

ARACHNA IN METROPOLIS

A short story by Valentina Marinova

„Lord, oh Lord, the sorrow in this world is endless!”

The well-known phrase of Yordan Yovkov’s famous character, Moganina, is often activated in my memory bank when I take a trip somewhere. I remember how adamant my literature teacher in high school was when she insisted that we look for the details in stories (it was only years later that I was convinced of the benefits of „close reading”). For example, after looking so hard at the loose ends of the headscarf worn by Guncho’s wife, I cannot go by a woman wearing a headscarf without checking to see whether it is tied well or whether its ends are loose.

Headscarves are not uncommon on the Balkans and their outskirts. That is probably because, when women let loose and take them off, the grief accumulated inside finds it easier to get out. I don’t know whether the expression „loosen the ends” brings the people from other Balkan nations salvation, but our grief always seems to be described as „not fully described” or „not under control”. Its ends are loose and hang somewhere in the distance, still beyond our field of vision. It is our Tyrannosaurus Rex that snaps at our heels, bites us and takes chunks of flesh until we are reassembled again.

While we were walking toward Notre Dame, Nenad was enthusiastically telling us his stories of trials and tribulations as an immigrant in Paris. He told us with pride about his small leather business, which generated decent income and allowed him to pay for his son’s wedding. Not just anywhere, but in the beating heart of Paris, on Rue de Rivoli. The slightly different version of the *Gentleman for a Day* Balkan syndrome cheered me up.

The little man grows big and lives up to his dreams, who cares if it is only for a day. The scale of one’s dreams is of crucial importance in this equation. Did Nenad find us or did we find him, I am not sure. What I do remember was that I was infected by the crazy idea to walk from District 80 all the way to Notre Dame Cathedral. We were on the verge of getting lost because 5-way street junctions were more of a norm than an exception in Paris, and that made choosing the right path exceedingly difficult. He must have overheard us arguing where to go on one of these junctions

because I heard someone shouting almost in my ear „Ot deka ste, ot deka?” *

From that moment on, he was at our side for several hours making sure we knew our way around the main subway lines and that we could find our way in the city. Nenad came from Pirot and, armed with his Balkan creativity, could strike a conversation with anyone or appear out of nowhere at the head of some of the longest and most exhausting queues. After he volunteered for the job of being our personal tour guide for more than four hours, I started to ask myself why he was doing it and what, if anything, he expected from us in return.

Experience in business makes you used to transactional relationships and, unfortunately, leaves an ugly imprint on your standards for human presence. At the

* Note by the translator. From the Western-Bulgarian folk dialect: „Where are you from?”

end of the day, in addition to the wonderful impressions that everything we saw left in me, I had an answer to that question, too.

While we did the tour of the small galleries in the Latin Quarter, Nenad breezily and rather sparingly mentioned a thing or two about his family. Maybe meeting us woke some invisible neural links to the memories of his family. Apparently, the combination of being perfect strangers to him and being born some 80 kilometers away from his hometown of Pirot evoked in him a complicated feeling of identity, closeness and a state of being removed. While we were at Pont des Arts bridge, where an uncountable multitude of locks kept safe the love of thousands of couples, I believe I saw that as Nenad was resting his elbows on the railings, a tear formed in his green eyes and hurtled toward the turbid green waters of the river. It felt like *déjà vu*. I had seen somewhere else before this mirror symmetry between the moving water and the pain flowing from Nenad's eyes and being carried away by the Senne now. The Senne, which was swelled with tears, flowed like a revelation, an all-seeing eye, containing within itself the grief of millions of eyes. Nenad spoke slowly and ceremonially, he heard his own voice as if from outside of his body, taking the pain out from his throat, or from somewhere deeper still, where it had precipitated – calcified and shapeless – and loaded it into his words. They, in turn, took away its power, made it visible, bare and helpless. But only momentarily.

‘It was more than one hundred years ago’ Nenad freed his voice and his throat relaxed. ‘When they moved the border in 1919, my father’s parents, Grandma Zara and Grandpa Lazar lived in Vrabcha, near Pirot.’

One day Vrabchans woke up and thought it was going to be just a regular day, only to find themselves living on opposite sides of the border. They divided the village because of the Treaty of Neuilly. There were houses where the kitchen would be in Bulgaria and the bedroom, in Serbia. The same happened with yards, fields and grave parks.

‘Grandma and grandpa were engaged. The plan was to get married in the spring. But when the border bisected the village, grandma’s house was in Serbia and grandpa’s, in Bulgaria.’ Separated by the border, they were not allowed to see each other. Because they were young and in love, they believed they should do something about it.

‘Grandpa wrote letters to Belgrade twice, begging them to let him see his fiancé but they never answered. He knew that the letter may never come and time passed by.’

He also knew that the border guards shot to kill. Two weeks earlier they had shot Stanko.

‘He was a good friend of Grandpa’s and the man just wanted to pick his grapes. The guard shot him dead. So Grandpa took his time mulling over what to do. He made plans and watched the border from a distance. No one was allowed to go near the chain link fence. So Grandpa decided to tunnel under it at night. There was a suitable place near the river where there was no ditch, plus it was in the shadows, and the flowing river drowned out any other noise. Grandpa dug his tunnel. He snuck out for a week and ultimately he got to the other side. He decided to go a couple of meters further where he could hide in some bushes and then in the forest

next to the river. Whether fate smiled on him, or the gods of love I am not sure, but he made it by some kind of miracle and went straight to grandma's house. That's the story of how he and grandma Zara got together.'

'Well, my grandpa's mother, Mariola, was beside herself that Lazar would leave home like this. After all, there was men's work to be done and, according to her, it was inappropriate for the groom to live in the house of the bride's parents. She gazed at the river and read beans to see when Lazar would come back home. A month or two passed by and spring rolled around. Mariola took her goats to pasture above the village. As she was sitting there, her back braced against a rock, she saw a group of border guards carrying shovels and doing something near the river. She recognized that something wasn't right and they had discovered Lazar's tunnel.'

Mariola knew that it would take a miracle for her to see Lazar again. Because of her stubborn character, she blamed Zara for everything and mainly that she had lured him away from her.

„Where did you go, Lazar, weren't there enough girls on this side of the border for you that you decided to take your life in your hands?" She kept the tirade going, loosened the ends of her headscarf and sunk in heavy thoughts. Some more time went by and one night a rifle cracked. Mariola knew what was going on „Let him live, Mother Marry!"

In the morning they brought Lazar's dead body to her on a cart. He was shot in the back and the bullet went straight through his heart.'

Nenad stood up. Looked at us. His face was now clear.

'The lord works in mysterious ways. Only our hearts must lead us but our rational minds to not allow it.' He said quietly. 'But that is not the end of the story' a sudden jolt ran through the small, tiny wrinkles on his face.

'When they killed grandpa, everyone in the village heard about it right away. Zara was pregnant with a baby boy.'

She never went to see her dead fiancé. She loosened the end of her headscarf and let the pain flow out. She decided that it was better if she remembered him alive and that she would tell her boy about their love. Mariola, however, could not live with the thought that her Lazar was dead. Wherever she turned she kept seeing Lazar. He came to her and talked to her in her sleep but she could never make out what he was saying. She wasted away. Her pain crushed her. And she blamed Zara for everything. Unable to overcome the hate inside her, she uttered a horrible curse. Only one person heard it, Miro, Lazar's brother who was mentally ill. He followed his mother everywhere like a puppy and kept repeating every word she said. He babbled all the time. People were used to this and usually paid no attention but once they heard him saying: „Zara, Zara, may you have a child of your own and live to mourn his death!" They took pity and told grandma Zara about it. She went to church and asked the father to read a prayer for health for her every Thursday.

'My father, Lazar, was born that autumn and Zara got married to grandpa Milan. I remember him. He was a good man. Mariola died soon after. She never knew she had a grandson. Grandma Zara and grandpa Milan had two more children. The curse never got to them. They grew up healthy. Their lives were not easy, but I am not going to tell you about it now... My wife and I, however, lost our sweet daughter, Maya. She left for the US five years ago and last autumn they called us and told us about the car crash. She was with her boyfriend. Both are gone now. All we have now is Alexander. I already told you about him. He is a smart boy and his girl is

kind and pretty. My thoughts are with them. They built a home together but I keep thinking about them and worry that something bad may happen to them.'

Only half an hour had gone by but it seemed to me that we had been there for ages. I felt somehow small. Memories raced in my head, events linked up in unexpected ways, a part of me was here and a part was stuck in a fairy tale world where every word and every event gained some complex meaning. It was like a fabric my imagination could not stop weaving. I was sure that after the conversation spoken over the quiet current Nenad's family would be alright. My husband was quiet, too.

'It will all pass, Nenad' I said. 'See, the water will carry this pain away!'

When he looked up at us again, I could see that Nenad's eyes had turned bright and blue again and I saw in them specks of gold that were smiling back at me...