

Ivana Šojat

The Adhan

(Ezan)

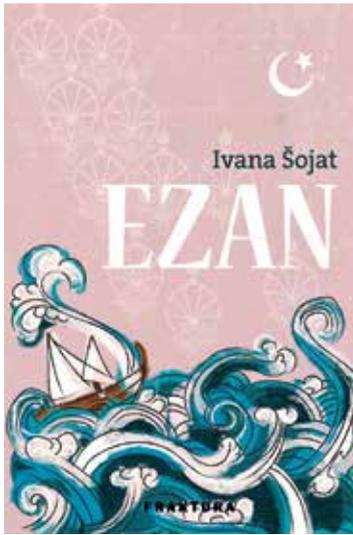
Novel

Translated by Valentina Marconi and William Gregory



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IVANA ŠOJAT was born in Osijek in 1971. She spent several years in Belgium, where she obtained a university degree in French language and literature. She is a novelist, a poet, an essayist and a literary translator. Her works include collections of poetry *Hiperbole* (*Hyperboles*, 2000), *Uznesenja* (*Ascensions*, 2003), *Utvare* (*Phantoms*, 2005) and *Sofija plaštevima mete samoću* (*Sofija Sweeps Up Loneliness With Her Capes*, 2009), collections of short stories *Kao pas* (*Like a Dog*, 2006), *Mjesečari* (*Sleepwalkers*, 2008), *Ruke Azazelove* (*Azazel's Hands*, 2011) and *Emet i druge priče* (*Emet and Other Stories*), novels *Šamšiel* (*Shamshiel*, 2002), *Unterstadt* (2009), *Ničiji sinovi* (*Nobody's Sons*, 2012), *Jom Kipur* (*Yom Kippur*, 2014), *Ljudi ne znaju šutjeti* (*People Don't Know How to Keep Their Mouth Shut*, 2016) and *Ezan* (*The Adhan*, to be published in 2018). For her novel *Unterstadt* (2009) she received Vladimir Nazor literary award, Ksaver Šandor Gjalski literary award for the best novel, Fran Galović award, Josip Kozarac and Ivan Kozarac awards for the book of the year.



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What are those crucial elements that shape our characters at earliest age? What are those crucial memories one looks back to in the sunset of his life? The year is around 1530, and somewhere near Bosnian Jablanica, Devshirme, a commonly practiced Turkish blood tax, was paid with life of a small boy Luka. Forcefully taken away from his mother whose name he has forgotten and put into the foreign environment whose language he doesn't speak, Luka becomes Ibrahim. Since still in early formative years, Ibrahim adopts all of the Ottoman values, almost unquestionably accepting new mother and father figures, their language, knowledge and skills, the religion of Islam, on his life path of a relentless warrior for the Turkish Empire, a Janissary. When his time is near to come, he's sharing his life story with his son. He's looking back to great loves, unforgettable friendships, countless battles from Anatolia to Szigeth and significant encounters with grandiose historical figures such as Suleiman the Magnificent. But why did he reject all of the advantages that came with the Ottoman court? Because of his faith in humanity.

Deeply lyrical, stylistically and structurally brought to perfection, embellished with rich poetic imagery of forgotten Turkish Slavonia of sixteenth century, *The Adhan* is a brilliant historical novel with no loose ends.

The Adhan

The world is small indeed. In the end, we all return somehow to the place we first sprang from. Except that we are different. The world does not change: it changes us. Most likely so we may look at it differently, and find things to wonder at. Things to keep us from dying of boredom.

I remember Zachlunia only vaguely. Only sometimes, although recently more and more. A sharp, crystal-clear image of those always-blue hills at dawn walks into my dreams as if through a haze. The green from the grass, or the water-swollen mist. And the smell. The smell comes to me too: the smell of the sheep, wet from the rain or the drizzle, the smell of their faeces and the sharp blades of grass beneath my fingers, the land, the water, the green water of the Neretva, as frightening to me as Satan. I remember my mother, whose name I have forgotten, scaring me with stories: the river was like a monster, swallowing wayward children, or dragging away an over-zealous water bearer who had waded too far into the current to return. I think she also told me, my mother, that sickness travels by water. We might dream of walking through it, grey and muddy, feeling with our feet for the riverbed unseen to the eye. Or it might pour down on us as rain, drenching our clothes, making us catch cold, chilling our hearts and our blood, turning us to stone and killing us. Or it harbours some invisible impurity, creeping into our bodies through our noses, ears, eyes and mouth, then breaking out in ulcers on our skin. My mother told me that, or perhaps I made it up, as people often do, embellishing the past with details to make it even worse, traitors to ourselves, let alone to others.

I remember the stones, grey and pointed, sticking out from the ground, running along the steep hillsides like water or snow at the end of winter, when the snow begins to melt and slides down the valley. I remember the stones people used to build the small, dark churches for the pale, bearded prophet Jesus and his priests, stones for the walls marking the boundaries of the pastures and for

the foundations of the dark wooden houses. At least, that is what I seem to remember.

Her voice returns to me too, sometimes. And sometimes, I hear the voice that was perhaps my mother's shouting my name, shouting louder than the clatter from the wooden wheels of the cart carrying me away: "Luka, my son, Luka! Don't forget your name, and don't forget: keep a good head on your shoulders!" I do not remember her face. Not because I have forgotten, but because I did not want to look. I was afraid of tears. Afraid of my own tears, at that moment when I had to be a man. I kept my gaze fixed on the sky, which at dawn was still restive somehow, not blue, not grey, just dark beneath the sun, its light appearing just then behind Mount Čvrstica and the peaks of the Prenj. Birds as small as pebbles and as silent as spies flew past my eyes. So all I recall is a voice, perhaps hers. The name was mine. My first name. From before I was born again.

And my ears *feel* this voice, the voice that perhaps was my mother's. I listen to it, summon it back, evoke it in my head. I feel it until my insides numb with tenderness. Like when we lose something, and try to remember where we lost it, that thing we so badly want to find.

It happened to me once: still young and angry, fired up somehow from climbing in Anatolia, I misplaced the Imam's note. Scared to death, I searched for it for hours, only to find I had had it all along, tucked in the folds of my belt.

In that voice, the voice that perhaps was my mother's, I somehow hope, and somehow fear at the same time, that I might find myself, or rather, find some part of my former wildness, from the time before I grew up. How could I restrain myself, like a stallion rolling in the dust, remembering the foal he once was? I see it that way sometimes. At the sight of an animal that could kill a man with a single blow, but that instead rolls on the ground like a lamb, I am struck by a strange affection. An odd affection, like for the woman who let me go without a fight, who forewent motherhood for me, to give me a better future. Until now I never thought about this, not in this way. Perhaps a man must grow older and have his own children before he can walk in his parents' shoes, forgive them, or lose all sympathy with them forever.

I doubt now whether my memory is correct. I know people often push other people's lives into their own memories, merge them with their own and rearrange them. They embellish or deform them, filling the holes in the web of recollection. Most likely to ease their conscience. I remember squat, wooden houses covered in moss and hay, houses scattered at the base of the blue mountains. And the sheep. I remember them clearly too, somehow. Like the soot-filled room, the dust, the packed-earth floor in summer, sticking to the bare soles of my feet, the water steaming from the kettle on the hearth, the oats being cooked in a pot, the straw

that we slept on, probably, and that ended up scattered through the room like the feathers from the chickens plucked in the yard.

I remember the bundle of ash-baked flatbread and sheep's cheese that my mother placed in my hands and probably told me to eat.

But no recollection of an embrace. Nor of a father. I am quite unable, it seems, to remember my father. So I try to place him somewhere far away, on those mountains, on the pastures with the cattle or at war, kept from being there when the men of the Shah Gulan came from the Neretva *nahiya* to take me away. For the *devshirme*, the blood tax. According to what I know now, our house was the fortieth in the *hadiluk*, so I had to be given away. Or hidden. I do not know why my mother did not hide me, but nor can I begin to imagine how she could have. By lying, perhaps, about my sudden, premature death, or concealing information from the scribes.

"You'll be better off there," I hear her saying. Or imagine her saying. Perhaps I imagine her voice to justify her. Or to thank her for the fate she gave me by agreeing to pay the tribute as a Christian subject.

I tell myself now that my mother thought I would be better off elsewhere, even though she would be seen as a traitor. Even when I see before me the back of a woman's hands, which I know for certain are hers, with blue, thick crosses stretched across equally blue veins. Crosses within circles. For protection. As if a symbol, scrawled on the skin with charcoal and spit, could stem Satan's hunger. No, I would rather not think of my mother that way. Better to think of sour milk. Wet nurses always smell of sour milk somehow, and of the infants who cling to them, like to the air they breathe.

I breathed deeply as they carried me away. And without looking back, as I said. Without even crying. Some children, younger than I, did cry. I blinked back my tears and looked at the sky. My cheeks burned from the touch of my mother's hands as they stroked my face for the last time from my temples to my chin. As if she were washing my face, preparing me to enter the house of God, readying me for the night or for something new. I ought to have looked at her more. At her and at the mountains. To memorise her better. Now all I remember is her eyes, from a fog thicker than the past, her eyes grey like clumps of wet soil, and the palms of her hands, and the backs of her hands. I ought to have looked at the yard; I would know now how many brothers and sisters I had. Instead I am not sure if we were four or five. Was my mother rocking a wailing baby in her arms, or was it me, crying silently inside my head? I barely saw a thing as they lifted us onto the cart. It was pulled by a strong, sturdy horse that scattered droppings along the way. A black horse with a long, sparse-looking tail. Its great rump glistening from the sweat and its groomed hair rocked by the rhythm of its slow

steps and the clunking of the cart between the gorges. I did not know where we were. I had never left the *kadiluk* before. My head dangled, swinging to and fro, and as I watched the sky it seemed to sway, lulling me to sleep. We drove beneath the branches, like an upside-down fountain with leaves trapped in the water. I listened to the others, crying, groaning, mumbling to themselves or shouting for their mothers, and I smelled the air as it shifted from blue to green, from grey to brown, and then to something oilier, thicker, more humid.

Sometimes, when I lowered my gaze, I was struck by how we always leave the dead behind, but also the living, who slowly fade away. Like memorial stones by the roadside or landmarks on the moorland. Monuments to the fallen, tokens scattered like pebbles on the hillsides. White cities to the dead passing beside us. Or maybe it was us passing them. I am sorry I could not read back then. Not that I would have understood: some things we only start to grasp when they grow closer. Like death. Until now I had never thought about where I might be buried, where I would wait, covered in earth, for the two angels, Munkar and Nakir, to prepare the book and cancel out my good deeds with all my evil acts still unre-nounced. Back then, death was someone else's business, and I was not ready for it yet.

Still, I do remember thinking how strange it is that we cover the holes where we lay the dead with stone markers, like small versions of the buildings where we look for God and worship him. As if burial places were tiny boxes for votive decorations. But again, perhaps I only think I thought that then, when in truth I am only thinking it now.

In any event, we travelled by daylight through the gorges and mountain gullies. We set off at first light, after the men driving us had responded to the first Adhan, kneeling on their rugs pointing eastwards and worshipping their God, lowering their heads all the way to the ground. I watched them from my corner and felt strange, somehow admiring their fervour. For them, the God who in my mother's stories was always in the sky was there right in front of them, towards the rising sun, with the sky it emerges from bleeding over the mountains. Sometimes we would stop to quench the horses' thirst, and our own. And so until twilight, which by some miracle always caught us near an inn, a hamlet or a market. We always spent the night under a roof. The only people who travel at night are fugitives and madmen, highwaymen and conspirators, or *hajduks*, peasant mercenaries who under the cover of the winter dark descend upon the villages looking for food and company. We were travellers without ulterior motives.

Although even then I did not cry, the first night was the hardest. There was nothing I could cling to in the darkness, lying there on the hay, beside the horses

sleeping on their feet. There were no smells to take me back, to soothe me, to lull me and take me to the state beyond which we slide into dreams. During the day we collect smells, they stick to our clothes, hair and skin. We eat smells, we give them off through our breath, our mouths and noses, through the pores of our skin. So everything around me was new: everyone around me had gathered smells from places that were unknown to me. The boy who had been crying desperately from the moment they had hoisted us onto the cart, and who must have been younger than six, smelled of salt, and of the dust that made the soles of our feet grey and rough; he smelled of the sheep milk mothers gave to their male kin to make them grow stronger. I listened to him in the darkness for some time. Finally, I pulled him towards me, hugged him like a lost lamb and asked him his name. At first he stayed silent as though he could not remember, as if searching for his own name inside his head.

“Berko,” he said at last, holding back his tears with a voice still wet from crying.

“My name is Luka,” I whispered into his ear. My breath smelled of the lamb soup and flatbread they had given us for dinner. “Do not be afraid. Sleep. We will be better off there.” I do not know why I added that, repeating what my mother had said. Perhaps it was to convince myself. Finally, he fell asleep, and I with him.

The following day, Berko stayed by my side all morning. I did not realise back then how much this helped me. Seeing his fear and sadness, I held firm, warding off my own despair by stemming my tears and staring at the sky.

At the next inn, we were caught out by a storm. My heart jumped as the sky screamed violently, as if in flames, like mighty giants raging in the skies, clashing with swords and shields in the dark above us. Berko was shivering. I whispered into his ear, and told him what little I had learnt until then about God.

“God is angry with the infidels,” I said, as if certain the thunderbolt would not slash the roof above our heads. The water rumbled around us like streams of meltwater flowing down Mount Čvrsnica and the Prenj range in late spring. I remember well trying to dispel the thought that at that moment we ourselves were among the infidels, and alone just like them, hoping that the wrath of the God whom everyone back home spoke of with wild eyes was fair and precise. Hoping God would see us and not send us to the place I feared as much as the autumn night creeping too soon into the woods.

“But where is God?” Berko asked me, surprisingly alert. His voice was weak, womanish amidst the hustle of terrified, neighing horses, and the angry, screaming sky, the water pouring down, gurgling and flowing on the cobblestones.

“In Heaven,” I said, confidently. But in truth I did not know. No one had ever told me where this God was whom everyone was so afraid of, the God to whom the priest spoke in a language I could not understand in the small stone building people called ‘the church’ or ‘the house of God’.

“And where is Heaven?”

“Above us,” I replied, looking up at the beams of the stable roof, where the shadows danced to the rhythm of the torch-flames. The air was damp and muggy, imbued with the smell of horse-piss and rain-soaked hay. I asked myself briefly, blasphemously, if perhaps God did not sometimes come down onto the roofs together with the rain. To wash us with the water which, so they said, brought pustules, sickness and death.

Berko asked me too if I knew where they were taking us. I told him I thought they were taking us to the capital of some sort of empire, but that only God knew. But I was not sure. I was not sure if God knew, or if only the stocky, well-fed, moustachioed men knew, with their baggy breeches, turbans, and feathers on their heads that floated like manes when they walked.

On the fifth day, when the sun had climbed to its highest point in the sky, dappled with swift clouds, we reached a wide, slow-moving river. The sight of it took me aback. Not because of the slow movement of the water, but because of its colour. From the barge they had loaded us onto, I gazed in disbelief as the grey reflection of the sky above and my own rippling face looked back at me from the water. However much I stared at it, I could not see the river bed. One of the men with a turban and feathers on his head and a *yatagan* hanging from his belt noticed my amazement, smiled benevolently at me and drew very close, so close that his moustache brushed against my cheek.

“This is the Drina, son,” he said. I pulled back, bewildered by the timbre of his voice, by the river that had suddenly acquired a name, but mostly by the language he had spoken. I had never thought that once he had been a boy like me. “Do not be afraid,” he added, taking my shoulders in his hands and looking me in the eye. Not daring to return his gaze, I stared into space. He tightened his grip on my shoulders. Reluctantly, I tensed up and stood tall, as if standing my ground. Behind him, over his shoulder, a city rose up, strewn with white, spear-like minarets pointing at the sky. At God. Or perhaps it was not like that. Perhaps that is not how I should remember Višegrad before Mehmed Pasha and his bridge, before his brief return and second departure.

“You are not afraid, I can see that,” he said, smiling. When finally I looked at him, briefly, his eyes were as grey and murky as the Drina splashing the wood beneath our feet. “You are just waiting.” I did not understand what he meant

then. I had no time to. There is a time for action and gathering, and a time for taking stock: when some men are left with shoes, and others with rags on their feet. I am telling you this to spare you disappointment. You cannot understand it now, but one day you will. Like I do.

* * *

You can tell a Giaour from his huge, heavy sword that must be raised high into the air and then brought down onto the enemy, and from the armour that makes him sink like a stone in swamps and rivers, or walk like a weak, feeble old man when he falls off his horse in battle. The Shias from the edges of Shah Tahmasp I's empire, however, wield their swords just as we do: quickly and swiftly, with an upward stroke across the arm, ribs and neck. I learned this on the passes through the Persian mountains. From a distance, they looked like huge, earthen palaces, long-since abandoned by man and ravaged by rains the likes of which I had never seen. Nor had I ever seen the face of a man about to leave forever, in that moment before Munkar and Nakir grab him beneath the arms and carry him away for the *qabr*.

We were ambushed on a pass where, apart from to the attacker, crouched and lying in wait, arrows were of next to no use. First, we were decimated by a shower of short, swift arrows; next, we were pounced on by the cavalry. It was Allah's will that I should survive, or at least I thought that then, staring in shock at what remained of us after what a chronicler, choosing his words with care, would later call a victory. I would like to tell him it was also Allah's will that I should kill for the first time there and then, and have my first encounter with rage. Or perhaps these are more inventions. Thoughts coming to my head now which, shocked though I was, I could not summon up back then.

To this very day, I do not know why he brought his hands up, and his sabre with them. There was no need. The moment his hands paused in the air felt truly endless to me. I bent my knees and raised up my arms. I cannot describe to you the feeling that spreads through your body like boiling water when the edge of your sabre or *yatagan* plunges bone-deep into human flesh, when you hear your own exhalation first, and then his. His last.

I held my breath for what seemed an eternity. As if my arms and legs had been motionless forever. Everything stopped and fell silent as I looked first at his ever paler face, then at the blood gushing from his armpit, flooding the leather of his breast-plate studded with rivets and silver, shying horses. His eyes and mouth were wide open, as if about to speak. His eyes were pleasing, I thought, dark like

the wet bark of an oak, or like the horse he had fallen from and that had run away from the fight in the pass as if chased by fire, or by the fear of it. His eyes stared at me, fixed on my gaze like the knives the Giaours use, so they say, to cut out the tongues and dig out the eyes of believers in the ravines on the Carpathian Mountains, sending them to Allah mute and blind.

I do not know when his sword, still clean and shining, still unstained by blood, fell to the ground, covered with dry soil and pebbles, because the clanging all around us was relentless. I only know that he fell into my arms, and that I welcomed him into them, whispering into his dark hair, wavy and greased: "Allah will welcome you as a hero." I have never told this to anyone. You see? I am showing you all my weaknesses. And I must add this: after a battle, men are left lying on the ground, but the jinn that have followed them throughout their lives rise again. Not all jinn are the same. Some scatter into the earth, but others, steeped in anger, continue spoiling for a fight and seeking revenge.

Why do I mention the jinn? Because of the power I told you of: their power to blur our reason. Because of Idriz, and because of the beautiful, defeated Persian women. Did I mention how handsome that first dead man was? I remember the subtle, reddish dust lifted off the ground in clouds all around us, but most of all I remember his handsome, dark face, his huge, warm eyes open wide, his dark hair shining like Doz's mane in the meagre sun choked by the dust like a cloud heavy with rain. I know memories are deceptive, but their beauty is the only truth I can cling to from my visit to Persia. It is true too that invisible armies I was unaware of at the time were both stalking us and advancing upon us. While the jinn army was marching behind us, the Black Plague was approaching like a swarm of flies. Within a month, the Black Plague in Istanbul would wipe out more people than weapons did during that first battle of mine. At dawn the next day, in the nearby village, the jinn would possess my comrades' minds and blur their reason.

As best we could, we arranged burials for our dead. We cleaned the blood from their bodies using sand, wrapped them in sheets, laid them together in a grave, like boys on a cart for the *devshirme*, and set out again. We left the bloodied bodies of our enemies behind, for the ravens, the dogs and the jackals. As I came to realise with time, they gather in their numbers, as if appearing from the ground, to feast on the spoils of destruction.

In the middle of the desert, where there was nothing but stones and dust, the first thing we came across was a small village of weavers of purple carpets. Most people there were women, the elderly and a few children. The few men who were there were barely armed and knew nothing of fighting or war.

We quickly wiped them out.

I thought we would leave straight away. Aside from the carpets, there was nothing in the village worth taking. Their most precious goods were the brightly coloured wool, a few finished carpets, and most importantly the water from a well as deep as a gorge. But just then, the invisible jinn army caught up with us, assaulting some of our number. I think it was then that I remembered Mensur's words, how one day I would not recognise some of my own people. I think it was then, but I cannot be certain.

Lead by Idriz, like hungry mountain beasts forced by winter into the towns, some of our men began breaking into the houses and dragging the women outside. Beautiful women, crying women with children screaming in their arms. Suddenly those men were not my men. I no longer knew them. I watched, shocked and helpless, as Ajdin hauled a girl along the ground, pulling her by her hair as she screamed and resisted. He stopped in the middle of the dirt track in a cloud of dust. His face shifting, he leaned over the girl who was probably begging, and struck her in the face with the handle of his *yatagan*. The blood flooded her beautiful face, and her eyes froze as if in death. Ajdin paid no heed. Instead he tore off her clothes, making inhuman sounds as he stood and watched her dark, delicate body, her fine breasts left now at his mercy, or his lack of it. It is when we are at someone's mercy that we learn if he is man or beast.

"Persian whore!" Ajdin shouted, in a voice stripped of all humanity. He untied his trousers and dropped them to his knees. For a moment it seemed the air around me was different, as though inhabited by an invisible, turbulent presence. I shouted to him:

"Ajdin, you will regret this; you will feel sorry!"

He did not hear me. Could not. So I stepped closer, and struck him on the shoulder from his side. I remember the sound the air made, expelled from his chest by the sudden blow, and the look of surprise on his face as the dust danced around his head and the limp legs of the girl fell like branches, revealing her pudendum. Seeing me, Ajdin screamed. I punched him swiftly on the nose, covered both of them, and dragged the girl's body to the shelter of the house, into the shade filled with the smell of dyed wool. I stood there for some time, the time needed for my eyes to adapt to the sudden darkness, and inhaled the scent of turmeric, mint tea, wild honey, wool and cooked lamb. It was curious how long it took for my eyes to grow accustomed to the dark, softened by the light that trickled through the small window covered with red fabric, and for me to notice, in the corner of the room, beside a water pot and bowl, a woman with large, round eyes, holding a baby in her lap and covering his mouth with her hand, most likely

to subdue him, while a five or six-year-old boy clung to her clothes. She was frightened, and stared at me with tears streaming down her cheeks.

A moment later, I was dazzled as someone pushed away the curtain over the doorway, and then plunged into a darkness I can barely describe. Idriz and his men stormed into the room. I say *his* men, as they could not be, would never be, *my* men, no matter how wisely Mensur might explain it to me.

One of them took the baby from the lap of the woman with the large, round eyes, brandishing it like a jute sack half-filled with flour. I remember the baby's head and arm dancing around in the air, fluttering like olive branches in the wind that gusts down in winter towards Manisa, blowing everything out to sea. The baby wailed and bleated, in the way only nurslings can when they are terribly frightened. His mother cried for help, stretching her arms towards the baby, who a moment later went flying towards the wall, hitting it and falling silent forever. For a moment, a great stillness seemed to take over the room. I truly think that for one moment everything was quiet. Then the boy, who was holding onto his mother's waist, pressed between her back and the wall, burst into tears. Roaring like thunder, Idriz tore the woman's scarf from her head and threw it to the floor. As if possessed, I watched the scarf drift slowly down, deaf to the clamour in the room. When I next looked up, I saw Idriz pulling the woman by the hair and pushing her to the ground. I saw her falling and begging, crawling on her hands and knees as mucus and tears dripped onto the packed-earth floor, onto the purple carpet embellishing the otherwise modest room with its colour. Two other men carried away the child. He screamed like an animal, his cry of "Mama, mother!" not sounding human any more, but rather like the shriek of an animal the butcher is about to slaughter, whose throat the knife is about to slice through.

I flew into a rage. I think I screamed as I hurled myself onto Idriz, and then onto the two men taking away the crying child. I think Idriz fell, so I turned to the other two. But even if he did fall, he must have stood up again quickly, raised his *yatagan* on me from behind, and struck me, cutting me across the ribs, then hitting me on the back of the head. I am sure he hit me on the back of my head. Everything stops there. To this day I still ask myself where people go when they lose their minds and turn into savages.

When I came back to my senses there were no more human voices.

The silence was frightening. I lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling, blackened by the soot from the hearth. I listened and sniffed the air, noticing the smell of something new. I swear I could smell something different among the scents I mentioned before: the smell of fear, salty and pungent, and the thick, sticky smell of blood one can always smell on blades. I sat up slowly and followed the tracks

of what had happened in my absence with my eyes. The woman's clothes were scattered on the floor in shreds. There was no blood, so I was surprised I could smell it. I know now that blood smells even when it gushes out unseen. And I know that men, after slaughtering with their sabres and *yatagans*, continue their slaughter on the women. I think I thought too about Safija and Hatidža, the beauties who educated me. And I think I wondered where Mensur was.

Slowly I stood up, limping. My head was heavy, pulling me down to the floor as if someone were pounding it still with the handle of a *yatagan*. Slowly, I touched the back of my head. It was covered in blood, already dry but still sticky.

When I finally pulled the curtain, the light blinded me like darkness. So I stood for long enough to be able to distinguish the new sounds. Someone exhaling repeatedly as if chopping wood for a fire. But the blade I could hear was not cutting through wood. It was slicing through flesh, down to the bone. One need hear that sound only once, to know it for the rest of one's life.

Slowly, as if feeling my way in the dark, I emerged from the hut and into the sunlight and dust. To my left (I always look first to my left; perhaps the angel on that side has a more alluring voice), I saw Idriz with a sabre hanging from his hand to the ground. He was covered in sweat and blood, and naked to the waist, as if he had been sweating blood. I barely dared look beyond his right hand, rising and falling again beside something covered in blood. There are things that do not scare us at the time. Only later, when we decipher them, do they become frightening. Like when bandits attack in the dark, wielding torches. It took me some time to work out what it was that was swaying above the ground, brushing it. It was hair, a woman's hair, long and sticky with blood. It took me longer still to work out that Idriz and his men must have taken the woman with the round eyes, the one carrying a baby and whose child was hiding behind her skirts, tied her by the legs, and hung her upside down from the frame that the weavers in the village used to hang up the freshly-dyed wool to let it dry.

I do not know what I said in my head. I do not know why in the middle of all that horror, I dragged myself like a madman to the first person I could find and asked, with a voice I did not recognise:

“Where are the children?”

I do not know how that person looked at me, the hair of the woman still dangling before my eyes like a wad of freshly-dyed wool dancing in the wind. To this day, all that remains in my head, like the smell of the slaughtering of the lamb before Eid al-Adha, is the sound of his voice, tight with contempt, which always crouches even when it is prancing. His voice that thoughtlessly muttered the question: “Why do you care about those bastards?” I think I wanted to ask

how his mother had died and whether he remembered her. I think I wanted to tell him how much I would have liked to remember my mother's name. But I said nothing. The children, most likely in tears, were already travelling on a cart, like sling shots in the hands of a peasant, to be turned into future executioners, fighters, maidservants and concubines.

I asked myself how we forget. How would Ajdin and Idriz ever eat again?

I did not know where Mensur was. I did not know that blood was dripping from the back of my head and from my temples to my skin and staining my *dolman* blood-red.

"When it is finished, when it is all over, then you will see it dry," Mensur told me. I found him sitting on a rock a little further from the village, shaded by the horses munching oats from their canvas nosebags. He was polishing his already perfectly clean *yatagan* with the edge of his *dolman*, the blade reflecting his face and the sky that sparkled in the heat. I touched my neck, rough from the dry blood. A fierce, sudden pain assailed my head, so I leant down and coughed out my soul. A soul yellow like bile. The bitterness lingered in my mouth, acrid, foamy saliva I could neither spit out nor swallow. Saying nothing, Mansur passed me a canteen of water. I looked at him but, blocked by the sun and the pain, I could not find his eyes.

"I know what you want to ask me, and I know you know what I will reply. If you are clever, and you have truly felt the blood on your neck." He sighed, then signalled to me with a movement of his head that it was time to go, to move further into the territories of Shah Tahsmap. Because of Ali and Abu Bakr, because of the beautiful women, the swift and slender horses, and because of honour, which some use to justify their greed.

Maybe it was then that the army of jinn flew above our heads and over the raised manes of our horses hurrying towards Istanbul. Sometimes I think that in that moment the wind sounded different over the rocks that from afar look very much like fortresses. At least this is the impression I have, although I often have impressions of all kinds. Later, as we prayed the Isha prayer, I had the impression I had not washed properly, that in my prayer I was receiving Allah's blessing and mercy in my hands while being impure. An ice-cold shiver shot through my spine, past my buttocks and thighs and down into my feet like the freezing water of the deep Persian wells.

Behind me, Mensur recited a prayer from the Surah Al-Baqarah. Whispering, I tried to join him: "Our Lord! Punish us not if we forget or fall into error, our Lord! Lay not on us a burden like that which You did lay on those before us; our Lord! Lay not on us a burden greater than we have strength to bear. Pardon us

and grant us forgiveness. Have mercy on us. You are our Lord and give us victory over the unbelievers.”

I asked myself how much a man can bear, how much a man can change, without even realising.

As I wiped my face with my hands to avoid covering Allah’s blessings, I felt no consolation. Quite the contrary: I had the impression I was spreading smooth, soft mud over my forehead, eyes and cheeks.

I said nothing of this to Mensur. The silence in which we had been floating since the last meal felt to me like a gangway over muddy, turbulent water. Everyone around us was laughing and sneering, enjoying the end of a day that Allah for who-knows-what reason had allowed them to survive. I wondered if they ever worried about the hundreds of jinn they had deprived of a body that day, and who would scatter into the deserts, waiting for someone’s anger or deep despair. They cared not for the two angels following them step by step, one enunciating clearly all of their good and bad deeds, and the other writing them down.

“They bite our legs and tear at the bellies of our horses!” I wanted to shout as we travelled to Basra. “I can see the black clumps of dirt jumping up ahead of us,” I said to Murat once we had set up camp, close the Persian Gulf. To the West, the sky was growing red, like a bedsheet soaked in blood, and all around us was blue, heralding imminent darkness.

“The heat makes you rave,” he said, smiling and biting into a flatbread. Suddenly, the smell of the sheep and of the lambs that had been born on the way invaded my nostrils. I sensed they would not survive to see the sea, a sea completely new and different to me. “Idriz’s eyes have sunk into the darkness,” I whispered, in a voice, almost a growl, that did not sound like my own. It was then that he stopped chewing, stared at me with a serious look on his face, and fixed my gaze with his. The encroaching darkness had eaten all the blue from his eyes, leaving them suddenly dark, like wet soil.

“You have still not forgotten.”

Close to tears, I shook my head and said nothing.

“Death only hurts if we survive it,” he said, quietly. I knew he was trying to comfort me, just as he had tried to comfort me by saying he did not fret for those whose good deeds numbered enough for the angels of death to forgive their sins. I wanted to tell him the mark left by Idriz’s *yatagan* on my shoulders still burned, and that this was why I still felt cold at night. But I hid this from him, the pain that sometimes, when Doz was at a gallop, filled my eyes with tears that bit at my cheeks.

“I see tiny spheres of darkness sputtering towards us from the ground. Like

a swarm of underground insects foretelling our misfortune,” I went on. I clenched my jaw, perhaps because of the cold creeping in with the darkness, or perhaps because of the fear of what I spoke of.

“Can you interpret what you see?” He leaned towards me and looked me in the eye, as if searching for something in my gaze. I wanted to tell him he smelled yellow. Not yellow like the sun, or the hair of the women from the north, but yellow like all the yellow things produced by the earth and then dug back into it in winter.

“No,” I said.

“You still have to learn,” he sighed, and went on eating. “Allah gave you a gift, but you have yet to learn how to read.”

When I replied that I knew how to read, he smiled so freely that the flatbread jumped in his mouth.

I would learn later that he was right. I had sensed the evil but could not give it the shape of what awaited us. I saw the darkness on the horizon, but could not see the jinn who would assault us in Istanbul, with the Black Plague that would snatch Hatidža away from me and Mensur. Nor could I see Doz who, near Halab, would stumble on a stone while galloping homewards, break one of his legs and scream like a human, groaning and begging me to free him and put him out of his misery. Nor could I see myself, weeping and lacking the strength to show him mercy.

I told no one how that night a raven landed by my head as I slept. Stinking from the sweat that suddenly covered me, I sat up to look for the bird whose wing had brushed my face as it flew away, but already it was gone. The chill remained and kept me from falling back to sleep that night, so I waited for the Fajr prayer weak and exhausted.

* * *

It is said that the winter before our raid, led by the Bosnian Pasha Arslan Bey, governor of the Sanjak of Pojega, was the worst, with teeth as sharp as a grinning wolf. Perhaps that winter had indeed been exceptionally cold, but still I feel no one can ever be certain that something has been ‘the worst’ of its kind. We can never know what lies ahead.

What mattered to us then, however, was the mud we were sinking in. After the grip of the ice and snow, the ground begins to sweat under the glare of the quickly-rising sun, turning everything in Slavonia – the shallow-tilled fields or the pastures made for cattle by clearing the densest forests I had ever seen – into a mire.

Slavonia, I must admit, is both beautiful and excruciating. So flat that one feels one is travelling while staying in the same place: along the roads, built by the Rumelian emperors so their armies might defend the borders of their great empire undisturbed; through the thick shadows of the woods that drink water like the flocks of ducks who fly down to the Danube, the Sava and the Drava; through the packs of wolves and herds of wild boar; attacked by the bears descending from the Bosnian mountains for food; through the bandits and the ambushes, and past the fires of the vilayets set alight by a different hand every time, because near a border things are never neat or peaceful. People always bow in the direction of power, and move beneath the heel of whoever seems stronger to them at the time, so much so that the holy warriors, the Turkified Christians, can switch allegiance and become stormtroopers for the Giaour Emperor Ferdinand I overnight.

As we waited for the Padishah to catch up with us, to then leave together for Siklós, Pécs and Buda, I watched Karalik grow into a big, powerful dog, and taught him to recognise my voice and Tiris's trot. Together with Kemal, I made bolts for the strap of red leather that the tanner Afan had made for him on my request. After a beer, which in that area is particularly good, Afan revealed to me that before he swapped the name of his God with that of Allah, he was called Arpad. I told him this did not concern me, any more than it concerned me why he had reverted and hidden, for reasons he seemed to have inherited from his father, or his grandfather or great-grandfather, as often happens among the Giaours. Nevertheless, I withheld the name I had heard my mother speak that final time before my departure to a different life. Afterwards, I felt ashamed. But afterwards is too late. Unspoken words wound just much as harsh ones. Except the former wound whoever keeps them in their mouth or heart, whilst the latter hurt those who are struck by them. In Allah's eyes there is no difference.

I wonder sometimes why Allah does not stop us with a miracle. Especially those of us who believe they need no Nasheed after shedding the blood of others. To this day I cannot understand why He allows them to torture everyone to death, why He lets them get away with the illusion that the world is theirs, and permits them to spread fear and terror in it. Like Idriz, Ajdin and their men, enjoying themselves, wide-eyed and sneering, even in the Sanjak of Pojega, ruled by Arslan Bey. Even when we left for Osijek, they did not quieten down. There, according to the Padishah's order, a pontoon bridge was to be rebuilt over the temperamental River Drava, and over the mire that the Drava and Danube form as they flow towards Hungary. Most likely because of the beer - which may cool the body, but also covers it in stinking sweat and goes to men's head more than wine does - they stopped their Arabian horses in the hamlet of Čepin, not far

from our assembly point, in the miserable plain where Christian subjects of the Empire fattened their pigs, feeding them on acorns while the Turkified subjects, always suspiciously loyal to the emperor (more to ensure their own safety and avoid the land-tax levied on infidels than out of any strong love or faith), harvested the scarce yield and gathered wood to be used for building and heating. There were women there, not particularly beautiful nor especially sweet-scented, but that the heavily-armed gang of horsemen longed for. There are men who cannot restrain their desires even when they are threatened with death. Such were these men, especially when they spotted one among the women, whom they later said was particularly beautiful, and who because of her beauty was also arrogant. I cannot tell you her name; I did not even hear it. I am sorry for this. I have always wanted to give people a name, so I might pull them from the darkness of oblivion.

However things went, the story goes that Idriz attacked the woman first, and that she struggled and screamed so much that the other women came to rescue her, while the local men for some reason were not in the fields nor in the woods. Chaos ensued, and everything ended just as it had in the Persian carpet-weavers' village. For there are some people who must have everything, even if this means dealing with the dead and carrying a piece of corpse with them for protection.

I was not there. If I had been, I would have prevented it, I swear on the grave that awaits every single one of us in the same way. From that day on, I could no longer call Idriz or Adjin my brothers. This was not hard, given that Idriz was scared to death of Karalik, and Adjin followed his fear like a sheep. It was interesting, however, to see how the Christian subjects of the Empire in Osijek, once a possession of the Province of Buda, were more afraid of me and the often unsettled Tiris, than they were of Karalik.

"Giaours avoid cats, especially black ones," Abaz explained to me, "but they are quite at home with dogs." I wanted to tell him his smile did not really suit him; that, being dark, he looked frightening with a grin on his face. But he went on talking and told me this was because cats are scarcely mentioned in their Book.

"Perhaps the cats slipped the prophets' minds," I quipped.

"The messengers of God are sacred people," Abaz said, suddenly growing serious. "They are not to be joked about. Remember that."

Abaz saw magic in everything, and jinn and succubae everywhere. All manner of amulets hung from his body, and some of us knew he had auspices written in ink pressed into his skin on the parts normally covered by clothes.

"It is against the doctrine," Murat had told him, but Abaz did not care.

"Auspices are auspices, one can never have enough."

He did not let anyone compare this with Idriz' carrying a corpse with him, from one evil action to the next.

For three days we waited for the Padishah and his entourage, which, as was customary, was made up of all the viziers who wished to remain viziers, among them Vizier Suleyman Pasha, who, after the fall of Buda, would become Beylerbey of the Buda Eyalet. However, the proudest among them was Rüstem Pasha Opu-ković, Grand Vizier and first on the list of those who, probably even in their sleep, were plotting evil actions under the powerful protection of the only remaining Sultana, a woman quick to use her blade, or even her teeth.

Although waiting may at first seem like a tedious pursuit, in a city with five mosques, the largest bazaar between Istanbul and the still unconquered Vienna, hammams and caravansaries, and food not found in such abundance or variety anywhere else in an otherwise starving Europe, our wait seemed more like a return to a different, more innocent time, as if we were once again in Edirne, where they had taught us how to slaughter using bags full of hay and sand. Had it not been for the heavy, humid air, and for those tiny creatures drinking our blood, it would truly have been like in the songs of the wine-weakened, who sing as if their memories of past women and happiness were real. There was no more mud. The sun battered the landscape like a giant, heavy stone.

Believe it or not, I had no interest in the women there. Your mother had already set up home in my head, like a constant whisper one strains and tenses to decipher. While the others experimented with forbidden women in houses whose windows are never open, and boasted that these or those women were better, or those with a dark skin or those whose bodies were as white as Chinese porcelain, I was busy hawking with Karalik, and forging the unbreakable bond that would join us until the end of his life.

And there was plenty of hawking to be had, especially above the part of town where the banks of the River Drava rise up to form something that at first sight one would not call a hill. There, the winds, even the smallest breezes, howl so much that people say it is the jinn dancing behind the cemetery of the infidels, threatening them with what will befall them on the day of the world's end. There were rumours too that ancient graves from an even older empire hid there, above the river, under the ground covered in grass and underbrush. I paid no mind to this. Aside from the bloodsucking insects, Slavonia teemed with life, and there was plenty of prey for the hawks. This was some consolation as I itched at night from the bites: amidst so much life, there must be some tiny, evil spirit, lest everything be too pretty and pleasant.

When not spending time with the birds, who flew back to my hand with dead

mice and rabbits, I liked to wander in the bazaar, the large one I told you of, enjoying the smells and the colours, the voices and the languages. Because traders, son, are a little like the bees: no border and no war can ever stop them.

“There will be no dawn without a sunset,” Murat would say, with a serious look in his eyes. He would hold his hands behind his back as if unwilling to touch any of the goods that had arrived there from the lands of the setting sun.

“People always crave what they cannot have,” Mensur whispered once, exhausted. I think no one else heard him except me. Perhaps this is why I memorised what he had said. I will also never forget the *mehter*, the military band in front of the mosque of Qasim Pasha. I felt an invisible army was standing next to each and every one of us, the infantry lifting their unseen sabres into the air, and the archers firing their sharp, silver arrows into the sky, screaming with the voices of angry angels.

We left for Siklós. The bridge we passed across wobbled so much over the water that I am sure it prompted the Padishah to swear to himself and to Allah that he would build a wondrous new one. The mud clung to the horses’ legs and the capricious water stank of rotten wood, of grass and of the pigs that, so I heard, were lost to the river every year. The water, it seemed, would attack and capture overnight anything that was unprepared.

The *mehter* had filled my heart with courage but, as I listened on the road to the whispers of those who, eleven summers earlier, before the siege of Vienna, had attacked Kószeg, [missing text?].

“A horseman with a fire-sword. I tell you, Satan himself attacked us,” whispered one man, riding ahead of me. I do not know what he looked like, let alone his name. I simply saw how beneath his hat the sweat trickled down his badly-shaven neck. He lowered his head to his chest, the way people do when saying something they do not want everyone to hear. I heard him because of the breeze blowing from Hungary, carrying his voice and hissing as it blew the smell of the approaching hunter to its prey. I wanted to ask what the horseman looked like, and how he knew it was Satan, and not God, to whom we had become insufferable. Young and wild though I was, I said nothing. You know yourself that such a question would have been blasphemy. No, I do not think myself a coward. Whom would it have helped, and how, to ask such a question? It would only have made me seem suspicious.

I did still think of Safija and Hatidža, who so often had talked to me of moderation, of how a man should not lose himself, dissolving in arrogance the way people do when they have eaten or drunk too much. Those who gain power only hunger for more, I am sure that is what I thought. I am sure, too, that at that moment there appeared before me the tall, ivory tower on which the powerful

climb, and because of which they see the real world less and less. That is, they lose sight of the details. They see only the land that is worth conquering, just as I do not see the anthills or mice I crush with the hooves of my Arabian horse. And the Padishah is but a man.

In the keen anticipation of heroism, and in the thrill of what may have been imminent death, I did not even notice that Mensur had slowly moved away, and that Kemal had approached the Sultan.

This is why I am telling you: always keep your eyes and ears wide open. One morning you will find I have left my body. And one day you will find you no longer have the strength, or the will, to do what you have postponed for so long.

The sabre that the Padishah, the magnificent Sulejman, waved above the tall grass and the dry, undulating mud of the plain, signalling to his troops that we should attack Siklós, whose palisades the Slavonian troops had undermined and weakened with explosives the night before, was a gift from the Bey Arslan of the Sandjak of Pojega and had been forged by Kemal. Mensur's heart was dried out and exhausted by then. I saw none of this, nor knew anything of it. I merely stared proudly at Karalik's head and back as he pranced in front of me and Tiris, smelling blood. I felt invincible. The horse, the dog and I had been in a battle once. We bit angrily and attacked ruthlessly. I did not look at the faces of those who fell before me; Tiris advanced with no fear of the fire, screams and explosions, and Karalik bit both the men and the horses, all of whom feared him. And there was no horseman with a fire-sword when Siklós fell. Nor did he appear when we crushed Pécs and Buda.

In Buda, however, I was overwhelmed by sadness. Sadness of the worst kind, the kind that pounces on you like a ghostly, unnoticed wave on the high seas, washing over you and dragging you with it to the sharp rocks of the sea bed. Flail and kick as you may, still you scrape your face and chest on the spiny rocks, your heart tensing as you feel the tear of your flesh, powerless to prevent it.

After the battle for Buda, we found Mensur lying on the ground outside the city, unable to stand up. At first we thought, as often happens in a battle, that someone more cunning or skilled than he had killed him, but the blood that ran down his shirt and stained his *dolman* and breeches was not his. He had fallen untouched, pale, his arms outstretched and his eyes open towards the sky, like the Jesus we see in the small, dark churches of the Giaours made of stone or wood.

"Azrael, the angel of death has killed him with his sword," someone shouted in a horrified voice, and everyone stepped away from Mensur as if stepping away from illness or stench.

Deep in my despair, I almost fell as I rushed to dismount from Tiris. I hurried, almost on my knees, to Mensur's body, which grew paler and paler, as if his blood were pouring into the soil.

I took him by the shoulders and shouted, "Baba!" Even though he could not have been my father; even though he could barely have been my older brother.

"Stay away from him!" someone shouted again, a different man, perhaps. "He may have caught the Black Plague!"

"Then I will catch it too!" I shouted in Mensur's face. But then fear seized me. As if, once he was dead, I might have woken him up, but without his soul. There is nothing more frightening than a body walking around without its soul. You will find that out for yourself, or perhaps you will not. God willing, you will not!

I closed Mensur's eyes with the palm of my hand. "Safe journey, father," I said softly, and then cried like a small child, as I should have cried on the cart that took me away. Men are cursed by the tears they are forbidden to cry. Cursed because, even when they are boys, they long to be fully grown, and hide behind their still unformed manhoods.

I felt angry with him later, and said terrible words about him, cursing him for leaving me. I made Murat cry even more than he would have because of Mensur's death alone. Only now, as I tell you this, do I realise why my father, brother and friend left in such haste, with no warnings after the last battle and the final victory on the domain of the Hungarian Emperor Ferdinand. You will think what I say is foolishness, stupidity and foolishness, but I will tell you nonetheless: the honourable Hatidža was the only safe harbour of wisdom, kindness and sweet-smelling beauty in a world that, even when we do not realise, smells of blood, putrescence and tears; in a land that, unable after a battle to swallow so many dead bodies, gives off a stench for months afterwards, and festers into sodden, crimson mud.

We buried Mensur in Buda, rushing to the grave that smelled of yellow, cloying soil. "Hurry!" I heard someone say from beneath the shroud. Or perhaps it was me, fighting the urge to stop and glance once more at that face which would no longer look like his. I repeated to myself that he had been just, that by following his example we would ourselves soon stand before Allah and find peace. We humans are strange: we never think beyond ourselves. We are weak and selfish, fearful and crazed. And we are not good. We cannot be, not without a *kanun* to restrain us. Even when we pray for the dead, we think of ourselves wrapped in a shroud, and our hearts skip a beat at the thought we might be left somewhere, lying alone on the ground with no one to care for us. Even the most powerful Padishah I have met makes mistakes. Even he is a man who does not see clearly when he climbs too high.

Do you know when an invader has truly conquered a domain? When he has killed all those who called that place theirs? No, when he has strewn it all over with his cemeteries.

I was not wise enough to remember this then. Only later did I begin to understand. When we were in Szigeth, and had to bury the Padishah's heart and intestines in what was once Hungarian land. But it is not yet the time for me to tell you that.

I thought that, after the raid the various bandits who call themselves armies repay their service with, and after the battle for the *timar* in the newly conquered land, we would turn around and return to Belgrade, and go back to the hills of Fruška Gora to track down some wine to reinvigorate the army that was now going back home in smaller numbers. But instead we headed back across Bosnia and its mountains, whose peaks and gorges seemed frozen in eternal winter, as if keeping its snows under perpetual shade and cover of cloud, only for them to increase tenfold during winter itself. But not all of the army headed into the mountains where, unbeknownst even to myself, I secretly dreaded I would find myself again. Only a small section, ten of us under Murat's guidance, headed to the Dervishes to revive our souls.

"We need to purify ourselves," Murat whispered to me as we walked, somewhere halfway along the journey, beyond the Sarajevan hammams and the river I had heard so much about that it looked more like a stream to me. I told him I felt sad because of Mensur. That I could no longer remember his face, or his eyes, and that I had lost all spirit. "It is just Mensur still following me," I said, smiling sadly. I wanted to signal to him that there was no reason to be scared.

"Whoever follows you for over forty days is a demon, not a person," he said, his blue eyes widening like mirrors.

"Where are we going? When will we stop?"

"We will never stop. Not until Allah stops us," he smiled. "But we will pause at the Dervish monastery in Blagaj."

He explained to me that people could find comfort there in both prayer and water. I had no idea what he meant. I merely told him I was afraid I would never go back to my own people.

"Who are your people?"

I could say nothing.

Nor could I fall asleep that first night in the monastery, built just above the source of the roaring River Buna, right in the middle of the *kadiluk* that built seven mosques among the scree slopes of its mountains, and even built four bridges over the Buna. Through the noise of the water, green like the River Neretva, which even now returns to me more and more in dreams, I eventually saw

Hatidža's huge mirror, waiting for me in Istanbul. It was a strange and frightening dream: the mirror shimmered in an empty room, surrounded by a darkness as thick as the black smoke rising in spirals from a house where, after a fire, everything – the furniture, the provisions, the people and the animals – still burns. From the darkness, shadows that were darker yet began to surface, standing one by one at the mirror and looking at themselves, their faces eyeless, before finally disappearing into the mirror. As they did, the mirror grew more and more opaque. Then everything stopped. "When I stand in front of it, it will eat me too," I thought.

I awoke in dismal humour. As if, the day before, I had sung the Nasheed with the Dervishes in heavy Giaour armour. As if nothing could ever purify me, or save me.

* * *

Our parting will come sooner than I thought, so I hope that in Kamal I have found a good guardian for you. If he is willing and Allah allows it, he will even become Grand Vizier, so I need not worry for the fate of your soul once I am in my grave. For if you thought it is wild out here, you are greatly mistaken. At court there may be no wild beasts – only tamed ones, thrown into cages for the sport of people so spoilt that they are weary of everything – but believe me: there is nothing wilder than the intrigues of a palace, of people who live surrounded by scented silk and have forgotten what life is like, who have no idea what it means to have blisters, or a groin swollen from a long ride. They know nothing of the blood that clots on a sword after a triumph, stinking and gathering evil spirits on the blade, and carrying them with the victor until someone remembers to clean the *yatagan* with flames.

You will have no friends then. You may, perhaps, have people who protect you only because they see their own future safety or advantage in you. And do not believe flattering words. Behind them hide the daggers with the longest blades. And do not believe people who bow to you, if you reach such a lofty position; those who bow the lowest will be the first to jump on you when you fall, if you fall, although I hope you will not.

I speak like a madman. Of course you will fall. Several times. It is human fate. But the wise learn from their failures and stand back up stronger. So be wise, even when you think the ground is swallowing you alive, even when you are certain no one in the entire world loves you any longer. God willing, you will find love, and if that same God decides to put you to the test, then He will call your love to Him before you. Like the Padishah, left without the woman who made

him a poet and killer of his friends, son and nephew, and whom he forgave everything, no doubt because of the smile that she would wear, even when stripped of all her jewellery.

I did not see him until we reached Szigeth, but they say Sulejman's face grew completely dark when forced to accompany his love – a woman who, so it was said, was so cruel in life as to bury four of her own children – to the hereafter. I tell you, do not think me mad: the great Padishah died that day in the year 965 according to the Hijri calendar, and went on walking just so he could reach the tent outside Szigeth, where Allah's lightning bolt struck him, ending his ascent and reducing him once more to a mere man. I do not say this with any joy, or out of any ill opinion of a man I always admired for his fairness and wisdom, but to help you understand that life is all about the things we consider small, but without which we do not exist.

In Istanbul you will either become a beast or you will become a man. It is all in your hands. Do not swell with pride and do not grow arrogant, but hold instead to what Allah gave you to navigate through life. He gave you a knowledge of languages, your pen, and your chisel. Languages, so you might break through to other people; a pen, so you might mark the passing of time, and a chisel, so you might, with one gesture of your hand, create beauty from the deep darkness that will settle inside you. Only beauty and love are eternal. Although beauty is not always what you see. Eternal beauties are rare.

My heart stopped four years after the Padishah's. And my blood froze. Had it not been for you, I am certain I would have lain myself beside Vasilisa's white body and never stood up again. You were sitting in a corner, beside a jug of water that despite my efforts could not wash away death, just as the imam's holy words of protection could not fight off death's angel. Under the cover of night, I went to call for the priest. He was a withered old man, on his way to the Holy Land, which Kemal had once again opened up to everyone. When he began giving Vasilisa, who was barely breathing, the Extreme Unction, I pushed him away from her, telling him she needed a new beginning, and certainly not anything Extreme. He looked at me as if I were mad.

"God is calling her to Him," he said gently, in a weary voice. It was the dead of night, and I did not know what I was saying. In the dark I could not see you.

"At least tell me the name of the sickness that is taking her," I growled, as if wishing to wake all the dead. "Tell me, so I know." I did not think at the time of how those killed in battle do not always know the names of those who slay them.

You were crying, were you not? Stunned and bewildered. You did not know what death was. Ten-year-old children ought not to know what death is. The fully-grown do not know either, but they feign confidence in knowing what

awaits them. No one ever came back from the dead. Although the Giaours do say Jesus rose to death only to return three days later as a saviour, a gateway to salvation. I no longer know who to believe.

Your mother was swallowed up by the soil of the Christian cemetery in Ohrid. In my memory it was reddish, always dry, and scattered into dust. Just as I allowed her still to pray to her pale Jesus for salvation, so I also allowed her her faith, even in death. I knew deep down that Allah would show her mercy. I knew too that I would never be able to rest beside her. Not because of the cemetery, but because of the place where she had died, and where I never could have stayed. I knew this every time I entered our room: I would have seen our mattress and her upon it, floating into death, and gone from me forever.

In that same year, it seemed the empire was on the rise again. Ferdinand I was succeeded in leading the entire Roman Empire by his son, Maximilian II. Maximilian was more lenient towards the Padishahs, and indeed towards everything. He did not know whether to force the Padishah into submission by siding with the contending Christians, or to ingratiate himself with him and thereby placate him. He did not realise the Padishah was a dead man walking, who had swapped love for bitterness. A miserable man, like me.

And just as I was certain that in the Jannah, if Allah received me there, I would see your mother's delicate face again, so I always thought, and later knew, that we never meet anyone by chance. There are some encounters that repeat themselves, anchoring us to something that will save us.

Beside myself with grief, I did not know where to go. The first place I thought of was Blagaj. Karalik was no longer with us. I remember clearly the day when, old and exhausted, he dragged himself into the smithy and lay down beside my foot to die. He looked at me, his eyes so human-like and filled with sadness, as if knowing no one would care for me as he had. Then he let out a breath, as if falling asleep, and was gone. In a single moment he changed, just as people change when they breathe their last. They say I should not have, but I cried. As did you.

"Do dogs have a soul?" I asked the imam the next day. He looked at me as if I were mad, but said nothing. If we have something fixed in our mind, no doctrine or words can shake us from it. And if I must be damned, so be it. Although I think I will not be: the further I go through life, the more I think that Allah does not care about these ideas we attach ourselves to.

On my way to Blagaj, I went to look for Alemdar. When at last I saw him, I burst into laughter: "I was crazed enough to choose fear."

"You are just braver and stronger than I." He smiled and looked at you. You did not return his gaze; you were too overwhelmed, your eyes flying over the evergreen mountains and the gorges, snow-covered even in summer, where the

sun never reaches. I remember how, when we first met, Alemdar said in passing that the snow there was older than we were, and would outlive us.

That night, as we sat by the fire, which on the Durmitor peaks must be lit even in summer, Alemdar told me that a small child needs a mother.

“You are the first one to tell me that,” I said. “Everyone else tells me I should send him away to be trained.” I told him I had been taken away from my mother at the same age, and had no idea if she was dead, although it was as if she were.

“Kaplan is not one for war,” he said, though he could not explain how he knew. He repeated what he had said to me about my eyes, and I told him that you could see, too. “Devastation is quickly forgotten, but your boy will build. I can sense it. And to build something one needs a tenderness we men lack. He needs a mother.”

When he left, Alemdar gave you a talisman, a small stone with a hole through the middle, which he threaded with a leather string.

“Listen to it,” he said, tying it around your neck. You looked at him in surprise. Do you remember? “Listen to it. It is a small drum, a fragment of a larger drum. Allah speaks through it. He talks of the creation of the world.” You still carry it with you now, now you understand it. And because of this, I feel at peace. Alemdar knew little of the world of men, for he knew that men can barely see the world that existed before them, and that will continue after they are gone. He knew the song of the world that would go on breathing even without people.

From Blagaj I wrote a letter to the Effendi Husein, telling him that, as he already knew, a woman who cannot retain a man’s semen inside her is only a burden and, trusting his good memory, mentioning his requests, or my promise, that at the first opportunity I would forge a *yatagan* for him, decorate it with ivory and carnelian, and write “Allah is my protector” on the blade.

One month later, rather than sending me a message via messenger, the honourable Effendi, keen perhaps to acquire what warriors do not decorate themselves with, but use instead to kill, and feeling little attachment to a woman left to him in a will, sent me Amira. And with her, Jusuf.

“Fate always returns us to the start,” Jusuf shouted, still riding a black horse so covered in sweat that it shined like volcanic glass. I did not think of Mohács then, where he had turned from warrior to slave. Instead I shouted back that I was envious: he could attract the best horses by whispering, and by singing songs that were often coarse.

He dismounted, and approached to embrace me. As he walked, his arms outstretched and with the sun in his long, blonde hair, all ruffled from the wind, I thought he resembled the angels in the church of Mary’s Assumption in Ilok. I smiled and thought of Vasilisa. Near the end she told me again and again how she trusted the angels to be lenient towards her even though she had sinned.

“But they will go on torturing me,” I would answer in a whisper. I lacked the courage to tell her how it is better to die than to survive the death of the one your heart is tied to.

Behind Jusuf’s horse, stock still, drawn, and sitting oddly erect, Amira rode a white horse that, because of the dust from the road and the bad weather that had befallen them twice on their journey in the form of a storm, looked worn and grey. I smiled to her over Jusuf’s shoulder, through his hair that smelled of horses and of the grass on the mountain paths. The smell of the Buna, rumbling deep below us, drifted up to us on the wind.

Amira made no gesture in return. Not with her eyes, nor with her smile nor her voice. Ghost-like, she merely followed us, and when I brought them both into our house, a small building squeezed beside the school, she simply stood in front of you as you stood and watched us entering, letting the last, pinkish light of the mountain sunset through the door. She crouched in front of you and looked you in the face.

“The woman with the honey-coloured hair was beautiful,” she said at last, in a voice I did not recognise. Then she raised her hands and slowly held your face between her palms. For a moment, I felt a terrible fear she might tear off your head, jealous of everything I had that had been denied to her. But she did not. Like a mother, she leaned towards you and kissed you, first your forehead and then your cheeks.

“I will take care of you,” she said, mainly to herself, and I felt a shiver thunder through my body.

I will not tell you the rest of the story. You know it already.

You will also recall the Muezzin Amir, he of the sweetest voice I ever heard, his eyes as yellow as the amber carried here by traders from the northern seas that are said to be trapped in ice for half the year, his hands skilled at woodwork, and his patience, enough to explain to a boy like you that the pieces of wood that trees become when they meet the final fate of their beauty have shapes and inlays lying in wait within them. You remember the hours he spent telling you of the voices hidden in every tree, and of the tools the Giaours fashion from the trees that grow in these mountains. Once, over the wine that we sometimes drank in secret, he told me he could feel Allah inside the trees, and that sometimes he would hug them and feel something flowing under their bark, something warm and pulsing.

“As if they suck life out of the earth, just as you suck air through a reed when you dive deep in the water,” he said, smiling from ear to ear, his eyes glowing like embers. He was dear to me, very dear, though I did not know him for long. I loved how he would describe in such detail all that he felt and saw.

“May Allah grant you long life,” I told him before we set off to come here. I did not mention it then, and perhaps I just imagine it now, but I sensed it was our final journey together.

“A long life without giving is like an Adhan on the wind,” he said, sounding on the verge of tears, and hugged me. “You hear something somewhere, but you can distinguish nothing, as if the sound were indeed coming from nowhere.” He whispered to me that I should take care of you, and teach you everything I knew, that we never know when we will die, and that time passes. “Death is a silent, but powerful advisor, heard at the end even by the most powerful,” he added. He then told me of the mosque and the cemetery the magician Sinan had built a few years earlier in Mostar, beside the River Neretva, commissioned by the Karagöz Bey, brother of the Grand Vizier Rüstem Pasha Opuković, who soon would cease to be a Grand Vizier, and to be alive.

He told you not to forget him. And it is woeful somehow to talk to children about oblivion and remembrance. You know now that children only know what is most important. Later their vision blurs, and their ears grow confused by the sound of trivial things. I know you did not forget: all that springs to life beneath your fingers is a homage to Amir, to whom Allah granted no children.

From Blagaj, Jusuf took with us a few strange, small, stubborn and tough horses, who lack the grace of the slender, round-eyed Arabian horses we had trained on, but whose legs do not break even on the highest peaks and who can carry everything a man hoards during his lifetime, and with which he cannot part even when he knows he has no real need of it.

Thus overloaded, we headed for the valleys, towards the Danube where I had fallen in love in Ilok, while Vasilisa purified her soul before her God.

Jusuf asked me nothing. He simply followed me, like those who follow close behind the guide they have appointed to bring them back to where they lost their way. On the road he told me only once that he was not entirely certain I knew what it was like to drown in mud. I said nothing, because I did not know. Just as I did not know that in the inns where we spent the night in the *hadiluk* of Osijek you would begin sweating profusely and raving about things you could know nothing of, and I would rush search for a doctor. You said that in your dreams you had seen a woman with painted hands, long, untied hair, her head uncovered, dressed in goat wool and with dark scarves dancing around her as if she were walking through water. You said you always saw me in those dreams, not the way I am now, but smaller, younger. “The woman comes closer to you and hugs you, and you start to grow older. She pulls you closer and closer as if you were sinking into her. Until you disappear.” You do not remember that?

Back then I could not interpret the dream that kept returning to you, and

which you would wake up from terrified and tearful. You dreamed of me quite often. You dreamed of me coming back. And you dreamed of my mother, even though I never spoke to you about her or her hands, or the crosses she used to resist the circumcised invaders. So I went at first to the doctor, who sent me to the imam in a town with five mosques. Despairing, I wondered how many inscriptions we would need to protect you from what I had passed on to you. But I knew not everything we fear is a curse. By following the gifts and skills we are given as if they were a vocation, we yield ourselves body and soul, like a wet nurse breastfeeding the offspring of another. Like an ironmonger, I could open the doors to all *kadiluks*, and like a soothsayer, I could open portals to the world that seemed unfathomable to those who are blind to the invisible. And if knowing in advance is a curse, it is comforting now to know that death is not the end, but only the moment when you will wrap my body in a shroud so I might continue my journey unconstrained.

There will always be horses that need shoeing, so when I told Judge Gani-Bey that I would pay for the land Jusuf and I had chosen near Erdut, right beside the Danube, by tending to the horses of Sarač-Agha and his guards, he merely looked at me with a strange smile and asked me if I knew the Danube. I replied that no one could ever know such a great river, just as no one can ever know himself.

He knew, that wise man, that a river never remains the way you first find it, especially if you first see it during the drought of a long rainless summer, when the streams fed by the snow on the faraway mountains have long-since dried out.

Do you remember the first spring in this house that Jusuf and I built with the help of the landowner Esmin's hefty-handed servants?

"It is good that we went no closer to the water," Jusuf said one morning, his hands on his hips and naked to waist. He had goose-bumps, either from the cold of that dawn, or from the water that always breathes chill air and brings the cold from the mountain passes that it crosses. If you remember, the water had reached as close as two cubits from the house. The dark trees stood in the water like an army in a swamp waiting for the order to attack, freezing and cursing the Serasker who has decided to take an unusual route and surprise the enemy from behind.

To amuse ourselves, we built a boat in a few days. You carved the oars together with Jusuf, and we rowed through the woods, marking how the submerged grass looked eerie under the water as it danced like the landscape in a dream where we run on the spot and cannot escape our pursuers.

It was then that we heard the news of the death of Rüstem Pasha Opuković. Most likely to soothe the bitterness he had stirred in many people with the decisions in his will, he had left behind in this world a few mosques, a caravansary

in Edirne and one in Erzurum, and inns for the drunk and tired who would not even know who it was that had built these shelters for them to rest in on long journeys.

We also heard that in the last battle of the most powerful Padishah of the empire, Mehmed Pasha Sokolović had become Grand Vizier and Serasker; his wisdom would shine even more, and the empire would have gone on rising had it not been for the envy and the evil of those who convinced the Padishah to kill one of his sons so the other could reign.

Blind eyes are selfish, mark my words. And mark this too: no one has yet fallen into the abyss without taking others with them.