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## THE MARBLE ROOF

**T**HE RICKETY HOUSES STOOD CLOSE TO THE RIVER, just below the medieval Slavonic Krakra fortress, at the edge of the town. During the wet summer, deep muddy puddles dented the streets. Some inventive people put sandstone slabs in front of their homes so their wives and kids would not sink in the mud. Sometimes, white marble slabs lay in the streets; some of the men worked at the Central Railway Station in Pernik, unloading the wagons full of precious white marble from the village of Simit, stealing slabs if they could. A flock of children usually sat under the sheet iron roofs in the neighborhood. Sometimes the kids grew bored and threw stones at the International Express Train Sofia-Athens, other times they argued over green apples and feathers, or pretended they were police officers and thieves.

It was Thursday so the men did not unload marble from the wagons at Pernik Railway Station. That day Simo had invited them all. All folks from Karama gathered in front of his house. The house didn't belong to him; its owners were his two married sisters who had nine children between them: beautiful children with black eyes, darker than the nights in January, the best looking kids in Karama. If you watched these kids play football, it would delight your heart especially if you loved the game. If some decent coach came to Karama, he could choose a dozen lads like the famous football player Stoichkov. And if the coach were clever enough to teach the children of Simo's sisters? My God! Both young and old, from Brazil to Germany, from Poland to Japan would speak about Bulgaria! These children rarely went hungry.

The roof of Simo's house was white marble. Simo had stolen it under the very nose of the station chief at the risk of getting caught, beaten and sacked. Who could nick Simo for stealing white marble from Pernik Railway Station? Fatma was one-hundred-percent convinced nobody could.

Most people knew her Bulgarian name was Natasha, and the Bulgarians sent for her saying, "Please, Aunt Natasha, come home to make a lucky charm for my boy. If he sees a big truck he cries his lungs out and I think this should end. His father's a driver, you know."

So Natasha made lucky charms, told the lad's or lassie's future and saw many good things in it. Everybody recognized she was a very decent lady. She introduced Simo to the snow-white beautiful girl whose eyes were as green as the mountain Vitosha, which towered over the town, far above the taut copper wire clotheslines on which hung dozens of washed clothes. The girl's eyes looked even greener than the mountain; you could take Natasha's word for it.

Simo had purchased twenty-five cases of beer—such a beautiful girl was arriving to Karama for the first time. Simo spent his salary on twelve bottles of brandy; not the cheap swill from Dan's café "Lena." He bought some swill, of course, what difference did it make what alcohol you'd be boozing if you were stone drunk? You wouldn't differentiate between the swill and the gorgeous plum brandy, would you? For the kids he bought Coca-Cola, Pepsi and Sprite. He bought each lassie a hairpin, which cost Simo two lev and you could only find them in the posh shops in the center of Pernik. Simo bought each lad a penknife. Even the youngest toddler of Karama would know when Simo brought his pretty girl to the house with the most beautiful marble roof in town.

Everybody was waiting for Simo; he said he'd arrive at 3 PM. His mother was chatting with Natasha, both of them smoking expensive cigarettes. So did Simo's father and Simo's married sisters. They all usually smoked the cheapest possible gaspers but that day they made an exception. There was no marble from the village of Simit at the railway station and the space around it looked desolate. But everybody guessed it was perfectly all right, and even the babies in swaddling clothes were ready for the feast.

It was past three and Simo still hadn't shown up. The men waited and waited, then shyly and gradually made a decisive move. They started opening the bottles, but not the ones with the gorgeous brandy; they'd crack them open the minute Simo brought his young bride. Guzzling the

swill they had long ago gotten accustomed to, they realized it tasted delicious, like any normal brandy in their mouths.

The children, too, could not endure waiting that long; kids like Stoichkov, the football player, were impatient. Opening their bottles of Coca-Cola, Pepsi and Sprite, they looked seriously secretive indeed. Then they started arguing over one exceptionally beautiful piece of glass and after that about whose penknife was the sharpest.

"Where's that son of yours, Nadi? It's a shame he's late." Fatma said. That day she had put so much rouge on her face that her cheeks shone like the sun itself.

"He'll show up any minute now," Nadi answered. She had borrowed three hundred lev from the café owner Dan, who you went to when you wanted to buy pork chops. She had four daughters and only one son; Simo: slim and tall, with a handsome face, serene like the moon. A smart chap he was, the only man capable of dragging out so much marble under the very nose of the Station Chief!

At last the exhaust smoke of an ancient car mixed with the rain, and a green boneshaker belonging to one of Simo's numerous cousins roared and spluttered, climbing the hill of Karama. Surely it was Simo and his young bride! Then the men simultaneously switched on three old cassette recorders, and "You Are My Everything," the Gypsy love hymn, blared up to the Krakra fortress, to the Vitosha mountain and perhaps even to Athens in Greece. The women and the children also sang at the top of their voices. That song always brought you happiness and if you sang it to a pretty girl, she was certain to give birth to strong sons and beautiful daughters with warm brown eyes.

The green boneshaker crawled along the only street in Karama covered with asphalt. Everybody was itching to catch a glimpse of Simo's girl first, although Natasha had described her in minute detail—a girl with green eyes like the hills overgrown with thick pine-trees. The girl's skin was white like an iceberg, or whatever Fatma thought an iceberg looked like.

The car stopped in front of the house and Karama stood on tiptoe with bated breath. The door opened and Simo showed up dressed in a brand new T-shirt, the best one from the most fashionable sports store in Pernik. He had paid a juicy twenty lev for it. He had put on a pair of black corduroys as well; a wonderful chap and you could take Fatma's word for it.

No girl got out of the car.

"He's hiding her," the men laughed through their beards. "He's not ready to show us his bride."

"None of your tricks, boy," the women laughed as well. "We've been hidden in exactly the same manner, you know." Everyone knew the young bride should be hidden and the first who should see her was her mother-in-law. If the girl was pretty she was given a gold coin. If she was not then she received her gold coin all the same. You simply had to pretend she was pretty and you could do nothing about it.

"Where is she? Where is she?" the children shouted craning their necks, the girls with the expensive hairpins in their hair, the boys squeezing the penknives tightly in their hands so no one could extricate them from their fingers in the hustle and bustle.

"Where is your bride, son?" Fatma asked. She looked so pretty with her new rouge that the young women had better take care! "Simo, don't hide her. Let us see her."

Simo looked down at the holes in the street, unable to raise his head.

"What's wrong with you, son?" his father asked.

The air was clean and it was cold although it shouldn't have been at that time of the year. It was June, the wind blew and the drizzle was slowly turning into a steady rain. There were few trees in Karama, but above the shacks and puny narrow backyards the green woods started. Not much of a forest: bushes, prickly shrubs, and thorns, but they all had a lot of green leaves from which goats grazed.

"Where's the girl?" Simo's mother asked. Simo looked handsome in his yellow, expensive t-shirt. His black corduroys were excellent, too, although dried mud splattered up to his belt.

"She..." he muttered, his eyes glued to the holes in the asphalt. "She won't come."

Everybody shut up. One could hear the clouds move in the sky and the stones wobble in the ancient walls of the fortress. Not even the little kids said anything.

How could a girl in her right mind lie to Simo, how could she refuse to come over and live with him below the Krakra fortress? It was so beauti-

ful there. One hour by the express train and you reached Sofia, three hours and you'd wake up in Greece! You could go to Portugal or Spain; you'd only have to catch a train and beat it. Why should you stay in Karama if you didn't have a girl? It was not worth it.

"Why isn't she coming?" Fatma asked. "I know her. She wouldn't lie to you."

Simo stood silent and it was a pity he was in such a yellow t-shirt, so bright and ostentatious that everybody stared at him.

"Well, she will come on the next Thursday," Simo's eldest cousin said. "Cheer up, guys. Let's drink bottoms up. For Simo!"

"Cheers," all men and women muttered, crooking the elbow or sipping at the delicious brandy that couldn't compare with the swill, then the children ate the pork chops thinking they could swallow them all in one gulp. Even the grown-ups were of the same opinion because the broiled pieces of tender meat tasted so good and melted in their mouths.

"Don't get upset, man," his youngest sister's husband consoled him. "She'll come some other day."

Simo, a man who looked suddenly very thin and could not understand why it was raining and cold in June, did not hear him. The rain became heavier but he did not go under the roofing iron where all the rest had gathered together.

He stood alone, immobile in the rain, unable to think, unwilling to hide in his house, the only one with a marble roof in the whole neighborhood.