

RUNNING

PART I

SPRING, SUMMER

Thieving During Communism

I was barely eight when our poor Miss Nancy died back in our village in southeast Bulgaria. One day she was as warm and happy as one of those old Soviet dignitaries sitting at the Red Square parade, batting those big moist eyes and masticating with slow abandon at the hustle bustle around, the next day she lay on one side rigid and quite dead, frozen in her favorite posture of calm. I ran to uncle Boromir and announced to him in a voice full of precocious tremor. “Nancy R. is stiff as wood and she won’t move. Grandma says her sweater’s all knit. Grandpa says, um, she stopped hearing the whistles. What does it all mean?”

Uncle’s eyes dimmed and he stared at something far, far away. “Ah, child Miroslav, they call it what they want to call it, the old ones. But it’s simple, man, real simple. You get what’s coming to you. We all do.”

“Why is it coming to us, Uncle? I don’t understand.”

But Uncle was past listening to me. “Your sister goes and dies on you, kid, and next thing you know, you could be next! Your own number’s up and the worst of it is. It’s always been up, you just never realized it. And here is the thing, the thing this whole thing is about.”

Uncle’s lips almost touched my ears. “Comeuppance, child. Remember the word. It’s what we all get paid in, the common wages for us. Comeuppance, son, and we all get it, one way or another.”

I remembered the word. Comeuppance. Now I had three weird metaphors for the thing that befell our cow. A finished sweater. Some kind of whistles and this getting what’s coming thing. That much I got but what really was behind these three ideas I couldn’t even grasp at. I

was only eight, remember. And it's not just love you can't hurry. It's death, too, at least the true understanding of it.

Now Miss Nancy, last name Reagan, wasn't Uncle's sister and everybody knew that. Rather, she was our oldest cow which was probably why she died. While living, she was a creature of inordinate calm, a record milk-maker, but a cow nonetheless. She had been with us a long, long while, ever since she was this itty-bitty calf, but even in those early days Uncle thought Miss Nancy was the prettiest thing ever, her eyes so big and moist. Uncle took to spending much time with her, taking her out to pasture, grooming her and the like. He swore she spoke to him and even cared about him like no one else could. Not Grandpa and Grandma, nor Uncle's own wife later, and sure as hell not his brother and my dad, Ivan. "Nothing to it," Uncle would say coming out of the pen, "Miss Reagan just loves me like a sister." And to him she was a sister, Linnaeus' taxonomy be damned!

I never quite forgot the day Miss Reagan got her comeuppance. And tonight, who knows, maybe my own comeuppance cometh. My own true understanding cometh. Everybody gets caught sooner or later, right. We get caught tonight, I guarantee you it won't be pretty. We get caught tonight, they will parade us round the school yard early tomorrow in cuffs or chains. Everybody's parents will be there, pointing their big fat fingers at us. "See that!" they'll be telling their young ones. "That's what happens to anti-socialist criminals!"

Or maybe there is no parade. Maybe they take us to some secret dungeon where they gouge out our eyes and rape us! Why not! If they think we are paid by the Turks to spread fear and destruction, hell, they'll do us like they did Mister Popkiutchukov, the Kiutchuk, as my

friend Bâte¹ called him. They'll send us to some dungeon in the sticks and torture us to death. That'd be high comeuppance, wouldn't it now!

The Kiutchuk, now there is a man with a tale. He was our high school Medieval History teacher. I remember he loved talking about the Turks. I even remember some of the stuff he said about them because it was not the usual drivel you heard from others. During their five hundred year rule of Bulgaria, he'd say, the Turks weren't all that bad like most historians claim. They brought organization and structure to us and left a lot of our traditional institutions intact. They also brought us hygiene at a time when we all thought taking a bath was a health hazard.

That was two years ago, in 1987. A year later, the Kiutchuk was gone without a trace. "DISCHARGED FOR UNPATRIOTIC BEHAVIOR" read the note outside the Administrative Room. Right! Discharged, my outsize nose! A friend whose best friend's girlfriend was, I guess, the second cousin or some such relation to the daughter of someone who was the administrative secretary at the Head Master's office told me the real truth. The Kiutchuk, she said, had been arrested and sent to a secret concentration camp for undesirables near the town of Lovetch up North where he was tortured and raped and was to be disappeared on account of his spreading rotten lies. Yes, that's how you cook the *borsh*t here in our precious Bulgaria, which is also how you cooked it most any place in the Soviet bloc! Buck the line, and swift comeuppance, here you be. Helluva thing!

Bâte, to be sure, had a different version of events. Nonsense, he snorted. The Kiutchuk probably defected to the West and the slimy lizards from the School administration were trying to cover it up. Now, here's one thing you have to know about Bâte. He was the kind of person so

¹ 'Bâte' is actually not a proper name. It's not something you'd see on any Bulgarian's birth certificate. It is a word which means 'older brother'. When put in front of a proper name, it can also mean a sign of respect, like 'elder'. Nobody remembers how Bâte got to be Bâte. He had no younger brother nor was he particularly wise, being all of eighteen. He had a real name but nobody used it. To us, and nearly everybody else around, he was just Bâte.

wrapped up in his way of things, it's downright infectious. Most of the time he'd have no clue what he was talking about but would be so vividly opinionated I just couldn't help believing him. Why that was, I really had no clue.

That's the thing with beliefs. Or memories, for that matter. They come unbidden and as vivid as, and sometimes more vivid than, their cause. And they bring their nasty whiny cousins with them. Ideas, possibilities. They come in flooding skull pores, skin pores, seeping in, rumbling through, like wild water. They get in there, start swirling and circling round and round, jostling and battling one another, until in the end they become one another, they become the same thought, the same question and the same gnawing scraping feeling all over my head, my mind, eyes, ears, my nose, even.

My mother, Maria, the chief psychologist at the 6th Communist Party Nucleus, she put it best. What is it, Mother, I asked once, makes me run wild with thinking like this and then like that and why can't I stop it?

She turned to me, my dear mom, as if she was seeing me for the first time in her life and adjusted her enormous horn-rimmed glasses. "Anxiety, son, is what we call it."

Anxiety! Now there's a word for you. As fine a word as you will ever find, finer than comeuppance even. And so worth a thousand pictures.

I realized I must have closed my eyes at some point and now flung them open. I was on a little knoll ringed by white birches, which made up a grove. The grove itself was fenced by foul production plants, shit-hued giant boxes, skinny chimneys belching sulphur. In the Soviet Bloc, they called them *Kombinats*. The great monosyllabic West called them plants. Comrade Gotse Delchev's Kombinat for Cellulose and Other Refuse, over there. Then there, by the road, the

Kombinat for Rubber and Rubberized Material, which latter part I'd heard included just resin, a decidedly shorter word than "rubberized material" but why question the Party's naming efficiencies. These, and the ten or so other Kombinats, combined to form our mighty, resonating answer to the harsh corroding West, our steely, stalwart, Stalinist and so unquestionably better, gentler, fairer Industrial Zone.

The Zone sat right past the narrow rail for shorthaul cargo on the edges of Sofia. And Sofia, to complete the circle, was the central tumor on the canvass of Bulgaria, its capital in short. Sofia, like the Zone, was nothing but eroded asphalt, concrete, rail, rubber and a dab of grass poking out here and there.

My eyes slid to the ground under my feet. Chunks of charred browned meat strewn about. Brown waxy wrapping paper flapping in the March wind, torn, stripped of carrying purpose. Fire flickering, unlocking odors like boiled lard admixed with the latter elements of Mendeleev. Liquor bottles, vodka, wine, some syrupy liqueur, rolled about like shipmates in a squall.

Well, Hell on earth it might be, this pustule of a place, but at least I wasn't all alone. Two shapes, a pencil and an oblate, stirred not far from me and a groan or two floated up from them.

"Báte?" I turned to the oblate. "Do you think I suffer from anxiety brought on by thinking too much? For I am wracked by memories and thoughts and such, my stomach shrinks and all I see is doom and despair, bad outcomes, the lot."

Báte spat out the grass stem he'd been chewing. He was a short and chubby person with a very large head, beautifully formed fat lips and slow hazy eyes the color of dense brown. His skin was milky white and his cheeks hung down like the cheeks of an old bulldog. In all features he was the spitting image of his overflowing mother, not the skinny swarthy hollow-cheeked father, which led to some sinister suspicions around the neighborhood.

“Anxiety?” Báte said. “How can you have it? None of us, simple workers, is anxious here. None in our sunny country even knows what the word means! Only the reactionary bourgeois intelligentsia suffers from anxiety, my *lokum*.”

I frowned. If anybody looked like Turkish delight, it was you, buddy!

“But, Báte,” I said, “my family on mother’s side is pretty bourgeois. Perhaps I’ve inherited the condition.”

“Inherited bourgeois anxiety? Well, have you their pale skin? Have you their outdated rhetoric?”

I made to answer but my friend raised his hand. Silence!

"Well," he went on, "the answer is no. And no. You may go back to worrying, and that in the soundest Socialist sense. I, on the other hand," Báte grinned and pointed to his milky white neck, “am pallor incarnate!”

I examined my arm. Medium-white, somewhere between tan and beige, I guess. “I can see I have not excessively pale skin. But how do you know that I’m not given to outdated rhetoric? I mean, I talk in strange ways sometimes. I try to think simple and talk like a regular healthy worker, but my mind at times heats up with ideas, possibilities, the snippets of whatever I have read and heard. The net effect is this confused banter, this flowery thing which may qualify as old-style bourgeois diction.”

Báte's eyes became serious. “Don’t get me wrong, you have bourgeois tendencies.” Dramatic silence again. I steeled myself for the conclusion. “But bourgeois you are not. And anxious you are not. You might think what you say is confused banter but it is not. It is directed, purposeful and focused. Believe me, you are going somewhere and you don’t even know it. Get back to your thoughts, ideas and possibilities with a clean patriotic feeling.” Báte patted my

shoulder gently and went back to lying face down on the ground looking for dandelions to chew on.

I exhaled with relief. Báte thought I was not a bourgeois. That had to count for something. The man's my best friend, after all. But wait. A nagging sensation of obviousness filled my head despite the clouds of liquor therein. I looked about. Am I the only one seeing it? My puzzled eye fell back on Báte who saw the query on my brow like a bead of sweat about to roll off.

“Yes, I do look and sound like a hateful *bourzhui*,” he said, “as Lenin called the sons of bitches that opposed the Proletariat. But am I in truth one? I am and I am not, if you want me to. That's the puzzle I leave you with, my dear *Komsomolets*.”

As my thought drifted toward the new food for thought, I heard a loud gurgle, then a burp. Sweet nauseous smell washed up at my nostrils. Báte and his blasted Cuban liqueur!

“Don't be a fucking Pomak, Báte.” That was Krasi, the other figure on the mound. And those were his first words all day long! Ok, his first whole sentence. Which was nothing new as Krasi was real short on words as a principle. If he were a dramaturge, surely he would be our own Pinter.

Said Pinter rose to his feet and examined the sky. Unlike Báte, he looked just like his daddy who spent most of his waking hours sweating under a furnace at THE GLORIOUS COAL KOMBINAT BY THE NAME OF GEORGI DIMITROV, which by some miraculous central-planning coup actually sat not in our Zone but mercifully far to the south of Sofia's southernmost tip. Krasi's legs were just as strong, if slightly more bowed, hair as straight and oily, moustache just as thin and hugging of his cleft upper lip, but that was it for similarity. Inside his head, Krasi dreamt one fiery consuming dream: to be a great hero and a soldier for his beautiful motherland.

His dad dreamt great blonde beer jugs and women and winning gloriously at *bellotte*, the local version of bridge.

I chewed up the last bit of my beef and walked the four or five meters to the small brook which cut the grove in half. It weaved round the birches and the sundry brush frosted with the particulate matter that settled from the air, courtesy of the skinny troika spouts from the Delchev Plant. It dribbled round the lumpy ground trod by proud *lumpen proletariat* who tried to live but mostly died with crimson sudden dreams while their sickled, hammered shapes still shone on the banners, scooping as it did so sick malignant estuaries gushing from the Zone's *Kombinats*.

When I got to the brook I unzipped my pants and started relieving myself into it. What's a Pomak got to do with anything, I thought? Does Krasi even know what they are, the Pomaks? Has he even seen one? I have. I lived with them back when I was little and my grandparents and Uncle were taking care of me in the village. Pomaks are Bulgarians like us but they follow the Islam and live mostly in the southwest of Bulgaria, which is where our village is. Mother, when she deigned to come down from Sofia to visit me, always told me not to play with Pomak kids. Grandfather didn't like them a whole lot, either, even though he saw them constantly since the Pomaks were Grandma's best customers. Neither did Uncle, but we'll talk about that later. All this was in effect much ado about nothing because even if I wanted to, I couldn't really play with the Pomak kids because they were never around. Their parents always made them work or read their Qur'an.

Say, that reminds me! Mother always said Pomaks were criminals who steal stuff and vandalize Socialist property. So maybe I'm a Pomak, too? I don't particularly like stealing and vandalizing, but I do it, nonetheless. In fact, I'm about to do it tonight which would make me a Pomak, right? Not an anxious bourgeois. A Pomak. That's good, I guess, in the sense that it

argues against me being an anxious *burzhui* which is what I was afraid of being to begin with. Now, being Pomak is no picnic, either, and who knows maybe it's better to be a *burzhui* than a Pomak, since nobody I knew seemed to like Pomaks. So where does that leave me?

Maybe I should ask Bâte again? I should say, Bâte, am I a Pomak? 'No,' I imagine him answering me. 'No, my curvy *tikva*,' he would likely say, 'I am the Pomak, not you.' Nonsense, Bâte, I imagine protesting, you're patently not a Pomak. 'True,' he'd allegedly answer, 'but why don't I from now on be all things that you are afraid you might be, ok? That'll save us a lot of time and a lot of stupid questions.'

Ah, Bâte! Puzzle solved. I raise my bottle and drink to you, my dear sacrificial friend. And so I drank to him. And drank again. To me. And drank again, this time to my articulate imagination. And again. The bottle lost a lot of weight in my hand and the world around spun with a pleasant and slightly exhilarating speed. Yep, Bâte, you are right, that's what I am. Bulgarian zucchini. Alcoholic Bulgarian zucchini. But not a filthy criminal Pomak, no way! Nor a pale, corrosive, anxious *burzhui*. That sounds good to me. So good in fact I'll drink to it.

A loud truck rumbled by. The grove was flanked by roads and trucks traversed these roads constantly. Trucks were the lifeline of the Industrial Zone - they brought in stuff, like old paper, raw ore or scrap metal, and ferried back out to the world post-consumer pulp, shiny new metal sheets and various machine parts. Of course, half of what went in bled out into the underground waters and the various passing brooks, including the little brook by our little knoll, and then on into the ground, making the former cancerous poison, the latter barren dirt. What can I say! Efficiency was not at issue when everybody owned everything, or, put differently, nobody owned something. The concept of waste was a bourgeois concern, something the pampered West

could afford to think about, while we, well we mostly gave not a piss about it. Maybe on it, but certainly not about it.