

CHAPTER 1

AS HE WAS CROSSING THE INTERSECTION, Mark Gurabardhi noticed a crowd of people, which was growing by the minute, gathering on the right-hand side of the street. Most likely he would have walked past without a second glance if he hadn't heard someone say the word *snake!* — spoken not in fright but in astonishment.

A snake at this time of year? Now that was out of the ordinary. . . . Mark went over to the knot of bystanders to see what was going on. Most of the people standing around were passersby, looking on just as he was. “Holy smoke, it really is a snake!” someone said, as they all shuffled around to let newcomers get a look. “But how can you tell if it’s dead or alive?” One glance was enough to tell Mark that it was neither dead nor alive, but just hibernating, like a normal reptile.

ISMAIL KADARE

Two youngsters (something about them made it clear that, without specifying how, they were the ones who had unearthed the snake) flashed their eyes in pride at the crowd. To demonstrate their rights of ownership, they poked the creature this way and that with a stick. When they lifted the reptile off the ground, people shrank back, but each time they did, someone in the crowd piped up with a “Don’t worry, frozen snakes don’t bite, and even if you do get bitten, it’s not dangerous, the venom’s too weak, like it’s diluted by the cold. . . .”

A man in a felt hat seemed to be looking for a target for all his pent-up anger. “We’ve come to a pretty pass,” he seemed to be saying. “Where but in Albania do you get minds as warped as that? No, we don’t get up in the morning to do something useful, we get up with some crazy idea in our heads — unearthing sleeping snakes! What’ve you got between your ears, you little perverts? You wouldn’t lift a finger to help save those antique vases or ancient bronzes people are forever digging up all over the place these days — oh, no, you wouldn’t, but you don’t miss a beat when it comes to finding horrors like this!”

Two others were discussing what to do with the snake. You could bury it again where it had been found and let it wait for warmer weather, as nature intended; or you could put it by a fireside — you’d have to be very careful, all the same — and let it thaw out.

“Have you all lost your minds?” another bystander blurted out. “All winter long we’ve all been frozen to the bone. No-

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body cared a fig about us when we were cold — and now we're supposed to worry about some lizard?" Then an old woman chimed in. "Everything's gone to wrack and ruin, mark my words. I've been around for many a long year, God knows, but I've never seen anyone try to stop a snake from hibernating in peace!"

Mark turned around and was about to move on. His old friend Zef, if he'd been there, would surely have seen a symbolic link between this frozen reptile and the present state of affairs. Only two weeks ago, when they'd been chatting about the way things had gone in their bizarre world these past few years, Zef had likened the monstrosities of today's Albania to the ancient tale of the girl who had married a snake. And he'd added, with dark foreboding: All these *faces* that change their masks from one day to the next, like in some Greek drama . . . they don't inspire a lot of confidence.

Mark felt a pang of guilt for not having asked about his friend, whom he'd not seen since then at the office or in the café.

He looked up as a police car went by. The spirals of black dirt that it raised in its wake seemed angry at being dragged out of their slumber, but then slowly settled down before returning to rest on the somnolent highway.

Though the patrol car had been moving briskly along, Mark managed to get a good look at the policeman's face. Sitting in the front passenger seat, the officer had even seemed to turn slightly so as to look in Mark's direction.

He'd been tempted to yell after him: Mind your own business, big boy! He hated people turning around to look at him. In this instance, he disliked it even more than usual, since he'd realized that each time he ran into the officer in the café, the man looked at him with an ever more inquisitorial eye. Not all that long ago, of course, he thought with a sliver of a smile, he, like everyone else, would have been utterly distraught at the very idea that he might have inadvertently said something that could be taken two ways, even if it wasn't something actually forbidden. Nowadays, strangely, he would almost like to feel he was being watched, at least a little. . . . But it was late, far too late, for that, as for so many other things.

When a second vehicle — an ambulance, this time — went hurtling past in the same direction as the patrol car, Mark was convinced that something really unusual had happened.

As long as they're not rushing about like that on account of the snake! He dismissed the thought almost as soon as it had occurred to him.

As he arrived at the building where he had his studio, his mind wandered back to the strange story that Zef had told him: a girl engaged to a snake, then the wedding feast, the heartrending old tunes, the first night. . . . Whenever he remembered this part of the story, he could rarely refrain from taking a deep sigh.

Before he opened his front double door, his attention was caught by the right-hand leaf. It looked as if something

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had struck it quite hard. Then he remembered: it was the same dent he'd noticed a week before. He'd thought then that someone must have tried to break in.

The windows of his studio hadn't been cleaned for quite some time, but there was still plenty of light in the main room, maybe even more than needed. He turned toward the easel, with its unfinished nude, then cast his eyes at the other paintings he had hung willy-nilly here and there. There were some stacked on the floor, mostly facing the wall. Though they had been stored here for some time now, Mark knew by heart where to find every one of his unhung works: *The Delegate*, *The Festival of the Loaves*, *Highland Spring*, *Miner with Lamp*. . . .

He went back to his usual position at the easel, inspected his brushes to see which he would use, and lightly touched the unfinished painting between the legs, where he had barely begun to brush in the shading of the delta. I just hope she hasn't had the bright idea of shaving her pubic hair again, he said to himself as he glanced at his wristwatch. She should be here any minute. They'd recently had a slight argument about her pubic hair. He'd done his best to try and explain that it was not only a question of his own personal taste as a male, but it was above all a question of art: he simply could not put into his painting the kind of sanitized pubis that you see in porno movies or fashion parades. She had not been easy to persuade.

He checked the time once again. As always after they had been apart for a while, he was eager to spot little changes in

her physical appearance. But as she was coming back from the capital on this occasion, he felt not just curiosity but the sharp pangs of a quite specific desire.

To get her off his mind, he pattered about the easel, put his brushes in order, looked at his paint tubes, pressed a couple with his fingers. For no particular reason, he wondered if he had been spied on these last few years. Many other people had also been asking that same question recently. It was said there had been quite a few stool pigeons, especially among writers and artists.

His eyes came to rest on the blotches of color on the canvas that stood on his easel. Venetian red. Van Gogh yellow. Prison blue. Ah, yes. That was the color that had got his old friend Gentian into the camp at Spaç.

He picked up a brush and started to mix colors on a blank corner of the canvas, the way he usually did to warm up, or when his nerves were on edge. He took two steps back to inspect the blotch. He'd once heard someone say — or had he read it in an old history book? unless he'd actually thought it up himself, under the influence of the conversation or the old book — that before the great fire of Voskopoja, intimation of disaster had appeared on painters' canvases. A disturbing shade of red that had never been seen before began cropping up here and there.

He almost smiled to himself. So what color would be the right one for the times they were going through? It was often called a "period of transition." In other words, hermaphroditic, or, in the old language of the people, "a bitch

and a dog.” He looked at the patch of color he’d mixed to divine the times, and curled his lip. It was a dull and murky gray. One of the two — Time, or he himself, who had created the shade to express it — was dead to the other. At least that’s the way it seemed.

Then he heard his girlfriend coming up the stairs, almost running. She’d had her hair done in a new style, and it suited her; when he kissed her, he smelled a new perfume.

She poured forth news and gossip from the capital as she took off her clothes. There were more disturbances among the student population. What was more, the BBC had broadcast a speech by the pretender to the throne, apparently giving new hope to the monarchists, who had reestablished a political party.

Mark had the impression that her words became clearer and clearer as more clothes fell from her body. . . . There was a rumor that the state was going to be parceled out, shared by the people . . . in other words, all the assets of the nation, the fruit of forty-five years of socialism. . . .

He found a special thrill in watching her get undressed in this way, with both of them pretending not to know why she was stripping — to pose for the portrait, or to make love. It was a convenient ritual, especially on days when they were angry with each other. A minor quarrel could stop him from kissing her, could make her reject the merest caress of her hair, but taking off her clothes could be seen as having absolutely nothing to do with their squabble. Her gestures simply fulfilled her role as an artist’s model, even if every

movement she made to remove her clothes also increased Mark's desire.

There was a story circulating that the ministry of justice had legalized gay and lesbian associations, even if the names of the organizers were still being kept secret. A publishing house specializing in works by celebrities had just been founded.

"Well, well," he said as he looked under her armpits. "You've removed it all?"

"Yes," she replied, "but, as promised, I've not touched anything down below."

"Did you have any particular reason for the armpits?" he muttered.

"Same as everyone else," she said, articulating every word separately. "In Tirana, everybody does it."

She took off her panties, and Mark observed that her pubic mane was intact.

An Association of Young Idealists had also been established, she went on. And another group with a rather surprising name: the Post-Pessimist Association. The latest buzzword for insulting someone: "Megabugger!" As for the students from a certain university, they were allegedly planning another demonstration under the slogan "Down with the people!"

She laughed a pink laugh between each of her pieces of gossip; her cheeks were turning crimson, and her eyelashes seemed heavy enough to crush any tears beneath.

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“So you don’t want me to sit?” she teased, as he pulled her toward the bed.

“Afterward, my darling . . . It’s Sunday,” he added a moment later, “the offices downstairs are empty, so you can yell all you want.”

She did indeed scream, in due course, but not as much or as loud as he had hoped.

“Don’t you want to do any work today?” she asked afterward. Instead of going up to the easel, as he usually did once they had gotten up, he was standing in the bay window, in a dream.

He could imagine that his own eyes betrayed disappointment and frustration, just like the last time that something of this sort had happened between them. He presumed rather vaguely that such regret was like the loser’s last consolation, when a love affair begins to cool off. Maybe his only hope of recovering the attraction he felt he had ceased to hold for her was to sacrifice his painting (at least, provisionally) by invoking a spiritual crisis, or the feeling of being misunderstood as an artist.

“So what’s this business about sharing the state’s assets?” he asked without turning around. “That strikes me as pretty strange.”

She frowned before answering.

“To be honest, I didn’t really understand it myself. . . . I think they mean that, as the state was socialist . . . in other words, the property of everyone . . . now that the system

has changed . . . a share of it can go back to each and every person. . . . But I'm not really sure."

"I see . . .," Mark mumbled.

The disturbing screech of a police siren could be heard outside, then a screaming motor. From behind the window, Mark watched the patrol cars rush past.

"That's the second time the police have come tearing past."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you: on my way over I ran into a girlfriend who said there'd been a holdup at the National Bank."

"A holdup at the National Bank?" Mark sounded as though he could not believe it. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes, quite sure."

"A heist, a bank robbery," he muttered, as if talking to himself. "Strange-sounding words . . . Our ears aren't used to them, are they?"

"Yes, that's what I felt when I heard the story, too."

She asked him for a cigarette, and as he brought his hand nearer to light it for her, he could see she was trying hard not to smile.

"Maybe it's a terrible thing to say," she said, "but when I heard that word, it seemed, like, how can I put it — it sounded really smart, like something from the West."

Mark burst out laughing.

"That's true enough! Our ears are accustomed to something quite different!"

He could have added, Such as "sheep rustling," "stealing a

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rug,” or even “damage to the socialist heritage,” but all of a sudden the notion that her leaving him would be a catastrophe cut his train of thought off sharp, as with a kitchen knife.

For a while now, ever since he had gotten it into his head once and for all that everything having to do with her was facing forward, toward the future, and everything relating to himself was turned backward, toward the past, conversations of this sort frightened him.

He went back to the bed where she was still lying naked, and whispered into her ear:

“And if I gave up painting, would you still . . .”

He said “love me” so quietly that she only heard the last syllable, and even that was almost completely muffled.

She almost bit her lower lip. When she had come into this studio for the first time, three years ago, a shy girl though not a virgin, she didn’t hide the fact that she had been attracted above all by Mark’s fame as a painter. She realized in due course that he wasn’t as well known as she had imagined, but she had remained no less attached to the man.

Mark did his best to mask his newfound fear of her leaving him, since he was convinced that if she noticed it, she really would dump him on the spot. For the time being, he felt she was the only gangplank he had toward the future, and that if the plank were to break, he too would collapse in a heap.

“I asked you a question,” he said with his mouth close to her ear, as if he were concerned to have his message travel

the shortest distance possible. Now he felt surprised at having dared broach a subject that terrified him above all else.

She kept her eyes lowered, and as Mark looked at her eyelids it struck him that, of all the parts of the human body, the tips of the eyelashes gave by far the most reliable reading of guilt.

“Yes, of course,” she answered. “And even . . . maybe” (Good Lord! she too was skirting around the fatal word), “maybe even more than . . .”

In any other situation her answer would have troubled him. What was this “maybe” that referred to his art? Maybe it would be better if his art ceased to exist? Maybe it would be better if it were just a mistake, a source of misunderstanding, an obstacle between them?

At a different time, the same thought might perhaps have occurred to him, but he had in his mind’s eye the still-sharp image of the disappointment he’d felt just a moment ago when she’d said, “Don’t you want to do any work today?” So he persuaded himself that her vague answer to his question didn’t warrant his doubting her right now.

He kept on stroking her between the legs, and she did so too, with an uncharacteristic lack of inhibition. And it was she who took the initiative, pulling him on top of her, so that Mark didn’t have time to remind her once again that it was Sunday and that the offices downstairs were closed. She launched immediately into a deep-throated groan to which he was quite unaccustomed.