

Birds

By Elena Alexieva

The first bird fell from the sky at 16 hours 42 minutes on August 3rd in clear weather, no wind and air temperature of 33.4 degrees centigrade. It was a greenfinch, *Carduelis chloris*, with a body length from 14 to 17 centimeters and wingspan from 25 to 27 centimeters, dark green plumage, a yellow band in the wings and a yellow-edged tail.

Of course, the woman had no way of knowing all this. She had never before seen such a bird, although the species is widespread not only in semi-mountainous areas and lowlands abounding in sylvia and shrubbery, but also in human settlements, parks, gardens, backyards and all across the territory of the country. She didn't even know that *Carduelis chloris* was not an endangered species, therefore one specimen more or less would make no difference at all.

The woman just heard the powerful thud against the window, gave a start and for a fragment of a second wondered who would be throwing stones, and all the way to the second floor at that, provided that the only thing beyond the fence was the other house, ironically, identical with this one, where she had no enemies, just an unpleasant elderly couple who lived there. Then she jumped from her bed, opened the window and saw the bird down there.

The bird was lying on its back, eyes open. One wing was spread out. Its beak was opening and closing convulsively as if the bird was gasping for air. The woman wrapped it in the towel she had grabbed on her way and carried it to the house. The bird tossed in her hands, freed itself and dropped on the ground once again. The woman lifted it patiently.

Such a nice bird, she thought, with lemon pants and a greenish grey vest. It must be badly shattered. Its entrails must be a mess.

It would be too cruel to leave it like this. Clearly, the bird was about to breathe its last. Inside the house it would at least die in peace. In the scorched garden it would certainly suffer much more. Unless some animal finished it off in the meantime. The neighbours' dog, for instance, who was in the habit of sneaking through a hole in the fence to pee on each and every tree and shrub, and even on the roses in the flowerbed. He was a young dog,

good-natured and sheepish, and when she scolded him he would sit at a safe distance, his tongue hanging out, and look as if he was grinning like an idiot.

The woman entered from the terrace, sat at the dining-room table, placed the bird in her lap and waited. Surely, there would be something more sensible to do in a case like this, but she had no idea what it could possibly be. She had heard that when a horse broke a leg they shot it. But then, she didn't have a gun, nor did she know how to shoot. The easiest thing would be to wring its neck. Wasn't this what they usually did to birds? But the very thought of it paralyzed her. Besides, she was busy reading a book. And later, when the sun had set, she would have to water the roses.

Now the bird lay, eyes closed and almost lifeless in her lap, wrapped like a baby in the kitchen towel, its beak opening and closing ever so slightly, as if it was no longer gasping for breath but was instead babbling quietly and indistinctly as an agonizing soul babbles with death.

Such a nice bird, the woman thought again. She felt too embarrassed to unwrap it and examine it closely. She took the bird as gently as she could and climbed upstairs.

The room was cool and plainly though pleasantly furnished. Quite pleasantly, indeed. The furniture was new and made of light wood. The white gauze curtain delicately fluttered in front of the open balcony door. The woman placed the bird on the floor by the wall, made herself comfortable on the bed and took the open book which was lying there face down. It would hardly do the bird any good if she kept crouching and staring at it. Why not read while she waited. Who knows how long it would take. It could be over in a minute, but on the other hand the bird could last till next morning.

She had hardly managed to read even a couple of sentences when the bird stirred. It got rid of its cocoon with surprising force and staggered across the room like a drunk. Then it reached the nearest corner and huddled there. It stared at the woman with one dark, beady, whiteless eye or at least so it seemed to her. During its short trip, the bird had twice shat on the parquet flooring.

The woman rose to clean it and the bird, still meandering, rushed terrified under the bed. The woman wiped the droppings with a piece of toilet paper, knelt down and reached out. Panicked, the bird rushed ahead, came out from under the bed, hit the wall and froze again.

The woman sighed.

This is a miracle, she thought but was in no hurry to rejoice. She knew how much death loved dirty tricks and never shied away from playing one. So the miracle didn't as yet cancel the dying.

She carefully lifted the towel. From outside, urgent and distinct, came an anxious cry and the bird in the room immediately uttered an identical one, strikingly loud and clear. What followed the woman could only describe as a brief verbal exchange. She even felt she could tell exactly what the two birds were saying to each other. She stole up on the one whom a moment ago she was waiting to breathe its last, threw the towel over it and caught it. Apparently, despite everything the dying had been put off, and so the bird no longer belonged in the house.

She took it out to the balcony and left it on the mosaic flooring. The bird didn't stir. From close up it was indeed strikingly beautiful. It would make a terrific picture. The woman, who in principle hated such things, went back into the room and a moment later re-emerged, having forgotten her principle, smartphone in hand, just in time to see the bird jump on the railing and fly off to the plum-tree where another bird, exactly the same, instantly joined.

Just look at how it regained its senses, as if nothing had happened, the woman thought. That was quick.

But she was not in the least bit disappointed, on the contrary.

The whole miracle had taken twenty-eight minutes. It was still too early to water the roses; the sun had no intention of setting yet.

Only a week earlier the woman and the man had been sitting at the same table, on the very same chairs. Everything in the house seemed rejuvenated, brighter, cheerier and somehow changed. She had taken care of this and it filled her with well-deserved pride.

"When did they say they were coming?"

"At five. But they'll call before that. I have to meet them down in the village. I need to drive before the truck and show them the way."

"Can't they come earlier?"

"Probably not, I don't know. They said five. Why? Are you in a hurry?"

"Not at all. Don't worry, I'll wait."

He is lying, the woman thought with slight satisfaction. She knew his lie was in her favour. He was lying not to her but for her.

“It’s okay if you have to go. I’ll ask the driver to help me bring the stuff in. It’s not too much, anyway – just a chest of drawers, a bed, a mattress and a nightstand. We’ll manage.”

“I told you I’m in no hurry. After all, that’s what I came here for.”

It was hot but not as hot as it was going to be later. All the windows and doors were open, it smelled of paint.

The garden door banged and someone called from outside. The neighbours’ dog started barking like mad.

Before they had even seen the man who came to the doorway, the two of them, the man and the woman, smelled him. He was small, skinny, with a growth of beard up to the eyes and as dirty as a human being can possibly be and still be called that. Under the large jacket reaching down to his knees, he wore a sweater, a once chequered shirt and God only knows what else. Compared to the rest of him, the hands sticking out of his rolled up sleeves looked like spades.

The woman rose and went toward the small dirty man but dared not come closer.

“Come in, come in. You’re welcome.”

Then she turned to the man by the table:

“This is Svetlozar from the street below. I gave him the old sofa. Remember? The broken one.”

The man by the table smiled warmly. He was presentable and solid, with a broad chest and a beautiful head. Compared to the newcomer, he looked like a young man.

In fact, no wonder if they are both the same age, the woman thought.

“So? How’s the sofa?” the man said instead of a greeting.

“Fine,” the other one said. “It’s still good.”

He just stood there, keeping his distance.

“Nice to meet you. Svetlozar. Svetlozar Mikhailov. Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mikhailov.”

“My pleasure, Svetlozar,” the man said with an even broader smile. “It’s good when neighbours know each other. Lend a helping hand when needed...”

“She, your wife I mean, brought the sofa right to my place. A great wife you’ve got there.”

“She’s good, she really is,” the man agreed. “I’m sorry we don’t have the time now but we’re waiting for some furniture to arrive. You know how it is. But do make sure to drop by some other time.”

The woman saw Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mikhailov to the door and locked behind him. The dog started barking again but soon calmed down.

“What’s the time?”

“Quarter to four. It’s still early. You said you were in no hurry, didn’t you?”

“Sure I’m not. Just asking.”

“He’s not a bad guy I think. But he drinks a lot. They all drink here.”

“And not just here.”

“Why did you tell him I was your wife?”

The man laughed and gave her one of those looks of his.

“It wasn’t me. He said it. And then, it’s not so bad for them to know there’s a man in the house.”

“Except there isn’t.”

“Exactly.”

The second bird fell from the sky at 15 hours 22 minutes on August 7th, Sunday, in similar atmospheric conditions and air temperature of 35.1 degrees centigrade. It was a *Sylvia curruca*, lesser whitethroat, with a body length from 11 to 13 centimeters, wingspan from 17 to 19 centimeters, grey head, light grey back and wings, pure white chest and belly. Both birds belonged to the *Sylvia* genus, the difference being that *Sylvia curruca* spent the winter in Africa, while *Carduelis chloris* didn’t.

This time the thump came from the kitchen window. It was not as loud as the first one had been, and yet it was enough to give someone a fright. The woman, sitting in the living room, heard it and immediately knew what it was. There could be no doubt. She did not even hesitate, although the fact that a second bird had fallen from the sky within just three days seemed weird, to say the least. Very quickly, but without risking a broken leg like the first time, she rushed to the closet, grabbed an old T-shirt she used as a rag, and went down to the garden. She was amazed at her brain which figured out everything automatically, without having to think, at the appropriateness and equanimity of all her

actions, at her nerve, but also at the profound resignation, almost bordering on indifference, the kind which doctors or firefighters might experience while struggling to save a life.

The bird she found downstairs was grey and tiny, smaller than a sparrow. It could easily fit in the palm of her hand. It was probably its colouring that made it look like a mouse. It didn't do any of the things the first bird had done: it didn't toss, didn't turn its head, didn't struggle dramatically for air, didn't even indicate it had noticed the colossal outline of its saviouress bending over it. To the woman's, but mostly to its own relief, the tiny bird simply closed its eyes and died.

Now that she could examine it as much as she liked, there was nothing to look at. It was a most ordinary grey bird without a single bright speck. Neither pattern, nor hue or rich plumage embellished it. Of course, it might have made a pleasant sound, of the kind which – for lack of imagination – is referred to as 'singing'. But now it was over.

The only thing the woman could do was bury the bird in a remote corner of the garden. She certainly knew that burying a dead bird, and such a tiny one at that, was sheer nonsense, but in these temperatures it would very soon begin to rot and stink – something the woman would never allow.

For one brief moment she wondered where all the dead birds went, as they probably died every minute, and if so, instead of just falling from the sky now and then, they should be showering over all populated and unpopulated places regardless of landscape or location, but then this question did not bother her at all.

Probably, she thought, they get eaten by all sorts of animals such as the neighbours' stupid dog. Which is why we don't see them around.

Then she decided against it.

And yet, what if...?

True, the bird seemed stone dead, but the woman had no way of knowing for sure. She could not, for example, press her ear to the bird's chest, firstly, because the bird itself was approximately the size of her ear. And secondly, because she had no idea what a bird's heartbeat sounded like.

(She remembered how she had been told at school that birds had evolved from dinosaurs. Now it no longer seemed so improbable.)

She lifted the bird with the rag, careful not to touch it, took it inside and placed it on the table. She felt she had to give it a chance.

In about half an hour she took it back outside and dropped it in the tall grass on the other side of the garden gate where the neighbours' dog would no doubt find it.

Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mikhailov had two sons: Koko and one other. Koko was a lunatic and followed his dad wherever he went. The other one the woman met only when she went to their place to bring them the sofa. They both looked exactly like their father, the only difference being that the lunatic had also grown his dad's beard up to the eyes, while the other one hadn't. And yet, the beardless one scared the woman the moment she saw him, while the lunatic didn't.

She knew the two of them, the father and his lunatic son, from before. Two years ago they had come to dig a grave for her deceased dog. It was not like the neighbours' halfwit mongrel. It had been a pedigree dog, large, sensitive and elegant, a real prince. At the end of its otherwise happy and comfortable life it had fallen seriously ill and had died in great pain. The woman was grateful that she had at least where to bury it. She and the dog had shared many a happy moment in the house and the surrounding garden.

It was late February. The winter had been mild. They took the dog from the car to the place where they would bury it in a wheelbarrow. Now it lay there relaxed and peaceful as if asleep. It had not slept so deeply and quietly for months. The woman would stroke its head and kiss its brow already turning cold. At first she had tried to hide her tears but eventually she gave up.

The grave had to be deep and large like a human's. She could not believe that the two skinny men, no bigger than herself, would cope, but they dug with determination and with a kind of quiet solemnity very much befitting the occasion.

"A very nice dog," Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mikhailov remarked.

Now and then the lunatic would stop digging, lean on his shovel and smile absentmindedly.

"Go on, my boy, dig. We need to get it done."

The lunatic would look at his dad trustingly, with childish adoration, and would obediently go on.

On the other side of the wire fence, where the other neighbours lived, a white rooster marched proudly, cocking his head, listening. The low sun which would soon set off for the snowless horizon peeked into the freshly dug grave with cold curiosity.

The woman had never seen such a dignified funeral, not even of a human being.

Once they had lowered the dog into the hole and covered it, she gave the father and the son fifty levs each. It was way too much for the job but she had made up her mind. Then she had gone to the cellar, filled a bag with red apples and handed it to the lunatic.

Since then, she had not sought their services.

Once she began to spend more time in the house, the woman got in the habit of locking herself up even during the day. She would lock just the garden gate. It was enough. And it wasn't out of fear, but to ward off unwanted visitors. In the village, an unlocked door meant an open invitation. One time, for instance, she had found in the garden a vaguely familiar woman with whom she had never exchanged more than a few words. Another time, a loud meter reader had barged in, stirring her from sleep, and before she was even properly awake, had urged her on to check the readings of the water meter.

It was not that she felt safer in the locked house. She just lived there.

One afternoon someone knocked on the garden gate. The woman clearly heard the bangs, followed by some kind of babbling behind the wall. She hesitated. She didn't want to see anyone, but a mysterious force, that of her own confusion, pushed her out and she opened.

Svetlozar Bozhirdarov Mikhailov was standing at the gate.

He was not drunk, or at least did not look it. The woman was embarrassed. She was not properly dressed, certainly not in this heat. Her face was not done and her hair was a mess. It hadn't been dyed for ages.

"Come in."

"I thought I'd come by. I was down there. They had a job for me."

The small dirty man sneaked into the house.

She let him sit in the kitchen. She had just finished cleaning the dining room and the living room. The polished parquet shone, the dusted cushions were lined like soldiers on the new sofa.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've just washed the floors. They haven't dried yet."

Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mikhailov tacitly accepted the apology.

"And the mister? Is the mister here?"

The woman reflected for a moment. She could not understand what he was saying. Perhaps he had been drinking after all.

And then it struck her.

"No," she said. "The mister is not here. He went back to town. He's got work to do there."

The man nodded.

"Well, if he's not in..."

But he didn't move, didn't rise to go.

The woman felt obliged to continue the meaningless conversation.

"How are things at home?"

The man shrugged.

"How could they be... Fine."

She knew what he had come for but it never crossed her mind to offer. If she did, she'd never get rid of him. Besides, she kept no brandy in the house. All she had was whiskey and gin and some expensive cognac, at the bottom of the bottle. The mister had brought it, ages ago. The woman kept it for special occasions.

She didn't ask if he wanted coffee. It would have sounded like a joke. Besides, Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mikhailov might not have refused.

"I too have a job for you," she said. "In the garden. There is this undergrowth that needs clearing. But later, not now. I'll find you when I get to it."

The man nodded again.

They remained silent for some time, she – standing behind him, as if guarding him, and he – sitting on the battered stool where she never sat, only stepped on it whenever she had to reach something up high.

She remembered how she had brought him the sofa. She remembered also her astonishment at the house she found there. Not at all the shack she had expected. A solid three-storey house, larger than her own. Indeed, the walls were unplastered, the handrails were rusty and the windows were broken, but a real house it clearly was. She remembered the woman, the mother of his two boys, the lunatic and the beardless one, who looked like a

man herself with that square jaw and dull face of hers, with her grey, close-cropped hair – the mother who never cracked a smile as she watched her men bustle excitedly around the dilapidated, heaven-sent sofa. Later, someone had told her that the house was not built by the man, it was inherited from his wife’s brother, but it made no difference. Her house too was inherited. She hadn’t built it herself.

Sometimes she’d wake up in the middle of the night thinking of it. She’d toss and turn in her brand new white wooden bed, gasping for breath under the duvet, twisting the satin sheets, wrapping her brain around who she could leave it to. And not years from now. Tomorrow. Even today. She, younger as she was than all her potential heirs, was unable to find peace in the nicely furnished room, innocent like a girl’s, where the night breeze played with the gauze curtain and it seemed to her there was someone there.

It made no sense to ask him.

He already had a house. Bigger than hers.

At last Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mikhailov rose to go. She couldn’t wait to open the window. Once he left, she must not just air the place but open all doors and windows to let the draught in.

“Is he coming back soon?”

“Who?”

“Your man.”

“When he’s done, he’ll be back. Don’t worry.”

“I’ll come by again. For the job, I mean. In the garden.”

Of course. The garden. But if he imagined she’d let him booze as he pleased...

She slammed the gate behind him. Then she turned and turned the key until she could turn it no more.

Across the street, which wasn’t even a proper street but a most ordinary dirt road covered with gravel, Koko the lunatic was squatting and waiting for his dad. When he heard the door slam, he raised his eyes filled with adoration.

On the next day, in the worst heat, there was another bang on the gate. The neighbours’ mongrel was barking like crazy. The woman could hear him madly rattling his chain, aiming for the street.

I hope he breaks loose, she thought.

Now the intruder was yelling at the top of his lungs right at her doorstep, unintelligibly, menacingly, so the woman was unable to tell if he was yelling at her or at the dog. She caught a slurred curse, then another one. Of the rest she wasn't sure.

It felt as if the whole village was listening.

She quietly locked the front door, went upstairs and shut herself in her bedroom. Further than this she had nowhere to go.

She waited for what felt like an eternity before the bangs died out.

On the next day it happened again.

The woman was not in the least scared. She just wanted it to stop. She could always call 'the mister'. He'd fix it all. And yet, she immediately discarded the idea.

It's so stupid, she thought. I can't call him every time someone knocks on the door to come save me, can I? What a shame!

She was convinced that Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mikhailov meant no harm. She kept telling herself that he wasn't a bad guy, he was just in a bad way, this poor father of two – the mental and the other one, who was supposedly not mental (well, that one was really scary, there was something peculiar about his face, something beastly, and yet it didn't mean he was a criminal, right?), a harmless village drunk, a wretch despite his large house or maybe exactly because of it.

And could she ever forget how decently he had behaved at her dog's funeral?

All she had to do was talk to him. Amicably, but firmly. Explain that he was disturbing her and that when she had a job for him, she'd let him know. No rudeness, no threats. If she had to, as a sign of goodwill, she could give him something else. There was plenty of old stuff around the house. The old vacuum cleaner, for example, which had broken down after the renovation and she intended to buy a new one next time she went to town. It was a minor problem and he would certainly find someone to fix it for him. Or the stove which had stood in the kitchen ever since the house was built and even back then it was already ancient, having served them for many years in their city home. The stove she meant to replace as well, although nothing was wrong with it. It worked just fine, only the hotplates were so badly corroded that they crumbled and fell apart at the slightest touch. Finally, she could also offer him money as a small upfront payment for the garden job.

Of course, he'd never set foot in the garden. Nor in the house for that matter.

The woman calmed down and waited.

Svetlozar Bozhidarov Mikhailov never turned up again.

Sometimes she'd see Koko the lunatic wandering up and down the street. On his own. The dog barked and he replied with incomprehensible yells and curses, just like his dad. The woman tried to ignore him.

Poor feeble-minded boy, she thought. Perhaps there had been a way to help him, but now it was too late.

Summer was over and she went back to town. She felt well rested. She no longer awoke in the middle of the night wondering whom to leave the house. She was still too young. The house was dear to her and she loved it. And yet, others had built it and for another life. But the woman had no other life she could give it. There were no other people either.

Besides, there was no need to look or wait for them. There was a much easier way.

I can always sell it, the woman thought. Anytime.

Then she'd close her eyes and sleep dreamlessly, like the dead, until daybreak.

Translated by the author