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MOTHER

Zija Dizdarević

There lies far behind me, more than fifteen years far, my silenced Bosnian childhood.

Do I remember? There was a box – a room, and through it was walking a weary thin face, legs in slippers, faded harem trousers, and a gentle devoted look. Mother! From wall to wall, from door to stove, from lunch to dinner, from autumn to spring, within walls, among four walls, built into walls, an unpleasant woman's life carried on.

I remember: there was sun, plenty of sun around us, when children's games and black ragged peasant shirts were going through the courtyard and in front of the window. Mother was languishing in the gloom of the "green room", patching clothes. The dark walls were drinking blood from the woman's cheeks in the shadow.

I remember: we used to run after horses across the threshing fields, over grass and stones, through playful children's spaces, forgetting to go to the mosque five times a day and – later, Father's beating was the end of the joy. Mother, gloomily obedient and silenced like us, whimpered: "Yours is Father, even when he hits you a little… kiss his hand and pray, son," and at every blow and cry her face would twitch, and she would turn her head away.

Beaten up, broken childhood, unfinished games, the woman hidden in the dark and Father's merciless look. The sentinel sabre that would irascibly chase down the streets… We were growing up.

"Don't you move from in front of the house. Did you hear me? Don't make me ask you with a stick where you were! And now, first ablution, and then prayer!

A wall in front of children's small wishes.

Teacher's stick was longer than Father's, and children were silent at school out of fear. My cry… I remember Mother: she was losing colour in her face.

Hidden behind the mourning black headscarf, "the veil", wrapped into wide linen, abaya, she would hide from people when she was supposed to walk down the street on a rare day. Aunts, aunts-in-law, nannas, grandmas, women and women passed through our "halvat [1]," bringing with them dark veils on their faces and obedience in their eyes. They would drink coffee and talk about shirts, covering humbly their faces when

my father came in.

I wondered: Did they have a father? Have they ever jumped barefoot through the meadows?

In order not to mess around, we were allowed to go out to the street on those occasions. We would play in front of the house and stare longingly at the distant hill peaks that were brushing clouds.

And we were growing up.

Every other year a child would join us. Mother would usually lie then. I just do not know why I was beaten more often and why Mother's eyes were growing deeper, and why we ate stale bread in the mornings…

Yet, women came. And some games with them. The games: klis [2], "canon", ćiza [3], dust. We would get away from the rooms to the street and make dreams out of stone. Oblivion.

Yes. There are four apple trees in our yard, they have blossomed fifteen times since then, and I do not know for certain if my childhood tore apart at that point.

I remember: It was summer. Mother was in the window, above the dust in which we were sitting.

The bending street, lit in the sunshine, yellow, deserted, played with us. One old wall leaned against the pebble stone tower that Fikret had been gluing with watered dust. It was quiet and hot.

Then something shrieked fiercely and lengthily. Strange! We were waiting for a new start. And, we heard: tooo-oot! to-o-ot! two times.

– Exactly like the trumpet of Mica's Ante,' – disclosed Bajro.

– No, not true, it's more like when Mešan sings. There…'

– To-oo-oot! too-oot!

It amused us, and it was coming closer. As if it had been behind the wall of our yard. Sitting in the dust, we were turning our heads towards the sound.

Why was Mother thumping persistently on the window?

…Fikret had his green, short, ragged small trousers on…

And suddenly in front of us was a huge black body of a dragon.

Or a monster. The Sun was glittering from the glass eyes which were going towards us. Quite close…closer. Terribly close! Toot!

'Auto!' – petrified Bajro jumped.

I do not know if a loud and hopeless cry was heard behind the window. Neither do I know what happened to the pebble stone tower. Were Fikret and Bajro with me or not? It was only when I clang to the wall, and felt it underneath my nails, my hands clenched, that I remembered…

Everything happened in a heartbeat. I turned around. I spotted only a small arm that waved feebly under the wheel. As if a piercing and broken cry echoed in my ears.

Suffocation in the throat. Whose heart was beating that much?

The car ran over Fikret and stopped. In the dust I could see the green…something green. People and children. Clamour. Terror.

With the mouth distorted and half-open, with no veil, and no abaya, Mother ran out and stood with her arms bent over the smashed body that stopped twitching. I do not know…I was looking only at her, not making a move, and I wanted, I desperately wanted to run away from that horrendous moment and deep down inside a crazy thought started to form: maybe all this is not as it is …maybe it is not true.

And Mother's eyes were widely open. Her petrified look was high above the bloody, dusty soil and everything around me, and me, all of us drowned in that painful look. I cannot recall if there was, after all, any sun, dust, car and people, but I know that there was, and there still dwells in me like a burden the infinitely eloquent stiffness of Mother's eyes.

Then Father came. He stood there stunned, silent for some time, then, seeing Mother uncovered, he frowned:
– Don't you see that the whole world is staring at you? Why did you come out without the veil? Get inside!–

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I remember: I was 'starting school'. Mother was crying while she was seeing me off.

– Watch out, my son, the city is an enemy. Walk neither along the middle part of the road, something will run over you, nor take the street's edge timidly – be on guard, something may hit you from the roof, but go here 'n' there…''

She knew nothing further to say. Or no more could she say?

Translated by Ana Stanović Obradović and Mirjana Savić Obradović

Note: The Bosnian writer Zija Dizdarević was killed in the concentration camp Jasenovac in 1942.

Notes

1. A guest room typically located on the ground floor of a house. ↩
2. A children’s game similar to tip-cat. ↩
3. A children’s game similar to pitching pennies. ↩

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