

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

The White Mouse Grants Luck

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First publication

Why does the white mouse grant luck? I have found out. And I'll tell you.

When you are born, life deals you a hand. Better or worse. You are born a healthy or sick baby, small or large, rich or poor, white or a bit darker. That's how it works. If your parents are wealthy or at least employed, that's already a pair of kings. If you are born in a family that has enough to live off of, and your parents suddenly die, that's a pair of aces.

Regardless, you cry when you are born. From the warmth of ninety-nine degrees Fahrenheit, you are out into the freezing seventy or so, amidst masked people, and in between the knees of Mrs. Mom. And in fear, tearful, you wait for the first hand, you wait for your cards... If you wake up in a home made of cardboard, surrounded by brown faces, some of whom are happy to see you, while others look at you with concern, then you're... Hmm...! Those who understand that even at such a young age, you need to eat, at least your mother's milk, are worried. One day, your ass will need something more concrete.

In the midst of people with brown faces and big smiles, you still don't see how poorly you've been dealt. At only three or four years old, when you see that whiter, cleaner children with better clothes and shoes, have their mothers pulling them away by the sleeve when they try to play with you, you realize you have been dealt twos and threes. That hurts more than hunger and cold, they say. At five, you realize that you are little Gypsy, Gyp, Zigeuner, Tsigano, Pikey... And that this whole array of compliments comes in a package with a wooden-cardboard existence, along with hunger and cold. At six or seven, you should go to school. But what a bummer! You have nothing to go out in. You have nothing to wear, nor to put on your feet. You have no money for books. Nor for paper and pencils, a pencil case and erasers, a tracing paper and markers, for modeling clay and crayons, for... Even less for the bus. You can't be among white children, dirty and greasy. Pops and mom, almost inevitably illiterate, might somehow get you to school, as hungry and dirty as you are. But the silk-clad parents of little white children would complain and... And so on, around in circles.

I just don't understand why, alongside that infamous nationalism, the word "racism" is

mentioned so rarely in this country. Racism is more evident here than all other “isms.” Now, let the earth swallow me while I write this if it isn’t true! Let the snake under the table bite me, and I’ll drop dead right away if that’s not the case! If there is anything written after this, know that I am fine and that I am right. Because if... It took me too long, as usual. But for the right reason. To give you a closer look, so you might even come to like the hero of my story.

His name was Imsho. I’m not sure that was it, exactly. I doubt he knew either. He was one of us, a Gypsy from Mostar. He spoke excellent Romani and was somewhat worse in our three languages. You know, these newly arrived Roma mostly do not speak their own Romani language. Those from Kosovo speak Albanian and... Hmm... There you go. It turns out my Imsho is a polyglot. We all turned out to be polyglots. However, unlike most people in Mostar today, Imsho was a local.

I met Imsho from the window of my then-favorite café while I was sipping the coffee made for me by my then-favorite waiter, Buza. I remember it was Friday. I remember because, like every Friday, I left work early to watch the Roma festivities, that is, the weddings. In other words, right across from the café was the registry office for that part of Mostar. And in that part of Mostar, people mostly got married on Fridays. Leaning against the window, I watched the people, the women, the flags. The bride would regularly be one of the uglier ones. The groom would usually be gap-toothed and lanky. You know, during the war, there are hardly any good dentists, and even less money for expensive clothes. After the war, the same. I think at that time, around five o’clock, they would let those poor souls loose to trouble me. Who knows... I know they’ve been tapping my phone for a long time, for heaven’s sake, maybe they even organized that mess with the poor folks to... There you go. Now the last thing I need is to go crazy because of you!

There were flags there, from the green one with the crescent and star to the one with lilies and the national one; the one that looks like a psychological test for a driving exam. There were, although rarely, nice cars and “Armani” suits among the diaspora that came to get married and pull some poor girl out of our... ugh. Well, now, the groom was as ugly as a thief, and she was beautiful like a painting. So, he would usually be, at least by our standards, wealthy.

To me, in that bustling place, Imsho and his family were the most interesting. He had a round face, a broad smile, and warm eyes. He resembled a little haystack, as he usually carried all his clothes with him, that is, on him, so that no one would steal them from him. At least that’s what he used to say. Umica, his wife, was a pretty Gypsy, slightly shorter and lighter than he was. His youngest son at that time, in the mid-nineties, was just a baby, only a few months old, while the older one was a five-year-old, very cross-eyed and skinny. They would take pictures in front of the center, where, as we said, weddings took place, around four-thirty. At the same time when I used to be there. If some other Gypsy wanted to take his territory, Imsho would curse in Romani, wave a stick around, and threaten with his fist. Umica would argue for him, while the little five-year-old called Hara would screech. And they would always successfully drive away the rude intruder. Umica and Imsho would hide, “sneak” the money from each other when they stepped out of each other’s sight. Buza and I would see that very well from the stands, from the café window.

Imsho would sometimes come to us, join us at the café, and, much to Umica's dismay, he would order a beer. He would do it in one go, to the bottom. Then I would order him another one, and the same thing would follow. Then, poor thing, he would start to stumble over his words, just at the moment when the sound of the first wedding horns could be heard... Then Imsho would rush out, trying to make his way to the groom, looking for the most crowded area, to wish them happiness, many children, and a long life, and to ask for a little money in return, to improve his own life and family situation a bit. Since he couldn't say it in Romani, he would wish the couple, in the language of the newlyweds, long children, many lives, and many other things that the newlyweds would never wish for themselves.

Sometimes he would enter the tavern with some cardboard, hand it to us, and mumble something like:

- Come on, bless your mother, you write me "Congratulations, newlyweeds"...!?

I would write what he wants with Buzin's thick marker. Basically. I would write "Congratulations to the newlyweds!" However, since he didn't really know me well back then, he would carry a cardboard sign with that written on it and ask someone else what it said.

- Why is he checking? - I asked Buza, a favorite waiter of mine.

- Well, they write all sorts of things to him... - Buza said.

- Like what?

- Well, once Trla wrote, "May you bear crocodiles." And before that, Chisha wrote, "Newlyweds, your shit is as big as Hum"... - Buza revealed to me.

By the way, for those who don't know, Hum is a large hill above Mostar... One Friday, there were wedding guests there; it was a sad sight to behold. The groom was wearing canvas sneakers, jeans, and an oversized jacket that probably didn't belong to him. The bride was about fifteen years old, heavily pregnant, and the guests were so impoverished that not a single one of them passed the time in front of the center by stepping into the Buza's tavern for a quick drink. Imsho and Umica blessed and wished the best in vain; none of the wedding guests gave them even a penny. In a fit of righteous anger, Imsho took his baby son from Umica, handed him to the bride, placed him in her arms where a modest bouquet was already resting, and said:

- Here you go, a child, may you live long!!! So you don't have to give birth...! You are more Gypsy than the three of us...!

He must have been referring to three of them who weren't in the bride's arms...

On some Fridays, during those rainy days in Mostar, Imsho would carry the wedding guests across the ravine for a few coins, which the poor sewage system in the Old Town generously let flow toward the happy newlyweds. Everyone would be clowning around there, Imsho and his crew, the wedding guests, and the two of us in the café... And when I changed jobs and stopped coming to the shows on Fridays, Imsho and I remained great friends. When I would be there officially, for work (and how else, if you please?) in front of some café with important people like representatives of the International Community and members of the city government, I would stand up and greet my great friend. Moreover, I would insist that everyone shake hands with the man who carried all his possessions on him, regularly suggesting to them that, on behalf of the city and the International Community, they give him a few dimes as a member of the smallest minority of people in Mostar. They would often do it so as not

to lose face in front of each other and come off as stingy. Little Hara would then watch them suspiciously with his squinty eye, holding onto his father's clothing. He found them suspicious, convinced that those con artists who were with me wanted to deceive and steal, and perhaps even something worse. Children are a wonder. They can instinctively sense who they are dealing with...

Imsho never asked me for money. Because I would give it to him even before he asked. Imsho's job was like any other. You know, it's not easy to reach out and ask for something; it takes courage to do that. One has to swallow a lot. And I, the weakling that I am, would rather dig ditches for someone worse than myself than ask for charity like a human being. Actually, our government stole the patent from Imsho. Heheee, the government knows what it's doing! And they live off international charity. They wouldn't be able to get so well-off and buy such cars just by sucking the blood of my people and Imsho's, because... Excuse me. I, having given (or received, I don't quite remember) my notice at the place where I worked, as I already mentioned, started missing the wedding performances on Fridays. But I didn't stop seeing Imsho and his family.

Then, one day, I started seeing Imsho with the kids, without Umica. The younger one, already a two-year-old at the time, was running around a bit, occasionally holding the hand of the older, cross-eyed Hara.

- Imsho, where is Umica? - I asked.

- Gone... - Imsho said.

- Where?

- To Bosnia, my friend... With some young Romani... With some Hungarian Romani...

- And she left you the kids...

Imsho simply shrugged at this question-statement, causing the pile of clothes on him to rise and fall with a loud rustle. And on his brown face was a smile, like some sort of apology for being incomplete like that, without Umica and with two children, for having become a single father. I pulled a bill out of my pocket and handed it to him. He shook his head and said:

- Don't, my friend, give too much... It's better to give a little today, a little tomorrow... I'm a poor Gypsy, what I have, I quickly lose... But you can buy chocolate milk for the kids, which Hara and the little one love...

Soon, the younger son, the little rascal, was welcomed into the orphanage. At first, they hesitated, but then they took him in. Hara didn't want anything from old Imsha, for God's sake. With his squinting eyes, and if he were to cry, he would be as ugly as the devil himself. They wandered through the city like a little Gremlin and a bundle of hay with an oval face on top, rummaging through trash cans and sharing smiles like politicians share promises. The sun warmed them as if they were white, the sun that warms us all and doesn't ask what color our faces are or what we carry in our pockets and on ourselves, loving the world a hundred times more than it deserved... Then he told me how Hara went to live in an orphanage, like his little brother, who was three years old at the time.

After that, Imsho stopped rummaging through the trash cans, wore a neat checkered shirt and vest, and was clean and well-groomed. When I offered him money, he would politely decline with his already famous smile on his oval face and thank me. I was not

surprised. Yes, I thought. Imsho, like any other honest person, he has the right to save something for retirement, step back, and start enjoying the fruits of his labor.

In a few months, Imsho disappeared. Muhamed, his brother by skin color, a skilled worker, and my great friend, told me that Imsho had died of cancer. And then he asked me why I was crying, and he started crying too. I cried, the first and last time that year, because my dark-skinned Imsho didn't want to tell me that he had that deadly illness. That's how these people are, the Gypsies. When they are joyful and celebrating, they invite everyone. When they are sick and suffering, they prefer to be alone. They think, perhaps, that there are people whose lives are harder than theirs, so it's better not to make them sad...

Translated by Adela Jušić

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