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My Poor Sofija

The night has put the village to sleep, the streets are empty, the gates are locked. Only Nana Sofija sits in front of her house, looking at the sky. The moon is as big as a balloon of milk ready to pop. It looked the same that night, a long time ago, when she and Milica sat in front of the house. It got so close to the ground that it seemed it wanted tickle the crowns of the trees. They giggled, took turns laying down in each other's lap, talking. Before going to bed, Sofija went to the outhouse bathroom to wash. She lathered her body eagerly, thinking about the jokes they had told. She stroked her breasts, her belly, her upper arms. She spread her legs to reach what women quietly called down there. A flickering image of Milica's warm eyes came to her, it was as if she was still there. She felt a weird jolt. She spread her lips, then looked left and right to make sure she was alone. Her fingers kept moving. The blood inside boiled up with lust. The moonlight burst over the fields. So, that was it, she knew somehow, just as she knew this was something she shouldn't talk about. Not even to Milica. She almost let it slip once, but how would she make her understand, every jolting pleasure brought back the memory of her body, her scent, her lips, her untangled hair.

One Saturday, they went to a shindy at the village dance hall. Leaning against the wall, they sipped their sodas, swaying to the music. Half an hour passed, and then he burst into the room, Slavko, the local brawler no one wanted to mess with. Sofija caught his eye. She hid behind other bodies, but to no avail, after a few drinks, Slavko came up to her, grabbed her violently and started pulling her toward exit. No one dared say anything. Only Milica sobbed inconsolably. All the screaming, all the struggle, it was futile against his relentless might. The next day Sofija swore to her mother and her father he didn't touch her, she cried through the whole night. It wasn't enough – the whole entire village saw her leave with him. They dropped her bag on the doorstep and shut the door. That was the beginning of Sofija's married life.

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Soon the great war began. The dirt gulped human blood, and there was no lack of it in their house either. He would get drunk and beat her. Abandoned by everyone, Sofija would pour herself a glass too. One, two, three. She drank herself blind for the first time when she gave birth to a dead child. The second was a stillborn too. Slavko swore, cursed, beat her – claiming she did it on purpose. Luckily, the third child was born alive and healthy, but had it been different, he might've beaten her to death. They named the boy Nikola. After the war, she had three more children. She never called on anyone, and no one ever came to her. The children grew under her bleary eye, as weeds in poisonous soil. She had to take care of the animals too. Rakija was her only respite. But all violence comes to an end, and so did Slavko's. He was killed in revenge, and as to where his body was lain, no one ever found out.

The village thought the poor woman's soul would finally find peace, but it was too late for Sofija. Her life became Slavko's tomb. She was a drunk and a bad mother, whose children wandered the village roads full of lice. They were ashamed of their stumbling, word-slurring mother. Nikola took after his father, he stole, threatened, beat. One morning, at dawn, police came to Sofija. They took her to the railway near the village. "Yes, it's Nikola," she said. First the father, now the son, the people and the officials were alarmed. They agreed the rest of the children should be protected from the bullets, and from such a mother.

Drinking, loneliness and poverty aged her before time. The children had long been living in other republics. They wrote every so often, and less so, talked on the payphone. She never complained or asked for anything. Even drunk, she knew she had nothing to ask of them. She worked the fields, breaking her back from dawn to dusk, taking their reproves: "C'mon woman, faster, to hell, you hag." Winters were hard. She would throw a blanket around her shoulders and knit, mittens, hats, scarfs, whatever someone might need. She would also knit a little something for her children and grandchildren, as a present, in case they ever came by. Her neighbor gave her his small black and white TV because he got a new color set. She loved boxing and Muhammad Ali. She would sit through the entire night, waiting for a match. When Ali thrashed his opponents, she'd set the yarn down in her lap, and then clench her fists, jerking her shoulders. Only in that ring, she thought, the good fights the evil, beating and trampling it in the name of some justice which exists nowhere else.

One Sunday, the neighbor received a late delivery of firewood. He didn't have time to chop and stack it, so he asked Sofija. In return, he promised her a nice piece of bacon, two bags of flour and some kaymak. She was just stacking the beech on the cart, log by log, when she heard someone behind her back call her by her name. She stood up and turned around. She barely recognized Milica. A few months after the shindig she had married too and moved away to another village. They hadn't spoken or seen each other since. And now, after all those years, they were finally standing next to each other again. Milica hugged her tightly, mumbling through tears: "My poor Sofija." Sofija stood stiff as a tree stump in her embrace. Why is Milica crying – because of the old days? Because of her own or Sofija's fate? She felt emptiness seep in, and just like she had done back then in that outhouse bathroom, she took her dress off, spread her legs, slipped her gnarled fingers inside, then squeezed, pressed and stroked – wanting just a glimmer of that old pleasure, only to feel nothing. The next day, she found a hundred-dinar bill in her pocket. She thought of Milica, unsure what to feel. She took out the bill, looked at it, then put it back in. And then again, and again.

This morning the news of Milica's death came to the village. She died in that other village, surrounded by her children. Sofija sits in front of her house, looking at the moon. She doesn't understand, how can everything that walks walk under its bright shine? How can we fit everything that fits in us under its white light? It makes her cry, but there are no tears left. There is no joy, no children, no Milica. She goes inside the house, locks the door and turns on the radio. She takes a glass and a bottle of rakija from the cabinet. Her head keeps slumping on the table, as if it's Milica's lap. She keeps going, she drinks and she pours until the moon hands the sky over to the sun. And in that moment, her whole being fades into unconsciousness.

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