

Wound

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Gaspar Syeveratz considered himself fortunate to get the conductor job at Vrbitza railroad. The prior conductor got run over by the train, lost both his legs high above the knee. An ambulance crew made tourniquets to stop the bleeding and applied a blood clotting powder to the wounds. Gaspar recognized that there was a silver lining in this horrible accident, *sreca u nesreci* as the saying goes, as he got the injured man's job although he didn't have the necessary experience. That warm September morning, when the local train from Belgrade had struck the old conductor, Gaspar was dressed in his good navy blue suit, a remnant of better times when he traded marten fur, which allowed him to polish his appearance. With black curly hair above his high forehead and hazel eyes, a family trait of Syeveratz men, he looked younger than his forty-five years. He was offered the job right there by the stationmaster dressed in an ill-fitted suit and gold-rimmed spectacles. The man shook Gaspar's hand before they even washed the blood spattered on the platform, "*Dosli ste k'o porucen*, you came right on the money, Comrade Gaspar!" As he was getting ready for work, Gaspar turned up the crackling radio to hear the news about the first visit made by an American President to Yugoslavia. More than two hundred thousand citizens lined the streets, cheering as President Nixon and Marshall Tito waved from the open-top Mercedes Benz limousine, driving in a motorcade from the airport to the Old Palace in Belgrade center. Gaspar listened carefully as he shaved. The newscast talked with equal importance about their outlook on 1970s world problems, overcoming the Middle East crisis, and the two statesmen's attire, Tito in a dark, double-breasted suit and Nixon in a light blue-gray coat and checkered tie.

His wife Yana ironed Gaspar's dark blue train conductor's uniform and sent him off with hot rose-hip tea in one thermos bottle and bean stew in another. At work he showed good humor

and politeness to all, including passengers, his train crew, and the engine crew. He inspected the train tickets, overlooked cardboard boxes with noisy chickens under the passenger seats in second class, and helped young women, traveling alone in first-class coaches, place their leather suitcases in racks above their seats. He supervised the firemen and dispatchers, always sympathetic to hear about some ungrateful son who didn't send money back home or the locomotive engineer's last hangover. He moved through the cars listening for the train's whistle before each station and promptly collected the fares from the new passengers. His heart pumped with the rhythm of the locomotive's engine, starting slow and then increasing in speed.

The stationmaster noticed how Gaspar courteously and laboriously carried out his duties and gave him a promotion. His new job was in the office copying the daily ticket sales and cash receipts into permanent office ledgers. He worked diligently, and his penmanship was meticulous. He aligned his rows and columns perfectly. He classified the documents into tidy piles and stored them neatly in drawers. Every time the stationmaster glanced at Gaspar's logs he tapped Gaspar on his back, "Very good, very good."

The stationmaster asked Mara, the cleaning woman, to make two black coffees every morning. In the back room where the brooms, buckets, and mops were kept, Mara ground the coffee in a brass hand grinder as she waited for the water to boil on a hot plate. After she served the stationmaster, she'd bring coffee to Gaspar's desk on a small gold-colored tray that held a long-handled copper pot with a lip, a Turkish cup, teaspoon, and two cubes of sugar. They'd exchange the same pleasantries every morning.

"Good morning, Comrade Gaspar, have some coffee."

It was then Gaspar's turn to dip one sugar cube in the black coffee, biting off a small piece before each sip.

"Comrade Mara, better to let the village perish than the old customs!"

Roused by the hot drink, he would then take off his coat, roll up the sleeves of his white shirt, and begin to write. From time

to time he'd walk to the window to stretch his legs and watch the passengers board or get off the train, enveloped in locomotive steam, daydreaming about women with silk shawls over their shoulders, perfumed powder lingering on their milky skin. Every afternoon Gaspar saw the same older gentleman, out for a stroll, walk past his window. The man wore a white summer suit, a straw hat, and light brown leather shoes. He walked slowly with his hands at his sides, his back straight like a ruler, as if he had a purpose and somewhere to be, a beatific smile on his bearded face. Gaspar nicknamed him Professor.

In his office even dust speckles filled Gaspar with a proprietor's pride. He noticed a dusty plant in one corner. Being in a good disposition after treating himself to a shoeshine that morning, he moved the plant on the windowsill. He dusted its leaves with a damp handkerchief and filled an empty milk bottle with water from the station fountain. He made a habit of watering the plant every payday. Before long the plant grew two shiny, new leaves. He decided to look up the plant's name at the library next time he went to town. He could also visit his son Tomo at the *Oslobodjenje* newspaper building farther down the street. But that could wait. Gaspar preferred not to change his daily routine.

His zealousness didn't escape the stationmaster's attention. He called Gaspar into his office. A picture of Marshal Tito hung on the wall with the slogan, "*Comrade Tito we swear to you, from your path we will not depart.*"

"I'm very pleased with your work, Comrade Gaspar," the stationmaster said, rubbing his palms together. "In addition, I want you to keep track of the payroll. You will see, just basic accounting, adding and subtracting a few numbers here and there. If you do well, you could advance to a tariff inspector one day!"

That Saturday Gaspar got a raise. He bicycled to the farmer's market and filled his rucksack with leg of lamb, buttermilk, potatoes, and apples. He stopped by the grocer to get cornmeal, yeast cake, raw Arabian coffee beans for Yana to roast, sugar, and tobacco. He also bought a perfumed lilac soap for Yana. On a day

like this, he allowed himself fanciful spending on his wife. It wasn't her fault that he had married a bride his father found for him, he thought. Yana was sixteen then, and he had just turned eighteen. He just did whatever his father asked him to do.

Once, after he had been drinking late with his chess friends, Gaspar confessed to Tomo, "I married your mother on first sight, as if buying the suit seen on a window dummy. Just like that, without thinking. After you've paid for your suit, you look around the store and realize that they just got the latest fashion in. Handsome new colors and fabrics. But you're stuck with your suit from the shop window."

He whistled on his way home. As he approached the first house in the railroad settlement, he noticed a plump woman on the front stairs of her house. She sat like a man, with her legs wide apart. A sleeveless gingham dress barely covered her knees. She smoked, looking at the sunset, and when their eyes met she didn't flinch or cover her legs. Her red hair dyed with henna reminded him of the mahogany cabinet in the stationmaster's office. He wondered if the woman's hair would have the same cedarwood-scented fragrance.

When he got home, the house was quiet, empty. Damn woman! Where was she? Wandering around like a gypsy! Gaspar took the lilac soap he had planned to give her and went into their bedroom. The scent of lilacs brought back memories of his childhood home, of the sweet, sharp smell of a purple lilac tree that grew near their house.

During World War II, when Gaspar was a youngster watching over their milk cow in a field not far from the village, he'd seen a tall woman in black in the distance. She was alone and empty-handed, no sheep or goats in her trail, no firewood on her back, not even a field basket or water bucket in her hands. She waved to him to come closer and only then did he recognize his mother. He stopped in his tracks, because she had left a good week before to go to their hut high up on the mountain plateau. At the summer meadows with the other women, she would draw wool on a distaff,

knit, and make soft cheese and yogurt while the sheep grazed on the plateau pastures. But how did she get back here? They did not expect her to return for another month.

His mother waved to him again. "Gaspar! It's me."

He ran to her, but she held out her hand for him to stop a few steps away. He noticed that she stood on the barren slope on her one good leg. Her peg leg was missing. How could she balance? Or walk? As a young woman she had been left crippled after a neglected field wound caused putrefaction of her left leg. People in the village thought that her suitor would cancel the wedding, but Gaspar's father spurred his stallion toward Silvana's house, carrying apples, three gold ducats, and an embroidered handkerchief. He kneeled by her bedside with her father's blessing, and greeted her: "God bless your wounds, Silvana!" The village carpenter made her a hollow peg leg out of linden wood to fit the remaining stump of her left leg, and she adjusted to it. Gaspar knew that his mother could walk to the mountain plateau or down in one day. But not with only one leg.

"Where is your wooden leg, Mother?"

"I lost it," she said. "Now, hurry home and tell your father to hide. The Chetniks are coming. Run, son, run!"

He flew like a falcon downhill, turning only once to see his mother's black silhouette on the same spot. He heard thunder and a gust of wind pushed him forward. He found his father clearing the boulders on their land. They alerted the others, who ran for hidden caves nearby. Gaspar and his father climbed the hillside behind their house. As soon as they closed the shrub-covered entrance of their secret dugout, they heard the neigh of a horse.

Gaspar peered through the brambles and saw the Royalist guerrillas stop by his house. The standard-bearer carried a black flag with a white skull and crossbones with the inscription FOR KING AND COUNTRY—FREEDOM OR DEATH. The men had big beards and mustaches, fur caps and pistols and knives. Only the commander rode a horse. He lifted his German Luger in the air and fired. He shouted, "Anybody home?! *Ej, domacine!*"

But no one emerged. It did not take them long to understand that the village was empty. The commander ordered his men to search for food supplies. The Chetniks' troops plundered potatoes, corn cobs, and slabs of bacon from town cellars and left in a hurry calling, "Long live King Peter II!"

The sky turned black in the middle of the day, and the faithful rain came down. The wind moaned, and after the downpour stopped, torrents of water spilled down the hill slopes, but Gaspar never abandoned his post, watching the winding path for his mother. Instead, two rainbows appeared in the misty sky, the colors of his mother's embroidered linen—crimson roses, apricots, gold, rosemary, forget-me-not, plums, and violets. She must have taken shelter, for the night. *Black Mountain women are stronger than men*, his father always said. *Your mother can take care of herself.*

In the morning when she still hadn't returned, Gaspar and his father walked a good two hours up the mountain to the summer meadows, the gray falcons gliding over their heads, shrieking, the scent of wild thyme sharpening. They didn't hear sheep bleat or his mother's song, but the grass was red—their slaughtered sheep lay in pools of blood between the blooming heather and blueberry bushes. Gaspar ran to their hut, but it stood empty. Only his mother's wooden leg lay on the floor, the three gold ducats she kept hidden inside it gone. He ran outside calling his mother, but the snow-peaked mountains echoed only his own voice: "Mama! Mama! Mama!"

He found her sitting on the ground, leaning against the tall haystack, her hair unbraided, her throat a deep wound. When her eyes seemed to flicker toward him, he crept closer. "Mama?" he whispered. He leaned over to meet her gaze, but she kept looking into the distance. And then he understood that the slight movement he'd detected in her eyes was only the fast moving clouds reflected in her irises, only the wind that rustled the dry grass around her hair, and he buried his face into the warm hay to silence his howl.

Father carried her body in his arms all the way back to the house. That night, during the all-night wake, he told Gaspar

that she couldn't have walked all the way down and up on one leg, that it was her ghost that spoke to him and warned him of the danger.

At dawn, the wailers left the side of his mother's coffin, the ragged hills reverberating with sounds of sorrow. His father bent down and with his lips lightly brushed his wife's mouth and said, "Goodbye Silvana, my fearless angel." Gaspar stood by his mother's open grave while his father moistened the earth with red wine, "May the black earth lie lightly on you, Silvana. Now, in God's name, farewell!" Gaspar was a motherless child now, but vowed to remember his mother and her deed. They had to avenge her death, or her soul would wander this earth forever.

Gaspar often dreamed of the encounter with his mother, running up to her and waking up just before he could touch her. He wondered why she didn't let him come close to her, why she stopped him, and if she hadn't, would he have run into an apparition, the cold empty air? Would she ever visit him again? He shivered.

But what tormented him the most was his anger. How could she leave him? He could hardly imagine the house without his mother. From outside, everything looked the same, as if she would come out any minute to greet him. But she wouldn't. His mother was dead. Never again would she stoke the fire and bake him fresh *pogaca* before dawn.

"You're not a child anymore. God bless your wounds, my brave son!" his father told him.

For a long time after that, Gaspar could never feel full enough or warm enough. He took to drinking one liter of hot milk every day and sleeping on the hay in the barn, his arms wrapped around his mother's wooden leg. And in the morning he entered the cold, empty kitchen to find marks on the dirt floor left by his father's all-night pacing, and followed the footsteps of his grief.

Now, he still held dear her wooden leg. He had carried it all the way to Vrbitza. Hearing Yana's footsteps, Gaspar hid the lilac soap

in the hollow of his mother's wooden leg and closed the bedroom door behind him.

Yana stood in the kitchen, putting her apron on over her dress. He could see her chest rise and fall. She seemed short of breath. But, why hadn't she been at home waiting for him?

"This is how you greet your husband?" he said. "With an empty house and cold tea?" He grabbed the pot from the kitchen table and emptied the old tea on the floor. Then he pulled out a chair and sat, reading the newspaper while Yana silently mopped the floor. She stirred the cornmeal into the boiling water, added some salt, garlic, and lard. She transferred the mush into a baking dish and put it in the oven.

Tomo came in as they were sitting down to supper. He took two squares of warm corn bread, a bite of sheep cheese, and a few cracklings. He dipped each crackling into salt and ate silently. Yana pushed a cup of cold buttermilk in his direction. Tomo looked up.

"I have to write an article about the gypsy camp on the left river bank," he said.

Yana grabbed a dish rag. "Here, let me clean the kitchen table so that you can work." She wiped the table hurriedly.

Gaspar looked away in disgust. He was a well-respected railroad clerk and his wife could neither read nor write! He moved the toothpick around his mouth. "Who wants to read about gypsies? Not me, for sure. What kind of scatterbrained editor do you work for?"

"It's not for an assignment, Father. If I write a real story, I thought, I might turn my boss around," Tomo said.

"I'm surrounded by fools," Gaspar said. He opened his cigarette case and rolled some of the new tobacco into thin onion skin paper. He went out to smoke, leaving the pungent hay fragrance of his cigarette hanging in the kitchen.

In his new position at the station, Gaspar was required to document everything from "cargo received" to the daily records of expenditures. He was expected to note the names of the workers,

hours worked, rate of pay, and total monthly wages in the payroll ledgers. And then there were invoices, vouchers, supplies, ticket sales, freight errors and corrections, pension records, monthly and annual reports. This was much more than merely copying the daily ticket sales and into the ledgers as he'd done before. His eight years of schooling were meager preparation for his new duties.

He worked longer and longer hours, wrestling with the obstinate calculations. He returned home cross and exhausted, and sometimes Yana wasn't even home. But he nevertheless continued his labors, the ledgers spread on an oilcloth at the kitchen table. The numbers danced in front of him in a haze. Long into the night, he wiped big drops of perspiration from his forehead with a crumpled handkerchief, muttering under his breath, "What have I done, what have I done?"

To fix the dancing numbers Gaspar went to the eye doctor, carrying a big box of chocolate candies to expedite the service. After he got his spectacles, he was filled with hope. His vision was now corrected and the numbers would now comply. But still they changed places at random, rolling around, hissing at him. His methodical columns dissolved, spinning the books out of order, and he had no one to turn for help. Even the office houseplant turned against him and started dropping leaves one by one.

At least, he breathed a sigh of relief when his friend Professor walked past his window with his usual amiable smile on his lips. Of course, the old gentleman wasn't really his friend, and most likely not even a professor, but Gaspar counted on Professor's routine; it gave his workday a sort of clockwork precision. But his calculations were anything but precise. He performed them daily without any sense of whether his answers were right or wrong. When the pile of papers on his desk grew suspiciously tall, Gaspar hurriedly filed them into the drawers, unfinished. *Oh, Gaspar, Gaspar,* he muttered to himself, *they want to humiliate you again. Gaspar, you stupid fool!*

He dreaded the stationmaster's visits and used various excuses to avoid him. One day, though, while deep in thought, he ran into the stationmaster on a platform. "Comrade Gaspar, I want you in

my office immediately!” As the freight train clanked by, Gaspar followed the stationmaster through the white cloud of sulfurous smoke.

“The regional inspector is coming to look over the records tomorrow,” the stationmaster said, prying into Gaspar’s eyes. He couldn’t emphasize enough what this control examination meant for his office. His reputation depended on it. The stationmaster accentuated each word: “Comrade Gaspar, have I made this clear?”

That afternoon Gaspar slipped away to look for his son at the *Oslobodjenje* newspaper building in Vrbitza center, but Tomo was out on an assignment. Probably wasting his time at the gypsy camp. Tomo’s boss must be a blockhead to encourage such rubbish!

On his way back to the station Gaspar saw the Professor coming out of a tavern up ahead, so he hurried to catch up with him. Wouldn’t you know it, Professor frequented *Kod Mice Varalice* tavern! Gaspar quickly checked his trousers for wrinkles and dirt, dusted his jacket’s lapels and wiped his shoes with his handkerchief.

Gaspar had hoped to befriend Professor one day, picturing the two of them taking a stroll along the river promenade lined with weathered oak benches, then sitting down to play chess. It may be that he wasn’t educated like Professor, but he could beat anybody in chess!

The old gentleman shuffled down the road, his hands limp by his sides, as usual. Only then did Gaspar notice that Professor’s hat was a bit askew, and that he slightly swayed and stumbled, halted, and lurched forward again.

After Professor disappeared around a corner, Gaspar cautiously proceeded ahead. As soon as he turned the corner, though, Gaspar saw Professor’s hat right in front of him. The rest of the Professor’s face and body was hidden by the large shrub. Gaspar waited for the Professor to continue his walk, but the hat didn’t move. Gaspar pulled out an almost empty pack of *Zelena Morava* cigarettes from his breast pocket, lit one, and inhaled deeply. He cleared his throat, preparing to salute Professor in his most cordial, and at the same time, most respectful manner. “My name is Gaspar

Syeveratz, Transportation Clerk at Vrbitza Office, at your service,” he planned to introduce himself. The hat still didn’t budge. Gaspar made a couple of reluctant steps forward, and then, not anymore obstructed by the large shrub, he saw Professor before him, urinating between the two trees. Like a dog.

Gaspar froze, as he came to realize what Professor’s staggering meant. “*Majko draga,*” he muttered to himself, “he’s a drunkard. *Pjano obicni!*” This whole time Gaspar had believed that Professor must be somebody respectable!

Back in his office, Gaspar slumped in his chair. He leafed through the daily incoming receipts and entered them methodically into the ledger, but the numbers stumbled lazily about the page. Gaspar looked across his desk at the window, at the wilted plant on the windowsill, covered in dust. He had forgotten to water it and it was now dead. He regretted that he didn’t even know its name.

It seemed to Gaspar that all his life he had been alone. Everybody deserted him. All he wanted was for his wife to be at home when he returned from work, and for his son to respect him. Instead, Yana was out wandering like a tramp and Tomo, that good-for-nothing son of hers, was spending his time writing about gypsies! But he himself was not that much better off than those gypsy bums—he could be out of work tomorrow! Let’s see how Yana and Tomo were going to manage without his wages! Then they’d appreciate him!

Gaspar slumped even lower in his chair. He was almost unemployed and now he couldn’t get out of his head the image of Professor’s flaccid flesh between his pudgy fingers as he stood in front of the tree with his pants open.

The next day Gaspar watched helplessly as the regional inspector, a short and round man, scrutinized the accounting ledgers. The room was very quiet. Gaspar stood by the window, more dead than alive, after a long sleepless night. The stationmaster paced around the office with his arms crossed behind his back. The regional inspector spat between his fingers and slowly turned the pages.

“Comrade Gaspar deserves a pat on the back for taking care of our books,” the stationmaster offered encouragingly to the regional inspector, who ran his fingers down the columns, silently moving his fat lips as he examined the numbers.

“He has a good memory,” the stationmaster continued, “and he has proved himself to be good in dealing with timetables and fares.” He turned to look at Gaspar, who avoided his gaze. The stationmaster coughed, forcing Gaspar to look up. He gave a short jerk of his head in the direction of the ledgers, then stared intently at Gaspar from across the room. He pierced into Gaspar’s eyes, and then suddenly collapsed into the nearby armchair. It became clear to Gaspar that the stationmaster recognized the horror in Gaspar’s eyes and knew full well that something was terribly wrong with the ledgers, just as Gaspar, in that brief glimpse, understood that he was not the only one unqualified for his job.

Wearing wretched expressions of condemned men, they both quickly glanced at the regional inspector who at that moment started sharpening his pencil. Gaspar discreetly pushed a heavy crystal ashtray in his direction to dispose the shavings. The stationmaster grinned a ghastly smile at Gaspar as the regional inspector solemnly closed the last ledger.

“Well, how about that coffee now, comrades?” the regional inspector said in a cheerful voice, getting up. He tucked his *mastiljava* pencil in his breast pocket.

The stationmaster jumped to open the door for him. “No problem, this way please. Mara, bring two coffees and two slivovitz in my office, at once! And a platter of prosciutto and cheese! I hope you have a good appetite, Comrade Inspector!”

“Do I ever! Yesterday, my neighbor complained of being so poor, not even having enough to buy herself some bread. I told her to look up at my example—I got myself stuffed with lamb roast and potatoes, why should I even bother with bread?!” The stationmaster laughed heartily and escorted the regional inspector to his own office for a meal. Gaspar was left alone with his dead houseplant.

When later that morning Mara failed to serve Gaspar's coffee as usual, he pretended that he didn't notice it. He smiled apologetically at her. "Oh, I was just about to tell you not to go to all that trouble, comrade Mara, I had some coffee already."

The cleaning woman stared blankly at him and shrugged. "Comrade Gaspar, I just listen to the stationmaster's orders."

At the end of his shift, Gaspar bicycled back home with a heavy heart, talking to himself in a low, angry voice, as if fighting an invisible enemy. It was now obvious to him that the whole system was rotten, and while he, Gaspar, was hitting rock-bottom, his superiors indulged in *meze!* You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. Slivovitz and prosciutto, indeed!

As he approached the railroad settlement, he slowed down in front of the plump woman's house. She sat on top of the stairs as usual, smoking and looking at him through the smoke. The sun shone on her bare legs and her red hair fell softly on her naked shoulders. Did she wait for him, he wondered? He could see her white thighs above her carelessly hitched dress. The woman smiled and beckoned to him to come closer. He saw himself getting off his bicycle, leaving it in the grass with one wheel still spinning, as he climbed the stairs and sat next to her. Without saying anything, she patted her lap, and he placed his head in the warm softness between her thighs. With her free hand, she smoothed his hair, slowly, absentmindedly, continuing to smoke. Gaspar closed his eyes, his arms wrapped tightly around her legs. As he found himself overwhelmed with fatigue, he only had time to think how he had finally found something that was long lost to him, and then he was fast asleep. ∞