



Gypsy Fleas

By Merima Dizdarevic

Ours was the upper; theirs was the lower. But we all lived in the *mahala*, or neighbourhood, of the new residential area of Lastva. The “new” were the identical two storey-four apartment-Bucharest soot style-buildings we inhabited thanks to my mother's job in the Yugoslav agricultural cooperative. *We* were the comrades and pioneers of predominantly Slavic descent. *They* were the ones who migrated to Europe from India, letting their culture become someone else's along the way. Their swartheness made our eyes itch worse than all the soot of Bucharest. Most of the population of the upper mahala advised us children not to venture into the lower one, which was why we loved doing just that. Most of the children our age there didn't go to school with us. Many of the people there didn't even spend enough time in our village for the duration of an entire school year or even semester. My relationship to those children, as well as to my other friends or classmates (the same thing back then), was mostly ambivalent. But then again, most relationships at that age were. The grown-ups didn't seem to have many established relationships with them, yet sometimes I would hear them talking about one, or some, of them fondly. This usually happened if one of them did some paid physical labour around the village or if they had volunteered for a government-organized youth work action. There was another thing I heard my mother and a friend of hers crediting them for: “knowing.”

I didn't quite understand this, but I do remember a time when a woman I hadn't seen before in the village came to our door. She was dressed like most of the women of the lower mahala, and I think she was holding a baby. My mother invited her in and they had coffee and talked. I didn't understand their conversation, but it seemed as though my mother had some kind of a problem that this woman knew how to solve. She made a mix of oil and whole coffee beans in a *filđžan*, a small round cup for serving Turkish or Bosnian coffee, and told my mother to bathe with it. Before leaving, my mother gave the woman some money; later she told our neighbour that it really had helped. This situation seemed, both then and now, genuine to me.

Later on, I met a number of women like her, with dirty, raggedy clothes, a baby on one hip and a bigger child by the hand, with or without pants, but they only insisted on telling me my future. Most people wanted to know how many children they would have or who they would marry. This was the standard information one would receive from these women at the various bus stops throughout the former Yugoslavia, whether one wanted it or not.

He was Kemo, one of them. An up-and-coming unauthorised barber in the village. The majority of his clientele were residents of the lower mahala, but lately he, or maybe his craft, seemed to have gained a certain recognition throughout the village. Even though he was a grown-up, he wasn't much taller than my friends and me. He must have drunk coffee when he was a kid. Kemo was fair-skinned in comparison to the other people of the lower mahala, yet still obviously darker than the people of the upper mahala. His skin wasn't much darker than mine, though. In the summer, mine was darker than his. From time to time, my classmates pestered me when noticing this and called me names, the same ones we used for the people of the lower mahala. Kemo's hair was black and he had a haircut that made his head resemble something you would wipe your floor with. A haircut that I believed was cut by putting a pot on someone's head and then cutting the hair along the rim of the pot. His haircut made him look almost exactly like the musicians in the black-and-white poster on my cousin's wall. Two of the musicians in the poster played the guitar, just like my cousin, but one of them held it the wrong way. I wondered who had cut Kemo's hair.

He cut my hair on the plateau of patched, coarse grass just under the road separating the upper and lower mahalas. I'm not sure exactly how it happened the first time, but I do remember not being too keen on the idea of Kemo as my barber from the start. I wasn't too keen on anybody cutting my hair, as it made me look like a boy, but my parents were convinced it would make my hair stronger. So they persisted, in spite of my loud protesting. The first time Kemo touched my head I swore I could see the gypsy fleas making their way across his scalp, passing his shoulders, gaining speed down his arms and finally splitting into ten brooklets and flooding my hair. I could feel them crawling on my scalp, making me itch. But then, after a wondrous split second, something in me changed course: suddenly I was drowning in the goodness of bathing in an ocean those brooklets had created. The immense and boundless warmth of a summer sea engulfed me as I flowed in the serene green and blue. It was like nestling in the best blanket fort ever built, the one holy-grail-fort that would house all the cushions you would own when you were big enough to have the money to buy a thousand cushions and soft blankets. I did not care anymore about my short hair, didn't care that even the doctor thought I was a boy that time I manufactured stomach pains so my mom would take me to town. I tried making my hair grow from pure desire, but after that day, I did it only so that it could be cut anew.

I had forgotten to ask Kemo who cut his hair. I decided to do it the next time he cut mine. But I kept forgetting. Probably he used a pot and did it himself. Mostly, I didn't speak to him when he was cutting my hair. He asked me something from time to time, but he wasn't too talkative either. There were only two types of people in the lower mahala: those who wouldn't stop talking and were always asking for something of you, and those who looked at the ground and spoke as little as possible. Kemo was like that, but he always lifted his head enough for you to see his smile, a smile that seemed eternal.

One day, while lighting his third cigarette, a boy from the lower mahala called Kukuruz, which basically means *corn* or *corncob*, told me and my friend Dijana that Kemo was getting married. Inside my almost buzzed head, a picture started developing: me taking that smelly, burning stick from his hand and using it as garnish on his usual slice of oily bread. I awoke from my little reverie as he slapped my left shoulder and said, "Let's go watch." Damn it! It was already happening! In all of the eight years of my life, I hadn't felt that kind of stinging in my gut. Nevertheless, I ran after Kukuruz like a feral sorrel with a mohawk for a mane. Dijana didn't want to be associated with the people of the lower mahala, and she wasn't allowed to, like most of us kids, so she stayed and watched, careful not to dirty her clothes, while she covered the hole I had dug to hide our slingshot ammunition. Some time later, a cousin of mine told me that Dijana's

father was actually from a lower mahala in a small town up north and had moved to our upper mahala just before Dijana's older sister was born.

Kukuruz was a couple of years older than us, but he was about our height. I knew for a fact that this was because he was a smoker and because he used to drink coffee. My mother had told me that if you start smoking and drinking coffee when you're a kid, you stop growing. She also told me that you grow a tail, but I never did see Kukuruz's. Maybe he was too embarrassed to wear it out. Kemo was pretty short, so he probably also used to drink coffee as a kid, but I couldn't imagine him having a tail.

I wanted to run, but Kukuruz was in no hurry. He was dragging his feet behind him as he continued to munch on his oiled bread. I hated him. Him and his bread. Still, sometimes when my mother quickly handed me a slice with butter and jam, or one with chicken paté, always just a second before I ran out of the house again, I felt bad, thinking of him and his oiled bread. He always annoyed me, but since I found out his real name was the same as my father's, I usually forgave him pretty fast and continued playing with him. Once I even defended him when a group of boys from fifth grade were picking on him. Being a girl I always had some leverage, but the fact that I had four older, male cousins in school helped significantly.

Not many boys ever picked on me, and they even let me play their boy-sports when I insisted. Whenever they played football, they wanted me to be goalkeeper. This wasn't my favourite position, but I was sensible enough to understand that I was very privileged to be offered any position at all. One of the happiest days of my life was the day we played football outside the old barracks that used to serve as offices for some company. We played on asphalt that was in such a bad need of repairs it didn't seem like asphalt at all – it looked more like a dirt road. Our goals were our jackets coiled into jacket-balls and I was, of course, one of the goalkeepers. The extraordinary thing happened like this: I made a really good save and launched the ball back onto the dirt field. The ball flew over the entire playing field and right at the other goalie, but he didn't manage to catch it, and it went in. It went in! Right then and there I knew this was a story I would tell over and over again; in fact, I couldn't wait to tell it, tell it to everyone. But first I had to enjoy my team celebrating me. The whole thing led to me being the most sought-after goalie for a while. But just for a while, since it turned out to be a lucky strike, or rather, kick.

I could hear the music now. It sounded like a lower mahala wedding, all right. When we got to the containers just before where the shacks started, I stopped. I thought it best to observe from afar. But Kukuruz was of another opinion. He tugged at me and didn't understand why I didn't want to come closer. After he started calling me a coward, and telling me I wasn't any better than them anyway, I followed. We went to one of the wiggly tables outside of Kemo's house. All of the tables and chairs were empty; everybody had risen to their feet. Kukuruz wouldn't let me sit down so I was standing by one of the tables furthest away. He couldn't stand still so he went back and forth and in-between the tables, hopping about. It was all happening. The bellies of the men in the brass orchestra were jumping up and down, as the sound travelled from their hollows. It shot forth out of their horns in galvanized and shiny rhythmic cannon balls that exploded and reverberated in the space between the ground and the shoes of the people, magnetizing them both and making them repel one another. The air was filled with the scent of chicken droppings mixed with a hundred cheap colognes, sweat and sweet fruit distillates fuelling the vibrating tawny bodies. Kukuruz was dancing and jumping and showing his unevenly decorated gums – he told me he would get a golden tooth as soon as he could afford it. I couldn't help but smile as he approached me, dancing, and took me by both of my hands. I hesitated and looked to the ground like Kemo

sometimes did, but then I felt something coming from inside my belly. I jumped up – there was no going back. He drew me closer to the crowd and we started spinning around faster and faster, then stopped, fell on the ground on our bottoms and laughed until the ground stopped spinning. Then we got up again and started jumping up and down and dancing and hitting a timbrel that had mysteriously found itself in our possession. There were a couple of women that had one of their own, and so I followed their lead. I held it in my right hand, hit it against my right hip, then my left hand and finally shook it up in the air above my head. Kukuruz seemed very proud of me, and spun me around again and again.

Then I finally saw him, him and his bride. She looked very young. She was covered in layers of white. They were brought to the centre of the pulsating crowd. All the people were turned towards the two, dancing, dancing, dancing. The couple could do nothing but join in, be taken by the pulse. I watched Kemo oscillate until he reached a vibrating unification with the universal sound. Mesmerized, I forgave him for getting married; my head was, from then on, infested with gypsy fleas.

Merima Dizdarevic was born in Yugoslavia in 1983. She migrated to Sweden as a civil war refugee at the age of ten. Her mother tongue is Bosnian (formerly "Serbo-Croatian"). English is her second or third language, as is Swedish. She is also a musician, a member of the band Urkos, of Malmö, Sweden. Her poetry has been published in Bosnian.