

LADY JANE
EMIL ANDREEV

To my dear dog Kera Maria-Tamara

I am a bitch and that's true but to consider me a lowbred cur, as you probably would, should you see me, is preposterous. My stock is aristocratic along both lines - the human and the canine. I shall explain.

You must have read about metempsychosis (the transmigration of souls), or reincarnation. Yes? Well, all you read on that matter (regardless of how incredible you found it) is nothing but the truth. Remember: the theory of reincarnation is true! There is no need to ask Plato (today he is a pure-blooded Arab stallion in the USA) to convince you that it is so but should you consider me talking bullshit, please, feel free to do so! Just like me, he still knows and understands human speech though he has transmigrated into a horse. I could give you his address, if you would like me to and will bore you no more. It's all up to you to believe me or not, as you will.

Now, I say a word about the method of narration. I am not the first animal in world literature to tell a story – definitely not. But that I am the first queen, if with but a nine-day reign, killed by violence and later reincarnated into a **gray** dog that is non-existent in literature; at least, in Bulgarian literature. I'll try to be clearer.

When I was a human being and lived in England my name was Jane Grey. In July 1553, when I was only sixteen, I was Queen of England for some nine days following which I was thrown in the Tower of London and beheaded in February 1554. Ten years later my fellow-countryman William Shakespeare was born but I didn't have the chance to visit any of his plays.

If you wish to learn more about me, you must see Trevor Nunn's *Lady Jane* featuring the young actress Helena Bonham Carter. A brilliant film shot in the second half of the 20th century when I'd already reincarnated in a seven-year-old gray she-dog struck by the ill luck of living in Bulgaria. The inhabitants of the concrete-panel block of flats, where I dwell, called me Jinna as if they had known my previous name. Listen for a second: Jane and Jinna. How similar they sound!

To say that Bulgarians had had no kings and queens would be wrong. They must be presently roaming around, reincarnated, however, somewhere over the English Channel. Maybe my one-time noble colleague Maria is having a pee in Regent's Park at this very moment under the name of Mary, which, for a dog, is pure happiness because she'll be led on a leash, she'll be fed, cured and taken care of regularly. And as to the creatures like me, living **here**: that's a poor lot beyond all accounts!

How I found myself in Bulgaria and at the end of the twentieth century at that? That's a story worth not just one but two feature-films; I'll cut it short, though. First, you know that the average lifespan of a dog is about twenty years, so it makes me a mongrel mix of a seventh-generation hereditary beagle and a Bulgarian *palash* dog.

Now, some hundred years ago (not all my dog-ancestors had had the luck to turn twenty) my first great-great-grandmother Mathilda was born in Blenheim Palace. (It's the home of the 11th Duke of Marlborough and birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill, built for John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, between 1705 and 1722.) She was a beagle of pure blood in which, with her whelping, the soul of King Arthur's dignified queen Guinevere transmigrated.

One day, after a tiresome hare-hunt, my great-great-grandmother Mathilda got lost and thus reached the Strait of Dover, swam across it and went to continental Europe to get no further than Mannheim, Germany. There she gave birth to six (already) half-beagles. One of them, a boy, headed for the Hungarian Pusta but finally managed to arrive at Regensburg. From that moment on, for many years my forefathers started a long journey along the Danube. Thus with the seasons the beagle line got thinner and thinner but the new European blood strengthened the generations. Led only by Love, my mother reached the lands of the Lower Danube, Lom, Bulgaria in particular, and settled near the railway station there.

On exactly the sixtieth day of my life a railway engine driver from Sofia liked me and put me in a horsebox from Lom to Sofia. But the darkness inside depressed me so much (it reminded me of the bloody Tower) that I took to my paws and ran straight here, under the old red Moskvich (it's a Russian car) in front of the block of flats not far from Sofia's downtown. The block, of course, was of concrete panels but I had not the privilege to live in it. Inside the block poor Bulgarians resided even more wretched than us. One cannot deny, however, that, no matter how poor they were, the people from that concrete building took care of me. Someone gave me a bone, another stale bread soaked in soup; overall, though an aristocrat, I accepted the facts for there was nothing of the kind for the other dogs around. They, of course, envied me and foraged the dustbins. Then came the day when I had to share their fortune. How they gloated!

There were two reasons for this: first, people got so poor that they also started to forage the dustbins; second, there came a bloody cur who started to pretend that the territory in front of the building was his own. Had I not been a lady, I would have had a fight with him! I suspected that in that ugly cur my fat and lecherous fellow-countryman Henry VIII, Tudor, had been reincarnated. I was seventeen years old when he popped off but I still remember him. Fie!

I deserted the Moskvich, of course. Nevertheless, I'm now grateful to Fortuna. Otherwise I would never have started rummaging in the dustbins and therefore would not have met the proud Zabunov.

Oh, the person he was!

Mr. Zabunov was a seventy-five-year-old retired teacher of Bulgarian language with a pure white beard and clear blue eyes in which there was not a trace of discontent, anger or sniveling but great dignity that made you envy him indeed.

The very moment I saw him near the dustbin I felt that he was reincarnated like me. He stood foraging the garbage using neither a stick, nor a plant, but a cane

with a golden Thracian lion-head for a handle. I recognized it was Thracian because we had a similar one (silver, though) in our palace in London. A knight from Baldwin's suit (the 13th century Duke of Flanders) had found it when he had fought in Bulgaria and luckily saved his skin from the soldiers of King Kaloyan, he had brought it with him to Normandy. Later, when he ran out of money, he had sold it to a parson from Exeter whose great great grandson had given it as a gift to Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury, the person responsible for my short queen hood and sudden brutal death. History, you know!

I came close to Zabunov and wagged my tail. He understood me and smiled. It gave me courage and I jumped into the dustbin and started nuzzling. I found nothing but a rotten chicken breast; Zabunov had collected the pieces of bread. Chicken breast in my mouth, I was just going to get out when...

"Humiliating, isn't it, my Lady?" he said and looked me straight in the eye.

I jumped out and dropped the chicken breast.

"You, you... are like me, really?" I asked, wagging my tail more vehemently.

"Yes, my Lady. I would even say that I am fed up with reincarnating." He brushed up the cane in the coattail of his old greatcoat, which he never took off. "Let's go to my home and know each other better. I think we have much to say."

I followed him so astonished that I forgot the chicken chest.

The place called "home" was an old abandoned and battered house at Pirotska Street that was soon to be destroyed. There was a roof above only one of the rooms, in the corner of which, over a pile of boxes, Zabunov resided. I must admit that "home" was far more comfortable and cozier than "my" former Moskovich.

"You can live with me here," Zabunov said after we settled down on the warm and soft cardboard. "Thank you!" I answered. I turned around in a circle several times and lay down. He produced some pieces of bread from his pocket, put them between him and me and urged me: "Help yourself!"

Being decent, I took a piece, pushed it towards the molars with my tongue and started munching. I did it very quickly so that I could hear Zabunov's story as soon as possible. He seemed to understand me. He unbuttoned his greatcoat, leaned on one side and began:

"I know everything about you, my Lady; I witnessed the whole royal strife after the Fat Man's death; Henry VIII, I mean. When he died I was a four-month Irish hound, a son of his beloved bitch Gertrude. My lucky mother - it was only she who was not slain! But I don't feel like going back to those dark days. You too, I suppose?" I wagged my tail in approval. "You just have to know that after you were beheaded Cranmer got what he deserved. You might not remember that, but after the death of Edward VI he convinced the Duke of Northumberland to make you a queen and then secretly betrayed you to Mary Tudor. The same Bloody Mary, a true and legitimate daughter of her father, put Cranmer on trial and he perished on the stake as a heretic in Oxford on March 21, 1556. They found remains of his body in the ashes - yet another piece of evidence that he was a wicked vermin. Have some more!"

I thanked Zabunov but didn't do it because I was very excited about having been revenged. "And what happened to you?" I asked. Honestly, I couldn't remember Zabunov as an Irish hound. "Well, a guard of Elizabeth killed me because she ordered everything reminding her of her mad catholic sister to be obliterated." "So, now you are in the second phase?" "No, in the third." "You've already been a human being!" "Yes, but a long time ago. I was a Thracian noble man in the reign of Zalmoxis. Now, I am again in these lands to complete the cycle, you know."

I watched Zabunov and could not believe my eyes. To be reincarnated in a dog here, in Bulgaria, and to meet a soul completing the cycle – why? And why in this country? Couldn't he pass through his last reincarnation in another place? Switzerland, for example, or even Greece; Thracian tribes lived there too.

"No, my Lady." Zabunov read my thoughts. "According to our Orphic belief the soul is divine and eternal but is boxed in the body as if in a coffin no matter what body it is. To become sacred, the soul must walk a long way of purification and perfection. It must remove the *Titanic*, the bad, beginning, and reach the *Dionysian*, the glorious, unity. It can happen only through an existence of harmony – no killing, not to mention suicide.

"As a Thracian prince I killed many a time; as a dog in your country – I did, too. My two previous body forms were destroyed after violent deaths, just like yours. Now I'm left with but a last chance."

"But why in Bulgaria?" "Well, for reasons of sentimentality. The soul must go back where its journey once started. As Orpheus himself used to say in his *Hymn to the Stars*: "...and bring to a glorious end the commendable deeds."

"You mentioned Zalmoxis. What does he have in common with you?" "Zalmoxis? He simply came out to be a cunning person just like Cranmer. I was thrown on the three spears as a messenger because of Zalmoxis. Well, I expired at once, without reaching him."

I let my tongue hang out, out of surprise, but Zabunov understood me and went on: "It's a long story. First we, the Thracians, as Herodotus put it, were numerous but were not quite united. Had we been ruled by a single man, we could have been invincible, yet that would never happen. Later the Odrysian king Tereus tried and nearly united us but the Bessians, a different Thracian tribe, could not stand the thought that he and his people would be the leaders. Wars, wars again and – nothing at the end. As for Zalmoxis, at that time we, the Thracians, led a poor life and were rather naive people. Zalmoxis came from Samos (there he was a slave of Pythagoras) and turned the heads of our folks. He explained to them that neither he, nor their table-companions, nor their descendants would ever die but go to a place where they would live forever and have everything they wanted. Our people gave credit to him and years after his death they already believed that if they threw a man on three sharp spears, he would become a messenger and go to Zalmoxis. If the man died, then Zalmoxis was favorable to them, if he didn't – the messenger himself was to blame. Of course, the messages were given when the messenger was still alive."

“And you died because of that nonsense?”

“I had no choice. My Lady, don’t you think that St. Thomas More was beheaded for a similar piece of nonsense?”

“There’s no telling,” I replied and felt sleepy. “Well, this is my story in a shell. Now, let’s have some sleep for tomorrow we must be the first to be at the dustbins. We shouldn’t lag behind or else we shall starve to death.”

From this day on Zabunov and I became inseparable friends. There was not a dustbin in the neighborhood that we didn’t know: he – like the palm of his hand, and I – like the paw of my leg. And so, our days rolled on.

But one morning we realized that there was nothing more to eat in the dustbins. We foraged and rummaged and searched but in vain. We felt neither sad, nor disappointed. We both had suffered too much. We rather felt sorry for the non-reincarnated human beings who became angrier and more nervous; and it meant that they could kill us just like that – out of pure malice.

It was Zabunov’s idea to start going to cemeteries and gather the ritual food that people had left on graves there. And so we began. Soon good manners were restored. We were living a jolly life sharing the food we found. Inspired by the cemeteries Zabunov never stopped telling me how opulent Thracian funeral rites and sepulchers had been. How joyful his tribesmen had been at someone’s death and how sad they had been at the birth of a baby; how they had buried the rich together with the wives and horses, with their weapons and treasures and with food enough for half a year at least. How amusing it was with Zabunov!

Yes, but then we didn’t even think about the hard days approaching. For, in several months the food in the cemeteries grew all the scantier and finally it disappeared completely. A rival had appeared on the ground – a plain signal that the cemeteries would be divided into zones soon, and, being well-behaved and noble, we were to be driven into a corner. That meant simply a slow death. To the proud Zabunov it was rather humiliating to beg, for me it was impossible, for reasons easy to grasp.

“What now, my Lady, are we going to beg?” he asked rhetorically while we were strolling hungry in the Sofia Central Cemetery one day. Instead of giving him an answer I drooped my tail and ears.

“Never, darling, never!” he went on. “Though a Thracian once, I, the Zabunov of today, am still an aristocrat of old. I am not falling on my knees this time!”

I believed him but how could I help him (myself)? The only way out was to put an end to our lives. We could jump under a tram or from a high building and who would feel sorry for us? They would write a sentence or two in some newspaper and that would be all. People would neither know that I was Lady Jane nor recognize the former Thracian prince in Zabunov’s lean and crushed body; let alone reincarnation, the Orphic belief, or our mishaps in time and space.

We sat on a battered bench (of course, I lay down next to it) and stared at the weeping willow in front of us. Sad, so sad, thought I and put my head over my front paws. But I couldn't lie silent that long and I asked:

“Zabunov, are you thinking of the same thing that I'm thinking of?”

“I'm afraid, yes, my Lady! But this time we must **not**. This time we should spare ourselves or else we'll have to reincarnate once more and suffer in yet another form of life. Can you imagine being here again?”

I dared not. I licked his noble hand gently and stood on my four paws. Zabunov also stood up and we slowly walked along the cemetery lane. Some sun lit us.

Translated by Vladimir Dinev