

Chronicle in Stone

It was a strange city, and seemed to have been cast up in the valley one winter's night like some prehistoric creature that was now clawing its way up the mountainside. Everything in the city was old and made of stone, from the streets and fountains to the roofs of the sprawling age-old houses covered with grey slates like gigantic scales. It was hard to believe that under this powerful carapace the tender flesh of life survived and reproduced.

The traveller seeing it for the first time was tempted to compare it to something, but soon found that impossible, for the city rejected all comparisons. In fact, it looked like nothing else. It could no more support comparison than it would allow rain, hail, rainbows, or multicoloured foreign flags to remain for long on its rooftops, for they were as fleeting and unreal as the city was lasting and anchored in solid matter.

It was a slanted city, set at a sharper angle than perhaps any other city on earth, and it defied the laws of architecture and city planning. The top of one house might graze the foundation of another, and it was surely the only place in the world where if you slipped and fell in the street, you might well land on the roof of a house — a peculiarity known most intimately to drunks.

Yes, a very strange city indeed. In some places you could

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walk down the street, stretch out your arm, and hang your hat on a minaret. Many things in it were simply bizarre, and others seemed to belong in a dream.

While preserving human life rather awkwardly by means of its tentacles and its stony shell, the city also gave its inhabitants a good deal of trouble, along with scrapes and bruises. That was only natural, for it was a stone city and its touch was rough and cold.

No, it was not easy to be a child in that city.

ONE

Outside the winter night had wrapped the city in water, fog and wind. Buried under my blankets, I listened to the muffled, monotonous sound of rain falling on the roof of our house.

I pictured the countless drops rolling down the sloping roof, hurtling to earth to turn to mist that would rise again in the high, white sky. Little did they know that a clever trap, a tin gutter, awaited them on the eaves. Just as they were about to make the leap from roof to ground, they suddenly found themselves caught in the narrow pipe with thousands of companions, asking “Where are we going, where are they taking us?” Then, before they could recover from that mad race, they plummeted into a deep prison, the great cistern of our house.

Here ended the raindrops’ life of joy and freedom. In the dark, soundless tank, they would recall with dreary sorrow the great spaces of sky they would never see again, the cities they’d seen from on high, and the lightning-ripped horizons. The only slice of the heavens they would see henceforth would be no bigger than the palm of my hand, on the occasions when I used a pocket mirror to send a fleeting memory of the endless sky to flicker on the surface of our reservoir.

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The raindrops spent tedious days and months below, until my mother, bucket in hand, would draw them out, disoriented and dazed from the darkness, to wash our clothes, the stairs, the floor.

But for the moment they knew nothing of their fate. They ran happily and noisily across the slates, and I felt sorry for them as I listened to their wild chattering.

When it rained three or four days in a row, my father would push the gutter-pipe aside to keep the cistern from overflowing. It was a very large cistern, extending under most of our house, and if it ever overflowed, it could flood the cellar and wreck the foundation. As our city was all askew, anything could happen then.

As I lay wondering whether people or water suffered more in captivity, I heard footsteps and then the voice of my grandmother in the next room.

“Hurry, get up. You forgot to shift the down pipe.”

My father and mother leapt from their bed in alarm. Papa, in his long white drawers, ran down the dark hallway, opened the little window, and pushed the pipe aside with a long stick. Now we could hear the water splattering into the yard.

Mamma lit the kerosene lamp and led Papa and Grandmother downstairs. I went to the window and tried to see out. The wind was furious, dashing the rain against the windowpanes, making the eaves groan.

I was too curious to stay in bed and I ran downstairs to see what was happening. All three grown-ups looked worried. They did not even notice I was there. They had taken the cover off the cistern and were trying to see how high the water

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had risen. Mamma was holding the lamp while Papa leaned over the side and peered in.

I shivered all over and caught hold of Grandmother's dress. She put her hand on my head affectionately. The wind shook the doors inside and out.

"What a downpour," Grandmother said.

Papa, bent over, was still trying to see inside the cistern.

"Get a newspaper," he told my mother.

She did. He crumpled it up, lit it, and dropped it into the cistern.

"The water's almost up to the rim," Papa said.

Grandmother started murmuring prayers.

"Quick," my father cried, "the lantern."

Mamma, pale as wax, her hands trembling, lit the lamp. Papa threw a black raincoat over his head, took the lamp, and headed for the door. Mamma tossed an old dress over her head and went after him.

"Where did they go, Grandmother?" I asked, frightened.

"Don't be scared," she replied. "Neighbours will come to help with bailing out, and then the cistern will calm down . . ." Her voice became rhythmical, as if she was whispering an old tale: "In this world, each ill has its cure. Only death, my dear boy, has no remedy."

Muffled knocks at a door sounded through the rumbling of rain. Then again, and yet again.

"How can we lower the water, Grandmother?"

"With buckets, dear boy."

I went to the opening and looked down. Darkness. Darkness and a feeling of terror.

"A-oo," I said softly. But the cistern didn't answer. It was

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the first time it had refused to answer me. I liked the cistern a lot and often leaned over its rim and had long talks with it. It had always been quick to answer me in its deep, cavernous voice.

“A-oo,” I said again, but still it was silent. I thought it must have been very angry.

I thought about how the countless raindrops were gathering their rage down below, the old ones that had been languishing there so long getting together with the newcomers, the drops unleashed by tonight’s storm, plotting something evil. Too bad Papa had forgotten to move the pipe. The waters of the storm never should have been let into our well-behaved cistern to stir up rebellion.

There was a noise at the door. Xhexho, Mane Voco and Nazo came in, with Nazo’s daughter-in-law in tow. Then Papa came in, and Mamma, shivering with cold. The door creaked open again. This time it was Javer and Maksut, Nazo’s son, carrying a big bucket.

I was glad to see so many people. Chains and buckets jingled. All the clattering seemed to lift the anguish from my heart.

I stood back a little and watched them all noisily setting to work: Mane Voco, tall, thin and grey; Nazo’s son and her daughter-in-law, so pretty with her gentle, sleepy look; and Xhexho, breathing heavily. Mane Voco, Xhexho and Nazo drew buckets of water which the others emptied into the yard. It was still pouring rain, and from time to time Xhexho would mutter in her nasal voice, “Good God, what a flood!”

As each bucket was emptied out, I said silently to the water, “Go on, get the hell out, if you don’t want to stay in

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our cistern.” Each bucket was filled with captive raindrops, and I thought it would be good if we could weed out the nastiest ones first, the ringleaders; that way we could lessen the danger.

Xhexho put down her bucket and lit a cigarette. “Did you hear what happened to Çeço Kaili’s daughter?” she said to Grandmother. “She grew a beard.”

“You’re joking!” said Grandmother.

“May I be struck blind,” said Xhexho. “A black beard, really, just like a man’s. That’s why her father won’t let her out any more.”

That got my attention. I knew the girl, and it was true that I hadn’t seen her in town for quite a while.

“Oh, Selfixhe,” Xhexho moaned. “What a life we lead! One bad omen after another the good Lord sends us. Like this flood tonight.”

Xhexho, her eyes following Nazo’s beautiful daughter-in-law, barely three weeks married, whispered something in my grandmother’s ear. Grandmother bit her lip. I moved closer to hear, but Xhexho flicked her cigarette butt away and went to the edge of the cistern.

“What time can it be?” asked Mane Voco.

“Past midnight,” my father said.

“I’ll make you some coffee,” Grandmother said, and motioned for me to come with her. We were on our way upstairs when we heard the door creak again.

“More people are coming,” she said.

I stuck my head over the railing to try to see who it was, but I couldn’t. It was dark in the hallway, and terrifying shadows with shifting shapes slipped along the walls, as in a nightmare.

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We went up two flights and Grandmother lit the fire in the winter room. I got back into bed.

Outside the storm howled, and the rooftop chimneys groaned like living things. I began to wonder if the foundations of our house, instead of standing on solid ground, weren't paddling in the treacherous black water of the cistern.

These are bad times, dearie, we're living in a time of trouble and treachery . . . As sleep overcame me to the soothing rumble of brewing coffee, bits and pieces of conversation, words picked up here and there from adults, came to mind, their meanings as slippery as water.

When I woke up the house seemed mute. Papa and Mamma were sleeping. I got up without making a sound and looked at the clock. It was nine in the morning. I went to my grandmother's room, but she was sleeping too. It was the first time nobody had been awake at that hour.

The storm was over. I went to the living-room windows and looked out. Motionless grey clouds covered the high, cold sky. They looked as if they were stuck. Maybe the water they had bailed out of the cistern the night before had now evaporated and risen up into the clouds to frown sternly down at the wet roofs and gloomy earth.

The first thing I noticed when I looked down at the lower part of town was that the river had overflowed. Not surprising, in weather like that. It must have tried all night, as usual, to jump over the bridge, shaking it like a pack-horse trying to throw off a painful load. You could see the mark of the river's wild nocturnal efforts most clearly on its bloody back. Having failed to sweep away the bridge, the river had turned on the road and swallowed it whole. Immensely swollen

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from this gulp, the river was now busy digesting the road. But the road was tough, accustomed to these unexpected attacks, and now lay patiently under the swirling reddish waters, waiting for them to withdraw.

Stupid river, I thought. Every winter it tries to bite the city's feet. But it wasn't as dangerous as it looked. The torrents that spilled down from the mountains were a lot worse. They too, like the river, tried to bite. But while the river would strut haughtily at the city's feet before its attack, the torrents rushing down the gullies leapt treacherously on its back. The gullies were usually empty. They looked like dead, dried-out snakes strewn across the mountainside. But on stormy nights they came to life, puffed themselves up, hissed and roared. And down they hurtled, pale with anger, with their dog-like names — Cullo, Fico, Cfakë — rolling chunks of earth and rock down from the higher sections of the city.

I looked out at the countryside, transformed during the night, and thought that if the river hated the bridge, the road surely felt the same hatred for the river, and the torrents for the embankments and the wind for the mountain that checked its fury. And they all must have loathed the wet, grey city that looked down with contempt on this destructive hatred. But I loved the city most of all because it stood alone against the others in this war.

Without taking my eyes off the roofs, I tried to understand what connection there might have been between last night's storm and Çeço Kaili's daughter, whose beard of bad omen suddenly came back to mind. Then my thoughts turned to the cistern. I got up and went downstairs. The hall was drenched. The buckets and ropes had been left in a heap on

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the floor. Somehow they made the hallway seem even more silent. I walked to the mouth of the cistern, lifted the lid, and leaned in.

“A-oo,” I said to it quietly, as if afraid to rouse some monster.

“A-oo,” answered the cistern almost reluctantly, in a hoarse, strange voice. I knew then that its anger had subsided, but not completely, for its voice was more muffled than usual.

I went back up the two flights to the living room, looked out and saw with joy that far off, at a distance too great to measure, a rainbow had appeared, like a brand-new peace treaty between mountain, river, bridge, torrents, road, wind and city. But it was easy to see that the truce would not last long.

“OK, you can have France and Canada, but give me Luxembourg.”

“You’re kidding! You really want Luxembourg?”

“If it’s all right with you.”

“Well, give me Abyssinia for two Polands, and we could do a deal.”

“No, not Abyssinia. Take France and Canada for two Polands.”

“No way!”

“All right, then, give me back the India I gave you yesterday for Venezuela.”

“India? Here, it’s yours. What do I want with India anyway? To tell you the truth, I changed my mind about it last night.”

“Did you change your mind about Turkey, too, by any chance?”

“I sold Turkey already. Otherwise, I’d give it back to you.”

“In that case you don’t get the Germany I promised you yesterday. I’d rather tear it up.”

“Big deal. You think I care?”

We had been haggling for an hour, sitting in the middle of the street trading stamps. We were still arguing when Javer came by. He said, “Still carving up the world, I see.”