

Angel IGOV  
An excerpt from the novel

*The Meek*

In the thick February fog, heavy with the scent of coal, a young man was standing on the bridge by the Yuchbunar baths, tearing pages out of the notebook in his hand and tossing them into the river. When the final page had been carried off by the current, he seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then with sudden determination he tore off the cover as well and tossed it into the dark water, which in places glittered with thin slivers of ice. Without looking down he turned around and quickly set off towards downtown. At that time of the night, there were no other passersby: the streets were snowy and deserted. Here and there, from the yards in the side streets came the listless barking of dogs. The bright breath of the electric street lights on Pirotska was unable to pierce the fog, but hung around the lamp posts like ragged halos. The man's footsteps crunched on the trampled-down snow, which was black from soot and cinders. He didn't meet anyone, and even if he had, his neighbors from Yuchbunar likely would not have recognized him at first.

That was you.

We knew you, Emil Strezov, for months and years we followed your every move; and even though we didn't see you then on that bridge, even in our sleep we knew that you were there. Carried away in their rapid movement, our eyeballs still noticed everything, even behind our closed eyelids: the gray tatters of the fog, the lonely man's footsteps that sprang up in the snow. We saw, we heard. We remembered how you moved to the neighborhood, how you came from that nearby town, so insignificant that its name isn't even worth mentioning, we saw with our own eyes how from a down-and-out high school student you became an underappreciated poet, and then the generous autumn of '44 suddenly thrust into your hands the power to shape human fates. We joked that one day, our children, when they entered that university of yours that you never finished, would come across one of your poems in the thick anthologies, they would read it and say: well, it's not bad. And we would tell them: Emil Strezov, you say? He lived across the street back in the day. If you only knew how I knocked him flat once. And what did he do? The kids would ask. What do you mean, what? He wasn't a hooligan like us. What was he like? He was... He was the little old ladies' darling. He was Uncle Petar's polite tenant, he was always rushing around, with books tucked under his arm until that autumn, with a pistol tucked in his belt later on, but he always found time to say hello and chat a bit about the great events that had taken place and the even greater ones that were to come. But if any of us had passed you on that night, he surely would have noticed that there was something strange in your gait, in your gaze, in the wrinkles unexpectedly carved into your forehead, which made you look grown-up and furious; that one of us would even have screwed up his face in turn, wondering whether he hadn't mistaken someone else for you and whether that rushed young man was the same person who so fiercely, his face ablaze in a smile, had made the rounds of the Sofia streets in early September.

Emil Strezov had moved into the neighborhood long ago and even the true locals had taken him as one of their own. When he arrived, he was an utterly forgettable kid – he turned up from somewhere one dusty summer morning on the doorstep of Uncle Petar the shoemaker, who critically looked over his shabby shoes, patted him on the back and took him into his home. Rumors rushing through the streets had it that he took him in so his son, his only son, the stammerer, could have a friend. He had arrived by train, rushing rumors had it, by train from somewhere up north. His father had died, rushing rumors had it, his mother was sick, too, he would live here and help out in the shop. We didn't pay much attention, but suddenly autumn rolled around and we saw you with the stammerer in the yard of the high school – two freshmen in their uniforms. You were the same age and you always went around together, you walked down the recently paved main street, your clothes grew tight on you before our eyes, you were ever hungrier for life and supposedly ever more street smart but in fact you were likely ever more startled by the colorful whirlwind of the city, especially in those mysterious confines beyond the borders of the neighborhood, where the rich and the beautiful roamed.

We all lived in the street. Even you, when you weren't studying or working. That's how it was in Yuchbunar. And then the final fall rolled around and in any case everything already looked insignificant in light of what was happening in the street. We would all stay outside all day long, confused faces would swim in the soft light of the sunset, we would say 'hello' as if in a dream, you would pass by with that red arm band and a pistol on your belt, as black and shiny as expensive chocolate, but even though you were wearing a red arm band and carrying a gun, just like us, you, too, could not yet grasp your own role in everything going on around us, you knew you were a part of it, but you weren't sure how exactly, as if one side of your brain was constantly getting ahead of the other. It was a wild and hot September, the fruit in the orchards on the outskirts of the city would burst and the pent-up juice would rend the haze with a splash; and you would make the rounds of the ruins, fondly looking at the buildings crushed by the air raids, opulence turned into a useless heap of rocks, remnants of mysterious origin flung about pell-mell – most likely pianos, living room furnishings, sideboards – you would look at all that and sense infinite possibility gathered in your fist. Of course, Kosta was there by your side. The two of you would cross the center of the city, greedily drinking in the destruction with your eyes. What had once been the main shopping street, with its carefully arranged shop windows, was razed to the ground; only here and there jagged columns, tilted roof beams, windowless walls were gaping hungrily. Kosta would grab your arm and stammer with excitement. Here, he would say, on top of these ruins, on top of these c-c-collapsed buildings we will build the future of c-c-communism. On the next corner you would stop to savor the sight of the ruins of some law office. You would hug your friend and say the same words, only without stammering.

Kosta stammered with "k" at the beginning of words and during that September his harmless defect once again became a source of inexhaustible embarrassment, because it detracted from the whole proud romanticism of his declaration that he was a communist. The sudden change, the moment the people took power, suddenly laid waste to his dogged attempts to avoid all words beginning with that damnable letter. Otherwise he had learned to use synonyms. So as to pick and choose them, he spoke slowly and carefully, and as long as he was not mistaken in his choice of words, he sounded like a wise old man. He was gradually perfecting

this. But we all remember the first time he did it. How long must he have been thinking it over? It was a long time ago, back in high school, during one recess. A group of us were just waiting for you to come out into the yard, you were always the last ones out, suck-ups dorks? that you were, you spent so long gathering up your notebooks and quizzing the teacher about Goethe and Mendeleev, while we were already flying down the stairs and, if it was the beginning of the month, elbowing each other in front of the lemonade stand. Someone yelled: there they are! And we immediately swooped down on you, a gang of obnoxious punks in predatory peaked caps, a flock of cantankerous crows, we surrounded you, running in a circle, twisting around like monkeys and yelling: *Kosta, say cock, c-c-come on, K-k-kosta, say c-c-cock*. At first during these attacks the stammerer would turn bright red and refuse to utter the offending word, and this often earned him kicks and slaps, and you earned them, too, right alongside him, but this time while we were bleating out *K-k-kosta, say c-c-cock*, he solemnly raised his hand, waited for the racket to die down and with icy calm said: *dick*. We froze, so startled by the failure of our torment, that we didn't even lunge forward to pummel him, what's more since the long shadow of the groundskeeper was towering from the entrance. We never tried the same joke again, nor did we think up any other.

However, there was not a sufficiently precise and dignified synonym for the word c-c-communist.

Emil Strezov should have been thankful that the neighborhood gangs tormented Kosta like that, because otherwise the two of them would hardly have grown so close, never mind that they were like two peas in a pod: black-haired, swarthy, ostensibly of average height, but as they walked hunched over, they looked short and timid. From the rushing rumors on the corner, the neighborhood quickly grasped the details of that unexpected arrival. In brief, Emil Strezov had come from a grubby little town further down the Iskar Gorge with a frightened gaze and a single, solitary set of homespun clothes, poorly sewn for his figure which was in any case scrawny, such that his high school uniform came to him like manna from heaven. In the last war Uncle Petar had fought shoulder-to-shoulder with Emil's father, who had recently passed away, and besides that he only had one child of his own and that's why he agreed to take the kid in, to help him find his footing in the big city. In any other house, Emil Strezov likely would have slept as best he could in the shop, and in his few spare hours he would have sat alone and morose, without even a drawer in which to hide the poems he wrote late at night. (Poems! From the very beginning we were sure that you wrote poems; and what a field day we would have had if we had gotten our hands on them then!) But since Kosta stammered, had no friends and was terribly shy even when at home with his own family, Emil Strezov's poetic works found in his person a devoted audience. He would listen to him carefully and praise his poetry with clumsily disguised delight, while the author, his lodger-friend, practically a brother, would let his gaze wander outside through the window. And in the first moments this gaze, veiled by simple rhymes, would run up against the inner courtyard and the family's cobbler's workshop, but then the buildings of the high school, the cinema and the chocolate factory with its wine-red façade would come into view. He had a good view of them, since all the surrounding houses were low: the houses of blue-collar workers and refugees from the wars, built in a single night on vacant lots. Among them the shoemaker's two-story home stood out like an anchor of security and calm. Kosta's father, Uncle Petar, was a true local, he had been born in this house, which in turn had been built by his father, who was also a shoemaker, in those forgotten years when the neighborhood

was still cutting a path through the melon patches and swamps. And by the neighborhood's standards he was not poor, and for some of us he was downright rich – they said that there was milk on his table every morning, and on market days his wife would come home with a large hunk of meat. The shoemaker made good money. Because no matter how poor Yuchbunar might be, we nevertheless needed shoes, and shoes got torn and mended, torn and mended until some evening they completely fell apart, but even then the sound pieces of leather were put to good use in making a new pair. Uncle Petar also kept models of fancy shoes in his workshop, and wouldn't you know, several times a season he would get orders to make a pair of those. Oh how we went to town when we got the money! We would buy ourselves Uncle Petar's fancy shoes, we would buy ourselves new caps, we would buy ourselves bow-ties and suspenders, and go strutting down Pirotka Street, the whole gang would get together and go to the movies, stretched tight as strings we would pass by the girls' high school – first on the left-hand and then on the right-hand sidewalk – and we would take the girls to the cake shops; and after that, some of Uncle Petar's shoes, having already fulfilled their function, would find themselves beyond the bridge in Konyovitsa, resold to the local conmen there.

And then all hell broke loose. Uncle Petar's shoes went stamping down the pavement of Pirotka like cavalrymen's boots. The news spread around the whole neighborhood that the people had seized power. But still, when we say that the news spread, doesn't this spreading and going around always have to have some kind of form, flesh, method? Later it became very fashionable to collect memories. You, comrade, do you remember in the morning of September 9<sup>th</sup>, where you were when you heard the good news? Well now, on the morning of September 9<sup>th</sup>, I was sitting at home, the kids ran in shouting: the people have taken power! That's what they said over the radio-diffusion set. It was a Saturday, that's why I was at home. But could Emil Strezov of all people really have overslept, dreaming his sweet dreams, until the sun started beating down on him and woke him up, while at that time such important decisive events were taking place in the city? He, who always got up early, overslept right on the most important day! Was that how it was? Emil Strezov, it's too early to guess what you'll write someday in your memoir, when you'll be going around bent over with a fine dusting of dandruff on the shoulders of your lined suit coat, but we're not promising that we'll read it. We don't make any promises about that bound volume with hard covers, because even now we suspect that inside you'll be fibbing a bit, because you, with all your virtues, have got that weakness, you're not good at lying, so why should we read it? If the time comes when you can speak the truth out loud, that will only be because nobody will care about it anymore, everyone will have forgotten everything and Yuchbunar won't even exist anymore. But if one day somebody sits down to tell about that business truthfully, then his story will have to be contradictory and fragmented, he'll have to speak in many voices, which say different things and sound different: no two voices are the same, right, but no two moments are the same, either, especially in days like those when it often seemed to us that life began all over again every morning, and that we've got to learn to walk from scratch again, how to eat and how to talk. And, to maintain its honesty, that story will have to twist and turn, to wind down the dusty streets and to jump along the rooftops, just as we did, it'll even have to turn against itself sometimes. And, if the story will be endowed with a hundred sets of eyes – a sprightly, monstrous spider straight out of ancient nightmares – again many things will remain mysteries, because can you ever know what things were like? We saw

some things with our own two eyes, others we heard about, from the rushing rumors on the corners, while yet others we guessed at, presumed, made up – whatever you want to call it. One way or another, you wake up one morning and the world is different, because during the night someone has changed it right under your nose. And what do you know, you want to take part in it: of course you can, you're just the boy we need, we'll find you a role. Later you'll have time to forget. But there, in the core of the past, there will always be some beginning: a sudden jump out of bed, and some voice indignantly smacking you across the ear: *the people took power, and you're still asleep!*

Thus everything inevitably went back to that September morning: you overslept as never before, while outside the sun was already shining. Sunbeams in your window, sunbeams rattling like pebbles against the window. Sitting up in bed, the young man realized that they really were pebbles. That's how the young men and girls of Yuchbunar called on each other; that's also how Liliana had called on him, before she disappeared: a handful of pebbles against the glass. He rubbed his eyes, got up, leaned out the small window and gasped. It was Liliana, it really was Liliana! Startled by excitement, Emil Strezov started coughing and a wheeze tore through his chest; amidst the clear joy in his mouth, which was still sleepy, the sinewy sputum of fear leapt up – as always, just like every time, as soon as he felt that tickle in his chest and the first clenching of his stomach muscles. Cough, Emil Strezov, go ahead and cough – that's what your family's good at! Didn't tuberculosis carry off your little sister, then your mother, too, there in that miserable yellowish-gray little town in the gorge. Cough, Emil Strezov. The old alarm clock was hissing rhythmically, outside the linden trees and the yellow ghost of consumption beneath them; and the hissing of the alarm clock pierced your brain like a yellow stinger. But today he woke up before the fear, today the sun burst in along with the handful of stones against the glass, and that was Liliana after all those months of her feverish absence, and he was awake.

So that's how Liliana – at least that was her name before she went underground – left her nighttime dwelling place and once again appeared before Emil Strezov in the day. She didn't want to say where she had been for those months, during which he and Kosta silently wondered whether they would see her again, or whether she had long since decayed in pieces: a head, cut off by the gendarmerie for 50,000 leva; a leg, jutting up like a bad joke out of the crater of yet another bomb.

Liliana came back; but she impatiently slipped out of their embrace and was almost not even smiling, and she dismissed all questions about where she had been and whether she was feeling all right with an angry wave of her now-swarthy hand. This was no time for fiddling around: the people, she said it a third time, have taken power, and finally explained in brief what that meant. During the night, they all had come down into Sofia... What do you mean, they all – well, the tank brigade, the Resistance fighters... C-c-come on now, a tank brigade, Lily?! Oof, they came over to our side, you dummy. They had taken over the ministries, the central telephone pavilion, the police had disappeared, they were gone, they had all hidden down some rabbit holes, the regents had been arrested... But what about the boy-king, Emil Strezov asked. The boy-king, Liliana said, is playing with his tin soldiers in his room. Did you see him, Kosta chimed in, and Liliana lost her temper completely, she wasn't interested in any boy-king, there would be no more kings, or any tin soldiers. Do you really not understand, have the bourgeoisie worked you over so badly that instead of brains you've got mush between your ears? Kosta was

offended, he said it wasn't fitting for a c-c-communist to talk like that and they would always be where the people were. If that's the case, Liliana said, then come with me.

On Saturday morning, Yuchbunar still hadn't found out that the people had taken power; but even the neighborhood dogs had caught wind that something was up. Curious, one of them trailed the three young people, who quickly set out along the suddenly silenced streetcar line. Liliana was in the middle, arm-in-arm with Emil Strezov and Kosta, she was practically dragging them onward. She's a strong one, that girl, the neighborhood clicked its tongue from behind the yellowish curtains. Gazes darted towards them, but they didn't feel them, not yet. C-c-can you at least tell us where you're taking us, Lily, Kosta was startled when he saw the local police station in front of them, he grabbed the girl by the hand and looked at her pleadingly. Why couldn't she explain what was going on, just as before she had carefully explained about Marx and class struggle, about the origins of the family, about proletarian revolution and the renegade Kautsky? But Liliana merely pointed at the police station and they saw that the building had changed overnight. A red flag was waving from the balcony on the second floor, while in front of the entrance instead of the policemen, unshaven men in homespun clothes and caps on their heads were milling around, tugging at the holsters on their belts and smoking. The first order of business, Liliana said, is to create a People's Militia to stop any attempts at counter-revolution. And to keep order, of course. Didn't I tell you that the policemen are hiding in their rabbit holes? But, she added, wagging her finger threateningly, wherever they've holed up, we'll drag them out of there. C-c-can we sign up for the militia, Kosta asked. Of course, she replied, not only can you, but you must. You are *remsters*, right? And she led them towards the entrance of the building.

Even earlier many people from the neighborhood suspected that Liliana was a member of *rems* – that's what they called it, otherwise it was officially the Workers' Youth League, even though what could be official about it, since the government had already outlawed it ten years ago, when the military staged the coup of May 19. Outlawed or not, *rems* went about its business, and many of the young men and women in Yuchbunar were known to be members. Before the war, and even later, before the Germans attacked Russia, the *remsters* didn't do anything in particular. They organized gatherings, parties, played guitars and accordions and the young people came to their meetings with pleasure. They gradually took over the community centers, held various discussions there, but they were careful not to talk politics in front of everyone, only from time to time they would let slip some crack about the priests. And they would fight with the legionnaires. The legionnaires also organized meetings, they also held discussions, they talked about patriotism and being educated in the Bulgarian's time-tested moral virtues, they dreamed of unity in the name of the national ideal, they rejected the political parties, but even more than the other parties they hated the *remsters*. Thus from time to time gatherings of one or the other group ended in some cracked skull, while the policemen stood by with their hands in their pockets watching the show, and on that point, but on that point alone, we were of one mind with the police. In any case, after Hitler attacked Stalin, the *remsters* went deep into hiding. From every tenth house some young person disappeared. The Yuchbunar locals learned a new word: *underground*. Most of them were still not very sure what these fired-up kids were doing underground, they remembered their hurried gait and the dangerous glint in their eyes. From time to time you could catch a glimpse of one of them at night, clattering along the rooftops, startling the neighbors, who kept silent. They knew that the

police were looking for them, albeit without particular zeal. Little by little, things got serious. Shots rang out, cries carried through the dark. At the bend of the river, plainclothes agents killed one of the neighborhood boys; he had stopped home to get food and stumbled into an ambush. Another young man shot himself in front of the community center. About yet others we heard tell that they had taken to the hills with the guerrillas. There was at least one whom they put through all manner of court trials and executed, he had been a *rem*s secretary and had organized *campaigns*, although just what these campaigns consisted of, no one in the neighborhood could say, because everyone who knew had already gone underground. Like everyone else, Emil Strezov and Kosta were bound to remain in the dark. They, of course, had gone to meetings at the community centers, they had joined the local temperance union and knew many of those who disappeared, including, though only fleetingly, the young man who had blown his brains out. Shortly before she disappeared, Liliana, whom they had met two years earlier at a discussion about Darwin, informed them in a whisper that they were already remsters, too, that she had personally vouched for them and that, if need be, the comrades would come looking for them. But no one came looking for them until that morning, when she herself arrived.

[...]

In the next few days we started seeing you often, together or apart. With red armbands, you would make the rounds of the neighborhood, strutting, supposedly keeping law and order, but not seeing any further than your nose, or at the very least you didn't see *us*. Tsenev had taken you under his wing. He showed up with you once or twice, you made a couple rounds of the neighborhood, you showed him the police chief's house (locked up and empty, but we, too, knew that), you showed him the chocolate factory (the owner hadn't come back at all after the air raids), you showed him the church and the school, as if he wouldn't have been able to find them on his own. But he looked satisfied, insofar as could be told from his expression. (Okay fine, but who was this Tsenev really? What detachment was him from, what was he supposed to be at the moment and who had given him power? You could tell that he was not some truly important figure, but at the same time it was clear that he wasn't a small fry either and that, we must admit, confused us – it confused you, too, but you wouldn't admit it.) In any case, no matter how much we listened to the radio – and it was always blaring about how the people had taken power, how the Fatherland Front government had been formed, calling for a warm welcome to our brothers the Red Army, and always underscoring the obvious fact that everything had changed – in those first days change meant that three young people like us had started going around the streets, our streets, in red armbands.

But very soon everyone realized that the neighborhood itself had changed. Not simply because of the red flags flying over on public buildings, and the slogans which appeared soon afterwards and which important girls carefully wrote in paint on old bed sheets. The very rhythm of the day had suddenly shifted. Above the low houses fear and fervor ebbed and flowed, one followed the other before again giving way, thus the neighborhood now fell hushed with supercharged fear, now exploded, spewing out the people hiding in their homes; within the span of a few hours those same heads would be hiding behind the yellowed curtains of the shabby windows, and then suddenly they would find themselves on the street, fusing into the gushing

streams of people nearby, just before coming together in an agitated sea and heading off who knows where, the mood would again change, the people would scatter and the dusty streets would again lie empty. Even the usual everyday bustle had somehow become different. In the morning the milkman would deliver the milk cans always with the same cart, but it was as if some anxious glow quivered around it, while the glass bottles, into which the thick milk was poured, broke more often than other times. The milkman cursed just as before, but now when passing by the policemen he added the regents into his well-wishing, and at one point he wrote on his cart in red paint: "Long live the people's power."

And you were given a pistol.

Tsenev handed it to you at the station, winked at you and patted you on the back and seemed to be getting ready to give a lecture on the tasks facing the newly formed people's militia, but that suddenly struck him as boring, he waved his hand dismissively and sent you to patrol the streets. And so you set off along the yellow streets, past the uninviting fences and the suspiciously bristling hovels. The neighborhood was in a quiet phase, squatting sullenly and seeming not to be following what you were doing, but countless pale faces with small but darting little eyes were watching you. You didn't see anything irregular on your rounds, you didn't see anything interesting at all. The hidden watchers kept silent and didn't give themselves away, it was as if no one even noticed you right up until you went to go home.

Miko was squatting in front of the neighboring house, nine-year-old Miko, digging with a stick in the dirt. He saw you come strutting up the street in your tunic and red armband – you didn't have a peaked cap yet, in those first day the militia men didn't have caps and could be recognized only by their red armbands, but to make up for that a holster with a pistol was hanging from your belt. Miko saw you and opened his mouth, his eyes lit up with delight, he got up, threw away his stick and saluted you with his right hand, on which he had only two fingers. And why, why did Miko have only two fingers? Because one day he found a pen in the dust of that very same street, one of those the British planes dropped, the pen was gleaming in the dust and Miko picked it up, and the moment he opened it, it exploded in his hands. You saw him, you saw everything from your window, you had heard of English pen-bombs, the rumor was going around the neighborhood: the Americans dropped gigantic bombs and destroyed whole houses, whole neighborhoods, the English also dropped those sorts of bombs, oh yes, but beside that they also dropped pens, toys, trinkets, they glittered in the dust and when the kids picked them up they exploded and blew off their fingers. You saw him, but you were so startled, you were so scared that you couldn't shout at him to warn him, you couldn't yell: Hey, Miko, don't, don't open that pen! And the English pen-bomb tore off three of Miko's fingers, never mind that he was Jewish and the English said they were protecting the Jews from Hitler.

So now Miko had only his pinkie and ring finger on his right hand, but he saluted with them and looked at you as if you were a character from a film and he had seen you on the screen of the neighborhood cinema. That's why you also saluted him, but he didn't dare speak to you, he just watched you pass by in your tunic and red armband, with the pistol hanging from your belt, and pushed open the green gate to the little yard with its rusty hinges, and went home, new and important.

The pistol was put to work the very next week when the incident with Stefan the Sinister occurred.

Stefan the Sinister was an invalid from the previous war, with an almost completely



paralyzed left leg and a government pension, and the neighborhood hated him, because he regularly served as a court expert – hence his nickname the sinister. In his capacity as a court expert, Stefan would go around this and other such neighborhoods in the company of a repossession agent and a policeman, visiting the home of overdue debtors. There the repossession agent would prepare an inventory of the property, Stefan would certify the truth of the inventory with his signature, while the policeman would scowl and suck on his mustache. The debtors would wring their hands and wail – the men usually disappeared and left their wives to deal with these unwanted guests, perhaps that way they would have at least a bit of mercy. The repossession agent would talk about the law, expressing the hope that the family would nevertheless manage to cover their debts, so it wouldn't come to confiscation, uttering a few stock phrases that did not mean anything substantial, and with a practiced gesture would again place on his head his beige soft cap, which the neighborhood noticed from afar and which presaged disaster. Stefan wouldn't say anything. He would sign under the inventory listing his neighbors' pathetic property, drag his paralyzed leg outside, climb into the carriage with great effort and the threesome would continue on visiting addresses. If Stefan had been poor, if he had needed the money they paid him for this baleful work, people likely would have forgiven him and the aureole around his scowling, puffy face wouldn't have been so sinister. But that was the rub – Stefan wasn't poor at all: besides his invalid's pension, he lived alone in a two-story house with a balcony across from the school and rented out the whole first floor to a bookstore, where the school children bought their notebooks. Some said that he went around to houses with the repossession agent out of malice, that he enjoyed seeing his neighbors' poverty. Other who had known him for a long time claimed that Stefan simply had a particular attitude towards law and order and considered these sinister visits his duty. He was always grumpy, but it was as if deep down he was not a bad person. Once he even lent you two leva at the store.

After the people took power, the repossession agent's soft beige hat disappeared; the policeman vaporized as well. Only Stefan was left. It looked as if the carriage would never again appear, while the sinister figure of the invalid suddenly took on the clear contours of a class enemy. First of all the house across from the school woke up one morning to a broken window on the upper floor. Nothing came of it and the next day a second broken window on the upper floor could be seen. On the third day a whole crowd of women and kids gathered out front: cursing, booing and hissing and hollering at the owner to come outside. The boys pegged the upper floor with slingshots; the bookseller downstairs wisely closed up and let down the shutters. Come out, the women cried, come out, you lousy scoundrel, blood-sucker, fascist! Someone told you that trouble was brewing – could it have been us? – and you quickly headed that way with your red armband and pistol. No one knew why and how the crowd had gathered, who had led the women there, what they meant to do with Stefan the Sinister and where their husbands were. Enemy of the people! A voice shrieked and the others took it up. A kid climbed on the fence of the school and screamed from there: death to fascism! You hesitantly rubbed the red band on your arm. You weren't sure what was expected of the people's militia: to help the people deal with the class enemy or to restore order. And besides that, Stefan really had lent you two leva at the store.

At one point he appeared on the balcony and the chanting suddenly broke off, because he was holding a rifle. No one knew Stefan the Sinister had a weapon, he had surely tucked it away from the war. He propped himself up on his good leg and readied the rifle to shoot. The kid

who had been yelling “death to fascism” quickly scampered off the fence and ran towards the school, but no one else seemed to react. Stefan the Sinister did not shoot, nor did he say anything, he kept silent, just as he kept silent during those inventories, and kept the rifle aimed at the women. Everyone was as if paralyzed. The pistol ended up in your hand of its own accord, you lifted it up, and your voice sounded hollow and lonesome in the dusty morning: step back, or I’ll shoot! Stefan slowly turned and your eyes met. His were empty, dark and almost weary. He waved the rifle slightly as if wanting to say get the hell out of here, boy, then he pointed it at you and hesitated, you were close and could clearly see his finger trembling on the trigger then suddenly it tightened... The shot tore through the yellow air, but your skull didn’t explode, nor were you hit in the chest: you felt a sudden burning in your stripped arm and beneath the red arm band a second band was spreading: blood, your blood. The bullet, as you later would realize, had ricocheted off the iron fence of the school and had grazed your arm. But then you were injured, the enemy had shot at you and instead of returning fire with fire, you dropped the pistol and clutched your arm, and the women started screaming. He killed the boy, the same voice rose up that before had been yelling “enemy of the people.” Stefan the Sinister didn’t budge from his place.

Then Tsenev showed up on the street. He wasn’t running, he wasn’t yelling, his small figure was striding with large solid steps towards you and, even though the yellow skin on his face was stretched taut, he didn’t show any sign of agitation, he made his way through the women, reached you, tossed a glance at your wound, then absolutely business-like, with a practiced gesture he raised his gun towards the balcony and fired. Stefan staggered, dropped the rifle, fell onto the metal railing, which over the years had grown warped and rusty so it couldn’t hold his weight, the railing crunched, tearing away from the crumbling cement, and Stefan’s sinister body fell flat on its face on the pavement. Tsenev put away his gun and said calmly: one fascist fewer.

The women started to scatter.

*Translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel*