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Through the Snowstorm

Petar Kočić

It was already getting dark, and yet they could not sell their cow. Hardly had anyone even looked at them, let alone asked for the price. Not even to joke about it!

The old man was deeply saddened by this, and felt a great deal of pain, and had he any tears left, he would have cried bitterly and despairingly. But, being exhausted and worn out by a long period of misery and wretchedness, he sighed heavily and started on his way from the market, his body bent, pulling a small pregnant cow on a lead, whose fair hair, small umber horns and round udder, full of milk, between its pale and fleshy legs, could hardly be recognized on a dry and severe winter evening. A child rose up and followed the cow — he could not have been older than twelve — firmly holding a small hazel branch in his frozen hands.

The old man was stepping with his back bent, heavily setting one foot after the other. His hair was completely white, he was bony and sturdy like a block cut out from those huge and constantly dark and gloomy mountains that mutely rose above his village. Some hardened frost built up on his bare, hairy and broad chest. He raised his bristled, thick eyebrows, below which, as if from a distance, the tired and nearly numb eyes peeked dimly, and he trudged and headed forward along the road.

The dry winter was harsh. It struck from everywhere, stinging, almost biting, with sharp and bitter cold. Hardened snow crunched and bent, whining lamentably under their feet.

— No one offered anything, Vujo! – the old man flinched and turned to the child.

The little boy kept silent and walked, tired and weary, after the cow. Everything on him bristled and stiffened from the dry frost. The frail, soft hair on his face stood on end, and his hands turned first red, then black due to the harsh winter.

When they were in the middle of the čaršija [1] it started snowing more heavily. One after another, the snowflakes came down as if on purpose, first with effort, as if struggling and straining, and then more easily, frequently and densely.

— Nobody even made a joke about the price, and the night caught us here in the čaršija! — the old man shook away his thoughts once again, while something painful and despairing trembled in his words, eyes and face.

It was getting darker and darker, and something seemed to be coming up from afar secretly and deceptively, humming hollowly.

The snowflakes were crossing paths in the flight, breaking one against the other, and rustling in the slight and subtle noise above their heads, and the three of them, the old man first, the cow after him, and Vujo after the cow, were moving slowly and steadily through the čaršija, foot after foot.

The old man became overpowered by his thoughts, the grave and dark ones, shaking his soul to the core.

Once he was the most prosperous and handsome landowner in the whole of Krajina. In the faraway villages, towns and cities, in taverns and inns, along the imperial roads from Bosnia to Constantinople, people used to talk and retell of the allure and richness of Relja Knežević from Zmijanje.

There were both great strength and manpower in his household. Some forty or fifty younger family members worked on his ploughland, from which, in the hot summer sunshine through the mountain azure, some trembling and panting voices echoed and broke off, and a great and swelling strength brimmed and burst beneath their warmed shirts and silver necklaces. And the song of work and ardent youth, the song of effervescent and boundless mountain strength along with the piercing swish of scythes and sickles echoed powerfully and widely from the hot trembling of white plump throats below the blue mountain peaks.

In the early dawn the countless livestock used to leave Relja's pens. In no time a flock of sheep would cover the field below the mountain and turn it white. In long lines, the cattle would depart into the mountain to graze, and come back to rest close to the water at noon. Jablan the bull, who was well known all over Zmijanje for his praised bravery, would proudly separate himself from the cattle, move ahead, and then roar mightily, booming, digging and insistently spreading the soil with his horns.

Relja himself seemed to grow and spread, too. His chest was straining to burst, and his heart was filled and overflowed with some sweet, wondrous warmth.

All that was his progressed, flourished, multiplied and spread indefinitely. Looking at his cattle and estate, he would often feel some hidden, unclear chill and premonition… » This has been spilling out for a long time… overflowing! « – he would whisper, shaking and suppressing that horrendous and bodeful thought which crossed his mind then.

And everything gave birth, grew, progressed; the women bore twins, the sheep bore twins, the goats bore twins, and a basket of seeds brought tenfold harvests. The pens covered half of the field, and the barns clustered on a plain like a little town.

The word about Relja was spreading. » Why do you boast so much? Why are you flying so high, as if you have the wealth of Relja Knežević! « — could be heard when somebody started being proud of something. At church and monastery gatherings, at baptisms and weddings, a godfather would show his honour and respect to a godfather, or a friend to a friend: » Thank you, my godfather, thank you, my friend!

You honoured me with this glass. May the Lord honour you with descendants and abundance. May you have bumper crops, full harvests and may your bulls roar like those of Relja Knežević! «

Pashas would also seek accomodation at his place. Black-cloaked Greek bishops with high kamilavkas [2] like copper pots, with endlessly long, wide sleeves and ravenous hearts for yellow aspers [3], would come to him and bless his home and his pens. And he gave them a lot, too much, without counting, without hesitating, by the handful. The rams from Relja's pens were sent to the vizier himself for the Kurban-Bayram Feast. He even received some written command from the Emperor. For what reason, he did not know, nor was he willing to ask anybody about it. 'This is not what I need, and it's not right for the Emperor's letter to drag around in the house!', he said and burnt the written command. All the male members of his family were armed to the teeth. He did not even think of asking for weapon licenses, nor did anybody think of questioning him about it. The arms were frequently collected from the population, but there had never been any zaptiah [4] visiting Relja's place, not even for a cup of coffee. As if they were holding themselves back.

He was recognized and welcomed everywhere. But to be a local chief or to sit in the Emperor's assembly was not his choice regardless of the reward, nor did he permit it to anybody belonging to his family, although it was well known that his ancestors were judges at Zmijanje, and that he was a descendant of Rajko from Zmijanje who was sung about in epics.

— If I cannot be a chief as my forefathers were, I refuse to be a Turkish Alaibey [5]— Relja used to say proudly.

He detested the čaršija folk and rarely would he come downtown. Three times a year: when he was supposed to pay land taxes, to load up on drinks for Name Days, and in spring when he escorted his sheep from their winter period stay to lambing barns in the lower plains.

It was known a few days in advance when the herd of Relja Knežević from Zmijanje was to pass through the town. The čaršija folk would gather around the street corners, and the Turks would sit on their sofas to observe and enjoy the hardy and white livestock. When the bell of a massive bellwether, with its prolonged sound, announced that the front sheep were out of the town, the ones in the back were entering the čaršija, shimmering in the full light of the thin, spring sun, and after them Relja, riding proudly on a white muzzle bay, dressed in the dark blue coat and red, scarlet breeches, with a red scarf around his head and the large, silver buttons on his chest, fully armed. Both the Turks and the čaršija people admired and wondered at Relja's allure and wealth, and the delight and warmth arose within his soul, bright and soft as an unknown song without words that rose from the heated soil and in its smell bonded with the smiling spring sky.

The pens overspilled, the barn windows brimmed, the house became overabundant with his healthy, strong and sturdy children and the purse, full of white and yellow aspers, tightened up considerably around Relja's belt.

And, on one ominous day — he recalled it very well — the hot mountain winds picked up suddenly, and started chasing and whirling the warm dust, spreading it across his pens, barns and ploughland. In those days the livestock was bleating in the pens during the night. The pen fence was creaking painfully, as if wailing, the shepherds were dreaming gloomy and strange dreams, and the dogs around the pens were howling somehow sadly, too sadly and yowling like hungry wolves in the mountains in the dead of the winter.

And the whisper started by the word of mouth:

— Relja's white muzzle bay turned up dead in the pond.

— The three heifers that had just calved, the cowhands found dead in the pen in the morning.

The carrion eagles, those large mountain eagles with bare necks and long, sharpened beaks started flying around Relja's barns and descending towards the pens. Black crows and ravens in long and large flocks croaked ominously and evilly above his hamlet and estate, falling upon the fattened carrion with their dismal shrieks, and he was pacing back and forth, all mournful and anguished, as if headless, crushed and ruined by the sudden woe and sorrow. Gloom, apprehension and a feverish, profound shiver were quivering on his cheeks and the cheeks of his youngsters. Every youngster dreaded and felt that something invisible was creeping in and spreading insidiously across the pens and barns, bringing down mercilessly all the living creatures before it.

— Even Jablan was found dead among all the carrion in the pen! — a whisper spread again, a painful and faint whisper from mouth to mouth, and from the pen fields there could be heard the despairing wail of little Djoko for his Jabo. And all the youngsters started crying and wailing. Relja was also greatly saddened, but he collected himself, frowned, then just sighed dryly, and as if getting a little carried away, he shouted:

— Don't cry, don't moan, my children! No crying and no moaning will mourn the end of my power and my splendour. Sing, sing, my children! Jovan, Milan, Vida, Jagoda, my children! Don't cry, don't weep, but hug each other and sing the song out of deep grief, the one that will make both the wood and stone cry, let alone a man's heart! Sing that song, that great song, holding each other, and lament the fall of my strength and splendour!

Little Djoko was wailing all day long recounting Jablan's battles, and toward evening he fell asleep on the dead body of his bull that nobody could separate him from. He fell asleep never to wake up. His small heart, full of boundless child's love, broke due to the immense sorrow for his Jabo.

And the first stretcher was borne away from Relja's house.

Thereafter, the first youngsters started getting ill and falling like freshly cut grain after the reaper. The stretchers kept being carried, the graves were lining up and the hoarse female throats were chanting mournful songs. The men, bareheaded and disheveled, without their red belts and blue coats, and their large silver buttons, hit by sudden and insidious misfortune, were persistently silent, with no tears or cries, but

only saddened, broken, devastated…

And the graves were lining up, small and big ones, male and female. Horrendous to look at! Then there came ragged beggars and lunatics from faraway villages; the graveyard was full of them. They also sensed, smelled, like those voracious mountain eagles feeding on carrion, grabbing the drinks and greasy food that was brought to the graveyard. Dressed in some new, fragrant clothes, which were left behind by the deceased, they would pour out the drinks over the graves, eating greedily large, greasy bites, snarling at each other like dogs. Crazy Šele put on the complete new clothes of Markan, Relja's late brother, and jumped madly across the graves, mumbling so loudly as to deafen the ears.

— Ay! Iy! Uy! How does my head suit me?… Am I not strong and seemly, let me not demonstrate it, like any other lad?… Ay! Iy! Uy!… Uyuyuy!…

Mad Krstan, dressed in the best clothes of deceased Luka, Relja's nephew, sat on a stone above a grave, leaned back on both his hands, and talked loudly and seriously to himself, with a voice seeming to come from great depths:

— The sun has to set on one before it rises for another. This should not be the case, though, but people want it that way, so let it be. I am not a human being, I am crazy Krstan, and to this crazy Krstan, it is, if you feel like it, my crazy Krstan, even pleasing. Isn't it so?

— Yes, brother Krstan, that is true— he was changing his voice and answering to himself…

— If this were someone smart talking, brother Krstan, these would be doomy and bloody words, but it can't set on me nor rise for people, because I'm not a man but crazy Krstan. Isn't it true, brother Krstan?

— That's true, brother, true…

And crazy Krstan kept on mumbling and thinking things through, while the dreadful and horrendous wail and lament sprang up and broke away around him. Suddenly he flinched, his eyes bulged, he opened his mouth, tore off frantically all the clothes and ran off from the graveyard naked, and the other lunatics followed him with loud, deafening scream and squeal. The only one who remained was notorious Kalasura, who, ever since she was a child, wandered the villages, going from house to house and telling people that she was looking for something. For several days, from dawn to dusk, she had kept moaning and wailing at the graveyard, not eating or drinking anything. She was offered some food and drinks, given the clothes that were left behind after the dead, but she refused them all, not wanting to accept them, and continued to moan incessantly. The bereaved family and the gravediggers felt increasingly dire and menacing foreboding. They kept chasing her out of the graveyard, but she fought persistently, not wanting to leave the place:

— Don't touch me, I'm mournful, I have a tender and affectionate heart. These're my children, my sisters and my brothers. I want to mourn their deaths. Nobody'll do that as sincerely as I will…

She was chased out of the graveyard, but she kept coming back and during the night, when everything calmed down and became quiet, she moaned and lamented, walking from grave to grave, and upsetting deeply the souls of the appalled youngsters.

Relja, with his posture upright, his face sombre like some hardened sinner, and his gaze blank and stiff, was walking back and forth, whispering and murmuring dryly and feebly:

— What strange luck and black fate I have!… My God, my God, why are you so cruel! Why have you ruined my estate and destroyed my kingdom? Haven't I supported monasteries and churches, haven't I helped the lame and crippled; haven't I worshipped your name and lit candles to your glory?

Then suddenly he would flinch, stagger, put his arms akimbo and turn to his pens from which the menacing screech of eagles and chilling croak of crows and ravens resonated, and he would say half crying:

— Oh, you black crows and eagles, feed, feast and drink up my blood and my power! Strengthen your wings, then rise high to the vault of heaven and fly across the country and world. Let your black screech and moan announce my untold misery, the death of my kingdom and my splendour all over the world!

And everything died, lay in the grave, except him and a few young women who soon were married off; and everything came apart, vanished, everything disappeared but the hard and rocky soil, with nobody to plough and cultivate it any longer, and the empty and stale barns, from which one could smell the stench of death and bleakness. The pen fence was partly carried off by people, and the other part dried and rotted away. The rest was taken by invisible misery, pillaged by birds in the sky and spread by beggars and delusional lunatics. And he remained alone with his soul hardened by frost and ice, and as hard as a stone, as black as a burnt stump in the mountains, he came down above the hearth in which the fire was dying down…

Most of his time he languished in and around the house, and rarely did he go out to meet people who looked at him as a curiosity, a scarecrow. He was hurt deeply by that fearful, unclear and secret gossip whispering whenever he appeared among the people who did not know him – only when they whispered something. He avoided feasts and mass gatherings at churches and monasteries like the plague, because there was a lot of talk of his terrible loss and misfortune. Whenever he thought about those gatherings and feasts, his soul would suffer inwardly, as there were no more of those large buttons shining on the slim and imposing Knežević people, no more of their flintlocks rattling, no scarves dazzling white in their flutter, nor the long necklaces tinkling softly and rhythmically on the plump and beautiful women and girls who would breathlessly pass around the gifts to the godfathers and friends, going from one table to another at the mass gatherings. Quiet became those vibrant and pompous words that used to echo from end to end at gatherings, feeding his soul with sweet warmth: ›› Thank you for your gifts and endowments, your glorious kingdom! ‹‹

At gatherings and feasts, his power and grandeur had spread widely and forcefully. It was all gone, everything died, withered, vanished, never to come back. Only those big,

pompous words sank deeply into his soul and lived with him and he with them. He was too easily offended. Hearing a single word about his needs and poverty was enough.

— Poor, miserable Relja!

— Leave me alone, my brothers! My destiny's black, my misery's immense, and my misfortune's larger than life. I'm not miserable Relja! I'm a king with no kingdom…an emperor with no empire! — he would shout desperately, trembling, and then he would start sobbing so loudly that it was sad to look at him.

To each of his family members, younger as well as older, Relja had erected a headstone in the very first days, and then he built a solid fence around the graveyard, all by himself, with no one to help him.

He kept himself clean and neat, doing both washing and patching his clothes on his own. Sometimes, on Sundays and holidays, he would put on his festive clothes, but he looked somehow sad and inappropriate in them, feeling ashamed of himself.

— Relja, Relja, these clothes don't suit you anymore! — he would tell to himself, taking them off right away.

Some of his distributed livestock, which he had previously given away and rented, he brought back home to seed and reproduce, but he did not succeed. Something once lost, can never return!

He brought back to his household little Vujo, his nephew and the only male, after his mother had died.

When it all got out of hand, when he became completely impoverished and destitute, he started going down to the plains, where nobody knew who he was, and worked there for wages.

In that way, during the summer, he would earn some money for the winter period to feed himself and light candles on his youngsters' graves. It cost him a lot, but on every All Souls' Day, both in winter and in autumn, he used to light candles, organize memorial feasts and burning of incense.

— But, have you seen, Vujo, how cold and merciless people are today: nobody even made a joke about the price, and All Souls' Day is tomorrow! — began Relja again, as if coming back from a dream, when they got some distance away from the čaršija, and started climbing the hill. — Tomorrow the graves and headstones of our children will be in the dark, not lit. I have no means to commemorate my deceased youngsters, nor to offer some presents to the lame and crippled for the family souls to rest in peace…What Relja Knežević has come to! — he sighed with bitter recrimination.

Vujo did not hear or comprehend him, but was all trembling, his teeth chattering from the bitter cold which swept over him from all directions, and penetrated deep to the bone.

The snow was rustling and flapping softly above their heads, making a shrill, creaking

sound under their feet, and around them the ghastly white winter night seemed to drag on sadly, voiceless and breathless.

When at Dobrnjsko Polje they turned from the main road toward their village, the moon was descending and the feeble starlight was hardly noticeable amid the immense whiteness.

It started snowing more densely when they reached the mountain that was to be crossed in order to go down to the fields.

The cow started hesitating and holding back.

— Are you coming, my kin? — the old man turned, and pulled harder on the lead.

— I'm coming, I'm coming – the little boy could barely utter the words.

— Are you cold?

— Yes — answered Vujo with an effort, hardly making a sound.

Relja took his scarf off, shook off the snow from it, and wrapped it tightly around little Vujo's head and ears.

— Warm up a bit, for God's sake, it seems to me that a big snowstorm is ahead…Throw away that little branch, my dear, and put your hands in your bosom… Here, take my cloak, and wrap yourself up well – the old man said, took off his cloak, and was left half-naked.

— What about you, Uncle?

— My child, I don't need anything. Nothing can scare me, neither the snowstorm, nor the wind, nor the cold… Great snowstorms've hit and chased me, but they could do nothing to me…

Under heavy frost, the tall spruce trees started to sway lightly and bend, creaking and casting off handfuls of snow.

Relja felt a sudden sharp pain in his heart. He just shook his head, and continued to walk, whispering, full of foreboding:

— There's a blizzard ahead. I know Zmijanje, I know the nature of our mountains and our ill-fated, rocky country: everything snarls slyly and insidiously!

Suddenly, the tops of the fir and spruce trees shivered unexpectedly more strongly and forcefully, and a heavy and loud blizzard sprang up as if the whole mountain were shaking from its foundations.

It darkened in front of their eyes. The snow started covering them harder and harder, the storm blocked their breathing, and yet they pushed forward, staggering and swaying.

— Are you coming, my kin?

— I am, I am — the child barely answered, trembling more from fear than from the cold.

— Come on, my kin, come on … Oh, what a dreadful night and blizzard, — I am going to lose this poor orphaned child! — the old man was whispering and making his way through the storm with all his strength.

Worn down and exhausted from the heavy strain and sharp lashing of angry winds, they stopped to take a breath and recuperate, listening with immense fear and anxiety to the wild night blasts howling and shaking, one would say, heaven and earth, breaking and smashing everything ahead.

From time to time, the storm and the winds abated and calmed . Nothing could be heard, nothing could be felt but their shallow, weary breathing, and that gradual, quivery dying out of the wind that trembled and slid on the whiteness of the snow around them.

— Can we go on, Vujo? — the old man called out after taking a rest, tightening his grip on the lead in his hands.

— We can, we can! — Vujo answered, and his voice trembled with that insane, ardent mountain defiance which, even with a little child, the more strenous the effort is, the more fiercely it awakens and flames.

— Forward, Vujo! — Relja shouted, collecting all his strength as if he was going to wrestle with somebody.

In a moment, all of a sudden, the snowstorm broke out again. The fir trees were swinging from the very root, creeking painfully, and the winds, in their furious rage and howl, were tearing apart and scattering away the branches and the frost from their tops in all directions.

They crossed the mountain, and came down into the field. The roads had been covered by snow, there was no single path, not a sign, nor any breath of life, and the storm was constantly raging and roaring.

They hit the tombs of the people lost in storms, which were numerous, innumerable at Zmijanje, and Relja felt that they had got lost and shouted as loud as he could:

— Help! The snowstorm has swept us away! We’ve lost our way!… We’ve lost our way!…

The whirwinds embraced and seized his weakened voice, and, as if avenging, frantically tore it apart and dispersed it in the enraged and hysterical night of Zmijanje. When the storm, for one little moment, calmed down, he shouted again:

— Help! We’ve lost our way… we’ve lost our way! The snowstorm has swept us away!

In front of the houses of the Nakomičić family, who have always rescued straying

travelers and visitors crossing Zmijanje in winter, there leapt a wide and huge flame of burning straw, and a loud, long shout was heard:

— To the right, brothers, to the right!

Relja exerted all of his strength and ran across the snowdrifts towards the flame, which was going high up into the sky, bending under the gusts of wind, from one side to the other.

Vujo also lunged forward, struggling desperately himself as well, but he grew more and more tired, worn down, his strength was leaving and failing him, and that little ignited defiance started to exhaust, and die out.

— Are you coming, my kin?

— I am, I am, the child was answering weakly, stumbling, falling down and getting up, and then suddenly a powerful blast whooshed, and a heavy snowdrift hit him on his chest. Vujo cried out, and collapsed without strength.

— Are you coming, my kin? — Relja was shouting from afar.

— I am, I am — the old man thought he had heard the child's voice.

— Come on, my kin, come on! — Relja was mumbling, pushing defiantly his bare, disheveled chest against the unmerciful and overpowering whipping of the angry mountain whirls.

Some immense power possessed him, with all his nerves tense. He was staggering, falling down, getting up, swaying, with a gruesome feeling that he was fighting against something horrendous, invisible, which was stifling and strangling him, overpowering his stamina and breathing.

— Are you coming, my kin? — he shouted again, and turned around unconsciously, but there was neither the cow, nor Vujo behind.

He held only a piece of the lead in his hand. The winds had torn off and blown away his cap, and his shoes had fallen off somewhere in the snow. He was barefoot and almost naked. He gathered all his strength, and staggering across the snowdrifts, ran back.

— Vujo! — he cried out in despair, and fell by the little boy from whom the winds had dispersed the snow.

Somewhere in the distance, in the disturbed winter night, the chilly howling of hungry wolves could be heard from the mountain tops, merging with the roar and rush of the wild winds that were shaking the ground, like invisible giants carrying large snowdrifts on their strong chests, and tossing them angrily in all directions…The winds were whistling, whistling and roaring, and the half-dead lips were kissing and passing away in a mellow death…

Link to the Zmijanje Embroidery

Petar Kočić 1877-1916

Translated by Ana Stanović Obradović and Mirjana Savić Obradović.

Translation dedicated to Milan Savić, our Father and Grandfather, born at Crni Vrh.

Notes

1. In Turkish *çarşı*, business and cultural district, downtown. ↩
2. Clerical headdress worn by Orthodox Christian and Eastern Catholic monks. ↩
3. Former Turkish monetary unit ↩
4. Police officer ↩
5. Colonel of the feudal cavalry ↩

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