

ONE WINTER MORNING

The boy woke to a house so quiet, he could hear the grandfather clock ticking across hallway. He glanced at the shadow his rocking horse cast on the floor by the window and thought it must be late morning.

He wondered why his grandmother, his Buna, hadn't come to help him dress, her voice softening his endless complaints: the itchy collar of his starched shirt, the uniform too tight at the elbows, the woolen socks made for a peasant. Some mornings she called him the Lazy Prince of Lost Hopes; others she urged him to grow up, be a good boy and get ready for school. At the word school, the boy cringed; he hated being there especially during winter recess, when, cooped up in the auditorium, he had to endure the teasing and the finger poking of boys taller and stronger than him.

He waited in bed for Buna's hands to pull the goose feather quilt away from his body, her smiling presence ready to pour out love, thick as honey to last him a full day. With his eyes closed, he played the game of walking imaginary flights of stairs, counting the steps up and down, a game he invented while waiting for things to happen. This time he thought he would go up to number thirty, but soon he got tired and lowered his bare feet to the floor. He yelled out "Where is everybody?" waited, then added "I'm freezing!" a complaint lost in the room emptiness.

He walked to the window and placed his forehead against the glass pane, but drew back immediately from the cold surface. Outside, tiny snowflakes were trying to stick to the corners of the window frame, only to be lifted up by the wind in swirling sweeps. Dunes of snow were turning the garden into a white Sahara. Not long ago the boy had learned about Earth's vast deserts and some of its highest mountains. He could find them on the globe in his father's library, pronounce their foreign names and, encouraged by his mother's prompt nod, even able to recite a few geographical facts. His father, the professor, was really proud of him, so proud that he bought him two books, one about rivers and oceans and one about animals. The boy liked the last one best, since he dreamed of becoming a zoo keeper, and also because the book had plenty of illustrations, and a double colorful picture in the middle of it, one side of Mongolian wild horses and the other of Irish ponies.

The silence made him wonder if it were Sunday or a national holiday he was not aware of, but welcomed it as a free time to read a book about animals or ride his rocking horse. For awhile he pondered the words Tante Ortansa, his father's sister, had said to his mother: "He's too big *pour son cheval a bascule*. This infantile behavior should be discouraged." He didn't know all the words – his aunt had just started teaching him French– but he believed that it was something related to his toy horse. The word 'infantile' puzzled him; he wasn't sure if it meant a disease or something he had done wrong that he should be ashamed of.

The boy loved his rocking horse; the soft leather reins, the yellow yarn tail, the wooden croup brought to a chestnut polish by generation after generation of small riders. Most of all he liked the soothing motion, that back and forth swing that brought dreams of faraway lands or lulled him when he had to change the end of unpleasant stories.

There, sitting on the wooden saddle, he would now alter the end of *El Zorab*, the ballad Father read to him the night before. It was a sad story of a Bedouin forced to sell his Arabian horse to a mean Pasha so he could afford to buy food for his children. But after the trade was done the Bedouin realized that he could not part with his horse. He went back to the Pasha to return the golden coins and asked for his horse back. The Pasha refused and even threatened to have his servants beat him up and throw him in jail. Desperate, the Bedouin killed his beloved horse.

The boy didn't like the end of the story. Father, in his lecture-hall voice, explained the intricacies of the Bedouin's dilemma, his love for his children and his love for his horse, also a member of his family. The boy understood all these, but he didn't like the killing, the blood dripping from the dagger, trickling red from one illustration to the next. "Why did the Bedouin have to kill his own horse? Couldn't he take the money, buy food for his family and also buy a new colt?" he said, tears choking his words. He couldn't see his father's face, but he heard his words as he was leaving the room: "The boy is too sensitive for his age. He is treated more like a Persian prince than a growing young man." He crossed the hall to the library to his own books in which death was reduced to a word or to a black and white photograph.

Now, as he stood by his toy, the boy considered another ending to the ballad. Soon his thoughts went to real horses, their tragic end in battles, brought up by exhaustion at the edge of a country road or killed by their own masters. He wondered if, as a child, his father had liked horses the way he liked them, if he had ever stopped and turned his head when a coach passed, the driver stiff in his buttoned-up tunic, the horses shaking the red pompons adorning their forelocks. He decided that his father had always been a professor with a stern face and a serious voice.

The boy was not afraid of his father. He knew he loved him, a different kind of love, but still love. What he didn't like were his father's dark moods, evenings when he entered

the dining room with the words: "Today the imbeciles came to my classes. They stayed over for two of my lectures." At his words the women of the house would tense. The boy's mother would drop her hands in her lap while Tante Ortansa would switch to French as Safta, the maid, would bring in the soup tureen. "What could they learn from your lectures? They need brains to understand organic chemistry," his aunt would say, as soon as Safta would tip-toe out of the dining room. "Did they say something to you? Did they ask questions?" his mother would turn her worried face to her husband, her dark eyes searching for answers. "*Ils sont partis sans une parole,*" his father would reply, watching the door for the maid's return. Buna would say nothing, only her hands would tighten on the edge of the table, as if everything were bound to take a wild ride out of the room into the city.

How could the imbeciles be admitted to a university where the entry exam was one of the most difficult tests of all the country schools? Tante Ortansa had once pointed out to him that, since he knew how to read, he should start preparing for the exam, provided that he really wanted to be somebody, not a worthless zoo keeper.

Why didn't his father ask the imbeciles to leave the auditorium? Why didn't he say something to them? After all he was the Professor. The boy wondered but never questioned; he knew to keep quiet and just watched his parents' eyes locked into each other's gaze while the soup was getting cold and Tante Ortansa was getting hot, red in the face, firing French words like bullets.

He hated the imbeciles; they always brought uneasiness into the house and lonely evenings for him. There were empty hours without reading time with his father, without legends of Greek gods or other immortal heroes, and even without lilac scented hugs from his mother. Some evenings the mood of the house was so somber that Buna would forget to call him the Prince of her Life, and Tante Ortansa would not insist on conjugating the French verbs of that day. Then he knew not to mount his rocking horse or to wiggle his hands in the shaft of light coming in through the open door. The projected shadows of rabbits, wolves, and mice running on the opposite wall would take place only in his mind as he tried to ease himself to sleep.

The wind rattling a loose gutter outside startled him as he stood, one hand on the reins, the other brushing the woolen mane. He felt a cold draft snake up his legs under his light pajamas. He shivered. From the bottom drawer of his dresser he fished an old shirt, a pair of pants, socks, and a sweater. He was amazed at how simple it was to get dressed without Buna's help. Fastening the buttons one by one he felt grown-up, but he also felt sad as if the accomplishment didn't belong to him, but to another boy, a strange one who shared his face and his clothes.

The kitchen seemed cold and unfamiliar; no shards of eggshells left on small plates, no empty coffee cups in the sink, no smudges of crimson lipstick on the brim of water

glasses and no sign of Safta working at the stove. The dining room was also deserted; chairs undisturbed, the long table still covered with the evening tablecloth, no crumpled napkins, and no bread crumbs. He wondered why everybody had left without breakfast when his father had always reminded them that the first meal of the day is the most important one and should not be skipped.

From the other side of the house, came a muffled sobbing. He crossed the small hall between the dining room and his aunt's bedroom, leaned slowly against the door and placed one ear to the keyhole. Buna was crying, or his mother, or both of them; he couldn't tell.

Then he heard Tante Ortansa's voice, sharp and clear: "We should have left a long time ago, even before the king left the country in December '47. My brother didn't even consider talking about it. Do you remember, Elvira, the day I wanted to see the French Consul to ask him to write our names on the list of émigrés? Alex forbade me to go. Now we'll all suffer the consequences of his poor decision. He always cared for his lab, his work, and his students. They came first; his family came in second, if it came at all."

"Ortansa, please, he couldn't know that everything would change so fast. Please don't blame him..." his mother's voice sounded nasal as if she was trying to hold back tears.

"And now what's left for us? Soon I'll have to learn Russian to keep my job at the University. French will be banned and the proletarians will teach us Marxism-Leninism, and you, Elvira, will be labeled as the wife of a political enemy, you'll see."

"Please, both of you...keep quiet," Buna's voice urged them. "Let's pray for Alex. Maybe he won't be sent to jail, only detained for questioning, and then released. He didn't do anything wrong. He is a good teacher, everybody knows that. He didn't say anything against the government. I know my son, I know." she said something else, but her words drowned into sniffing and didn't reached his ears.

"But don't you see, Mother? We are intellectuals. In their eyes we are the reactionary class, the enemies," Tante Ortansa said something else in French, a bad word for sure since his mother shushed her and Buna asked them both to keep their voices down.

The boy tried to make sense of what he had heard, when the front door opened with a loud bang. Then the noise of boots being stamped on the threshold followed. He ran to the door and for a moment he didn't recognized Safta as she was standing in the door frame, holding a round loaf of bread to her chest, face red from the blistering wind, her black kerchief sequined with crystals of ice. The maid's eyes fell upon him, and in her dark stare, there was a heavy sadness, a pitiful sense of loss.

The boy couldn't stand that look. He ran to his room, to his rocking horse, to change the beginning of all the bad things he sensed were about to happen. In the grayish light coming through the window, the wooden horse had borrowed Safta's eyes, the same

sorrowful lowness which made him feel uncomfortable, lost and lonely. He felt tears in the corners of his eyes as he swallowed a lump in his throat. With shaky hands he turned its head to the wall. For a long time he cried, then he looked out the window at the snowflakes swirling, drifting, soaring, and powerless at the mercy of the wind.

One winter morning, fifty years later, in America, the boy, now himself a professor of animal behavior at a Midwestern University read an interview with a soldier who, once, had been part of a firing squad. Tortured by memories, and facing his own death of cancer at an old age, the soldier confessed as being one of the participants in a gruesome execution in the winter of 1956. In one single night 230 intellectuals were rounded up like a herd of cattle and put to death in a forest, at the outskirts of the capital.

The professor set down the magazine and gazed out of the window, looking at his teenage sons shoveling the snow, puffs of breath lingering around their mouths, cheeks red from the frigid weather. He tried to remember his first morning without a father, but most of the details of that cold day were lost in time or tinted by the recent findings in the historical article. All he could remember was his wooden horse, the back and forth rocking, and the last story read to him by his father, a long ballad about a Bedouin and his Arabian horse, a story whose sad ending he had never changed.