

Gordana Kuc was born in Belgrade. She graduated English Language and Literature at the University of Belgrade and Hunter College in New York. She worked at the American Embassy in Belgrade as the English Teaching Advisor, at the AYUSA International as a Special Consultant, and at the SOROS Foundation as Consultant for English Teaching in Eastern Europe and Humanitarian Aid for Former Yugoslav Republics. She lives in Belgrade and New York.

In the life of the Salom family, Kuic offers her readers a synthesis of archetypal characters of Balkan reality.

P. Lazarevic, literary critic, *Odjek*, Sarajevo, 1987

Kuic has courageously plunged into an unusual topic, one which has not been touched upon in Yugoslav literature so far. In her attempt to show the destiny of a Sephardic Jewish family living on Bosnian soil, in Sarajevo, the author has gone much further: she shows the inevitability of historical developments; she paints history as a monster who continually returns in cycles, but also as a joker who readily changes the colours of its mosaic pieces.

D. Albahari, writer, Belgrade,

It is not Jewish, it is not Yugoslav. It is about all people, and it is about the importance of family, told in a tough-minded way by a woman whose ancestors were survivors. *The Scent of Rain in the Balkans* is universal.

Jeanne Smoot, Professor of Comparative Literature, University of North Carolina, U.S.A.,

... an exciting chronicle of a world apart, recounted in a readable, fluent, natural style, but not lacking in thoroughness... One of those novels that the reader cannot put down.

I. Mandic, literary critic *NIN*, 1987

THE SCENT OF RAIN IN THE BALKANS

a novel

by

Gordana Kuic

Translated into English by Richard Williams
Rewritten by the author

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The Ballad About Bohoreta

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To mother and father

Il faut que le roman raconte.
Stendhal

CHAPTER ONE

SARAJEVO, 1914

"Mama! I want a new frock!" wailed Riki for the twentieth time that day, in her small childish voice. Every inch of her little face reflected determination. She had tried every trick in the book. She had pouted, whined, sulked, thrown a tantrum, flattered, cried, stamped her feet and tossed her dark curls. But nothing had worked. She had even pretended to be ill again. Still no reaction. Under normal circumstances Mama Esther could never have coped with this barrage of tricks from her youngest daughter without giving in, but this time she really didn't have the money to buy material for a new dress.

Papa Leon was not exactly a hard worker, so he didn't earn very much. His attempts to succeed in the numerous businesses he involved himself in were rarely more than half-hearted: and he had his wife Esther and seven children to feed, five daughters and two sons.

"I simply must have a new frock when Franz Ferdinand comes!" persisted Riki, as if the Austrian Archduke were coming to Sarajevo just to see her. "I'm going to go right up to him and ask him for a bun, so there! Bet you he gets them baked fresh every day!"

Blanki, who was four years older than her sister but just as tiny, kept quiet as usual. She was thinking how Riki always got what she wanted. First of all, because she demanded it, loudly -- for how could you ever get anything if no one knew you needed it? And secondly, because she was so persistent and she pestered the entire family until they did as she wished just so that she would leave them in peace.

Riki and Blanki were the best of friends, but they couldn't have been more different. For instance, Mama Esther, who was absent-minded, hardly ever set foot outside the house. Every hour or so, she'd send one of the children out on grocery errands. If she sent Riki, her mission was bound to end up in a muddle, for Riki would head straight for the first sweet shop, buy herself an ice-cream or some dates, maybe even a pastry, then meet other children and start playing, completely forgetting why she had gone out in the first place; but whenever Blanki went shopping, she'd make a beeline for the store and return immediately with her purchases. She knew that Mama had to be obeyed, even though she had been asking herself recently whether maybe Riki wasn't the smarter of the two, since things always turned out so much better for her.

It was just the same with sweets. Blanki would never dream of asking one of her older sisters to take her to a sweet shop, but after a while she had worked out a scheme. All she had to do was to say 'sweets' to Riki, and her little sister would cling to Nina's or Clara's skirts until one of them, or sometimes both, would give her some money. That was why Blanki concluded that even if there was nothing she could do about her own shyness, she could at least exploit the talents of her enterprising younger sister.

The girls never asked their mother for money. Her main role was to explain what they didn't understand, then to feed them and serve as a go-between in their dealings with their father, and, apart from that, to look after them

if they were sick. Mama always had a lot of work to do, but as she bustled around the kitchen, Blanki would keep bothering her with questions to which Esther responded with inexhaustible patience. Blanki was convinced Mama knew everything. She told her about the Egyptian Pharaoh, Rameses II, who had been forced to release the Jews from their slavery thousands of years ago, long before Blanki and Mama Esther herself had even been thought of, and even before white-haired Grandpa Solomon whom they called *nonu* Liacho, had graced the world with his presence. And the man who was the leader of the Jews then was Moses, and he had called all his people together and told all the women to make haste and bake loaves with nothing but flour and water -- like the bread Blanki ate at Passover, which they called *boyu*, and so they were led out of the land of bondage to the Promised Land. Blanki could recite by heart all the Ten Commandments that Moses had given to the Jews when they had arrived at Mount Sinai. But then Mama would come to the strangest part of the story: their ancestors had never spoken Ladino, as all of her family did now, but Hebrew, which neither Blanki nor any of the others could understand at all, except for the most learned Rabbis. Papa Leon would sometimes throw in a few Biblical quotations in the Holy Tongue but no one in the family would understand them, except Buka who could even say phrases from the Talmud. Then came all the Hebrew kings: Saul, and David, and Solomon, who was the wisest one of all, and who had built the first Temple, just like the one Papa went to at Yom Kippur.

Blanki adored stories but it was often a struggle to get someone to tell her one. Most of the stories came Riki's way, for she was frail: she was Mama's fragile *jugatona*, her little scamp, her special pet. Riki sometimes even got the best bits of the watermelon, or 'the heart' as they called it, a delicacy Blanki had never tasted. And the fairy tales which were spun to lull Riki to sleep! Blanki thought it unfortunate that she was usually brimming over with good health. If she ever felt ill, she kept it to herself because she was too timid to complain, until Mama Esther would say anxiously: "*Fijika mia, tienis temperatura!* My little one, you've got a fever! Why didn't you tell me?" Then she would be treated to legends and tales without having to ask. Thus she even looked forward to being ill. When she had mumps, Mama Esther told her about a horrid man called Torquemada, who had tried to force all the Jews in Spain to start worshipping a different God. "How many Gods are there, Mama?" she asked then, seriously worried. Mama reassured her that there was only one. Since the Jews refused, Mama continued in her melodious voice, they were driven out of Spain, where they had lived happily and luxuriously for one thousand years. As a result of this story, Blanki named her ugliest doll, the one she had pieced together with her own hands, Torquemaditta. Although she knew that Queen Isabelle and King Ferdinand of Spain were enemies of the Jews, she imagined herself as a beautiful princess dressed in pink muslin, who was rescued by a courageous Spanish knight on a white horse and carried off to the far corners of the world. The two of them would retrace the same long winding routes as her grandmothers had travelled before they had come to the Ottoman Empire, all the way to Bosnia, where they had been welcomed and allowed to settle. In Bosnia the rulers were Turks, but they had left the newcomers to their own devices and

treated them well. The Jews had built their first houses right on the spot where the Temple now stood and where Riki liked best to play.

There was also a fascinating legend about Juan Garcia Galan de Olivares, the notorious Spanish Inquisitor who was said to be one of the Salom ancestors, but Mama Esther never wanted to explain the intricate details of how a Catholic dignitary could have been the forefather of a Jewish family. After refusing to talk about it she'd always add that clarity came with age.

Yes, Mama's role was cooking and telling stories. The eldest sister Laura, whom they called Buka or Bohoreta, which was the usual nickname for the first born children, had the job of teaching the youngest ones to read and write. Nina's and Clara's only responsibility was once every now and then to give them a copper *kreutzer* with the Austrian Monarch's head on one side and the Hapsburg coat of arms on the other. As for Papa Leon, all he had to do was punish them if they were naughty and intone songs in his rich voice while they all sat around the enormous carved table and waited impatiently for a pause between the prayers, so that they could chew an apple or a fig, a walnut or two, or some dried fruit.

Blanki took care of little Elias and Papa Leon was in charge of Isaac, nicknamed 'Athlete', but he was already grown up anyway and, being the eldest son, the world was his oyster. Only Riki, who was everyone's darling, was looked after by all of them. There was order in the Salom family, a chain of command. And so there should be, thought Blanki. Otherwise baby Elias would start bossing Grandpa Liacho, and Mama would do the children's bidding. With no order, there would be no family, and without family the world would collapse. So, although to be obedient sometimes irked her, Blanki liked the fact that everyone in the household knew who was who.

"Mama, which of us do you love most?" asked Blanki, dunking a piece of bread into the oily, sweet-sour pickle brine they called *mindrugus*, which was a favourite among the children for its delicious flavour and among the grown-ups because it was cheap.

"Well, *fijika mia*, my girl-child, how many of us are there?"

Blanki started counting up on her fingers, murmuring, "Me, Elias, Riki, Nina, Buka, Athlete, Clara, Mama, Papa, Grandpa... Ten altogether!" she said triumphantly.

"And how many fingers do you have?"

"*Dies*, Mama, ten."

"*Buenu*, Blanki. And what do you think: which one of these fingers would you like to have cut off?"

After pondering this problem for a moment with both hands splayed in front of her nose, Blanki answered, "Not one of them! *Ningunu!*"

"There, you see? That's how it is with all of you. You're equally precious to me, and I would never give up a single one of you... When you were very little and we were still living in Istanbul, there was a good, kind, rich man, a friend of your Papa's, who wanted to adopt you. When he came to our house for the first time, he thought you were a doll because you sat there so quiet and well-behaved in the corner of the *minderluk*. Only when you blinked your pretty eyes,

he realized you were a living lovely girl and he took such a fancy to you that he said he'd give me a big bag of gold if I would let him have you... Ah, we were so poor at the time we had only one small fish a day for the whole lot of us, but I didn't give you away. I'd never let you go, ever, not for all the gold in the world! When he saw how much I loved you, he gave me some money anyway, without telling your Papa." Mama Esther's blue eyes glistened with tears. "What would I ever do without you, my little angel?"

Happier and prouder than ever, and emboldened by the story, Blanki continued with her questions. "So why do you have blue eyes and blonde hair, Mama, when all the rest of us have dark eyes and dark hair? I'd much rather be like you!"

"Now then, *alegria mia*, joy of my life," said Esther, "you know very well why. How many times have I told you already?"

"But I don't know! I don't!" fibbed Blanki who wanted to hear her favourite story again.

"All right, this is how it was," began Esther in her velvety voice, the succulent Spanish words, sweet as ripe grapes, rolling from her lips. "Once upon a time, your Great-grandpa Liacho lived in Vienna. He was tall and handsome and fair-haired and he married a beautiful lady who was blonde, too. They lived in a huge mansion with towers, and lots and lots of rooms and hallways. And do you know, in the garden there was a lake with swans gliding on it... It was always spring there, because whenever it got chilly outside, they would go inside, and there'd be huge fires blazing in the fireplaces in all the rooms... They were never cold like we are here. And there was so much light from the candles that the sun seemed to be shining all the time. Every room was decorated with flowers: chrysanthemums, aging hydrangea, lilacs, and violets. So, during the winter they made the house into a garden, and in the summer they lived outdoors, in the real garden... They had seven daughters, and every daughter had a maid of her own. As time went by, the girls grew up and soon they were old enough to get married, so bridegrooms had to be found. But, there were very few Sephardic Jews in that part of the world, and even fewer who spoke Ladino, like us. Of course, Grandpa wouldn't hear of asking any of the young men from the available Sephardic families, because they were all cousins of one sort or another. As I've told you, it's not good to marry a cousin, even though our religion permits it, because there's often something not quite right with the children from those kinds of marriages. They may be sickly or deformed... But of course there were plenty of Ashkenazi suitors..."

"Are they the carpetbaggers?" interrupted Blanki.

"Yes, that's what we, the senior arrivals, call them sometimes, but it's not fair because long ago we too came here carrying only bags in our hands... Yes... Anyway, it was around that time that Great-grandma Sarah got sick, and died soon after, God rest her soul. The *kaddish* was recited and the family went into mourning for her. When it was over, Great-grandpa began wondering where he could find some young Sephardic men. Finally, someone told him there were many of them living in a place called Sarajevo. Since he had to have grandchildren, he gathered together his seven daughters with their seven maids

and twenty-one trunks and set out on the journey. Many days and nights later, they arrived here on the cobblestones of this city. All the local people stopped and stared at them because of the big ballooning skirts and the frilly lace and ribbons and bonnets and gloves they wore. 'They have come from another world!' people cried, while Nonu, his daughters and their servants were all just as flabbergasted to hear everyone talking in a strange language called Serbian and to see their big baggy pantaloons, and all the turbans and fezzes, and long-stemmed pipes and colored slippers with glittery toes! But they did find what they had come for: so many Sephardic young men! Thus, every one of the daughters and every one of the maids found the prince of her dreams and they were all happily married and bore many children. Shall I tell you now what was the most important thing of all and why Great-grandpa travelled such a long way? It was to preserve our customs and our holidays and our language and our memories of the past and to save them from fading. They never learned Serbian and nor have I, but that didn't bother us at all, because everyone we know speaks Ladino..."

"I will learn proper Serbian!" Blanki murmured.

"You should, my child. Spanish the way we speak it, with this mixture of Turkish and Serbian words, is not enough. You should learn French and German as well, like Buka..."

"Mama, what happened then?"

"Well, the great Sephardic tree grew another big branch, that's what happened! One of Great-grandpa Liacho's daughters had a daughter too, whose name was Esther, and I don't need to explain who that is, do I, now I'm telling you this story all over again for a hundredth time? So, that's why I am blonde, because I take after my Grandpa Liacho. And the rest of you are all dark because you take after your Papa Leon."

"But why does *Nonu* keep asking me whether I'm his grand-daughter or his great grand-daughter? Doesn't he know?"

"Of course he knows, *querida*. It's just that when people grow old they become a bit forgetful and we have to prod their memories. Gently, of course! Remember, he is over a hundred years old..."

Riki dashed into the kitchen like a whirlwind.

"Mama, Mama, would you sew me a new frock?" she chirped, as if asking for the first time.

"Oh, *linda mia*, my pretty one, when will you ever listen? Haven't I told you a thousand times that I don't have the cloth to make one with?" countered Esther patiently, as she went on with her work.

* * *

The next morning, as they were being washed and dressed to go out and see Franz Ferdinand's procession, Blanki listened in delight to Buka's story about the great Archduke who had come all the way from Vienna to visit them and how he would ride in with his wife in a big automobile with golden handles and with a

whole cavalcade of generals in bright new uniforms, headed by Potiorek, the Governor General of Bosnia himself.

"Just look at the decorations, *ermanicas*," said Buka opening the window. "Little sisters, look: Sarajevo is preening herself today like a bride before her wedding!"

Indeed, Blanki had never seen this town of hers decked out so lavishly. Yellow and black flags of all sizes were fluttering in the breeze. As Buka tied her sisters' bows and fastened their shoe buckles, she told them how Bosnia had once been independent under its own king, until it was seized by the Turkish Sultan Mehmed II. After that it had belonged to the Turks for a long while, and then it was wrested from their hands by the Austrians.

We must be very precious if everyone's fighting over us, thought Blanki to herself, and then went on to say aloud: "You know what, Riki! I'll ask him for a bun and you can ask him for a dress!"

"*Buenu*," answered Riki in agreement and added, "When I grow up I'm going to marry a Jewish Archduke and always have plenty of dresses and lots of buttered buns!"

"You cannot!" said Blanki sadly.

"Why not!? Why not!?" Riki protested.

"Because there are no Jewish Archdukes."

"How inconvenient," Riki shrugged. "Then I'll have to find a rich merchant."

Blanki knew that this warm, hazy day, the twenty-eighth of June, was the date the Serbs of Sarajevo called St. Vitus's Day and celebrated as a great holiday. The Muslims, Jews and Catholics did not. It was a good thing for people to have different holidays, Blanki thought, because it evened things out and prevented confusion. If Serbs, Muslims and Catholics, for example, were to try to squash into the Temple for Passover, there would be an awful crowd; and if, say, Jews, Serbs and Catholics celebrated Courban Bairam, then the Mosque would be so jam-packed that people would have to queue up to wash their feet in the fountain; and what if the Muslims and Jews and Serbs were to go to Mass in the Cathedral, or if Muslims and Jews and Catholics were to... No, it would be impossible, especially because of the problem of space, which was the most difficult in the tiny Serbian church. Perhaps this was why, instead of going to church they celebrated their family's saint, Slavas, in their homes and the priests would come to them there to cut the Slava cake.

Blanki also knew that St. Vitus Day was the sad anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, when the Serbian King Lazar, way back in 1389, had lost to the Turks. It was little short of a miracle to Blanki that the Turks of Sarajevo, who were called Muslims as well as Bosnians like everybody else, spoke Serbian, the native language of their former enemies! And it was even more amazing to her that the Serbs consented to speak to them at all! Hadn't all those Serbs been killed by the Turks at Kosovo? Hadn't they been tortured and impaled on stakes? Hadn't their children been taken away as tribute to the Sultan? Perhaps lately

they had decided to make peace, after they had counted up all the dead on both sides and discovered that the numbers were equal.

Blanki would have asked Buka about it on the spot, if Riki hadn't been fidgeting so much while Buka brushed her hair, and nagging her for a *kreutzer* to buy flowers to toss in front of Ferdinand. Her round cheeks were ruddier than usual, decided Blanki, looking at her own cheeks which were pale anyway, and even more so today. "It must be because we're so excited," she murmured to herself.

Finally, holding hands, with little Elias tucked safely between them, off the three of them went.

Blanki had never seen anything like it in her life: the streets were packed with people all dressed up in their best; it was like a sea of red fezzes, parasols, and broad-brimmed hats adorned with flowers. And every one of those hats was stitched together by her sisters Nina and Clara, thought Blanki with pride. How important they were! If it weren't for them there would be no milliner's shop, and if it weren't for the shop there'd be no hats, and if it weren't for the hats not a single woman would ever set foot outside her front door!

It was fabulous to stroll about a city with so many policemen, so many gleaming sabers, swords, scabbards and uniforms with braided epaulettes and polished buttons! Riki should marry a policeman rather than an Archduke. But she wasn't sure if there was such a thing as a Jewish policeman. She would have to check.

The shallow River Miljacka gurgled and tinkled its accompaniment to the crowd's deep murmur as Blanki, Riki and Elias arrived at the Apel Quay.

Delightedly, Blanki peered over its stone parapets at the water rippling along, on and on, always in the same direction. What would happen if someone stopped it somehow and the waters began to rise? It could flood the whole city together with Tzar's Walkway, Chehaya Walkway, Latin Bridge, and Goat Bridge as well!

The white dazzle of all those bobbing parasols reminded Blanki of the soft, slippery carpet of fresh-fallen spring blossom that she so much loved to walk on. Ah, what indescribable beauty everywhere! She sighed deeply.

It was quite difficult to get through the tight circle of huge grown-ups, she thought, but she certainly couldn't miss the chance to go up to Ferdinand and give him her greetings.

"Everybody's taller than us!" exclaimed Riki furiously as she tried to squeeze between the splayed feet of a colossal gendarme, whose boots were planted like rocks in front of her. Her lips pouted, and an impish little smile flickered across her face. Blanki knew that she was up to something, so she called to her, "Riki! Come here! *Ven aqui!*", at which the gendarme shifted his stance, so Riki's piece of mischief collapsed.

"Is His Majesty coming this way?" Blanki asked the gendarme timidly, while Riki tugged at his sleeve and yelled at the top of her voice, "Where is he! Where? Where? Tell me!"

"Hey, that's enough! Run along, kids!" retorted the policeman.

Although she couldn't see anything, Blanki suddenly heard a piercing shout. The crowd began shoving and jostling, hemming them in entirely. Then people started running. A terrifying noise was followed by an ominous silence. As the mass of bodies around her thinned, Blanki caught sight of a white skirt, with funny red markings spattered over it. "*Vamos de aqui, prestu!*" she cried in a frightened voice. "Let's get away from here!" She glanced at the faces of the grown-ups around her. She had always considered faces far more interesting to look at than animals or trees or sky. But now they scared her. Something was wrong here, very wrong. On every side she was surrounded by a multitude of feet scurrying hither and thither. Through tears, she stared paralyzed at the whirling rainbows of clothes, uniforms, slippers and shoes. Scinting real danger now, she grabbed Riki and Elias firmly by the hand and started to beat a retreat.

"Something terrible's happened!" she gasped. "*Aydi! A casa!* Let's go home! Quick!"

But Riki wanted to stay right where she was, and going against her wishes was never easy. Blanki tugged at her with all her might.

"I don't want to go! *No quiero! No quiero irme!* 'Fraidy cat, that's what you are!" Riki shrieked mockingly. "I like it here! Boom-boom! Like firecrackers! Let go of me, will you! *Deja me!*"

Enraptured by all the uproar and tumult, Riki kept breaking free, so finally Blanki grabbed her by both hands and simply dragged her along, but a moment later she was left empty-handed. She stood stock still for a moment and then called, "Riki! Riki!" Since there was no answer, she set off, amidst all the confusion, racing along the streets in search of her sister. She flitted everywhere. She shouted until she was hoarse. Not a sign of Riki. She had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed her, vanished into thin air!

As tears trickled down her cheeks and Elias wept with exhaustion, Blanki thought how unfair it was that today of all days such a misfortune should befall her. Instead of witnessing untold beauties of the resplendent arrival of the Archduke, she had not even seen Franz Ferdinand, and, what was even worse, she had lost her little sister.

Sobbing bitterly, she walked home with a terrible feeling of self-reproach: her parents had entrusted the two younger children to her care, so it was her duty to bring them back safe and sound. Her strong sense of responsibility made this failure weigh even more heavily on her. By the time she reached home, she was completely worn out and terrified.

She stopped in the courtyard to gain courage. What would her parents say? Papa was bound to give her a hiding. And how would they find Riki? Maybe someone had stolen her and taken her away forever! Maybe the police had arrested her. Maybe she'd never be able to play with her again! She decided that if Riki was not found, she would commit suicide. She wasn't quite sure what that meant but she assumed that it was something ugly one did to oneself.

Mama Esther needed little by way of explanation. No sooner had she caught a glimpse of Blanki weeping, with only Elias beside her, than she grasped the situation. She did not scold her frightened child. She lifted her up, gave her

a big hug and wiped her tears away, which made Blanki cry all the more. Mama Esther said that there was nothing to worry about, that she would tell Papa Leon, and everyone would be out looking for Riki, so that she would be home in no time. Riki was probably playing hopscotch somewhere.

Even so, as soon as the family found out what had happened, they were thrown into confusion. Hurriedly, they all dressed to go out. Father Leon, who was hot-tempered at the best of times, flew into a rage and shouted at Mama Esther for letting them go out in the first place. Buka tried to calm them down by saying that Riki could take care of herself and that she, the wise eldest sister, was not worried at all, but as she pinned her hat on, her hands were shaking. Nina was wailing loudly and when Blanki noticed that even her mother was putting on her *tukadu* then she realized this was a very serious matter indeed. Papa Leon's eyes flashed fury and vexation. With his fez already perched on his head, he paced up and down waiting impatiently for his wife to get ready.

Papa lined them all up in the courtyard and decided who would go where in search of Riki. Athlete was detailed to search Vratnik, the Turkish quarter, named after its massive gate. His brief was to start from Podzebhana and to work his way downwards, investigating every walled enclosure, every courtyard and garden, every little street and alleyway, every nook and cranny. Although it was most unlikely that Riki had wandered into the Muslim district, it still had to be checked.

Clara and Nina were assigned to search together through Bijelave, the main Jewish quarter. That left Buka, who was instructed to comb the neighborhood where they lived, and Father and Mother to check all the way from Jajce barracks to Dzidzikovac, the Serbian quarter. Blanki and Elias were left at home in case Riki came back by herself.

"Don't forget 'Under the Oaks' coffee house, though I doubt she could get as far as that!" Father yelled after Athlete.

Just before evening, with sun and moon both visible in the cloudless sky, they all returned home and wearily climbed the wooden steps, quite oblivious in their own despair, of the fateful disturbances in the city they had just traversed. Nor did they notice how suddenly the clouds, heralding a storm, were pulling a heavy curtain above their heads. The wind stirred the branches, and massive raindrops riddled the ground, drumming on the cobblestones. Mama brought preserved fruits and water out to refresh the exhausted family. Even the usually talkative Nina was silent. Riki had not been found.

Then, from somewhere high up, outside the house, they heard the sound of a small voice wafting in through an open window. First a short "Oo-ooh," and then another, longer and louder. Mama Esther, who happened to be passing by the window, looked up hopeful and fearful at once, and in an instant all the others had crowded around her. There was Riki, swaying on the highest branch of the largest linden tree in the courtyard, waving and wailing, "Mama! Maaama! I want a new dress!"

"*Por amor del Dios!* For the love of God!" muttered Esther under her breath, then exclaimed, "You'll have your dress, *querida!* Just come down. Slow and careful. Now!" Her voice was quiet but commanding.

"I'm going to help her," said Athlete.

"You stay where you are," ordered Esther. "It's better for her to come down alone than to see how worried we all are and get into a panic herself."

"D'you promise?" Riki shouted down.

"I promise, my little angel. And you know that Mama keeps her promises!" Then she added softly: "You'll get your blasted dress even if we all go hungry!"

"And, I want the marrow from all the bones!" pursued Riki in the true fashion of a blackmailer, trying to extort the right to the favourite family delicacy. Whenever she made soup, Mama would batter the larger bones on the chopping board to prise out the warm marrow. She would then spread this over slices of bread for the children who always fought over it.

"All right. You'll get that, too!"

"Promise?"

"I promise. Now enough of this! Get down! At once!"

Riki made her way lightly and nimbly down the tree very satisfied with herself. She had got what she wanted at last.

That night Buka wrote in her journal: "Today, in the city that nestles at the foot of Mount Trebevic, a seemingly ebullient crowd, to all appearances united in its various faiths, customs and tongues, tripped towards a time of death. Beneath their superficial innocence and benevolence which have been practiced during centuries of slavery, Bosnians are an entirely different people. Serbs, Catholics, Muslims and Jews are compulsory cohabitants. They've been struck by an ancient curse: the curse of division. Their deeply rooted sadness, bitterness and passion are manifested differently in each national group, but are ever-present in all... Most of them have been yearning for freedom and independence for centuries, especially young Serbian intellectuals. Will the assassination of the Austrian Archduke bring them freedom? Perhaps. But at what price? I am not worried for those whose ideas and deeds will undoubtedly become an integral part of history regardless of what they will be called later: freedom fighters or bandits. But I am concerned for the others, for the majority, for their survival in the approaching martial gales and games, the current of which will not be easy to brave. To this majority our little Sephardic population belongs, with its Judaic gloom and its Spanish animation, both almost hammered flat during Ottoman times by the ferocious Turkish masters on one side and the suffering Slavic slaves on the other. And now, at the threshold of another conflict, where will we, Jews, turn?"

"For Riki, for Sarajevo, and for humanity, thus ended the 28th June, 1914. My little sister got a dress and the bone marrow, Sarajevo an assassination and a crooked cross on the Serbian Orthodox Church which was struck by a thunderbolt in the cloudburst, and Mankind probably another Great War."

* * * * *

A few days later, Esther was sitting at the kitchen table preparing dinner with tears in her eyes. Blanki and Riki were watching her and crying too, for whenever Mama wept they felt obliged to keep her company.

"Mama, why are you crying?" asked Blanki through her own tears.

"Because they've killed Ferdinand," answered Esther.

"Is he a Jewish king then as well?" asked Riki.

"No, no... And I am not crying just because he was killed, though even crushing an ant is bad, let alone a human being... I am crying for all of us..."

"But we're well and healthy," interrupted Riki.

"Yes, but those poor Serbs aren't..."

"Why, Mama, why?" asked Blanki.

"They're tearing down their houses, destroying their shops, confiscating their property. I am crying over injustice. And the worst of all is that a terrible time is coming. *La guerra!*"

"What's war?" asked Blanki.

"It means suffering, hunger, fear, and pain... Sons, brothers and husbands go away, and their mothers, sisters and wives don't know if they will ever return..."

"Then what's peace?"

"Peace, my little sisters," said Buka who had just walked into the kitchen with a smile which had a touch of reflective sadness, "is a time of kindness, safety, moderate ways and trivialities, when life is taken for granted, and when we have the energy to grumble."

Blanki did not understand completely. Nonetheless, she announced: "I'm for peace."

"Me too," agreed Riki.

* * * * *

A surprisingly beautiful day dawned on Sarajevo at the start of spring. The snows had melted away and the earth was dry again. After so many months, the sun finally resumed its place in the sky, heralding the short, hot summer that people longed for, and when they would throng to Bembasa beach. The grimy Bosnian cobblestones turned white at last. The heat had not begun yet, but the blossoms, spring breezes and the pleasant murmur of the river all seemed to announce that something glorious was about to happen. And it did: the Salom family moved into a spacious flat by the Miljacka, right on the Apel Quay.

The war was in full swing, but, "War or no war", as Esther often said, "customs have to be maintained and, just as nature looks fresh and pristine, so must the home." Not a speck of dirt was allowed to remain, so the bustle of cleaning filled every Jewish household, a great spring fight against dirt was faithfully waged in honour of Passover, the most cheerful holiday Blanki could imagine. All the world seemed to rejoice: the birds sang more loudly, the music of pianos flowed out through windows opened at long last. There were few pianos, but Sarajevo was small, thus music as well as gossip spread easily. Even the bells atop the Cathedral took on a purer sound.

For many weeks, the passion for cleaning raged like an epidemic among the Jewish womenfolk. They washed, scrubbed, rinsed, rubbed, scraped, aired,

polished. Blanki was assigned to work on tin pots, brass pans and silver cutlery. All her natural patience and persistence were necessary to achieve the shine required, and when this was accomplished, Blanki beamed with enchantment but, unlike Riki who bragged all the time, she didn't run around boasting. However, if Buka or Mama Esther happened to be in the same room, occupied with some other task, Blanki would prolong her own. Without interrupting her work, she would fix her dark, keen eyes on her mother or her eldest sister with such fervour and desire for knowledge that neither had the heart to refuse her.

"Buka, *comu si llama el Senor muestro, muestro Senor del Mundu?*"

Blanki would ask. "Tell me, please, what's the name of our Lord, the Lord of all the world? Does he have a name?"

"This is a complicated tale," Buka would begin, "and since it took place a long time ago, there are several interpretations. Let's just say that for a time God had no name..."

"Why?" Riki would yell passing by.

"Because He was One and Only and did not need to be identified. Later, people held him in such high esteem that they didn't dare, or even know how to pronounce his name which consisted of four consonants: JHVH. But this proved not to be practical, so they started calling him Adonai..."

"I don't understand why."

"Because people are used to having names. In a way, names prove that we exist," Buka said reflectively. "They are written on birth certificates and on tombstones... Well then, by joining the vowels and consonants of the two names we were given Jehovah. But, remember Blanki, it is not His name that is important. What matters is that we nurture a sense of justice, honour and goodness that are the essence of our beloved Lord."

"Yes, I understand. But then why do people make wars and kill each other? Why doesn't God prevent it?"

"Ah, *querida*, you are asking me difficult questions. It's because there are also injustice, dishonour and evil in the world. Contrasts... Like, if all were white, you wouldn't be able to distinguish anything, would you? You couldn't tell one thing from another, nothing would have a shape. Do you see?"

"Yes. It would be the same if everything were black!"

"Right, Blanki! That's why opposites and differences exist. That's why one act is judged by comparison with another. For example, now, when there's a war and soldiers are killing each other, many noble and fine deeds are being done. People save lives of other people, help each other in these difficult times. Now is the time when the human spirit is put to the test."

"When did people start fighting each other?" pursued Blanki.

"Since the very beginning of their existence. Quest for power is one of the strongest human drives..."

"The strong destroy the weak. Right?"

"Yes, darling. Still," continued Buka, as if thinking aloud, "I believe there is a balance between good and evil in the world. There has to be!"

"Buka, tell me about the tyrant named Antioch who tried to convert the Jews by force..."

"Next time, Blanki. Mama told you to go shopping, remember?"

Blanki dashed to the corner grocery store to buy food. Nothing must be *hametz*, so fresh provisions were purchased. Riki did not dream of helping her. She could not imagine a lovelier time for play. She wished that spring and summer would last forever. She skipped about constantly, getting in everyone's way. Finally, Mama gave her the task of taking two neatly wrapped dresses to the relatives for whom she had sewn them.

"When you have dropped them off, you come straight home," were her explicit instructions, repeated several times while Riki nodded her head gravely before tearing off down the street.

When the menfolk had gone to the temple, Mama Esther took advantage of a free moment to attach a fragrant sprig of rue and a carnation to her prettiest *tukadu*, with its diaphanous veil. Her blond hair, moistened and smoothed at the temples, hardly showed under the ornate little cap. She checked once more whether the children were clean and properly dressed. After this final inspection, they went out into the courtyard -- as they would do each day until the end of the Passover week -- to wait for Papa and the boys, so that together they could all perform the ritual of eating bread with *ta'an alva* or oil on the threshold of the house.

Sephardic women seldom went to temple. Buka claimed this was due to Turkish influence, adding that Judaism was a religion for men, Christianity for women. Blanki had always had a burning desire to go up to the balcony of the synagogue and peep through the narrow holes in the wooden screen which hid the women from the men down below.

Evening was approaching, and with it the Seder. For Blanki the most moving moment of the holiday was when Papa would read from the Haggadah. But Riki hadn't returned, and Mama, now very worried, posted her at the window to watch for Riki.

"*Tristi di mi!* What are we going to do! What if Riki doesn't come for the Seder?" exclaimed a horrified Blanki a moment before she saw her sister running towards the house, prancing and humming. She was still carrying the package under her arm. Then all at once Blanki witnessed a peculiar change in her sister's behaviour: as soon as she came up to the gate, she began crying at the top of her voice.

Mama ran out to meet her. "My little darling, why are you crying!?" she asked.

Riki was choking with tears and sobs. She barely managed to mumble: "My stomach hurts!"

Blanki wondered how Riki's stomach could have started to hurt all of a sudden, just as she arrived on the doorstep.

Mama took the package. "Why didn't you give them the dresses?" she asked.

Through tears and sighs that melted the hearts of the whole family, Riki stammered that she had found no one home. Just then, examining the parcel more closely, Mama discovered to her astonishment and despair that the dresses were missing. Only the wrapping paper remained. Somewhere along

the way, Riki had lost them. But it was impossible to extract any explanation from the weeping child; not even Blanki could learn where she had strayed or how the dresses had been lost.

Once again, thought Blanki, Riki got off easily, even when responsible for such a loss. Not a single sharp pinch, the inevitable punishment that would have followed as a matter of course had any other child in the family committed a similar offense. Papa would have been informed, and that would have meant a painful spanking. Blanki looked sadly at her arm, which often bore bruises, even though she was unfailingly obedient.

"Oh, our little sister is very clever, isn't she?" said Buka smiling, because as soon as the storm had passed, Riki had dashed out into the street with a skipping rope, to be the first to greet her father and brothers.

"That is the truth," murmured Blanki to herself, wondering again how Riki always managed to eat one of her cakes in addition to her own. "She gets a *kreutzer*, I get a *kreutzer*. She buys two cakes, I buy two cakes." But there similarity ended: in a twinkling, Riki would have gobbled up both her cakes. "Give me yours!" she would then say in a hurt tone. "No, this is mine. You ate yours!" "Give me! Give me!" "No, I won't!" At that point Riki would sit on the ground and start to cry, pounding her hands and feet on the pavement. People would gather, and she, not Riki, would be so embarrassed that she would give her little sister whatever she wanted, just to stop her crying and to keep passersby from staring. So it was that Riki always ate three cakes. Fair enough, concluded Blanki, because Riki would be the one to get the money for the sweets.

In the evening, before they went to sleep, she would tell Riki everything she had learned from Buka and Mama during that day. Her favourite tales, which Blanki would proudly recount in her most solemn voice, were about Moses, David and Solomon.

"When King David ruled Judea, the Jews raised livestock and farmed, and the Canaanites were merchants..." Blanki would begin.

Every word and every name, even the most difficult, remained etched in Blanki's memory, while for Riki a story lasted only a day, soon to be buried beneath new and enchanting adventures.

* * * * *

Summer arrived in its finest form. One Sunday, Mama forbade Riki to go swimming at Bembase, that wonderful, exciting place which the colourful crowd made even more inviting and where the river was the warmest and the sun the brightest. But Mama said "No!" and locked the gate, which meant there was no appeal. No trick would be of any use. As usual, Riki had tried to wangle permission, but this time she failed: the gate stayed locked.

She then decided to take revenge on her elders or perhaps she simply wanted to relieve the boredom with a little thrill. She began readying herself to commit suicide. She put on her prettiest dress and fastened a white bow in her glossy black hair. Examining herself in the mirror, she decided she looked like

the wonderful Viennese dolls she had seen at the houses of rich playmates, -- only she was dark and the dolls were all blonde.

"When she sees how pretty I am, Mama will be even sadder that I'm dead," she whispered spitefully. Everyone would cry over her and feel guilty for the times they had scolded her. The more she thought about it, the more pleased she was with the notion. The trouble was, she didn't know how to go about it. What did it mean, to kill oneself? Would you die if you jumped from a tree limb, for example? She rejected that as a bad idea, since it would wrinkle and soil her dress. One died from being shot with a gun, but where could she get a gun? What if you stood in the sun too long? Perhaps...

She finally decided to confide in Blanki, who always had her nose in some book and knew all sorts of things.

As soon as Blanki heard about the problem, she found a solution: she had read that eating matchheads brought on certain death. They found a box of matches and broke off the red tips, which looked like candy. Gravely, Blanki offered to die with her sister, so as to keep her company afterwards in heaven where Riki would not know anybody, and would have no one to play with. Actually, that was not Blanki's most important reason. In reality, she wanted Mama and the rest of the family to cry over her as well, not just over Riki.

After thinking Blanki's proposal over for a moment, Riki agreed. Blanki ran into the house, put on her white dress and -- in the most daring exploit she had yet undertaken -- took Nina's hat.

"Since I'll be dead anyway, no one will be able to scold me," she said to herself as she placed the hat on her head. She was a little discouraged by the fact that it fell over her eyes, but she grasped it just the same, to show Riki how brave she was.

Hidden by a large bush, the two of them sat down on the lawn behind the house and each bit into one of the little kernels. The taste was revolting, not at all like candy. Unable to swallow the nauseating stuff, they both spat it out.

"Blanki, it would be great to die, but I can't eat this," said Riki dejectedly.

"Me neither," replied a disappointed Blanki.

"I have an idea," suggested Riki. "Let's just pretend we're dead."

Blanki accepted this proposition as the only remedy for their setback. They stretched out on the ground and tried to lie still, which wasn't at all easy, especially for the restless Riki. They lay like that for a long time, a full ten minutes, until Buka came outside and saw them. Despite a rebuke, they refused to divulge what they had been up to, lying there on the grass in their best dresses and Nina's hat.

"It will be our secret," said Blanki, "ours alone, for the rest of our lives."

Riki never forgot that Blanki wanted to die with her. She considered this the real beginning of their undying friendship, for sisters are sisters by birth, but friends must be chosen, she concluded.

* * * * *

Business in the millinery shop was doing well, so Nina and Clara had managed to gather the money to send one more child to school. In Buka's opinion, Blanki deserved to go and although Buka could not contribute much from the private lessons she gave in French, German and Latin, her opinion was respected. What an injustice, thought Buka, to force the lazy Isaac to study instead of spending all the money on Blanki's education. But as a son, he had priority.

In the autumn of 1915, Blanki enrolled in school, after a delay of several years. Usually quiet, she erupted like a volcano, bubbling over with childish excitement, beside herself with joy. Among other Jewish and Austrian girls from rich homes, she was the only one from a poor family who was accepted by the strict board of the Cloister of St. Augustine.

The first day of school arrived. When the nuns were assigning seats, they first asked blue-eyed Gretchen, daughter of the richest Austrian in Sarajevo, whom she wanted to share a desk with. That's as it should be, reflected Blanki. Someone as pretty, as blond and finely dressed, ought to be first in everything. Looking around at the other girls, Gretchen tossed her golden curls, and to Blanki's great astonishment, pointed her tiny finger in its expensive glove at Blanki herself. She declared that she would share a desk with Miss Salom, the poorest Jewish girl in the school!

At the end of the day, when she had mustered the courage, Blanki timidly asked her, "Why me?"

"Because I like you," replied Gretchen simply.

"But why do you like me?"

"Because you told the teacher you wouldn't say the prayer at the beginning of lessons since it isn't your prayer. No other Jewish girl dared to say that. And you're the smallest one here."

"I am the smallest, but I'm also the oldest... I was a little late starting school. You know," she added boldly, "I'm not stupid. I learned to read and write by myself, and my sister Laura, whom we call Buka, taught me German and history... And I've read a lot of books."

"I like girls who are brave."

"What does 'brave' mean?" asked Blanki, meaning the word itself in German, but Gretchen thought she had failed to understand the concept, and started to explain.

"Papa says the soldiers fighting at the front are brave -- the Austrians and the Bosnians. They aren't afraid of death."

I wouldn't like to die now, not one bit, thought Blanki, not when I've just started school! But she didn't want to say this to Gretchen and have her change her mind about Blanki's courage.

* * * * *

In the course of the long, freezing Sarajevo winter, great drifts of snow rose along the edges of the pavements, so high that passersby could not see the other side of the street. This time the snow was not soft; like tiny stinging pellets

of ice it was driven along by a keen and bitter wind. Icicles grew on the roofs. Sharp and pointed, they hung ominously like knives that could stab people if they should fall from above. On some days, sleet covered the tree branches with a coating of ice and they sparkled in the sun like a thousand diamonds. The entire world was hard and white.

The war made itself felt. As Mama Esther had predicted, life grew increasingly less pleasant. The Saloms ate bread made from a strange sort of flour that oozed water. Want affected the children. In chilling winds, Blanki wore a short, light coat. This did not bother her since she was warmblooded, but hunger did. She felt sharp pangs in her stomach that only food could drive away. Still, unlike the other children who cried and asked Mama for bread, Blanki endured her pain in silence.

Once during playtime at school, Gretchen offered Blanki a round bun: crisp, golden and fragrant. Blanki took it and opened it up: bread spread with butter, and on top of this wonderful delicacy, a slice of ham!

"Thank you," Blanki said, "but what about you?"

"I have two more. I can barely eat them all."

How casually Gretchen spoke of such bounty, Blanki marvelled. How nice it must be to just have what you want. At that moment she noticed that beyond the superficial differences between the two of them, there were others, far more significant.

As soon as she returned home, she proudly told her mother what had happened.

"Blanki, my angel, you're such a baby, although you're going on... how old are you?"

"Eleven," answered Blanki, who looked more like a child of six.

"Ah, *querida*, don't you know that we aren't allowed to eat ham?"

"Why not?" asked Blanki in frank astonishment.

"Because it's made from pork."

Blanki thought this over carefully. Her eyes filled with tears at the knowledge that what she had done was a great sin. She wondered why her mother didn't seem in the least angry. Then, all at once, a triumphant smile spread across her face.

"But Mama, you always said that in Jewish homes it is not permitted to eat pork! Right?"

"*Si*," agreed Esther.

"Or eels either, because they look like snakes, and we might make a mistake? And... and you also said that each of our laws was triggered by a practical reason?"

"Yes, my child, that's correct."

"Well, then," she went on encouraged by her mother's assent, "since it's not hot here like it used to be in Judea, but so cold that my fingers turn purple, and since I didn't bring the bun home, but ate it at school, then our kind Lord will probably forgive me, won't He?"

Esther smiled. "He will, precious, He surely will. You just go ahead and eat all the buns that Gretchen gives you. In times like these God surely can't punish you for that."

"*Gracias*, Mama... You know, you are... we are different from the other Jewish families," continued Blanki pensively. "Like we say 'you' to you and Papa, and other children say 'he' and 'she' to their parents."

"Blanki, there's only one He, and that's our Lord God. Only He should be spoken of in the third person."

"I understand... But what about she? There isn't our Lord's mother or wife, is there?"

"No, but mothers and wives are respected by Nature, since they bring children into this world."

"Is this their most important role?"

"Yes, besides fulfilling their own dreams."

"Did you fulfil yours?"

"I'll tell you when you're a little older, *querida*."

* * *

An important date, Blanki's birthday, the first of December, was approaching. In a family of seven children and a like number of birthdays, and in a year of want, those dates might well have slipped everyone's mind. But Riki never forgot it. This time she was determined to put on a ballet performance. She realized, though, that she could not mount such a spectacle all alone, so she enlisted the help of her sisters. The enterprise had to be kept strictly secret, for the success of the entire plan depended on surprise. Clara was to play the piano, Buka would write some suitable poems, Nina's job was to sew costumes and hats, and Mama Esther was counted on to prepare refreshments. Riki, of course, was to choreograph the ballet and be the prima ballerina, with a select number of girls as supporting dancers.

From earliest childhood, Riki had danced. Her every movement, no matter how routine, looked like graceful ballet. She fluttered along without touching the ground, in steps that were often intricate and always charming. Otherwise totally irresponsible, when she would trace some imaginative and elaborate figures invented on the spur of the moment, she resembled a grown person, gravely conscious of what she was doing.

Blanki was told to invite all her friends for the afternoon of the day, but she did not find out anything about the performance. Her excitement had no effect on the unflappable Riki.

Wednesday finally arrived, still and cold. The sky was dotted with snowflakes falling thickly and steadily. Sarajevo lay tucked beneath a soft, white blanket. The footsteps and the clop of horses' hooves were barely audible. Street lamps illuminated an ethereal vision of a transparent silvery curtain that fell to the rounded surfaces.

Riki and her companions put on skirts made of large artificial walnut leaves, and covered their heads with wreaths of multicolored flowers. They

resembled forest fairies, winsome heralds of a better life. In the frost of the winter they seemed to bring a promise of springtime and peace.

The well-stoked stove heated the room. Mama Esther had not stinted on wood that evening. Clara played cheerful melodies as the ballet about a good princess in distress unfolded before the captivated audience. The dance was interspersed with recitations read both chorally and individually in the high-pitched voices of the little girls.

Though she was the smallest, seven-year-old Riki was obviously the troupe's leader. All the tiny performers watched her attentively for the signal to begin the next stage in the complicated production. For the grand finale, Riki climbed onto the chandelier. There she swayed, then suddenly plunged from her high perch. The spectators jumped up, afraid she was hurt, but Riki glared at them angrily as she got to her feet, saying: "That's how it's supposed to be! I flew just like a real fairy!" The other children gasped with admiration: Riki could even fly!

After the performance, which ended to tumultuous applause, guests were offered prunes and dried figs. Gretchen had brought some chocolate, and Mama's gift was red whortleberry juice from the hidden corner of the cellar where she kept the last of their pre-war reserves.

"I wish we were always warm," said Clara.

"And full," added Nina.

"And all together," whispered Mama Esther thinking of Isaac who had gone to war.

Amidst the drabness of everyday life this was an unforgettable evening: cheeks were rosy, peals of laughter resounded through the sparsely furnished apartment, fingers flew over the piano keys, and warm, melodic verses of old romances melted even the hearts of those who could not understand Ladino.

For one evening, the war seemed far away from the house on the Apel Quay.

* * *

Nina, second in line among the sisters and the "great operator", as Buka often called her, never stopped thinking up a host of business ventures. Like the two other sisters -- Clara, slightly younger, and Buka, slightly older -- Nina was more mother than sister to Blanki, Riki and Elias, and to Esther she was more friend than daughter. Since the grown-up male side of the family, -- Papa Leon and Isaac -- was not concerned much with everyday affairs, not even decisions involving the family's income, the three older sisters and their mother made all the resolutions and carried them out.

So it was that two years before the war Nina, at that time only twenty, but full of enthusiasm for any kind of commercial enterprise, had decided to open a millinery shop. Such an undertaking by a young Jewish woman was unheard-of, especially if, like Nina, she was poor and had no solid masculine backing, but she had not hesitated. Stubbornly begging for credit and going into debt she had scraped together the money and opened up "La Parisienne" right across from the

Hotel Europe in the heart of Sarajevo's business district. With the help of her sister Clara and her own brave heart and skilful hands, she had made a success of it. The shop had been a sensational revelation for people from all over town. Previously, women had been obliged to travel to Zagreb or Belgrade, and the wealthiest as far as Vienna or Paris, merely to buy hats. Now they could obtain the articles they needed so badly right in town, at their convenience and cheaper into the bargain. In a very short time, the Salom sisters became famous for their "fine touch and plenty of taste." Weathering several crises, the shop survived and made a substantial profit most of the time.

Nina's personality was perfectly suited for this sort of business. Unfailingly talkative and able to gossip in several languages, she was unsurpassed in these arts. Customers liked her and confided in her. On the other hand, Clara was scornful of idle chatter. She considered Sarajevo a backward place and hated the fetters imposed by it. She had been born a woman of the world, she thought, aloof, somewhat self-centred and capricious, but always certain that she would be able to fend for herself.

At that time Nina ruled the family simply by virtue of earning the most money. Since she shared it with the other members of the household, she expected them to accept all of her endless schemes, tricks and manipulations. Any idea that came to mind she immediately put into action, and then saw it through to either failure or success. Her latest idea was to buy a tobacco shop, hoping to better the family's financial situation during the war years. She decided the shop should be run by Blanki.

"She is too young for that," objected Buka.

"Not at all!" replied Nina confidently. "It is never too early to start learning how to earn money! And that's that! Which means that Blanki will have to leave school. It costs too much anyway! Having enough to eat is much more important than Blanki studying all sorts of nonsense. She can learn them just as well from Buka."

Nina never placed much value on book learning. She seldom read, and the foreign languages she knew -- German, French and Serbian -- she had learned by listening, without ever touching a book.

No one objected to Nina's decision. Buka was sorry about it, but since she herself had difficulty earning money she had nothing on which to base her opposition to her sister's intent. Clara was indifferent. Mama Esther had confidence in her enterprising daughter, and no time to question the justice of such a step.

Blanki, of course, was not consulted. One day she was simply informed of their decision. She wept in silence, sobbing for nights and days on end. Apart from her family, she loved school more than anything else in the world. Although they promised her that when the war was over and money was not so scarce, she could go on with her studies, Blanki sensed that her school days were over.

Nina put Blanki in charge of tobacco sales and cousin Simha in charge of the money. After several months without a penny of profit, Nina grew suspicious and inspected the accounts. She discovered that Simha was fleecing them roundly. Nothing could be recovered. Simha had taken the money and spent it.

Going to court and accusing a relative would bring shame on the whole family. Blanki was in despair; Nina was furious.

"*El guerku la llevi!*" Nina fumed with impotent rage. "The Devil take her! I hope she drops dead, the beast, the snake! It turns my stomach to think about that revolting woman!"

"What did you expect?" put in Clara blithely. "That she'd work for the miserable salary you gave her?"

In Blanki's opinion, the worst was that when they returned home Nina did not say, for all to hear, that Blanki was not to blame for having to close the tobacco shop. Instead, she ranted and raved, pouring out a stream of invective on everyone involved, forgetting that she herself had played the leading role in this circus. Blanki wept bitterly, but kept quiet. Finally she sought out her mother.

"Mama, *yo no soy culpanti*," she sobbed. "It's not my fault!"

"I know, *querida*. Simha robbed us."

"But she's our cousin. Why would she do that to us?"

"Because she is dishonest. Also people in need sometimes become thieves."

Blanki made three important discoveries that day: that some people steal, that family should not always be trusted, and that injustice can arise even among the most beloved. Nina's refusal to say that her younger sister was blameless was the most terrible wrong Blanki had suffered in her young life.

Mama Esther seemed to read her thoughts.

"Don't cry, *fijika*," she said, taking Blanki on to her lap and wiping away her tears. "Life is cruel in some ways, but beautiful in others... It consists of nastiness and kindness... And growing up isn't easy, is it? You grew up a little today."

Blanki felt very old. Soon she fell asleep in her mother's lap. The next morning, when she woke up, light was coming through the window.

"Ah, Mama, I was so sad last night," she whispered, "that I never thought I would see the dawn again."

"The new day would have been born anyway, my child," answered Esther, getting up from the armchair. "Whether we are present to see it or not, life goes on. It is inextinguishable." Blanki nodded sadly. "Don't worry any more, my little flower," Esther went on. "Soon the salon will start to do very well, you'll see, and we'll have enough money and food on the table. Everything will be just fine!"

All of a sudden, business was indeed booming. The shop was warm, its two iron stoves crackling as they heated the spacious salon and workshop, which were separated by a curtain. Outside, snow fell thickly, while indoors steam curled around the moulds on which felt was stretched into various shapes. The sewing machines clattered away, tracing enchanting patterns of intricate seams. Snatches of song came from the workshop, while the steady hum of feminine voices governed the salon.

"Miss Nina, maybe... perhaps... this flower... Should it be blue?" suggested Mrs. Ninkovich, as Nina struggled to suppress her laughter and workers peered from behind the curtain, giggling discreetly because their regular

customer had a habit of closing her eyes as soon as she put a hat on her head in front of the mirror. Clara attributed this inexplicable behaviour to Mrs. Ninkovich's reluctance to see her own unattractive face, which only showed that this eccentric woman knew what she was doing.

"Could Miss Clara try it on, so that I can see how it looks," she asked turning to Nina.

Clara sauntered in with her big-city walk. With barely a glance at anyone, she set the hat lightly on her head and made a few turns in front of Mrs. Ninkovich, who now had both eyes wide open. Clara decided to give a slight smile -- the greatest effort she was willing to make for any customer. Then she took off the hat and without a word returned to the workroom. Meanwhile, Mrs. Ninkovich gazed at the hat approvingly.

"You know," she began, lowering her voice, "Mrs. Perich's husband has a new lover again."

Always curious, Nina pricked up her ears as she packed the hat in its round box. The conversation lasted a long time. In the end, the flowers on the hat remained blue, the cash register jingled to Nina's satisfaction, and Mrs. Ninkovich went on her way happily.

No hat could make the woman prettier, thought Nina and sighed, but it didn't matter as long as the shop was full. She had been praying to God to send her more customers of any kind for so long that it seemed He had heard her: they were coming in droves. They would all crowd inside together, as if they attracted each other by some strange magnetic force.

When the salon filled up, Clara would emerge from the workroom. She took the Serbian and Ladino-speaking customers, and Nina waited on the Austrians. But no matter who was trying on hats, Nina always had to meddle, giving advice to Clara's customers as well as her own. In addition to this she would call orders to the workroom in Ladino. Then suddenly, in the midst of all the confusion, she would stop, glance vacantly at Clara, and ask her in all seriousness:

"Clara, *por amor de Dio, que lingua stoy hablando?* For God's sake, what language am I speaking?"

At that the whole room would burst into laughter.

* * *

Following the failure of the tobacco venture, Blanki didn't return to school. Instead, she was given a different task: to help her sisters at the salon. She made no objection to her new duties. Whatever her elders decreed, was how it had to be. She considered this a debt that she paid in advance for something wonderful that would happen to her later on in life. Blanki believed that happiness had its price. A person had to earn it honestly. That was why, smiling and uncomplaining, she rose at daybreak and hurried to "La Parisienne" to open the usually frozen heavy metal shutters, to light the stoves, and to dust and clean the shop. She took wood and coal from the bin beneath the pavement and lugged it inside in buckets. Once the bucket was heavier than she expected, and

she tumbled along with it into the coal hole. She emerged black with coal dust and breathless with fright and exertion. Her sisters chuckled when they saw her. She joined them hesitantly.

Slight, brisk, and intent, clad only in a thin dress and short coat, she shovelled away piles of snow from the shop entrance. A passerby would sometimes look on and ask: "Aren't you cold, little girl?" She would answer, smiling politely: "No, not at all."

* * *

The great event every family looked forward to impatiently -- the marriage of the eldest daughter -- came in the spring of the same year. Buka was to wed Daniel Levi, son of a respectable Sephardic family. The bridegroom had finished school and now had a good job.

Fixed rules were followed: pre-arranged introduction, engagement, family meetings and, finally, the wedding -- a time of indescribable gaiety for Blanki and Riki. As she left for the temple, Blanki wore a pair of fine suede gloves, her first brand-new article of clothing, not altered or re-tailored or handed down from an older sister, but purchased expressly for her. Her dress was decorated with flounces of pink lace and sprigs of white lilies on the lapels.

Buka wore a yellow bridal gown, in a shade as soft and transparent as lemon juice. The comment around the town was that the Saloms always had to be different.

The unaccustomed extravagance threw the entire family into a state of feverish joy: Mama Esther no longer worried about whether there would be enough to eat the next day, while Papa Leon fondly stroked the children's hair. A single desire ruled the household: that Buka's wedding should be happy and lavish.

One more surprise brightened the festivities: the eldest son, Isaac, came back from the war, thin from typhus and completely bald. Athlete's thick, curly hair had fallen out, never to grow back. His return meant the celebration would be enriched by song and a few of his fun-loving friends who had also succeeded in getting out of the army. No one reproached them for doing so; on the contrary, to escape the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces, especially at the time when they were attacking the Kingdom of Serbia, took a courage and resourcefulness that was worthy of respect.

After the wedding ceremony a supper was prepared not at the bridegroom's, but at the bride's home. Papa Leon insisted on this unusual procedure since he could not give his daughter a proper dowry. The grown-up sisters, Clara and Nina, were among those invited, while the younger children, Riki, Elias and Blanki, had to go to bed. In their view, this was an unfair decision.

The bridegroom invited his friends, mostly Serbs, claiming they could drink more, sing louder, and court women more passionately than Jews. Of course, for Jews, Serbian women were out of bounds, just as Jewish women were for Serbs, but that did not prevent members of the same sex from being friends.

The large dining room table was covered with china and crystal borrowed from a Serbian family whose moveable property Papa Leon had hidden in the cellar of their house at the very beginning of the war. At that time, all Bosnian Serbs were persecuted by the Austro-Hungarian police because the Archduke Ferdinand's assassin was a Serb. Candles burned all around the room. A whiff of the carefree celebration carried all the way to the children's room, tickling Blanki's nose. Her curiosity urged her to take at least a tiny peep at the enticing space where her sisters and all sorts of new people were going to party through the night. After reconnoitring from the door, she gathered her courage and darted into the dining room. Just as she entered, she heard footsteps. They approached ominously. As quickly as she could, she hid in the corner, behind the large philodendron that flourished under her mother's skilful care. Once there, she decided to stay and watch the proceedings unobserved, then when the guests had left, steal cautiously out and scamper back to bed. She hoped that in the general excitement no one would notice that she was missing.

Clara looked so pretty, Blanki thought as she watched her sister arrange flowers on the table. She looked rather solemn, but serene and even a little haughty in her sumptuous blue dress trimmed with lace. Nina, flushed and all-a-quiver, did not know which way to turn. She ran constantly about the house and was no help to anyone. Her bright dress of crepe de chine was no less striking than Clara's. But Buka's surpassed them all, which was exactly how it should be, Blanki decided, and then asked herself when she would grow up and be able to dress like that. Time certainly seemed to pass slowly.

The guests began to arrive. Daniel, with his fine, soft features and large, weary eyes, was introducing his friends. In the doorway stood a tall young man, slender but muscular, with a prominent nose and a jester's grin. "This is Petar Ignyatich... Hm... A dangerous fellow he is! I've never seen a woman who managed to resist him!"

His restless eyes flitted from one guest -- and one bottle -- to another, until their mischievous course came to a halt on Nina's face, where he fastened his gaze. "Miss Salom, I'm indeed happy to meet you," he said gallantly in his deep husky voice. "You adorn the heads of all the women I know -- and they need it. But yours doesn't require any trimmings, it's beautiful enough already. I've never seen a prettier one."

Nina turned so red that tears welled up in her eyes. Usually talkative, but now benumbed and overwhelmed by a surge of excitement, she was silent, frantically asking herself whether what she had heard was true. She had always doubted her beauty, but Mama used to tell her that it depended on the beholder - - whatever that meant!

When Petar changed places to sit next to her she whispered, "Oh, *tristi di mi*, what will I do?" frightened by a sudden realisation that she wouldn't be able to resist him. Then she shrugged and grew angry with herself: he was a Serb, and from Herzegovina! Resist or not, she couldn't marry a Serb, and Herzegovinians are known for staying life-long bachelors! How could she let herself just gape at him like that? What was happening to her!? She couldn't utter a word in Serbian! All her knowledge had simply vanished! While the slim, elegant Petar,

bending over her diminutive self, spoke in his flowing, precise dialect, the purest Serbian. The words slid from his lips like wine down a thirsty throat!

"Miss Nina, I'd like to take you to one of our village weddings, in the autumn, when the fruits of the earth are the sweetest... Eyes sparkle, lips quiver, eyelashes flutter with shyness and yearning, bride's kerchiefs, painstakingly and lovingly embroidered with gold and silver dance in the breeze... Barrels of brandy, songs, and drums: the earth shakes, blood races, feet perform the intricate steps of the *kolo*, boisterous merriment explodes together with guns..."

"Guns?" she repeated, flustered.

"Of course! Bullets zoom into the sky..."

Nina listened spellbound, captivated more by the expression on Petar's face than by what he was saying. He took a drink of wine, and began to sing softly in a hoarse but expressive voice that carried to every corner of the room. She had never in her life met a man more handsome, more intriguing -- and more perilous.

"Come on, lift those glasses!" he said standing up. "Here's a traditional Serbian toast: It's your turn, said the host/ Each of you propose a toast!/ Drink it my treasure,/ Ice is on the top,/ Honey the last drop,/ Break the icy top,/ Drink the honey drop!"

"You haven't tasted a drop, Miss Nina," he said as he sat down.

She shook her head.

"Go on, just a sip." He handed her the untouched glass. "After all, your sister doesn't get married every day!"

She could not imagine opposing him. Under his spell, she swallowed wine for the first time in her life. As if stung by a bee, she twitched and felt terribly warm.

"Different customs, but the essence is the same everywhere," he went on, "for Jews, Muslims, Serbs and Catholics alike: love is always beautiful and thrilling, a once-in-a-lifetime experience while it lasts... And here's a Muslim wedding song: The nightingale starts singing believing it's a day,/ Get up Fata, dear bride, give your presents away."

"You must have been a wedding guest very often, if you know all those customs," ventured Nina in her best Serbian.

"Yes," he nodded. "And talking about traditions, do you know that before St. George's Day, girls go to the mill with jugs and catch the drops of spray that fly from the waterwheel. Then they wash their faces with this water to become prettier, and they bathe in the river to look healthy and fresh. You, Miss Nina, look as if you've done nothing but that all your life."

"Oh, I... I wouldn't say..."

"I assure you it's true."

"You shouldn't be saying things like this to a young Jewish woman," Nina protested reluctantly.

"With Serbs," Petar continued with a cunning little smile ignoring her observation, "a young man rarely marries a girl from the same village... And in Muslim culture, when parents refuse to give their approval, young people devised the practice of stealing the bride and forcing their elders to utter the required 'God

bless you'... What if I, in the middle of the night, abducted you, Miss Nina?" Just for an instant, Petar's face grew serious.

At that moment, while Athlete was softly coaxing forth the tender notes of a languid *sevdalinka*, a crash behind the large flowerpot was heard, and Blanki tumbled out from behind the plant where she had fallen asleep. There was a brief hush, and then the room erupted in laughter. Buka gently lifted Blanki and carried her off to bed.

"I'd like to get married, too," Blanki muttered.

"You will, quicker than a wink."

Buka caressed her little sister and tucked her up under the covers. At the door she turned and said: "*Durmi buenu, angeliku miu...* Sleep well, my little angel", as if she were saying goodbye.

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