

SHQIPE SYLEJMANI

Burden and Blessing

A TALE OF TWO WORLDS



For Kadire and Vahide.
May you one day climb the mountains of Albania
together.





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1

In my grandmother's garden the flowers are in full bloom, warmed by the rising sun on this radiant spring morning. Grandmother had scattered the seeds two years ago and they had grown into an exquisitely beautiful carpet of flowers. These flowers are one of Nana's legacies, left to us after she died last year.

Last year ... How time flies! I'm sitting on the wooden steps that lead to the large garden, our house behind me and the sun shining on my face. With a notebook to hand, I am enjoying the twitter of the birds and I wish with all my heart that Nana were here.

If she had been, she would have been more likely to pester me with questions than to enjoy the peace and quiet with me. Yet her invariably loving advice, for example on what my future husband should be like, was encouraging rather than reproachful – as if she wanted to remind me of my own worth.

"Find someone who suits you – neither better nor worse," she used to say. What I lacked, I should look for in someone else – in this way we would complement each other. This notion of a relationship had in the meantime become the only one I was willing to entertain.

* * *

My family was still asleep when I was woken early in the morning by my own restlessness. I was ready to go. I had landed in Kosovo the day before and traveled to our home in Veternik, a district of Prishtina, to rest before moving on to Albania.

I had always thought of Albania as a magical place. It beckoned me with its history, with its literature and with our cultural roots. But I had never had the courage to explore all this. I had suppressed the desire to discover my roots, because the present fascinated me more than the past.

When my thoughts drew me to Albania notwithstanding, other destinations suddenly pushed their way in: I traveled in Europe, was enchanted by New York, discovered for myself the whole east coast of North America. In South America and Africa, I collected impressions of the respective cultures like pictures for an album. And Albania was forgotten.

In every corner of the world, I searched for something that gave me a sense of freedom, peace and wholeness. But this fulfillment was always short-lived and as soon as I returned to my daily life, a small, troubling void began to spread within me.

I couldn't share this feeling with anyone, because no one understood. I tried to fill the emptiness with love for my family, friends and others with whom I had relationships, but my devotion became too much for them - I became too much for them.

And if, in a rare fit of courage, I did share these thoughts with someone, they responded that my longing for fulfillment was just a youthful craze, a phase that would pass. They intimated that I was getting above myself, telling me I was looking for something that didn't exist and should adjust to the flow of life like everyone else.

Everyone agreed on one point: I expected too much of this life.

In their opinion, life was a succession of events, a sort of staircase that everyone must climb, step by step: education, work, marriage, children, death.

I had learned to keep silent about this. To nod and smile in response. For here, my arguments would fail; my otherwise strong, carrying voice would crack.

* * *

The first inhabitants of the neighborhood had risen, made ready for the day ahead, and were leaving their homes to go to work. Immense effort had gone into acquiring all they possessed: a large house, a beautiful garden and some savings for their annual vacation by the sea. They were content.

An elderly neighbor passed our house on his way through the village. He saw me sitting on the wooden steps that led from the house to the garden as I wrote in my notebook and wiped the tears from my face.

"These crazy foreigners," he must have thought on catching sight of this girl from wealthy Switzerland. "They have everything one could wish for, and they're still not happy."

He passed my family's dried-up apple and plum trees and the large field where corn, onions, potatoes and fruit trees had grown. In the fall, Grandfather had harvested pumpkins and plums and brought all the neighbors *pite*¹ or jam made by my grandmother. Now, everything seemed deserted.

The neighbor shook his head as he watched me daydreaming. I recognized the look he gave me, which said:

"If I had had time back then to sit around, write and dream – pah! Nothing would have become of me! I grew up and realized that a well-ordered life is only possible with hard work!"

He was like so many people I knew: content to have made the right decisions in his life. And so he went on his way. He had learned to ignore the stabbing in his heart when he remembered his own dreams and now, after all this time, he scarcely felt it.

* * *

I heard the key turn in the old front door and my grandfather emerged. He came slowly onto the balcony and slipped into his brown sandals. Over his shirt he had put on the jumper knitted by my grandmother that he wore so often. Baba was 81 years old and one of my heroes. He had aged a lot in the past few years, though, especially since the death of his wife. He came down the steps and beckoned me to him, then sat down and closed his eyes, facing the sun and savoring the morning breeze.

"Good morning, little one," his hoarse voice greeted me. "What are you doing out here so early?"

"Good morning, Baba! Oh, don't worry about me! But shouldn't you be getting a bit more sleep?" I replied, ran over to him and hugged him. Holding him, I felt his boney arms and remembered the strong man he had once been. After my grandmother died, he had given up and it was evident that he had abandoned life. He hardly ate anything, smoked more and more, and was preparing to let go.

"Oh, little one, at my age you're happy if you can get up by yourself in the morning and get through the day without pain. And really, I've wanted to go for quite some time – my life has been long enough," he said and smiled wearily at me.

"Baba, please don't talk like that. You're going to live for ages – you have to stay strong, at least until I get married!" I answered, knowing how much he wanted me to take this step. "You don't want to miss my wedding, do you?"

He laughed loudly, shook his head, and taking a packet of Marlboros from the pocket of his trousers, he lit one.

"You keep raising my hopes – and yet you have other plans than marriage, I see." And he pointed to my notebook.

"Oh, Baba, you know me, I have all sorts of ideas in my head! But one day I'll find the right person – and then you must be fit and well for my big day," I said, smiling.

He looked at me and pinched my cheek. I was 28 and still his "little one".

“You must do what you think right, Shote. Because everything you do will affect the rest of your life. Look at me – I wasn’t a particularly good person. Often, when I’m here alone, I think that this is exactly what I’ve deserved.

“When I was a child, my grandfather kept telling me this same story. I didn’t understand it then, but now I keep thinking about what he said,” he explained, almost breaking my heart with his words. My grandfather had had a difficult life and although he never spoke of it, I knew that he had many regrets.

Curious, I asked: “What story, Baba?”

You do it for yourself

A poor wayfarer traveled the world, taking with him only what he could carry on his person. He believed that everything you own ends up owning you. The man was very wise and would entertain people with stories that he collected during his travels. He earned his bread in this way and shared his stories with the world. He called himself “Baci”, the Albanian word for “uncle”.

One day, as he was telling his stories at the marketplace of a village near Korçë, the village elder approached him.

“Your stories could cheer my family up. They are missing my son, who is at war. Please be my guest this evening!”

Baci thanked him for the invitation, which he gladly accepted.

In the family home, the best veal was served in honor of the penniless Baci, who thanked the head of the household, saying: “Whatever people do, they do ultimately for themselves alone.”

The wise man told story after story and was treated to the best dishes and drinks. He expressed his thanks over and over again, adding: “Whatever you do, you ultimately do for yourself alone.”

The village elder, head of the household, grew increasingly tense as time went by.

"How can Baci claim that all our actions are for ourselves when my family serves him and not themselves the best dishes?" he wondered.

Yet Baci repeated the sentence at every opportunity. When they had all gone to bed, the head of the household couldn't sleep. He lay awake until morning, the words of the wayfarer resounding in his ears. In the morning he swore to himself: "If Baci repeats that sentence once more, I'll teach him a lesson."

Breakfast was on the table and immediately the wayfarer had eaten, he expressed his thanks and repeated the detested sentence. The head of the household stood up and went to the bakehouse.

"Bake a loaf for Baci's journey, but mix poison into the bread!" he ordered his wife.

"What are you doing, husband?" she admonished him. "Leave the poor man alone – he hasn't done us any harm!"

"Do as I say! He failed to appreciate our hospitality right from the start, and he annoys me the way he talks. This should teach him a lesson!" responded the head of the household and he watched his wife closely as she prepared the bread.

Baci was making ready to continue his journey when the master handed him the freshly baked bread wrapped in a cloth.

"To strengthen you on your journey," he explained.

Baci thanked him and took his leave with these words: "May everything you do find its way back to you."

Having continued on his journey for several hours, Baci caught sight of a soldier resting in the shade of a tree. To show respect, he joined the young man and asked him how he was.

"Oh, holy one, how honored I am that you should sit down beside me! I come from the front and haven't an ounce of

strength left. Another few hours and I would be home, but I have run out of food,” explained the young man.

Without a second’s hesitation, Baci reached into his bag and took out the village elder’s bread.

“Here!” he said and handed the loaf to the young man. “It was baked this morning, take strength from it!” continued the wayfarer kindly and went on his way.

The young man regained his energy after eating the bread and set out toward home. On arrival he was warmly welcomed by his family. A short while later, however, he developed a fever and was racked by nausea, until finally death stole up on him. On his deathbed, the young man complained of the unknown wayfarer and the cursed bread that had brought this suffering upon him.

When the village elder heard the laments of his son, tears overwhelmed him. His poisoned bread had killed, not the wayfarer, but his own son.

Baci’s words resounded once more in his ears: “Whatever you do, you do for yourself alone.”

My parents had told me numerous anecdotes with a moral, but this one was new to me. It was a tradition with us to raise each other’s spirits by telling stories, offering advice or passing on news.

To make sure I didn’t forget the story, I wrote it down in my notebook.

It was still early, but I had to leave if I wanted to arrive in town before the morning traffic.

“I’m off now, Baba, but I’ll be back in a few weeks. Please, Babë, take care of yourself.”

“Where are you going, Shote?”

“I’m going to do exactly what the wayfarer in your story did.”

¹ A pastry with cheese, meat, or vegetable filling.

2

I packed my bag, woke my mother and kissed her on the cheek.

"I'm going, Mama," I whispered, in order not to wake my father. "I've prepared muesli for you and left it in the fridge. I'll let you know as soon as I arrive."

Sleepy-eyed, my mother got out of bed, drew me out of the room and shut the door behind her.

"Where are you going so early, Shote? I thought we would be driving you to the bus station," she murmured, still half asleep.

"I have to go *now*, Mama. I've already wasted so much time. I'm ready."

She looked at me and her tired eyes filled with tears.

"Don't worry, Mam. It will be wonderful, you'll see."

She took my face in her hands and kissed me on the forehead.

"Thank you for doing this. Papa doesn't say anything, but he's proud of you," she told me.

I kissed her on the cheek again and reached for my bag. Before the door shut behind me, Mama called: "Don't tell anyone that you come from Switzerland, Shote! They'll only swindle you!"

My mother's concern was justified. I was setting out on a journey, not knowing what awaited me. Yet I had spent the last 12 months thinking about what I wanted to do with my life. And I didn't want to waste another second before putting my plan into action.

* * *

Shote was the name my grandparents had given me, which was why I was full of gratitude for it. It used to be the custom for parents to give someone – usually the grandparents or a close relative – the honor of choosing the newborn child's name.

The name Shote derives from the fearless and graceful Shote Galica, a 19th century Albanian war heroine. It was said of her that she combined the will of a man with the skill of a woman. She was driven by relentless ambition, which gave her the strength to overcome her enemies. No man could intimidate her and she led her troops with courage and pride. She was a born warrior.

The name symbolized strength and in turn gave me strength when this threatened to fail me in the battle of daily life.

In the meantime, I had discovered that strength is not gained through one's name. It was life itself that either drew one into the abyss or turned one into a survivor.

* * *

Our house, which my grandfather occupied alone when we were in Switzerland, was only about a mile from the center of Prishtina, where I was born, and I could look down over the whole city on my way to the bus station.

How it had changed during the last 20 years! I clearly remember running through the poppy fields as a child and breathing in the scent of the grass. There were almost no other houses there then and no cars drove past. The only sounds to be heard were the twitter of the birds and the chirping of the crickets.

I envied the flowers for their graceful beauty. They seemed to be full of pride in displaying it. If you glanced across the field, they all looked the same. But if you studied them individually, you would discover their unique magic.

Beauty. It seemed to hold such high value in our time. I loved discovering beauty in others – whether it lay in remarkable eyes, a warm smile, or a charismatic personality. Perhaps this was partly because I couldn't find this beauty in myself when I looked in the mirror.

My mother used to say: "What you have within you will sooner or later shine out."

But her words didn't always get through to me. So as a child I would hide in these fields when the neighbors' children teased me or threw pebbles at me because for them I was a foreigner. I used to lie for hours on the ground in the poppy field and dream of my future life.

On one occasion when I was hiding, I didn't hear my grandmother calling as she searched for me. In the end, she found me lying in the grass.

"Little one, what are doing here all alone? Why aren't you with the other children?" she asked me in her gentle way.

"Oh Nana, they prefer to play without me. But it doesn't matter – I like being alone," I answered, smiling and trying to hide my tears from her. But nothing escaped my grandmother – conceal it for my sake though she might.

She lay down beside me and we stayed there for quite a while in silence. Then I took all my courage in my hands.

"Nana," I asked, "will I ever find love? Even if ... I'm not so pretty as the other girls?"

"My angel, your beauty is special, because your heart is pure. Only the person who recognizes that deserves your love. Let me tell you a story."

The fairest flower

A young man wished to marry and went to see his grandfather, who was known for his wise decisions. The young man asked him:

"Baba, how can I find the right wife for me?"

"Go to the field early tomorrow morning, Djalem, and bring me the fairest flower you can find. Then I will tell you how to find the right wife."

The young man set out for the field of flowers at the first light of dawn. He searched the whole day long, walking up and down the meadow. Evening approached and when it had grown so dark that he could scarcely find his way home, he stood before his grandfather with empty hands.

"Baba, I searched and searched, but I simply couldn't find the fairest flower. Immediately I found one that was absolutely exquisite, I saw from the corner of my eye another that was even more enchanting! And so the day passed, and in the evening, when darkness fell, I couldn't distinguish them any longer, so I couldn't find the fairest flower for you."

His grandfather answered: "That's how it is with love. Every woman is beautiful and special in her own way. If you keep looking for the best, you will keep searching your whole life long. Find the one who makes you happy. Otherwise, you will end up - as you have today - with empty hands."

3

My grandmother was known for her anecdotes and I have fond memories of them. Whenever anyone needed advice, they went to her and received the gift of a tale. Her words were intended not only to offer people a solution, but also to provoke thought, to show them their own situation from another perspective and to guide them to the right path.

I appreciated my grandmother's way of providing advice, which showed me how benevolently she supported her fellow humans. This, too, made her an exceptional person for me, whose compassion and devotion I admired and tried to emulate.

It was all the more admirable that she preserved these qualities despite her life, which at the beginning seemed like an endless, agonizing fight against fate. She had lost her brothers in the war when she was a young girl and shortly afterwards had to bury the rest of her family. Of the whole family, only she and two of her cousins survived. Together, they found work with an old farmer, who made his living alone. My grandmother knew how to manage the young men and helped the farmer to run the farm. When he died, he left everything to her and soon tales were to be heard in the neighborhood of a comely and bold young woman whose strength and skills were indistinguishable from those of a man.

Grandfather had told me that he already knew then she would become his wife. However, I wonder to this day how he managed to win my grandmother. For, despite his upright character, his good reputation and his strong

charisma, it was always my grandmother who stood out in their relationship.

As was customary in those days, once married, she handed the farm over to her cousins, joined my grandfather's family in Svirce, a village in the Medvegja region, and started a family of her own. She brought 12 children into the world, three of whom died young. I couldn't imagine the pain that must have caused her, but it never showed. Nana, as her children and grandchildren called her, raised her children in the village and as they grew up, they left Medvegja and moved to Prishtina. They settled in the capital and built the house we still live in when we are in Kosovo. Nana spent the rest of her life there.

It always appeared to me that she had never lacked anything: she had a beautiful home and was surrounded by love and her family; it seemed as if she had found her purpose in life.

The night we received the phone call, I lost not only my grandmother, but also something within myself – it was as if part of my heart had died with her.

She had often asked me to visit her in the previous months. But caught up in the hustle of my daily life as I was, it hadn't seemed important to me. Today, I am ashamed that I told her I didn't have time, but would come soon.

Back then, I was powerless with the pain of never being able to hear her request again.

* * *

I missed the funeral intentionally – I wouldn't have been able to bear the finality of her death. In Kosovo, tradition dictates that the deceased must be laid to rest the same day. Those who no longer live in the home country, therefore, often cannot attend.

I arrived in Kosovo a day later, fearing the days to come. I had never been to a burial and felt guilty because I was

relieved. My parents were already there, and looking at my father, I saw that something had died in him, too. My grandmother's death had come out of the blue. This sudden demise is referred to as "*tap rrap*", which can be roughly translated as "in a trice". This was doubtless the Albanian way of surviving bereavement with humor.

* * *

Immediately after the funeral, the family gathered for the traditional ceremony, a sort of memorial celebration. For three days a chair stood at the end of our yard, signaling to the neighbors that the family had lost one of its members. During these three days, visitors came to express their condolences to the relatives.

I was dressed in black and felt unwell. My soul was weary, and so I stood there by the open front door of the house, dazed and numb with grief. It was February and snowing, and while the icy wind blew outside, I greeted strangers who wanted to pay my grandmother their last respects. The men and women were separated and I could only hope that my brothers would take care of my father, since they were receiving the male visitors in my uncle's house next door.

I shook countless hands, surprised at how many people my grandmother had known. What wouldn't I have given to be alone, to cry, to howl and to mourn in my own way. Yet the longer the ceremony lasted, the better I understood the purpose of the gathering and the shared grief.

For the guests not only brought solace but also pleasant memories. They told us stories of their experiences with my grandmother, of her deeds, her advice and her unique personality. At these moments, it was as if the visitors made her come alive again through their stories.

* * *

On the last evening, we were all worn out and mournful at the prospect of the times to come. The following day, we would all go our separate ways and only the memory of Grandmother would remain. We had just finished the traditional dinner that brought the funeral ceremony to a close, drunk tea and fallen silent when my oldest aunt suddenly asked: "Do you remember when Nana ate her first popsicle?"

Only the closest family members were still at home with us, but there were so many of them that some of my cousins were sitting on the floor.

"How could I ever forget! She took an enormous bite from the stick and swallowed the whole lot - like water! She practically suffocated!" answered my father, clapped, and laughed despite himself.

The laughter grew constantly louder and the memories of my grandmother turned the evening into a night of anecdotes. Everyone told their favorite stories about Nana - how she always got the children mixed up, how strict she was with us and how she became increasingly gentle as she grew older; how she sprinkled sugar on freshly baked bread and taught us children how to care for flowers, fields and animals.

The days of mourning reminded me that Grandmother was a true fighter, despite all the blows fate dealt her. She would storm through the house like a whirlwind and right to the end she would clean and sweep, cook and tend the fruit trees, flowers and vegetable garden. She was as deft as a young girl, full of energy and yet so gentle, loving and warm-hearted.

My father often said that I reminded him of her in the way I managed any task and took on responsibility for everything, at the same time showing my fellow human beings and their concerns an open mind. For me, this had been - until then - my grandmother's greatest bequest.

* * *

The day after the funeral ceremony, we were already in the middle of preparations for our return to Switzerland: my job and my projects awaited me, all of which I had put on hold until the funeral was over. I was clearing the table after lunch when there was a knock at the door. My uncle stood there with a leaving gift for me: it was an old notebook of my grandmother's.

Tirana, Korçë, Gjirokastër, Saranda, Butrint, Shkodër, Ulqin, Shkup, the mountains, the old fortresses and some places in Kosovo were all listed in it. It was a sort of itinerary that my grandmother had drawn up. She had planned something in every city: Tirana – absorb the culture; Korçë – pray in the famous cathedral; Gjirokastër – visit the Enver Hoxha Museum. These were travel destinations that she had noted down on the first two pages of the notebook – places that she had wanted to see during her life.

In the book lay the pair of old earrings that Grandmother had worn ever since I could remember – two little gold coins, each attached to a clip.

* * *

My grandmother had dreamed of traveling – of discovering Albanian-speaking regions – and she left us without being able to fulfill those dreams.

I told my father about the notebook and asked him why he hadn't taken her on this journey. He explained to me that my grandfather had promised it to her on their marriage, but they had both spent their lives feeding the family and tackling their everyday life. When Grandfather retired, war broke out – and after the war he was too weak to travel.

And so it was that Grandmother never left Kosovo: She took her wish to see the mountains and the sea with her to her grave. She had, it is true, been surrounded by love

throughout her life, but the fulfillment of her dreams was denied her.

My cellphone rang. It was my boss, who wanted to know when I would be able to come back to work. At that moment it became clear to me: I was caught in the same vicious circle as my grandmother. My life consisted of projects, requirements and tasks. All because I believed that was the right way to go.

I looked at my cellphone, knowing which appointments it would dictate to me from tomorrow on and thought briefly about bringing this race to an end, destroying the gadget and with it everything that awaited me in Switzerland.

Was this the life that I had wished for as a child in the poppy field?

I didn't allow myself to dwell on this thought for too long. There was so much I had planned to do and achieve in Switzerland and I didn't want to let my bereavement devalue it.

It had taken an effort to build everything up. Had I not dreamed of exactly this career? Of a beautiful home? Of fabulous journeys around the world – to all the places I could visit? It was pure luck that I was able to lead such a life, wasn't it?

As usual at moments when I was plagued by doubts, I thought of all the women who didn't have that luck – those who couldn't live in a country like Switzerland; who didn't have the same opportunities as I did; who longed for the freedom that I enjoyed. I thought of my relatives in Kosovo and how thankful I ought to be for what I had. For this life was a gift. I had to hold on to it.

* * *

On arrival in Switzerland, I immediately plunged back into work. I didn't want to give my bereavement any more

space, didn't want to be deterred and didn't realize that I began to lose myself.

The year passed quickly and the anniversary of my grandmother's death approached. Thinking about the funeral ceremony I was reminded of her notebook. My Nana's lines, which she had written with so much hope, were lying around somewhere.

I found the notebook in the drawer of my bedside table and leafed through it. The places were not beyond reach, yet Grandmother had chosen duty over dreams of traveling. I wondered how often she had run her finger over the names of the towns and conjured up these destinations in her mind: the sand beneath her feet, the fresh mountain air and the ancient monuments.

Didn't we owe it to ourselves to fulfill these wishes?

I tried to think about my own aims, but I could scarcely identify them anymore. I was too preoccupied with investing all my strength in my actions. I imagined my life as a garden, which wanted to be tended. Which had to be tended.

I was back at the point where I wondered whether this was everything I wanted of life.

* * *

"It's love that's missing," concluded my mother, when I went for a walk with her a few days later and tried to explain my thoughts to her. I nodded silently. How could I speak with my mother about something that she wouldn't understand and that I didn't understand myself? For her, only love counted. That was the purpose of life for *her*.

"As soon as you meet someone, marry and become a mother, you'll have completely different worries. Then your life will be fulfilled," she added. I thought about it and wondered whether I was ready to take these three steps. The way I saw it, a union between two people was only

possible once they both knew what they expected of life and of their partner – if they both had the same wishes and aims.

I hadn't got there yet.

"No, Mama, that's not it," I answered before I could stop myself. "I'm just not happy here," I explained, surprising myself by the statement, which felt like a sudden liberation. I realized that these words were the most honest I had uttered for a long time.

"What does that mean, Shote?" she asked.

"I don't know, Mama. Right now, the way things have turned out here, I can't see where I'm going."

* * *

In the evening, the conversation with my mother and the thought that I wouldn't find happiness here went through my head again. I looked at my grandmother's notebook, which still lay on my bedside table. She had known exactly what she wanted. And yet she had never been able to undertake her journey.

I thought of Albania and the countries she had listed. I imagined the itinerary and how she would have traveled through the various regions, from mountains to cities, from ruins to beaches.

I felt the anticipation rise within me as I thought of the places and smiled involuntarily. What if the notebook were not a coincidence but a sign?

Perhaps my happiness didn't lie here, but awaited me there – in the very countries of my ancestors.

4

You often only notice what you have absorbed from a country when you are somewhere else. And that's how it was with me when I set out for Tirana. When I arrived at the bus station in Prishtina I realized that I would immediately be identified as a "foreigner". Ten minutes after the scheduled departure time, there was no bus in sight.

"It will come when it comes," said the ticket seller in response to my complaint and waved me aside as the next passenger came up to buy her ticket. The other passengers didn't seem to notice the delay. I stood there and wondered about the local regulations. How could the public transportation be so unreliable? In Switzerland, this would be scandalous.

I was surprised by my thoughts and angry with myself. I had actually become one of those ignorant "foreigners" who expected Swiss conditions to apply here. Much in this part of the world would not work in the way I was used to. It was time to take things less seriously. I would still travel to Tirana today – did it matter whether I arrived 10 or 20 minutes earlier or later? No one was waiting for me, I was not in a hurry and I was taking the journey to please myself. Patience was a virtue that I had found hard to practice since my childhood.

"*Sabr*," my grandmother always used to say. The expression comes from Arabic and Albanians use it very frequently. It not only means "patience" but also – and this impressed me more – "perseverance". It expresses faith in God that everything will happen as written.

I revered this word.