

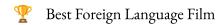
Published with the blessing of **Father Boyan Sarăev**

Dedicated to my sister Desislava.

Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

In 2025, a feature-length film adaptation of the novel *Don't Close Your Eyes* was released, based on a screenplay by Martin Ralchevski. The film won multiple awards:

2025 London International Film Festival, London, UK



52nd ICVM Awards (2025), Windsor, CO, USA

Best Foreign Language Film

2025 Christian Film Festival, Newport, VA, USA

- Best Feature Film
- Pest Producer
- Best Actor Alexander Kanev
- Pest Supporting Actor Krustyu Lafazanov
- Pest Supporting Actor Hristo Garbov

2025 Salty Earth Film Festival, Fort Atkinson, WI, USA

- Pest Drama
- Best Cinematography

Other books by Martin Ralchevski:

- **♦** ENDLESS NIGHT
- **♦** FOREST SPIRIT
- **❖** DEMIGODDESS
- ♦ 30 POUNDS
- **❖** DECEPTION
- **❖** EMIGRANT
- **♦** ANTICHRIST
- **♦** SOUL
- ❖ THE MEANING OF LIFE
- **❖** ETERNITY
- **♦** LAST PROMISE

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FOREWORD

Following the loss of the wondrous monk from *The Meaning of Life*, his noble work is continued by his friend, the radio host Nikolay. Later, this spiritual legacy is passed on to the twins Pavel and Nikolina, whose story concludes in *Eternity*.

In *Don't Close Your Eyes*, Pavel is an exemplary priest in the capital, while Nikolina is deeply faithful but gravely ill. This is where the mystical figure of Peter also appears.

This is a richly blessed work, masterfully built around the legend of the hermit of Strandzha. It reveals the grandeur and the inner strength of those who truly love Christ. The faith and unwavering spirit of the young Father Pavel, who loses his sister but refuses to accept her death, are deeply moving. And the extraordinary encounter between him and the holy fool-hermit is without parallel.

A book that is the pinnacle of prayer and Orthodox life in modern times. A golden quill.

—Father Boyan Sarăev

PART I: Year 1981

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what He has done for my soul.

(Psalm 65:16)

THE IDIOT

eter was sitting at the table, watching with excitement as his mother lit the candles on his birthday cake. Beside him were his father Ivan and his sister Ivana.

- Happy birthday to my grown-up boy! Stanka exclaimed cheerfully, carrying the cake toward him.
- As of today, you're officially an adult!
- Thanks, Mom! he replied, puffing out his chest in excitement.

She placed the cake in front of him and encouraged him to make a wish before blowing out the candles.

Peter hesitated, and his father and sister looked at him expectantly.

- Hurry up his mother nudged him or the candles will burn out.
- I wish Dad would love me! he murmured and looked at his mother, waiting for her approval.

Stanka's eyes filled with tears.

— He does love you, my boy — she stroked his head. — He loves you! It's just... grown men aren't like mothers. They love too, but... in their own way. Now come on. Wishing you health and happiness. Blow out the candles!

* *

It was a truly warm, sunny September day. The air still carried the dryness of summer. Most people had left their daily chores behind, donned their summer clothes, and were strolling through the streets of the seaside town. Some were headed for the beach. Ivan and Stanka were among them.

— Oh, what beautiful weather — Stanka beamed — it's the end of September, and it still feels like summer. It warms my soul.

Ivan grabbed her by the shoulders. He was a large, rough, and unrefined man. Affection was foreign to him.

— If the water's not cold, I'll go in for a swim — he declared, gazing out at the blue expanse that soon opened up before them.

There were about thirty people on the beach. All locals.

Ivan and Stanka spread out a large white sheet on the sand and lay down on it.

Ten minutes later, warmed by the sun's rays, Ivan got up and headed toward the sea, while Stanka closed her eyes and drifted back in time.

They had been born and raised in Ahtopol¹. As kids, they played in the sandbox at kindergarten, later studied together at school, and before they knew it, they'd grown up and fallen in love. They married at

¹ A small seaside town on the Black Sea coast in the South of Bulgaria. - Author's note

the end of the 1950s². Shortly after, in 1963, Peter was born — their first child. From the very beginning of the pregnancy, Stanka sensed something was wrong. The doctors confirmed her fears and gently advised her to terminate the pregnancy. Abortion had only recently been legalized in the country³, and she could have easily taken advantage of the opportunity, but her maternal instinct wouldn't let her.

Over the years, Ivan would often drive invisible, venomous arrows into her heart, saying he regretted that she hadn't gone through with the abortion when she had the chance. The boy was physically healthy, strong, and handsome, but from birth, he had a degree of intellectual disability that, unfortunately, couldn't be cured. And back then, that was almost like a curse. In the era of building a new social order, the weak and the different weren't tolerated. On the contrary — those were times of conformity and relentless ambition. There were always those who sneered behind the boy's back. The more heartless even called him by the cruel name "idiot."

"But why do they say that?" Stanka would grieve... "He's my son. I love him."

But her emotional pain didn't touch Ivan in the slightest. As a poorly educated and coarse man from the deep countryside, he refused to accept the fate of having a disabled child and couldn't overcome his shame. It showed in every aspect of his attitude toward the boy. Sometimes, when he was alone with Peter for too long, a terrifying thought would cross Stanka's mind — that he might be capable of hurting him.

Because of the stress and worry from raising Peter, she had trouble conceiving again. It didn't happen as planned, and it took eight whole years. This time, fate spared them nothing. The baby was a girl — healthy and beautiful like a drop of morning dew. When the nurse handed her to Ivan, she admitted she'd never seen a more beautiful and well-formed newborn in her life. Ivan was so proud and happy that he wanted his daughter to bear his name. Stanka agreed. They named her Ivana.

* *

Of the 20th century. - Editor's note

² Of the 20th century. - Editor's note

³ Since 1956, abortions have been legally permitted in Bulgaria. – Author's note

The *Indian summer*⁴ lingered longer than expected. It was cherished not only by Ivan and Stanka, but also by their grown-up children.

It was Friday. The date — the second. The month — October. The year — 1981. Peter was still basking in the pride of recently turning eighteen. Ivana was ten.

Stanka and Ivan had some urgent business in Burgas⁵ and had to spend the entire day there. They had explained to Peter what the errand was. In the years to come, he would often try to remember what exactly they had told him, but he never quite could. The only thing he would never forget was that on that sunny morning, he saw them smile for the last time in his life.

Stanka carefully sliced some bread, spread it with butter, placed bits of ham in between, and wrapped the sandwiches in plastic bags.

— Here! — she showed them to Peter and put them in the fridge. — Keep an eye on the clock, and when it's twelve thirty, eat them with Ivana. Drink a little milk too. We'll be back by dinner and everything will be fine.

— Uh, can we go to... the sea? For a swim? — Peter asked shyly as they all stepped out of the house and gathered around the car.

At his words, Ivan's face darkened.

- Absolutely not! he raised his voice.
- But... look how warm it is Peter looked pleadingly at his mother.
- No! You heard what your father said. You can't! she didn't give in. It's dangerous for you to be at the sea alone!

Stanka and Ivan got into the car, while tears of disappointment welled up in Peter and Ivana's eyes.

— You know I have friends and connections everywhere, and I'll easily find out everything — Ivan warned Peter through the open window. — Watch yourself! If I find out you went to the beach, you'll be in serious trouble. You've been warned!

⁴ The last warm days in the late summer. - Editor's note

⁵ The main town in the southern part of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. - Editor's note

Ivan started the engine of his new Moskvitch⁶, shifted into first gear, and drove off noisily. Stanka turned around, smiled at them, and waved through the open window.

Once the car disappeared from view, Peter sat sadly on the small bench in front of the house, and Ivana went back inside.

Not even half an hour had passed, and warmed by the autumn sun, Peter suddenly gathered unexpected courage. He went into the house and looked for his sister.

- I'm going! he said with authority.
- Alone?! she was surprised.
- Well, you heard Mom and Dad. They didn't let us go. That's why I won't go to the beach, but to the rocks! Behind the hill. No one will see me there. And Dad... he won't find out.

A storm erupted in Ivana's heart. She began to pace nervously. Inside the house everything was gray, dim, stuffy — and most of all, boring. But outside it was sunny, warm, so magnetic and tempting. She couldn't swim, but she loved the sea and every chance she got, if the weather was nice and their parents allowed it, she'd joyfully splash in the shallow water. She wanted to do it now too. Ivan and Stanka were far away and wouldn't be back anytime soon. Her brother wasn't the most reasonable person, but in case of danger, he would always come to her aid.

— I'm going to put on my swimsuit! — Peter perked up and went into his room.

He wasn't gone long, and when he returned, Ivana was already waiting like a little lady — wearing her swimsuit and a dress, a towel slung over her shoulder, ready for adventure.

Peter had a plan. He explained to his sister that they would deliberately head *up* the street — opposite the direction of the beach — so the neighbors wouldn't suspect anything. Then they'd turn past the last house, circle through a nearby grove, and make their way back to the sea near the big rocks. They'd go down a narrow path, he'd help her down the steep parts, and that way they'd be completely alone on the small rocky beach. Ivana's eyes lit up with excitement.

As they walked, she kept glancing back at the house.

— Don't worry. No one's going to catch us! — Peter reassured her, giving her a gentle nudge.

⁶ A popular Russian (Soviet) passenger car brand from the 20th century, no longer in production. – Editor's note

It was strange, but despite his obvious mental challenges, Peter sometimes radiated a surprising confidence. At moments like this, if someone who didn't know him saw him, they'd never suspect he had any kind of intellectual disability. In fact, years ago, a kind and educated woman from Burgas had said something similar to Stanka. The essence of her words was that if Ivan, instead of constantly yelling and insulting his son, treated him with understanding and love, he would improve greatly. Stanka had held onto those words and tried her best to compensate for Ivan's hostility and aggression — but unfortunately, she didn't always succeed. "Evil must be stronger than good," she would conclude sadly, whenever Peter came seeking comfort after yet another insult from his father.

The rocky beach wasn't far from their home, but because of the long detour, they reached it after nearly an hour. They carefully descended the steep path, stood before the sea and congratulated each other on the successful execution of their plan. They laid their towels on a secluded flat spot, and Peter eagerly jumped into the water from a low rock. He swam around, explored, and found a shallow spot where Ivana could easily enter the sea. He dove, jumped, splashed, swam, and played like a six-year-old for nearly two hours without a break. During that time, Ivana went in and out of the water several times. Finally, exhausted from all the swimming, Peter dragged his feet to the towel and collapsed on it. The sun warmed him, and he dozed off.

When he was calm and well-rested, his mental disability was hardly noticeable. But as soon as he stepped out of his comfort zone, the problem quickly revealed itself. Now was one of those times. He completely forgot about Ivana, relaxed, and fell into a deep sleep.

While Peter had been in the water nearby, Ivana felt safe and swam confidently. But now, even though she was a little scared, she decided not to wake him.

Shortly after entering the sea again, she noticed the sky beginning to turn gray. There was no wind, but the heavens seemed to grow heavy all at once until they turned pitch black. Out of nowhere, waves appeared. At first small, then big, and then even bigger. Despite the changing seabed, Ivana managed to find the flat spot where she'd been swimming earlier and tried to stay there, not drifting left or right. When a storm is approaching, the waves start out evenly sized. But then, suddenly, three larger waves rise from somewhere. She didn't know this about the sea and took the bigger waves as a challenge she had to overcome. From her perspective, they looked like water giants. She was small and naive, and in her childlike innocence, she believed she could fight off the stormy sea. That was until one of those water giants lifted her high and swept her rapidly out into deeper water. When she tried to stand, her feet found no bottom. She searched for it again and again—but it was gone. It all happened incredibly fast. There was no time to think. Realizing in horror that she was far from shore and couldn't touch

the bottom anymore, she gathered all her strength, pushed herself up, and managed to scream for help. Half-asleep, Peter heard the faint cry—but the crashing surf and whistling wind quickly drowned it out. A second cry never came. Ivana was swallowed by the raging water and began to sink, her small lungs rapidly filling with seawater. Within a minute, her limp body reached the bottom. Her muscles still twitched in reflex, but she had no strength left to push herself back up. Her heart pounded three times faster, trying to compensate for the shock, but the lack of oxygen sealed her fate. The more she struggled to breathe, the more her lungs filled with water.

* *

Twenty minutes later, chilled by the rising wind and the absence of sunlight, Peter woke up. He stirred reluctantly, yawned, and slowly sat up. A few more minutes passed before he realized that Ivana was gone.

—Vanya? —he mumbled once he fully came to his senses. —Where are you? Vanya?!

Panic overtook him instantly, and he jumped to his feet. The calm sea from a few minutes before was completely unrecognizable—it now looked like a boiling cauldron. Peter stepped into the water and anxiously scanned the waves. His worry grew with every second. And with good reason.

He searched for her. Called her name. Lamented the moment he had fallen asleep. Then suddenly—he froze. His eyes widened in horror. He saw it. A part of her bare back, rising and falling with the surging waves. Peter went wild. He threw himself into the water and swam toward her with all his might. Despite the stormy sea, he reached her relatively quickly. He grabbed her carefully and, holding her with one arm while swimming with the other, dragged her to the shore. He laid her gently on the towel and, horrified, began shaking her, trying to bring her back.

—Vanya? Sweetheart! Don't do this. Open your eyes! Do you hear me? Please, open your eyes! —he pleaded. —Open your eyes! Open your eyes! Open your eyes! Open your eyes...

But it was in vain. Ivana's soul had already crossed over to the other world.

*

Peter spent more than two hours by her lifeless body. He stroked her hair, tried to warm her, rubbed her arms, and never stopped begging her to open her eyes. Eventually, physically and emotionally exhausted, he collapsed beside her, still holding her hand as if she were alive, and stared up at the sky. It was streaked with black, white, gray, orange, pink, and colors of every kind. While he had been desperately trying to pull her back from the afterlife, the storm had quietly passed. The gloomy sky was preparing to give way once again to the sun. Only then did Peter notice Ivana's belongings. Her flip-flops, her towel, her little dress, her bag. Everything was neatly arranged, just as she'd left them before entering the sea for the last time. She had folded her dress beside her flip-flops, and placed the bag with the sandwiches their mother had packed right next to it.

Peter lay beside her for a long time, knowing there was no point in seeking help.

The dread of having to tell their parents crept in slowly. At first, he considered lying—saying that she'd gone to the sea on her own, without telling him. "What does it matter," he told himself, full of guilt, "nobody probably saw us anyway." And he was right. There was a chance the truth might never come out. But then his conscience stirred. He figured it would be better to tell them he had warned her it was dangerous, but she went in anyway. In the end, however—grief-stricken and shattered—he decided to tell them the truth.

* *

It was a little after five-thirty when the dust-covered Moskvich pulled up on the street in front of the house after the long drive. Ivan got out of the car, stretching tiredly and at length, as if they were arriving from Sofia⁷ rather than just from Burgas.

Sitting on the small bench in front of the house, pale with fear, was Peter.

⁷ The capital of Bulgaria, 500 km away from Ahtopol. – Author's note

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The next hour would become the worst of his entire life. Years later, every time he remembered it, his body would shudder with sorrow, pain, and regret.

- —Where's Vanya? —Ivan asked, skipping any greeting.
- —She's gone... —Peter replied guiltily and broke down in tears.

There are moments in life no one can escape. They come in the form of illness, betrayal, loss, and death. They can't be dodged or avoided. Sometimes—though rarely—there are people born with a special kind of grace. They have devoted parents, perfect health, know nothing of cruelty, envy, or suffering, and their first encounter with death comes only after they're grown and prepared for it. But those are rare exceptions.

—I didn't understand—where's your sister? —Ivan's voice rose, suspicious now.

And then Peter's blood ran cold. Instead of saying what he'd rehearsed, fear took hold of him, and he mumbled that she was at the beach.

- —At the beach? Now?! —Ivan's eyes bulged in disbelief.
- —Uh... uh... N-n-no. N-not at the beach... S-s-she's... on the cliffs.

—Talk, you idiot! —Ivan roared and raised his hand to strike him, but Stanka rushed in and stopped him just in time. —Why is she there?! Why did you take her to the cliffs?! I told you not to go to the sea! Why didn't she come back with you? Is she alone? Who's with her?!

From that moment, time sped up.

Ivan and Stanka bolted down the street, Peter chasing after them. As they ran toward the sea, Stanka stumbled—and if Peter hadn't caught her, she would've fallen hard.

* *

— Where? Where?! Where is she?! — Ivan shouted when they reached the rocks.

Terrified by his father's fury, Peter instinctively tried to delay the moment of truth.

— I... I... it's my fault. I brought her here... I fell asleep, and then, then... then the storm came and she... she... — Peter wanted to continue, but fear choked his words.

Paralyzed with dread, he raised a trembling hand and pointed toward the spot where Ivana's body lay. He had placed her on her beach towel and covered her with his own, neatly laying her bag and sandals beside her.

The echo of the mighty cry that burst from Ivan's broad chest rolled across the coast. His jaw quivered. His eyes turned bloodshot. His blood pressure spiked. His mouth fell open. The child he loved — the only child he ever truly loved — lay pale and lifeless on the rock, covered with a wet towel. Ivan bent down, lifted her up, and shook her. The girl's head flopped backward.

— Vanya! Vanya!?.. My little Vanya! My soul, my darling?... — he began to wail over her.

Up until that moment, Stanka had been frozen in shock, refusing to believe her eyes. Only when Ivan cradled Ivana's cold body in his arms and began to grieve aloud did she grasp the horror. She collapsed beside them, sobbing and tearing at her hair.

Peter stood at a distance, weeping, dreading what would come next.

After a few minutes, the initial shock subsided. Ivan came to his senses, stood up, and slowly looked around. Nearby lay a thick, short piece of wood and two large stones. He lunged and seized one of the rocks.

— Idiot! I'll kill you! — he roared with all his might, turned toward Peter, and hurled the stone at him. But it was too heavy and fell short.

Ivan was beyond reason — mad with rage. No force on Earth could douse his fury or stop him. He wasn't interested in explanations. All he saw was Ivana's dead body, and all he heard were Peter's words: "It's my fault."

He had never truly loved the boy anyway. Over the years, he had hit and punished him for far less. And now, this — this was beyond comparison. Nothing could hold him back. Seeing the stone falling short, Ivan grabbed the piece of wood he had noticed earlier. He stood up, bellowed like an enraged beast, and charged after Peter. That jolted Stanka back to awareness. In that instant, the grief over her dead daughter was eclipsed by the threat to her surviving child. She tore her gaze away from Ivana, turned to Peter, and screamed with all her might:

— Run! Run far away! Run! Run! Run!

Until that moment, Peter had stood motionless, ready to face the consequences of his actions. But his mother's cry startled him. Ivan had nearly reached him and was raising the log to strike when Peter spun around, dodged the blow, and bolted. He dashed up the rocky path and managed to escape his father.

— I'll kill you! I swear! You monster! I'll kill you!... — Ivan shouted after him.

His fury was absolute, but the age gap took its toll — slowly, he began to fall behind.

When Peter reached the top of the hill, he turned briefly to look at his mother.

— Run, son! — she cried out. — Run and don't come back! Run far away! Into the mountains!

* *

His father had long given up the chase, but Peter couldn't calm down. He kept running, flinching, glancing over his shoulder. He only slowed down and dared to stop once he was deep in the Strandzha mountain, near the village of Brodilovo. He circled around the southern edge of the village, silently praying he wouldn't run into anyone. Dusk settled in. All signs of human presence disappeared. A deep, lasting silence fell. Stars began to sparkle in the sky. The forest began its evening song. Finally, Peter exhaled.

After some wandering, he found a small rise with a large bush. He climbed up, sat beneath the bush, and faced the direction he had come from, just in case someone appeared.

There's an old proverb that says evil never comes alone. Until that cursed day — Friday, October second, 1981 — Peter had never truly known evil. But to his horror, he realized not only that it existed, but that it had more than one face. The first was Ivana's death — so terrible, tragic, and final that even the thought of it made his heart stop. The second was his deranged father, who had sworn to hunt him down and kill him. But evil had a third face, too — the loss of everything. In a single moment, Peter had lost not only his sister, but also his parents, his home, his room, his belongings — his entire familiar, safe world. He had just turned eighteen, and now he was a fugitive. Back then, the law showed no mercy to those who committed such crimes. And though his mental retardation was clearly recognizable, it wasn't officially documented anywhere. If he were caught, there would be no leniency. He would be tried as a murderer. Strangely enough, even with his limited understanding, he was fully

aware of the danger he was in — and was determined to flee as far as possible from the *scene of the crime*.

* *

It was the most terrifying night of his life. He fell asleep under the bush, curled up in a pile of leaves. The first dream he had was of his father chasing him with the log, while his legs grew heavier and harder to move. His father was catching up. Already, there was no way to escape. Still, he wasn't giving up and kept running. He pushed with all his strength, but his legs barely moved. At last, his father caught up to him, swung the log, and struck him on the head. Peter screamed, shuddered, and woke drenched in cold sweat.

But exhaustion, however, was so strong that it overtook him, and he soon fell asleep again. In the second dream, he and Ivana were children again. They were on the city beach, playing in the sand. He had built a huge sandcastle, and she was decorating it with seashells. Their mother and father were nearby, chatting and laughing. Suddenly, everything changed. The sky darkened and a strong wind blew. It was so strong it lifted them off the ground and carried them out into the sea. Within moments, the shore vanished from sight, and they were alone in open water. "Big brother, what do we do now?" Ivana cried, clinging to him. In the next instant, a huge, terrifying fish appeared from somewhere, grabbed her, and dragged her toward the bottom. The fish swam incredibly fast, but Peter dove after it to save Ivana. They sank deeper and deeper, until all light from the surface disappeared and darkness surrounded them. He tried to breathe — but couldn't. Water filled his lungs. Moments before drowning, he woke again, soaked in sweat.

He sat up and looked around. Once he was sure he was safe, he lay back down in the leaves and began to cry softly. He wept until the sky began to lighten.

STRANDZHA

eter couldn't reason things out, but he felt everything with his heart. He stood up, relieved, and looked up toward the sky.

As if he wanted to thank the heavens—or fate—or both, for keeping him alive, but he didn't know how.

To be alive is a blessing. It's a gift from above. But being alive doesn't mean being happy. Peter was glad that his father hadn't caught him, yet crushed by the fact that he had lost everything. Some people called him an idiot, but that wasn't quite right, because even his timid and naïve soul sometimes gave rise to complicated questions. Like: why is life so unfair to him? That thought was spinning in his head now. He couldn't take care of himself even in the city, and now here he was in the forest. On the run. And not just from his father—but from the law. A situation that would terrify even a perfectly capable person.

He turned around a few times, looked carefully, and made sure to remember the direction he'd come from so he wouldn't mistakenly head back that way. Once certain he was going the right way, he pushed deeper and deeper into the forest. The terrain was rugged and hard to navigate. It seemed he was approaching the heart of the mountain, because there was no sign of human life anywhere around.

He walked on without thinking. His soul was gripped by guilt over Ivana's death, by grief, and also by fear—fear of being caught. His stomach rumbled with hunger. Soon his father would be giving testimony to the police, and Peter would likely be declared a national fugitive. And in the early 1980s, such a directive was tantamount to a death sentence.

Late in the afternoon, frightened, starving, and frozen, he finally saw signs of life. In the distance, near a small clearing, leaning against a gnarled tree, stood the broad back of a man holding a shepherd's crook. Sheep grazed around him.

* *

At the exact moment Peter timidly approached the shepherd, Ivan stepped across the threshold of the militia station in Ahtopol.

Ivan's rage and urgency were so apparent that the duty officer—a man in his fifties with a close-cropped haircut and a clean-shaven face—didn't bother listening to him all the way through. Instead, he handed him a pen and a sheet of paper to write everything down.

Ivan sat at the small table, looked at the wall across from him—where a portrait of Todor Zhivkov⁸ hung—and began to write. The officer waited patiently. Ivan wrote, sighed, fumed, and cursed. Finally, he punctuated his last sentence with such force that the pen tore through the page. He went to fold it, but the officer told him it wasn't necessary. Ivan handed it over, the officer took it, and that was that. Or rather—things were just beginning. What Ivan had written was now in the hands of the state. That was reason enough for him to take a breath and curse his runaway son all over again. The officer began to read slowly and carefully.

As he read, the painful image of Ivana's lifeless body once again sprang to life before Ivan's eyes. The horrific sight would haunt him for years to come. It wouldn't let him rest—neither by day nor by night. It would torment him endlessly, and he would curse the day it all happened a thousand times over.

— I understand your situation, comrade, and I thank you — the officer finally looked up from the page after about two minutes. — But I want to tell you right away, it's not that simple to launch a national manhunt. We need to verify the facts.

Ivan rose from his chair.

— But why? What's stopping you? He's a murderer! And... a fugitive!

⁸ Todor Zhivkov - Prime Minister of Bulgaria, 1954 - 1989.

The officer was taken aback by Ivan's malice and persistence. That kind of confrontational behavior was far from tolerated in those days, and anyone bold enough to act like that could easily get into trouble.

— I didn't say I wouldn't do it — the officer replied calmly, though he was irritated by Ivan — just that it won't happen immediately.

Ivan glared at him from under his brows and shook his head mockingly.

- Of course. That's just perfect. Get all your paperwork in order while the killer gets a nice head start.
- Let me do my job, comrade the officer scolded him lightly. I assure you, every measure will be taken. Even if it takes a few days, we'll catch him. He has nowhere to run.

Ivan stood up, waved his hand dismissively, and stormed out of the station, furious.

* *

Peter watched the shepherd for a long time before mustering the courage to speak.

The encounter between them was unusual, but touching. When Peter finally revealed himself, the shepherd startled and looked at him warily.

— Please... could I have a little food? — Peter murmured, his voice trembling.

The shepherd sized him up and quickly realized he meant no harm.

— What's your name? — he asked, motioning for him to come closer.

Peter stepped forward, but kept some distance.

— I'm Peter. I'm eighteen!

The shepherd smiled, opened his bag, and pulled out a small plastic pouch. Inside was some cheese. He also took out a piece of bread and handed them over. Peter's eyes lit up like a child's. He cautiously approached, snatched the food, then stepped back to a safe distance and began eating ravenously.

The shepherd let him satisfy his initial hunger. — How'd you end up here? — he asked a few minutes later. Peter, still famished, ate noisily. — My dad came after me — he said sadly. — Why? Did you do something wrong? Peter looked worried and scared. — I have to hide. Is there somewhere around here I can live? The shepherd tapped the ground a few times with his crook. — Look, kid. I don't care what you've done. The mountain might seem big, but if someone's really after you, they'll find you. That was all it took for Peter to start shaking in fear, his eyes darting around nervously. — Vanya drowned. I was asleep. I didn't see her... But my dad's gonna kill me — he sobbed, stopping mid-bite. The shepherd understood that Peter had become a victim of circumstance. "Great, just what I needed," he thought and bit his lip. — I'll tell you what to do — he said after a pause, rising to his feet. — Come on. Let's go to the cabin. A childlike smile spread across Peter's face. The shepherd herded the sheep with his crook and led the way, with Peter following from a distance. Before long, they reached a small, rustic mud-brick house with a makeshift wicker pen in front. The shepherd corralled the sheep inside and bolted the gate. Then he walked over to the cabin, threw the door open wide, and motioned for Peter to enter. But Peter hesitated at the threshold. He kept his distance, watching with distrust.

— Come on in! Don't be scared! — the shepherd called kindly.

After a brief moment of hesitation, Peter finally stepped inside.

* *

The hut was truly poor. The floor was made of old, cracked planks nailed lengthwise. There was nothing on it—no rug, no runner, not even a mat. The walls were bare and crudely plastered. On one of them, to Peter's surprise, two icons hung. The room also held a table, a single chair, a chest, and a bed. That was all. Peter noticed how stark and unwelcoming the home was, and with a pang of nostalgia, he thought back to his parents' house in Ahtopol.

The shepherd opened the large chest, bent over, and after a brief search, pulled out a pile of outerwear. It was a pair of pants, a sweater, and a coat. He handed them to Peter, saying he was turning blue from the cold and needed to put them on immediately, or he'd get sick. Only now did Peter glance down at himself and realize with surprise that all this time he'd been wearing only shorts and a T-shirt. He obeyed the older man and awkwardly began dressing. The clothes were old and smelled strongly of mothballs. As Peter struggled to put them on, the shepherd walked over to the pantry. He brought out some bread, cheese, and onions, and stuffed them into a ragged woolen sack. Then he set the bag on the table and looked at Peter.

—It's for you! For the road — he said, giving it a light pat.

Peter was still getting dressed, but he reached out, took the bag as if it were a precious treasure, and set it down at his feet.

—I... thank you — he said.

The new clothes didn't fit well. They were two sizes too big, and it was obvious. Peter didn't feel comfortable and kept making strange movements, trying to adjust them on his body.

—Now listen to me carefully — the shepherd came close, and Peter froze in place. —I want you to remember something. There is a God! He's invisible, but He's near all good people. He's close to you too, and He will help you. Now you're going to head straight west from here. To Bachkovo. To the Bachkovo Monastery. Got it? Say it back to me.

Peter swallowed hard.

- —West! To Bachovo. To Bachov Monastery... he repeated.
- —Bachkovo. Bachkovo. The Bachkovo Monastery! The Bachkovo Monastery! the shepherd emphasized slowly. —Say it again!
- —Bachkovo. The Bachko...vo Monastery. The Bachko...vo Monastery Peter repeated dutifully like a good student.

The shepherd nodded in approval, then adjusted Peter's coat, which was askew, and rolled up his sleeves.

- —Do I have to go there? Peter asked fearfully.
- —You have no other choice. If you stay, they'll find you.

Peter began to tremble, but the old man took him by the arm and led him outside. He pointed toward the direction Peter was to take and continued explaining.

—I'll say it again. You'll keep walking west. Stay on that path and don't stop. Keep walking, and don't talk to anyone. And when you meet someone who seems like a good person, just ask them this: "I'm going to Bachkovo. Do you know the way?" That's all you'll say. And God, through good people, will show you the path.

Peter became even more flustered. Sweat broke out on his forehead and he nervously wiped it with the sleeve of his coat.

—And... Bachkovo... is it... is it far? — he asked with a shiver.

The shepherd put a hand on his shoulder.

—If you walk during the day and only stop to rest at night, you'll get there in a week. The food should last you. I packed enough, but ration it just in case.

Peter set off slowly along the indicated path, glancing over his shoulder at his benefactor.

—Wait! — the shepherd called out suddenly.

Peter stopped, and the man caught up to him.

- —When you get there, tell the monks the truth. Just like you told me. Tell them what happened, that you're scared, and that you came all the way from Strandzha. They're good people. They'll hide you.
- —Alright Peter replied and started to continue, but the shepherd stopped him again.
- —Ah! And one more thing.
- —Yes?
- —Repeat this short prayer to yourself: "Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy..." and the Lord will protect you. Got it? Say it back.
- —Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy... Peter repeated dutifully and began to walk down the path, while the shepherd crossed him from behind and watched until he disappeared into the distance.

* *

Meanwhile, Ivan was getting ready to leave. He grabbed a backpack. Inside he packed a thermos of coffee, a bottle of water, three sandwiches, some biscuits, a hat, a large knife, and a map of the area. Stanka watched him nervously.

- —And what's the knife for? she asked in alarm as he stood at the front door, putting on his shoes.
- —You know damn well why! he grunted.

The answer shook her. She burst into tears. Ivan tried to pass by, but she clung to his backpack and began tugging on it. That made him angry. He drew in a breath, tensed, and shoved her backward. Stanka fell to the ground.

—We lost Vanya. And now... Peter too? — she sobbed louder. —You're going to kill him? Is that it? Just because he was born... different? So he should die for that?

Ivan looked at her with disdain, grabbed the door handle, and moved to leave.

—No! — she cried out. —You're not doing this! I won't let you! — then she stood and latched onto him again.

But Ivan was far stronger than her and shoved her once more. This time, she fell badly and struck her hip hard. The injury was clearly painful—she tried to rise again but couldn't. To her dismay, she remained on the floor.

Ivan grabbed the handle, opened the door, and just before stepping out, turned his head toward her.

—And don't get in my way again! Got it? — he roared at her and slammed the door behind him with all his strength.

* *

Evening was falling. All around was silent and empty. The silhouette of a frail young man in oversized, ragged clothes moved like a ghost along the dusty black road.

—Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy... — Peter's lips whispered. He was already very tired and wanted to stop to rest, but he had the feeling that someone invisible, someone good like an angel, was walking beside him the whole time, giving him strength. That's how, without even realizing it, he covered thirty kilometers before giving in to exhaustion, stepping off the road to spend the night.

* *

Ivan stopped in the heart of the mountain. He stepped out of his shiny Moskvich and stretched. The area around him was wooded, but accessible. He looked in every direction, uncertain. Then he pulled the map from his backpack, spread it out over the hood of the car, and began to examine it closely.

—As far as I know him, he must've gotten somewhere around here — he muttered through clenched teeth. —I'll catch him! No way around it!

After drawing a large circle on the map with a pencil, he locked the car, slung the backpack over his shoulder, and set off toward the nearest slope. He knew his son well, and that made it even harder for

him to believe Peter had managed to slip away. That only fueled his rage. Ever since Ivana's death, it was as if some evil demon had taken hold of him—one that gave him no rest, day or night. The demon was especially cruel and relentless and demanded only one thing of him: blood.

* *

Above Peter twinkled a thousand stars. He lay on his back, gazing at them in awe. At school, his teacher, Comrade Barzova⁹, had told them the stars in the sky were like grains of sand—more numerous than all the grains of sand on every beach on Earth. He stared, and he stared, and he saw that there were indeed many stars, but more than every grain of sand on Earth? That seemed impossible. And yet, why would Comrade Barzova say it if it weren't true?

A single tear rolled from his eye. At school, they'd taught them that in socialist society all people were good, that there were no thefts, no violence, no murder. But then why was his own father chasing him? It wasn't Peter's fault the weather had turned so suddenly that day. His father should have known that. Ivana had died because of the storm and a terrible chain of events. Peter had swum for a long time, and then he had fallen asleep. And he'd only fallen asleep because he was so very tired. A father ought to understand these things. Not scream that he would kill his son. That wasn't right.

Another tear rolled from his eye.

* *

Peter was walking quickly down the road when a group of young men appeared from around a bend. As they drew closer, they slowed down. Peter's heart began to race. He had dealt with boys like these at school and in his hometown. He recognized them right away. They were the kind you couldn't mistake. Usually they just shouted something mean and moved on, but sometimes—not often—he'd gotten a slap or two for no reason, just because he was weaker and couldn't fight back.

⁹ During the socialist rule in the country, 1944 – 1989, instead of *sir* and *madam*, the address was *comrade*. – Author's note

The boys slowed down even more, eyeing him. There was no one else around. They were on an intercity road, which likely meant they, too, were traveling on foot. One of them stepped in front of him and gave him a challenging look. Peter had no choice but to stop. He was scared. The boys were clearly looking for fun. He took a shaky breath and was about to clench his fist and throw the first punch when he suddenly remembered the shepherd's advice.

—Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy — he began repeating quickly.

Whether it was luck or a miracle, he didn't know. But one thing was certain—the danger passed. The one who'd blocked his path suddenly waved a hand and stepped aside. The others laughed loudly, pulled him back into their group, and they continued on their way.

The danger was gone, but for more than an hour afterward, Peter remained anxious and shaken.

* *

The sky was clear. A gentle wind was blowing. Indian summer lingered. In other words, the weather was kind to the poor runaway.

It was already late; the sun had long since set when Peter left the road. He leaned against a tree and began to eat, smacking his lips and wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

It was something of a miracle that, given his limited mental abilities, he was still managing to follow the direction the shepherd had given him.

After the long marches each day, he fell asleep quickly. His sleep was deep, but not very long, because in the early hours of the night, the temperature would drop noticeably. Then he would get cold and wake up. Sometimes this happened an hour before sunrise. Other times a little later, but always before dawn. Once awake, though, he didn't linger. He would get up, stretch, and immediately set off again.

*

Not a word, not a trace of him — Ivan hissed angrily a few days later as he came home. He looked visibly exhausted and filthy, with pine needles, thorns, and small leaves clinging to his pants and jacket.
Someone must be sheltering him. But there's no way he can stay hidden for long. The militia knows what they're doing. They're a bit slow, yeah, but I'm sure if they have to, they'll go all the way to Vidin¹⁰ and track him down. And I'm not done either. I'll do at least two more big searches myself.
Next week I'll give the hunters some money and ask them to come with me. They're experienced guys. They know the terrain and we'll do a kind of manhunt. It's just a matter of time before he falls into my hands.

Stanka let out a sigh of relief, and a faint trace of satisfaction flickered across her face. Ivan noticed it immediately and got angry.

— You don't believe me?! And you're *glad* — he shot her a caustic glare. — Hah! After all these years of marriage, it turns out you don't know me at all. I will *not* forgive him; and I will *not* give up! Got it? Remember that!

Stanka came closer and tried to hug him, but he brushed her arm away.

— On the contrary — she said gently, despite his coldness. — I do know you, and I know you well. You will forgive him. Time will pass, I don't know how long it will take, but your heart will soften.

— You're wrong! — Ivan laughed bitterly in her face. — There are things that *cannot* be forgiven. What kind of mother are you, anyway? We lost our dear, golden, wonderful daughter because of that... idiot, and you're telling me that someday my heart will soften toward him... Nonsense. Empty talk. That will *never* happen. Get it through your head!

* *

Peter's feet were raw from all the walking. From time to time, he would stop, take off his shoes and socks, and let his soles air out. He did the same just before entering the first town along his route. He

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¹⁰ A town on the opposite end of Bulgaria, 600 kilometers away. – Editor's note

stopped well outside the first houses, took off his shoes, rested for about ten minutes, then put them back on and continued.

The town was small, clean, and very green, but Peter never learned its name. On the sidewalk in front of a small eatery, someone was selling ice cream in waffle cones. A few people had bought some and were sitting at the little tables or nearby in the park, eating temptingly. As Peter saw them all around him, he could almost taste the magical sweet creaminess of the ice cream and licked his lips. Oh, if only he had some money. Just thirty cents would do. He sighed sadly, turned his head away, and quickened his pace.

He was nearly at the outskirts of the town when he thought it would be wise to ask someone for directions. In front of one of the last houses, on a little bench near the fence, an old man sat quietly dozing, basking in the last rays of autumn sun.

— Uhh... this is the road to... Bachkovo Monastery, right? — Peter asked timidly.

The old man was lost in thought. He looked up and seemed puzzled by the strange question.

Peter stepped a little closer.

— Uhh... Is it far?

The elderly man snapped out of it, gave Peter a quick look, and his face filled with sadness.

- Yes, this is the road, but if you're walking, you've still got quite a bit to go he said.
- Thank you Peter smiled and walked quickly past the old man's astonished gaze.

* *

It was late morning. Peter walked slightly hunched but purposefully along the side of the road, hoping to reach his destination soon. Many cars passed him, but he never tried hitchhiking. Not because the shepherd had told him not to or because he was afraid. He avoided it for one simple and sensible reason that he felt deep in his heart — not to attract attention. Perhaps that's why no one had stopped for him yet.

The car that slowed down and crawled past him was a dark blue Lada¹¹. Peter had a deep, instinctive fear of Moskvitch cars, as he involuntarily associated them all with his father. So when he saw it was a Lada, he didn't panic. Still, he didn't dare approach. He stopped about twenty meters away and waited.

Inside the car were a man and a woman, both around fifty. The man opened the door and called out:

— Where are you headed, kid?

Peter stepped forward but hesitated to answer.

— We're going to Plovdiv¹². If you want — hop in! — the man encouraged him.

Peter looked at the man. He definitely seemed kind-hearted. But that alone wasn't enough for him to feel safe.

— Is that close to the Bachkovo Monastery? — Peter asked shyly as he stepped a little closer.

The man was surprised. He glanced at the woman beside him, clearly signaling with his eyes that the boy was strange. The woman understood his unspoken question and quietly nodded that she was okay with picking him up.

— It's close. Get in! — the man said a moment later and opened the back door from inside to make him feel more welcome.

At last, Peter gathered the courage. He climbed in, shut the door, exhaled with gratitude, and even gave a faint smile.

* *

The man and woman were kind people — and chatty — so it was a small miracle that Peter managed to withstand their questions without revealing the real reason for his journey. Their conversation revolved around something they called *the West*. They claimed that in this "West," there were things you couldn't find here. People there, they said, were better dressed, wealthier, and freer. Peter knew what

¹¹ A brand of Russian cars. – Editor's note

¹² A large city in the middle of Bulgaria. – Editor's note

"west" meant — it was the direction where the sun set. In school, he'd learned that the sun rose in the east, passed through the south, and set in the west. But these people clearly meant something else when they used the word for the sunset direction — something he didn't quite understand.

It was early afternoon when they dropped him off not far from central Plovdiv. Peter thanked them and headed in the direction they pointed out. It took him about an hour to reach the southern outskirts of the city. He still had the energy to go on, but since the man had told him the monastery was only thirty kilometers away, he felt calm. He would reach it, even with breaks to air his feet, in just a few more hours. That gave him hope, and he sat down on a slightly broken bench by the road to have a bite to eat.

At first, the road to the monastery was straight and seemed endless. But after a while, it began to climb gradually into the mountains. Soon it became so steep that it wore Peter out. As evening approached, the chill of the mountain air began to set in and cut right through him.

According to an old saying, every long journey starts off easy but ends hard. For Peter, though, it was the opposite. His journey had started hard, but it seemed like it might end easy. He was tired, yes — but he also felt a strange sense of anticipation. In his pure heart, the image of that unknown place was one of safety, beauty — even magic. Because this journey wasn't just his first time truly leaving home; it was also his first real adventure. Perhaps that's why, all along the way, it felt like an invisible hand was supporting him and giving him strength.

He passed through the small town of Bachkovo in the early evening and was just wondering which way the monastery was when he spotted the sign.

Only a few kilometers remained.

*

When he saw the monastery fence, he flinched with excitement. After so many hardships, obstacles, misfortunes, and nights sleeping outdoors, he was finally nearing the gates of the place where, according to the shepherd from the Strandzha mountain, he would be accepted and hidden. The clearest signs of his long journey were his wounded feet and the now-empty sack. Apparently, the

shepherd had real experience packing food for travel, Peter thought, because he had portioned everything just right to last the entire way.

Everything around was quiet, dark, and deserted. Peter stopped in front of the gate and stared at it. He had never seen such a massive door in his life. There was no doorbell, but a small iron rod stuck out through a narrow slot. He examined it carefully and, after a bit of hesitation, realized it was a mechanical bell. He pulled it toward himself and let go — and a soft chime rang out from a small bell inside.

The long-awaited moment of meeting the masters of this noble home had finally arrived.