drilled army parading in honour of work. So he was not very much surprised when he realized that his meadow was really a large, well paved city square where citizens come to stroll to demonstrate their civic loyalty.

He noticed also that his meadow, which steadily was becoming more like a square, was surrounded by public buildings. To conceal the fact that these were actually walls, streets and wide boulevards led from the square to their respective dead-ends. Trpen noticed all that only later, for right now his attention was caught by the architectural beauty of the buildings that surrounded his so-called meadow. It was truly impressive how even a visitor who had never been here before could distinguish at a glance to what institution each building belonged. The sign by which they were recognizable was as incomprehensible as it was obvious. The greatest achievement of the builders, architecturally speaking, was the remarkable and complete transparency of the buildings. Everyone at every moment could see what every clerk was doing and how. The system was so perfect that every clerk could see in turn what every other clerk was up to. It's understood, of course, that the authorities inside the institutions could keep an eye on the activities of every individual outside. Nevertheless, complete transparency from the outside was blocked by areas of barely noticeable opaqueness, areas which, as you gazed on them, gave off a feeling of chill and hate. But Trpen also understood that these opaque areas nevertheless were a source of hope for most men.

All in all, Trpen was not spared the impression of great transparency which would guarantee complete visibility to his approaching settlement, so

that the opaque areas remained in the frame of secondary meaning in relation to the coming event.

He was far more preoccupied with his motives, his justifications and visions of the future, which for him were undoubtedly convincing. He failed to understand that always in such situations one must take into account to what extent that which is happening, and will happen, agrees or doesn't agree with the existing social system. For that reason he couldn't comprehend the exact meaning of these opaque areas, or even determine their precise location on the buildings. Only then would he have been in a position to explain the reason for the calm stride of his enemy in front. Independent of all these considerations, Trpen followed him to the centre of the meadow, which for his enemy was a city-square.

The fact that the struggle will take place on a meadow appeared to him to be an advantage. But then all of a sudden he noticed again those opaque areas which now spread their chill into the marrow of his bones. He was at a point of screaming, but managed to control himself.

Trpen felt tired. All these contradictory impressions wore him out and made him impatient for the struggle to begin as soon as possible, regardless of the outcome. Let us begin, he told the man. He spoke gently, as if afraid he might frighten him away. Nevertheless, that's how the final settlement began.

They were supposed to grapple each other firmly. But now that the struggle had already begun, Trpen noticed that the men he fought with had no bones. He felt overwhelmed with disgust. It's as if he fought a snail, a snake, some sort of horrible earth-worm. He was humiliated and frightened. All that had to be observed from the surrounding buildings. For such was the law of their technology: spotlights are set up in such a manner that all irregularities in the combat are cast down like shadows. Since nothing happened, Trpen knew that this dirty fight was considered proper in the eyes of the audience.

In the meantime, of course, the struggle went on. At the given time, which came so quickly, it was terminated. Trpen had no interest in the official outcome. The end was so obvious that the clerks in the surrounding offices had already resumed their work on the heaps of dossiers which still had to be examined. Not only was the event over, the most important in Trpen's life, but it was already forgotten. Thus, all that he was proud of became now in the regard of the public shameful and deeply insulting, he thought of how miserable he must look standing in his flowering meadow. In contrast his enemy, who stood a little to the side, appeared fine. He just had to fix his necktie to show how much he cared for his appearance.

Now all that Trpen wanted, as he retreated from that miserable place, was to see his meadow in that same joyful and flowering mood as in the beginning.

Someone stepped up to him. It was an official-looking individual with a face that gave off as much intelligence as befitted his position in the system. No, he told Trpen, we couldn't foresee with what arguments your opponent would come armed. At the same time we didn't know yours either. We had no right, he said, to limit the freedom of the individual. As he spoke Trpen relived the defeat. He heard the official refer to the 'bonelessness' of his

enemy as 'having proofs.' Luckily, Trpen felt a deep contempt towards the official, and the intensity of that feeling gave him back his dignity.

Turning to go away, he again saw the meadow with all its rich colours. Then he realized that the struggle was something that had no end. All that happened here was only an episode. There's no final settlement. He was so happy that he could not continue to dream the same dream.

When he turned over into the next dream, he saw the official he had met at the end of the struggle in his last dream. Actually, this was no other than the man he had fought with. His surprise was so great that Trpen screamed and woke up. But only a moment later he was thoroughly confused. He didn't know which dream he was dreaming now.

Everything is reality.

## THE BALKANS ARE AN OCEAN

Judging by what can happen to a Macedonian, the Balkans are larger than an ocean.

They gave us twelve hundred people to escort in Thessaloniki in the First World War. We were Serbian soldiers. We didn't know what was going on, really. Those twelve hundred people, we found out, were Macedonian rebels. So they were seen as rebelling against the Serbs, accused of being communists and things like that, as always happens.

We took them first to the railway station. They were waiting, lined up four-by-four in each row and along the sides with fixed bayonets on the rifles. We came to the railway station and pushed them in the wagons like cattle. They were put in the wagons just like you put nails in a box, upright. We guarded them, from inside. One at each door of the wagon. We were ordered to keep the door a little bit open so one could breathe inside. I have my gun stuck to my side like cloth. I can't move about, nor do I have the ability to turn my gun against them. We were probably sacrificed together with the prisoners.

We were Macedonians, too.

Anyway, the train started, going slowly but surely.

I stand there at the door and wonder how 'I can tell the people that I am Macedonian, one of them, because if they decide to try something they will have to kill me first. I would be the first victim, although I don't have anything to do with the business of the Serbian military authorities. They would just have to push me through the door and I am done for.

After a while someone wanted to light a cigarette. Here I am, I said to myself. I took the matches from my pocket and lit his cigarette.

'Here you are,' I said in Macedonian.

He looked at me, smiled, and I told him:

'Don't worry. I am a Macedonian, like you.'

'Really!' He said.

'Yes' I said. 'The guard at the other door is a Macedonian, too.'

'The poor man, he was so glad. He shouted to the people in the wagon:

'Hey, they are Macedonians.'

They were all glad.

So we had a nice journey.

When we arrived in Thessaloniki, we lined them up again: they four by four in rows and we from the sides with bayonets on the rifles. We took them to a camp outside Thessaloniki. In the fields. That camp happened to be

English. It was fenced with barbed wire. Inside, here were tents and cottages. We put them there. We were separate. We sleep separately, eat separately. Important persons, you see.

We spent two months there. 'The only trouble we had was the fact that we had to be on guard duty very frequently. Two hours on guard and two hours free. Unfortunately it was too far from our homes to decide to escape from the army. We, the Macedonians, during that war of theirs, didn't think about anything else except how to escape.

'The prisoners, naturally — although the guards didn't know anything — made up their minds to run away from the camp. We were talking, waiting for the time to go on duty. It was before the sunset. All of a sudden we noticed that they, all twelve hundred, started to go towards the gate. The guard on the gate was a certain Marko, a Macedonian. He was a man who hardly ever opened his mouth. The prisoners go right up to him and he slowly, very slowly, word by word says meekly to them:

'Stop or I'll have to fire!'

He says that he will fire but at the same time keeps the rifle in his hand, aimed towards the ground, and steps back ready to run away.

We, since we are not on duty, just watch what happens. We see that they drive Marko away. We are laughing. As we see it, if the prisoners succeed, the Serbians will have no reason to keep us here and they will send us back to Bitola from where we can easily escape. No expenses for the journey. So they're trying to escape and we are glad.

Still, we are not that happy. All of a sudden an officer appears on a horse. On a white horse. He runs the horse around, waves with a gun in his hand and shouts to us:

'What are you doing? Fuck your Macedonian mothers. Return the prisoners!'

We had no choice. By himself he couldn't do anything to the prisoners, but he could kill a couple of us. So we took the guns and surrounded the prisoners.

'Step back!' we say to the prisoners but with rifles less ready than Marko. We keep ourselves aside, just in case. If you fire into such a crowd, you'll kill perhaps fifteen people with just one bullet and be sorry for a couple of lives.

We don't fire but that damn officer on the horse shouts like a mad dog:

'Fire! Fire!...'

We become afraid that he may start to fire at our backs. Well, we start to shoot but high up, above their heads, or in the ground in front of the prisoners.

The prisoners probably became afraid and started to disperse. It was managed somehow but from that moment on they double our time on duty. But not for long. We belonged to the Drina Division of the Serbian army. I don't know what happened but Belgrade was informed of what went on here with these prisoners. It became known to the English and the French too. They found out that it was a great shame for the Serbian Army and decided to move us to Shabac in Serbia. Other soldiers are supposed to be transferred here, more loyal to Serbia. So we are to go to Shabac, passing through Bitola.

So far, so good. We will be on our way home.

The officer took us all to the railway station in Thessaloniki. He was to take us to Bitola, according to the order he was given.

As we were going through the middle of Thessaloniki, almost approaching the railway station, all of a sudden, who knows how and from where, a sergeant appears with a soldier. The sergeant stops in front of our formation and shouts:

‘Soldiers left, fuck your mother.’

He was drunk. Our officer carefully told him:

‘Go away,’ and makes eyes at us not to pay attention to him. When the sergeant saw that, he turned to our officer.

‘Whoever’s in charge here, fuck your mother too,’ he said to him.

‘Excuse me, Capitan,’ our lieutenant says mockingly.

But the sergeant doesn’t get the joke. Nearby, there was a guard, a Greek soldier, who was protecting something. The Serbian sergeant ran to the guard, trying to take the rifle from the Greek soldier in order to put us under his command. But when the Greek saw how serious it was, he stuck the bayonet in the drunk’s stomach so that he was killed on the spot.

What happened after that we don’t know. Since we didn’t have anything in common with that sergeant, our officer took us to the railway station.

‘The sergeant was the first.

We came to the railway station in Thessaloniki and got in the train. There, in the compartment, a Serbian soldier took up all the bench and didn’t let anybody sit down.

‘Where are you going?’ We ask him.

‘To Nish,’ he says.

‘This isn’t the train for Nish,’ we say to him.

‘Fuck off,’ he tells us.

The fool thinks that we’re lying to him just to take his seat. Well, since he decided to take this train, that’s his business.

Almost at the same time when the train was starting, the conductor appeared, a Frenchman. He came up to the Serb.

‘Ou vas tu?’ he says to him in French.

‘To Nish,’ he says.

‘This train is not for Nish,’ says the Frenchman.

The fool finally realizes and runs from the compartment, jumps out while the train is already moving fast.

I don’t know exactly what happened but he fell under the train. The train cut off his legs, leaving him crippled.

So there was another gone. But there were more to come, though we couldn’t know that. In the wagon next to ours, there had been another fool like the one we found on the bench in the compartment. During war-time people get angry. As we were told later, he was stretched out on the bench and wouldn’t let anybody sit. Our people begged him to let them sit down but he told them:

‘You can sit here on my prick.’

Ours were probably offended and put up with him as long as they could. When it got dark in their compartment, they took him by the legs and shoulders and threw him through the window of the fast-moving train like a

log. Nobody saw or asked for the fool.

Well, when it was over, since we were going towards our birthplaces, we got in a rather good mood. We were happy that we're going back to Bitola. If we go to Shabac, we will go. Doesn't matter who was saying or doing what, we were making plans now to escape from the Serbian army. It was not our army, nor was it fighting for any Macedonian cause. Well, not all of us will succeed, but we all plan it. We have big plans. America and Australia, so that when the war is over, we'll return home with some earned money. We, the Macedonians, do not need the war business. The business of war is nothing but a waste.

If a man is overcome by joy, he becomes a fool. So, since we were joyful and it was warm in the wagons and the weather was nice, we climbed to the tops of the wagons. To refresh ourselves and enjoy the valley of Voden. You see, a fool always looks for luxury.

But we had forgotten or didn't know that there was a tunnel on our way between Voden and Lerin. And there was a little rain so that the roofs became slippery. We wanted to get down but we couldn't, it was so slippery. It was difficult just keeping ourselves on the roof. As for the train, it didn't know how to stop except at the station, like a dog which pees only by a pole. So while we were on the roofs of the wagons, the train entered the tunnel. We were nearly suffocated by the smoke. We who were saved. As for the rest, those who fell from the roofs of the wagons and were lost forever, I do not know. I don't know how they were.

Anyway, finally we were in Bitola. Spiro Drishkov and I didn't wait long. When they let us out of the barracks to enjoy the town, we took our chance. By that evening we were right back at our village of Braychino.

Now, Spiro and I, we are hiding up there in Stenje, in the Drishkovski's stall. We are all alone. There is no snow yet but it is already cold so that we sit there by the fire and get warm. Fools, we are drowsy instead of being alert.

I don't know where they came from. Two Serbian gendarmes. Legal. In uniforms, with guns and everything which makes a soldier or a policeman look as they look. 'They entered the stall with their guns pointed straight at us.

Well, it meant they had us.

The fact that they had us was one thing, but then they started to heat us up pretty bad.

Get up! Go forward! Fuck your mother, Macedonian! They couldn't do anything without fucking something. They put us in front and now we are going towards the village. They butt us with rifles. At that time, in the Balkan wars, the Serbs had French rifles which you couldn't fix not to fire. And he butts you with such a rifle. So it is not enough that their butting hurts, but on top of that you are afraid that the rifle will fire into your body. A fool can easily kill you one way or the other.

We were probably supposed to be beaten to death but when we entered the village, my friend Spiro's mother met us. She probably knew what had happened and someone had given her advice. So she came and put a golden coin in the pocket of one of the gendarmes. So the dogs came to rest.

They don't beat us any more but they take us further on. First to the next village, then in Resen and finally to the barracks in Bitola. They put us inside the yard of the barracks and let us free.

In the barracks there were a lot of people. Soldiers, but civilians like me and Spiro too. All the Macedonians were running away from every army and then by force they were taken back. Like in our case. If the Serbians put three in uniform, two would run away for sure. 'That is why most of the people in the yard of the barracks were civilians. We were already in uniforms. Because, we first escaped from the Bulgarian army, but we were caught in territory invaded by the Serbians and they dressed us in their uniforms and sent us to Valevo. Spiro and I ran away from Valevo, in the uniforms which we still wore. Now they only need to give us rifles. We came back from Valevo with rifles too, but we hid the rifles in the straw where we were hiding. We didn't tell the gendarmes anything about the arms. After all, at that time, it was better if a rifle belonged to you than to any state.

So we're in the barracks, in the yard and all we do is stare at the gate. We see that people are being put in and out, but what we're looking for is to see who are those who are let out and who are not. We notice that those who are in uniforms are let out without any problem. If it is so, I conclude, then we are to be let out. We're in uniform.

'Listen, Spiro,' I say to Spiro Drishkov. 'Do you see that those who are in uniforms are let out?'

'I see,' he says.

'Aren't we in uniform!' I say.

'Yes,' he says, 'we're in uniform.'

'Then, let us try,' I say.

So we both went to the gate and passed through without any trouble. And didn't go back. That night we spent with relatives in Bitola and the next day, before going back to our village, we went to the barracks to retrieve our bags. Because when Spiro's mother gave a golden coin to that gendarme, she gave each of us a white bag of food. So because of our greed we went back to the barracks.

We passed through the gate easily.

We took our white bags and came back to the gate, now to pass out for good. Spiro goes first and then me a little behind him.

Nobody said anything to Spiro, but I don't know why, the unarmed duty soldier said to me:

'Hey', you're called to go to Prilep.'

God, I thought. What do I do now!

'Alright,' I say, 'but I have to look for my friend.'

Spiro is on the other side of the gate. He looks at us and listens to what we are talking about but keeps quiet. I signal him with my eyes and he understands.

So, with the soldier on duty I go to look for my friend. Well, Spiro goes ahead of us and we go after him to look for him. See?

I don't know what to do.

Over my shoulder I have a new blanket which was given to me in the barracks. A beautiful blanket.

I say to the soldier on duty:

'Listen, if I give you this blanket, would you go away and let me free?'

'No,' he says. 'I am not allowed.'

What a fool. Although a Macedonian, one of ours.

So we walked a bit more and I said to him again:

'I have two hundred French francs. If I give them to you, would you let me go?'

'No,' he says.

Two hundred francs at that time were equal to two and half napoleons, but he doesn't want it!

When Spiro sees what happens, he disappears in the little street, but I still cannot unbutton myself from this fool.

We come to a place near where Mihajlo the doctor and Josif Tudzarov were living. They were teaching in the high school there at the time. And then I said to the soldier on duty:

'Listen, I will have a look in this house and if I don't find Spiro I will come back to go to the barracks. I don't know where else to look.'

'OK,' he says, 'but be careful.'

'Don't worry,' I say.

So I entered the yard of another house and passed into the yard where those young people were living. I didn't go right up to them because they didn't know me personally. While they're figuring out who I am, any fool may come and arrest me. So I enter the outhouse and close the door from the inside.

So I stay there inside the outhouse.

A long time must have passed, when finally Mihajlo came outside. He probably needed to go to the john and wanted to come in to where I was. He tried the door but it was locked.

'Hey,' he said. 'Who's inside?'

'Me,' I said and told him who I was.

'What's the matter?' he said.

'Well,' I said, 'I'm running away from the army.'

'Damn our Macedonian business,' he said.

Anyway, so far so good. Now I have to find my comrade Spiro. It is already dark and it snows. Fortunately, I find Spiro but our problem now is where to go.

It happened that Spiro had some friends who were living in Douledzik near Bitola. So we went to them. They seemed to be excellent hosts to us. Such friends had Spiro. We were so welcome that we wanted to stay forever, but we had to go, such was our business. We told everything to the man there. We told him that we're bound to go back to Brajchino, over Mt. Pelister, but we don't know whether we'll be able to get across because of the snow. Christmas frosts had begun. 'The mountain is under snow and it's snowing outside right now.'

'Try,' said the man, 'but I do not know whether you'll succeed or not.'

We started next morning. We easily got to Dihovo and Nizho Pole. When we started to climb the mountain, there was more and more snow. A lot of snow. We became frightened. Are we going to be trapped by ice on the mountain? Pelister is extremely dangerous in the winter. What are we to do now?

We hesitated for quite a long time and finally decided to take the next valley, to go along Red River. It might be better, we hoped.

We did so. We passed a short section, climbed a bit and it was God save us when we came to a place too steep to go up. We found ourselves in front of a sort of snow dam. The wind had made a wall of snow, a wall which was above our heads at the top. Several metres high. That had.

So we started to walk along that snow wall. No place to pass.

When a man finds himself in such trouble, he'll do things that look foolish.

I put my coat over my head and made a hole in the snow. With my head. The snow inside was soft. I entered the snow and started to dig ahead. Like a dog. I continued to do it until I didn't come to a hard layer. And I used my head again. I saw the frozen layer of snow and broke it, found myself at the other end of the snow dam. And I called Spiro, my comrade, through the hole.

'Come on. I've done it.'

The weather got better. The sun appeared in the sky and became blinding and radiant. We started to sweat. So before the night we were hack in the stalls.

'You're back again!' said Joshe Drishkov, who'd hoped we would not return.

'We're hack,' we said.

We don't go down to the village. We stay here in the stall and make plans to pass the border to go to Greece but the weather is very had. And we're afraid to stay here because they may catch us again.

Next day we started. We passed over the river and started to climb towards the border. We did our best but finally we realized we'll never manage it. Very bad weather. So we returned. When Joshe saw us back, he said, 'Poor you.'

Next day the weather was not that bad. Fortunately, the snow was frozen at the top so that we could get over it. The snow was more than one metre thick. If it had not been frozen, you would have had to walk through it, which would have been very hard indeed.

Still the walking was not easy at all. We walked all day long and we still didn't come to the border. If the weather is good, it's only a few hours walking. The night was already coming so that we entered a cave under a rock and spent the night there. Next day was sunny but still very cold.

Finally we came to the border. There we entered the watchtower, made a fire and got warm. There were no soldiers during the winter there. They were down in the village. During the winter even a chained dog wouldn't stay in that place.

'The weather worsened again. A terrible cold wind started to blow so that we were afraid that because of the wind, we may take the wrong way and return to the Serbian soldiers. But Spiro appeared to have a wonderful sense of direction. Thank God it happened that he didn't follow my brains but I followed his, and so we got to the village of German in Greek territory. While we were approaching German, we met many fellow Macedonians from German walking and with horses, mules and oxen. They were collecting

wood. Since we were down near the lake of Prespa, it wasn't cold any more. We finally felt good.

We went right to Spiro's cousins. They immediately recognized us, invited us home but we told them that we'd escaped from the Serbian army and didn't want to be seen by someone who shouldn't see us.

'Don't worry,' a cousin said. 'It's just Joshe Vrzov from your village who's here with us.'

We didn't want to be seen by that man.

'No,' we said. 'We don't like Joshe knowing we're here.'

'If that's so,' he said, 'I'll take you to a relative at the upper end of the village.'

He took us there. To a certain Bozhin. Nice except that Bozhin happened to be connected with the Greek authorities. All of them, Bulgarians, Serbians, Greeks, they all had such shits among us Macedonians. He said:

'I am supposed to declare such people.'

'No,' said Spiro's cousin. 'You'll not declare these people. They'll spend the night and tomorrow they're leaving.'

So it was arranged for us to spend the night in Bozhin's house. For dinner they had leek pie, tasty, smelling good but didn't invite us to join them. They sat down, ate, and didn't even ask us if we were hungry. They didn't even offer any bed to sleep in. So we spent the night like horses and early next morning we left. We let them sleep on. Actually they didn't want to see us off.

Well, forget it.

Now we started to walk towards Lerin. Again over the mountain. We came near two villages which were on the road to Lerin-Paply and Rydory. Here was a well on the road and we saw some women who were trying to guess who we were. We just followed our road.

We came up on the top of the hill where it was sunny. We stopped for a rest. And to eat a little. We had bread now, because that morning when we left Bozhin's place, we went to the village of Medovo, to an aunt of mine who gave us bread. She invited us to her home but we were in a hurry. So we decided to eat here.

As soon as we started to eat, we heard a noise, bells ringing so that all the place was echoing. We got frightened. Was it to be more trouble?

They were a caravan from the village of Nivitzi by the lake of Prespa. They had loaded the horses with fresh fish and were taking it to market at Lerin. We exchanged some words with them, told them who we were and together with them went down to Lerin. They found a hotel for us and left to take care of their business.

Next day we went right to Naydo the Cottoner from Bitola. In 1914, when they divided Macedonia among the Serbians, Greeks and Bulgarians, he preferred to be with the Greeks than with the Serbs and came to live in Lerin. When he was escaping from the Serbs, he was helped by the villagers of Brajchino, and so he was good to all of us. So we went to him. He asks us:

'Where are you from, boys?'

'From Braychino,' we say.

He was glad to meet us.

We got two photographs for each of us and he in two days had Greek identification cards ready for us. So we became Greeks too. That is the Macedonian destiny. Well, if it helps, it doesn't matter for a while.

Soon we get passports too. Now we have to take the boat and go over the ocean, to America. All went pretty well except some trouble I had at the last moment. Actually it was because of my own stupidity.

I was on the pier in Patras, Greece, where we were getting on the liner to America.

It was very hot there. 'The brains in my head started to boil. The stones and sand around were like burning coal. We waited in a line in front of a small building. One behind another. The line so long you couldn't see its end. I stood in that line but finally got sick because of the heat. I got so sick that I left the line and went to refresh myself with water. I left a couple of times and whenever I returned, I was last in line. I had to. I couldn't stand the heat. Spiro and some other people from my village were already on the liner. I was the only one left behind on the pier. The sun sets and the boat is about to leave. I'm really getting worried.

I get so mad that I leave the line and go towards the shore. I am mad and ashamed to be left here like a donkey. I blame myself loudly.

I talked to myself like that while behind me there was a Greek policeman. I didn't notice him. On top of that, he happened to be Macedonian; he understood everything I said. When he saw me acting like a lunatic, he stood in front of me and said:

'What's the matter?'

I told him, I cannot catch the liner.

He looked at the liner and said:

'Yes, you won't succeed!'

What am I to do? I made up my mind. I took out five drachmas and put them in the policeman's pocket. He pretended not to notice what I did. Anyway, he checked in the pocket, took the money out, glanced at it, and put it back in his pocket. He looked again at the liner and said to me:

'It is a long row. Impossible.'

I got the message. He wanted more. At that time, with one drachma you could buy yourself a lunch. Not a good lunch but still enough not to be hungry. Eighteen drachmas was one napoleon. But it's not me who is asked.

So I took out two more drachmas and put them in his pocket. This time he didn't check.

And the miracle started.

The policeman looked around and all of a sudden untightened his belt, stood behind me, struck me and started to force me ahead.

He was making it look serious. I started to think that I'd got into some new kind of trouble. Anyway I played my part in the joke. He chased me like that and made a lot of noise. So we passed all along the line and he drove me into the building, to the checking in.

'Now, open your eyes,' he whispered to me in Macedonian and left me.

I passed through the checking in and then I had to hire a boat to take me in the sea to the liner. I had to pay two drachmas.

I paid.

When the boat came to the middle, the boatman stopped the boat. Wanted me to pay him a drachma more. I would have paid, didn't have any choice, but that policeman, from the shore, shouted in Greek to the boatman and it was over.

'I didn't know he was your friend,' he said.

So I got on the boat. When my people saw me, one of them on the boat started to shout!

'Here he is! Here he is!'

But they'd already had dinner. I was hungry.

'I'm hungry,' I said.

'Don't worry,' they said and took me to the kitchen on the boat. 'The cook gave me a big dish of macaroni with eggs and other different things. And I started to eat. But a human being is a strong thing. He wouldn't die, even from the great quantity of food I ate.

So it's important to get things started. The rest is not so important, where you are after you get there, but you've got to start.

## THE PRESIDENT OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE

Finally the public was informed that the President of the Central Committee of the Communist Party had resigned. Bearing in mind that this announcement followed after several successive medical bulletins concerning his health, it was not supposed to be a surprise to the public. Still, although there was nothing else behind it, the nation was very much surprised. It was common practice for a leader of a communist party, who according to the constitution has all the authority over the nation, not only to die in his chair but even to terrify his people afterwards while the successors finish their struggle for the post. The other way for a communist leader to leave is to be overthrown by force. The nation was sure that neither of these was the case.

As for the president personally, although everything was going smoothly, this resignation was an evident acknowledgement of a defeat. It doesn't matter how successfully he was hiding it behind the medical bulletins, for him there was no satisfaction in the fact that most of the people were unreservedly praising him since he really was approachable, his speeches acceptable, courageous and with quite a sense for the specific interests of the nation. He particularly paid attention to the creative people, so that with time they ceased to be aware of the demise of creative freedom.

The President of the Central Committee feels a private sadness. His body, which for so many years has been serving him, all of a sudden becomes a cage for his spirit. He knows that he is not an abandoned case but that he excludes himself from the service of the future of humanity, as he believes. Sometimes he is jealous of his own success which, as it seems, continues to live, having no compassion for his exhausted body. Since his mind is still working normally, sometimes new ideas are sparking in his head; they stand the critique of his mind and press him towards action. Those are not pleasant moments, because he knows that he is giving up voluntarily, but at the same time like every newly retired person, he feels himself abandoned.

He still goes back to his office only because of some protocol reasons which are imposed on him, to meet groups of fellow revolutionaries, to be photographed with groups of children, to show his face on TV looking as happy as possible. All of that makes his retreat more unpleasant. The subordinates behave as normally as always, leaving on his table all the current information, among which there are decisions for people to be imprisoned or sent to camps and mental hospitals. There are moments when he wants to intervene, but as a disciplined communist he wouldn't do that. Although it is not clear to him what it means: to be disciplined in such cases seems like

passing on his problems to his successor. But he can't think much about it. He retires. It has been decided.

Sometimes he has strange little wishes. He would like to walk around his large office with his hands on his back and his head hung over his chest. He wouldn't do that because he would be afraid that someone could enter the office and catch him in the position of a walking monument.

He looks through the papers on his table, mostly police reports. He again comes to the report of the so-called 'Grain Spikes.' He avoids concentrating on it because he simply feels that he wouldn't be able to leave it like that. It's a case of young people who are suspected by the police of being an anti-communist movement. Which might suggest that the youth all over the world are disturbed and express themselves through all sorts of protest.

He withdraws back in his chair and for a while he hears through his inner ear the sound of a hymn and a howl at the same time.

He bends over the police report. Just takes it in his hands and doesn't read it. Should he? It doesn't matter whether he should or he shouldn't. The problem is that he is afraid of the power of youth; he doesn't know what sort of sentiment it might awaken in him: the revolutionary with iron hand or a sentimental old man. Neither of those would he like to face. Why, finally, this came up on his table now, when he had already stepped down from his office? He is sure that he will give an order that police reports are not to be sent to him anymore. Whether he should do that — he hesitated for a while. It wouldn't be had if he were kept informed. This almost ideal system is his creation, his child, and as is known, a parent is a debtor to his child to the very end of his life. In a hidden cell of his brain is born the grotesque image of how death makes everybody equal, the emperor and the beggar. What justice! It reminds him of how the most eminent ant must feel when a fool steps on it!

Sometimes he is sorry that he didn't continue to write poems as he used to do in his early youth. Although it would be a shame for an eminent politician to write poems. Imagine. And he knows, too, that a politician lives to die, while a poet dies to live. What a paradox! That is why he devoted all his life to make this ideology — materialized in a regime to last forever. The question is: did he write his poem? And if he didn't, why does he retire? If one thinks too much, everything ends up as a puzzle, and the best conclusion is not to enter the puzzle but to press further on through the puzzles.

Still he didn't give up the case of the grain spikes. He took the paper home to look at it at his leisure. He even felt glad, not knowing exactly why.

After he arrived home he simply forgot the case. He sort of liked the cozy home atmosphere: the attention paid to him by his wife, the presence of one of his grandsons. 'Then during the lunch and afterwards his mood sank. While he was taking the main course, he found a tiny hair in the dish, which reminded him of the clothes of the servant. Then while he was taking a little nap he was wakened by troubles in his stomach, so that he had to take a tranquilizer. For the rest of the day he felt apathetic.

Next day he woke up with a feeling of rare alertness. He heard a bird singing and, when he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the bright sunny light of the day. Soon he went to the garden for a walk. He was breathing deeply and felt as if he were in a boat on a quiet sea. Let this day he

according to the rule of the blood, not of the reason. It was to be his last official day in office. Simply put, he is to be there at noon just for the sake of the TV cameras. As usual there was a call from his office at eight o'clock. The secretary informed him that there would be nothing else for him today except the cameras.

'I like it,' he said alertly and, just before he hung up, he said to the secretary, even to his own surprise:

'Listen, I would come at ten o'clock if you can arrange for me to meet those young fellows, the grain spikes!'

The secretary said that in a short while he would confirm it. Good, said the president to himself. His mood became much better. I am doing well, said the president to himself. Suddenly he wanted to have a cup of coffee, something which he hadn't had for a long time. Coffee was not good for him, but he still wanted to have it.

While he was waiting for the coffee, there was a call from the office. The secretary informed him that the lads would be brought to his office at ten o'clock.

'Fine,' he said and, as he hung up, he lost all his good mood. He didn't have the desire even to touch the coffee. He felt disgust. He was sorry because of his own decision to meet those young political bastards. He wished he could cancel it, but he thought he'd not be able to. He felt unpleasant. Still he finally found a reason for that foolish meeting: he would do his best to make a good impression on them on the day of his retirement. It might be a good move for his future image with the nation. So he managed to return to his normal mood.

He took the police report and started to read it carefully. The more he read, the more it looked to him like a childish game. There was no evidence that those three youngsters had said anything with any political meaning, but still they were very active delivering around square pieces of paper, like visiting cards with a design of a green grain spike and a yellow sun. It was so widely distributed, especially after the three boys were identified and imprisoned, that the Party became worried. Why should it not be a game, a sort of gambling without money? If there had been money, it wouldn't be anything. So the conclusion was that there must be something. The president got frightened but still decided not to give up. It was a luxury he wanted to afford himself.

The secretary met him at the door. The president was smiling, wanting to pretend that his wish to see those boys was a joke, sort of something which is not serious. But the secretary was unusually stiff and gloomy. The president knew that he was being warned. He asked the secretary:

'Are the boys brought?'

'Yes,' comrade president, said the secretary and immediately added: 'But I was warned by the Secretary of the State Security that the investigation is not yet finished. The police have found new evidence.'

The president understood the meaning of what he was told.

'Don't worry,' he said.

Soon the lads were introduced in his office. They looked funny to him. When he was at that age, he was hunting birds for the fun of it. He was very

good at hitting birds. Yes, but at the same time he was not much older when he got involved in revolutionary actions.

Anyway he had decided to be as polite with them as possible. He offered them whatever they would like to have.

'We don't drink,' said Vitan.

'We don't smoke,' said Peter.

'Just Coca-Cola,' said Stephen.

The secretary, who was waiting for the order to be dismissed and leave the president with the boys, smiled and said:

'What about brandy?'

'The boys just looked at him, didn't show any change on their faces, and said nothing.

During the conversation comrade president did his best to suggest that the lads acknowledge their guilt and ask for mercy. That would be good, thought the president, especially having in mind the favourable publicity that would come out of the case. But strange enough these little bastards didn't seem to be interested. Or they were such fools as not to understand what he was offering. Being afraid that he'd be the loser, he openly said to them:

'If you report, I may help you!'

'We are not guilty,' they said with astonishing simplicity.

All of a sudden after that comrade president felt a strong attack of gastritis in his stomach and a short pain in his chest.

'Take them away,' he said to his secretary.

Damned fools, he said to himself and because of the flow of events during the day he didn't have time to think of them. Only better in the evening, when he got to bed, he reminded himself of a little episode in the biography of the Italian politician Cavour and his clash with the Red Lion, Garibaldi. When Cavour retired, he admitted to a friend that 'that man Garibaldi did everything to make me feel like a stranger in Italy, like a scoundrel who gave Nice and Savoy to Napoleon.'

First he felt very unpleasant with the way the episode came to his mind, but after he'd given it a second thought, he concluded: The difference is that I am not the reactionary Cavour but the Red Lion, Garibaldi, the ideological future of mankind.

It was a very consoling thought and he fell asleep relatively easily. He was very careful over what he had for dinner. Still he dreamed a strange dream. He saw himself being the old woman from the novel One Hundred Years of Solitude with whom many children were playing, moving through the offices of the building of the Central Committee.

## A COMPLETELY LOYAL CITIZEN

I can slaughter. Yes, a man. Specially if he is one of those clowns. I would not waste a bullet on any of them. All I need is an order, hut don't make me dig a grave. Digging is hard work and what I like best is to have a pit ready to throw the thing in. I would slaughter them by day and by night. It doesn't make me sick at all.

A few days ago I had to kill my hog. To kill a hog you have to have someone else hold it while you put the knife in its throat. To go to call Betko, Stouro, you, him ... While I go, while I tell him, while you find out whether he can or not and to go to somebody else to beg, fuck it, I said to myself.

Woman, I called my wife. Boil water for the hog. Because as soon as you kill a hog, you have to scald it with hot water. The hotter the water and the warmer the hog, the easier it is to fleece the hide. It's boiling, she shouted to me from the kitchen after a while, and I took the axe. It's a heavy axe. The hog was enjoying the mud in the yard. I got it by the hip and it started to run around. I got mad and ran after it. I struck it a few times. It became all bloody but finally I got it in the head and it fell down. After that, in a hurry, because it might get up, I took the knife and plunged it in its throat. I worked with the knife in its throat thoroughly and then showered it with hot water. It was still alive, fuck it, but as soon as it would move I would pour hot water in the wound on its throat. It was still making certain moves when I was opening its stomach, but it was nothing, fuck it. What I want to say is that I don't mind killing. There are people who are afraid to kill a chicken. For a chicken I don't need any knife. I do it with my hands. Fuck it, it is so easy. I overcame my fear at the time when we got the order to exterminate the dogs in the village. Then the orders were called instructions.

I'll tell you right now how it was. Listen!

My cousin came back from the committee and called the peasants to the school for a meeting. At that time everybody used to go to meetings. Some because they liked it but most because they were afraid, dependent. And then my cousin told the people: listen, the dogs have to be exterminated. No more dogs in the village. We are going to be civilized. That is what Restoration and Construction requires of us. There shouldn't be a single dog left in the village.

'There was deep silence when the people heard that. Even your dogs are to be destroyed hut no one asks your opinion. Only Dine Popovski stood up.

This is an 'order' for the dogs, he said.

As soon as he said that, I jumped up. I was a socially conscious youth at that time. Really. I jumped up and shouted at him. It's not an order. It isn't your capitalistic regime any more. It's an instruction, I told him. No more orders. 'They were orders at the time when your father, the priest, was getting the people drunk with religion and took his fee — it didn't matter how poor one was. And sat down.

You've been told by the child, my cousin said to him. I don't have anything more to tell you. Well, what was told was told, and now we have to start: My cousin made it clear — immediately.

Since it was unanimously decided to do it, now on the agenda we had to choose people who would kill the dogs. When my cousin opened up that subject, I stood up and volunteered. Me, I said. Accepted, said my cousin. After me, Bodle declared himself. The hog, it's his nickname. If you want to offer him a drink, give it to him in a glass and take care of the bottle because he'll grab it from your hands. God save him from entering your house while there's nobody in it. He'll eat up everything and drink up the whole barrel you've saved for winter. He is never full nor does he have any shame, he offered as well, hut my cousin said to him:

No, you can skin the dogs, carefully, because all the skins should he collected and sent to the committee. It means that they need one more for killing. Then I stood up and proposed, let us choose someone from among the reactionaries.

No, said my cousin. Reactionaries will dig the hole. You should throw all the corpses somewhere.

My cousin knew everything. Such a secretary our party never had nor will have, he was a politician. Can't you see how high he is now? They say that he bribes, signs false documents to say people took part in the Liberation war. It's not him who takes. It's the people, the people who give him. Why shouldn't you give him something if thanks to his signature, you get a rich retirement! It's not had if someone throws you bread. Or money, which is much better because you can buy whatever you need. Each month the money comes right in your pocket.

And then my cousin nominated first of all Dine Popovski to dig, because he was the first to raise his voice against the progressive action which was to take place. There are different sorts of reactionaries, some not so big. The real reactionaries were killed immediately after the Liberation. Like those women whose husbands send them dollars from America and some others. You know them, fuck their mothers .

When the reactionaries finished with the hole, my cousin went to inspect it and told them to dig some more. He told them! This hole is not to be small. It's as it should be because you, being the reactionaries you are, wouldn't give a hair more for our socialistic society. Because of that you have to double the hole by depth and by width. When they finished the hole, we were notified, we the killers and skimmers. We went there, in the field of Tome Manov and there, by the hole, there was an oak tree. I don't know whether it's still there or whether Tome has cut it. That oak tree had a branch which seemed put there especially so as to hang the dogs. According to our instruction, we were to kill the dogs here and the Hog to skin them over there. As for the dogs, everybody was obliged to bring his dog personally.

If they have one. There were some who had two, even three dogs. For the house, for the sheep, for the barn. Those who had sheep might have even five dogs each. To our people dogs were like tools. Because there was a lot of cattle in our village. Ten thousand sheep were pastured on this mountain around the village. Every household had ten to twenty goats, oxen, cows, horses, everything. In the morning when they used to take them to pasture it was hard to move through the streets, and the mountain around was echoing with the bells on the necks of the cattle. It was not like now when we've forgotten what milk is. Nobody gives a damn for the cattle. They want to buy from the shop. Why shouldn't they? He's some fool to roam through the mountains if he can sit here and wait for the postman to bring him the pension he never earned.

At that time about five thousand goats were slaughtered. Because of the instruction that came from the Committee. Almost everybody in the village got diarrhea because of all the goat meat they had to eat. People from this village never ate or will eat as much meat as they ate at that time of exterminating the goats. The meat from a dog you can't eat. If it was eatable, I would still have meat from that time. Because of that we had to throw it in the pit.

Tome Menov gave his field voluntarily. He pretended to be progressive but I know why he offered the field. We dug up half of it. Then we killed over two hundred dogs. He knew that it would fertilize the field for the time when all will become private again. Why shouldn't I take advantage? he thought. He was shrewd although he was progressive. He is a fucking devil. All the time while we were in the cooperative he was sending meats, apples, cheese, wool, and everything from the common store to Jane in Skopje. Jane was a big shot. Remember when once we had elections with more than one candidate? Jane was one of the candidates and nobody threw a ball in his box. People hated him. But Tome knew what to do. Tome went to Skopje beforehand and asked Jane to tell my cousin to nominate him to be guard of Jane's voting box. And so when the time came to count the votes, Tome spilled all those rubber balls from the full box into Jane's empty box. So Jane won although nobody liked him. Well, because of that, all of Tome's five children got education free of charge and today Tome gets the highest pension in the region. He was constantly on the progressive side. That's the truth, although during the war he never even saw a partisan.

So Tome was the first who brought his dog. He came there in his field with the dog on a rope tied around the dog's neck. We were ready. Mitre, the second one who was chosen to kill the dogs with me, wrapped the dog's neck with barbed wire and was ready to hang it on the branch while I was ready to strike its head with the back of the heavy axe. The Hog in the meanwhile looks devilishly at the dog and at Tome and sharpens the knife for skinning. Tome appeared to be soft, with the heart of a reactionary. He almost cried. Please, he said, I cannot stand to look at it. The Hog said to him, You are going to watch it. If you don't watch, you align yourself with the reactionaries. And while Tome was hesitating, Mitre hung the dog on the branch and, as soon as the dog started to struggle, I struck its head. You should have seen how its head exploded and its brains all in blood flowed out. I don't know how I did it, but I was covered in blood. Over the aprons,

the face and since I had my mouth opened, even my mouth was full with blood and brains. Warm, very warm.

And so we were killing dogs a whole week. Some people couldn't come with their dogs because they were busy. Some didn't like to come. Some were hiding their dogs or making excuses. Finally everybody brought his dog. My cousin was persuasive. And we did the job, no mistake.

Only two dogs were saved. All the rest were skinned and thrown in the pit. No, I wouldn't like to lie to you. Three. Three didn't go in the pit. One of them I hid.

While we doing that job, one night Mejo the drummer came and asked me: Please, I need a dog's skin for my drum. I will give you one, I said. Next day, Mitre hadn't come yet and while the Hog was busy with skinning, I killed a dog and threw it down in the bushes and took up another. You know, in the morning we had more work. People would bring the dog, tie it up someplace and go to work. Also, they didn't like to watch. So I easily took another dog and that fool the Hog didn't see anything. Later, when Mitre came, I pretended to go home for something and got the hidden dog in my house. That dog had very thick skin. Mejo was very pleased. Do you know how much Mejo paid me? More than my monthly permission today. He was so pleased with the dog I had chosen for his drum. I had to steal it because the skins were counted. For the industry which then started to work against capitalism and imperialism. And the Committee was very strict about the number of the skins.

Only one dog we didn't succeed in killing. Mihajlo's dog. Mihajlo brought it and said: 'Here it is. Take it and kill it.'

'Put it on the branch with the chain,' we said to him.

'No,' he said. 'I wouldn't kill any dog myself. Just take it from the chain and kill it.'

The dog all the time barks and growls at us. No way to approach it. He would bite you. We couldn't put the barbed wire around his neck. Even the Hog, of whom all the dogs in the village were afraid, couldn't approach it. A sharp dog. Real beast. We finally let it go. 'Leave it,' said the Hog. 'I'll get it,' he said, having something in mind. Finally, when we saw that we couldn't manage it, we let it run away. In the evening, at the meeting, we self-criticized but it was not very bad. 'You should not let dogs get away,' said my cousin. That was it. The second dog which was saved was Timko's dog. I don't know how it happened. It happened while I was striking it with the axe. I missed it somehow, loosened it from the barbed wire, and it ran away. As Timko told us later on, the dog first came right in his yard, then Timko wanted to leash it on a chain and hide it some place. But when the dog saw the chain, it ran away once again. Who knows where it went? No one saw it any more.

It was at that time that I rid myself of the fear of killing. It was not easy. Nights I was dreaming angels. People dressed in white were visiting me. I would step in front of them and say, I will kill them. What could they do to me? And I didn't tell anybody what dreams I was having. Religion was forbidden. Such were the instructions. It was said that no one should believe in any god. And I really didn't believe. Not only me. All of us who were progressive didn't believe. Mostly me and the Hog. One day we started a

competitive conversation. I don't believe in God more than you, I said to him. No, he said, it is me who doesn't believe the most. It is me, I said to him. No, he said, if it was you who doesn't believe in God most, you would have shit in the church as I did, he said. I already have shit in the church, I said to him. Have you? Yes, he said, and I did it first. No, I said, I did it first for sure.

The priest himself later told the people that he had found two shits in the church. Those were our shits. The Hog's and mine. Only I am not sure who did it first. Him or me. If he ever comes back from Australia, I will try to find out. I simply want to know which of us was the first.

At that time, according to my cousin's report which was confirmed in the committee in writing, we killed one hundred sixty-seven dogs. And our names are there in the report. If someone wants to write the history, he will find our full names. All the other villages did it much later and nowhere else were the dogs exterminated so thoroughly as in our village. Thanks to us. Me, the Hog and comrade Mitre. But not every village has my cousin. He was a rare Secretary of the Party.

Nevertheless, I wonder why people detest killing. I told you about my hog. As for the enemies, all I need is an order. Or just an instruction, like it was then. I'd start it immediately. That's all I need. An instruction ...

## FACELESS MEN

Certain unusual people have appeared in town. Now, because there were so many unidentified phenomena, the news sent shivers all down my body. So you can easily imagine my interest in such an occurrence.

Because of health reasons I never used to leave home. Only once a day during summer would I go out in front of my house, which was situated on the outskirts of town. There was a stunted mulberry tree by a fence, obscuring the street. Under the tree there was a bench and this was the furthest I ever went. I communicated with the rest of the people thanks only to a few friends and relatives who told me the news. They're the ones who brought me the news about the unusual people.

It confused me. I could hardly comprehend what was going on, because I simply couldn't believe it. People, rather dangerous ones, were in question. At first I asked what they were like. My Uncle German told me: 'Evil people,' he said.

If my Uncle German, a solid and wise person, had said so, then it was obviously so. After some hesitation I started to inquire more. I wanted to know what those evil people were doing. To my guests it seemed as if I had asked an indecent question. I couldn't find out why it should be so, but later I realized that even my guests had no exact answers. They pretended these faceless strangers did not exist. I shivered: in an instant I realized that it would be dangerous to delve into the presence of the evil people.

I wanted to find out what these people were doing.

'Nothing,' said my Uncle German, more to calm my excitement than to explain.

'Hee, hee, hee,' giggled my other cousin Marko, whom I would not call a very serious person.

'Ahem ...' said one of my visitors significantly, a visitor whose name I won't mention.

All these rejoinders didn't add much, but obviously they hid a meaning far greater. I asked the question which interested me most.

'Listen,' I said firmly. 'Could it be said that these people are members of a certain organization or service?'

My cousin Marko smirked. My other cousin Najdo said, 'More or less.'

Our conversation wasn't leading anywhere. I had to be careful.

'You mean, they're not in a certain service?' I asked.

'Not in a certain service,' echoed my cousin Najdo.

‘Ahem ... ‘ another significant response from that visitor whose name I won’t mention. I could sense a strange, deep, and uncomfortable silence, so quiet I could hear him raise his right leg and cross it over his left.

‘Right ... ‘ said my uncle vaguely.

It became obvious that it was not advisable to carry on this conversation, but as things grew clearer I became even more curious.

‘Well,’ I said impatiently. ‘What are they? Workers? Salesmen? Policemen? Newcomers from another planet?’

I was probing deeper. My guests felt uncomfortable. I was furious because they were trying to hide a truth that should be uncovered.

‘They are ordinary people like all the rest,’ said my uncle calmly, trying to convey something to me which I couldn’t understand.

‘Are there shoemakers among them too?’ I asked almost playfully.

‘Yes! Shoemakers, cobblers, lemonade-makers, frame workers, craftsmen, workers, peasants, and leaders!’ exclaimed my cousin Marko giggling.

In any case, it was obvious to me that these faceless men were doing all the usual jobs. They were both employed and unemployed.

Actually, they were us.

Gradually, at my insistence, my visitors started to tell me various stories of what they’d heard or seen being done by these faceless men. I listened attentively and came up with an image of them from which I determined shared characteristics. Above all, they were as common as the rest of us. As I was told by my visitors, they were seen in markets and cafeterias, banks, offices, at birthdays, weddings and funerals. They had families, relatives, and friends. For the most part you could say they were nice people.

Trying to be systematic, I wanted to know how they dressed. Of course I wasn’t thinking of any special uniform. This task seemed a difficult one for many visitors. It was as if I had asked the details of a wristwatch. Everyone was tempted to walk around town staring suspiciously at people. By our actions my visitors and I inadvertently started an unauthorized investigation. And worst of all I got myself unknowingly involved in a very risky situation.

It soon became apparent that clothing itself would not be significant. Actually it was another way they had of hiding themselves among everyone else. Afterwards I tried to make my visitors help find out what were the characteristic features. Because they didn’t answer, I figured that a semblance of normalcy was their main means of hiding themselves among the rest of us. The question that worried me was — how would I identify them?

Naturally I asked my guests how they behaved.

‘Ask Dostoevski!’ exclaimed Najdo.

I wasn’t getting anywhere, but there was one clue: example had shown that a third person could identify the faceless man from between two others. The trouble was that unfortunately the third person only had a personal impression and could never prove what he felt. And to rely on impressions alone involved great risk.

Listening to the anecdotal accounts of their activities led to further conclusions. They all had different levels of power, depending on their personal abilities. And yet, the extent to which they could hurt you depended

also on the victim. The more innocent the circumstances were, the more results they gained, the less useful they were. So ultimately the deeper you delved into the subject, the less important the example became. 'That was why from the entire array of faceless men, I succeeded in singling out only two, and these two — as I discovered later — were the least worthy.

The first one, according to the description I was given, had a roundish, dark-skinned, pimply face. His face was so fleshy that you 'wondered whether he was able to see at all. If you happened to talk to him, you didn't have the impression that he understood you, even though you were sure he followed the conversation. Generally you would not feel comfortable in his presence. It wasn't necessary to shake hands with him in order to know that his palms sweated. Finally, it was quite clear that he was one of them. With no great effort of imagination I dressed him in a uniform and called him 'policeman,' for reasons of personal identity.

The second faceless man was even less important, but he was the one who was seen in the small quiet street where my house was located, on the outskirts of town. When I heard the news for the first time it was a surprise, and I started to hope that I might get in touch with him.

'Hah!' blurted my visitor, whose name I won't mention. After this outburst there was an awkward silence, which, I think, bothered him the most.

But let's go back to the first faceless one. I was surprised that such a creature could be seen in our street, where usually nothing happens. And I still couldn't see any motive for evil of any kind which would attract one of them to come to our street. I named this one 'Cucumber.' He was a lanky man, long-armed with a longish face, his eyes almost on his forehead. A funny detail about Mr. Cucumber was that he used to take long clumsy strides — so I was told. It seemed as though he were jumping over stones across a river while he was walking.

'Reminds me of a pendulum,' said Najdo.

At this point I came to the conclusion that it would be much better if I called him Mr. Pendulum. This name was more in accordance with my moving image of him. Actually, formed, the image of Mr. Pendulum was so vivid that I was sure I knew him as well as my visitors.

In any case, as the story of the faceless men unfolded, a kind of sharp blade, deep in my body, started to press into me, as though pushed by an invisible hand.

My friend Pejo was not a frequent visitor of mine. He came from time to time, and with him he brought an important detail. Once, he happened to see a faceless man in action. He tried to give me all the details of what he had seen, though it didn't last more than the click of a camera shutter. First of all it was absolutely clear that the unknown man was superior. This didn't mean that it was customary for them to cause or to get into fights. Yet obviously they didn't hesitate to participate when it was unavoidable. You could never be sure just what it was that would rouse them to action, and it was equally difficult to determine how to avoid trouble with such a man.

There are always extremes. My friend Pejo was firmly convinced that whenever they got into a conflict they never left any trace.

If by chance they did, they wouldn't be considered as members by the others.

In any case they became irrefutable. 'They had a system of winning by which you were beaten before you'd realized you'd been attacked. Only later would the beaten one find himself suffering unpleasant consequences. He'd lost the battle before ever realizing he was in it. That was why the result was not only defeat, but deep insult too. My friend Pejo finished his story, saying in conclusion: 'You know, the strange thing is that at the moment when I thought I was sure to witness a conflict — it had already taken place! I was still looking for the conflict when the winner would look as though he were just passing by. You could never be sure he had ever met anybody. The worst part is that although I'm sure of what I saw, I would never risk being a witness.'

While my friend Pejo was telling me his story, the blade, deep in my body, was turned and twisted by that invisible hand over which I had no control. My friend Pejo finally admitted: 'I'd have the feeling I was doing something unfair.'

At that moment the blade cracked. I didn't feel any pain except that I started to bleed, which was worse than torture. Paradoxically enough, in a certain way I was happy with my inability even to go outdoors. I felt ruined.

Some psychological exercises were of great help to me. Now I needed even more because of the torment I'd fallen into. Although — as it is in such cases — I vacillated about their value, I had been doing them even more. I paid particular attention to the concentration which, through meditation, would lead me to a realization. To this end I used to go out and sit on a bench under the mulberry tree, next to the fence by the street.

I already knew that the root of the existence of the faceless men was included in the unnatural orientation of life tendencies. A faceless man could not be created except by human beings who provided an ideal base for such phenomena. The idea struck me that one day the faceless men might easily become the essence of life.

'The most dangerous thing was that they were doing their best to hide themselves under the good tendencies of humanity. The point was, what did we stand for? Was I going too far?

I used to go out to the bench by myself. And every spring, when I ventured outside, there was always somebody from the family to help me. Later on they would let me go by myself, but there was always somebody who kept an eye on me.

That summer, after all the news and the attention I had given to the faceless men, whenever I would go and sit on the bench, I had to try and empty my mind. First of all I would try and forget about them — then later on I even rid myself of the slightest thought. I would leave a space in my head only to let in that which could be taken in through the ears and nose. I used to go out at noon when it was hot and people were lazy and ready to rest. That dead fall of life suited me. Sometimes, with the aid of only my ears, I succeeded in following the voices of rare birds from far off. Whenever I was in such a state, the roar of a car was catastrophic.

Noises caused by people were rare. Even rarer than cars. Perhaps that was why, whenever I heard human footsteps, I used to get excited; something

deep in me would start to move. Particularly if it happened to be a woman. In such cases I felt as if I could fly. Yet at the same time I was afraid of the possible approach of a faceless man.

Gradually I mastered the skill of differentiating footsteps. I already had in my mind a whole gallery of passers-by, probably neighbours who frequently used to walk the street. I could differentiate the rather clumsy male walk from the tepid and sort of stinging walk of a woman. That was the basic element by which I had built the shape and character of passers-by. I was less certain with the women, who were exciting me too much. It would not be an exaggeration if I say that I was frequently waiting for a woman to arrive. But then something changed.

Recently I had great success with my psychological exercises. I used to reach a much deeper void. It seems that I was preparing for the coming event which was to take place.

I didn't know what it was, but still I paid special attention. At first, I gradually became aware that what had interrupted my concentration was a man's footsteps. They were approaching, passing in the street behind me. Suddenly, I noticed that those steps reminded me of a man jumping over stones across water. Automatically I built up in my imagination his figure; by his long strides I immediately knew it was Mr. Pendulum. As soon as I discovered this he was already gone.

I didn't know why, but I didn't tell this to my visitors, even though I was anxious to converse with them about the strangers. My Uncle German, cautioning me, said, 'You can never be sure what's going to happen. That is why I always prefer to keep to myself'

He was of no help to me. I did not understand the meaning of his words. Nor did I understand my cousin Marko's words, which were even insulting. He said, 'You should be happy they couldn't get to you.'

I remember that at those words my visitor whose name I won't mention said: 'You can never be sure.'

'Well,' said my Uncle German, 'except if a real character is in question.'

'A real character is the highest aim of the faceless man,' exclaimed my visitor whose name I won't mention.

What the man whose name I won't mention meant was incontestable. It put an end to our conversation and left me confronted with the question: what kind of character am I?

The next day I woke up much earlier than usual, feeling joyful about the coming day. 'The first thing I was aware of was the lonely singing of a bird. I felt as though I were expecting something, though I knew there was nothing. That was why I felt tormented.

As usual, I went to sit on the bench under the mulberry tree. I felt nervous because I'd not been sleeping well, which was an excellent basis for being imprudent. 'That was why at a certain moment I stood up and carefully, successfully unnoticed, walked out towards the road. Meanwhile something was taking place. While I was trying to pass the gate to the street, I became aware of the steps I'd been listening to. With surprise I realized that they were Pendulum's steps. I was confused. 'The most important thing was the fact that somebody was crying and running away from him. It was a

teenager's cry, a cry coming out of a deep insult. My unexpected appearance as a witness of the event caused an immediate change in the situation.

While I was still trying consciously to understand what was going on, the stranger noticed me. For a while there was no sign of the man. The cry was dying away on my right. I started to wonder what was going on. And then I heard Pendulum's steps fading away on my left. I made a last effort to come out to the street, but it was no use.

I could not forget the inflamed crying of the boy, and the certainty that it was caused by one of them. I could almost hear the deep silence hovering over our little street. It was becoming unbearably hot. On the bench I felt like a wounded dog. While I was listening to my visitor's talk about the faceless ones, I thought I had understood.

Now all I know is that I was overly excited.

'And that's not all,' said the man whose name I won't mention.

He was damn right; that's not all. I don't know how long it took me, but thanks to my psychological exercises, somehow I relaxed. I succeeded in concentrating so much that I heard the blades of grass around me bend and break. It was so still that I could hear the cry of a baby from afar. It seemed as though there was not a sign of the species.

For a moment I had forgotten the event. Suddenly new steps provoked me. They were the same footsteps that jumped over stones across water. They were the steps of one of them. I felt that they were approaching because the steps became softer and softer, as though someone were walking carefully on tiptoe. I jumped.

'I knew it,' said the man whose name I won't mention.

'Sure,' added my Uncle German.

It was not necessary to try to convince my visitors that it was the same man, the Pendulum. What was worse I realized that the man whose name I won't mention and my Uncle German already knew the end of the story. 'The rest of my visitors were not capable of guessing. My cousin Marko impatiently asked, 'And then?'

'Then what had to happen, did.' It was irrefutable that the strange man was approaching me on tiptoe, closer and closer. I panicked. As I recalled later there was no sound of my 'profound character.' I succeeded in hiding my face as well as I could, though my means were limited.

'Certainly,' said my Uncle German. 'A man has nothing more important than his face.'

'Ahem ...' commented my visitor whose name I won't mention.

'And then?' asked Marko impatiently.

In fear I stood up and turned towards the street. I knew that the strange man was standing along the hedge, staring at me, his mouth agape with astonishment. I was face to face with this nameless phenomenon.

At that moment he discovered that I was blind.

I couldn't see, but I knew everything. None of my visitors would deny this. When he saw that I was blind, his mouth widened to a mocking smile. He was as satisfied as I was desperate.

After all the torment I'd been through, I knew only one thing for sure: the faceless men were hiding the evidence against themselves in the name of all of us.

## MARRIAGE IS A NEED FOR A MAN

Marriage is a need for a man. Let me tell you an example, something that happened to a friend of mine. His name is Kote.

That Kote had lost one of his hands. The left one, in an accident.

He has a bench in front of his house in the village. Something available to everybody. Kote is a sociable person. One day he sat there to mend his shoes. While he was doing his job, two little children, his brother's boys, were playing. He didn't pay much attention to them. He kept to his own business. At a certain moment, one of the little boys says to him, 'Uncle, uncle, look here ...'

He turned and saw something alright. 'The boys were playing with a bombshell and he heard the voice of the wick burning. As soon as he saw and heard that, he grabbed the bomb to throw it away but was afraid that he might damage something. So he ran a few steps to throw the bomb on a lot behind the house next to his. If I kill a chicken, it won't be a great loss, he thought. But in the meanwhile the bomb exploded and so he lost his left hand.

His family life was comfortably settled. He had good accommodation in his own house, his wife was a very respectable woman, and he had a boy and three daughters. All of them healthy, clever, and submissive. As the water in a riverbed through a plain runs quietly, so too were his family affairs.

Who knows how it happened, but something went wrong with the health of his wife, and in a short period she died.

It was the hand of fate. The only thing he could do was to accept what God had said had to be done.

Fortunately he had good children. They took on his wife's part of the work so that he continued to live happily with them. They cooked, they did the dishes, they washed the clothes, took care of him and everything. It's not quite as it was while his wife was alive, but still it's not too bad. All a man needs is to keep things going.

So it was going that way, as good as was possible.

When the time came, his son got married. He married a girl from a neighbouring village, one who had relatives in the town of Bitola.

So it wasn't long until they both, the son and the bride, went to Bitola. They found work and somehow got an apartment to live in. It meant that they had got something better. So they said, but for Kote it was worse.

Since that happened, Kote has had to accept living with his three daughters. Anyway it was the girls who did whatever was to be done for

him. Nonetheless, the taste which he had in his mouth when his son left the house was very bitter. He clearly saw what was happening to him, but he couldn't do anything. Accept what you must. Even a king must accept what comes to him.

According to the custom, the oldest daughter married first. As soon as she married, she went to work in Germany with her husband. She left for a better life, of course. When a home comes to be deserted and uprooted, as it has come to Macedonia, it runs the full course. Anyone would think that it is going to be a better, more beautiful life. It doesn't matter that it gets worse, to devastation, to extermination. It is beauty which devastates mankind.

I was glad, too, says Kote. My children are going to a better life, you see. So his second daughter went to a better life. She went right to Bitola. The third one married the best — she found a husband in Skopje.

And so my friend Kote was left to live alone like a black cuckoo. Because there are male abilities and female abilities. A man doesn't have the abilities of a woman. As a woman doesn't have a man's abilities. You should know that. That is why everything in this world is divided in two, to look for each other, to find each other, to get together, to enjoy ourselves but to be support to each other, too. As for Kote, above all, he was a cripple, he couldn't even put on his shoes by himself. He couldn't cook, couldn't do dishes. What was he to do, poor man? Above is too high, down is too deep.

lie thought a lot about what to do. Finally he decided to visit his son in Bitola to consult with him. And he told his son what his trouble was. My case is such and such. I am a cripple. I cannot take care of myself. Because of that I came to ask you whether you can take me to put me in a corner.

Well, Father, said his son, I would take you — why not? — but where to put you? You see yourself how narrow this place is. Tomorrow my son may want to marry. He will ask for a place, too. I don't know where to put you.

So it was. Here, where he was supposed to be accepted, he was rejected. He was ashamed to go to the daughters. Kote is an orderly man who knows what is fair. But fair or not, he could not live by himself. He will wallow in filth. He will starve to death, not to say what he will do if he gets ill. So, having no choice, he went to his daughter in Skopje. So and so, says he to her. I cannot manage by myself. Could you not take me in with you?

Well, father, said the daughter, it would be nice to take you. Why not? But my mother-in-law will immediately say that I have two husbands, that I am not like the others who have only one man to take care of.

So Kote comes back home with his head down. The only thing he could do was to go ask his third daughter. He could not even think about the one who was in Germany. He would go to the next daughter, but he is too much afraid that he might be turned down again, he would not be able to withstand the shame. Finally he called his son and his two daughters and told them:

'Listen to me. I cannot live by myself. Since neither of you can take me, I think it would be best if I remarry. What would you say to that?'

What could one expect them to say since they had already torn apart all his property in their thoughts, like vultures do. No, Father! they said jointly. How could you do that at this age? Shame on you, everyone would say.

You see, it's not a shame to be left alone, but it is a shame if you take care of yourself

He actually consulted them in hopes that someone among them would say that they would take him. Since no one said that, he told them that he had made up his mind. I know, he said, that is a shame but my turn to bear shame has come.

Now he was going to marry. He made it known around through friends, he was a healthy man, very good, a good landlord and housekeeper, so that it wasn't very long before women from the region of Prespa came to visit him. Here I am, she said. My husband died and you may marry me if you like. Through the conversation they had, he found that the last one was her second husband. Well, he said to her, let me think it over and if I make up my mind, I'll let you know. If that's how it is, she said, let me spend the night at your place, since it's too late to get back. No, he finally said to her. You must leave my house now.

After a while, another came, from Bitola. Her appearance was pretty good, but he first wants to find out her situation. Are you a widow or divorced? he asked her. Well, I'm divorced, she said. I'm sorry, he said, but why, if I may ask. Such was my fate, she said, but would not give any details. He said the same to her as to the other. I would like to think it over and then I'll let you know.

He prefers to wait. One should not be in a hurry. Happiness doesn't come running. He needed time to inquire a bit about the two women who came to him. As much as he could, but not too much. Because he wants to be careful. He wouldn't want to spread gossip. For the sake of the women, too.

Fortunately, a third one came. From Bitola again. But this one tells him everything about herself immediately. I married him, she said, because I loved him. He was a very nice man. Very good. I have had two daughters from him. They're like angels. I'd give my life for them. For him, too. I didn't know which of the three of them was dearer to my heart. Unfortunately, my man started to drink. Bad company, poor salary, bad relations in the factory ... I don't know why but he became another man. Not the one I loved. Still, whenever he was sober, he was good to me. The same man. But whenever he got drunk, he'd start to beat me. Badly. I would press my teeth and tolerate it: I continued, even stronger, to praise him among people. I suffered that for as long as I could. When I could stand it no longer, I went to my mother. Mother, I said to her, so and so. But my mother was a woman as one should be.

'Take it easy, daughter, she said to me. Be patient, it will pass; he'll be good again. The darkest night has its dawn, she said.

But mother, I said, and showed her the marks all over my body. Take it easy, she said again.

Well, I was trying to take it easy, but my children suffered too. But since it was my mother who said what to do, I submitted. It should be that way, I thought. And I was patient until one day he took out a knife and ripped open my side. He would have killed me. I ran to my mother again. Look, I said. Now there was no choice, even for her. She took us in, me and my daughters. So that's how I became a woman to be married, she said to Kote.

Kote told her his story too, and so they came together and started to manage their own lives again.

To tell you the truth, she takes care of him. She is really spoiling him, but that is what is so beautiful. To be able to sit over there and to have a wife bring you a cup of coffee at the place where you are seated. Congratulations to you for what you have done for her, for both of you! When you get up to go to work now, you will do it gladly instead of complaining just to earn your bread. 'That's when a cup of coffee is really tasty — not like it is when I prepare you a cup.

Maybe I could fix better coffee than any woman in the world, but it's different when a woman serves it to you. Apart from that, a lone man like me doesn't know how to entertain his guests properly. I have everything ready, but when someone comes to visit, I don't know what to offer. I turn just like a fart in the pants.

A woman, if she wants, knows what a man needs. Kote put it nicely: as long as she is considerate of me, he says, I would never criticize her. From that point on, a woman should be free. She would know all by herself how far to go, because she is a woman. As we men have our troubles, so the women have theirs. Their troubles are even bigger. That's why, find in a woman as many weaknesses as you like, marriage is still a need for a man. At least it has been up to now. How it will be tomorrow, when there are no more Macedonians, remains to be seen. If it happens, it will be because of our lack of action.

What's wrong with our men that every woman looks for a husband somewhere else, in the cities, between the traffic lights? 'That's why we don't have children in the village any more. You see — the school is being closed. Do you remember how it used to be? How delightful life was with the children, although we were much, more poorer ...

## FLIGHT TO ETERNITY

While Joseph was traveling, Sandra had a heart attack. Even though her cheeks had blossomed with health, Joseph had never been fond of that look, as if her body were straining towards health. Even if it made her more beautiful and desirable.

Joseph didn't learn of the heart attack until the day after his return. Sandra's mother phoned him:

'Sandra wants to see you,' she told him. It sounded as if someone were reading a telegram.

'What happened?' Joseph asked uneasily.

'Nothing,' her mother said, but after a slight pause, she said quickly, 'Her heart ...'

She spoke and was silent, choked by tears, but managed to ask when Joseph would come.

'Right now,' he said, already impatient to leave.

Amazingly, Joseph wasn't uneasy, but he was simultaneously impressed by an awareness of being troubled. He asked himself, as he was going out, why Sandra wasn't in the hospital. And he rushed. He rushed a great deal. And the more he rushed, the more he felt as though he were traveling through water. Of course he didn't know what he would have to do for his dear Sandra. The most dear. The one and only.

Actually, all these questions were as though he would have asked them, not as though he were asking them.

His time, space, and consciousness were somehow engaged so that it seemed that everything was being decided by the very thoughts he was engrossed in. This is how he came to face the most difficult question which presented itself when he heard that Sandra had had a heart attack. Just as time, space, and consciousness had been made equal, fate had been added to them. Joseph felt that somehow he was everywhere, above the events and omniscient. Even the weather coincided with his state of mind: it was an early spring day, clear and bathed in a sunlight more beautiful and intense than in the paintings of the impressionists.

After he had rung at the entrance to Sandra's apartment, he waited. It was as though he had waited too long, but that wasn't so unusual, he was content to wait, because at this minute Sandra was making herself pretty. She never let him see her with even a hint of untidiness.

All that was happening after he had received the bad news was a mixture of drifting and floating. Somehow he soon found himself in Sandra's

apartment, in her bedroom where she was lying on the bed, encircled by her two sisters and brother, her father and mother, who, he just now realized, was the one who had let him in.

He was happy to see that none of them were crying, though they were all pensive and sad, their heads bent with an air of expectation. But Sandra ...

Sandra's eyes shone with joy at the sight of him, and her face was illuminated as if it reflected her understanding of the joys of life. Smiling, he went to her and said jokingly: 'So you decided to lie down, you lazy thing.'

Filled with happiness, she gave him her long white hands and he took them and sat on the bed beside her, his gaze locked with hers.

Her hands were like soft gloves, gently touching him and spreading warmth over his body. Then he bent over slowly, kissing her soft lips, which instantly whispered so much love that he felt a sense of endless, joyful soaring. He soared in a place where the grass was lush, the trees were blossoming, and everything was colourful. There the people looked happy because of the great laughter of all the children of the world.

When he turned once towards her family, who stood stiffly a little way off, he was pleased that along with concern their eyes showed joy because of Sandra's pleasure in his having come. He also saw gratitude in their expressions, a gratitude that he read more clearly than they could have hoped. Moved by all this, the tears welled up in his eyes. He might have turned into a sobbing hulk, but he restrained himself in front of these dear, respected people. He turned to Sandra as though he wanted to excuse himself for his restraint, he knew that she understood him, that they understood each other, like two swift-flowing waters that run together, one into the other.

'Mother,' Sandra said, turning unexpectedly towards her mother. Her mother gazed at her so attentively and ready to come to her that she actually took a step towards her.

'Tell me, my dear,' her mother said.

And then she voiced her wish with such simplicity that there was nothing amazing or unusual in her words:

'If you like, please leave me alone with Joseph. I beg you!'

Joseph looked up at Sandra's mother, who looked as if she had at last broken into tears of joy upon hearing her daughter's request. He saw how she just looked at her daughter and gently took her husband by the arm, leading him out. The husband lifted his gaze to her like a stag and agreed, ready to leave. Then she thought of something. She released her husband and approached Sandra and kissed her on the forehead. Straightening up, the mother looked at Joseph and bent over, kissing him on the forehead as well.

Then her father and sisters stepped up and kissed Sandra, then kissed him. Past of all her brother stepped forward. He kissed his sister but stiffened up in front of Joseph, who felt uncomfortable. At last the brother held out his hand and shook hands with Joseph as heartily and thankfully as he could. Joseph understood him: greeting him, he got up from the bed. Sympathetically, he put his arm around his shoulder and, as though to accompany him, took him to the door. There he bowed to Sandra's family, who started down the long hall towards the stairs that led down to the exit which overflowed with sunlight. Just then, before he was about to go back in and close the door, something unusual happened. Unexpectedly her mother

turned and, seeing that he was still there, made the slightest bow to him. In response Joseph bent at the waist with a look of complete understanding on his face. But he felt that was not enough and he went to her and took both her hands and kissed her gently, thanking her.

Joseph returned to Sandra whose joy filled the room. He gently embraced her.

'My darling!' he said to her. He thought about telling her that all of this was beyond belief, but he didn't. Now it all seemed preordained.

Besides, here in front of him was that same body of poured, melted white marble that looked as healthy and enticing as in all those endless hours and nights he had spent with her. Even now he felt the familiar desire to kiss and caress her, throwing himself on her neck and searching out her body with hands like blind travelers. But he was afraid of hurting her.

He sat up, still embracing her and caressing her shoulders. They looked deeply into one another with the sensation of plunging into warm healing waters. Sandra sensed that he was afraid to come totally to her because of her illness and smiling said to him:

'The button!'

So Joseph could remember. The button. That was a detail from their sweet lives, a memory of their first meeting and the key to their paradise. When he would reach out to unbutton the top button of her blouse. It was enough for Sandra to unconsciously touch that button, which often happened, for her to think of him and become so excited that she was frightened those around her would know what was happening to her. She had told Joseph about it or he simply knew it! Or the memory of that was what excited him! Joseph was so happy that he didn't really know whether Sandra had just now mentioned the button or whether he, carried away by desire, remembered the button and became excited when her blouse, stretched by her full breasts, opened to reveal her alluring whiteness. Sandra lay before him bare-breasted and naked beneath the white sheet which partially covered her.

For several minutes he stared at her marble body, then raised his eyes to her face. He saw that she wanted him to rejoice in her body and he returned his gaze to her torso. He put his hands under her arms and, pulling them upwards, bared her shoulders completely. He started to fondle whatever part of her body came closest to his lips and all of him, also naked, intertwined with her.

Not for a moment did he forget her illness. That concern was in fact a vital part of all that was happening. It was like something that he had become accustomed to a long time ago. He was so careful that he could himself feel how much more gentle and delicate he was with her. He loved her gently and slowly, rapturously in this long, lingering film which they had never known. They felt like they had been hurled into space and left to float there eternally in infinity. It was like an endless coma from which there is no return. Joseph had never experienced such a calming of his soul, such a sweet journey. Sometimes in the depth of that rapture, he thought that he could secretly hear the life of the whole world in which, he was quickly convincing himself, all the children of the world sleep such a gently and blissful sleep in this kingdom of happiness, he felt better and better. He had left his body and was floating in a great beauty where everything was so light,

clean, clear, open and bright, to the land of eternity. The one thing that filled all of the endless emptiness of this paradise was an unheard cosmic beauty which intoxicates, carrying one off even deeper into its beauty. The body of his Sandra was the trail of all of his past of which he alone knew, a past without a break and future that knew only happiness. In fact, the present was comprised of all that he knew of both the past and the future.

It was strange how he had to keep rediscovering the music that was sounding in his ears. Why couldn't he discover its duration, when that very music kept him enthralled and held him in its power? For all the time that he lay in this most beautiful act of love with Sandra, what he experienced was like a reminder of something, he did not know what, but it was there in him, something which seized them and united them even more closely.

Yes, it was that cosmic music. Music which comes from afar. Unheard. Music which comprised all of the known and unknown notes and which at the same time was reduced to the three basic voices, interwoven in a mutual and melodious game. That is why the music came partly from the heavens and partly, it seemed to Joseph, looked as though it was being played in a park by an orchestra of people dressed in white uniforms. All around strolled couples with children, all handsome and beautifully dressed, all with happy expressions on their faces and so formal and dignified. You would have thought that the air had stopped circulating in amazement and that all the people lived in peace, breathing tranquility and security.

That bliss lasted and lasted, as though it had no beginning. It was as though he had been experiencing it from the moment of his conception in his mother's womb, a conception with the power to imagine the creation of Sandra whom he would meet and with whom he would share all that he was now experiencing. Everything happened like a dream within a dream. Like a dream within a dream that competed with each other to see which would take the senses into the most beautiful and most wonderful places.

Just as he reached the heavens, Joseph fell, from heaven to heaven, directed towards a ring-shaped cloud which was infinitely far away yet was here before him, towards whose opening more and more he headed, experiencing the sweetness of flight through airless place, the sweetness that led him to the other side of bliss. That cloudy ring awaited him. It awaited him with convulsions brought on by its impatience for him to come to it. At last he drew near and the ring impatiently grasped him in its sweet embrace. That was an instant, an eternity. Joseph could never have explained it to himself. He knew only that that instant, that eternity, before him burst an endless tunnel loaded down with the greatest darkness through which he peered, exhausted and straining, until at last through the endless distance he saw the sparkle of white light towards which he flew headlong.

He must have fallen asleep on Sandra's breast. He woke up with a start. What am I doing? He asked himself. He asked himself how he could beg her for forgiveness now. How do you beg forgiveness from a dead person!

He lifted up his head to see her face. Sandra's eyes were wide open, staring into nothingness. Although he accepted this he still did not move away from her. He just reached out his hand and slowly, as gently as he could, he closed her eyes. He held his palm over her eyes for several

moments to keep the lids closed. Then, after he took his hand away, he looked at her again: Sandra's face looked smiling and happy to him. It was as though she were inviting him back into that dream from which Joseph had just returned.

In any case that calmed him. He was so calm that he asked her to show him the road to eternity. She was at last following it. And he spoke the words from the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Seated on the bed beside her he recited with assurance:

'O daughter of a noble family, O most dear. Your time has come to seek your road. The one and only road. To see that which is called the dark light, because that will now appear to you and do not flee from that light, neither from joy nor from the fear that you might experience. Recognize it and know that that light is consciousness, an empty open space, clean, bare spirit without center and without bounds. Grow to know it and stay in his presence ... ' It seemed to Joseph that he knew how to recite the whole book to his beloved until he led her to her final release, And he wanted to do this for her but his mind pursued the question that he himself posed and that interrupted and confused him.

How long is it since she died? He asked himself, and he didn't know.

And he put his hand on her breast to see if she were cold.

But what was that now! Someone had hit him several times on the face as if to wake him. He opened his eyes slightly. He saw his son seated on the mattress on which he was lying. He was always happy to see his dear and caring son but this time he was indifferent.

'Do you want me to give you something to eat? Or should I give you some medicine?' his son asked.

'She's cold,' Joseph said. He mumbled. Or he wanted to say that. He did not know what he had said or whether he had said it. Because he felt so cold. He felt very cold. He hadn't said anything. Actually he wanted to tell his son that he was cold, but he was overcome by a startling brightness that he saw everywhere before him. Hmm, he said. How could I all those years not know that everything is so simple and clear? Actually nothing is not something. Refreshed, nothingness is something. The brightness that he was looking at became brighter and whiter, without barrier, transparent to the other side of the transparency. He felt happy. The one flaw in his happiness and simplicity was the raw sorrow that his son was experiencing. All for his sake, for whom all was now so good. But even that flaw quickly melted away in the white brightness that overtook even him.

His son finally composed himself. He lit the long-prepared candle and placed it beside his father's bed. He stood, showing the deepest respect for his beloved and valued father and then bent down, kissed his forehead and sat down beside him to keep vigil.

## TOTE'S FINEST STORY

It was always the same. At every wedding, at every party where Tote was...

'Come on, Tote. Tell him about it,' people kept asking.

But Tote still managed to put up with it. He liked to have everybody asking and he was glad that they wanted to hear about it, but all the same it hurt him. Eventually he came to believe that they weren't trying to understand him. They can't see what I suffer, he would add, absorbed by his grief, his greatest sorrow. 'Then he would make excuses to the people gathered around.

It was always the same. There he was again today, Tote — so short, pale, thin, and apparently calm with his scone on his shoulder and his pitcher of wine in his hand, going to a wedding once more. He didn't want to go. He had tried to get out of it, but it was the same this time as it had been many times before. He just had to go. Who would go if he didn't? He had no children, but still blood is thicker than water. Children. No, he hadn't got any children, but that sorrow had passed long ago. When once he had realized that it was not his luck, and when once

At that time his father had still been alive. It was then that the tailor had come to their house. He had been very strange, that tailor. He had sat cross-legged on the hearth by the fire, jabbing all day with his needle and saying nothing. It looked as if he were sewing the one spot. The man had worked in silence. He spoke to no one, not even himself. And then, when he stopped sewing, he still said nothing but instead he slowly and cautiously unwrapped an old elastic-bound clarinet from a piece of cloth which had been lying beside him all the time. He began to play, alone, for himself without troubling if anyone was listening or not. The tailor was fascinating and strange. Tote was enchanted by the tailor's air of mystery, which was actually much like his own strangeness. Then again, he found a secret, unconscious strength in the clarinet. The silent tailor had been kind, or it may have been that he had recognized in Tote a man who could inherit his silence, he had revealed his secret to Tote.

In twenty days' time the tailor left the village forever, and it seemed as if he had left his strangeness just for Tote. The more he played, the less he felt the pain of his instinctive desire to have children.

Tote soon began to amaze people in the village with his playing. It was as if two powerful wishes united in him — to have children and to play. No, in fact there was only one desire in Tote, to play, to play as well as he could.

And Tote played. He was happy, the happiest of men, but as people say, hard times awaited him, painful to his strange spirit. Perhaps he caught cold at a wedding (so his wife said). Who knows what happened, but 'Tote became very ill. He was in bed for years. He'll never get up again, people said. He brought it on himself, they said.

Tote didn't get better. He lay there with the clarinet beside him, looking for sonic defect to mend or sonic spot to clean and finally he just held it in his hands. Nonetheless, he stayed in bed and wouldn't be separated from the clarinet, hoping that one day he might get well again and be able to play.

Then, one time, a doctor came to the village by chance. Neither Tote nor his wife knew anything of him, but during the day the villagers themselves brought him. He was a tall, thin, frowning man, and Tote felt afraid of him. The doctor looked serious. He didn't smile and he didn't chat.

'Perhaps he will get well, but he must never play again,' the doctor said to the villagers.

After that, when someone would ask him to play at a wedding, Tote would never play, in spite of their frowns. Tote took the doctor's words very seriously. The years passed and people lost interest. More years passed and they gave up, and still Tote refused to play.

He didn't play, but he alone knew what he was going through. As each wedding day grew nearer, Tote's heart beat faster, he could hardly wait until dark. At times, he would think that the day might pass quickly, so the disappointment would be over. What about the night! The night before a wedding would be the most painful, the most unbearable. Perhaps the morning would pass quickly and even the afternoon, but night came. Then he would go to bed, but would he get any sleep?

Then Tote would calmly pick up the clarinet, sound a few notes, moisten his fingers, lick his lips and begin. He would begin to play his most beautiful tune. He would become lost in it and play, play ... but what was the matter with him? Was it possible? He was playing all night, but nothing could be heard. He would get frightened as if he wanted to hide somewhere, but he couldn't. He would become still more frightened and then wake up all soaked in sweat. Then he would play again, and again there would be no noise, Again the sweating and again, again ... and he was always blushing with shame in his dream. He would wonder why he couldn't.

It was like this, waiting for the wedding days, yet here he was with the scone on his shoulder and the pitcher of wine in his hand. He was going ahead, but it was uncomfortable, mournful, while all the time his poor heart beat, despite Tote, urging him to hurry and get there sooner, to leave his scone, congratulate the newly-weds and then, apparently calmly, proceed to the room where the nearest relations were sitting and where the musicians would come later to stand at the end of the table.

He sat there frightened, like an uninvited guest with his head lowered and afraid, strangely afraid, in case someone should remember his name. He was afraid, but all the same from time to time he looked at the door to see if the musicians had arrived yet. He sat wrapped up in his own far-off thoughts, which were yet thoughts that absorbed him entirely, keeping him bowed, silent and ashamed.

'Help yourself, Tote. Have a drink,' someone said.

But it seemed to Tote that someone was calling him. He straightened his head, thinking how to defend himself from the attack which troubled him. Still, he had to take the glass of rakia (schnapps) offered to him kindly, because he must accept what was served.

The musicians would come into the room last and sit at the end of the table as if they were without importance, yet Tote envied them. He wished he were in their place and holding a clarinet in his hands like a baby just as that player there was holding it. The clarinet. Tote really wanted to be forgotten now, entirely forgotten so that he could be alone with his clarinet somewhere, bowed and alone even if only to regard it in peace without being afraid of people's stares. But not like now. Now he looked at it, shame on his face, stroking it in his thoughts with his fingers, but the clarinet was there in his hands and he felt how his beating heart pushed it away by itself. He would just take it in his hands to try a note or two. But Tote forgot the clarinet bent over his left arm and his glance fixed on the clarinet in the hand of the player. He forgot that people were looking at him.

'Come on, Tote. Play for us,' a guest said.

That was enough to start the whole table cackling:

'Come on, Tote. Play something for us.'

'Why shouldn't I dance to your tune for once ... Come on, Tote. Go on, try it.'

Some strangers who didn't understand what was going on were surprised, and the others explained to them:

'Go where you like around Prespa, you won't find another player like him. You'll see, if he decides to play. Who knows, but I don't believe he will.'

The call for Tote to play was repeated, and it began to ring in his ear like an echo, and it went on repeating, endlessly, until at last it agonizingly lost itself somewhere far off, never coming back with the same burden of illness for Tote. Why did people torment him? Tote wanted to take up the clarinet and play his favourite tune to rouse the table of a hundred guests to call the wedding party from the other rooms and the yard, to amaze the musicians and to show some of them that he still knew how to play as he had once and to confirm the story which the young men told about him. Most important of all, he wanted to satisfy his long-suffering desire to play.

But he dared not.

Many years had passed since he had played for the last time and perhaps he wasn't so sure, or had quite forgotten. Still, he could feel the power and believed that he could still make Chorola, always the last to respond, throw his cap on the floor and shout 'That's it, as I'm alive,' and dance and stay on one knee, twisting his old bones on one leg and forgetting his sorrows. Who knows!

'Go on, go on,' they urged, but somehow more kindly. Still the echo passed over him, carrying his fear away, destroying the desire to play with his fear. Yet his longing was young and urgent.

'Just let me see what kind of clarinet you've got,' he said.

Tote couldn't resist. Dozens of hands stretched out to offer it, hoping that he would play this time.

Tote took the clarinet with trembling hands, moved a few steps and realized at once that he had a fine instrument in his hands, one better than his

own. All at once it occurred to him that this moment of time would not last and that he would snatch it and play and play, even if they were all against it. But Tote was frightened. What was it he wanted? Had he forgotten the disgrace that might come to him? He suppressed these thoughts and went on stroking the beautiful clarinet, opening the stops, shutting them and trying the reed with his nail, listening with his ear as if he were afraid to offend the instrument's sensitivity.

'Go on, Tote,' they urged.

Still Tote resisted.

'No, I'm not used to it. This is someone else's ...' he said.

There somewhere near the head of the table sat Chorola, saying nothing, listening, waiting to see what would happen. For a moment he couldn't control himself; he forgot to respect Tote, a man who had played so many country dances for him, a man who had freed him from so much sorrow, and so he lifted his hand for everyone to be silent. But the guests were too noisy and suddenly with all his strength, he hit the table:

'Tote,' he shouted, as loud as he could.

It became quiet, which was unusual for a wedding. The whole table waited to hear and see what would happen. Chorola went on softly as if he were begging:

'Tote, for my sake, whether you play or not, I shall die before you do ... Tote,' he shouted again at the end.

Chorola's words cut Tote to the heart. Tote had played wonderfully, enchantingly, and Chorola had danced to his playing, danced his best and would never dance again, if Tote refused to play. Tote was remembering many village dances on the green, when he realized that the hand was still offering him the clarinet. No one else had thought to take it. They were all waiting for Tote.

Tote drew the clarinet towards him, but he was still deliberating. Once more he tried it slowly, quietly, as if he wanted to satisfy himself and finally play and return the instrument, but a strange silence stood in his way, causing him to hesitate and fear disgrace. He tried to balance the two agonies as well as he could in his soul, a soul which was too delicate to hold two such large emotions. The two emotions were struggling against each other and both together against Tote. He felt that he could hardly endure the strain of this terrible conflict. Suddenly a power which Tote couldn't control drove him to take the greatest risk of his life, the same risk that the people who wanted to hear him were taking.

He forgot the silence, he heard only the notes of the clarinet and was prepared to endure this moment of doubt forever.

'I'm dying of waiting, man,' Chorola called again in his harsh, commanding voice.

Tote had already run through a few notes that resembled his old playing. His fear was ebbing in the unequal struggle. Tote tried the notes a bit more bravely. If only he could start the notes dancing now and fill the room with his finest music. Yet Tote himself didn't notice when his fingers began by themselves to pass over the body of the clarinet, or when the notes of his favourite tune began to emerge.

Tote really hadn't forgotten how to play. He even felt there was something finer in his playing. He could still play. Then why was he suffering so? Now it was as if he had never felt the slightest fear.

Tote was already in the middle of his favourite song. The kettledrum began to follow him instinctively. It was like holding nothing at all in his hands. The only thing that existed for him was the melody, which momentarily grew more and more beautiful. So he drifted into forgetfulness.

The guests gradually began to lean forward and listen. A sweetness entered their expressions, as if they were in love with the whole world. This was no ordinary wedding music. They were listening to an exquisitely sad story out of their pasts. As he played, Tote was telling a story. They could picture another Tote, wandering through the fields, running happily after his Cveta. They took part in his wedding, at which Tote and Cveta had become a blissful married pair. They listened to his efforts to make life happier, and they saw the sweat on his brow. Then they shared his sorrow, his longing for a family, and they could tell how his spirit filled with love wandered aimlessly without an object, unable to find a resting place.

'Tote was not playing. He was telling the finest tale that anyone there had ever heard.

Soon Chorola roused from his dream. He raised his head and leaned on his sinewy old hands and shouted, but it was as if someone unknown to them all were speaking.

'Oh, Tote ... '

Chorola spoke and sat upright to hear the rest of the tale, the story of Tote's serious illness, of his wish to get well, to live, to love all that was good, to hate what was bad, to struggle and work.

The guests listened to his grief in having done nothing with his life, that life had not even allowed him to play for others as he had always done.

But Tote no longer was aware of anything. He couldn't sense the tears running down his face and disguising his happiness. He didn't notice when the clarinet screeched painfully and fell from his hands, as he fell down.

He still played on, better and better, and in his absorption Tote told of future happiness.

## ROAD TO THE SKY

Papa doesn't answer me. He takes me back into the room to the two uncles, the two grandmas, and the grandpa. Mama is at work. But I want to know why we don't live on the hill. So all day long I quiz the uncles, the two grandmas, and grandpa about the hill. At last Mama comes home.

'Because we don't have a house,' she says.

Immediately I demand:

'Why don't we have one?'

'Ask your father,' she says.

I go to bed before Papa arrives, so I have to wait until he comes home from work in the morning. When I hear him come in, I immediately ask him. He hugs me and replies that someday we will have one.

'On the hill?' I ask.

That, Father doesn't know. I listen to him telling Mama, Grandpa, and the two grandmas that he went again to see about a 'span' of land for a house. I bring him a 'pan' full of dirt:

'Won't this do?' I ask impatiently.

Everyone chuckles, and although I understand them, I know that with grown-ups you can never come out ahead. They always do what you least expect them to.

One day father comes home wildly excited. They have given him a place for our new house. He lifts me up high, swings me around, and says:

'On the hill, on the hill!'

I want to go to the hill at once.

'No,' says Papa. 'First you should ask when the house will be ready.'

'Well, when?' I ask

'In the spring,' says Papa.

'And when is it "in the spring?"'

'Another time,' says Papa.

Grown-ups don't know anything. So big, yet neither Papa, nor the uncles, nor grandpa, nor the two grandmas know when it will be 'in the spring.' I ask the neighbour's boy, Slavche, but he answers that it's never 'in the spring,' and Peche says that he knows because in the city there are airplanes on the ground.

One day Papa tries to explain:

'Do you see the peach tree?' he says. 'Okay. You have to wait until the leaves fall and then grow back again. Then it will be spring.'

'Before that,' says Papa, but I can't figure out what he means by before, then after, and so on.

Boredom. The days pass, each duller than the one before. I don't go to the hill, and! Still don't know when it will be spring. I decide to call together Slavche and Peche to help tear the leaves off the peach tree, so that they'll grow back faster. Peche says that he'd like to climb the peach tree, but that the whole household would see us at once because it's so close to the window. He suggests that we strip the leaves from the little quince behind the other houses instead. I don't want to, because the quince isn't a peach tree, and its leaves don't grow back in spring.

While I'm thinking about all these things, the leaves on the peach tree turn yellow, a big wind blows and carries them away, and then the snow falls. Papa is thoughtful. He says if he hadn't had the money that Grandpa gave him, he wouldn't have been able to do anything about the house. I look at the Grandmas. Why don't they give Papa some money? Later, when Uncle punches me in the head, I tell him:

"Grandmas," you are grandmas.'

I ask again and again what our house on the hill will be like. Will I be able to walk through the sky every day? How many skies can you walk through at one time? Will we be able to loan things to Aunt Milka through the balcony, and will we use the same bathroom as the people who live in the next room? Papa tells me everything. And I forget to call uncle 'grandmas' when Papa drives the car up and we load everything into it: my little stool, the doll Mama made me, Mama's coat that we go bye-bye with, the stove for cooking beans, and everything. Grandpa, one of the grandmas, and an uncle remain in the old house, and hugging me good-bye, say over and over:

'Don't forget us!'

'Look at the hill,' I say. 'I'll be there.'

The car drives off, carrying Papa, one grandma, and me. I ride along, the happiest I've ever been in my life.

Now we sleep there, but from the window you can't see the hill. Peche and Slavche are gone. The upstairs neighbours don't cut wood. I ask Papa:

'Is our house pretty, Papa?'

'Don't you see it?' he says to me.

'No,' I reply uneasily, and ask him:

'And the sky — where is it?'

'Far away,' answers Papa.

I am silent. The one grandma is lying down now and Mama is at work again. I ask Papa:

'Is it very far away?'

'Very,' says Papa.

## JOURNEY

Nice ... I had a nice time. Very nice. Why not? I visited my daughter, I saw her. At least I'm sure that I don't have to worry about her. And I saw all of them. Our people there. There in our Macedonian church they have over there. They are all fine in every way. Woman, I am telling you, they have one church that couldn't be better. The same as ours while we had a priest in the village. The priest there both talks and sings in our language. A fine person. Modest. And they're all in good health. Send their best.

Send their best to everybody. Doesn't matter whether someone had quarreled with another, now he greets him, sends him his best. Thank God that greetings are not objects, because if they were objects, doesn't matter how small, they would be hard to carry, apart from being expensive to be brought! We shouldn't worry about them, they say. Why should we worry about them? They are all well, even better than well. They have everything they need. They all have houses. Beautiful houses. Inside, carpets from end to end. Refrigerators that breathe like oxen when they have eaten too much clover, stuffed that much. The TV sets they have flash, sing and play by day and by night. Cars in front of the houses — like mules here. Some have one car, others have two or three. You can go someplace at anytime. Whenever you want or wherever you want.

And call each other with those phones all the time. Whenever my daughter hung herself on that wire, she would faint laughing. They laugh as though they're from the street, God forbid.

Well, daughter, I say to her, why do you stay hung on that wire? Why don't you go there to talk like a human being to another human being? Or she may come here and that would be a chance for me to see her, to say back in the old country that I've seen her.

Oh, no, mother, she says, how could she come here or me go there? You don't know how far away she is.

They talk only by calling. Anytime they want. By day and by night. In the middle of the night, at midnight. That's what they do, as though they've no rules to live by. But who knows what sort of place it is where they live? I neither saw nor heard it, damn it. When she's at home, he's at work. When he's at home, she's at work. Every now and then they go away and around. He probably goes different places where they talk indecently, drink, and where shameless women go.

What to tell you about their children? They go crazy all the time, like they've been let off chains, God save us. The language they talk is no language at all; I couldn't understand a word, as if they are not my children,

too. I'd ask them something and they only laugh as though they thought, God save us!

I kept being imprisoned at home there as though I was crippled. What could I do all day long except keep silent and wait. Willingly, unwillingly, I'd sit in front of the house and keep looking into the street. I would sit there and wait for someone to pass by. A day is like a sea, never passes. But where they hide, the people, during the day, I don't know, Since I am not very clever, I start to think that the sun there isn't a sun; it must be artificial light as the light in the plane, in the underground. Otherwise how is it possible for a street to be so deserted? Only a car, from time to time, would crawl by like a turtle which is frightened of something. Only a policeman.

The policeman was frequently visiting me. I felt uncomfortable, a woman alone to be visited by a male. Doesn't matter whether a man is a policeman or whatever for a woman when she is alone at home. It's indecent in any case. But he was coming to collect the fine for something my son-in-law had done wrong. A nice person, he would only ask for the ticket to be paid. Listen, I say to my son-in-law, isn't it better to deal with that policeman at home? Perhaps it will cost you less, at least you will not have to pay him travel expenses from the police station to your house. He laughs like he's God.

But the wonder of wonders was the journey. One doesn't have capacity to wonder that much. First the start ... Both from here and there, all the same. First they collected us all in a big building located as in a large field planted not with trees or grain but with cars. The building inside all open, without walls inside to divide the space in rooms as it is in houses. All of us gathered from all over the place. No one knows anyone nor pays any attention to anybody. Only, if you knew someone, you could exchange a few words, if you could open your mouth after such a long detainment. God save you from needing anybody's help!

So it was. We stay there as though we are, God save us, herded to wait. We doze over our belongings as we wait to be called. When they finally call us, they simply grab our luggage. They would put your suitcase in a hole or something like a doghouse and that's it — your luggage disappears. Then they chopped our tickets, took some more money from us, and put those seals of theirs on our passports. When you pass through that ...

Oh, I shouldn't forget. Before they ask you for your passport, they force you to pass through the hands of a thief who ransacks your bag, even your pockets ... So I was told. They can take you aside, in a hidden place, take all your clothes off and do whatever they want with you. Shame. There is everything in the countries around the world. Well, when all of that is over, they put you in another room. It is again large, like the stables we built during collective farming, which we pulled down before they were finished. This room is not that large but still very large.

People sit there, stand and wait, while in the meanwhile some bulky girls march around so indecently that you're ashamed to look at them, As you look at them, you think that they are ready to undress to the skin right there before the eyes of all the people present.

But worse is to come. Around that large room where we wait there are little rooms attached like appendages. When they finally call you, they take

you into one of those little rooms, depending on where you are bound to. If you're going to America, they take you in the little room to America. It's all orderly, if it's for order. Now, from all those little rooms there are tunnels, narrow, just to walk through. And not very steep, so that you can't realize that they're taking you under the ground for the money you pay them. Made very comfortable. Everything is to marvel at and to experience.

When your time comes they call you. All going to America, they shout from the walls, should enter this door. They don't tell you that you're to enter a tunnel. And like fools the people start to pour in like water through a funnel. They vie for who will enter first. Like who knows what beauty is waiting for them. The tunnel doesn't go straight through. It crosses to the left, and then to the right. Foxes. They delude you so cleverly. So the people go further and further, till they reach a wall where the tunnel is cut.

Those who are first sit there in the first row, with their faces to the wall. Then all the rest behind them. You reach the end and sit in the first empty chair. The chairs are very comfortable, like if you have noticed the kind on TV where the women sit with their legs uncovered. The chairs are placed like the benches in schools or those meetings where our men quarrel about something which is none of their business. Ten or thirteen chairs in a row. So we are seated inside one behind the other. When all the people going to America like me are stacked in, they put another wall behind all of us inside and so we're buried alive. But you don't know that. Because they tell you that you are going to fly. And it's very nice inside the tunnel. I admit that there is everything. The chair soft, in front of you a little table which you can place in your lap anytime you want or put it away. On both sides little windows, probably, because you can't see anything through them anyway. I was sitting in the middle. Because only the more honourable passengers are seated by the windows, the fools who pay more for the same thing. It's just light that you can see in those little windows.

'They are very tricky. If you travel by day, you see daylight. If you travel by night, you think it's nighttime. Wonder of wonders, when it's necessary, depending on the time, even the sun and moon are flashing in. Nowadays, woman, I'm telling you, people are only living by delusions. Believe me. Perhaps I, fool that I am, see nothing else, but I see that there is trick piled on trick nowadays.

And again those bulky girls saunter among us. Like nude. Skirts high over their knees, bare arms up to the shoulders, breasts as though they are about to give suck. You are ashamed even to look at them. And all the time they hump their hips in a man's shoulders. No shame at all. Dear God, what if next to that man is sitting his wife, his sister or even his mother! Women in the world nowadays have lost the curtain through which a woman should look.

Believe me, woman, what I am telling you. When they'd seated us, when they had closed us in that tunnel, they strapped us to the chairs with belts like those we use to tighten the saddle to the mule. We were to do it ourselves, but I didn't hear, so one of those bulky girls came to me and tightened me so that I felt nailed to the seat all the way. And now, they said, we are to take off, to fly. We are like climbing the sky.

Shit! How is it possible for a human being to be a bird? Even God doesn't dare to do it. Just a big noise, I got a headache. It didn't stop till they decided to take us out. Anyway, although I knew what the trick was, I decided to be patient. I knew that they were going to keep us in that hole for as long as they wanted. Buried alive. For so much money, but what could I have done to that daughter of mine, fool as I am. Thank God I didn't have to go to the lavatory. I wouldn't be able to survive that shame. They said there was a place somewhere in the back which was used as a lavatory, probably by the wall behind, someplace like behind our village shop where men go to pass their dirty water and then the sheep stop to lick the salty stones. A woman can't do that.

Cursed are we, women, we can never do what a man can do. Otherwise, I would never get married. No woman would, for sure. No one else can please you the way you can please yourself, never. It's even easier to quarrel with yourself. Anyway, that was a place where men and women were going equally for relief. How it wasn't stinking in the hole where we were put, I don't know! It must have been another trick. And so, woman, we spent a long time in there like under the ground. Like from morning to evening. It was so comfortable inside.

As for eating and drinking, they give you as much as you want, if only you can stand all those disgusting things they serve you. Only beautifully arranged. The most beautiful. Do you know why they arrange it so beautifully? Because there are more and more women who don't know what cooking is. I was almost tempted to say to the girl: Daughter, meat needs to be cooked, not arranged, but I realized in time that a wheel turns downhill too fast to be stopped. Now and then, the whole trip, one of those girls comes and gives you a glass of black liquid filled with gas. I would always take it politely and, as soon as she would go, I would pour it out on the floor beside me. And I would return the glass to her as though I'd drunk it.

Would you like some more? she would offer me again.

I laugh like a lunatic and say, No, No. I've had enough, I'd say to her.

I was cheerful with those girls, not to irritate them. But a lot of food. A lot. Even milk from a chicken, as they say. In my daughter's house too. Meat, meat — piles of it. But their meat is not like ours. Tasteless. I don't know why. You can't even taste it. When they would put it on the table, like a pile of garbage, as soon as I saw it, my stomach would turn upside down and immediately I felt as if I'd vomit. I only ate cheese. White cheese. Thank God that the Bulgarians and the Greeks bring it there. And very good. You can't imagine how good it is. The same as ours. As though I had taken it from own vat in the basement. The bread over there is like straw but soft, always soft. The right kind to be eaten with cheese.

And so, woman, God had pity on us and they took us out from that hole who knows how deep under the ground. And again they let us go through a narrow tunnel, now climbing up. You think you are going back through the same tunnel they got us down. First we go to a place where they have thrown our luggage. Around a millstone. A huge one. The stone turns and turns, throws out our suitcases and mills them, mills .

The people went crazy running after their own belongings. It's yours, you don't want it to get lost. But how could they behave like that with things

which aren't theirs? After you've paid as much as they wanted to take from you? But finally I saw her ...

First, I first saw my son-in-law. Where my eyes were wandering I don't know. Still in that crowd. Fortunately, soon afterward I saw children holding onto a woman by the dress. So I saw my daughter and my grandchildren, all moving and smiling. When I first saw my son-in-law, I became afraid that my grandchildren might be ill and that's why she couldn't come to meet me. I am so afraid for all of them. Thank God. As for their health, they're all alright. Their cheeks are not red as they would be if they were breathing this air of ours but that is the colour on the faces they have over there. Their air is too polluted. Factories, smoke, poisons, chemicals and things like that. That's what they have a lot of, that's how they live, make their living and get rich.

So I went there and came back, but I still don' know if I can tell you whether that America of theirs is on the ground or under the ground. Too many tricks for a human being to guess. I wonder a lot why people, when they get there, change the colour of their cheeks, become pale. They are not white and red like here.

## THE RED BUS

Like a puzzle the man in a black suit appeared at the entrance of the red commune bus. As soon as the commuters noticed him, they lost their capacity to think. His appearance was both a joy and a dread. The general conclusion was that he must be one of them. The yellowish briefcase in his left hand and the newspaper with red headlines confirmed it.

With envy the chief accountant noticed his white, perfectly ironed shirt, which was a mark of distinction for him. One of his younger assistants observed that the man in the black suit tied his tie anew each morning, something he had never learned how to do. All the commuters were impressed by his tall appearance and the features of his face: his brow, which suggested to them knowledge, his bluish hair, nobility, and his thin lips, sharpness. All in all, there was something astonishing in the appearance of such an individual in this shabby red bus, among this insignificant people who as a collective were home to an everlasting boredom.

Well, there was some puzzlement, but still everybody was sure that this man must be somebody of a higher, if not the highest, position. Especially when, after entering the bus, with no hesitation he took the first seat permanently booked for the President of the commune. As soon as he did this, the commuters collectively sensed a frozen scream in their throats.

This was a case which not only could not be remembered, it simply had not happened since the bus was introduced. As it was known for sure that the bus served to take the community officials from the city to the commune and back again, making three stops including the President's apartment, it was also determined who sits where in the official red bus: the messenger had the back seat next to the door and nobody except the President himself was allowed to enter through the front door. The President had occupied that seat for such a long time that the man in the black suit, when he sat down, actually felt somewhat uncomfortable because of the difference in size of their two bodies.

There was an absolute silence in the bus; everybody was staring ahead except the driver, who was turned backward with his left hand over the steering wheel and with his mouth opened.

Of course next came the Vice-President, whose place was next to the President's in the first row. As soon as he saw the unknown person, he became confused, but after he got a good look at him decided to remain calm. After all, he thought, he took the seat of the commune President, so mine is still free. So he managed to take his place, although he felt extremely ill at ease.

The President, as usual, appeared at the door with a broad smile on his face: once again he had to say something to the guys in the bus, something at which they would laugh loudly together. But when the President saw the man in the black suit in his seat, the smile on his face was arrested. All of a sudden he looked like a fool in front of all his subordinates. The most astonishing fact for all those present was that the man in the black suit was still comfortably sitting in the President's seat with his newspaper opened wide in front of him.

On his side the President was an experience man for such a situation. Soon he pulled himself together, smiled to the man in the black suit, and looked with severity upon the Vice-President, who was himself an experienced person, though less so than the President, so that he jumped from his seat and said politely:

- Excuse me, comrade! Take your seat.

The exchange of places between the President and the Vice-President altered the rest of the hierarchy within the bus: the Head of the Department for Economic Development moved to the seat of the Head of the Department for People's Health and Wealth, and the Head of the Department for the People's Health and Wealth to the seat of the Head of the Department for People's Education, and so on, while the messenger at the back seat by the door found himself standing.

The man in the black suit watched the displacements for a short while and, as a discreet, ironic smile appeared on his face, he turned forward and said to the driver, who was staring at him:

- You should mind your job, comrade driver.

The driver, it seems, didn't guess what the man in the black suit meant and looked incredulously towards the President. It took some time for the President too while he speculated, but as soon as he got the idea, he almost shouted to the driver:

- You should start the bus, comrade, pronouncing the word 'comrade' as though he were pronouncing the word 'idiot.'

The driver noticed that the man in the black suit frowned at the pronunciation of the word 'comrade' by the President. He didn't guess what the meaning of the frown was, but he knew simply that the real boss in the bus was not the President but the comrade in the black suit. That instinct among the members of the working class is usually almost perfect.

After the bus started, the man in the black suit folded the newspaper and put it in the right pocket of his jacket. He looked at the President next to him as though expecting a question from him, but the comrade President didn't dare ask anything, although at least one question was almost hanging on his lips. The ironic smile again appeared on the face of the man in the black suit.

Led by his instinct, the driver turned back and asked the man in the black suit:

- Comrade, where exactly do you want me to take you?

- People's Assembly! said the man in the black suit curtly and started to examine the dirty floor by almost staring at it.

Comrade President felt uncomfortable in his seat and looked critically towards the Head of the Department for the People's Health and Wealth.

At that very moment the Head of the Department for the People's Health and Wealth was smashing a cigarette butt with his foot. The atmosphere in the bus was like a thin wire the second before it snaps.

The Head of the Department for People's Health and Wealth became aware that everybody was staring at him. He looked around, feeling like a trapped rabbit, and knew that he must do something immediately. He bent down to collect the smashed butt with his fingers.

The commuters at this moment heard the authoritative voice of the man in the black suit saying:

- Do not endanger the health further!

The sentence was pronounced in such a way that no one had ever before heard such decisively pronounced words. Everybody was impressed and wished to be his subordinate. Except for the Head of the Department for the People's Health and Wealth. He didn't know what to do.

The President, who saw a chance to show his superiority, shouted to the Head of the Department for the People's Health and Wealth:

- Use a tissue, comrade!

It made the situation for the head of the afore-mentioned department even worse: he didn't have a tissue. Ready to give up, he almost started to smirk. Fortunately, one of his assistants at the last moment handed him a paper tissue.

The bus had already passed the first and the second bus stop without pausing but nobody protested. It was clear that the comrade in the black suit was first to be driven to his destination.

Soon afterwards the bus stopped in front of the building of the People's Assembly of the Republic.

Nevertheless the man in the black suit didn't move from his seat. Led once again by his instinct, the driver looked back and shouted to the messenger standing by the back door:

- Open the door for the comrade! Are you waiting for an official invitation?

The messenger opened the door, stepped out, came to the front door, opened it and made a bow to the comrade in the black suit. Then the comrade in the black suit stood up, looked superciliously over the commuters, paying particular attention to the comrade President, and stepped out.

He didn't move towards the building of the Assembly but waited for the bus to continue. He could see how hurriedly the commuters followed the example of comrade President who immediately after the door was closed moved to his place, followed by all the rest, so that the messenger's place became free again.

As the bus moved further on, the commuters could see the man in the black suit still standing and laughing. It was puzzling, but it became clearer when they saw through the back window of the bus that the man in the black suit walked in the opposite direction from the building of the People's Assembly of the Republic.