

TODOR G. VLAIKOV

SELECTED NOVELS AND STORIES

Introduction: Todor Vlaikov's Idyllic Bulgaria (by Petko T. Hinov)

Selections from

MY LIFE STORY

Volume one: MY EARLY LIFE

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[Sample] Chapter 3. A Tale of My Sister

We have already finished digging the maize. Quite a volume of work has my elder sister accomplished both at home and round our relatives, and at neighbours, to whom she lent her digging labour. Her hoe is already put aside. Now she will take a respite, so as to collect some strength for the harvesting. Because the wheat-fields have become yellow and soon sheaves will start dropping.

But lo, one early morning, even before dawn, somebody is knocking on the upper gate. An early bird, as always, my sister has long been out and about, and now she is sweeping the porch, over which she'd sprinkled water in circles.

“Whoever could it be *that* early?...” And she rushes to open the gate. It was Ana of the Kuzman family, her bosom-friend and faithful comrade from beyond the river. Sis’s heart skips a beat: what is the matter?

She has come to ask her help for the digging — their maize, at the Chakal place, has come out later and only now they are going dig it. She had found hoers from the neighbourhood, but was intent on inviting her as well. She had already told her mom as well. Her mother was also insistent...

My elder sister respects their request: she will gladly oblige. But will *her* mother allow her to? Because she has already tucked away the hoe and has told her not to go to digging again this year.

They can try to beg her together, can't they? Maybe then she'll let her. It will be very well being together there... Ana's elder brother has also come back from around the villages, where he has worked with builders, like one of them... In an instant my sister's fair face is suffused in deep rouge...

So, let them go together then, to beg for mom's permission... With arms around each other's waist the two friends swiftly rush toward the staircase to the inside house.

At first mom is unwilling to let her go. Dad has also ordered her not to go again. But my sis is begging her so earnestly! Her bosom-friend is also backing her. Moreover, mom observes a joyful excitement in her, underneath which her experienced eyes perceive something more... Finally, mom gives her permission.

Beaming with joy, my elder sister sees off her girlfriend, who is quite pleased, too... She'll get ready and there will she be in an instant...

So, she gets to preparing and beautifying herself diligently... Her snow-white striped sleeves are tucked up, over her colourful and very clean tunic she has put a purple silk bodice, her waist she has girdled with a gaily-woven waistband. She has her head scarfed with a lovely olive-coloured thin, pattern-stuff kerchief, with two doves on the forehead, where, under the kerchief, was sticking out curls of her auburn hair — she looks as though she is not preparing for hoeing, but for a ring-dance. And, looking at her cheerfulness, mom, too, is feeling glad, so very glad! So, she goes and takes for her the hoe and gives it to her herself.

Before leaving, my elder sister dashes off to the garden, which she exits with a flower stuck over her ear. Mom cannot take her eyes off her. How lovely she is to her! And how she looks like... like a betrothed damsel. Mom sees her off to the gateway. And she is following her with eyes until she is quite out of sight. May the Holy Mother of God watch over her!

At the Kuzman's, one after one, gather the diggers. My elder sister arrives, too. Ana meets her with gladness. Her elder brother Rad is there, too — a tall, stalwart unmarried lad with sky-blue eyes and thin blond moustache. He, too, is meeting the diggers. He is talking with them, making jokes... Her, too, he meets with a jocose piece of banter. His eyes, however, sparkle with a warmer light, and his voice sounds somewhat tremulous... She shyly lowers

her eyes. Peony blush shoots up her cheeks. In order to conceal her fascination, she hastens to mix with the other girls...

Suddenly a pain jabs her heart. For Todora of Vitan's family has come as well... Why, oh why have they called her, too?... Well, there's nothing wrong, is there? She is also their neighbour, right? Rad meets her, too, with jovial banter. And she is mischievously looking straight at his face and is smiling at him. "What a shameless wench!" My sister's soul is pressed down by grief.

Here comes out Kuzman's goody wife — a merry and loquacious woman. She finds something suitable to say to each of the diggers. When she comes to my elder sister, she lingers with her longer and speaks more cordially to her. She asks her about mom — and praises her cleverness! — and inquires after everyone at home... After that she takes out two linen sacks with bread which should be carried to the field. One of them is handed to their Ana. The other one, in a casually intimate manner, she hands to my sister. This attention of Uncle Kuzman's wife dispels some of her heart's grief. In a while, quite cheery already, my sis is leaving with the party toward the maize field.

This love story began last winter. At first the lad started glancing at her in a somewhat unusual manner. Started chaffing jocosely with her. At the ring-dance, too, he began taking her hand to dance. Then he started to drink water off her coppers, to take her flower... It was obvious he had grown fond of her. She had

also taken a liking to him — such a handsome lad! The glances he casts at her, the wooing, his affectionate words — they all fill her heart with gladness. And she thrives and blushes more and more...

At one point, a comrade of hers, with whom she shares her innermost feelings, whispers on her ear that when they were gathered nearby her house, in front of Gruitchovets, Vitan's daughter Todora used to toss at him impish glances and teasing jokes, and he would always return something, or would joke with her in turn... These words pierce my sister's heart as bullets... She adds to them her observation that, since first spring she has not seen him at the ring-dance either... Has he gone to another place, or (who knows)... Black grief is poisoning her heart. Her ruddy face begins to wither...

But now his sister, whom she had not met for quite some time, came to invite her to their family's maize digging. And she saw him. He had been to work afar. He had just come back to the village. He is the same old handsome and comely lad. And now his cordial words, jovial and frolicsome, again filled her entire soul with gladness. But... why is she here, too, why this doggone Todora? And why is he also joking with her so merrily?...

Along the way my sister keeps walking with Ana. To her, as her faithful girlfriend, she confesses all her heart's secrets. Now she finds a chance and drops to her a hint about that hateful Todora.

“She is tempted, she is, but the sun won’t shine on that day!” Her mother does not allow even a mention of her name or her family. As for our mother — uncle Gencho’s wife — the moment she starts speaking of her, her praises flow out like a river!... As for her elder brother’s attitude, he’s doing it only so-so, to keep appearances by throwing at the other girl a word or two. As things are... she knows him quite well, doesn’t she? Of course she knows his heart...

Her dear friend’s words put sister’s heart at peace. Her soul, again, becomes lighter, brighter and joyful... Just as the clear sky that merrily shines above, ignited by the flaming East. Just as the small birds are joyfully singing down in the bushy willow-grove. Just as the leaves of the maize by the path gleefully rustle, blown by the gentle wind descending from the mountain...

The diggers come up to uncle Kuzman’s field. They put their belongings and topcoats on the boundary strip under the plum-tree. Standing, they eat a little bread and cheese, afterwards line up at one end of the field, make the sign of the holy cross and begin.

The tinkle of hoes is blending with the initially quiet conversation of the diggers. The voices grow louder and louder. Their sound is entwined with perky pleasantries, with rippling laughter. And the field is getting noisier and jollier.

The sun has sprung quite high above the mountain. Noontide is nigh. The diggers are somewhat weary. And a little hungry, too.

They often cast an eye toward the road coming from the village. And lo, finally two people are showing up: a man and a younger lad. They are carrying something in their hands. The diggers' eyes rivet on them. They are closer now, yes, that's them: Rad and his younger brother! The lunch is coming...

The field enlivens again, laughter and banter quicken again. And a maiden's heart trembles as a bird...

After lunch, together with the rest, Rad also grabs a hoe and starts on a furrow. Great animation sets in. Again begin the jokes, the banter and the hints. Now they are thrown at the young master. He is joyous, good-spirited and talkative. All jests are answered by his jests. Among those jokes and hints some he wittily parries, others he allows in with laughter and gladness.

Not seldom, the hints the girls are tossing at him, also involve the blushing digger at nearer end of the field. Then the glances of many stare at her. Then he, too, joyous and smiling, darts a playful glance toward her furrow. And she either declines the banter with a trembling voice, or merely drops her eyes and, tacit, gets on with her digging...

Another time some girls from the other side of the line would throw at the young master something about the other one—the chatty and unrestrained girl at their side. When confronted with such a hint, she alone would reply with a loud laughter and with bold satisfaction would return the hint facetiously. Her laughter

is taken up by the entire company. The young master does not remain in her debt. He returns the banter with laughter. And mischievously throws an eye to the side *whence* she called. But both his laughter and his glance are not as warm and cordial this time. The more experienced lassies detect the difference. Todora, however, does not care to notice it. She appears complacent and victorious... And the other lass—the one that bashfully keeps her eyes down—neither she has felt the difference. She only hears the loud and triumphant laughter. And a sharp pang grips her heart...

They begin a song. Then another. Todora is the leader, her voice is powerful, ear-splitting. Her voice fills all the vicinity. Two other girls return the singing. Both their voices, however, get lost in hers. The song is finished. Rad cries out loud.

An instant later, another song flows upwards from the near margin of the field. It is somewhat less cheerful, with a wider glide. The voice of the one who's taken up that song is not so loud. But it is flowing smoothly and with a heart-sweetening gentleness; and the twills of the melody are fair and round, and at the end quietly die away. This wonderful melody falls right into the human heart! After it subsides, another loud cry gushes heavenwards. This time it is more extended and seems to spring out from the depth of a very moved soul.

This approving note, apparently shared by most of the lasses, wakes the jealousy and envy of the one with the thunderous voice.

And, rash as she is, “and ye call this singing,” she snaps. “Drawling as though... chanting a funeral song!”

The whole company is thunderstruck. What cruel-heartedness!... And are these words not ill-boding?...

Painful embarrassment grips all. Not a single one, however, pays like for like to her. The young master is nettled sharply, too. His eyes flame up with indignation, but he, too, is not brave enough to declare it. Something—a kind of diffidence or something else—bids him to hold it back...

The lass whose heart was pierced by these evil and ill-omened words, is silent, too, and keeps her eyes down on the furrow. Crestfallen, with a wounded heart, she is hardly able to hold her tears, ready to gush forth...

Noontide. The sun has risen high in the sky, dimmed by a veil of wavering haze. Its rays beat right above the heads and singe. The intense swelter is almost unbearable. The maize leaves hang immobile. All is deadly still.

The hoers, exhausted by digging and by the scorching heat, breathe quicker and move the hoes slowly up and down, as though with languor. No longer is anyone willing to sing. No more banter and laughter. Only here and there a lass would quietly say something to her comrade. And silence again...

Disheartened by the fatigue and the swelter, as well as with her inner excitement, she, the morbidly offended, just like the rest

of them moves the hoe with no particular ardour. Indeed, little by little her indignation was beguiled: she heard words of comfort and cheering from her comrades. Several times his compassionate glance—fervent and heartfelt—met hers, as well. Nevertheless, some despondence and dejection remain inside her soul. Certitude and doubt fight inside, gladness and sorrow entwine in her bosom. And her former merriness is gone for good. It seems as if something inside her has been broken...

At one time she draws herself up for a respite. She gazes at the other one, at the remote end—she is ahead of all the hoers, with an adroit hand she brandishes the hoe, hurrying to be the first to reach the boundary strip, which is not very far already. This cuts my sister to the quick. Now that wicked girl wants to show off as the quickest and the hardest-working. She may whistle for it! May another one appear who is every whit as good as her! So my sister shakes off her low spirits, notwithstanding both fatigue and swelter, sprightly, with extraordinary adeptness, she begins to brandish her own hoe and the maize roots in the furrow are swiftly dug and covered with soil. She leaves the line behind. In a few moments she will fall in line with the other one. Having noticed that her rival is catching up with her, the other one digs even harder. And yet, this one is catching up. One more effort—and lo! she overtakes her and comes out first at the boundary. Faint with exhaustion and glowing red, she stands up and, leaning on the hoe, she is trying to get her second wind. Approving exclamations fill

the air. My sister, however, conceals both her satisfaction and the proud feeling awakened in her heart, and hurriedly sits on the boundary strip, to take a rest while awaiting her company.

The other one, having also arrived at the boundary, returns the jests thrown at her, with laughter. It has been just for a lark. Is it really a victory—to have dug and buried some ten more maize roots? If you take like that an entire furrow: that is victory for sooth! And, after throwing a barely concealed vicious glance at her rival, without sitting she shoulders the hoe and swiftly strides toward the upper end.

These challenging words pique meanly the wearied winner... Isn't the other one considering a new race? And, suppressing her tiredness, she rises quickly, mixes with the company that's arrived and together with them walks to the upper end.

All hoers take position. That one is already standing upright at her furrow. "Come on now!" she cries and hurriedly jabs the hoe into the soil around the first maize root.

Curious glances rivet on the other lass, who is also set. These glances embarrass her. Annoyance exasperates her! Oh that accursed girl! "If only I had not let myself in for it!" ... Now... how unwilling she is!... But can it be that she should be frightened by her?... So be it! And, howbeit grudgingly, she also plant her hoe into the ground and starts digging quickly.

"Now quit that fancy both of ye!" an elderly hoer says. Nobody backs her, though. It seems all the others are eager to see

this new race. The young master, too, curiously casts his eyes now at one, now at the other. And the race begins.

Soon the two contestants come to the fore of the company. For a while both wield the hoe with an equal alacrity and their pace is the same.

At one point the other one there begins to outstrip. The one at this side is a little behind. It seems she is brandishing the hoe with lessened strength. Is she tired already? This is unlikely. There is something else. She seems to have been seized by a hesitation... Why this foolery?... Why did she take the bait of that one, so now she'd also become the sport of all the rest?... And she begins to feel sorry. To show off her industry? But is *this* how one's industry is to be shown?... The thought to put down the hoe and quit the race comes... But why didn't she do it at the very beginning? Now that she's already begun... What will the others say... And what will *he* think?... No!... She shakes off the thought, clutches the hoe dourly, and begins to wield it as a lightning...

Soon my sister catches up with the other girl. The latter, in her turn, is trying to keep ahead of her. This one, however, does not fall out. And finally manages to overtake her. The other one is now fighting to catch up with her. And the very moment when she's getting abreast, the one at this side outrivals her again...

An extremely tough contest begins. The others, already far behind, follow the fierce strife with unusual curiosity.

The sun, now at the height of noontide, seems to have stopped its movement and to be watching with a blazing eye the race of these two rivals. And it is unstintingly pouring over them its flaming rays. This lass is all afire. That lass is bathing in sweat. And both of them are gasping for breath in the insufferable, broiling hot weather. The race, however, ceases not. It rather becomes more vehement and frenzied. The two rivals now go at an equal pace, now at a close distance. The other one will sometime outdistance her, but this one will soon catch up and outrun her...

The end of the field is near now. Faint with uncanny exhaustion and enfeebled, they wield the hoes with apparently less fervour and somewhat sluggishly. And they keep almost abreast.

But lo, there is a woman looming on the road from the village, carrying some containers. Uncle Kuzman's wife. She is bringing the midday meal. The girl with the olive-coloured kerchief, aflame with the swelter, catches sight of her with her weary eyes. A tremor passes through her heart... With what tenderness and joy did she meet her this morning!... Now... Now she picks up, summons up all her strength and with some superhuman exertion begins to brandish the hoe speedily. Soon she overtakes the other girl. And sweeping ahead like a whirlwind, she reaches the boundary first.

“Again she came out first! Again she won!” burst out joyful voices.

Out of breath, dog-tired, she does not sit to get some rest, but throws away the hoe and rushes to meet the old mistress and take the containers from her hands.

“What’s wrong with you, dear girl? Why are you burning so?” asks the woman with anxiety.

Nothing is wrong with her. Must be from the hot weather...

Having finished their furrows, the hoers return to the upper end, under the plum-tree, where uncle Kuzman’s wife has seated herself to get some rest. Everybody hastens to felicitate the happy winner or to toss a jocular remark at her. However, she responds nothing. It seems she feels no joy at all. A kind of forced and unfeeling smile has frozen on her burning face. Her eyes seem misty. And her heart is beating madly, as though it would burst...

Uncle Kuzman’s wife tells her to rest. Some of her friends also invite her to do so. Ana even forces her to sit down... She doesn’t want. While they are laying and arranging the meal, she will go to bring some cold water. And she will splash her face a little, for it is blazing hot. Later she will get her rest...

She takes a small keg and a copper, and with a friend of hers amble to the well, down the road...

The meal is ready now. All workers come in a crowd and take their seat around. She is coming, too, from the well, forcing herself to walk briskly. And she sits among the rest.

Lo, she has refreshed herself at the well, and her fire is gone. Howbeit... why does she look so pale? Is she somehow feeling poorly?...

No, she's not unwell... The sun has scorched her a little bit... Now it's all gone.

"You have played an indecent joke, girls," scolds them softly uncle Kuzman's wife. "But now that she's feeling better, thank God. Let her have some food, then..."

But she is not hungry. She has no wish to have even a bite. It is her poor heart that's throbbing madly in her bosom still, and her head is somewhat giddy... but she is trying hard, she hardly chews and swallows with pain... May this noon break be over soon, so that she could have a nap aside...

Finally, everybody makes a cross and the food is cleared away. The hoers withdraw and sit down in groups on the boundary. She also sits, at the end... Another time after lunch they all usually lie down. She is wishing they would do the same again, so she could also get a nap somewhere... Nobody lies down... Maybe they would sit at least a little longer... Alas, it was not to be either!...

A little later one of them gets up, takes the hoe and walks to the beginning of a furrow... The same one again: the hateful witch! A little while ago, in front of him, she wanted to show off how nimble and quick she was — and she could not! Now she wants to show off to his mother how diligent she is...

One after another, all the girls get up somewhat slothfully. She, too, must get up. And oh how she wishes to stay seated! If she cannot lie down, then at least let her be sitting only... Nothing doing, she needs to rise... So, against her will she gets up. Her head is heavy. Her legs are stiff—she is barely able to move them. But she puts all her strength in the effort, pulls herself together and with sham liveliness heads toward her furrow...

“You might as well rest a little longer!” tells her with affectionate compassion uncle Kuzman’s wife.

She will not? She’s feeling well? God grant that she be always well and healthy... Now she will do a little more hoeing, for she is feeling quite like it... So, having taken Rad’s hoe, she starts on a new furrow.

At the other side that one, already bent down, is deftly wielding the hoe. “What’s the hurry for? Is that another race then?... No, that’s the limit!” remark the elderly women. No, this is not for a race. Just for the sake of it, she cannot help it, you know...

Everybody begins to work. So does she, taking pains to conceal her frightful enervation. How heavy the hoes is!... And the dimness lingers in her sight!... She could hardly see the weeds on the furrow... Suddenly she starts. She tries so hard to pull herself together. She raises up her leaden head. And, unconsciously in a way, her eyes seek out the other end, where that girl is. She spies her, as though in a mist... Again she leads the line!... And

something, sharp as a knife, cuts through her broken heart. “Ah, she has a cheek, she has!” All at once this girl is seized by her former frenzy: to strain all her might and... No, this will no longer do... Impossible... Let her have her way!... And in pain her face sinks down.

... Oh this accursed hoe!... She can hardly lift it!... How feeble she is!... Indeed, she should have stayed a little more to rest, just a little more... But how could that be?... In front of all of them—him, his mother... Again she braces herself up, strains and aches not to show her weakness. And forcibly, she manages to keep up with the others.

Preoccupied with jest and banter, which tend to grow more after lunch, her comrades fail to notice her exhaustion. Uncle Kuzman’s wife is busy, too, talking to an elderly hoer, so neither she looks at her... Only one pair of eyes follow her worriedly from behind... He must go to Dervish Mound, to make a round of the barley. He is held from leaving, however, by something: something bids him linger on. His eyes, full of tender compassion, keep a disquieted watch over the furrow where *she* is digging. He sees her helpless staggering. He sees the effort with which she raises the hoe... And his heart is torn apart by pain. He feels like rushing over to grab the hoe from her hands and force her to leave and take a respite. But he is bashful: won’t he let her feel ashamed? And some remorse is gnawing him... Why, why on earth did he allow all of this!...

Harder and harder it is for her to lift the hoe. Her head is as though filled with lead. Her ears are ringing. Something in her chest suffocates her fearfully. Her eyes see dark. Her legs are unable to support her... Look, she can't even bear with the others. She is left behind all... "Oh God! What a shame!..." And another, even more tormenting pain is added to the one that is choking her bosom so fearfully... Oh God, grant her strength to catch up with them, at least!... However, the hoe refuses to be lifted. Her feet are trembling. Grant her just a little bit of strength... Just this root... Just a single hit... Ah!... Black darkness falls before her eyes. And she is sinking in some abyss...

His eyes rested on her, this instant he shudders. What's that? She is tottering... She will fall... And he rushes headlong to support her. He does not succeed. She collapses over the hoe...

"What have you done now, my wee darling!" uncle Kuzman's wife shrieks affrighted, startled by the peal of the dropped hoe. So she rushes toward her, too. The others are scared as well. They throw away their hoes and timidly run toward the girl that's fallen on the furrow.

She sees nothing, hears nothing. But she is still alive. Breathing. Her breast is heaving heavily. And, in a weird manner, shudder now her arm, now her leg...

"She has swooned, God protect her!" whispers uncle Kuzman's wife and makes piously the sign of the cross. "Mustn't

touch her. Keep silent. Make no noise. She'll come round." And she sits by her side with a worried look.

Rad is anxiously moving about. Something seems to torment him. Something oppresses his heart. He cannot help himself. He is at his wit's end... Some of the lasses, her close friends, squat nearby with gloomy eyes on the swooned girl. The others have scattered in groups over the boundary, awaiting her recovery, so they could get back to work. Desolate and broken-hearted, they are whispering quietly to each other... One of them is sitting at a distance, with eyes lowered guiltily to the ground, not uttering a word...

The sun is sinking. Cool evening breeze is blowing gently. The very time for earnest digging. But digging is abandoned. The company is still scattered and disbanded as a flock of frightened sheep. Because their girl-friend, fallen on the furrow, is still lying unconscious and shows no sign of coming round yet...

Uncle Kuzman's wife quietly stands up. With quiet steps she goes to the boundary, where Rad is sitting restlessly. The others come from around together. It seems that she will not recover soon. Ah! This is all in God's hands! She will stay here to watch over her. They may take their hoes and go home... Let someone tell her mother. But, by all means, do it in a roundabout way! Who knows what dagger will stab her heart, poor woman!... And Rad must tell her father...

Everyone gets up. Two of her closest girl-friends wish to stay together with uncle Kuzman's wife. The rest of them shoulder their hoes with a lost heart. They turn back to look upon their swooned comrade one more time, and then crestfallen amble down the path, one by one. And at the very back—he also follows them...

A silent summer night has fallen over the field. The stars, host after host, begin to flicker in the deep firmament—just like candles in a Christian church.

On the boundary by uncle Kuzman's field a fire is quietly burning down. The firebrands have burnt out, but nobody pushes them into the fire. By the fireside two people are sitting with drooping heads—Dad and Rad. With worried eyes riveted somewhere into the dark distance, they stay silent. Now and then, as if by accident, one or the other would utter a word. The other one would nod or would simply utter something vague. And then again they would fall into their silence... A little distance away from them, the two girl-friends of my sister are still sitting, huddled into one another, whispering inmost words—a mysterious dialogue of their own...

And there, at the furrow, a woman pressed by heavy grief, is sitting by her side. My Mom. Her brow is down, unspeakable pain torments her soul. Her tearful eyes are staring at the face of the swooned girl, gently white in the darkness. Because she is still lying unconscious on the maize roots. Her rare breathing is still faintly audible. But it is becoming weaker and weaker... Ill-boding

despair overshadows Mom's soul. And yet, a ray of hope still flickers inside her heart. And her lips are immovably whispering a selflessly devoted prayer to the merciful Mother of God...

Suddenly Mom shudders and startled, rises from the ground. Some eerie glow is radiating all around the head of the prostrate girl. And a shadow of light rises above her body. Only an instant—then the vision is gone. And Mom remains staring with widened eyes into the dark expanse... This very instant a star begins to fall from the heavenly dome and flies through the boundless space. A deafened cry escapes Mom's bosom. She hastily bends down her brow, burnt by a portentous thought and gets up in fear. She listens closely... My sister's chest is no longer heaving... She has ceased to breathe...

“My dear God!”

And as a tree-branch broken by a storm, she collapses on the body, spiritless now... And dull sobbing rends the silence of the night.

And the stars above, which have now descended lower, begin to shimmer more brightly—like candles lit around a dear dead...