

VESELA LUTSKANOVA



Vesela Lutskanova (Sofia, 21.08.1935). is the author of over 40 books of short stories, novellas, novels. The debut book of the author is the collection of short stories "Life - this endless excitement", published in 1971. In this period, Lyutskanova began writing the novel "Clonings" (1975), which grew into a trilogy: "Clonings are back" (1996) and "The Clonings Are Gone" (2004). The novel "Cloning" is the first science fiction work in Bulgarian literature, in which such type of biotechnological manipulations with the human genome is so consistently deployed and raises many questions

about the boundaries of humanity and science. She actively publishes his science fiction works in the magazines "Krile" and "FEP", in the anthology "Strange Horizons" (2000), etc., as well as articles about Bulgarian science fiction in the magazine "ABV", etc. She is the winner of many literary awards, including 25 first prizes for stories published in the press, as well as the award for a contemporary novel of the publishing house "Hr. G. Danov" for "Storks on the Ice". In 1989, she received the prestigious „Eurocon-89“ European award for overall science fiction work. In 1993, she won the „Graviton“ Award for good imagination. In 2003, she received the American International Award for Prestige and Creativity „Golden Star". Her works have been translated into many languages - English, German, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, French.

In her prose, Lutskanova poses contemporary ethical problems, presents versions of life dramas of people from different social strata. The center of the narrative is usually the moral and psychological prerequisites for the drama of the characters. Spiritual, sensitive, attractive with their specificity, they express Lutskanova's uncompromising optimism, her faith in goodness. They are most often presented in the process of evaluation and rethinking of the life, in a painful search for new ideals after the dramatic loss of the old ones. The science fiction works of Lutskanova also contain the humanistic suggestion of the celebration of the moral principles in people. They often sound rhetorical with their open endings, provoking the reader to their own conclusions and decisions. The author strives to dynamize and generalize life situations and the psychological state of the characters

Sinopsis

LIFE - SHORT AND ABSURD



Her novel "LIFE - SHORT AND ABSURD" is a real family saga, revealing the destinies of three generations over a period of three centuries, passing through three different social systems. The personal drama of the characters is intertwined with the tragical destiny and misfortunes of the Balkans, the First and Second World Wars, inexorably changing the paths of their lives. The Belev`s brothers, heirs of one of the richest families in Bulgaria, become one of the poorest not only because of the times they live in, but also because of the destructive passion of one of them. There is no escape from the trap and their children learn to live in a new way until the 21st century.

Narrated fascinatingly, crossing time and space, with deep psychology, the novel subtly suggests that a person's immortality is in what he leaves behind - children who will carry him on, art who will preserve him, love and dedication to others , human kindness given to people.

Vessela Lutzkanova. LIFE - SHORT AND ABSURD. CIELA Publishing House, Sofia 2009, First edition, 295 p., ISBN 978-954-28-0599-1

Exerpt:

BEGINNING LIKE A FAIRY TALE

Once upon a time ..., this is how all fairy tales begin. So our story. Once upon a time, there lived a happy family and their four children - all sons. However, their mother got sick and died, shortly after her and the father. He left his sons a huge fortune and a bequest. They mourned as much as they mourned, and at last, they came to their father's wealth and betrothal. Just as in life, everything begins with birth or death.

So...

After the death of their parents, gone one after the other just in a week, they looked at themselves, all four healthy, young, beautiful, brothers by blood, brothers by love, and vowed never to be separated from each other, to work together, to support themselves, to defend themselves, to continue their father's cause. Their mother was devoted entirely to him and to them, she knew nothing of accounts but knew of love, while their father... ran the grain trade, handled all deals with experience, always won, won to the end, never yielded an ounce to the competition and he went away as a soldier at his post, and they felt bound to continue him.

So they would continue it.

They almost swore allegiance to each other. In memory of both. They sat around the table in their parents' home in front of glasses of red wine, still saddened by their loss, but resolute and silent. Three of them had wives and children waiting for them, the fourth was still a bachelor.

“How long?” – the eldest looked up at him. - "You'll be thirty soon."

“What until?” – the youngest started.

-“It's time for you... to have a home, a wife, and children. Don't you miss them?”

The little one just shrugged vaguely. One of the other two placed a heavy hand on the eldest's shoulder.

“Belo, don't mess with him. Time comes to everyone differently. Now something else is most important. Let's move on. To double, triple; quadruple what our father left us. Let us prove to everyone that the Belevi brothers can and will be worthy sons, merciless competitors who will not retreat an inch from the market, but will expand it. Therefore, we will not share any of the inheritance, if you agree.”

“I was going to suggest the same - finally Bello smiled and looked at all three, they nodded. - That's how we will be the strongest. Only Tinko bothers me. I think he has a secret passion that he doesn't share. It's not the women, it's something else. Let him tell us...”

“I don't have anything to tell you - the smallest one was embarrassed and his whole face turned red. - Whatever it was. I agree with you, we will not divide, we will work like kites. Moreover, we will be united. I promise you...”

Bello held her gaze on him for a long time before continuing:

“I believe you, although... may you resist! Will you resist?”

He just nodded.

“Yes or no? Let’s hear...”

“Yes.”

“And you are sure. In memory of our father... answer!”

“Yes.”

“Swear! In memory of our father.”

The other two shifted uneasily. Their brother was overdoing it. They tried to stop him.

“Belo...”

“It is important for all of us. Let's hear.”

Drops of sweat appeared on Tinko's forehead, they crept down his sides. He wiped them away with his palm that was also wet.

“I swear. In the memory of our father...”, but his voice faltered slightly at the end.

No one noticed except the eldest.

“Are you sure?”

“I swore!”

He put his hand on his heart, and none of them would doubt his love for their father. It was his weakness, the smallest, and he seemed to return it with the same affection. Always next to him, always with him... Until his very death.

"Okay," Bello sighed heavily and finished her glass of wine. – “Looks like it's time to open the cash register. How long has it been? No more tears! And let's see what we have. Are you ready?”

They only nodded, and Tinko anxiously asked:

“And the cipher? Does anyone know the code?”

“Me - replied Bello.” – “I've known it for a long time, but I've never looked into it. Our father entrusted it to me, and it was still good. He knew I would not abuse.”

“He trusted you the most...”

Tinko whispered quietly, but all three heard him.

“Because he is the firstborn...”, said the second brother.

“Not only for that”, added the third.

Bello dialed the code and the cash register door creaked upon opening. Tinko was peering over his shoulder. The other two, who were talking quietly by the window, startled at the little one's exclamation, whirled sharply towards them, and approached, gazing into the gaping womb-like inside.

“What's wrong?” asked Drago, second in line.

The cash register consisted of two partitions, on the upper where the folders were arranged, above them was an envelope, and on the lower one there was a rather large case.

“Let's open the case first, suggested Tinko.

“No, the letter” Belo said firmly.

“I suggest”, said Drago, “first the disiers, and last the letter, which probably contains our father's will, but before that we will know what we have so resectedly what we can do with it.”

The third brother backed him up, so Tinko and Bello just shrugged in resignation.

They opened the files to find the deeds to the lands they owned and swallowed sheepishly, then... the names and addresses of the merchants their father had done business with, local and foreign, they were even more embarrassed, but their real astonishment came when they picked up the case lid. The gold blinded them. In bars and napoleons. Banknotes in wads, tightened in rubber bands, were placed on the side.

“I didn't think we were so rich!” Tinko's voice rose in falsetto.

“I didn't think so either,” Drago snorted.

“They lived so modestly. They did not allow themselves any extravagances, any luxury!” smiled Stoyan, the third one.

“Are they an example of how we should live too? From here on...”, somehow thoughtful and sad states Bello.”But let's read the letter as well.”

He held it in his hands for a long time before reading in an excited voice, “To my sons.” He looked up at his brothers, there were tears in his eyes and his fingers were beginning to tremble. He tore to open the envelope with difficulty and swallowed several times. His voice, muffled by pain, sobbed.

“When you read this letter, I will be gone. “

Belo stopped, swallowed painfully, wiped her watery eyes with her palm and gathered courage to continue:

“But you will take my place with dignity. I believe in all four of you. I trained all four of you equally well and you were equally good. If you separate, you will become each other's competitors and that will destroy you before others destroy you. Stay together, don't tear the land apart and don't divide the money I leave you. With them, you can buy more land and achieve more than I have achieved on my own. Fill our house with life again. Let Tinko bring a bride into it and fill it with children, build a mill in the huge yard next to the barns, so that it too will be filled with millers and laughter, plant the land with wheat and oats so that there will be bread for the people and animals and buy more land. It feeds, not the gold. Help those who do not have. Do not forget two things, if you are together, no one can fight you. Moreover, a business that makes only money and nothing but money is not a good business.”

Belo swallowed before continuing with a sigh: “I believe in you, my sons. You are my greatest asset. Money is earned and lost. Support yourself and believe in yourself as I believe in you. I will not abandon you; even from the other world, I will help you. Well, I never told you that I love you, I love you and it hurts to leave you. Your father.”

Bello's arms sagged at his side, the blade trembling uncontrollably in one, the other clenched into a fist. All four were silent, their heads bowed to the floor to

hide their male weakness or out of respect for the dead they were to carry on. In silence they returned to the table, filled their glasses again, and again poured out, and drank again, biting cigarettes and filling the air of the room with a pungent, acrid smoke that filled their eyes with tears.

TEO BUKOWSKI



Anastas Ivanov, known by his pseudonym Teo Bukowsky, is a Bulgarian writer. He was born in 1973 in Shumen. He graduated from the Medical Academy, after which he worked as a doctor. He started writing fairy tales and poems in his teens. In 2014, his books "Murder 4D" and "4:50 - The Nightmare Hour" from the author's series "Dimensions of Fear" were released. Theo Bukowski worked on one of the novels for more than 20 years. His stories have been published in various collections such as "Childhood", "451 degrees of Bradbury", "On the wings of the raven". Participates in the *Tales of Once*

Upon a Time fiction club and the *Salamander* crime writers club. At the end of 2016, the collection of short stories by Theo Bukowski "And they crawl at night" was published. The premiere of the book took place on February 9, 2017. In 2018, he participated with his story "15 minutes" in the collection "Beyond the covers. Year One". Teo Bukowski is a founder of the rubric "Dimension X" for literature in the newspaper "Bulgaria today" (2019-20); since 2015 is a member of the union of Bulgarian writers, last year (2021) became a member of the Management Board for the union of Bulgarian writers. T. Bukowski is also a member of the leadership of the union on Physician-Writers "Dimitar Dimov", member of management at the club for crime writers "Salamander"; in 2019 is a first chairperson of the association for young Bulgarian writers. He is author of the novels as: "Murders 4D" (2014); "4:50 Hour of nightmares" (2014); "...And they crawl out at night" (2016); "9.8 on the pain scale" (2017) co-written with Desislava Sheitanova; "...And they fly at night" (2021).

4:50 - THE NIGHTMARE HOUR

Teo Bukowski, 4:50 - THE NIGHTMARE HOUR, Vessela Lutzkanova Publishing House, Sofia, 2014 First edition, 216 p. ISBN 9789543111343.

Synopsis:

4:50 - THE NIGHTMARE HOUR



Lora is a famous psychotherapist, a specialist in curing phobias and depressive-anxiety disorders. She often resorts to hypnosis in her therapies; her aim – to confront the patients with their biggest nightmares in order to achieve their catharsis. And when in a sunny spring week, a part of the nightmares begins to come true and her patients to die under mysterious circumstances, the psychotherapist’s reputation is staked. Lora still does not want to believe that there is a pattern to each death and that everything is aimed to her. However an experience in the mountains, an encounter with the killer face-to-face convinces her that the occasions have been out of control. Terrifying dreams, anonymous threats, and a

ghostly shadow coming out of an asleep lake – the whole point for solving the mystery is somewhere there. Is Tea – Lora’s daughter who committed a suicide five years ago – able to help her mother? In addition, how the serial killer Daniel Saroyan can influence what happens though having been placed in the psychiatry? One colorful police inspector takes over the case. Moreover, it is not only for him...

With this novel, the author breaks the stereotype of the detective genre the killer to be announced in the last chapter. Here, he offers an alternative to his readers by telling them his name still in the middle of the story. After all, the killer stays unnoticed until the end.

Excerpt:

Daniel

At half past three a.m. I got a call from the Forensic Psychiatry. One of their patients had tried to commit a suicide. He had tied two needles in a cross, kneaded them into the bread and swallowed them. It was his luck that his cellmate had divulged him on time; otherwise even the surgeons would hardly manage to save him. Nobody knows how they were cursing him while trying to take out the blades without perforating his esophagus. Well, they saved his live

and even ensured him with a three-week accommodation in the surgery. Then, they sent him back to the psychiatry to wait for the procedure of his lawsuit.

A few days ago, that, the same one, wanted to get in touch with me. He had read some article where I had raised the question about the cognitive dissonance in some criminals' minds. He claimed he was able to help me a lot with my works. Of course, nobody paid serious attention to him at the beginning but when they found a wire that was eighty centimeters long carefully put under his sheets, the colleagues decided to look for me. So, they found one more reason to remember our perfect professional relationship dating ten years before. I promised them not to postpone the visit and I was about to visit them the first day with less work to do. Moreover, I had no any previous idea about that man. His name was Daniel what meant God Is My Judge.

The state psychiatry clinic was situated in a beautiful park where a lively streamlet ran through. It was high-water at that season of the year. The building was old, with a fall-off plaster here and there, with bars on the windows and decayed gutters on the roof. The contrast with the fashionable neurological clinic neighboring it was really horrific. The psychopaths were such a category of people who the society was able to terrorize, to display a verbal sense of charity but when it came to money for curing the wishes ended up with a vague shrugging off.

Daniel was waiting for me. Though not showing interest to me at my arrival, his gestures betrayed a skillfully hidden excitement. He was short of stature and even the narrow little room that had been placed at our disposal for the meeting could not change my subjective idea about his height. His greyish hair was carefully parted and his eyes stayed sightless behind the dioptric glasses.

He neither greeted me nor even turned his head when I sat on the chair by him. He had been concentrated over the left edge of the book in his hands. He was not reading – just gazing at the free of ink white area.

“Daniel, am I bothering you?”

“No, nobody can bother me here. Maybe there's just one tedious thing – the missing time.”

“What are you reading?”

“I'm studying the paper.”

“That's interesting!”

“Yes, it is.”

The awaited silence fell on. He was breathing surface as if he was afraid not to scare me and make me leave the room. I felt he was studying me without any words and direct sights. I was not in a hurry with the questions, I did not urge

him to speak. Sometimes, two people need some time to adjust their thoughts unidimensional.

“So you are the one...”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“The psychiatrist with the naive article.”

“Probably, I myself am such, the article is not guilty for my character.”

“How many criminals had you known before you wrote it?”

“Many – I used to work in this building while I was writing it.”

“And for how many of them did you write it?”

“For none. Neither of them did deserve to be perpetuated in a book. They were simple people with the usual motives, without any imagination.”

“And you were looking for something more, right?”

“I’m not sure it was more but yes, I’m interested in the more different motives for the crimes.”

“Is that why you came?” – Daniel left the book and looked at me with his grey eyes of a hermit.

“We had to meet. You had tried to commit a suicide.”

“It was not an attempt for a suicide. If I had wanted to die, I would have mastered my death perfectly. I made an attempt to provoke agony.”

“A masochistic experiment” - I was still able to resist his eyes though my eyelids started stinging.

“I trained my pain receptors. Because I knew what would wait for me.”

“How can I help you?”

“You can’t, I just wanted to see you. It’s clear to me that you had studied all of my story. That’s why you came – to see a serial killer.”

“Are you such?”

“Not fully, I just write weird letters and send them to those ones who deserve to get them. Don’t you agree that everyone has the right to experiment. After all, the other people has to possess a minimal potential for development. Otherwise, all the efforts would provoke unneeded fatigue.”

“Are there many letters?”

“I don’t count them but I keep composing them. You yourself came when you read the letter...”

“Whom do you send them to from here?”

He narrowed his eyes and lifted his open palm in front of my face. Then he stood up and went to the window. He opened it and squeezed it through the bar. I saw him slightly moving his fingers. In a while, a grey pigeon with a white crest came flying and started cooing throaty.

“The birds love me unlike people. You are just afraid of the talented ones.”

“Is a special talent required to kill somebody?”

His face stretched and his eyes became leaden. He took his hand back and closed the window sharply.

“I hoped to be useful to you.”

“What with, Daniel?”

“You know what. Obviously, I made a mistake. Let’s separate as strangers who neither a word about their secrets and dreams did they share.”

Ramela

“Lora, I worry about your mother.”

Lena always called early in the morning. She had the unique talent to overpass her embarrassments to the other people.

“My mother is okay. You heard from her yesterday, didn’t you?”

“Oh, it was such a short conversation and the connection was bad – I understood nothing of what she told me. Then I had been trying to call her all day long but she didn’t answer to me.”

“He went to the Female Market and wandered around the downtown.”

“How I wished I had heard from her again.”

“OK, I’m calling her right now.”

I left the receiver and went upstairs. I was stepping silently as I was barefoot and my steps stayed inaudible even to myself. I approached the bedroom, placed my finger on the cold lock and froze. Not a single noise could I hear. A cozy Sunday silence of a spring morning. I stayed there for a second and went back. My moving was more silent than a ground-sea-swell.

“Lena, my mother is still sleeping. I did not want to wake her up. You’ll hear from her later.”

The human desire to look for our painful memories is weird. Presumably, it is connected with the bitter sentimentality deep-seated into our genes or it is because of the acquire sense of self-flagellation. I did not want to let any of my close people to go back where the memories are deteriorated into nightmares. At least not on that sunny day!

We have a meeting arranged with Ramela at the downer station of the chair lift. Both of us are carrying enormous backpacks but we are incredibly inspired by the forest came into leaf as well as by the many-voiced yell of all the birdy host that had felt the sunny caress. We are about to make a day’s march. Our stipulation is to go back with the gondola lift by way of relief.

I avoid keeping personal contacts with my patients. In general, the reference points in the situation game called psychiatric treatment has started fading away. I made an exception with Ramela falling into unnecessary emotion and probably I was wrong.

“Lora, you’re very happy this morning!”

“Well, I’m always such but you rarely notice it.”

We place the backpacks in front of us and jump on the seats. The chair lift floats straight ahead and I lose my balance for a while. It is good we have been locked with the protective bar.

“Lora, I have sandwiches with yellow cheese, bacon and sour cherry jam with me. As well as a few pieces of cake.”

“You mean that one, fancy cake, right?”

“Lora!” – Ramela knits her forehead and blinks. – “It was just a little experiment.”

Chill creeps over my bare ankles. Maybe I had to put my military boots from the metal period on. Never mind, I am rattling my teeth for ten minutes till the rope gets us up in the sun.

“Lora, I warn you – I have prepared slickers for both of us at any case. They’re a bit weird – black ones, with Dracula’s eyes.”

“Oh, yeah, to scare the forest witches. A true horror in daylight.”

We get off at the intermediate station and start for on a sandy path to the right. A few peeling signs warn us for avalanche dangers. But not in May. The route is almost perfect not counting our muddy boots.

“Lora, what do you think – who’s the next one?”

“The next one what?”

“The next killer’s victim. You or me... Or...”

“Ramela, stop it with those nonsenses!”

“No, no, you tell me. It will be interesting to know your opinion. You’re a person who clues complicated psychological puzzles every day, aren’t you?”

She blackmails me to speak nonsenses. She wants me to legitimize some impudent buzzes and to seal them with a science terminology. I have to be careful – because of Ramela’s age, because of her impulsiveness of perceptions and having in mind everything that has happened to her during the last year.

“See, Lora, sometimes it seems to me that I know more than I have deserved to know.”

“I trust you. What do you want to hear from me? That there’s a scary psychopath who’s constantly on our asses. Why shan’t we imagine for a while that he has just given up. He used to have a need of an emotion, had achieved it and everything was over. And he had departed away from this place.”

“You want to convince me that we’re in the clear.”

“Oh, yes, that’s a reasonable idea.”

“But it is not true, Lora. You have a good intuition and you can feel it that the mere chances are over.”

“The mere chances is a definition that is hard to be formed.”

“Oh, no! Here, for example, I understood about the real reason of Heidi’s death by chance. So what? Well, my life started changing. I had been feeling guilty that the child stopped breathing because of my carelessness. Because I had left her alone for a few minutes and she vomited but I was not there for her. Now I

know that even I had been in the room, the things would have happened in the same way. It wasn't my fault. The house is guilty..."

We cross the river. The water usually hides between the stones in summer and one can easily pass from one shore to the other one but then, if we do not want to freeze, we have to use the wooden bridge. Ramela jumps first and starts walking bravely balancing with her arms spread.

"Lora, be careful! It's quite slippery!"

I step carefully, holding on the carved handrail and made two steps. The rapids bellow roars menacingly throwing splashes on my feet. The timbers, covered in brown moss and foliage from the previous year, are cracking creepily.

"Come on, Lora, just a bit more!" – Ramela's cry deafens the river's roaring for a while.

I step more bravely. After all, when I have reached the middle of the bridge, it is the wisest choice to reach the other shore as soon as possible. Suddenly a hoarse scream splits the silence of the rocks above our heads. I do not look back. I only get myself together and jump ahead. I pull myself together lying on the grass and seeing Ramela's eyes shining above me in horror.

"What happened?" – I say as if to myself.

She points the bridge. There is a piece of rock on it. A part of the timbers hang broken above the river.

"Take it easy, Rami, I'm alive! That was a coincidence. Probably the rains have thorn the rock."

Our conversation rolls around the coincidences and the easily identifiable patterns, contingency and the inevitable. After all, each of us decides that she has convinced the other one of her arguments and we start talking about non-relevant topics.

At about noon we have climbed up the plateau. A gorgeous view! And air that makes you feel like immortal one.

The wind starts blowing our hairs. We tuck into our hoods and keep going on the path along the peaty meadows without saying a word. Drifts of hard snow shine at some places but fresh grass is greenish aside them. Some spring anemones make up blue piles. Gazing at them, I feel how my leg gets into the marshy soil. My toes are wet.

"Ramela, let's look for a shelter and sit some. I'm a bit hungry."

I see that she raises her hand in agreement and starts going down the north slope. Soon we find the path to the Hunting Shelter and sit by the leaside of a rock. Here, the sun licks our faces and the grass beneath us is warm and soft.

"Lora, why am I always followed by that damn misfortune? I was deeply in love, gave a birth to the most gorgeous child in this world and then the child died and I had only the insanity left of my love. Finally I didn't even manage to commit a suicide as it should be done."

"It's not as bad as it seems."

“Now, when I thought I was falling in love again, that piece of shit decided to make “three-way-in” and fell apart into the nothingness.”

“Forget about him! You had never been in love with him.”

She looks at me reprovably.

“What happened to your husband, Lora? Is he alive?”

“To me, he isn’t. Give me a cigarette!”

“You want us to smock? You promised you wouldn’t...”

“Are you about to lecture me?”

I lie on my back and start chasing the clouds in the sky. From time to time, I approach the aroma cigarette to my lips and then I slowly breath out the air of dreaming. Ramela hums silently some children’s song of which I can hear only the character’s name – Tom-Tit-Tot. I feel like getting sleepy. I close my eyes. I can hear her murmuring something but I do not pay attention to her and he keeps singing. Probably she used to be a wonderful mother. She makes you jump on some puffy cloud leading you to the endless sky of dreams with this tender timbre. A heady travelling which you wish it would never end.

The mobile startles me suddenly. It vibrates energetically under my head. I jump and grab it. Konstantin. He cannot get used to the condition of being healthy. Probably I will have to keep the illusion of illness some time more. At least, I manage to calm him down with the promise to see him very soon, of course.

Ramela is missing. For sure, she has disappeared while I was travelling with the clouds. I see her backpack thrown in my feet. I stand up.

“Rami! Ramela!” – how strong my voice seems to be from this high place.

However, I do not get an answer. I sit by the backpacks and start with the dessert. When I am hungry, I like it to start with the sweets.

I glimpse her black lush curls in a while. She jumps out of the trees and laughs as if nothing has happened. She has some flowers in her hands. No, they are not flowers but small mushrooms with white stalks and tender greyish caps.

“Do you want to poison me?”

“No, I don’t, Lora. These are magical mushrooms. They make life seem happier.”

“Mine is happy enough without tasting red amanitas. Where have you been? I am worried about you.”

Ramela makes a face at me.

3 p.m. The sun still travels high above the horizon but we have to hurry if we do not want to get down walking.

The girl grabs the backpack and goes ahead. She starts whistling but the song is not the same one about the character with the weird name. Going down, we enter a beech forest. Here, I feel the coming evening, the beams hardly break through the leaves and the creepy chill crawls between the tree trunks. We speed up somehow naturally. Ramela stops her music performances but starts whooping at me quite often.

“Come on, Lora, there’re just a few steps left!”

I do my best though my leg muscles start cramping. I have not been walking so much for a long time.

We reach the lift before they close it. We even have fifteen minutes of margin for a last sip of tea. And...

“Rami, gave me one more cigarette!”

She takes two cigarettes out of her pocket and lights them. We take a sip of the tea and do not talk. The fatigue is enough and we do not search for needless words.

“Lora, cancel my morning appointment on Monday.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t need therapy sessions anymore. I’m already fine, I’m cured.”

“I don’t think that...”

She interrupts me with a smile.

“It was a joke. The real reason is that I’m going to the police station. I mentioned it yesterday, didn’t I?”

“I thought you had given up.”

She just shakes her hand. I take my mobile out and text Konstantin. The morning hour on Monday is booked for him.

We buy tickets in a few minutes and get on the gondola lift. Our ankles are swollen. We float right among the clouds.

The fatigue has sat on my hips. Its weight prevents me even from moving my eyelids. I lean on my elbow and look at the tops of the trees.

“Lora, can we fall down from such a high place?”

“No, it’s out of the rules?”

Are there exceptional, out of the rules events? Or impossible situations? I had ever said – forbidden emotions. Was it allowable to make even an attempt to forbid them?

Empty gondolas pass. The day is just over.

The doors of the gondola open up at the middle station and some fresh air bursts from outside. The view becomes more clear. Ramela moves opposite me.

“Lora, I’m sitting by you. I’m fed up traveling back to you.”

I make room for her and feel her warm skin by my right shoulder. We keep travelling silently. Just the even clatter and the slight shivering of the gondola keeps us awake.

“Lora, look – children!”

Four or five gondolas are full of students with their backpacks – a tourist group. The adults are in the last gondola. Where have they started for at that time?

“Probably they’re about to sleep in tents” – Ramela sums up. – “We used to make bivouacs when we were children.”

We gaze at the greenery beneath us. A fresh spring tale! Entire meadows yellowish with blooming buttercups. The grass looks like sprayed with lime

with spread nests of white daisies downer. A black dog runs on the path. What a wonderful sensation it is to be a bird!

We pass a few gondolas more. All of them but one are empty. A man and a woman sit opposite each other. The man gesticulates nervously. His companion has leaned on the window, pulling her hat down without reacting. Obviously, that makes him even more nervous because he jumps and leans over her. He raises his hand above her head. Oh, gosh, he is about to hit her. They are so close to us but the gondola's window is matte and I cannot see the woman's expression. At that time something glints in the man's hand. A blade... a knife! Then it disappears somewhere around the woman's head. I manage to blink. Terrifying! Cardinal splashes spray over the edge windows. At that time the two gondolas flatten. The man sees us. He stays in order to hide the woman with his body. He raises his hand to greet us and puts his palm on the window. That gives me the creeps. His fingers are tinged with blood.

My muscles start to get numb. I am not able even to turn my head to follow the gondola creeping up. I cannot keep the noise out of my ears, the noise that follows my own heart and it is getting louder and louder till it melts with Ramela's screams. She shivers, yells and stamps with her feet hysterically what makes the gondola vibrate.

"Lora... Lora, he killed her! He killed her, didn't you see it?!"

I cannot calm her down, I have no powers even to embrace her. I cannot realize what in fact I saw. Was it possible that it did not happen but was only the result of our fantasies?

The rest of our going down was a lost while that has passed without ensuring me it really existed. I hardly hold Ramela not to get off while the gondola is still moving. It is good that the doors are automatic.

At the moment when she sees them open she jumps and rushes at the first met person. She screams like an insane woman.

"Stop them! There's a murder. He slaughtered his wife."

To be honest, if I were not a psychiatrist, I would scream similar nonsenses. The man in service of the gondola lift looks at her tepidly and decides not to react at the first moment. However, the girl stays in front of his face and splashes his face with saliva. He steps back and looks at me with his eyes full of hope. I go closer to my friend and enfold her shoulders.

"Ramela, let me explain. Sir, it seemed to us we saw a man who stabbed a knife into a woman's body."

The man starts reacting slowly. Firstly, he raises his elbows, then he takes breath and almost utters:

"Where, ladies, in the mountains?"

"No, in one of the gondolas."

"No kidding?" – his pupils narrow slowly.

However, Ramela does not give him more time for a reaction. She grabs his shirt collar and starts pulling him.

“Call the police! Stop the lift! Otherwise, he will escape. And there are some children with tents. We must catch him still in the air, at the scene.”

The man obviously understands that he will not get rid of us so easily because he raises his arms and starts lispng.

“Take it easy, there’s no place for him to hide. Now, I’m giving a call to my colleagues. Just wait for a while.”

He drags himself to the cabin with the telephone and starts dialing the number. He takes an anxious look at us at each pushing of a button. Finally, somebody answers to him. He makes a short conversation which cannot be heard by us because of the moving gondolas. A man stands before us in a while and reports: “My colleagues said none but a group of students with three teachers didn’t get off.”

“What idiots!” - Ramela screams and makes a decisive step towards him. – “He had escaped. Call the police! We missed him.”

Suddenly a coughing fit chocks her and she throws her backpack on the ground trying to take a breath. The man uses that sacral moment to move aside and looks at me graciously uttering the biggest offences I have ever had lately.

“Lady, you’re older and that’s why I’m asking you. Did you drink much?”

I am about to slap his face. However, I do not do it because of my age that he obviously guessed and because of the zero concentration of alcohol in my blood. I only shake my head in disappointment and pull Ramela out.

Of course, she has already taken out her mobile and calls the emergency.

Konstantin

He had been waiting for me motionlessly hidden behind the corner and distractively moving up and down the stairs between the floors. No, in fact, he would have drawn the guard’s attention in this way. Probably he had hidden himself in the narrow niche between the elevator, the sanitary facility and my office. He had noticed my getting off from his cover, followed me closely behind my back and when I was about to open the door...

“Finally, Lora. We have been waiting for this meeting for such a long time!” My hand was on the lock. His fingers had grabbed my wrist. I tried to turn around but he had pushed me so strongly that I could not move.

“Our meeting doesn’t need a visual contact.”

I hardly took a breath, my tongue had stuck to my palate. Then I took all the power in this world and whispered.

“You’re afraid of meeting my eyes? But nevertheless, you are in the video-cameras archive.”

“No, Lora, I’m not. There are only you and me here. I’m different out of this corridor.”

He breathed out in my ear. It was a nice warm tickle on my wet skin. I felt his mint breath and the silent slurping of a chewing gum.

“Lora, why do you mock at the time? It could be too late tomorrow.”

“Late for what?” – I uttered the words so hard as if the voice was not mine.

“Late for our common plans. How many times do I have to appeal to you to give up your naive dreams?”

He did not squeeze my hand very strongly but rather was caressing me with his fingers. However, I was feeling very weak to press the lock and enter the office. Probably then that nightmare would disappear.

“Everybody walks on their own paths...”

“Our paths, Lora, met at a crossroad. How many times are you supposed to meet the death in order to realize that our future is common...”

A familiar noise came from the elevator and announced its arrival at the floor in a while. Then I heard the doors slightly open.

“We do not separate, Lora!” - the man left my wrist and stepped away but I was sure my past had come back.

“Lora, why are you staying in the corridor? Did anything happen?”

“No, Konstantin, I was just waiting for you” - now the voice was mine.

NIKOLAY PETKOV



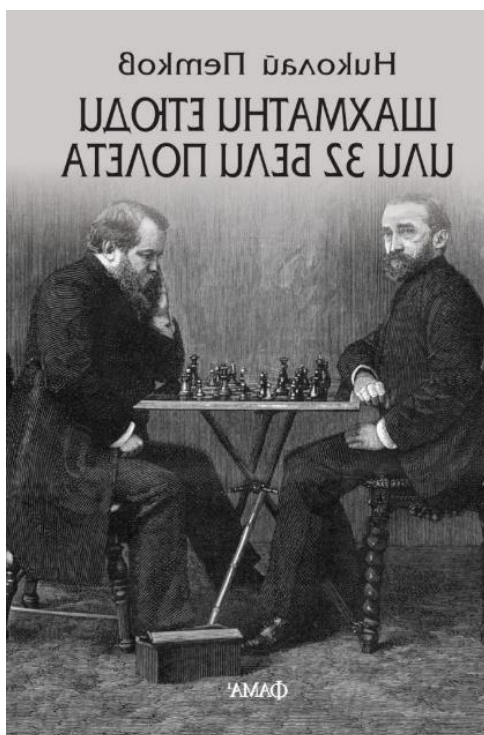
Nikolay Petkov was born on 15.07.1971 in Veliko Tarnovo. In 1989 he graduated from St. St. Cyril and Methodius Humanitarian High School, and in 1995 - from Veliko Tarnovo University "St. St. Cyril and Methodius", majoring in Bulgarian philology. During his studies, he participated in the editing and publishing of the student Almanacs

"Autodafe" and "Pir", and immediately after graduation published an independent book "A New Universal History of Dishonesty" (VTU publishing house, 1997). His second book is "Hymns and Monodies" (published by "Faber", 2005). In 2011, he defended a dissertation on "The Image of the Road in the Renaissance Narrative". Since then, the last 10 years, are the main part of his fiction works: the story "The Stadium of the Old Lady" (published by "Siela" 2012), the novels "Cyril and Hypatia" (published by "East-West", 2013), "Borges and others - there" (ed. "East-West", 2015) and "Here, with Gogol" (ed. "East-West", 2019), "When I was Hemingway" (ed. "Fama" 2022). The last book is the collection of short stories "Chess Etudes or 32 White Fields". It was released in May 2019 by "Fama" publishing house. N. Petkov have participated in media projects ("The Manuscript" on Bulgarian National Television, 2015), hosted an author's show on "Shumen" TV ("Eternal Calendar", 2016) and a column on BNT ("Tales of Faith" (from 2009 to now).

CHESS ETUDES OR 32 WHITE FIELDS

CHESS ETUDES OR 32 WHITE FIELDS. "Fama" publishing house, Sofia, 2021, 196 p., ISBN: 9786192180577

Sinopsis:



"Chess Etudes or 32 White Squares" is a collection of short stories that can figuratively be called *Chess Garden* or *Chess Gulestan*. Paying homage to the Persian origins of the game, the author composes a series of parables through which the history of chess unfolds from mythical times to the present day. Starting with the first great (but also little-known) masters - Maasnavi, As-Suli, Ben-Ezra, Abelard... the stories lead us from fabulous legends of real geniuses to personalities who managed to change history through chess. Timur (or Tamerlan), Boris Godunov, Rui Lopez..., turning the skill of managing small wooden figures into the skill of managing many peoples, are important characters in the narrative of Nikolay Petkov. Through their

images, the chess narrative, following the course of Time, leads us to the characters who created the art of modern chess. El Greco, Philidor, Al. Petrov, Labourdone, Staunton, Andersen, Zuckertort and... of course Paul Morphy - the man who drew a watershed between the mythical reality of chess and the modern standard.

With the death of Morphy, in the eighties of the 19th century, the current history of the game begins. Although meticulously documented, it is also an allegory and it is also a parable. Of war and peace, of love and hate. This kind of allegory is unfolded through seventeen stories about world champions. From the first - Wilhelm Steinitz to the last - Magnus Carlsen. In each of them, a chess genius meets some other genius. Being not historical but artistic facts, the meetings Steinitz-Turgenev, Lasker-Bulgakov, Capablanca-Hemingway, Alekhine-Borges (as well as the earlier ones: Rui Lopez-Cervantes, El-Greco-Descartes, Philidor-Handel, Alexander Petrov-Pushkin) ... create a number of mystifications by means of which not only the past but also the future of chess can be guessed. That is why - at the end of the book - an Iranian child appears. It grows in the town of Babol, province of Mazenderen; his name is Ali Reza and of course (one day), he will become the new world champion.

But from where and how it is understood, it will become clear to whom the book is carefully read.

Excerpt

Babol (Mazenderan Province, Iran) 2009

The boy's grandfather - the old Alireza Firuja is firmly convinced that since the word "chess" is Persian, it is already time for Iran to have its world champion; what's more: this champion must not only be his own grandson, but also the youngest champion in history. That is why he invited Ruslan Ponomarev. True, not yet twenty-six years old, the kid is almost a pensioner, but so what? Not long ago, none other than him improved the absolute record! "Yes, everything is forgotten," thought Alireza, but when Ivanchuk was defeated in 2002, it turned out that Garry Kasparov was four years ahead of him. That's right - the old Persian stroked his beard - in 1972 Fischer was 29 years old, before him Tal - 24, then... clearly what happened; but from today the era of Alireza ben Firuja will begin. That is why I will provide my grandson with the best teacher. "Was I wrong not to offer Anand the Indian? And maybe I should have chosen the Bulgarian Topalov? Or Kramnik?", the old man hesitated for a moment. Then he lit his hookah and start laughing:

"Only fools and wise men hesitate, my boy. If the cat starts to hesitate when to jump, it will starve to death. We trusted our instinct and chose Ponomariov. So much!!"

He wanted to continue his thought and explain to his grandson that he had not acted so impulsively; that still a high school student, to take away Garry Kasparov's crown is a miracle! But more importantly, the young grandmaster grew up in Donbas - neither a Ukrainian with Ukrainians, nor a Russian with Russians; that at the age of three he experienced the end of the world - the explosion in Chernobyl, and a little later, before he even started school, he lost his homeland. The Soviet Union collapsed and the boy from the village of Gorlovka settled in Kramatorsk. Another question is how to live in a city where tanks run more regularly than street buses; and what kind of city is the one whose name (quite logically) sounds like: «crematorium». However, at the age of 13, Ponomarev has an ELO 2550, and at the age of 14, he is the junior world champion...

And because Babol, the hometown of Alireza, is like Kramatorsk - neither with the Kurds - a Kurd, nor with the Persians - a Persian, nor with the Arabs - an Arab, apparently his grandson will never understand in which language he should speak and in which one he should remain silent - Pahlavi, Farsi, Pashto... Therefore - like little Ruslan - he too will have to learn the language of the Shah; not just to know it, he will have to sing to it; to be the chess Ferdowsi. But the most important thing is that the new "Chess-name" brings joy, because the amazing thing about Ponomarev (or maybe that's why they didn't choose

him) was his smile. The boy always shone. Although he experienced the end of the world every day, Ruslan radiated the meaning of the game: that calm joy, because of which the jinn envied the human race and invented sin... Moreover, his name - Ruslan... wasn't it Rustam; the same Rustam from Furdowski's book. He came into the world with the help of the magical Simurgh bird to give birth to his son Suhrab - the hero of heroes - the Ukrainian seemed to be thought of as a teacher of little Alireza Firuja since time immemorial.

“When you grow up, you will understand something that your father still cannot”, the Persian smiled mysteriously.

“What, grandpa”, the little boy had started to get bored from the long wait at the airport?

“Ruslan never studied to be a teacher, but he will be better than the best. Why? Guess it?!”

Then without waiting for an answer, he stroked his beard and continued:

“The Bulgarian, three years before he won a world title, taught Ponomarev how to be a champion. In caring for someone else, turn your back on yourself. Few - one of them is the one whose name we bear with you - the eighth Imam Ali Raza - are capable of this. He once stood behind Harun al-Rashid and made him the greatest caliph of all time. Harder and greater than that - there is none!

Therefore, the largest mosque - the one in Mashhad, will bear his name until the end of the world. Of course, comparing the eighth imam with a Bulgarian is like comparing a falcon with a camel. It is another matter that if you take the road through the desert, it is wiser to go with a camel than with a falcon. Not that Topalov is perfect. Do not get me wrong! But the fact is that he achieved the best performance against Ivanchuk, he showed how to become a champion. Nobody remembers today, but Vasily Ivanchuk was a master of a very high class; a mouth-man, as they say... The odds were 9:1 for him. Ponomarev had no chance. And yet he became the youngest champion. After which - like Bobby Fischer - he voluntarily came down from the top ... so that - after many years - he could return again, but this time - leading some small child by the hand ...

The old man believed that chess, like everything we have touched and which we have spent our time on will stand before us on the Day of Judgment. Then we will have to embrace him again, and if our caress does not revive him, all our labor will be condemned.

And since the plane turned out to be late, the grandfather had to be a little more talkative than he wanted. The Persian chess legends were as fascinating as The Thousand and One Nights. Moreover, perhaps "One Thousand and One Nights" was one of the chess legends. How else would his grandfather have known about Sisi ben Dihar the sage. How would he calculate how many squares there could be in a chessboard. The little boy repeated the parable. Then he rubbed her. However, he had a hard time imagining the number two raised to the power of 64. According to his grandfather, if each square were equal to a grain of

wheat, it would make a mountain a hundred times higher than the Himalayas. If the grains were arranged in a path, a person could go to the moon and back on them.

“And all this? Why grandpa?” - The kid was confused.

“To make it clear as day that everything in this world is like a chessboard. Even love! It's supposed to be a black and white square, but if you consider it well - in one love you will count more loves than drops in the Indian Ocean. And maybe - it's Omar's parable - the black and white square is our life, and the small squares inside - the moments in which we haven't lived; although (the thought is also Omar's) it is impossible to know this parable; as it is impossible for chess pieces to know whose hand is moving them on the board... Many, so many were the parables... perhaps more than the squares.

“Only, grandfather, your sage has gone wrong. He calculated the number in two chessboards. If the board is only one, the number will be odd... not that it matters that much, but I was curious how before it was raised to the sixty-fourth power, that unit doubled?”

“I knew you were not stupid”.

The old man was moved and hugged the child.

“Of course I don't know. Only He, Who is One, can answer you. That is why the sage - hiding from you and your question - has proposed that chess be played by four people, on two boards. He called it satranch. Its rules are almost the same. My father (may Allah have mercy on his soul) loved them and played on them... The game is not forgotten! It's still there! But it seems that only the inexperienced Luri, Bactri and Suri ... and the others - there know it.

