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THE RED WEDDING DRESS

Translated from Croatian by Janja Smrekar

It seemed like a game to her. Although she was already thirteen years old, she played with children from other tents every day. She knew very well what they had been through and why they were here, but she unconsciously clung to that child's attitude toward the world, moments in which you create an entire universe out of nothing with the help of your imagination.

They have been at the camp for a full year. They had lived in a big white tent, large enough for a family of nine, and had only a month ago received a shipping container that functions as an actual little house. Safiha slept in a room with her two sisters and four brothers. Father and Mother slept in another room, where the kitchen was as well. Every day, relatives and friends they had met at the camp came over for coffee. Some were brave enough to return to Syria, which was only some ten kilometers north. They would return. Some would return with gunshot wounds. They say they are part of the Free Army. The camp is full of green Free Army flags, but she didn't pay much attention to that.

Safiha goes to the store. Once a week, she goes with her sisters to an improvised store made out of planks to buy chewing gum or ice cream. The prices at the store are much higher than they should be. The goods are imported by skilled merchants in agreement with the guards, and everyone needs a dollar put into their pocket. Goods are abundant. The main "street", which the French doctors named Champs-Élysées, holds stores with live chickens, cafes, juicers, fast food restaurants, textile shops, jewelry shops, a library. Here in the evening, couples walk as if they are on vacation, and not on the white-hot sand of the inhospitable terrain on the north of Jordan.

Out of all the stores, the one Safiha found the most interesting was the one with the wedding dresses. She would look at them with her sisters and fantasize about marrying the perfect prince. Not, admittedly, about the marriage itself, so much as the act of getting married and the moment she finally dons the wedding dress. She thought of herself as mature. Her breasts swelled, her period came. She became a woman.

Out of the four wedding dresses, three were white, and one was red. She always watched the red one. Sometimes it wouldn't be in the store because people rented out the dresses for weddings, and weddings happened daily. Children were even born in the camp, and more than one per day. Even though the sun was scorching and melting the rocks, she would go in front of the store and imagine. She twisted strands of long black hair around her forefinger. She started applying make-up. Not a lot, just enough to accentuate her pretty round face.

One day an unfamiliar man came to the tent for coffee, she had never seen him before. He had a scarf over his head, wore a white robe, his black beard was neatly cropped. What she noticed, what all of them

noticed, were his fingers, covered in gold and precious stones, rings worth more than the property of all one hundred fifty thousand of the camp's residents.

"Sit, child, meet Saad," said Mother and showed her her spot on the carpet in the kitchen.

They sat in a circle, her father, mother, uncle and two older brothers. They drank coffee with hal, and the cigarettes were first-class, a gift from the guest. He was a man in his fifties, with a well-groomed face, scented with the finest perfumes.

"We saw your advertisement and thought you might be interested. She's just what you're looking for: long straight black hair, a lovely face, smart and knows the values of Islam, and above all loves Allah. Look and asses for yourself, it's not my place to talk too much. Eyes are a person's best tool," said the Father under his thick moustache.

The guest grasps his *tesbih*, twisting the beads, types on his bejeweled cell phone. He points the camera at Safiha and takes a photograph. He's quiet for a while, then says:

"Dear Sir, I hope we will be in business.

After all, my duty is to help you and her, help your afflicted nation. Let's just not rush, I still must consult, I must see," Saad said.

The entire time, Safiha watched and listened.

Even though the Arabic dialect they were speaking was a little bit different, she understood everything. Mother held her hand and nearly let out a tear. In her eyes, the man could see the burned down house, the home they had to leave. He could see the blown up bodies of relatives. The few suitcases in which they stuffed their belongings and left without questions, out of fear, not out of political beliefs.

The guest said that he will stop by in a week, but that the deal all in all stands and that they can consider it concluded. Upon leaving the container, he gave the head of the family a hundred dollars as a sign of gratitude. His cup of coffee remained untouched.

The following days, Mother explained to her daughter what was happening.

"You've realized yourself, you are no longer a child. You know our position, how hard we have it. We barely made it out alive. Don't worry, my child. You saw the mister. He's all polished, fine and he'll take good care of you. It will primarily help you, but us as well. He promised to help the whole family after you get married. He'll move us all to Saudi Arabia and we'll be close. We'll see each other often. He promised to pay your father five thousand dollars on the spot. My child, do you know how much money that is? Your father can't earn that much in two years. If he could work in the first place. Like this we're slaves, living on

humanitarian aid. How many times a week do you go to the store? I know, don't tell me. You only go once, and for small things. Imagine how many times you'll be able to go with this man. Oh, you can move into a shopping center because he can buy it for you. That's a man with high morals who respects Allah. Did you just see the Jeep he arrived in? And he doesn't even drive himself, he has his own driver and his own security. He has a spacious apartment in Amman, in an elite part of the city. He promised that you'll live there in the beginning, that's not even a hundred kilometers away. We'll be close. Later, when he arranges the permits for border crossing, you and we will go to our new home. Everything will be okay," Mother talked quickly and excitedly, and Safiha listened about the events she had no effect on. The only thing she said was the wish that had to come true:

"Buy me the red wedding dress."

After a week, Saad came through the doors of their container again. This time he held in his hands gifts for the entire family, five thousand dollars for the Father and in a special package, beautifully wrapped, the red wedding dress from the camp store.

"*Hamdulillah*," said the Father, squeezed the guest's hand and kissed his cheek. Happy to have finally closed the deal.

He too will now, just like some from the camp, taste happiness and finally make a step out of this uneasy situation.

"Tonight we go to my apartment. Here are all the papers that guarantee our merging, and in three weeks I come back for you and we travel south together," Saad promised sternly, took Safiha's hand and petted her cheek.

"From this day forward, you are my wife and I take care of you. Everything will be alright," he ran his hand over his moustache and squeezed all the residents' hands.

The car kicked up a big cloud of dust as it moved through the camp. Everyone turned to look, but Safiha looked ahead, not knowing where exactly she was going. This game played out so fast she didn't even have time to turn around. Her sisters cried, as did her mother. Father was satisfied, but there was a lump stuck in his throat. "It's about survival," he said to himself.

Nobody had seen or heard about Safiha for a full three months. The family thought the paperwork was just taking longer than expected and that they just had to wait a bit longer. The Father even went to the camp manager, but there was nothing he could do because it had all played out without him knowing. "What Saudi and what marriage?" he repeated in front of the Father.

Everyone dreaded, but the five thousand dollars he had given came in handy for buying so many necessary groceries. Humanitarian aid packages weren't enough for anything. One morning, around three o'clock, in front of the family container appeared Safiha. She was quiet and humble, as always.

She stood at the door while residents came out to her, kissing her and dragging her into the room. They didn't ask any questions. On her face she had more make-up than ever before, and she wore sparkling clothes with sequins and high-heeled shoes. In her hand she held the unworn red wedding dress.

THE MINISTRY OF ABDUCTED PEOPLE

Today is his first day of work and, just like every first time, no matter what it is, things do not go perfectly. Minutes move at a snail's pace, stress leaves the body in the form of beads of sweat at thirty-five degrees celsius in a hot unconditioned office. The wind is carrying sand inside through the windows, which are open for some kind of air circulation. White curtains are fluttering in the draft, and papers are stacked in piles in the corners of the room and on top of dilapidated ancient desks. They are being pressed down by red bricks, similar to the ones baked by the ancient habitants of Mesopotamia. But they were long forgotten, people who are just looking for their place in the vast expanse of history are here now.

Abdelilah is passing through a long, unkempt hallway. The walls had once been blue, but had faded over time. They are peeling and wounded in places by a stray bullet, because this building had too been struck during the occupation of the city. The hallway has held up well due to being protected from three sides. From the outside, the building looks like a hive, birds could make homes out of the bullet holes.

Abdelilah is carrying papers in his hands and entering neighboring rooms, leaving several sheets in each of them.

All the offices look the same. In each of them there is one employee sitting at an ancient desk, calculating, writing, underlining, adding and subtracting numbers. On the wall in each room there is a big black flag with the words, "There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God". Every floor of the dilapidated five-floor building has a head of department who controls the calculations, and on the very top there is a sort of minister who puts his signature and stamp on each sheet of paper to make it valid. *Clara pacta, boni amici.*

Ever since the ISIL fighters entered Raqqa, they had organized the leadership and started recording each action so nothing would slip the end-of-the-month calculation. Abdelilah knew they were tracking and testing him, but he could not have guessed that he will end up talking with the head of department on the first day.

Before entering the room, Abdelilah shakes grains of sand off his white robe, runs his hands over his beard, straightens the papers that still in his hands because he has not handed out all of them. He opens the door, enters the room of Mister Aziz.

Mister Aziz once worked as an accountant in the cotton industry. He understands addition and subtraction, so after the change of government he channeled his gift to other actions. All the same, calculating was needed, as was using logic from the field. It is warfare after all, and ISIL is fighting on battlefields from Damascus to Mosul and from Kobanî to the border of Syria and Jordan. There's a lot of work to do.

"Sit, Abdelilah," he points to a chair.

"Thank you, Sir."

"It's hot," Mister Aziz states.

"Yes, very hot, like hell," answers Abdelilah.

With his right hand he squeezed the thumb of his left hand to ease the nervousness because he felt that something was wrong, since the boss had called him into his office. He poured water into his glass and took the papers which he had revised and turned in for further work this morning. There's a black flag hanging on the wall, and every so often the sun peeks in through the waving curtain behind Aziz' back, blinding Abdelilah every time it happens.

"Abdelilah. It's your first day, I know. Not everything can run smoothly, but you still received the handbook that you were supposed to study in detail and follow. Liberty in assessments is always welcome, but not everybody is the same, you know that."

"I know they aren't and I tried to stick to the regulations, Sir. God willing, I will fix the mistakes very quickly, just point them out to me, I don't understand what this is about?" Abdelilah replies remorsefully and takes a sip of water.

The conversation started flowing and now he felt more at ease. He broke through the stage fright, that invisible membrane that is the most tense right before the start of the conversation.

"Let's say here," Aziz shows him a sheet of paper and beckons him closer. He is pointing at his calculation from this morning.

"You wrote everything down correctly when it comes to the facts and the people. Ten nuns were abducted, we have their names, the day of the abduction. That's all good. But we can't demand five hundred thousand dollars for them, who's going to pay that?"

"I know the Church has money, handing over five hundred thousand dollars probably isn't a problem for them," Abdelilah replies, somewhat puzzled.

"I know from experience that the Church certainly won't pay that kind of money for ten nuns from Syria. The maximum number that you can put is five thousand dollars per head... I mean, per person. That way they can either leave separately or together. There's ten of them, so that's fifty thousand dollars. During

negotiations we'll lower the price by ten thousand and that's forty thousand, all together. Families could pay for them individually, so that option has to be calculated. Put it under a serial number, and once the transaction is complete, add the confirmation and send all of it off to the archive."

"I understand, Sir. May Allah have mercy for my mistake. It won't happen again," he says and turns his palms over as if expecting someone to toss bread into his hands, then looks to the ceiling from which plaster is falling.

The sun peeks through the window again and strokes his cheek, but only for a moment. Quickly, it hides again, runs away, skillfully passing through yellow city streets.

"You entered the abducted Syrian soldier well. 'Be quiet at first, if need be, demand the release of our prisoners in exchange for him.' You're right. Let them sweat a little first thinking of all the things we'll do to him. Then we'll ask to exchange prisoners. If they happen to abduct or kill more of our own, we have no choice but to execute him," Mister Aziz says calculatingly. He strokes his long beard and a thought crosses his mind. "Oh, right, *habibi*, I forgot to tell you, while we're on the subject, those abducted Lebanese soldiers..."

"Yes, Sir, I remember they were abducted a while ago, but I had nothing to do with it."

"It doesn't matter. They were abducted a while ago and now we send their families photographs every so often. It's good for keeping the balance."

"I understand," Abdelilah replies readily.

"But this here is unacceptable," Mister Aziz raises his voice and stirs, grabs the paper and extends his arm, as if that will change its contents, as if the letters written in nice Arebica would fall off, but they remain.

"here it's clear you don't know the material. If you were with someone else, you'd be kicked out, but like this you'll only get a warning." Abdelilah starts to twirl his left thumb again, and the heat is doing nothing to ease his nervousness. Preferably, he would jump out the window and run away from this unreal place. "Had it been better before? Well it was... no, it wasn't. It had never been better. It's good now," a thousand thoughts are going through his head as he is trying to concentrate. He moves his head closer to the desk and along with Mister Aziz looks at the sheet of paper and the calculations underneath it.

"Journalists are, as you've noticed, always a good catch.

There's the most secret negotiations happening and the most money is getting pulled out around them and around humanitarians," Mister Aziz says.

"I understand, that's what I anticipated. That's why I put up a ten million dollar ransom."

“Yes, you put that, but it’s just not the same…”

“What’s not the same, Sir?” Abdelilah wonders again.

“When we recently abducted a French journalist, the ransom was even fifteen million dollars. Of course nobody knew about this because it was done in secret. Everything had been paid. We asked ten million for the American one, but the Americans didn’t want to pay, and the family didn’t have the money. This is where our Propaganda Department comes in and presents the whole case to the public. Unfortunately, the abductee must lose their life,” Mister Aziz is explaining, as if this is about bundles of cotton that he used to keep track of at the now ruined factory.

“That’s crystal clear,” Abdelilah agrees.

“You, however, wrote that we should demand ten million for a Croatian journalist. After that you wrote, I quote: ‘In the case of a refusal to pay the ransom or inability to negotiate with the government, activate film crew and produce propaganda material. Send to media and wait for reactions’. Not bad, at first, but this is a ‘Croatian journalist’. Croatia isn’t America, and that’s an important distinction. It would be very hard for them to gather ten million dollars to set their journalist free. The only possible option is crowdfunding. They’re known for their humanitarian actions, but it’s hard that they’ll gather such a sum for a journalist. If the government, in the election year, were to realize that paying ransom for the journalist would win it the election, only then would we have some kind of chance. All in all, it’s too much work and effort for such a precarious result.”

“I understand, Sir, but aren’t they in a coalition with America. I was counting on that,” Abdelilah is trying to justify his logic, but it’s not going well.

In the next moment, Mister Aziz knowingly refers him to the issue and explains with arguments the whole purpose of this conversation, directing him to his mistake with the calculation.

“This isn’t often the case, moreover, it looks like the only case. Croatians are allies of America, but they are small and the only thing they do is fulfil directives from Washington. They have no influence. They occasionally suck up so they can catch some kind of economic package, maybe launch a product to America, and that’s all,” Mister Aziz strokes his beard, laughs to himself and continues, “even the guards at this building use Croatian weapons. Yes, yes. Don’t be shocked. At the start of the conflict they had sent, in organization with CIA, seventy planes with weapons to Syria. It had been meant for the rebels, so a good deal of it ended up in our fighters’ hands as well. Nothing strange, it happens. Now they support America, whose planes are bombing us daily, but they do it without thinking. Oh, they have nothing to do with it.”

Mister Aziz takes a sip of water, as does Abdelilah. Two seconds of silence as he looks over the same sheet of paper, then another argument passes his lips.

“We don’t even interest them. If you’d only turned on the internet, you would know that their main news are godless nudity and gossip. Most of the people wouldn’t even know what’s happening. They’re not interested in the world. They’re turned towards themselves, addressing their own problems, fretting and biting themselves. Even if, God willing, the caliphate were to spread that far north, that country should be avoided at all costs. Let it go.”

“It all makes sense to me now. I just don’t know what we should do with the journalist from Croatia?” Abdelilah shrugs his shoulders, expecting the end of the meeting.

“Yes. That is a problem. If we demand ransom, it’s not good, if we kill him, it’s not good. You know what, Abdelilah, it’s best we release him where we caught him,” Aziz says decisively.

Abdelilah scratches his head, looks toward the window and yawns, but then returns to the conversation.

“That’s the biggest problem. We did not abduct him, we bought him from Al-Nusra for thirty thousand dollars.”

“Oh, may Allah have mercy on your soul,” Mister Aziz replies, shaken. “How could you have signed that purchase?”

“It wasn’t me, Sir, it was signed by my predecessor around a month before he got fired.”

“Oh yes, I remember him, he always needed to be admonished.

We had to replace him, he was impossible to deal with. Oh, God Almighty. How could he have signed that...”

“What should we do, Sir?”

“Al-Nusra abducted him?”

“No. They purchased him from Jaysh al-Islam for three thousand dollars.”

“They pushed him onto us! That’s why he was so cheap,” Mister Aziz becomes furious. He walks across the room and opens the curtain.

The room is filled with the light of the afternoon sun. Then he steps away, the curtain falls back, the room goes dark and he sits down again.

“Where was he abducted then?” Aziz asks the subordinate.

“He was allegedly abducted somewhere in Damascus, but Jaysh al-Islam hadn’t taken him either. They had also bought him, from FSA for twelve thousand dollars, and FSA had bought him from some taxi driver for five hundred dollars and a goat. He’d allegedly caught him somewhere in the city. The journalist got drunk on vodka at a Russian restaurant, headed to the hotel calling for a taxi in the small hours of the night, and the calculating driver seized the opportunity to earn money and did it expressly and easily.”

“Hm... So everyone gains except for us. I don’t know, I really don’t know what we should do. We lose in every situation.”

In the next moment he remembers:

“You know what. Let them put him on a bus that will take him as far away as possible. We’ll let him go, yes, we have no choice. Everything else is too much hassle and work. Unless... unless we shoot him like a dog and bury him with nobody knowing.”

“I can write anything,” Abdelilah offers.

“Write this: ‘Leave subject at an abandoned village at the border with Turkey’. Let him be gone already.”

“Understood, Sir. May I go back to work now?”

“You may, of course, but don’t make mistakes like this again,” Mister Aziz warns with his finger.

Abdelilah rises from his chair, leans in a sign of respect, takes the papers and heads to the door. Right before exiting, he hears a voice behind his back.

“Abdelilah.”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Watch your head, the door is a little low.”