

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Concert

Ismail Kadare

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About the Book

In Enver Hoxha's Albania, news was closely guarded and speculation forever rife. When an engineer stepped on the foot of a visiting Chinese man, a Diplomatic incident resulted, and couriers between Tirana and Beijing carried back and forth annotated X-rays of The Foot. Was the sudden tension between the two allies connected with the punishment meted out to a group of Albanian tank officers? Were Comrades Enver and Mao still in step on the sovereign role of the Party? The brittle nature of political realities is epitomised in a Gala Concert in Beijing. A hand-picked audience of diplomats and party officials see destiny for the fragile beast it is when, surveying the Politburo boxes, they notice to their horror an Empty Chair.

About the Author

ISMAIL KADARE, born in 1936 in the mountain town of Gjirokastër, near the Greek border, is Albania's best-known poet and novelist. Since the appearance of *The General of the Dead Army* in 1965, Kadare has published scores of stories and novels that make up a panorama of Albanian history linked by a constant meditation on the nature of the human consequences of dictatorship. Kadare's works brought him into frequent conflict with the authorities from 1945 to 1985. In 1990 he sought political asylum in France, and now divides his time between Paris and Tirana. He is the winner of the inaugural Man Booker International Prize.

ALSO BY
Ismail Kadare

Fiction

The General of the Dead Army
The Palace of Dreams
The Pyramid
The File on H
The Three-arched Bridge
Three Elegies for Kosovo
Spring Flowers, Spring Frost
Broken April

THE CONCERT

A NOVEL WRITTEN IN ALBANIAN AND TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH OF JUSUF
VRIONI BY

Barbara Bray

Ismail Kadare



Harvill Secker
LONDON

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THE WINDOW LOOKED DOWN on the street, where the passers-by, all muffled up, seemed to be hurrying along as fast as they could. A three-wheeled delivery van pulled up beside a tobacco kiosk, where drivers often stopped to buy cigarettes.

It struck old Hasiyé that the van was attracting a lot of attention. She wiped a space in the misted windowpane to get a better look.

Yes – three or four people had paused to stare at what the van was carrying: a tub containing a lemon tree. She could imagine the questions they'd ask the driver as he got back into his seat. "Where are you taking it?" "Where do they sell them?"

Suddenly the old woman thought she recognized Ana among the crowd. She was just going to tap on the window to attract her attention, when she remembered that Ana was dead – had been dead for a long time.

She sighed. More and more often lately she found herself not only getting the order of events mixed up, but also confusing real facts with things seen only in dreams. She tended to mix up the living and the dead, too, but she didn't mind too much about that. Most females of her age had the same problem: it was supposed to be typical of old women. Sometimes she thought that was why people treated them with respect.

She looked out into the street again. Ana was still there. Beautiful as ever, she was standing somewhat apart, gazing with a melancholy smile at the people hovering around the lemon tree. Why don't you just go on sleeping peacefully under the ground where you were buried? thought Hasiyé.

She could hear her grandson learning his lessons in the other room: "Sing, O goddess, the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus!" Would there never be an end to all this anger? she muttered to herself. Of late it had been getting worse instead of better.

She picked up her coffee cup and examined the grounds. They were muddy and hard to read, but that didn't surprise her. What future could an old crone like her expect?

"Sing, O goddess, the wrath . . ." She felt like yelling at her grandson, and at the world in general, for that matter, to go to the devil and take their wrath with them – there was far too much of it already!

Enough, enough! Don't keep dinning it in our ears!

She glanced outside again, but this time she couldn't see any van, or any lemon tree, or any people staring. I must have been seeing things, she thought. Or perhaps I fell asleep for a moment.

Then she nodded off again, but now what she seemed to be looking at were the bowels of the earth. Not underground caverns or catacombs which man really may see, but closely packed geological strata unvisited by light, impenetrable to the human eye. Nearby, invisible too, lay latent earth tremors and other nameless, formless menaces.

There was a faint rumble of thunder in the distance. Then the whole sky was rent by a long, sickly roar.

"Strike! Strike!" muttered old Hasiyé, not knowing who she was talking to, or why.

The bell had rung loud and long, and as Silva opened the door she prepared a smile of welcome for the first of her guests. But instead of them she saw a man with a tub on his shoulder, and emerging from the tub – a barrel sawn in half – the branches of a lemon tree.

"This is Gjergj Dibra's house, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, taken aback. "Is that for us?"

"You ordered it, didn't you?"

And without more ado he walked into the hall.

"Where shall I put it?" he asked impatiently.

The tub must be pretty heavy.

"Careful!" she said. Then, opening a door: "In here, please."

The man stumped across the room as Silva opened the French window on to the balcony.

"Anywhere here will do," she said. "We'll find a better place for it later on."

The man put the tub down, straightened up, and paused for a moment to get his breath back.

The phone rang in the hall.

"A lemon tree is all I needed!" thought Silva.

The man began to drone out instructions.

"You'll need to spray it with insecticide every three months, and change the earth every six. And if there's a frost, cover it over with cellophane or it'll shrivel up in a single night."

But Silva didn't pay much attention. Her guests would be arriving at any minute, she hadn't prepared the salad yet or carved the roast, and she still had to change and tidy herself up.

The man seemed to notice her impatience.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've come at a bad moment,"

"Oh no - it's quite all right!" she said penitently. The man had hauled a heavy load all the way up to the third floor. She might have made more effort to conceal her irritation.

"Can I offer you something?" she said, trying to make amends as they went back through the hall.

"No, thanks."

"Oh, you mustn't refuse," she insisted. "It's my daughter's birthday."

When at last the door closed behind him, Silva went back to check the dinner table. She was tempted to add a few finishing touches, but in fact did nothing but stare absently

at the coldly glittering array of plates and glasses. Then the doorbell rang again and roused her from her daze. She recognized her daughter's ring.

"Would you be a dear and make the salad and carve the meat while I have a shower and change? I'm sure I must smell of cooking!"

"Leave it to me, Mother!"

Silva looked at herself in the bathroom mirror as she undressed. Had she put on weight round the hips? She stood there pensively for a moment, as if she'd forgotten where she was. Then the phone rang again in the hall and roused her from her reverie.

She turned on the shower, anxious to get on as fast as possible now before the guests arrived. They were all friends, apart from a couple of Brikena's teachers, so they hadn't been asked to come at any definite time.

She came to a halt again back in her bedroom, wondering what to wear. But she soon felt cold, and settled for a mauve dress that she knew Gjergj liked. It still fitted perfectly: she must have been wrong about putting on weight. "I don't understand why you keep fussing about your figure," her husband sometimes complained. "A woman doesn't really blossom until she gets to your age!" (She was well aware he was being tactful in putting the emphasis on flowering rather than on ripeness, and she was secretly grateful.) "I may be old-fashioned, but I don't see why a woman in full bloom has to be as skinny as a rake!"

Silva smiled to herself as she looked in the glass. As often happened on birthdays and other festive occasions, the putting on of the dress had suddenly divided the day into two. Amid the seemingly never-ending rush of preparation there always came a moment when fluster was transformed into celebration. As she buttoned the neck of her dress, Silva realized the magic moment had arrived.

She didn't take long over her hair, just doing it the way Gjergj liked it, despite or perhaps because of the fact that

he was away and wouldn't be able to see it.

"Oh, Mother – you do look lovely!" cried Brikena when Silva emerged into the hall.

Silva smiled at her, threw a casual look at the table, and for some reason she herself didn't quite understand, began to wander aimlessly round the flat. Usually she liked to sit down and wait for her guests, but today that pleasure was spoiled by not knowing exactly when they would come.

Her daughter's voice came from the kitchen:

"I've done the carving, Mother – do you want to see?"

Finally Silva sat down in an armchair in the living room with her eyes half closed. It had been a really exhausting day, with her husband not there to give her a hand. A good thing I had that shower, she thought. The statuettes on the bookshelves, relics of her days as an archaeologist, loomed through the October dusk like a row of ghosts foregathering to exchange some secret. But the slightest noise or interruption would be enough to deprive them of their mystery and turn them back into figures of clay and stone.

Brikena, slender and tall for her age, appeared in the doorway.

"It's all ready! There's nothing more for you to do!"

"Thank you. Come and have a rest."

Brikena sat down opposite her mother.

"I wonder where Father is now!" she said.

Silva shrugged.

"Up in the sky over some desert, I expect! Or else in an airport waiting for another plane."

Brikena was going to ask another question, but her mother, lying with her head against the back of her chair, looked as if she needed some peace after her harassing day. So Brikena went and got a photograph album from the bookshelves, then sat down again and started leafing through it.

Silva could hear the rustle of the pages, and although she was trying to make her mind a blank she couldn't help

imagining the photographs her daughter might be looking at. A montage of years and seasons – especially summers – rose up in her memory. Her family had always been fond of taking snaps, and Silva enjoyed spending a quiet afternoon sitting on the sofa as Brikena was sitting now, looking through one of their many albums.

The sound of pages turning stopped. Silva could guess which snap her daughter's eyes were resting on.

"Which picture are you looking at?" she asked, her own eyes still closed.

"The one of Aunt Ana."

So she'd been right – she'd been almost sure of it even as she asked. She went cold inside, transfixed by the fierce pain she still felt whenever her sister was mentioned, although it was eleven years now since she died.

At last the pages began to turn again, and Silva took a deep breath, perhaps to free herself from the vice in which her daughter had unknowingly caught her.

The doorbell rang again. This time it really was some visitors. First came Silva's mother, followed by her brother and sister-in-law. Her mother, never very talkative, had scarcely spoken at all since Ana died. She might be at a family dinner or some other such gathering for hours without uttering a word, though she never inflicted her grief on anyone else. And unlike most people's vehement mourning, hers seemed so muted and so evenly spread over the whole of her life as to be quite bearable. Silva often thought this was the way Ana ought to be mourned.

Silva's mother kissed Brikena and handed her a parcel. Then she embraced Silva, went silently into the living room, and sat down in her usual chair.

"Is there anything I can do to help, Silva?" asked her sister-in-law.

"No, thank you. Brikena and I have seen to everything."

The sister-in-law and her husband settled down on the sofa. Silva sat on a chair facing them.

"It's freezing cold out," said her sister-in-law.

"Is it?" said Silva, getting up to put a log in the tiled stove.

Then there was a silence, during which Silva, surreptitiously studying her brother's handsome face, thought she detected signs of anxiety. Sensing that he'd noticed her looking at him, she turned away, but a little while later, seeing that he wore the same expression as before, she wondered why he had always passed so unnoticed among their small circle of friends. Had any but herself remarked his present worried look? He was a graduate of the military academy and at present an officer in a tank regiment; but people were always surprised to hear that Silva had a brother at all. This state of affairs had been even more marked when Ana was alive: Silva and Ana, universally known as the Krasniqi sisters, had seemed to monopolize everyone's attention, to the exclusion of the rest of the family. Whenever the girls mentioned their brother in conversation, people would stare and say, "Have you really got a brother? A real one, I mean, born of the same mother as both of you?" "Yes, of course!" they would answer, greatly amused.

Even now that Ana was dead, many people still thought of the two sisters together, just as they had done in the early sixties, when they were nearly always together, despite the fact that Ana was already married then and Silva still single. But everyone persisted in regarding their brother as practically non-existent.

"When did Gjergj leave?" he asked Silva, in the hope of cutting short her scrutiny.

"Four days ago."

"How inconvenient!" said his wife, referring to Brikena's birthday.

Silva knew that all her guests except her mother would make the same remark.

"It couldn't be helped," she said.

There was another ring at the door: two of Brikena's teachers and their children, bearing gift-wrapped parcels. As they took their coats off in the hall they too asked about Gjergj's trip, and they were just exclaiming "How inconvenient!" when the bell rang once more. Timidly this time.

"Who is it, Brikena?" Silva called out, not hearing any sound from the hall.

"Veriana," her daughter called back.

Silva jumped up. By the front door, struggling out of her raincoat, her cheeks red from the cold, stood her only niece. A frail figure – the very image of Ana.

Silva went over and kissed her fondly.

"Father says he's very sorry, Aunt Silva – something cropped up and he couldn't manage it."

"What a pity! But did you come all on your own?"

"Yes. On the bus."

Silva took her niece's hand and led her towards the living room. Silva herself just stood in the doorway.

"Good evening!" said the girl to everyone in general.

They all looked back at her with a mixture of curiosity and pity.

"Isn't she like her poor mother!" whispered one of the women.

Veriana went straight over to her grandmother, who made room for her on her chair and began stroking her hair affectionately.

"Besnik's been unexpectedly detained and can't come," said Silva from the door, answering her guests' unspoken question.

Silva thought she heard someone say "What a pity!" Unless, thinking the same herself, she'd only imagined it. She drew back into the hall for a moment.

She really was sorry Besnik wasn't there. It was because of him she hadn't invited Skënder Bermema. She liked them both equally, but always made sure they didn't both come

to see her together. Besnik Struga, her brother-in-law, who hadn't remarried after Ana's death, was naturally closer to her, but Skënder Bermema was closely linked to the memory of their youth, the rapturous years the two sisters had shared before Ana's divorce from her first husband. Moreover, before Ana met and married Besnik, there'd been a friendship between her and Skënder which even after all these years was still something of a mystery to everyone, including Silva.

An ideal time for going over all these memories, Silva had thought an hour ago. On autumn afternoons like this, just before some festivity, she liked to sit on the windowsill and, as darkness came down like a theatre curtain, forget present preoccupations and conjure up the past: the scandal of Ana and Frédéric's divorce; the endless conjectures about the reasons for it; the mysterious attitude of Skënder Bermema, whose name had been closely linked to the whole business even in the courtroom, which people had likened to a literary jury. For at the husband's request – though it had only made him seem even more ridiculous – the judge had pored for days over certain pages of Bermema's books which Frédéric insisted were dedicated to Ana. Then came the unexpected twist when it turned out that Ana's decision to get a divorce had nothing to do with Bermema, whose own marriage was going through a difficult patch, but was really due to her relationship with Struga, and to their sudden decision to get married as soon as possible. No one ever knew whether, in view of the fact his jealousy had been concentrated for years on Bermema, this lessened Frédéric's fury, or whether his anger at being betrayed was increased by the entrance on the scene of a third man.

Silva had never tried to get to the bottom of the matter: she preferred it to be forgotten. The aspect of the business that had upset her most, apart from the divorce itself, was the coolness that grew up between Besnik and Skënder. This grieved her not only because she liked and respected them

both, but also because they were the people most intimately connected with her sister's memory.

Strangely enough, the breach between Besnik and Skënder had opened up when you might least have expected it: after Ana's death. Was her death the cause of the rupture between the two friends? Silva would have thought it quite natural if it had been brought about by Ana herself, or by the break between Besnik and his fiancée, who happened to be the niece of Skënder's wife. But neither of these theories held water, because Besnik and Skënder had gone on seeing one another after Besnik had broken with Zana, and even after his scandalous liaison with Ana, which had swiftly followed.

But although it seemed that neither explanation was correct, Silva had a feeling it was no use looking for one elsewhere. After cudgelling her brains for some time she'd come to the conclusion that while neither her sister nor Besnik's ex-fiancée was responsible separately, together they had been enough to cause the breach between the two men. Skënder's wife might have put up to some extent with a vague rumour about her husband's relationship with Ana, just as later on she might have tolerated his seeing Besnik after the latter had quarrelled with her niece. But when the two considerations came together, and Besnik married the woman whose name had long been linked to that of her husband, Skënder's wife, perhaps understandably, had decided that the pill was too bitter for her to swallow . . .

Silva suddenly remembered she'd left her guests to fend for themselves in the living room, but when she got near the door she could hear a lively conversation going on: no one seemed to have noticed her absence. She tiptoed over to the French window opening on to the balcony, beyond which the darkness was now rapidly deepening. The lemon tree brought by the unexpected delivery man from some unknown nursery was there in its tub, spending its first evening in its strange new home . . . The doorbell

interrupted Silva's meditations: it was Gjergj's four sisters – the "herd", as he called them. Three of them were married; the single one was studying medicine.

The hall was full of voices, arms flailing to get out of coatsleeves, children rushing about with parcels.

"Brr – it's so cold!" said one of the sisters.

"Really?"

"There's been a sudden drop in the temperature. But it's nice and cosy in here!"

"What a shame Gjergj's not here! Couldn't he put his trip off?"

"No," Silva answered. "It wasn't up to him."

"Of course not," said the youngest sister. "And the way things are going with China . . ."

"Won't you come through?"

Silva shepherded them into the living room.

The atmosphere in the flat had all at once become cosy and cheerful. Back in the hall, Silva felt like smiling at the sight of all the clothes heaped on to the hall-stand. Some of the children's fur jackets looked as if they were riding piggyback on the grown-ups' overcoats; Silva took them down and put them on a divan in her daughter's room.

Then she went and inspected the table in the dining room. The quiet brilliance of the glass and silver seemed very remote from the commotion that had invaded the rest of the flat. The children had already established a route for chasing one another about, from the living room through the hall to Brikena's bedroom and back. Conversation in the main room was now so lively there was no longer much danger that the little party would fall flat. Silva, standing in the doorway, noticed that her brother was the only one not joining in. She drew up a stool and sat down beside him.

"Is something the matter, Arian?" she asked gently. "You look rather out of sorts."

"No, Silva – I'm all right."

From close to he looked quite drawn.

“What do you mean, you’re all right? I can see something is wrong.”

He smiled up at her with a look of sadness tinged with surprise, as if to say, “Since when have you started bothering about me?” Silva felt an almost physical twinge of conscience. She could see he was now in real trouble, though in the past the perpetual personal problems and dramas of his two sisters had seemed to deny him the right to any worries of his own.

Then Silva was called to the telephone.

She heaved a sigh of relief when everyone was sitting down at the table and the continuous clatter of knives and forks showed that the meal was well begun. She realized she was sitting next to Arian. Perhaps she oughtn’t to press him any more about why he looked so glum. Besides, by now she was beginning to wonder whether that wasn’t his usual expression: didn’t men have plenty of reasons for feeling fed up? She would probably have let the matter drop – this was supposed to be a party, after all – if out of the corner of her eye she hadn’t noticed her brother down two glasses of raki one after the other without stopping for breath. This was very unusual for him – not so much the actual drinking as the way he threw back his head after emptying his glass, and even more the way he set the glass down again on the table. His whole attitude suggested he had made up his mind about something and was prepared to take the consequences, whatever they might be!

“Have you got something on your mind?” Silva whispered.

“What if I have, little sister?” he answered calmly. “Even if I had a real problem, you wouldn’t expect me to tell you about it in the middle of an occasion like this, would you?”

Silva was put out not so much by his answer as by the sardonic gleam in his eye. Such a mixture of annoyance and sarcasm can be hurtful even if it isn’t directed against you.

“And why not?”

Now that he wasn't actually looking at her she could feel all the more clearly how vexed he was.

What in the world could have happened to him? she wondered, with another pang of conscience: did her brother have to be threatened by serious misfortune for her to act as if he really existed?

“I don't want to bother you with my troubles,” he said at last. “It's something I haven't told anybody.”

Silva looked swiftly at his wife, who was laughing and clinking glasses with Gjergj's youngest sister: was it something to do with her? She studied her for a moment. Yes, of course, she thought. He's jealous, though she probably doesn't suspect it. Otherwise, how was it she didn't seem at all bothered by her husband's sulks?

“It hasn't got anything to do with Sonia, has it?” asked Silva, for some reason regretting her question as soon as she'd asked it.

“Sonia!” exclaimed her brother in amazement. “What an idea!”

So it must be something different, something more serious, she thought. She was surprised at herself for imagining that anything could be more serious, for she'd been brought up in a family where the wives were always the source of any complications.

A wave of toasts swept round the table.

“Well, whatever it is, you shouldn't hide things from me,” said Silva, leaning her head briefly on her brother's shoulder.

She was getting more and more anxious about him.

He turned towards her, and the look of pain in his eyes struck her like an electric shock.

“I'll tell you if you insist,” he said, “though I'd made up my mind not to talk about it to anyone.”

He twisted his glass round in his hand, gazing at it as if it were an object of wonder.

"I'm probably, perhaps even certainly, going to be expelled from the Party some time in the next few days," he said. "And from the army too, needless to say."

Silva nearly dropped her fork.

"What?" she stammered. "But why?"

"Please don't ask any questions. It's very complicated."

"But how is it possible?" she murmured, as if to herself.

"It's a very complex business," he repeated. "And there's nothing to be done about it. But at least it can't hurt the rest of you."

"How could you imagine we'd think of ourselves?" Silva protested. "You ought to be ashamed!"

He gave a wry smile, stabbing with his fork at a piece of meat that he'd picked up and put down again several times already.

"But why?" said Silva again. "What's it all about?"

Arian stared in silence at his almost untouched plate, as if he expected to see something there that would help him decide whether or not to confide in his sister.

"As you know, there were some army manoeuvres recently," he said at last, "Well, in the course of them I disobeyed, or rather refused to obey, an important order."

So that's all, said Silva to herself: at first blush it didn't seem as awful as she'd feared. But her brother went on, as if he'd guessed what she was thinking:

"When there's a war on, that's enough to put you in front of a firing squad. But as it's peacetime I shall just be thrown out of the army. And out of the Party too, of course. That's all. I don't think there'll be any other consequences."

Silva sighed. But of course . . . what other consequence could there be? Wasn't it bad enough already?

Arian made another attempt to pick something up from his plate, but his fork seemed incapable of dealing with it. Silva felt terribly sorry for him.

"Is anybody else being punished?"

"Four out of the six officers in our unit. All those who refused to obey."

He made another stab at his plate, but gave up and refilled his glass.

"So why did you do it?" asked Silva.

"Do what?"

"That order – why did you refuse to obey it?"

He turned his head away abruptly. His eyes were blazing with anger.

"Don't ask me about it. I shan't tell you."

"All right, all right," said Silva. "What's done is done. Don't torture yourself."

He picked up his glass and drank.

"Just one last thing," Silva went on. "Do you feel guilty about it?"

"Absolutely not!"

Silva glanced absently round the table. She couldn't make up her mind whether his not feeling guilty was a good thing or not.

"Forget it now," he said, raising his glass. "Here's to all of you, and to Brikena's very good health!"

"And the same to you!" Silva replied.

He waved his hand dismissively, as if to say "For me it's all over – you'd do better to concentrate on other people!"

Silva set down her glass and looked round at her guests. The dinner party was going on just as it had before her attention was distracted from it. Perhaps her brother's problems weren't as bad as all that, she thought, and made an effort to dismiss it from her mind. Everyone was in the best of humours; the red wine sparkled in the glasses; the peaceful buzz of conversation and laughter was punctuated only by the sound of bottles of mineral water being opened. It was hard to believe evil could go on claiming its victims after such a gathering.

Silva woke up with a start. At first she thought the brightness flooding in through the window was the dawn, but then she realized it was the cold glow of moonlight. Brr, she was freezing! But of course – that was what had made her wake up! She stretched out a hand and switched on the bedside lamp. A quarter past four. She lay there for a moment, staring at the bare ceiling. Then she felt cold again. All the glass in the room was covered with frost. It must be freezing hard outside. She thought of Brikena and Veriana, asleep in the next room.

She got out of bed, pulled a woollen cardigan round her shoulders and went quietly out into the corridor. The door of the other bedroom was ajar. She pushed it open cautiously and went in. By the bluish light filtering in from outside she could see the two girls' hair mingling on the same pillow. No doubt because of the cold, Veriana must have left the divan and snuggled into bed beside her cousin. Smiling to herself, she went over and looked down at the two serene faces. Then she remembered her mother's injunction: never look at anyone while they are asleep. She pulled the covers up over the girls' shoulders, fetched another blanket from the divan and spread it gently over them, then tiptoed out into the passage.

But there, instead of going back to her own room, she felt somehow impelled to take another look at the scene of the dinner party. When she switched on the light she was dazzled at first, but her eyes soon adjusted. The table was just as it had been left at the end of the meal. Plates, glasses and dishes stood empty and half-empty where the guests had abandoned them to go and have coffee in the living room. Silva looked at it all, trying to remember where everyone had been sitting. It all seemed very far away. She noticed Arian's almost untouched plate, and sighed. She didn't feel in the least sleepy now, but couldn't concentrate properly, either. Reviewing the plates and glasses, she recalled scraps of the conversation that had ebbed to and

fro over them, interspersed with jesting and laughter. But during part of the discussion – the debate over Albania's relations with China – laughter had been only an outward mask disguising inner anxiety. One of the guests believed that these relations had worsened lately, as they had during the Cultural Revolution some years back, but that the deterioration was only temporary and the dark clouds would soon disappear. Someone else had answered that things looked more serious this time, and the crisis wouldn't be overcome so easily. There was no way we Albanians could approve of the rapprochement between America and China, so a certain amount of tension was only to be expected. Silva scanned the table as if imagining the trajectory of these exchanges. The opinions they expressed had been over-simplified and not very interesting, and two or three times Silva had caught Arian smiling rather condescendingly. It was the smile of someone who is in the know, and prefers not to join in the conversation of those who are not.

The crisis was only to be expected, repeated the husband of one of her sisters-in-law. But someone else reminded him that relations with China, unlike those with the Soviet Union, which were over for good and all, were subject to ups and downs: this last hitch was merely one of a series. Don't you remember? – we went through it all before, when the National Theatre proposed to put on Chekhov's *The Seagull* in the middle of the Cultural Revolution!

Silva remembered it very well. It was a winter afternoon: it looked as if it was going to snow. All Tirana was in a high state of excitement; no one could talk about anything except the play. People were feverishly getting ready to go to the theatre; telephones kept ringing. Was the opening really going to take place this evening? – there was talk of cancellation . . . Then the theatre itself, and more discussions with friends in the cloakrooms. It was rumoured that the Chinese had tried to have the production

suspended (Chekhov, like Shakespeare, was banned in China), and some officials at the Ministry of Education and Culture were on their side. Nevertheless, to the satisfaction of everyone there, the performance did take place . . .

But ever since then, Sonia herself had pointed out last night, it had been evident that our ideas were diverging from those of the Chinese. If I had my way, Gjergj's youngest sister had put in, we'd break with them altogether – I can't stand the sight of them! It's not as simple as that, answered one of the men; and what they look like has got nothing to do with it . . . I agree, said another: I think it's shocking the way so many people have started looking down on them. There's no denying they're great people with a marvellous culture . . . Yes, indeed! was the reply, but, say what you like, China will always be an enigma. Zhou Enlai once said that if you want to understand Chinese politics you should go and see the Peking Theatre . . . But that's full of incomprehensible symbols, monkeys and snakes and dragons . . . !

Silva started to clear the table, as if she were trying to get rid of the remains of the argument too. She soon disposed of part of the débris, but when she came to Arian's plate she felt another qualm at the sight of his helping of roast meat, with scarcely a mouthful missing. "Oh, I do hope he manages to get out of this scrape all right!" she thought.

The familiar sound of water running into the kitchen sink cheered her up a bit. She had started automatically on the washing up. Then it struck her this was an idiotic thing to do at half-past four in the morning, and she left it.

By now she was feeling cold again. She buttoned up her cardigan. The kitchen windows too were covered with frost. It must be well below zero, she thought. Then she suddenly remembered the lemon tree that had been delivered the previous afternoon, and what the man from the nursery had said: If there's a frost you must cover it up, otherwise it can shrivel up in a single night. It seemed crazy to think of going

out on the balcony in this temperature, yet as she switched the hall light off and made to enter her bedroom, she paused. After all, why not? It wouldn't take long to go and cover up a little plant. She went on into the bedroom, opened the cupboard over the wardrobe, and felt around for a big cellophane bag she'd stowed away there at the end of the summer. Here we are, she exclaimed, tugging at it. Then she remembered that it was full of clothes, the kind of thing you probably won't ever wear again but can't bring yourself to throw away. With some annoyance she started to pull the things out of the bag. There were frocks and blouses that Brikena had grown out of; a loose jersey dress that Silva herself had worn when she was pregnant; bits of lace; skeins of embroidery thread; different-coloured balls of wool; scraps of knitted sweaters started and left unfinished; and various half-forgotten frills and flounces made of materials pleasant to the touch and triggering off vague memories.

Silva tipped them all out on to the carpet, meaning to put them away later in the day, then, throwing a coat round her shoulders, went out through the French window on to the balcony.

It really was very cold, and the pale yellow light of the moon, together with the utter silence, made it seem colder still. The wan brightness seemed to have cast a numbing spell on the leaves of the lemon tree, as on everything else. Looking up, Silva saw a terrifyingly smooth sky which seemed to belong to another universe. At the thought that at this very moment Gjergj might be winging his way across that treacherously featureless expanse, a shiver ran down her spine.

The lemon tree would certainly have died in the night if I hadn't remembered to cover it up, she thought. She arranged the cellophane bag carefully over the little bunch of leaves, glad to find that it came down not only over the tree itself but also over part of the tub. Through the film of

plastic the lemon tree looked nebulous, like something seen in a dream.

As Silva was about to go inside, something held her back: the waxen mask of the moon. She almost had to tear herself away from the pull of it.

Back in her bed, which still retained some warmth from her body, she found she was still trembling, not so much from the cold as because of that terrible emptiness. She couldn't get back to sleep. Snatches of the evening's conversation, the arguments about Albania's relations with China, and thoughts about her brother's situation kept whirling about in her mind in ever-increasing confusion. If you want to understand anything about China, go and see the Peking Opera . . . But it's full of fearful symbols, monkeys and snakes and dragons . . . Silva tossed and turned. Monkeys and snakes, she murmured, trying to remember something. Oh yes – it was something she'd been told years ago by Besnik Struga. He'd said how, just as snakes appear to people in dreams as a sign of misfortune, so he had seen some in the Butrin marshes just before the break with the Soviet Union. "As you know," he'd said to her, "I'm not and never have been superstitious, but afterwards, when things went wrong between us and the Soviet Union, I couldn't get those snakes out of my mind. And oh, I almost forgot – do you know what happened to me a few months after the break?"

Then Besnik had told Silva how he'd been out in the street on the night of the first reception held after the rupture.

"Everyone was waiting to see a firework display, with rockets that had just arrived from China: they'd been the main topic of conversation for days. The whole sky suddenly erupted, and people looked up in delight and astonishment. For these were no ordinary fireworks – they were foreign, and as they fell they let out an eerie whistle that seemed to say, What crazy sort of a world is that down there? And as if that wasn't enough, another kind of rocket followed,

producing shapes like mythical Chinese serpents: first they all hung in a kind of curtain or fringe, then they disappeared one by one, leaving the sky black as pitch. People started shouting, 'Snakes! Snakes!' and my own heart began to thump. 'What, more serpents?' I thought. 'Another evil omen?' Because, don't forget, Silva, this was the first public celebration after the crisis . . ."

Silva, huddled under the blankets, remembered all these incidents, and for the umpteenth time asked herself why Gjergj's journey had had to take place just now. In her mind's eye she saw again the black briefcase containing the secret documents he had to deliver – documents that were keeping the two of them poles apart tonight. What was that briefcase Gjergj was carrying across the sky without even knowing what was inside? And this journey . . . She remembered the sudden notification, the summons to see the minister, the rapid issuing of the necessary visa. The mere thought that her husband had been sent on a special mission was unnerving. He shouldn't have gone, she told herself. And as she felt herself dropping off, her mind was filled again by visions more vivid than ever of Besnik Struga's rockets, her brother's imminent expulsion from the Party, and Gjergj's mysterious briefcase. She woke up again several more times, and always those images seemed linked together by threads invisible in the darkness of the room. But soon the first gleams of an autumn dawn began to creep in through the window.

2

THE SKY WAS UNIMAGINABLY EMPTY that late October night. A few hundred planes landing at or taking off from airports, some millions of birds, three forlorn meteorites falling unnoticed into the immensity of the ocean, a few spy satellites orbiting at a respectful distance from one another – all these put together were as nothing compared with the infinite space of the sky. It was void and desolate. No doubt if all the birds had been rolled into one they'd have weighed more than the planes and taken up more room, but even if every plane, meteorite and satellite were added to those birds, the result still wouldn't have filled even a tiny corner of the firmament. It was to all intents and purposes empty. No comet's tail, seen by men as an omen of misfortune, blazed across it this autumn night. And even if it had, the history of the sky, rich as it was not only with the lives of birds, planes, satellites and comets but also with the thunder and lightning of all the ages, would still have been a poor one compared with the history of the earth.

Against such immense vacuity the signals sent out by a certain spy satellite seemed desolate indeed. It was relaying in their most recent order, as drawn up for some official ceremony, the names of the members of the Politbureau of the Chinese Communist Party: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Wang Hongwen, Ye Jianying, Deng Xiaoping, Zhang Chunqiao, Wei Guoqing, Liu Bochong, Jiang Qing, Xu Shiyong, Hua Guofeng, Ji Dengkui, Gu Mu, Wang Dongxing, Chan Yonggui, Chen Xilian, Li Xiannian, Li Desheng, Yao Wenyuan, Wu Guixian, Su Zhenhua, Ni Zhifu, Saifudin and Song Qingling. In comparison with the size of the sky through which they were travelling, these names, despite their