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Pendjur for Baba

Mina Emilia Dahl
Bard College

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Pendjur for Baba

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Mina Dahl

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

Pendjur for Baba

For *baba*, Lubovka Georgieva Gerenska –

who is my spring, my strength, my devotion.

And for *diado*, Simeon Angelov Gerenski –

who is my heart, my kindness, my warmth.

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To my dear friends, whom I love - for holding my hand throughout this process and for embracing me when I needed it most.

To Bard College and everyone in it - for these last four years and the countless memories encapsulated within.

And most of all, to my loving family, whom I owe everything to. Every memory. Every thought. Every muse.

Thank you.

Table of Contents

Pendjur for Baba.....10
Bulgarian Glossary.....72

It is time to feed *baba* her medication. *Milurit, Romazik, Eliquiz, Vitsetin, Kardiket, Bizor, Mezimforte.*

Counting the pills, double checking and triple checking to make sure they are all there in my palm, each is one no bigger than the size of a baby tooth, like the ones my mother keeps in a jar on her vanity.

I leave the pill box on the table and stare into its labeled surface. The edges of the scotch tape my mother used to scribble her now faded instructions on have lifted. I can barely make out the words “*na gladno*”, “*sled zakuska*”, “6:00pm”, and “*sled vecheria*”. One of the “6:00pm” slots is now empty, its contents scattered in my palm.

I carefully place each pill into an empty, blue bottle cap I picked up from my *baba*'s seat at the table. The cap was once part of a *Vereia* milk bottle, that is, until my grandmother claimed it.

Baba prides herself in being a woman of cleanliness and organization. The house is always tidy, the backyard is always swept. She breathes life into discarded objects. Picks up dirt-laden stakes and deems them canes. Collects bottles and cardboard boxes to germinate seeds. Nurtures sprouts in yogurt cartons and makes drainage holes with bent forks.

These habits are a crutch in her old age. The bottle cap she adopted and has since used for her medication, has become a token of herself, a vessel she can organize her thoughts in.

The 6:00 pm news starts to rumble from the tv on the opposite side of the living room. A reporter with a bald head seated at a desk is talking over the image of a street in a village along the Black Sea coast. There has been a flood. His face remains blank as the people strain to gather all they have lost.

Ever since my return to Bulgaria, I have found that time escapes me. It flows through me, seeps into my environment, leaves my mind in a daze. Two months have passed in this blur state.

A pile of damp laundry and wrinkled blankets cover the Malaysian sofa in front of the tv. An old model ship made of willow wood catches my eye. It was gifted to my father from a friend he had made during one of his many travels to Zimbabwe. I used to imagine myself anchoring that ship, the way I was taught to on the small boat we chartered during our last trip to Tsarabanjina, a small island off the coast of Madagascar. Many years have passed, yet I am surrounded by tokens of our life there. The steel ostrich with a hollow egg for a bodice. The collection of five old men carved out of malagasy rosewood. The framed painting of a lily pond in midnight blue. The

bronze bonsai tree with pendant, crystal fruit. The marble solitaire with polished spheres and the copper baobab tree with geodes for roots.

I look at them all as if for the first time. These fragments of my past, which I will one day inherit. The table of petrified wood in the corner. The lapis lazuli egg and the geodes on the shelf. The carved Haitian man with the cane and the hat. The pyrographic paintings of villages and countrysides. The inheritance of my father. The memories of my mother. The hand embroidered pillows that smell like my *baba's* perfume.

I am full of stories that do not feel like my own. They accumulate inside of me, echoing in my mind, in my bones. I am their child. I have my father's freckles and my mother's smile. The same plump cheeks and *chipov* nose. But above all else, my eyes are a deep brown. The same as my *baba's*. Intricate and mellow. Sometimes, I try to see the way I think she would. To use the eyes we have in common to perceive this house as though I were her.

A stray cat leaps onto the sill of one of the dining room windows. Its black fur glides along the glass as she positions herself to look out towards the garden. I am reminded of *baba*, how she sits on her chair at the dining room table, looking out through the window. Every now and then she scolds the stray cats that patrol the land, though she forgets they cannot hear her through the walls.

When *baba* was in better health and spent more time outside, she delighted in shooing the foxes away from the chicken coop or swatting the perched birds from the fruiting trees. Each movement of hers was dynamic, punctuated by shouts. Now, she is trapped in this house, bothered by her stillness. Her body itches to move, to exert. Yet, age restrains her.

Baba has always been protective of the land we built this house on. It once belonged to my *diado*, and before that, it belonged to my *pradiado*, my great grandfather. We now share the land with my grandpa's last brother who has taken up a quarter of the estate. His house and small garden neighbor ours, and his chickens sometimes peck at my grandmother's peppers. My *diado's* brother had originally inherited an additional quarter, but he sold it soon after *pradiado* passed away, a decision my *baba* has never approved of.

Now, she is forever observing, eyes trained on the fence separating our garden from his. A fear that he may claim what's ours has plagued her. However, *baba* does not realize that to observe is to acknowledge a distance, to recognize that this distance can never be crossed. That to be seated at this table, in this house, she can only ever look through the window from afar.

This building that has become our home was built in 2005. Back then, my mother and father decided to cover the outside with pearlescent stone. Each rigid and chipped

shape reflects the stubborn sun. Some stones are dyed burnt orange, others remain the pale shade of an eggshell. I have traced the shapes of their jigsaw bodies with my finger.

A spot of shade unspools at the back of the house where the second floor balconies protrude. There, peppers have been laid out to dry on a wooden table, meat hung to cure. Strings of tobacco leaves have been left to crinkle next to racks of damp linens and socks. The soffits of the roof above the second floor are garlanded with wasp hives and cicada shells. Small sparrows and *liastovichki* peak through the space between red clay and wooden boards. At the height of summer I hear chirping and imagine what it must be like to lie in their nests.

Behind the house is the garden. A lawn of clover and rose bushes accentuated by apple trees and wild figs. At the far end of the garden is the *naves*, an open shed with matching stone floor and a clay roof. Inside of it, two tables and two benches, once intended for barbecues, have been conscripted by *baba*, a space she used to propagate plants and pick the stems off of dry camomile. Tomato seeds have been left to bake in the hot summer air, scattered across the old linoleum covering of one the tables, while empty honey frames occupy the left corner of the shed. Shovels and *motiki* in various degrees of decay have been propped against the pillars supporting the roof. You can tell which ones are *baba's* favorites, futilely repaired with duct tape and wire.

Either side of the *naves* is met by stairs, a sequence of slanted slabs of concrete topped off with makeshift wooden railings. They both lead to a plot of plowed land in which *baba* has planted potatoes and peppers. The cherry tree in the far east corner is older than I am. Its branches create shadows on the rows of beehives my *diado* once tended. From there I can see the orchard brimming with apples, plums, almonds, persimmons, *chereshi*, apricots, and peaches. Chickens peck on the fallen fruit at the base of the trees.

The inside of the house reminds me of the build of an old walnut tree, like the ones my brother, sister, and I used to climb up in our youth. The ground floor contains the living room, the kitchen, and my grandparents bedroom. Sometimes, when I sit on the mattress *baba* and *diado* shared, I imagine roots growing underneath, thick from within the mahogany bed frame. When I climb to the second floor, I feel as though I have ascended into the tree's crown. There I sleep, together with my brother, my sister, and my parents. The windows in the room overlook the garden and the orchard. I sometimes feel as though I am a leaf on the ancient branch of this tree-like dwelling, admiring from afar the labor that *baba* and *diado* have put into this land.

The basement reminds me of soil. It is packed with broken toys, dented picture frames, documents attached to letters never sent, old shoes with cracked soles, newspaper clippings, books with worn edges, paintings covered in mildew, crates upon crates of

rotting fruit, and dust. Among these discarded objects, *baba* keeps her cans of preserved fruit. They are all propped up on shelves in a small room we call *baba's* basement. There we keep our peach *nektar*, the sweet syrup of mulberries and *djanki*, jars of raspberry and apricot jam, canned blueberries and stewed pears. There we keep marinated peppers and pickled *turshia*, crystalized honeycomb squeezed into jars and a variety of bottles full of fresh *pendjur*.

Beneath everything, there is a slab of concrete, and on its surface, three holes. Small, about one centimeter wide and three centimeters deep. One of them is the exact dimensions of my index finger, while the other two match my brother's and sister's.

I was all of five years old when construction on the house began. Although I was a year younger than my brother and sister, I felt infinitely more restless. My great uncle, contracted as the architect and construction manager, had his men pour the first batch of concrete while I watched from afar. The air around the dig was full of loose dust, yet the grass in the garden remained crisp and green. I had spent that morning plucking clovers with my bare toes, counting each leaf in hopes of finding a four-leaf clover.

A blue nylon pool with white piping was set up behind the house. I often dunked my head into the cold water, counting until I ran out of numbers, only to emerge and realize I could never hold my breath longer than a fish.

The poured concrete was still wet when my mother and father called me over. To reach them at the bottom of the dig, my sister, my brother, and I raced down the hill. My knees gave out when I slipped on a loose pebble and crashed against my great uncle's side, laughing, embarrassed, and shy. At the edge of the concrete slab, my mother urged us to press our fingers into the gray mass.

We formed a small triangle in the corner of the wide block, fisted palms barely touching. The submersion felt as though I was being sucked into a damp place. I inhaled and wiggled my finger inside the wetness, feeling the strain of the mass around my skin. Grains of concrete were lodged beneath my nails when I pulled my hand away, and a chalky powder clung to my knuckles.

I look down at the dining room table and locate my *baba's* mug. We decided early on that my grandmother ought to have a consistent cup to drink from, one she could recognize and remember as her own.

Every morning, before she wakes up, my mother and I make her breakfast. Two pieces of toast and some jam or honey, together with a liter of tea. Although she claims she isn't picky, she enjoys the forest herbal blend. *Mashterka* and *laika*, berry and lemon, mint and slippery elm. It calms her.

Every morning, she rips her toast into pieces and drops them in the liquid. She used to sprinkle *sirene* on top and call it *popara* - a cheese dish from her childhood.

She can no longer eat *popara*, too much protein for her single, ailing kidney.

And yet, from time to time, *baba* begs for just a bite of meat, a *zaluk* of *kashkaval*. At first, we would say no. But to appease her, we'd allow it. Perhaps it is because of our inability to be stern with her that she still suffers.

After pouring some tea into my *baba's* mug, I look for the jar of honey on the dining room table. Over the years, she has cultivated a taste for sweetness, wants her beverages to be *blagi* rather than bland. We never questioned her, believing age to be responsible for the change in her tastes. But perhaps there is more. After all, she is not satisfied by mere sugar, or syrup, or candy. Rather, it is honey she values. Honey with its medicinal properties. Honey with its thick sweetness. Perhaps, it is also for this reason that she tends to the hives *diado* cared for with immense devotion. In her eyes, they are an extension of him. An embodiment of his soul and labor. The honey the hives produce, she savors. And the bees, their diligence and organization, she feels akin to. I am sometimes convinced that *baba* sees herself within those hives.

One of the first lessons she taught me was that everything has an order. That the world consists of intricate nestings of orders. I never interrupt her when she speaks of these things, of decomposition, of trees and rot and death, of how some orders can be observed and manipulated, while others lie beyond human control. She emphasizes

the bees and how they have only one mother. Over the years I have come to find that fact comforting. In a way, we all share one Mother, one Nature.

Yet, Nature, the Great Mother, and the queen bee are different. Yes, the queen bee is a matriarch, ruler of her hive. She is born a queen to maintain the order of her workers, and in turn, her workers accept her as their sovereign. In her role, she challenges her workers so she may choose the ideal candidate to fertilize her eggs. Flying high above her hive, keeping to a vertical line until she is positioned at a distance only few can reach, the queen waits for the males in her colony to approach her. The first one to do so is successfully selected to mount and impregnate her with the seed of the future hive. The queen bee is fertilized only once, after which she stores the male sperm in her body and chooses the precise time to lay each egg.

However, despite her apparent sovereignty, she is not in full control of her fate. If and when the hive deems it necessary to change its governance, it can overthrow the queen bee. It is this subtle yet decisive act of rebellion that renders her destiny futile.

It is only through the birth of a new queen that the hive can challenge its current sovereign. The bees responsible for creating the cells in which the eggs hatch sculpt each one in varying shapes and sizes. The largest, most intricate cell is always dedicated to the birth of a new queen, and the structure of the cell is one a beekeeper can identify. It's sheer size, it's architecture, those are all signals that the hive is

seeking a new ruler. The cruel truth in this structure is that the one destined to create her own enemy, her own successor, is the queen bee herself. She lays the very egg that will kill her.

At the age of twelve, when *baba* told me this story for the first time, I did not realize that she seemed to be speaking of herself, of the way in which she built this family only to have her home abandoned like an empty cell, and her offspring turn away from her. Perhaps she fears that all her labor will crumble in our hands.

However, my grandmother never mentions the role of beekeepers in her story. Maybe she forgets, or maybe she chooses to omit them. Maybe she does not realize that human hands have the ability to intercept the inner rulings of a hive. Or maybe she thinks that it is human arrogance to play with the destiny of other living things. But is it not the beekeeper's ability to identify the cell of a future queen, to crush and mold it unusable, that can save the life of the current matriarch? Is there no value in that interception?

Over the years, *baba* has sunk deeper into this land. She produces and reproduces the life surrounding her, planting the seeds that grow into trees and shed their fruit on the waiting soil. Through her labor, *baba* has become a kind of Mother. An extension of Nature. She echoes the Great Mother who, at the dawn of our deaths, breaks our bodies down, fractions our molecules, reconfigures them, endlessly.

But unlike a queen bee or the Great Mother, *baba* is confined to a body reliant on a mortal frame. Her bones creak with age. Her skin furrows into wrinkles.

Baba cannot see that it has been her obsession with the land, her indomitable will to merge with the earth, that has left her immobile with injuries, broken, and used. But I see it. So very clearly.

After searching the dining room, I find the jar of honey open and empty on the kitchen counter. A spoon inside glistens with what little remains. My mother must have used it that morning to make *bialo medche*, an heirloom recipe for sore throats, honey with baking soda and three drops of lemon. Once stirred, the mixture foams and turns white, hence *bialo*. I lick the spoon clean, and after rinsing the crockery under warm water, leave it to dry while I take the jar down to the basement with me, along with a plastic bag filled with bottles and other empty glassware. They clang against each other as I take each step down the stairs. I must find a new jar of honey to open.

The tiles of the staircase are cold against my feet. It's a refreshing feeling, keeps me awake. I turn the light on and look around.

We keep the jars of honey on shelves in the part of the basement I call *staiata na diado*. It is a room that reminds me of my grandfather, full of objects he used to treasure. His old beekeeping equipment, rusted combs and wooden frames, empty jars with broken lids, even a few boxes of loose yarn.

Baba told me once, a long time ago, of a day she had come back home from work with a ball of yarn in her pocket, purchased at a discount from a vendor down the street. *Baba* and *diado* had just moved to the city of *Blagoevgrad* and the family could not afford to spend money on clothing or shoes. All the expenses were tracked with a focus on buying only what was necessary for survival. Seeing the yarn in *baba's* pocket, *diado* had become furious. In his eyes, she had wasted precious *leva* on wool when they could have spent it on bread. They fought for the first time that day. With pursed lips and clenched jaw, *baba* had explained that the yarn was to be knit into sweaters, one for their daughter and one for their son. Very few people at that time could afford ready-made clothing. Yet *baba* insisted that her children be as warm as any other child. She never tells me how the argument ended. I imagine *diado* giving in, collecting the scraps of yarn leftover from her projects, storing them in a box in this very basement.

At the far end of the room, propped up against the wall by the cellar window, is the centrifuge *diado* used to harvest honey. Once, as a child, I hid inside its wide cylindrical body made of steel and copper. *Diado* made the centrifuge himself, purchased the metal and welded it together. On the inside are three caged slots made from scraps of wired fence, like the one lining our backyard. Each compartment is three centimeters wide, stretching from the top of the centrifuge down to the bottom. They form a triangle when viewed from above. Every Fall, when it was time to harvest the honey, *diado* would place the frames of unprocessed beeswax in each slot. And

before the centrifuge even began turning, the honey would drip down and pool at the bottom of the vat.

I was six when *diado* taught me how to operate the machine for the first time. The centrifuge had been brought up to the garage. A translucent tarp had been laid out on the tiled floor in hopes of collecting any stray honey that dripped from the transportation of the frames. I had wandered into the garage with bare feet, feeling my toes stick to the tarp in the places where honey had spilled. At the center of the room was the machine, and by its side, *diado*. He had the lid open, his head peering into the vat to make sure the frames were straight.

In the corner, *baba* and my mother were seated with their hands gliding over the sticky frames. Each held a metal comb used to unseal the wax so that the honey trapped within could flow freely. At their feet, they had bowls of honeyed scraps, some of which found their way into my *baba's* mouth. When she saw me standing at the doorway, she handed me a piece as well. *Duvka* she called it, another word for chewing gum. I was not supposed to swallow the wax, though I did all the same.

Diado had finished positioning the frames in the vat when he called me over. He showed me the inside, picking me up from underneath the arms to get a proper look. The metal was stained in places, made matte from constant use. The wires of the slots holding the frames dug deep into some of the wax. Honey dripped down the metal,

collecting slowly into a pool at the bottom. It looked dark, confined within the cylindrical vat. I had not seen blood at the time, though I imagine it must have looked quite the same. Thick, sticky, dense.

When *diado* put me back down, I felt my bare feet sticking to the linoleum tarp. He explained to me in simple terms how the vat worked. Turning a lever on the outside would spin the frames and the speed of the movement would force the honey out of the wax. He called it a vacuum, though I did not know the meaning of the word at the time. It seemed simple enough. He showed me the lever, told me how to hold it, how to push then pull to get it to spin. It was heavier than I had imagined, rigid and achy. But after a few spins, the metal loosened and the rotation of the lever became automatic. Momentum, *diado* had called it. Though I did not know exactly what the word meant, I could feel it.

Diado remained by my side, his hands holding the vat in place so that it wouldn't rock or fall over. With each rotation of the lever, *diado* counted. *Sedem. Osem, Devet. Deset. Edinaiset. Dvanaiset.* He didn't stop until he reached one-hundred, a number I had just become familiar with from school. When he did, he told me to let go. The lever continued to turn even without me working it. Momentum, *diado* explained again. Once everything was still, he opened the vat and looked inside, a pleased noise escaping his lips.

Diado took each frame out of its enclosure and flipped them around, so that the side facing inwards was now facing outwards. When he was done, he told me to turn the lever again, this time in the opposite direction. The counting began anew and this time I joined in. *Edno. Dve. Tri. Chetiri.* When he got to ten, I stopped counting.

While I was pushing and pulling, pushing and pulling, standing on my tippy-toes from time to time to get a better grip on the handle, the honey started to flow. It began to collect in a jar *baba* had placed on the floor. A small spout sticking out from the cylindrical vat dipped into the opening of the jar. Honey trickled in, then poured steadily. Once the jar was full, my mother replaced it with an empty one. A swift motion so as to not waste any of the honey.

Devedeset i osem. Devedeset i devet. Sto. *Diado* stopped counting and helped me keep the lever still. When he checked on the frames inside, they were empty. Before changing them out for freshly unsealed ones, he picked up a jar from the ones we had just filled and passed it on to me. The glass had begun to warm up. It was heavy, too wide for my hands to wrap around completely. The rim was covered in smudges of honey where my mother had swept a finger to stop the drops from falling. The color inside the jar was bright, a rich golden against the sunlight. *Diado* told me it was mine. That I had worked for that jar of honey. That my labor was worth something.

I remember hiding that jar in *diado's* basement, tucked between an old hamster cage and a half empty basket of yarn.

I walk past it now, the jar I cannot bear to open. At first, I thought that if I did, *diado's* ghost, somehow contained within, would fly away. That he would never return. But now that I'm older, I can't bear to have it go to waste. And somehow, eating it, allowing it to only exist during the split seconds it takes to dissolve on the surface of my tongue, seems like a waste.

I pursue the older jars of honey on the shelf, choosing one at the very edge. Standing on my tippy toes, I reach for it. When it's in my hands, I walk out of *diado's* basement and make my way towards the staircase.

It has been ten years since he died and we haven't been able to harvest as much honey. A week after his funeral, all the bees in our orchard died. A 'colony collapse' people called it, though I never knew if they were referencing the bees or our household.

Now, we only have one hive remaining. It stands alone at the far end of the orchard, shaded by the great cherry tree. The chair my *baba* used to sit on to unseal the honeycomb wax, a small wooden thing covered in sheep wool, is propped right by the side of the tree, facing the painted blue of the hive. On some days, she walks across the orchard and sits there for hours. She speaks to the bees when nobody is listening.

I too have tried to speak to the bees. To make conversation with their *buzz*. I asked them once why they've never stung me. They didn't answer. I cannot remember if I was disappointed or relieved.

Diado died in the height of summer. We visit his grave every July. Bring him fresh flowers and food.

Baba wakes up early on his anniversaries to make *zhito za pomen* - boiled wheat with honeyed syrup. It is served warm in waffle cones. The tradition stems from something *St. Pavel* once said about the way in which wheat cannot live if it does not die first.

How seeds only spread when plants wither and fall. *Baba* says we eat *zhito za pomen* to commemorate the fertility of the dead.

I never really liked the taste of *zhito za pomen*. It was grainy in my mouth, too textured and sweet to suit my grief. However, I have learned to respect it. To swallow it for him.

On the morning of my *diado's* funeral, *baba* couldn't make *zhito za pomen*. The guests we had invited were in our house. They had brought various foods as offerings.

Kebabcheta and *kiofteta*, grilled minced meat shaped like hot dogs and patties. Potato salads with chives. Sliced garden tomatoes and cucumbers. Some even brought homemade *rakia*, while others bought French red wine, the labels of which I could not read. My great aunt had baked bread, a large *pitka* she later tore into pieces for each guest. There was cheese and *kashkaval* on the kitchen counter, as well as jars of pickles

and olives. Someone had grilled peppers the day before, brought them in a casserole dish wrapped in saran wrap. Condensation collected in drops at the top that resembled tears.

The house was bare. All the pictures we had of *diado* were taken off of the walls. The mirrors were covered with sheets and my grandfather's portrait was turned to face the wall. We couldn't bear to take it down.

A few years prior, right before my first funeral, *baba* had explained that pictures of the deceased were taken down during mourning because their image could capture their wandering souls. That somehow, my *diado's* eyes in his portraits could suck his spirit in and keep him trapped behind the glass forever. When I was thirteen and grieving, that didn't sound too much like a horrible outcome. In fact, a part of me wanted him to stay, to linger.

I remember the knock on the door when the priest first arrived, his muted steps over our swept threshold. His voice as he chanted a prayer I could not understand and sprayed our heads with holy water.

*....Боже на духовете и на всяка плът, Който стъпка смъртта, съсила
дявола и подаря живот на Твоя свят! Сам Ти, Господи, упокой душата*

*на починалите Твои раби в място светло, в място злачно, в място
прохладно, където няма никаква болка, скръб и въздишка...¹*

He dipped a branch of boxwood into a copper *menche*. The small bucket hung from his forearm, intricate patterns of leaves and branches of olive trees carved throughout. I had never seen the vessel up close. I counted the leaves, analyzed the patterns to distract my scattered mind.

I had, however, seen a dead body before, the corpse of my great uncle squeezed into a silk lined coffin. He had died when I was too young to understand death. But this was different.

Diado's death shook me. I was abroad when I received the news. Coastal California had never felt so far away. The flight back to *Bulgaria*, the drive to *Krupnik*, it all passed in a blur. When *diado's* body was brought into the house, I could not breathe. We had positioned his mahogany casket to rest by the piano in the living room. Two sofas and a handful of chairs stood at the foot of the casket. Some people sat there, refusing to look away. Others wandered around the house, murmuring condolences and blowing their noses.

¹ *Dear God of the Spirits and of the flesh, He who smothered death, who ruined the Devil and gifted life to this world! You alone can calm the souls of Your deceased followers, can lead them to the land of light, the land of gold, the land of cool air, where pain no longer exists, nor grief, nor sigh...*

My eyes burned and watered as I focused on the guests. I recognized some of their faces as those of my cousins, watched them laugh in the corner. They were young and unafraid. It seemed as though this death did not affect them as it affected me.

The room smelled like food, tears, and decay. It was cold even at the height of summer, the AC blasting chilled air into the living room where my *diado's* corpse lay. Death itself felt crisp, its bite sharp against the skin my dress could not cover. Even when I was sitting still, my lungs felt as though they were being squeezed by the air around me. Every time I caught a glimpse of the casket, I felt my limbs go rigid. There was so little space inside. So little room to move, to breathe.

My mother invited me to say goodbye to *diado*, to kiss him on the cheek one last time. I do not remember if she was crying when she called out. One of her hands was squeezing *baba's* trembling shoulder, the other gripping *diado's* limp arm, like a child eager to bring both hands of its parents together, as though the simple act of skinship could solve any issue. Oh yes, I remember thinking, my mother is a daughter too.

My father, not too far away, stood stoic, his face calm with understanding. My brother and sister, cheeks red and blotchy from warm tears, peered into the casket. My brother was the first to kiss *diado's* cheek. As the older of the two twins, he often braved going first, the first to get shot at the doctors, the first to ride a bicycle without training wheels, the first to kiss the cheek of our deceased grandfather. My sister, second

oldest, followed suit, trembling lips pressing against his skin. They both pulled away, making room for me, but I could not bring myself to move. I could see *diado* clearly from where I stood, closer to the casket than I had been before. They had dressed him in his best suit, and I couldn't help but wonder how they got it from. Who had given it to them? Who had taken it from his closet? Who had given permission? *Diado's* face was unnaturally still. His skin was flushed with chemicals, fine blush residue sitting on top. Like a dusting of powdered sugar, yet far from sweet. He looked alive, yet wrong, like sleeping stone, or wax molded into a human figure on display in some unnamed museum. I remember these things: being scared to touch him, to feel his skin so much like skin, yet other. Breaking down, shuddering so hard I could not breathe. Making no sound as my head shook. Or perhaps I made a sound that I can no longer recall.

As I'm walking up the stairs of the basement, a fly lands on my calf. I try to swat it away with my free hand, clutching the jar of honey with my other. I've always disliked the feeling of bugs on my skin. Their ticklish legs and light bodies. Like the cricket that jumped onto my calf that summer, ten years ago, on our way to the cemetery. It was the middle of July, the sun above us hot and ruthless, beating down on our damp faces.

We were on the top of a hill, surrounded by tombstones, the names engraved on them worn out by time, others freshly inscribed in gray and white marble. The cemetery was old and unkempt. Graves covered in poured cement neighbored each other, the gaps

between them no bigger than the span of a hand. Roots of trees and patches of grass broke through the cracks of the older tombstones, while newer ones glistened in the sunlight.

To reach the spot at the top of the hill where *diado* was to be buried, we had to navigate the maze of graves. Those I could identify, I walked around. Others, buried under dirt and moss, we stepped on as the guests tried to squeeze their way through. We were like ants in search of the most effective path, hitting a dead end and circling back to the start when we strayed too far.

Once we were all gathered on the hill, the ceremony began. I felt another cricket jump onto my calf as the priest chanted. The casket sunk into the ground. We each held out a fistful of dirt, dropped it into the hole. The sound of pebbles hitting the lid of my *diado's* casket was clear and sharp. Eerily undisturbed, as though the stillness of the body inside could permeate the world.

The trek back down the hill at the end of the ceremony felt far less dizzying. I remembered when to turn right, when to leap over a grave, when to pick up my feet so as to not trip, when to apologize to a deceased stranger. Those details burned themselves into my mind.

It took months, if not years, to understand that *diado* was gone. To fully process his death as reality. We did not speak of him after he died. All of his clothes remained in

his closet. His toothbrush by the sink. His shoes by the front door. He was there, and not, all at the same time.

There are days when *baba* still sits in silence. When she spends hours gazing into *diado's* portrait on the wall. She sometimes speaks to him as if his soul were really trapped inside the glass. She tells him about the weather, about the bees, about the acidity of the soil. Sometimes, she asks him why he left.

We visit his grave on anniversaries. Forty days of mourning. Ninety days of mourning. A year. Two years. Three. *Baba* can no longer walk up the hill to greet him. The handful of times she forces herself to, she trips on a stranger's tombstone or needs to hold my mother's hand for support. We often bring him some toast and minced meat, topped with fresh tomatoes from the garden. A simple meal to some but a collection of his favorite foods to us.

We offer a serving to him every time we visit, place the paper plate by his tombstone while my siblings and I start working on the maintenance of the grave. My brother clips the dead rosebuds from the bush my mother planted at his feet. My sister bathes his tombstone in spring water while I scrape the moss around his name.

Baba likes to sit on a bench my uncle built at the foot of *diado's* grave. She watches from there. Sometimes she doesn't blink. Other times, she weeps.

Baba fills a cup with *rakija* and pours it on the soil. When she does this, her hand shakes.

There is a marble bowl of sand next to the vases at the foot of the tombstone. It is stiff with years worth of melted wax. My mother tries to break the particles apart with a fork. When she deems the center of the sand soft enough, she takes out a box of candles from the basket and passes one to each of us. They are a bright yellow, long and slim. The wax of the candles feels slippery to the touch. My mother lights *baba's* candle first. From her flame, she lights her own. Then, she allows my father, brother, sister and me to light our candles from hers. We follow that order.

When all of our candles are lit, we say a few prayers. My father sings a song he learned while traveling through Europe in his youth, a Baha'i prayer about God and death:

*"We all come from God
and unto Him shall we return,
like a stream flowing back to the ocean
or a ray of light returning to the sun."*

Baba hums along, but does not understand the lyrics. She never learned English. Neither did *diado*.

I think about death. About the kind of comfort it might bring.

I think about the dogs that will sniff out his grave and eat the meat we've left behind, and wonder if *baba* knows they are waiting. If she is aware that they linger in the bushes, eager to feast on the offerings of the living. I picture the bread *baba* made for *diado* in the pit of some stray-dog's stomach and I want to scream. It is torture to think of all of that wasted labor. And yet, the tradition remains. *Baba* prepares the meat. She bakes the bread. She plates the food for *diado*. And when our visit is over and we wrap up our belongings, she leaves the food behind and walks away, while the stray-dogs feast with vigor.

The drive back through the village is silent. *Baba*, seated beside me, squeezes my hand. We both have tears in our eyes.

For a brief moment after every return from the cemetery, the house feels empty. It does not lack in objects or memories. Rather, the air smells different, as though a scent were missing. I try to recall what *diado* smelled like, but I cannot remember.

I have reached the top of the staircase and close the door to the basement behind me. As I walk toward the living room, I pass by the entrance to our house. The stained glass surrounding the oak door catches my eyes. Through the glass I can see the branches of the apple tree *diado* planted when the house was first built, and onto which he grafted three different species of apple - *zlatna prevuzhodna*, *chervena prevuzhodna*, *zimna bananova*. Red apples that fade to a light pink when the sun hits them hang from the

branches on the left. Soft yellow apples with spots of green on their cheeks hang from the branches on the right. And at the apex of the crown, are small, crisp, green apples too small to bite.

I picked my first apple when I was six. *Diado* lifted me up onto the thickest branch and encouraged me to touch the fruit, to feel it in my palm, to twist then pull the stem. I do not believe I could have refused to pick that apple. Mesmerized as I was by its shine, I remain uncertain of my claim over it. The simple act of picking the apple felt as though I were violating the tree, as though I were infringing on its integrity.

I was young when I learned that to grow a *thing*, you must dedicate your life to it. That for plants to sprout, you must feed the soil with your own vitality and hope it is fertile enough to prosper.

Baba has lived here, on this *Krupnishka* land, for more than sixty years. She would seem to know every pebble, every grain of dirt, every dead root and every worm feeding on its decay. She has planted seeds and watched them sprout, has pricked her skin on thorns and used bloody fingers to pull nettle from the ground. This house is all she has left of her body.

Baba often sits on the bench out by the entrance. She spends hours looking at *diado's* mangled apple tree, its branches reflected in the stained glass lining the doorframe. They look serpentine in their reflections, old white and red *martenitsi* tied to the

branch's swollen spurs like collars. Many of those *martenitsi baba* made herself, gifting the bracelets to her grandchildren to wear each spring on the first day of March. Each one is braided with white and red yarn, cinched by glass beads and wooden charms. She used to say that the luck of a *martenitsa* is doubled when it's made by hand, even more so when it's tied to the wrist of a loved one by the maker themselves.

I can recognize my own *martenitsi* on the branches, weathered yarn broken down to strands, prey to the whims of the breeze. Every spring, I add a new one, tie it with a double knot where the most buds have formed. *Martenitsi* I have worn since *Baba Marta*, the first day of March. Each year, *baba* reminds me to keep them tied to my wrist until I see a stork perched in the nests by the river bank, or a blossom blooming on one of the trees, symbols of fertility, the beginnings of spring. I always anticipate when I might see them, eager to take the *martenitsi* off, to tie the strings to the branches of the apple tree. Sometimes, I tuck my bracelet underneath a stone so that its fortune can permeate the earth, like *baba's* story, in which a nameless village boy, too short to reach the branches of the blooming trees, decided to plant his *martenitsa* in the soil underneath a large stone. After seven days, when all the blossoms shed from the branches of the trees and young fruits began to form, the village boy returned to the stone and counted the bugs living underneath, each one a fortune. However, I prefer fruits to bugs. And so I tie my *martenitsi* to a tree, let the luck I have accumulated seep into the bark, flow through the heartwood, and feed into the roots.

In the summer, when the blossoms shed their petals and the ovaries swell into fruits, I feast, picking first the apples by my weathered yarn. I still have a *martenitsa* tied around my wrist. The knot made with my teeth soggy against my skin and the loose yarn at the end brushing against the jar of honey in my hands. As I walk into the kitchen, I try to open it, but the lid doesn't budge.

Baba opens her jars by hitting the lids at an angle on the tiled floor. The speed and force of the blow allow for a satisfying pop. After a few hits and failed attempts at *baba's* method, I accept my defeat and use the flat end of a screwdriver to wedge my way in between the lid and the glass rim. The lid eventually cracks where age has made the metal brittle. Once the jar is open, I spoon some honey into *baba's* mug and watch it dissolve.

Carrying the mug in my hands, I make my way back into the dining room where the cap of pills sits on the table. Next to the medication I see *baba's* plate, left over from lunch. On its surface is a small pile of tomato seeds she must have selected from her salad when nobody was looking. There can never be too many seeds to germinate, *baba* says, though my mother is forever trying to restrain her exertion.

Baba always begins her work on the tomatoes with a close inspection. She looks over every tomato that is brought into the kitchen, counts every dent and scar, presses with a calloused thumb on the soft flesh to see how much it gives. The tomatoes she

approves of are placed aside, while those that fail are diced into a cucumber and *sirene* salad.

If the tomatoes are picked prematurely, she waits a few days for them to ripen. Only then does she begin her dissection. She uses her fingers to pry the tomatoes open, tearing where the outer seams mark the location of their seed-pouches. The released juice collects in a white bowl placed at her feet, small chunks of flesh dropping with an audible *plop* into liquid *chorba*. *Baba* pays them no mind. She starts to unfold each seed-pouch, using her thumb and forefinger to slide the yellow ovules out of their enclosures. Gelatinous slime connects them, covering each grain in pink and orange membranes, slippery on the surface of her thumbs. She picks at the seeds stuck to her cuticles, red lodged in the crevices of her knuckles like fresh blood. What drips down her palms and forearms is met with an eager tongue.

Before the seeds fall into the bowl of *chorba*, *baba* slides them onto a perforated piece of cardboard, torn from a *Chernomorets* chocolate box. She likes to use cardboard to both suck and drain the seeds of their moisture. The day before, she would take an empty box of chocolates, sometimes finishing the truffles off herself, and tear the cardboard into pieces. Each piece she would stab repeatedly with a needle she keeps on the lapel of her cardigan. If the cardboard were too stiff, she would use a knife instead. Once the perforations were complete, she would use a marker to write the

species of tomato on the cardboard's surface - *bivolsko surtse*, *turski domashen*, *rozov domat*, and brandywine scarlet.

Only when she deems the paper porous enough to drain the tomato juice does she place the seeds in mounds on the surface of the cardboard. Applying just enough pressure, she presses on them with the cushion of her palm, releasing each seed from its membrane.

When *baba* is done, she places the cardboard on the window sill in the kitchen. We wait until the sun dries the seeds, and that very evening, we drink the liquid collected in the bowl. I often bite down on any loose flesh that finds its way into the *chorba*.

In February, when the seeds are fully dry, she plants them.

Within a dozen plastic containers selected from the tower of my mother's empty yogurt cartons, she surrounds each seed with a special blend of fresh soil and white fertilizer. She uses her hands to press the dirt down, making the soil firm enough to support the early sprouts. At the bottom of every carton, holes are punched for proper drainage. And when the cartons are stuffed and watered, she lines them up in a plastic casserole dish that I take up to my room, propping it on the sill against my window. Sometimes, I use the curtains to tuck them in, keeping the seedlings warm.

Baba cares for the sprouts as though they were her children. She pets them with an open palm, cleaning the dirt off of their fuzzy leaf-bodies. Only when they grow to be four centimeters tall does she plant them outside. Every night before I fall asleep, I speak to them, to the seeds planted with such care. I urge them to sprout and bloom, to grow as I have grown. And with every breath I take, every exhalation that passes through my lips, I imagine a fraction of my life consumed by them.

This year, she has placed the seedlings in the living room. I look them over as I make my way across the carpeted floor, checking to see if they need watering. I think of what they will look like in the summer, fully grown, swollen fruits hanging from those delicate stems, the way their skin will crinkle when *baba* dissects them.

Every summer in *Krupnik* weighs heavy with expectation and labor, soaked in sweat and burned to a feverish blister. It is a season of hands aching to cleave the earth, to plow through rock and stone, to pluck each weed and snap the roots of grass.

Summers dense with harvests, the choosing of ripe fruits, fingers piercing the skin of tender persimmons, juice trailing down an exposed forearm, collecting at the crevice of an elbow. The buzz of bees and wasps feasting on pendant fruit far out of reach, the smell of rotting apple cores littering the grass, the snap of a chicken's beak. *Baba* spends the hottest days of summer sitting in front of a fire, making *pendjur*, a kind of

preserve. She considers its preparation a ritual, taught to her by her mother and her mother's mother.

The process always begins with a harvest. My mother and grandmother meet me in the garden where I open the curtained tarp of our make-shift greenhouse, nylon draped on top of wooden stakes and sealed to the ground by the weight of large stones. Once inside, we pick the tomatoes and peppers, choosing a selection of *rozovi domati*, dwarf purple heartthrobs, and *bivolski surtsa*. In addition, I collect a combination of red and green cubanelle peppers, placing them in a separate bucket.

On the other side of the greenhouse, *baba* picks a few tomatoes too ripe to be processed, biting into them. She slurps every tendril of juice that drips down her chin. I follow her example and bite into a tomato with cracked skin, some of its flesh having been eaten already by beetles and bees. The seeds gush into my mouth like a broken dam and I drink in all the juice. What remains of the fruit in my palms drips with a steady flow. It has always reminded me of water, of my first swim in the Black Sea on the shore of *Slunchev Briag*. The feeling of my mind and body floating while the waves caress my skin. Each bite, each swallow, lingers as I wipe my mouth on the sweat-stained sleeve of my shirt.

After collection, it takes me several trips to transport all the brimming buckets to the oven stove my *diado* built along the right-side of our garden fence. The oven, made of

stacked brick and cement, is topped off with a steel sheet eternally dyed a charcoal black.

My mother takes each bucket I carry and relentlessly rinses every pepper, every tomato, using a ratty hose and our own spring water to do so. In the meantime, *baba* readies the fireplace. She chucks in split oak and plum branches to ignite the fire.

Once the flames have burnt through the wood, *baba* places each tomato on aluminum trays, sliding them into the oven. The stems have been freshly cut, now pointing down, to allow the juice to pool underneath. She adjusts the flame to ensure that their skin burns enough to peel easily. While the tomatoes broil, their skins loosening, *baba* places the peppers one by one on the heated stovetop. They sizzle at the contact, matching my *baba's* humming as she starts to whistle to their blistering tune. She turns the peppers over, admiring the scorched skin, the tough charcoal encrusted surface, the beads of juice leaking through the cracks. An empty bucket lined with an old plastic shopping bag has been put to the side. It begins to fill with the peppers that have been thoroughly roasted, every side of their oblong bodies deliciously burnt. When the bucket can hold no more, my mother ties the handles of the bag in a bow to steam the scorched flesh inside.

I sit behind *baba*, observing the curve of her back. She begins to sing a song I have heard her sing before.

*...Пролет моя, моя бяла пролет –
знам, ще дойдеш с дъжд и урагани,
бурна страшно, огненометежна
да възвърнеш хиляди надежди
и измиеш кървавите рани...²*

I sing along to the snatches of lyrics I remember. “*Prolet moia, moia biala prolet.*” Time goes by and *baba* continues to accept the heat. She never turns away or wipes the sweat collecting on her brow. When I point out the ash pasted on her temples, she waves away my outstretched hand.

Following my mother's instructions, I begin to pluck the charred skin off of the tender flesh of the roasted peppers, occasionally flinching back from their sharp heat, wishing I had the toughness of my grandmother's callouses. My hands have always been far less adept, clumsy and raw. My mother takes out the tins of tomatoes and places them on the paved path. Beneath each tin a rock angles the contents so that the released juice collects in a corner and allows the broiled tomatoes to cool enough to touch. My mother then begins to squeeze the contents out, peeling back the skin in one piece until it releases like a small pocket. She does so without complaint, accepting the burn of the boiling juice in her palms and the sting of the acid on her cracked fingertips.

After the peeling is done, all the peppers are chopped into strips and placed in a large vat *baba* inherited from her mother. The pot is deep and the outside has been charred,

² *Oh spring, my white spring – / I know you will come with rain and hurricanes / with stormy strength, like rebellious fire / to ignite hope in the hearts of thousands / and to purify the bloody wounds of war...*

much like the surface of the stove. In it we collect the juice from the tomatoes and what remains of their flesh, as well as onions, finely chopped carrots, the strips of sliced pepper, and a generous amount of seasonings: salt, vinegar, *kopur*, sugar, and *chubritsa*.

Then, the waiting begins.

My grandmother remains like a loyal guard by the oven. She uses a long wooden ladle to stir the mixture in the vat and probe the dying embers of the flame. Hours pass and it becomes dark. I see her trace the black outline of the mountains. She kicks stray rocks like a bored child. She never wavers.

When the *pendjur* is ready, we gather by the oven in the garden, empty jars in our hands. Spoons clang against the metal vat as we scoop out the mixture. The jars begin to fill slowly and once they are sealed, we are allowed to experience the first taste. Using *baba's* baked bread, often a *pitka* or a loaf, we scrape the remnants of the paste, feasting on our shared labor. It has become tradition to tear a *zaluk* and dip it in the mixture.

Baba is too old now to bear the summer heat or the labor of the fire. It is rare to be able to feast as we once did, to know the tension of an unripened fruit and welcome the sting of a burn. And yet, *baba* still craves that labor, the heat of the sun on her back, the warm sweat dripping down her face, the sizzling of dewy peppers on the garden stove.

I crave it too, and though our cravings are shared, they are different. She craves the swollen process of nurturing the earth, the point of connection between flesh and dirt, the exhilarating feeling of submission to the natural purpose of the world. And I crave the observation, to be included in a tradition I only know from the sidelines, to partake in it, to belong to it.

Now, we spend the summers confined to the living room, gazing out the window, seeing what once was but cannot be. Next to me, *baba* sits on a chair, hands busy playing with a cane. I can see her twisting it in her hands, fingers itching to do more. Her eyes follow the movements of stray cats outside. In my hands I hold the phantom fruit of a tomato my mother has brought from *Roska's* corner store. I can hear *baba* asking in her strained voice what the price was. Quite the bargain, I might say, three *leva* and twenty eight *stotinki*.

I pick up the blue bottle cap full of medication, count the pills again: six white capsules staring back at me. With the mug in one hand and the pills in the other, I cross the living room and make my way to *baba's* door. I can hear her muttering to herself as I get closer. Something about money and or land. I am reminded of Christmas eve, the night we broke apart the *pitka* with *kusmet* and found the lucky coin. There would have been an odd number of dishes on the Christmas *trapeza*. At the center of the table -

the *pitka* with *kusmet*, a round bread decorated with pleats and braided dough. Inside it, grandmother would have hidden a coin.

Before the meal began, father would have broken the bread into pieces, naming us as he did. When he ran out of names to dedicate the pieces to, he would have listed our house, the bees, the dog, the cat, the chickens, the property, then God.

We each tore into the pieces, searching for the coin that would bring us luck. The year before, God had claimed the *stotinka*. But this time, I found myself wishing *baba* would. For her health. And yet, the coin was lodged in the piece for the land. The same land *baba* has protected with her ailing body. The land that in turn has sucked her dry.

On New Year's Day, I would have taken the *survachka* out of my closet, wipe the dust from the garlanded pop-corn and shine the coins at its top. Empty walnut shells strung together around the arms of the budding cornel, dried plums and apricots hung from the center, accentuating the ϕ shape of the *survachka*. The handle, wrapped in red and white yarn and the pom-pom at the end, tickling my wrist before and after I tapped *baba's* back with the wand.

She would have waited downstairs, her back turned toward me as I hit her with the flat side of the *survachka*, syllables rolling off my tongue, their sounds accentuated by the knock of coin on wood.

*Surva, surva, vesela godina! Da si zhiva, da si zdrava, do godina, do amina!*³

Baba would have passed me an old five leva bill in return for the well wishes, and I would have pocketed it, thinking of the sweets I might buy from the store down the street, and of the *vafla* I would get her too.

Now, when I *survakam* her back, I am gentle so as not to hurt her. But perhaps I haven't wished hard enough. Her back, so much more curved as the years roll by, she can no longer stand straight, can no longer see into a pot on the stove. The same pot we would use to dye eggs for Easter.

*Hristos voskrese. Vuistina voskrese.*⁴

Baba used to create clover patterns on the surface of the dyed eggs. She would slip a flower or two in the egg-stuffed pantyhose before she dunked them in the warm dye.

And on Easter day, my brother and sister would always choose red eggs, while I would choose violet. When my sister or brother brought the tips of their eggs down onto my violet one, we would hear the crack of a shell giving way. Next, we would switch positions, the butt of my egg now above theirs. With each collision and crack of a shell, a victor in the Easter egg battle would emerge.

³ *Surva, surva, happy new year! May you be alive, may you be healthy, for the year to come and always!*

⁴ *Jesus has risen! He truly has risen!*

There was the *kozunak*, centered on the table during *Zagovezni*. Its braided crust symbolizing the body of Christ. On every placemat there would be a bowl of fish soup, made from salmon, *hek*, *merluza*, mackerel, *popcheta*, turbot, and *chernokop*. Each bowl with a fish head in it, its eyes a delicacy. And there was roasted lamb stuffed with rice and spices, served with potatoes, parsley, and spinach on the side. And on Good Friday, the priest would set a table up in church and call it the coffin of Christ. The congregation, one by one, bending and crawling underneath it before settling to pray for a year of fertility.

Or the cuckoo bird as it sings. How those that have loose change in their pockets would be blessed with fortune in the coming year. While those that do not would feel the rumble of hunger.

Or *Tsvetnitsa*, flower day, *baba's* favorite. With crowns of pussy willow thrown into the river *Struma*. Young women waiting on the river bank, hopeful that their beloved would fetch the drowning crown and claim their hand in marriage. Just as *diado* did when they were young.

I imagine the pussy willow crown in his hands, his clothes hanging heavy on him. His shoes squelching against the pebblestone road. And my *baba*, young, her lips stained red, pulled back in a smile, her hands outstretched to hug him, the water seeping into the dress of her *nossia*, both of them oblivious to the cold and wet.

Suddenly I have arrived at *baba's* door, have become aware of the woman waiting inside.

I push the door open with my back and enter to the sound of the 6pm news.

Baba is in bed. The seven pillows supporting her back are askew. Her eyes, barely open, blink slowly. She must have fallen asleep before I opened the door. She often does. What is there for her to do, after all, but sleep?

The half of the bed that *baba* does not lie on, the half that used to belong to *diado*, is now covered in objects. From the doorway I can see an old notebook left open on the sheets. It is full of *baba's* scribbles, each one a recipe. She treasures the notebook and speaks of it as an heirloom either I or my sister will inherit. The handwriting inside of it is pristine. I can make out the Cyrillic cursive that fills the pages and fades where fingers must have rubbed the paper dry.

Bulgarians hold their alphabet in pride, each letter carefully shaped by the brothers Cyril and Methodius, each a cultural jewel. With this pride, however, comes the severe rigor of penmanship. The letters must look a certain way, must all be of equal size, must connect to each other just so. As I scan *baba's* handwriting on the pages of her notebook, I am reminded of the stories she used to tell me, of how my mother learned to write, her *pocherk* identical to *baba's*, the same rounded Б and sharp Ж, the stories of her stern teachers who whipped her left hand when she was first learning the

alphabet, the necessity that every child must learn to write with their right hand in order to honor the Soviet code. Every comrade, equal, and as such, same. And the walnut shells spread on the floors in crowded classrooms, students forced to kneel on them as punishment. Times when everyone was taught to sit with a perfectly straight back, with both hands lying flat on the desk, knees touching and feet firmly planted on the floor, the epitome of rigid 'discipline', of 'order'. I see this rigidity permeate the pages of my grandmother's notebook. Not one word out of line, not one letter misplaced, as though they had been branded on her nerves. Compulsory cyrillic.

As she lies in bed, her body wrapped in thick blankets like a cocoon. I imagine the house of her childhood, not far down the street from ours, where she helped her parents raise silkworms. A humble structure with two rooms in the basement, each one swathed in silkworms. I see her at nine years old, tending to them, fully able to harvest the silk on her own. The same hands that would hold onto her mother when they walked to the nearest bus stop where she climbed the *chernitsa* tree and collected its foliage. How she would carry the mulberry leaves in linen bags, bringing them home, spreading them across the tables in the basement. The silkworms would feast in the night, chewing with a loud *ts ts ts ts ts ts ts ts ts ts*. They kept *baba* awake.

When she wasn't in school, *baba* would learn how to process the silk from the *pashkul* or cocoon. First, she would collect all the yarn before nightfall. Then she would place

each *pashkul* into boiling water to soften the silk. Using a straw whisk, she would stir the mixture, allowing each bristle to untangle the silk thread and separate the cocoons into strips. She would then pull apart the silk and let it dry on a flat surface. Again, and again, *baba* would repeat the process. Even at nine years old, she had begun to understand labor. I imagine her small hands braiding the dry silk into knots to store or sell. *Baba* says her mother had made a bedsheet from the silk once. The sheet has long been lost, but *baba* still searches for it in her memory. It was the only remnant of those silkworms her father kept.

I imagine *baba* sitting on the floor in her childhood home, all six of her siblings by her side, the *sufra* table in front of them. Great grandmother had placed a huge vat of *tarana* and *yufka* on the table for breakfast. She had woken up early, made the dough from water and wheat flour, then poured fresh goat milk on top, letting it saturate the crust. Once the *tarana* had cooled, *baba* and her siblings would take out a spoon and eat straight from the vat. She often says they survived off of *prababa's* various combinations of flour and water. Every morning, after feeding her children, *prababa* would take the bus to *Sandanski* where she worked in a cotton processing factory. Although *baba* was not allowed inside the factory, sometimes *prababa* would take her to the cotton fields. There, they would collect the cotton together. There were no laws at the time prohibiting the labor of youth. In fact, all students would be let out of school early to help in the fields. And in the summer, kids would be taken to youth

camps, where after games, they would be tasked with cutting down wheat using sharp sickles. *Baba* still points towards that mountain top, located North of our village. She tells us of the big walnut tree at the summit, surrounded by fields of wheat and *zhito*, of days when she would come back from school in *Kiustendil* and spend her summer vacation up there as a part of the *TKZC*. “*Niama pochivka*” she would say. ‘There is no time for rest’. And so many elderly women would call on the kids to help, to collect the *rakoiki* made from heaps of wheat. But *baba* and the kids would not mind. They would rush through the work, in a hurry to finish before the elderly women did, so that they could go down into the village and dance till the moon set. *Zabava*, *baba* calls it, a word meaning “fun”.

“*Nie go znaem na trud. Nie go uchihme na jivot.*” “What you know you’ve learned from books. We, on the other hand, have learned through work.” Such were *baba’s* words to me on a day when we were talking about the future, what I have yet to learn and achieve. Everything *baba* knows, she has earned through experience. To stave off starvation, she learned how to plant seeds. To stave off the cold, she learned how to weave yarn, how to be thrifty, to persevere, how to make the best use of so little. This has been *baba’s* existence.

And standing by her bed with her medication in my hand, I can’t help but follow the thread of that existence, the long difficult past that has brought her to her current

state, the sacrifice she made for the sake of her siblings, to give up her college education at seventeen and work in the tobacco fields. She would wake up before dawn and walk on blisters to the plant where she would string leaves together with her calloused fingers and hang them to dry. When she wasn't hanging tobacco, she would work on hemp with her mother, processing it into yarn and making rugs to sell.

I set the mug on *baba's* dresser so I can help her sit up. Her eyes, still glossed over with sleep, look up at me. They have grown hazy over the years, her vision worsening with time. She can no longer read, though she tries. The skin around her face has begun to set into wrinkles, deep divots where her cheekbones meet her eyes. In those features I see the marks of the past, places of my own youth, my old apartment block in Sofia, where we moved when I was thirteen.

The sky there was permeated with a gray stillness. Cold would seep through the cracks in the clouds, webbing itself against my skin. The distant winds would tumble off the slope of Mt. *Vitosha*, forcing themselves through the narrow alleyways. I would feel the air squeeze around me.

The blocks of isolated concrete have remained, unyielding, subject to the unrelenting sameness of facade Bulgaria adopted in 1946. The entire city had been consumed by apartment blocks plastered over with "the People's glory," the past. "Revolution." "Comradery." "Victory." The desolate appearance of my old apartment block in Sofia,

in contrast to the vibrancy of Krupnik. The city forever reliant on the monotony of lifeless commutes, people chained to office chairs, forced to count each *stotinka* to afford a living.

These very concrete blocks have become impenetrable, like shields against the bite of a past forced to gnaw on nameless bones. I imagine people marching inside these buildings, bodies lined up like soldiers along the throats of angular corridors. Their backs straight, as they were taught in school, as my mother was, and *baba* too. Their faces haunted by ideological stupor. Nothing special within, nothing different without.

When I used to walk along these blocks, I would see paint chips falling like a mutilated rain. Fragments of debris molted off the surface of the buildings. The sidewalks covered in powdered paint cascading down the *terasi* above. They were eternally weathered, these hollow blocks stacked together like faceless corpses, an image of deathlike comradeship. And within them there was a false sense of immortality, the features of which were sketched into the very face of the concrete, the ghost of greatness walking within.

I have observed the way in which these facades refuse to be demolished, a persistence similar to *baba's*, which reigns at the cost of her own body, those very bones that have been weathered into servitude.

I look and I see *baba's* mangled limbs lying in this bed in her room. There are no traces of comrades, no vigor, nor any vestige of collective responsibility to support her. Just an old woman. And through her I see the very ghost of a past that I saw in my old apartment block in Sofia, infested with automatons moving inside of it like ants, crawling down stairs, breathing air through fissures of broken glass. Elevator doors that creak and chime, again and again, mute to all else but the command of a button, the strain of solid bone. Where people move up and down the spines of buildings like refugees, seeking cover from a past hungry for recognition.

They do not see a culture that needs to be preserved. Like the homes in *Plovdiv* and *Varosha*, their walls, painted in hues of green and blue. The slim-bodied buildings covered in meticulous stone, mosaics detailed in colored glass and tile, their broad, wooden shoulders supporting the clay of their roofs, the trusses lined with intricate carvings of liliun jankaes, larkspur, roses. And where the borders of the houses branch out, supported by beams connecting to the stones of the facades, shade unspooling where garlic and peppers have been strung to dry. These homes, the work of human hands, fingers that delve deep into the earth and extract the clay, the mud and stone. And within them, young boys that herd sheep and play the *gaida* under walnut trees. Gardens where women prick their hands on thorns of morning rose and pluck dewy blossoms before wiping away the blood. Where goats wander the streets, their hooves

clipping in rhythm with the barking of stray dogs. Where milk is curdled and pressed into *butsi* of cheese to be traded for a dozen eggs.

Now, these homes in *Plovdiv* are forgotten. Their agricultural traditions deemed insignificant. The time when women would wait in snow crusted streets, bodies lined up to receive wheat and rice. Where *baba* stood, trading a year's worth of savings for a half ripe banana. The first she ever saw. Or the ball of yarn tucked in her pocket, itching to be knitted into a sweater for her children. And the hollow *Diado Mraz* chocolate bar, perched on the stand for ten *stotinki*, the only Christmas gift she could afford for her kids. One they shared. Whose wrapper my mother kept intact, stretched around scraps of tissue and cloth - a make-shift toy for her to play with.

And at night, the alleyways *baba* walked through on her way home. The darkness caused by stolen lightbulbs. Rusty sockets pried open by the hope to scavenge metal worth selling. Each bulb bearing the potential to be bartered for a slice of bread, a thin sliver of *lukanka*. I walk down these same alleyways, these same underground corridors. When I do, I see her as she once was. Young. A mother. A worker.

In my memories of Sofia, the sky remains unchanged, drenched in shades of gray, matched by the facades of the buildings. A nation erected under foreign rule. The five-hundred years of enslavement. The cruelty of the Byzantine empire and the blinding of the soldiers in *Klyuch*. The fifteen thousand men captured, each blinded

except for one in every hundred, permitted to keep only an eye so as to guide the other back home. Next to them, the faces of rebellion – *Vasil Levski* and *Ivan Vazov*. The poems they wrote and the songs they sang. The submission into the Soviet Empire. These wounds have been engraved into the very bones of the buildings. The closed openness of the halls, the structures full of cavities brimming with a tangible need to make sense of the past. To claim it. My block, naked. One of many. Its twins and comrades laid out across the street at full attention, ready for command.

Here, the air smells of smoke. Someone on the second floor is grilling meat. The delicious fumes cause my mind to wander. I pass the outside of the store on the corner of the first block and inside of it I see kids buying cigarettes and *rakia*. The owner frowns at them, identifying a bleakness in their futures they cannot yet see. I continue. Entrance 87a. Entrance 87b. 88a. 88c. There are graffiti on the walls. Two redacted swastikas and a declaration of love. The pavement at the foot of my building is potholed, full of puddles and mud. I close my eyes and hear the sticky sounds of shoes on grass. There are kids that haven't forgotten how to play, circling a mound of dirt. The air there smells of dog piss and cherry blossoms. The trees wait patiently for someone to claim their rotting fruit.

I no longer live in Bulgaria. When I left *Krupnik* all those years ago, *baba* saw me off the only way she knew how – with water.

“Da ti vurvi kato po voda” she said, throwing a pitcher of water onto the cobblestones outside. Since then, she has done it every time I leave. Though no one ever explained it to me, I have understood that the act of throwing water is a wish for smooth travels. ‘May the journey flow like water’, better yet, ‘may it be as though you have walked on water’. As though I were Jesus. As though *baba* were urging God himself to look after me. But now, I think of floating. ‘May it pass as though it is being carried by water’. Perhaps there is serenity in being carried away, floating on the top of a stream that dictates your life.

The taste of oil has always been heavy on my tongue. *Diado* was the first to teach me how to rid myself of oil, especially from the surface of soup. At lunch many years ago, we both looked down at our shared bowl of chicken and potato soup and saw the puddles of oil spreading on the surface. I stirred and stirred, and still it would not dissolve. The puddles remained until *Diado* dipped his spoon just below the surface and with a steady hand, began to scoop the islands of oil up. Each spoonful he placed into a small glass bowl. He repeated the process again and again as I watched in wonder. *Diado* explained to me that oil and water could never mix, that they were inherently different.

I sometimes feel like the oil on soup, floating on the surface, eternally other.

Once *baba* is sitting upright in her bed, I pass her the mug of tea I had left on the dresser. In my hands I can feel the liquid slosh against the porcelain. Its movements feel so unpredictable. Somehow unattainable. I pass the mug to *baba* and watch her take a tentative sip.

“*Da ti vurvi kato po voda.*” Her voice reverberates in my memory.

‘May you walk on water’. ‘May your journey be smooth’. ‘May you arrive where you need to be’. The water my *baba* showered the path with all those years ago was a symbol of life and fruitfulness. Just as the land needs water to grow, so do people, and I suppose, so do I. In *baba*’s eyes, the sacrifice of the water that could have been used on the trees in the garden was a way to guarantee my growth. Where water flows, flowers bloom.

I am not the only person in my family to have left Bulgaria. Many have left before me and continue to leave after me. My friends find themselves abroad, my family in Germany, and my cousins in Spain. *Baba* alone remains in Bulgaria, befriended by the *lелki* next door who are too old and ailing to accept change. They meet under the dim light of the lamppost and talk for hours, discussing seedlings and the heat of the sun. When cars pass, their conversations hush. Their eager eyes scan the vehicles for passengers who might have returned from abroad in hopes of settling down. *Baba* and her friends examine every person that walks past, greeting only those they know –

distant relatives, friends of friends, contractors and neighbors. They wait and judge the passing faces with critical precision aimed at the status of their settlement. Hoping some will remain. I can't help but feel that our departure has left them barren.

We, the departed, are left with few roots to keep us grounded. Existence becomes distant and bland. The rituals I once treasured have become echoes, pale memories. I wrap my wrists in *martenitsi* on the first day of spring. I impatiently wait until the first tree blooms to tether my Bulgarian heritage to a branch. I dye eggs on Easter in scarlet red and crack their shells with my friends. And when they forget the precise angle of their wrist before they bring their egg down onto mine, I remind them, because I want never to forget. I sing Bulgarian songs now only with effort. I try to convince myself that this is enough, that my roots will endure. And yet I am like oil on broth, disconnected from the core of my heritage.

Baba is my link, my motherland, the living connection to my origins.

I absorb the stories of her childhood, consume them like fresh fruit. I gnaw on her past like the shell of an apricot pit. If I take a hammer to its husk and break it in half, I would find a seed inside. And if I eat it, I would grow roots, just like her.

Baba, my tether, is withering. The country itself is withering. The land is dry with age. Those remaining in the heart of the nation have been left to a desolate existence. They carry the burden of tradition on their shoulders. I used to call *Baba* on the phone three

times a day. She would look at my mother and say “Mina came to visit!” I never corrected her or tried to explain the virtual workings of a phone. How I could be both there and elsewhere and nowhere at the same time. She would try to smuggle pie and potatoes through the phone, to give me sweets to put in my pocket and to share with friends. But no matter how much either one of us wanted to, I could never reach through the screen to hold her hand or collect the gifts she had offered,

I try to picture the four year-old son of my cousin in Germany whom I have never seen. How he speaks German fluently yet struggles to pronounce the “r” in *Bulgaria*. His knowledge of the land must be limited to digital pictures, the tiny screen of a phone. How he must be unfamiliar with the smell of *djanki* in spring or the feeling of bare toes stepping on mulberries to extract their juice. He has never bathed in the *Struma* river, has never climbed up *Rila* to see the lake *Sulzata*. He does not know the embrace of his Bulgarian grandfather or the sadness in his eyes. He is indifferent in the distance, yet I am not.

“*Babo*, I brought you your candies” I say, passing on the medication in the blue bottle cap.

“Thank you, *chedo*.” She knows the pills are not candies.

I pour them into her hand and wait for her to put them in her mouth while fluffing the seven pillows behind her back. The worsening of her osteoporosis prevents her from

lying down or standing without support. Each year, I add a new pillow to the pile. Once she has swallowed every pill, I place the mug on the table by her bed.

“Bravo, baba”.

On the wall opposite us, there is a wedding photo of a young man with a beautiful smile. Next to him stands a woman wearing a pearl necklace and a veiled tiara. An artist has painted a bouquet of roses in the woman’s hand, all in various shades of gray and white.

The photograph was a gift from my parents in celebration of *baba* and *diado’s* fiftieth wedding anniversary, an enlargement of a small picture my grandfather kept in his wallet. Having pictures taken at that time in Bulgaria was rare, film and lenses prohibitively expensive. But weddings were an exception. *Baba* says her father used the last of his savings to take that picture. It was a gift she has treasured all her life.

“Look how handsome your diado is” baba says, her eyes tearing up.

“You both look beautiful, baba. You look happy.”

“We were happy. Back then, we were.”

Silence seeps into the room, a kind of comfortable lack of words, as though they were never necessary. We can both feel him, my *diado*, looking right back at us from the portrait on the wall.

Baba stays silent.

“I miss him too.”

She lies back down in her pile of pillows and I move so that I am lying next to her. She has her feet tucked underneath the thick *iurgan*. I can smell the wool of her socks through the blanket, their earthy scent. She does not seem to mind or notice it.

My legs are stretched out on top of the mattress, and I lean back so that I can glimpse into her line of vision. We spend a moment like that, in silence. The murmur of the tv fills the space and the flashing images keep us occupied. *Baba* often leaves her tv on. She says it is less lonely to sleep with its company. She is watching a news channel discussing the politics of Macedonia and the most recent achievements of the *Levski* soccer team. Neither topic interests her, yet she listens.

From this vantage point I can see her favorite shirt. It is laid out on the arm of a chair in the corner of the room. Each of the buttons is made from mother of pearl, the collar wide and angular. Tortoise shell patterns scatter across the silk like muddy rain. She only ever wears the shirt on important occasions: weddings, funerals, anniversaries,

doctors appointments. To prepare for such events, she lays it out a week in advance, makes sure every button is securely fastened and each seam is tight and crisp.

Baba has learned to fill up her time with organizing and reorganizing her belongings. She scavenges her closet for any misplaced clothing, shirts that have fallen off their hangers or pants that have been folded one too many times. She tries on blazers she once wore but can no longer force herself into, skirts that once fit her but now hang too low and too long, shoes that squeeze her bunions and create calluses between her toes. She has taken out a pile of socks from her dresser, some missing their match while others have holes she has vowed to darn.

Inside of the closet there is an old Malagasy ice-cream box, filled with buttons and loose thread. She spends days examining each button, showing them to me as though they were part of a private exhibit. Some still have threads looped into them. She thinks each one is beautiful. Sometimes, she lingers on a button for days, trying to remember where it belonged. Did it fall from my mother's school uniform when she was thirteen? Did it belong to one of *diado's* well-worn trousers? Was it a part of my uncle's favorite blazer? She would carry the button with her while she tried to remember. Gliding her thumb over the surface, turning it over to see the loop in the back, squinting to find any branding or numbers. Her very memories have been collected in that box. They haunt each button like a specter.

I look around *baba's* room and see her life contained within it. Everything she uses, everything she treasures. The socks on her dresser, the stacks of bobby pins on her bedside table, the blankets she has fastened together with safety pins. The half-empty bottles of eyedrops, the crumbs from a *vafła* on a napkin, the used tissues by her bed, the smudged lenses of her glasses. The clothing she has folded on the chair, the very cloth that has doubled as her skin. All of these objects, the material vestiges of her story. And yet, the objects will remain, as objects do. They will outlive her. And I will be left sifting through the contents of her room. Picking up each button in her button box. Lingered over them for days, trying to reconstruct the stories to which they belong. Stories partially mine, yet distant, as though I were looking at them through layers of hazy glass.

I imagine *baba's* best shirt, now displayed on the armrest in the corner, once draped over her shoulders. How she must have worn it when I was first born. How she must have cradled my cheek against that fabric.

I see her in it. Taller and younger. Straight back and stern smile. Her hair permed, her lips stained red. There is a *pitka* in her hands, crumbs from the bread rolling off of the silk fabric of her shirt. My name, *Muha*, is written on the surface of the crust. Each letter, surrounded by dough-woven flowers. She has baked this *pitka* for my

prestapulka, has decorated its surface just for me, so that the path I walk on will bloom with flowers in abundance.

I turn my head and see *baba* on the bed. She is struggling to reach the mug I left on her bedside table. When she lifts it, some of the liquid spills out. She doesn't seem to mind, or perhaps, she hasn't noticed. She brings the mug to her lips and drinks with loud gulps.

I close my eyes and see her standing next to my mother. They are both looking down at the infant version of me while my mother loosely ties a string of white and red thread around my ankles. The strings have been woven together into a fine twist of yarn. Once she is done, they both step back and leave me standing on the path in front of our house. I am surrounded by family and friends, eager to witness my first step, my *prestapulka*. My brother and sister are there, each not much older than me. The twins pay me no mind, sitting on my father's lap as he's watching my mother beckon me forward, eyes wide and mouth open in excitement. She is making baby faces at me. *Baba* has one of her hands on my mother's shoulder, the other waves at me with encouragement. As though I, in my infant age, can understand the significance of this moment.

The channel in the bedroom changes. Suddenly I hear the sharp sound of a *gaida* playing through the tv. *Baba* has chosen to change the channel from the evening news

to the *Narodna Bulgaria* broadcast, where performances of old folk songs spill from the static of the old screen. A man with a deep voice starts to sing about youth and drunk love. Halfway through the chorus, *baba* sings along. She looks at me and tells me how she used to sing this very song when she was my age. I tell her I do not know the lyrics. Couples wearing *nossii* start to dance and twirl in a synchronized motion. Their rapid hops mesmerize me. *Baba* begins to bounce where she is sitting on the mattress and I feel the reverberations of her movements against my thighs.

In my mind, I have taken my first step. The thread tying my ankles together has snapped. I am fifteen months old, unsteady on my feet. I picture the joy on *Baba's* face when I don't fall. In her eyes, I am becoming independent and *Baba* has always had a love for independence. She sees me as though for the first time.

My clumsy steps are met with applause and congratulations from our neighbors. They sit back on foldable chairs, drinking wine and *rakia* from paper cups. Those too young to drink alcohol sip on Fanta and freshly squeezed apple juice. There must be a table somewhere with food and additional wine, some sliced salami and *lukanka* on it, some cheese and *kashkaval*. I catch a glimpse of the *pitka* behind *baba*, its surface covered in an embroidered linen cloth. The bread has been placed on a small wooden table away from the crowd. It is waiting for its turn in the ritual.

Baba has wiggled her way back down the bed to a fully supine position. Her head rests at an odd angle, chin dipping downward and sideways. I position myself so that I am leaning against the headboard, but the back of my head hits the wall. The cold sends a chill down my neck and I shiver. I move closer to *baba* so that she can rest her head on my shoulder. The top of her hair smells like age and memory – my first day of school, the scent of mothballs, the scent in the air before it rains.

I reach my mother's arms through the roar of applause and glimpses of faces I recognize, my uncle and my aunt, sitting on some chairs under the fig tree, my cousins playing with an inflatable beach ball in the garden. Suddenly *baba* has brought forward the table with the *pitka* on it. Over the linen that covers the freshly baked bread, my mother has placed objects. Each one points towards a possible future. A thermometer for a doctor. A calculator for a scientist. A necktie for an entrepreneur. A wrench, a clothing pin, a pair of red shoes. A phone, a pen, a book. I choose the pen.

Baba's chest is rising and falling now in a sleepy pattern. Her breathing has become shallower since the last time I lay in bed with her. My gratitude for these rare moments we share deepens by the year, to feel her next to me, slumbering. I close my eyes. The tv is still on and the music is too loud.

I am still gripping the pen in my small hands when the bread is lifted from the table. *Baba* grabs one corner and my mother grabs the other. They each pull and break the

pitka in half while I am left seated underneath. This is all part of the ritual, my mother is assuring me. I imagine the crumbs that must be falling in my hair, my *baba* picking them off, eating them. Nothing must go to waste. Everyone is eating a piece of the *pitka* now, savoring the letters of my name while they chew. Next to my no longer bound feet, snowdrops begin to bloom in the grass. I am touching them. I am plucking the snowdrops and waving them in the air. Or perhaps I just sit and look at the flowers sprouting from the ground. Around me, the adults talk. They consider what I might become. What role the chosen pen might play in my future. How I might wield it to repay my family, as any filial child would. They talk as though I'm not there, or more specifically, not fully there.

I open my eyes and I am in *baba's* bed. Her eyes are closed. I can feel her cold toes underneath the blanket and wonder if her wool socks have holes in them. I see the pile of socks heaped on her dresser left to be darned, the box of buttons she hopes to organize, the recipes in the notebook she plans to rewrite.

And then I am running. I am running down our street, *Kresnensko Vustanie*. Away from the celebration. Away from the house. I am running as fast as my legs can carry me. My knees wobble but I do not fall. The great walnut tree at the edge of my neighbors lawn flashes past me. I run past their gate and the shade of the *djanki* tree in the corner. I run over rocks and pebbles, seeing ants and bugs where my feet fall. I run past a stray

dog barking in the distance. Gravel gets stuck in the soles of my shoes and it stabs me in the toes, but I keep running. I think that if I fall, I might scrape my knees and bleed. A scary thought. I catch a glimpse of the horizon, the mountains tall behind the houses in the distance. They all seem so far away.

I am running and I can feel the white and red yarn still tied around my ankle. The loose ends sway with the force of my movements. Behind me, the guests are running too. Their mouths are full of bread and rakia, joy plastered on their faces.

I am running and I hear my parents calling my name. They are cheering me on. I think I catch a glimpse of *baba* standing by the house. She is wearing her favorite silk blouse. *Diado* is standing by her side.

I am running.

I am running.

I am running

Bulgarian Glossary

<i>Baba</i> - grandmother	10
<i>Na gladno</i> - on an empty stomach	10
<i>Sled zakuska</i> - after breakfast	10
<i>Sled vecheria</i> - after dinner	10
<i>Chipov</i> (nose) - button nose	12
<i>Diado</i> - grandfather	13
<i>Pradiado</i> - great grandfather	13
<i>Liastovichki</i> - swallows (bird)	14
<i>Motiki</i> - garden hoes	14
<i>Naves</i> - an open garden shed	14
<i>Chereshi</i> - cherries	15
<i>Nektar</i> - fresh fruit juice	16
<i>Djanki</i> - a kind of fruit (similar to a plum)	16
<i>Turshia</i> - pickled cauliflower, broccoli, peppers, and carrots	16
<i>Pendjur</i> - a Bulgarian paste made from pepper and tomato	16
<i>Mashterka</i> - thyme	17
<i>Laika</i> - chamomile	17
<i>Sirene</i> - a Bulgarian white cheese similar to feta	17
<i>Popara</i> - tea, bread, and <i>sirene</i> (feta)	17
<i>Zaluk</i> - a small piece (often of food)	18
<i>Kashkaval</i> - a Bulgarian yellow cheese	18
<i>Blagi</i> - sweet	18
<i>Bialo medche</i> - white honey	21
<i>Staiata na diado</i> - grandfather's room	21
<i>Blagoevgrad</i> - a city in Bulgaria	22
<i>Leva</i> - the Bulgarian currency	22
<i>Duzka</i> - chewing-gum	23
<i>Sedem</i> - seven	24
<i>Osem</i> - eight	24
<i>Devet</i> - nine	24
<i>Deset</i> - ten	24
<i>Edinaiset</i> - eleven	24
<i>Dvanaiset</i> - twelve	24
<i>Edno</i> - one	25
<i>Dve</i> - two	25

<i>Tri</i> - three	25
<i>Chetiri</i> - four	25
<i>Devedeset i osem</i> - ninety-eight	25
<i>Devedeset i devet</i> - ninety-nine	25
<i>Sto</i> - one hundred	25
<i>Zhito za poem</i> - boiled sweet wheat served during funerals	27
<i>Kebabcheta</i> - minced meat shaped like hot-dogs	27
<i>Kiofteta</i> - minced meat shaped like patties	27
<i>Rakia</i> - a bulgarian alcohol spirit	27
<i>Pitka</i> - a bulgarian homemade bread	27
<i>Menche</i> - a bulgarian small bucket full of holy water	29
<i>Krupnik</i> - a village in Bulgaria	39
<i>Zlatna prevuzhodna</i> - a species of yellow apple	35
<i>Chervena prevuzhodna</i> - a species of red apple	35
<i>Zimna bananova</i> - a species of yellow apple	35
<i>Krupnishka</i> - belonging to Krupnik	36
<i>Martenitsa/i</i> - a bracelet woven from red and white yarn	36
<i>Baba Marta</i> - the first day of March	37
<i>Chorba</i> - thick juice or soup	39
<i>Chernomorets</i> - a brand of chocolates	39
<i>Bivolsko surtse</i> - a species of 'heart' tomatoes	40
<i>Turski domashen</i> - a species of Turkish tomatoes	40
<i>Rozov domat</i> - a species of pink tomatoes	40
<i>Slunchev Briag</i> - a city by the Black Sea	42
<i>Kopur</i> - dill	45
<i>Chubritsa</i> - an herb similar to wild mint	45
<i>Stotinki</i> - Bulgarian currency coins	46
<i>Kusmet</i> - luck	46
<i>Trapeza</i> - dining table	46
<i>Survachka</i> - a large wand made from a tree branch	47
<i>Vafla</i> - a wafer	48
<i>Kozunak</i> - a bulgarian sweet bread served on Easter	49
<i>Zagovezni</i> - holiday that falls 7 weeks before Easter	49
<i>Hek</i> - heck fish	49
<i>Merluza</i> - hake fish	49
<i>Popcheta</i> - goby fish	49
<i>Chernokop</i> - bluefish fish	49
<i>Tsvetnitsa</i> - Palm Sunday	49

<i>Struma</i> - the name of a river	49
<i>Nossia/i</i> - bulgarian traditional dress	49
<i>Pocherk</i> - handwriting	50
<i>Chernitsa</i> - mulberries	51
<i>Pashkul</i> - cocoon	51
<i>Sufra</i> - a floor table	52
<i>Tarana</i> - a food similar to couscous	52
<i>Yufka</i> - a kind of dough	52
<i>Prababa</i> - great-grandmother	52
<i>Sandanski</i> - a city in Bulgaria	52
<i>Zhito</i> - wheat	53
<i>Kiustendil</i> - a city in Bulgaria	53
<i>Rakoiki</i> - heaps of wheat	53
<i>Zabava</i> - parties with dancing	53
<i>Vitosh</i> - a mountain in Bulgaria	54
<i>Terasi</i> - balcony	55
<i>Plovdiv</i> - city in Bulgaria	56
<i>Varosha</i> - a historic neighborhood in <i>Blagoevgrad</i>	56
<i>Gaida</i> - a Bulgarian bagpipe	56
<i>Butsi</i> - a block (usually of cheese)	57
<i>Diado Mraz</i> - Santa Claus	57
<i>Lukanka</i> - a cured meat	57
<i>Klyuch</i> - a village in Bulgaria	57
<i>Vasil Levski</i> - a Bulgarian revolutionary	58
<i>Ivan Vazov</i> - a Bulgarian revolutionary and poet	58
<i>Lelki</i> - aunties	60
<i>Rila</i> - a mountain in Bulgaria	62
<i>Sulzata</i> - the name of a lake shaped like a tear	62
<i>Chedo</i> - child	62
<i>Bravo</i> - well done	63
<i>Iurgan</i> - a thick blanket	64
<i>Levski</i> - a soccer team named after <i>Vasil Levski</i>	64
<i>Prestapulka</i> - the Bulgarian celebration of a child's first steps	67
<i>Narodna Bulgaria</i> - a tv channel which literally means 'National Bulgaria'	68
<i>Kresnensko Vustanie</i> - a street in Krupnik meaning 'Rebellion in Kreston'	70