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A Garden the Color of Mallow

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Men are, typically, bad at telling colors apart. Still, it would have been hard to find someone as clueless in the matter of colors as my grandfather. His spectrum boiled down to four basic colors, and as for all the rest—either they did not exist or (if the old guy was in a good mood) they were reduced, in short order, to a highly unspecific description: “It’s yellow, and also it isn’t yellow but rather something like it. It both is and isn’t.” Since the majority of the creatures and objects in this colorful world of ours are “is-andisn’t”- colored, many misunderstandings and difficulties arose with my grandfather. At one of the most pleasant times of year, nearly overnight, in the garden by our house the mallow bushes would burst into bloom and give off their delightful flashes behind the darkened, spear-shaped fence posts. In the quiet, sunny mornings their glow was so trusting and so sweet that not even Grandfather’s eye could avoid it, and he would grumble good-naturedly as he puttered around in the yard. “Well, look at that. The whole garden’s looking as blue as indigo.” To be sure, it was true that mallow flowers nowhere held even a trace of blue color, but if Grandfather said it was blue, then it had to be blue, and—that’s it! The same kind of thing would happen some years when Grandfather asserted that this same garden was red, and so for that season this was the rule: the mallow had to remain red. Grandfather had a relative named Sava Damjanović who had once been a poacher of other people’s sheep and goats. Now, with his advancing age, he had become a drunkard and a tongue-wagger, and he knew how to get my dear grandfather’s goat without even trying. As Grandfather was talking, Sava interrupted him in that deadpan way of his: “So, how do you come up with red for foxes, when they’re yellow?” “Ach. Yellow?” Grandfather gaped at him. “Your nose is what’s yellow.” With a look of concern, Sava fingered his pinkish toad of a nose and then he shouted: “Red! The whole world, from here to Bihać, knows that foxes are yellow, but you—” Sava’s world extended as far as Bihać because the old man had been thrown in the clink there a few times, but not even distances on that scale could make my grandfather change his mind. “Harumph. Bihać! And there’ve been other people who spent time in the “Tower of Bihac” and they don’t claim that foxes are yellow. It’d be better for you to shut up and drink my rakija, and don’t go corrupting my grandchildren.” But the grandkids, the three of us, piled as we were into a corner near the old men, waited for Sava to start up again with his rustler’s tales of adventure. The argument about color did not interest us in the least; a fox is a fox, whatever color it is. I myself was to get into trouble on account of Grandfather’s pig-headedness on this issue of color. It happened in the first place I went when I left home; it was in the first grade at my elementary school. At some

point along about the middle of the year, our teacher, a woman, was telling us about wolves. This is how they live, and this is what they eat, etc., until suddenly she tossed out the question: “Children, who knows what color wolves are?” I was the first one to raise my hand. “All right, then…Branko is going to tell us.” “Wolves are green!” I blurted out proudly. The teacher was taken aback. She arched her eyebrows in a quizzical look. “Where in God’s name, child, did you learn that?” “My grandfather says so,” I said, foolishly, but with great confidence. “That is not correct. Wolves are not green.” “It’s true! They are green!” Now, unexpectedly, I was showing a stubborn streak. I was revealing myself to be the true grandson of my honorable grandfather, Rade. The teacher drew very close to me, let her angry eyes bore straight into me, and grabbed me by the ear. “You go tell your wise old grandfather that that is untrue. Wolves are gray. Gray: remember that.” Almost in tears, I dragged myself home from school that day and, sniffling, I told my grandfather everything that had happened in school. I had no inkling of the kind of stir this would cause. “What? In front of the class, she yanks my grandson around, my favorite grandson, and a respected older man she mockingly calls ‘wise’—that is to say, a moron? So this is what we’ve come to? And to say to boot that a wolf isn’t anything approaching green at all. Harumph. Things cannot go on this way!” The next day my grandfather, very hot under the collar, arrived with me at the schoolyard and, right in front of all the other brats, blew up at the schoolteacher. “And is it you, you little whippersnapper, who knows better than I what a wolf is like? It isn’t green, eh? Oh, watch out for this one! I was born with wolves and grew up with them. I’ve been through a lifetime of hard times with them, and this woman here…I ought to whack your behind with this cane and teach you some sense for once…” My grandfather kept yelling his head off. The teacher burst into tears. And we schoolchildren derived one benefit from all of this: that day there would be no lessons. The very next morning the gendarmes led Grandfather away. The old man had to spend seven days in the county lock-up, and on the evening of his return, pale and taciturn, he wagged his finger menacingly at me: “And you, loud-mouth, just let me catch wind of you babbling like you know what’s what—and I’ll show you! Wolves are green, ha ha ha! What does it matter to you, what a wolf is like?” “But when she asked me…” “She asked you, eh? You have to hold your tongue, and that’s it!” The following spring, which was stormy and wet, the mallow bushes in our garden bloomed like never before, but it was like the old man didn’t notice anything. All the jabs by his tireless kinsman Sava didn’t help, either; Grandfather was blind to the colors and the flowers of this world. It makes you sad to think of it. Almost half a century has passed since those unhappy days, and Grandfather has long since been gone from this world. But to this day I am still not one hundred percent sure sure what color the mallow is. I only know that in spring, behind our blackened garden fence, something lovely begins to radiate, luminous and bright. It brings tears to your eyes, although you never know what’s causing that ache or what it is you’ve lost.

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