

A HOUSE ON THE DRIM RIVER

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Later on, when they grew up, Zeskov Stameski was no longer angry at Eredor Eredoroski for not going for a dip with him in the Drim River at night. As soon as he arrived in Struga, his first thought was to visit his closest friend. With lustrous eyes and cheerful saunter, Zezkov climbed the stairs to the low-level terrace, put his bag down on the first chair he came across, shouted aloud to announce his arrival, and set off towards what he considered the most beautiful house on the Drim River. Several faces appeared at the windowpane, pushing each other to get a better view, a few of them older and a few younger than himself, calling to him to come up and get a cup of coffee, and only then go wherever he meant to go. Zeskov made a semicircle, raised his arms and waived at them, his mouth assumed the form of a smile and pronounced stridently "I'll be home soon", then turned around to complete the circle, and walked on.

A house on the Drim! When he was a child, he blamed his parents for residing about a hundred meters away from the Drim River, in the internal network of the small stony streets, where it was no longer possible to hear, smell or see the river. He was persistently asking them why they didn't buy Eredor's house, where he used to spend longer hours than he did at his own home, observing the currents of the black waters on whose bottom they imagined, when they were children, the existence of castles built by underwater creatures hidden beneath the bottom or perhaps among the unsteady giant dark plants, growing in the river.

"Hey, hey, wait a minute, where are you rushing to, Zeskov Stameski?"

"Hey, Zvonko, how are you doing, man?"

"Oh, I'm fine, but we're not going to talk about me. You are supposed to be doing the talking, historian. When did you arrive from Skopje? How is it in the capital?"

"About five minutes ago. I'm going to visit Eredor," Zeskov answered.

"I was just thinking of telling you about him."

"So, do tell me."

"He has sealed himself up inside his room, would not come out of it. For weeks. His family is extremely concerned, they ask all of us who know

him to try and get him out somehow. We go to visit him, but he would not admit us in his room, he doesn't want to speak to anyone. Haven't you talked to him on the phone?"

"No, not lately. We don't see each other very much lately, you know how it is."

"Don't you see each other in Skopje?" – Zvonko seemed sincerely surprised.

"We used to... He works a lot, and so do I. You know..."

"But you have the same job, you're both historians, it's a shame not to keep in touch."

"Well... that's that. I'll get him out of his room, don't worry. Bye."

In fact, Zeskov was not really surprised that Eredor locked himself in his room, and did not take it as tragically as his family apparently did. Simply, the man was writing. It was not the first time to lock himself up, he was incessantly writing whenever he had a lot of work to do, would not venture any other tasks until he had completed his writing. And he created masterpieces – that is how Zeskov called Eredor's historical analyses, read by several historians in the institutes, but never sufficiently promoted. Zeskov was outraged, his eyes infuriated, when he was repeatedly persuading, almost coercing, Eredor to print, publish, promote his books about the history of Macedonia in the first half of the twentieth century until the end of World War I. Eredor was writing, he did not want to communicate much with those who did not agree with him – in writing, he would say, in writing, he would repeat, that is where all arguments are situated. Eredor highly respected several historians, whose demeanor was utterly opposite to his own, hence they were much more promoted in the public. But why should they be invited to all conferences, when your findings are much more relevant? – Zeskov often insisted, without getting a reply. After extensive and exasperating attempts at convincing his friend to be more frequently present in the public, Zeskov eventually gave up. Now, himself being a historian, but with an expertise in the ancient period, Zeskov wanted to share some discoveries he came across with his once closest friend.

When he arrived in front of the house located on the right side of the river, he raised his eyes towards the beauty from his childhood dreams – Eredor's house – and stood motionless for few minutes. His memories recollected in his mind and unconsciously he smiled, looking alternatively at the house and at the Drim. Even now was the Drim surging steadfastly, but the blackened waters beneath the surface no long concealed any chimeras

– neither strange underwater creatures nor luxurious castles or palaces. The darkness was not as black as it seemed to them when they were children. And the river now appeared shallower...

He knocks once, no response. He knocks several times and heard steps. As soon as the door opens, joyous screams surround him instantly. “Zeskov, man, you’ve finally decided to come! Come on, what are you waiting for?! Finally we’ve got someone to exchange a few words with about Skopje, our dear Eredor would not tell us a thing,” Eredor’s older brother says. “I want to see your guy at once, to throw him in Drim with his clothes on!”, Zeskov laughs. Then Eredor’s mother and father explain: many have come so far to get Eredor out of his room, but none succeeded, let’s see if you’ve got more luck. The younger brother runs to Eredor’s room to announce the guest.

Zeskov reports to Eredor’s family recent events from his life. Suddenly everyone’s voices die down. The silence lasts for barely a moment. “Son,” the father says with excitement, “we knew that Zeskov would take you out of there.” There is not a trace of exhaustion on Eredor’s face after the long weeks’ work, because he knows how not to drag what he had been doing with him after finishing his work. He is prepared to go out at once, and does not pay attention to the pleas from his family to stay with them a bit, so that they can chat with him for a while.

In the evenings, when they were in primary school, Zeskov used to come every single night under the window of the house that overlooked the Drim River, the window through which the room of his classmate could be seen, and used to call out Eredor’s name; when he did not receive a response, then he threw pebbles towards the windowpanes. It only happened once that he broke the glass, but in the nights that followed, he did not give up calling Eredor in the same manner. No one, except for the two of them, ever discovered who had broken the window. Sooner or later, during these night calls, Eredor appeared at the window, but he never joined his friend to take a swim with him in the Drim. Zeskov protested, was angry at him, demurred – and every night came back under the window with pebbles in his hands. He could not understand why his friend, and such a loyal friend at that, who once helped him in a difficult moment (at the time it seemed as the most difficult one in his life), did not want to get out secretly some night, as all children used to, and jump from the bridge into the cold river. This was a pleasure Zeskov devoured every night. He had been jumping countless times from the same bridge on which near the end of August every year, poets from all over the world read their poems during the Struga Poetry

Evenings. He loved doing that mostly at midnight, and then, soaked to the bones, entered his home quietly, and could not fall asleep for the coming hour due to his excitement. In the days between those magic nights, he also jumped from the bridge, but in the daytime Eredor accompanied him as well, and they jumped together in all positions they could possibly imagine, with their legs down, with their head down, turning in circles in the air, both of them together or one after the other. They plunged in the depths of the dark river, holding their breath as long as they could, with their eyes open in the river waters in order to find the hidden castles of the creatures living under the bottom, in the roots of the black plants. Those were the hours they have carried in their memory throughout the years despite the obligations, despite the time that split them apart.

“Creative thrust, ah?” – Zeskov was challenging his friend. “What are you writing about now?”

“You’ll be the first to read it, when it’s ready. When did you arrive?”

“Half an hour ago. You know what I’ve been thinking about?”

“Yeah, I can guess: how to buy my parents’ house beside the Drim.”
– Eredor smiled after his own joke.

“That’s probably the only enterprise I have not completed successfully.”
– Zeskov answered, also with laughter.

“Now it’s no longer that important, anyway we cannot observe Drim throughout the whole year, as we used to before, with all its changes in every season.”

“I may be able to.” – Zeskov stated mysteriously.

Eredor was watching him with suspicion. “Do you intend to come back to Struga and live here? Oh, come on, you’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’ll tell you later” – Zeskov responded – “but first I wanted to ask you: why did you never come with me to take a swim in Drim at night?”

“I didn’t want to worry my parents.”

“That’s all?”

“Are you disappointed?”

“A little bit, I suppose. Besides, I don’t believe you. That is not something that children normally care about so much. Never mind. So, you’d come with me tonight?”

At that instance, Eredor’s face sparkled just as it used to in the childhood days when the vicissitudes of daily life were of no concern to them. As if he had resolved an enigma from the most insidious niche in the world. He will come, he said, nothing will stop him. So, they agreed to meet that

night. That same night, two adults found themselves in a slightly embarrassing position when, along with a bunch of teenagers, they were jumping in the river from the top of the bridge. It was only an hour later that they decided to rest, sitting on the lower part of the coast, with their feet plunged in the murky river.

“I didn’t think you’d come this summer”, Eredor said.

“I didn’t plan to, but something unexpected came up. I’m reading about Alexander. He passed through Struga.”

“What? Alexander the Great? He most certainly did not! Struga did not even exist at the time of Alexander. Besides, a couple of years ago you were so much against research concerning Alexander’s life, you actually despised those who wrote about him.”

“That was because they wanted to prove that we were his descendants. This is something else, I’m more objective, you know. I have a lot of sources now, direct, primary sources, from historians who were with him at the conquering expeditions”, Zeskov was conversing self-confidently.

“Don’t smile so mysteriously. I’ll first check what you are saying hundreds of times, and then I may start thinking about whether I should believe you. As far as I know, the closest Alexander ever was to Struga is when he passed at least fifty miles to the east of it, nearby Prespa Lake, at least that’s what we studied, remember? Are you trying to tell me that someone wrote that Alexander passed through Struga, which already existed at the time?” – Eredor obviously did not believe his friend.

“Well, that’s not exactly it. There are other indications... that he passed at the side of Drim.”

“No, not a chance.”

“Never mind whether you trust me or not. Anyway, I need your help. Regardless of the fact that you don’t believe my legend, don’t spoil this for me. Alexander, according to the latest data I came across, was stationed in the house of that old man on the left side of Drim, just opposite your house.”

“You’re crazy! You mean Matijan? You’ve always wanted to have a house along the Drim River, you were prepared to buy mine – are you looking for a counterfeit reason to buy *his* house?” – Eredor was laughing.

“Your house is bound to be mine,” Zeskov said jokingly. “For the time being, however, I am planning to buy Matijan’s. Are you with me?”

“I *am* with you, but he is not selling it. We’ll have to think of a plan.”

And a plan it was they were reflecting on all night long. How are they

going to coerce the man at the age of at least ninety, to leave the house in which he had probably dwelt his whole life? It won't be easy. Alena, Zeskov's sister, waited for him at home, his father and mother were worried that he did not come sooner, to tell them everything about what was happening to him in Skopje in the past few months. Everyone in his house woke up in the early hours of that morning, and Zeskov was recounting episode after episode, they were listening, laughing, asking questions, encouraging him to relate more. It was not difficult to make Zeskov narrate with zeal further and further on, he seemed to have the energy to everlastingly speak about true event or else with some exaggerations expose his fecund imagination. Ultimately utterly exhausted, he fell asleep as the dawn was breaking.

He found Eredor in the bazaar the next day waiting with a newspaper in his hands. They barely managed to exchange a few words about their ideas on how to compel Matijan to sell the house, when the elderly man appeared from one end of the bazaar and was walking in their direction. They both stood immobile and speechless, feeling as culprits, following Matijan with their eyes until he got out of sight somewhere towards the street. They will first try to directly ask him if he is willing to sell, they decided. So, it meant they had to wait for Matijan to go back home, so they can knock at the door and ask – ask directly, is he selling the house. They will offer a sum of money larger than the house, or rather cottage, is really worth. They ambled along the river bank to and fro many times, walking the same path, awaiting the owner in whose hands Zeskov's joy or disappointment lay. When he saw Matijan on the corner from behind the "Sveti Nikole" restaurant, his blood was running through his veins with ferment, he was unable to palliate his heartbeat: am I eventually going to have a house with a view on Drim? If he buys it, he would to back to live in his native Struga, even if it meant traveling to Skopje for work every day. And, what's more, it was the house in which, as it was written in an old and tentative manuscript, Alexander the Great was stationed, on his expedition to Thebes. What did he expect to find there? He hoped for success this time, he hoped he would be able to collect money to purchase it, and he would be cogent enough to convince the old man to sell it. Matijan entered opening the low door, while Zeskov and Eredor simultaneously stepped forth to knock at it. Suddenly, a swarm of clouds imbued the sky, so unexpectedly did the white pillows endow the delightful celestial ocean that they appeared to be chasing each other, overtaking each other, and in a moment became gloomy, thundered as if they were going to immolate the ground beneath, and released an incessant

flow of rain – all this happened so abruptly that the two friends did not even manage to reach the door. Zeskov withdrew, interpreting the weather as a bad sign, and decided to leave this undertaking for the following day. Eredor on the other hand, was apt to contradict the superstitious signs, hence tried to persuade the young conqueror Zeskov not to give up. In vain.

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When they met in the “Zeneva” restaurant the following day, the blue sky was reflecting crimson glitter due to the intensive ferocity, promising heat throughout the whole day, probably in the coming days as well, because the rain would hardly penetrate the wall of heat that covered both the town and the lake from all sides. Zeskov was conversing of the new moments that he had read the previous day of Alexander’s life, of those moments that none of the students knew about during their years at the Faculty, when they were preparing the exams concerning the ancient period on the Macedonian territory, since the books did not include the all sources. There was an anecdote that reminded him of Eredor, and Zeskov told it to his friend – it was very similar to the anecdote which tells of how Alexander met Diogenes: In India, Alexander encountered naked ascetics, who were considered to be teachers and wise men in their areas. When the army passed by them, they knocked with their feet on the ground, and then behaved as if they did not even notice the thousands of armed and uniformed newcomers, and continued peacefully with their exercises. Alexander, with the help of a translator, asked what this behavior is due to, and received the following answer (here, Zeskov tried to remember the exact words of the naked philosophers, but had to content with interpretation): you are a man just like us, the only difference is that you have no good intentions and you are always busy, traveling far away from home, but soon you will be dead and you will only own so much soil as to suffice for your burial. Eredor was guessing: Alexander must have praised them, must have admired them; Zeskov was confirming. This is the dilemma, Zeskov said, why both you and Alexander (you see, I put you in the same group with him) do something that is completely disparate from what you respect and like. You respect your fellow historians, who practically fight to promote themselves at every single conference or seminar. Why don’t you behave like that as well? You think it’s OK, you like their aggressiveness, while you continue behaving in your recognizable, typical, way, you keep silent, you don’t fight. Just as Alexander – he was impressed by the ascetic

philosophers, yet he continued with his conquests although he knew very well that after his death he will only own the ground in which he will be buried. Why? Eredor replied that he should not search for secret answers to clear and obvious questions.

The discussion ended there, the drink was finished, the bill paid, and the walk taken towards the low door of the house that allegedly concealed some ancient secret and, what's more important, had a view on Drim's course. Eredor knew that now, when he met his childhood friend, he would have to leave his writing for the coming weeks, and would stop working these days, because, regardless of how much he wanted to do his job, he wished more to help Zeskov. Although they did not see each other as often as they did several years ago, the meetings with Zeskov seemed to have been going on incessantly until the present moment. They remembered events from the past, and had a lot to say to each other in the present. They did not find time to meet more frequently, or, if Eredor wanted to recognize the truth, he found neither time, nor perhaps will, because he realized they were so different and increasingly distant. Zeskov almost did not notice the difference. Everything for him was just the same as it would be if they were more similar. It was only that their ways diverged, their jobs, the places they frequented in the night, the friends in Skopje. Yet, the memories could not be erased, and it was only Eredor who knew how fiercely Zeskov wanted a house with a view on Drim, and it was only Zeskov who knew that Eredor planted a water herb on the bottom of Drim brought from the bottom of the Dnepr River (after a trip Eredor's father took to Kiev, where he bought from the local market a plant that, according to the seller, was plucked from the bottom of Dnepr), somewhere among the tall water plants that give the river its black color. It was then for the first time, as far as they knew, that someone in the world has planted a herb in a river, but what a miracle! – the herb grew as if Drim was its most natural environment. They followed its progress for a while, and then lost sight of it, and never found it since.

They stopped in front of the house. A strategy: first they will try the indirect means, and then, if these means do not cause a result, they will ask the question directly. And so – Zeskov and Eredor set off towards the barber's, whose owner was the father of a classmate of theirs from high school. "Mr. Stojan, where is Naum?" "He is at work, my dears, where else?" The plan was postponed for the afternoon. When Nuam heard of it, he instantly started thinking of ideas and making preparations, doubtless adding his own spices to it; he did not share his ideas with the other two

men. I will inform you of the results, he said as if responsible for the most confidential mission of vital importance. The two friends looked at each other: you will inform us? We want to be present as well. No way, no way, you will spoil everything – Naum was persistent. Trust me, guys. Zeskov and Eredor knew that grandpa Matijan (that is how the Struga residents called the elderly man) goes to barber's every Saturday, but not always at Stojan's; he went to a different barber every week, Stojan's barbershop being only one of those he went to. How long would they have to wait? Naum convinced them not to worry, he had a plan how to attract grandpa Matijan to his father's barbershop. Whatever this plan was, it was successful. The first coming Saturday, Matijan was in Stojan's barbershop since early morning, placed himself comfortably on the chair, closed his eyes in a peaceful siesta. Eredor and Zeskov tried to peek through the window, but Naum gave them a signal to leave.

"I can't believe that I am putting my fate into Naum's hands," Zeskov hesitated.

"Oh, he is imaginative... a little too imaginative, but let's give it a try."

In an hour they met at the coast of the lake, near the Drim Hotel.

"We'll see," Naum said secretly.

"What shall we see? Come on, tell us what happened," Zeskov was impatient.

This is what happened: while Matijan was in the barbershop, Miroslav entered (Miroslav was Naum's brother), much concerned and excited because of the news he had just heard. This comes from confidential people, not just anyone, Miroslav stated, there is no doubt as to its truth value: on the left side of the Drim River, from the House of Culture all the way to the bazaar there are underground waters harmful to the health.

"What underground waters boy, where did you hear such nonsense? – Stojan was angry.

"Yes, it's certain, I had such information myself long time ago, but I didn't want to tell you in order not to frighten you," Naum introduced dramatic tones.

They argued for half an hour what there was and what there wasn't on the left side of the river, Stojan completely stopped his work, evidently upset by the significant news, and his clients did not complain that Stojan stopped shaving them, they did not ask him to hurry up because they, too, wanted to hear and say more about this strange issue. Then the apprentice

(without any previous agreement with Naum and Miroslav who invented the whole affair) said that he was aware of the detrimental underground waters that cause illnesses, thus unintentionally aiding the plan. Suddenly he screamed: what about grandpa Matijan who lives there?! Everyone immediately went silent and turned their eyes towards the unfortunate man. Oh, grandpa Matijan, they all shouted with panic in their voices, move away at once! – They advised him.

“So, it turned out better than we hoped,” Zeskov was almost exultant at Naum’s story.

“Ay, what did I tell you?” – Naum was victorious. “What did I tell you?! Who’s the best?! Ay?! We’ve fixed this with my help, no problem!”

“And, what did Matijan say?” – Eredor asked, a bit more restrained.

“Grandpa Matijan?” – Naum was now a bit calmer. – “Well, he said... this is exactly what he said: What you are talking about is absurd.” Naum then added: “But, don’t worry, we’ll fix that, he’ll have to move.

“Right. If that’s what he said, he doesn’t intend to move,” Zeskov was now disappointed.

“Don’t worry, he’ll change his mind when he hears the same thing from different places, and we’ll take care that he does,” Naum was comforting him.

And, truly, the whole bazaar soon knew about the underground waters. But they did not flow only on the left side of Drim, but also on the right, under the bazaar as well, and still further. That is why all the members of the Sandovski family behave so strangely, that is why the Pavlevskis so frequently catch the flue, that is why the Arnaudovskis have such rough voices. In the course of the following week, everyone had explanation about everyone else’s behavior; the underground waters were to blame for it all.

“What have we done Zeskov?!” – Eredor smiled.

“No let’s see if he won’t move” – Zeskov did not hesitate to make his delight obvious.

Days went by, everyone they knew was mobilized to play a part in this difficult battle – they would appear next to Matijan here and there, in front of him and from the back, would almost jump out of the oven when he was taking his roasted tavce-gravce beans, and circuitously would try to extract from him the answer of the same question – when – when will he leave, when will he move out. And days went by, but they were not an inch closer to an answer. It is clear: we are not able to convince him to move with this method, the two historians told each other. Let’s move on to the next plan.

As they said it, so it was done. Now they talked to their friends who have become construction workers to spread a story that permission was granted to a construction firm to dig up the ground on the left side of Drim so that a beautiful new hotel is built. The firm only had to compensate to the owners of the small, old and decaying houses, who would have to move away, and the hotel would start rising up. Eredor did not get a moment of sleep all night long, turning around in his bed, coiling his body, seeing Matijan in front of his weary eyes on the bottom of the Drim River whispering softly clandestine words with the submarine creatures; and in the dream these insidious beings were erecting castles together whose peaks swiftly reached the surface of the black river, so swiftly that the roofs and the wall overflowed the river bank and then the whole town, which did not resemble itself but bore a resemblance to a Taftalidze, a settlement in Skopje.

The next morning, Eredor hesitated. Nonetheless, he uttered the question: "Isn't this a bit too cruel?" – he asked Zeskov rhetorically.

"No, of course not. We just want to convince him, that's all. We won't fool him, I'm willing to offer more than the house is worth. My sister is also ready to help. Now listen."

They made a deal. They contacted on the cell phones, sent each other messages about who saw Matijan and when, where he sat down for coffee, in which grocery he bought fruit and vegetables. As soon as the details were arranged, Alena and a couple of friends sat on the table next to Matijan's. They talked about different issues, and, ostensibly spontaneously, the conversation turned to the new hotel to be built on the left side of Drim. A couple of insolent eyes penetrated their heads, the old man left some money on the table, under the cup of unfinished coffee, and got up. "Stop bothering me," he said to the girls as he passed them in a singularly firm voice.

"How would you interpret this?" – Alena asked her brother later in the afternoon.

"How I would interpret it?" – Zeskov said with evident consternation. "The way it should be interpreted, what do you think? Isn't it obvious to you he is not selling his house? That he knows the hotel is a lie?"

"Now, stop shouting and listen to what I have to say. Do you know what the rumor is? Grandpa Matijan had a daughter, she was everything he had after his wife's death. She was born in that house, and a few months ago she died in that house. That's why he isn't selling it", Alena informed.

Zeskov contemplated, his mind could not be pacified. He thought with impotent rebellion against this impertinent and dignified old man,

how he was going to persuade him to give up the so desired house, and nothing could palliate Zeskov's alacrity to do so. It was a night of poignant thoughts, and so were the following few nights. He did not even want to see Eredor. The fifth night after Alena's information, Zeskov heard piercing sounds echoing from below his window, one of them so strong that it was a true miracle the glass did not end up on the floor in shreds. He peeked cautiously and witnessed a *déjà vu*, a scene in which everything resembled the frequent sites of his youth, except that the people assumed the opposite places: he had Eredor's place up in the room, and Eredor stood on his place down in the garden, below the window with pebbles in his hands, as if their souls had changed places. Come on, the alien body with his soul called him, and Zeskov responded adequately: no, I can't. But this transference lasted for only a moment, and the very next moment Zeskov laughed, and said loudly: I just wanted you to see what it is like when you go for a swim alone; and then: Wait, I'm coming down.

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After a relatively short period of convincing, Zeskov accepted the so "prosaic" variant of Eredor – to ask Matijan directly for a possibility to sell the house – despite the fact that Zeskov was utterly unsatisfied with this idea. They did not knock for a long time, when Matijan opened. There was something in his demeanor that discouraged them from stepping any further. But then his appearance mollified. There was no more dissipation in his eyes. Yet, he did not move. They explained they lived for a long time across his house, nearby, wanted only to ask a few questions regarding the house. Finally, he invited them in. I am a historian, Zeskov is elaborating his case to Matijan, historical moments had been happening in this house, I need it to do research, I will give you anything you request. Matijan is becoming increasingly impatient, so he pretends to be busy looking through the old newspapers on the small table. He hardly endures the end of Zeskov's speech, and then strictly states: I don't believe this house has any historical value, nothing important was happening here during the war. Oh, no, we did not understand each other, Zeskov replies, not such recent past, but a more distant past, Alexander the Great was here. At that moment a deafening laughter pervades the room, a laughter that does not vanish for a long time.

“What Alexander boy? That’s impossible, this house was not even built yet when I was a child. I am old, it is true. But that old? I should hope not” – Matijan said with the smile, and then quietly and with his recognizable impertinence spoke: Go away.

Zeskov and Eredor went away. They did not exchange a single word along the river bank and through the bazaar. They sat opposite each other in a coffee-bar, and Eredor tried to comfort his friend – we will think of a new plan, won’t we, when have we ran out of ideas? Zeskov was angry – this cadaverous old man is sitting there all alone, not talking to anybody, what difference does it make to him if he lives beside the river or not? Eredor did not reply, because what he was going to say would have made Zeskov even more miserable than he was at the moment. They agreed to see each other the next day and both left.

Eredor made a decision to go back to the old man, so different from the other elderly people he knew, who were eager to have a chat, to have a guest at their door, to receive him, offer marmalade and coffee and have long conversations. Matijan’s peculiarities, his sallow face, his maledictions, his irritability now proved not to be unalterable. His laughter and sense of humor made Eredor believe he could discuss reasonably with the strange old man of his neighborhood. When Matijan opened the door, he gave an appearance of boredom. Oh, just give up – he said shortly in a tired voice. Just one word, please, Eredor pleaded before the door was shut upon him. Yet, it opened again. My friend was dreaming of a house on the Drim for years, Eredor said standing at the threshold, ever since I’ve known him, and all the odds of buying one are always against him. Eredor was explaining how much it would mean to Zeskov, how thankful he would be. I am sorry, Matijan answered, but I don’t sell. So much of the attempt.

“Forget the house” – Eredor told Zeskov when they met the next day. I will sell you mine one day. Now, tell me about Alexander.

“No, I won’t forget it. I’m currently considering a new plan. I will inform you as soon as I have it planned.”

“Leave the man alone. He is old” – Eredor tried to dissuade him.

“Do you feel sorry for him because he lost his daughter?”

“You mean, what your sister said – that his daughter died there? No, I didn’t think of that. I can’t remember he ever had a daughter.

“Why would you remember? There was no reason to be interested in that.”

Concerning Alexander, Zeskov was telling Eredor, I am now reading a modern historian who uses Arian and other primary sources, Peter Green, and, you see, there is something connected to you; now I am again at the point when he meets the ascetic philosophers – is that an accident? Zeskov linked Arian's comments on the king's excessive admiration to his friend's character. His behavior, as Arian writes as if he has Eredor in mind (this is Zeskov's interpretation), was always exactly the opposite of the characteristics he expressed admiration for. To divulge the secret of this contradiction – this is my great priority, Zeskov said. For him, everything had to be explained.

A certain fiery premonition whispered to him that this was going to be a successful plan. It certainly is the last one, since the time to leave, to go back to Skopje is approaching, and Drim will stay behind, and he will not have strength or will or cause to think of ways to buy a house along the river. If he does not succeed now, he will not be coming back here any more, he will not turn behind his back. This is the last time. Eredor does not understand Zeskov's allusion: well, out with it, speak. Zeskov hesitates a little, thinks of what the best way would be to present the idea, and starts carefully. You know, he says, in an unsteady voice (no one has seen this self-confident young man in such an unconfident position), what the situation is like, politically I mean; we may seize the moment, and manipulate Matijan a little, you know... Tell him something, like: it's dangerous to live in Struga these days... don't look at me that way, he's old, he'll get caught on the bait, he'll get scared. The frown on Eredor's face was becoming bigger and bigger until it turned into obstreperousness. "Forget about me in this," he said and turned to go.

"Oh, don't be so moralizing" – Zeskov followed him with a fast pace.

"I am not moralizing, I am not teaching you lessons or anything of the sort. You are free to do whatever you want, but forget me".

"Again, it's just like you to do this. Why? Do you remember the first day we met?" Zeskov asked.

"I remember it well" – Eredor answered reluctantly.

"We were in the fifth grade. You were a new pupil in our school. At the beginning of the school year we went to an excursion, but I was punished to stay in the classroom until the afternoon when the others were supposed to come back because I hit Igor. Then someone else was supposed to stay with me, keep an eye on me, and then report to the teacher what I was doing. You were short, thin, you knew I was going to beat whoever stayed to

control my behavior, but you volunteered. Despite the desire to go to the excursion, despite the fear you must have felt, at least I thought so at the time. But there was no fear, and you had no intention of reporting anything against me. Then we became friends. And previously you didn't even know me, so how did you guess we were going to be good friends? A child who willingly sacrifices an excursion, that is, I believe, unseen in human history. And a fearless child, too, sacrificing himself for his friend. And, on the other hand, you don't want to have a swim with me at night, and now you don't want to do this harmless thing. I don't understand you".

"The fact that I stayed in the classroom instead of going to excursion had nothing to do with you. I would have stayed for anyone, because otherwise the teacher would have chosen the victim since no one else wanted to volunteer, and that is something I could not allow, I wanted to be the one who would make the decision."

"So, it was nothing personal? Is that the kind of friend I have? Who wouldn't do anything for me especially?"

"Aren't you glad about it? You have a friend who would do something special in any situation, you liked that at the time."

And night fell, and Zeskov and Eredor still quarreled, swimming in the waters of Drim. The mysterious creatures on the bottom of the river could hear how two voices were becoming increasingly vociferous, boisterous, thunderous; they could hear a loud splash in the water and a noisy argument between two young men. The water became obscure, wavy, foaming, and a pair of legs started swimming towards the coast. There was no one else left in the river except for Zeskov. He submerged in the darkness out of despair, what else was left for him to do in order to silence his rage? Suddenly he noticed how on the bottom of the river tiny holes were forming, minuscule windows from which light was spreading, and everything around Zeskov became so clear and visible that he could see the tiniest patterns of color of a whole school of fish spinning around his body. The minuscule beams of light that penetrated Drim's bottom expanded to the dimensions of a nut and illuminated underwater castles unseen before. Zeskov watched them confused, approached them and saw that the castles were built out of stones and mud and were hidden among the black plants that give Drim its dark color. And the plants, quivering under the pressure of the water current, were releasing bubbles that got glued to Zeskov's face, and as long as he was breathing these bubbles of oxygen he did not have to get to the surface for air. The little creatures were peeking through the gaps, swam out and led the

night swimmer many miles down the river. There, in front of Zeskov's eyes, a miraculous plant of the color of tangerine was disclosing its full splendor, its branches bore flowers of the tangerine color, whose form resembled the flowers of cherry trees. It was the same plant, now much bigger, that Eredor had planted on the bottom of Drim.

For days did Eredor stay locked in his room. His parents and brothers did not upset him, so he knew, when he heard the knocking on his door, that Zeskov had come. Back, to contemplate the events, to reach the other side, or to confirm his victory.

"Hey" – Zeskov sounded surprised when he came in. "Well... your parents think you are writing."

"That's not the only thing you can do on your PC" – Eredor answered.

"So, games, ah? What level are you at?"

"The seventh."

"You passed the green avenger?"

"I sure did. After two whole days... and nights."

There was a minute of silence. Then Zeskov wanted to tell his friend what he came here to tell him.

"I just came to tell you I understand."

"What do you understand?"

"Why. I understand why. Why Alexander was impressed by the philosophers and he lived for the conquests" – Zeskov said and got up to leave.

"So, is there any special, mysterious reason?"

"No, as you already know. It was his character that led him to do what he was doing, regardless of the fact that he was impressed by completely different things. That is so obvious, so evident, it seems that everyone else is aware of it but I."

There was not much else to be said. It was time to say good-bye. Laying his hand on the doorknob, however, Zeskov turned around:

"I... decided not to go along with my last plan. I'm giving up on buying Matijan's house. So, we'll see each other in Skopje, ah?"

"Yeah, maybe" – Eredor put an end to the conversation.

Zekov walks doleful, the insidious waters are getting to him, drowning him, but he breaths the bubbles, enjoys their oxygen. All he had been building in years, all his ideas, all plans for the house he was craving for, all friendly moments hurled in a chasm, in a steep abyss, obliterated, evaporated... Yet, there is no more fear of failure, he is freed, even, somehow,

almost unburdened, relieved of any cares. Thus, with an ethereal stride, softly touching the ground beneath, he reaches Matijan's house.

"Oh, you again?" – Matijan says opening the door. "You don't give up, do you?"

"I just came to tell you that I was sorry for your daughter" – Zeskov explains.

Matijan seems not to understand, watches him with incredulously.

"Your daughter, who passed away in this house recently" – Zeskov elaborates his explanation.

No one, literally no one remembers seeing Matijina, this Matijan, so merry, so cheerfully laughing like a child.

"I don't have a daughter" – he barely manages to squeeze his words through the laughter. "I've never had a daughter... at least not that I know of. Who told you such a thing?" he asks with a smile on his face.

Zeskov is looking at him without knowing what to answer. Matijan explains, I am old, he says, where have you seen a ninety-year-old man lift furniture and carry it from one place to another, move, have you ever seen such a thing? He slowly calms down and utters a "goodbye".

"But, I just wanted to..."

"Goodbye" – Matijan firmly pronounces.



Richard Wright as a Jigsaw Puzzle, oil on canvas

Luis Quintanilla, 1943