

THE SPRING BY THE JUNIPER BUSH

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The path was almost hidden by the grass. With difficulty a few rays of the sun came through the the leaves of the oak-trees and made little circles on the earth, beaten here by the feet of men and of animals.



A pair of butterflies threw themselves to the ground while playfully chasing each other; they rose again and continued their flight. The vine that embraced the ash-tree and tried to reach its top was laden with bunches ripening under the chirp of the cicadas. The few black grapes that could already be seen could not yet be smelt.

Suddenly, just where the path came out of the trees into a small yellowish field of rye, reaped only the month before, a woman appeared. He found it strange to see her alone in such a place, and in that red and white dress and the red veil embroidered with little white

flowers which were the garments of a bride. He shook his hands as if to shift the rays of light that were stopping him from seeing her clearly. Something was telling him the woman was his own betrothed, even though he'd not seen yet her. She, paying no attention to him, went down the path and headed towards the old elm-tree that stood in the middle of the field. Gjergj was worried, for in that very same place, a few days before, he'd seen hornets' nest that he'd sworn to burn away as soon as he could. He tried to cry out to warn her, but his voice made no sound. He wanted to reach her and stop her. A dry branch snapped in two under his foot and someone was calling him ...

He awoke, still worried. His room was full of light, but he had no desire to get up. He slowly closed his eyes so as to return to that dream interrupted halfway through. But he was not able to. He rose, got quickly dressed, and went down to the courtyard. The cooks who had been summoned to the village to prepare the wedding feast were already at work. The women sang while they cleaned the pans; the pantry master carefully counted the utensils that had been borrowed from neighbouring houses, marking each one so that it could be returned to its rightful owner. The wedding ox was silently chewing its cud. Perhaps it had already guessed what was in store for it, given that for the first time ever it had been allowed to eat as much as it wanted, tethered as it was near the haystack. But it was calm enough, as if it accepted its fate.

"Well, look who's just got up! The bridegroom!" cried one of the cooks. "Come on, Gjergj, come and drink some coffee with us. Now don't be sad – sooner or later we all come to that day after which we won't wake up alone in bed any longer. I hope it won't displease you too much!" he concluded, laughing.

Gjergj made a quick, forced smile and walked over to the well from which a woman had already hauled up some water in a much-dented bucket. She poured him a little, so he could

wash his face; she had a brand new towel that someone had brought as a present hanging over her forearm.

That Saturday passed very quickly, what with the arrival of guests bearing gifts, the laughter and the songs. After dinner the landlord called forth the Delegates one by one, then showed each of them where he should sleep, telling them they had to get up at dawn to begin the journey to the bride's house.

Early the next morning the Delegates gathered in the guest room. While the rest of them drank their coffee, the landlord took the First Delegate to one side for some final words of advice. "There is nothing owing to the bride's father," he said. "Every debt has been paid, and so you should not have problems." The Delegates left the house. Their weapons, polished for the occasion, were shining in the first rays of the sun, as was the mane of the bride's white horse, which had been saddled at first light. Nearly everyone had risen by now. The men formed a line to shake the Delegates' hands while the women made a little group of their own and sang their song.

*Oh First Delegate, a good journey you will make
And the bride you will bring to us soon!
A good journey to you, oh Second Delegate,
Return with the bride before noon!
Oh Third Delegate, a good journey we wish you –
Come back with a bride as tall as you!
A good journey one and all, but bring us no ugly bride
Whatever it is you do!*

Each of the Delegates fired a shot as he left the courtyard. While departing from the village, they met another group of Delegates who had come to take a bride to their own country. They must have come from afar, given the early hour they'd chosen to arrive. The group from the village stopped and made way for the group that was arriving, for thus was the Custom.

The envoy from the bride's father was waiting to meet them in the agreed place, and after the greetings they went together to the bride's house. The ram that they had brought with them as a gift stopped by the canal to drink. They waited for it patiently. They gave no importance to the sense of disquiet they found in the bride's house. It was normal: that day would be a day of celebration only for the bridegroom's house, for the bride is born in a stranger's house and must journey to her own house.

In the guest-room there was the exchange of greetings and tobacco. Then a man arrived with a bottle of raki, followed by another with a tray of fried cakes surrounding a little bowl of honey. The landlord of the house raised his glass and with trembling voice murmured, "Praised be Jesus Christ!" "Now and forever," replied the Delegates, "may you hear only good words about your daughter!"

Voices that seemed like desperate shouts were coming from outside the house. "You will never take our sister in this condition!" someone cried out, while someone else seemed to be reasoning with him, advising him to lower his voice. The bride's father apologised and left the room.

Taking advantage of his absence, the First Delegate whispered into the ear of the second: "The bridegroom's father said we would find no problems, but it appears that he was wrong."

The bride's father came back into the room with her elder brother, who immediately began to speak out. "My sister, your bride, is very sick. You cannot take her with you today, for she

risks dying on the road!”

The First Delegate grew pale; his forehead furrowed as though the plough had just passed over it. “We do not leave here without the bride. Otherwise this affair will finish in blood,” he said with a firm voice, looking at the weapons that were hanging from the walls of the room. “You are of good family, and therefore you must know the Custom well enough,” he added, staring at the bride’s father.

The latter lowered his eyes for a moment, then raised them again and began to recite the verses from the Kanun: “For the Delegates shall take the bride, even if she be on her deathbed. Even if they must drag her shall they take her. Therefore get her ready!” he commanded, looking towards the doorway beyond which the womenfolk were awaiting his decision.

“She has not even a voice for weeping!” groaned the bride’s mother, who had stood just behind the doorway while holding on to the last thread of hope. “Be silent, woman! Have you not heard what I have said?” her husband replied with a broken voice.

“If she should die, where shall she go?” her brother insisted. The question took the Delegates by surprise. The First Delegate took counsel with the others and with the bride’s father. Thus they agreed that if the bride should die before reaching the Cursed Pass, her body would be given back to her family. But if she should die after that place the body would belong to the bridegroom’s family. So they remained in silence until someone came to tell them that all was ready.

They took leave of the landlord and went out into the courtyard amid the angry faces of the bride’s kin. They went to the boundary and waited there for the bride. She came out, the women around her weeping aloud to cover her silence. Her brother embraced her, handed her over to the Delegates, then disappeared into the vineyard with his hands in his hair.

They lifted her onto the horse and so departed; this time they did not shoot their guns so as not to worsen matters further. The sun was burning. The bride’s aunt, who had joined the nuptial procession, came to her holding a handkerchief to wipe away her sweat. “How are you, Martha?” she whispered to her, clutching her frozen hand.

“I am dying. Can you not take this veil off me? I cannot breathe.”

“Not here because there are people passing by, but the First Delegate has assured me we will stop at the Good Spring.”

“I am certain I will not get so far,” came the answer. “Do you not hear the singing of the bird of ill-omen? It foretells my destiny.” She attempted to raise her arm to point to the forest from where the cry of the cuckoo was coming.

They arrived at the Cursed Pass and from there began their descent. Two of the Delegates held the bride’s arms while another supported her head for she was no longer able to keep it up by herself. By now their destination was not far away and the songs that rose from the bridegroom’s house could already be heard.

They arrived at the Good Spring and they took the bride there and let her lie down with her head in her aunt’s lap. Her aunt scooped up a little water and let it pour down on her face. The water evaporated, as if it had touched burning coal. Martha’s expression softened; her body shook, as if lost in a deathly pleasure, and for one moment she opened her dark eyes. The sun’s rays reached her pupils and dissolved into a final tear, which dropped quickly but did not reach her chin. Her eyes closed.

"My little one, she's gone," her aunt murmured to the Delegates, who watched dismayed as she tore her hair and closed herself in her own grief. The unusual procession came near the courtyard. The women stopped singing as soon as they saw the bride, now draped belly down over the horse's saddle, her hanging hands almost touching the earth. "It is time to begin weeping," said the First Delegate, making the dancer stand as still as a stone statue, holding her basket of sweets, rice and walnuts, which should have been thrown with joy over the bride and the Delegates. He walked up to the landlord and clutched his hand, saying only a few words: "May God give you strength! We have brought her home."

Gjergj woke up early. He had to attend the funeral of an old friend of the family. He would be there in the place of his father, who the day before had gone down to the cattle market to sell a cow and two goats. The wedding-funeral had cost them a lot of money. He untied the mule and took it by the halter. He began his journey on foot because he wanted to walk. He was full of thoughts. The day before he had met a friend from his childhood who was trying to cover up his embarrassment. "Anyone can see in your face that you've got something to tell me," Gjergj had said.

The other had hesitated a few moments, but then began to speak: "In the village they're saying that someone saw Martha near the church where she was buried, dressed in the normal clothes of a married woman. Others swear that they've seen her by the Good Spring in her marriage dress. They say it's because of that dispute between your family and hers about which clothes she was to be buried in. Neither here nor there – now, as in this life," the friend concluded lowering his gaze.

Gjergj hadn't known what to say, but had decided to go and speak to the parish priest to ask him if any of this was possible. He would go there after the funeral. He found himself thinking of hornets, but didn't know whether he had really seen them.

He got on the mule and stayed there until he'd reached the spring. A drop of sweat slipped into his eye as he dismounted. He tied the mule to a young maple tree and in his haste to bathe his eye, which was stinging, he passed the juniper bush and its sharp leaves scratched his ankle. While cupping his hands to lift the water, he seemed to hear a girl's merry laugh, to see with the corner of his eye a young woman dressed in red.

He threw the water on his face and quickly turned. No one was there – only the mule whose skin quivered every now and then to shake off the flies. It'll have been the gurgling of the water and the sun's rays, he thought while untying the animal. He cursed it: "What an idiot you are – all the grass you've got around you and you have to go and nibble the leaves of the juniper bush!"

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