

Želimir Periš

THE BONY-LEGGED BRIDE

Translated from Croatian by Will Firth

This is a song about Gila the witch / who brought misery to poor and to rich

And to those in the Ringtheater fire / that raged one winter's night, whose fate was dire

Chapter 1

in which the figure of a common folk singer represents the essential character of this book – an epic about Gila the witch, told without plan or order, using a sabre and a rifle as instruments of narrative technique.

“This is a song about Gila the witch, who brought misery to poor and to rich.”

“Wait.”

“*And to those in the Ringtheater fire that raged one winter's night, whose fate was dire.*”

“Please stop singing.”

“Alright.”

“Before you give your statement, we need to take down some basic information.”

“Alright.”

“Firstly, please state clearly your given name and surname, your father's...”

“Želimir Periš.”

“Let me finish: your given name and surname, your father's and your mother's names, where you were born, where you live, your occupation, and only then your reason for reporting to us.”

“My name is Želimir, surname Periš, father Ante, mother Branislava, and her maiden name was Uvanović.”

“Born?”

“In Zadar, forty-four winters ago.”

“Place of residence?”

“Wherever people from our lands like to hear a song accompanied by the one-string fiddle.”

“Where most of all?”

“Mostly in the taverns in Simmering, which is full of boatmen from the Balkans – big fellows whose hearts beat faster when they hear an epic, decasyllabic poem.”

“Vienna, then.”

“And at the fair in Favoriten, too.”

“That's also Vienna. Occupation?”

“Fiddler.”

“Is that your full-time occupation?”

“I can also play the double flute and the *gajde* but there's not a single decent set in Vienna.”

“*Gajde?*”

“What do you call them in Deutsch? *Balg*. The skin of a sheep that you put under your arm and pump with your elbow like this... Bagpipes, that’s it! *Oh, proud fiddle, you’re a comfort to play when my much-loved bagpipes are gone away.*”

“Please stop singing. And do wipe your head – blood’s dripping onto my desk.”

“Sorry.”

“Let’s get back to the point. So you claim to know who set fire to the Vienna Ringtheater this winter?”

“That’s right.”

“And when you came to report this information, you were received and questioned by two staff of this institution.”

“Three.”

“Do you remember their names?”

“One was thin, one fat, and the third was a hulk of a man.”

“Did they record your statement?”

“I didn’t see any paper.”

“So they questioned you and beat you up I the process?”

“The tall one hit me over the head with my fiddle and slapped me in the face a few times. And the fat one squashed my fingers with a bust.”

“What bust?”

“I’m not sure, but it could have been Mozart.”

“Why did they beat you up?”

“Because I played my fiddle.”

“Why did you play it?”

“Because they wanted to hear about Gila.”

“Who’s Gila?”

“Gila, from the song.”

“What song? Please give me clear answers.”

“This is a song about Gila the witch, who brought misery to poor and to rich. And to those in the Ringtheater fire that raged one winter’s night, whose fate was dire.”

“Is that what you sang to the investigators when they beat you?”

“That and all the other decasyllabic poems. The whole *Bony-Legged Bride*, the tale of Gila the witch, as sung to the one-string fiddle by Želimir Periš.”

“Why did you sing to the investigators about Gila?”

“Because I came to report that it was Gila who set the theatre on fire. And I told them how. She soaked the curtains with a liquid that can be ignited from afar, and after she closed the door so no one could escape she snapped her fingers and the curtains burst into flames. Hardly anyone escaped alive.”

“How do you know these details?”

“Gila told me.”

“Does this Gila have a surname?”

“No. Just Gila.”

“So her surname is unknown.”

“To be exact: it’s known that she has no surname.”

“Where is Gila from?”

“No one knows. Some say she’s from Herzegovina, others claim she’s from Slavonia. And there are those who swear she’s an islander, not from the dry land at all. *Where Gila comes from, that nobody knows, as if out of a mystic past she rose.*”

“You’re singing again!”

“I get carried away. That’s what our decasyllabic poetry is like – it really draws you in.”

“Please don’t get carried away. And take another handkerchief, you’re still bleeding. Tell me, where is Gila now?”

“No one knows. She never stays in the same place for long. That’s her job.”

“What job? What does Mrs Gila do? Please give me a clear and precise answer.”

“Gila is a witch.”

“A witch?”

“Yes.”

“Meaning, a witch set fire to the theatre here in Vienna?”

“Correct.”

“Why would she do that?”

“To kill the prince.”

“Crown Prince Rudolf?”

“Yes, him.”

“Why did Gila want to kill the prince?”

“Because he’s not a real prince.”

“Rudolf, the son of Emperor Franz Joseph, isn’t a real prince?”

“That’s what Gila says.”

“You heard this from Gila?”

“No, but from Anka.”

“Who is Anka, pray tell?”

“Anka the Revolutionary.”

“There’s a woman called Anka the Revolutionary?”

“That’s what everyone calls her.”

“What’s her real surname?”

“No one knows.”

“So she doesn’t have a surname either?”

“She has one, but she doesn’t want it to be known.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s a revolutionary.”

“A bandit, then?”

“No, a revolutionary.”

“Why is this Anka important to us? Does she know Gila?”

“Better than anyone. Anka has met Gila three times.”

“Three times?”

“More than anyone else. She first saw Gila, that legendary miracle worker, back in ‘31.”

“Can we talk about the fire? I don’t care what happened half a century ago.”

“I’ll get to that.”

“Get on with it, then.”

“I need the fiddle.”

“Why?”

“So I can sing.”

“Would you please be serious. I’m interested in the fire and how you know the details about it. I’m not interested in songs and particularly not in a fiddle. Can you please explain the connection between Gila the witch and the fire in the Ringtheater?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Then please do.”

“So you still want me to tell you the story of Gila?”

“Yes. If Gila set the fire I want to know the story of Gila.”

“The tale comes with a song.”

“There’s no need for that. Please just tell it.”

“I’d have to sing it.”

“We said no singing. Can’t you just tell it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I wouldn’t be able to remember it all. We fiddlers only remember stories when they rhyme. I’d leave something out, and you wouldn’t get the whole truth.”

“Mr Periš, if you don’t stop this nonsense you’ll get much worse than a few slaps in the face. I’m on the verge of clapping you in chains! Start talking or I’ll have you imprisoned!”

“Mr Imperial Investigator, sir! I respect you and your institution. That’s why I don’t dare to talk. Whoever talks – lies. That’s because language was invented for lying. Only song is honest. If you want to hear the truth, it has to be sung to you.”

“That makes no sense.”

“It makes no sense to people in the city, but for us in the country it’s the only source of meaning and truth. What’s sung lasts longer than stone. What’s spoken is forgotten and distorted.”

“I’m giving you one last chance to tell everything you know about Gila or I’ll arrest you for withholding information.”

“Can I sing?”

“No, you can’t sing!”

“Throw me in jail then.”

“You’re being frivolous. This is a serious matter.”

“I’m not being frivolous. And yes, this is a serious matter.”

“For God’s sake!”

“...”

“Are you absolutely sure you have to sing?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, alright, alright. Can you sing to me then?”

“I can, but I need a fiddle.”

“With a fiddle?”

“The song is sung to a fiddle.”

“And where are we going to find a fiddle now?”

“I had a fiddle, but the investigators took it away from me after they hit me over the head with it.”

“You can’t do it without the fiddle? Why not simply sing?”

“You can’t without a fiddle. It’s an intricate epic, and you need a bow to remember it all. It takes that for your voice to start. If your bow hand isn’t moving left and right, your brain has no rhythm either.”

“How about just waving your hand left and right?”

“I can’t do it without a bow.”

“Maybe we could find a substitute for the bow. This quill, for example.”

“Shame on you, Mr Investigator, for thinking a goose feather could replace a bow. A goose is a simple animal, strident and unruly, with neither the pride nor stature of a horse.”

“Then use a broom or something else, because we don’t have a fiddle and I’m not going to search for one all through Vienna now!”

“I see you have a sabre on the wall.”

“What do you mean?”

“A sabre is curved like a bow. I could play with it.”

“That sabre is a cherished memento of my army days.”

“That’s excellent, Mr Investigator. The sabre once brandished by your esteemed hands is worthy of the epic about Gila, the most fearsome woman ever to tread Dalmatia.”

“Don’t you make fun of me. I’m warning you!”

“Not at all, Mr Investigator. I really could play with a sabre in my hand.”

“So be it. We’ve wasted enough time on nonsense. Here’s the sabre, and now let me hear who Gila is and how you know details about the fire that no one should know.”

“Now I can sing it to you.”

“Get on with it, why don’t you.

“This sabre is truly a wonderful instrument. But it’s just a replacement for the bow. I need something for my left hand too. A neck that I can hold, otherwise it won’t feel like a fiddle. I see the sabre is accompanied by a magnificent rifle. That’s a Lorenz carbine, isn’t it?”

“How does a fiddler know so much about guns?”

“It’s a fiddler’s job to recognise what’s epic in life. And the Lorenz .54 is an epic in itself, an embodiment of Austro-Hungarian pride. You must have enriched your army days with gunpowder from its barrel.”

“No, it was never fired. It’s brand new, unscratched.”

“It’s a pity for such a wonderful weapon to live its life without fulfilling its purpose. Let me at least make a fiery song with it.”

“There’s a reason why it was never fired. A very good reason.”

“Let me refine it.”

“Here’s the gun, damn your eyes! And now play.”

“This is splendid, look. They both fit the hand like a fiddle and a bow.”

“Sing, why don’t you. About the fire.”

“I can’t do it just like that. A song can’t be rolled out and cut like pastry. A song needs to begin as it begins.”

“And how does it begin?”

“With Anka.”

“Anka the Revolutionary?”

“She wasn’t a revolutionary back then.”

“What was she then?”

“Just Anka. When she first saw Gila.”

“Hm, alright. Just get on with it, why don’t you.”

“The gun isn’t loaded. Do you have any bullets?”

“I have bullets but I don’t intend to load it. Get on with the song.”

“With a rifle in my left hand and a sabre in my right, I present the tale of Gila the witch as sung to the one-string fiddle by Želimir Periš.”

“Mr Periš, you don’t have to be theatrical. We’re interested in information, pure and simple. Strip down your creative act as much possible.”

“Alright.”

“I’m listening.”

“For every member of the human race, freedom – liberty – stands in pride of place. That’s why young Anka saw the solution, and with Gila aimed for revolution.”

*When the lives of their children are at stake, / parents think the devil can make or break
Although the illusion is obvious, / hope is valuable, even if hopeless*

Chapter 20

in which we re-encounter the motif of written magic, which allows the casting of spells that will not change anything, but they should still be cast because even meaningless actions bolster hope, and hope is valuable even when it is hopeless, especially for a parent.

Man is unaware of the suffering he causes the earth. It is displeased by the boots that tread on it. Mud creaks, stones clatter, gravel scatters, cobblestone crust splits and crunches, and the tramp of the reckless walker is heard far and wide. This walker was especially cruel to the earth, treading it hard, without respect, blind in his rush towards his goal. His steps sounded like *thump-swish-knock, thump-swish-knock*, three sounds in one, a triple step, a walking trinity.

Gila had been watching him since he got off the cart. Her finger pushed aside the heavy cloth over the window and, through the gap, hidden in the darkness, she studied the newcomer. *Thump-swish-knock*: one leg, the other leg and a stick that prodded the ground. *Thump-swish-knock, thump-swish-knock*. He took a few steps in triple time and stopped on the open ground with a view of the house. Gila followed his gaze as he surveyed the house, the stone walls from which layers of lime had peeled, the broken shutters with traces of former green varnish through which the cold December wind howled, and the roof of lichen-covered tiles, with rotten boards in places where the tiles were missing. The house was ruinous, a dwelling that exuded apathy and despair, but which hadn't been abandoned – someone still found a home under its roof. Gila eyed the observer. A wreck of a man, who himself exuded apathy and despair, but who hadn't given up on everyone and under whose greatcoat someone still found hope. She watched his despair. Ruin could be seen in every part of the man, beginning with his legs. *Thump-swish-knock*. One leg was healthy and strong, and he leaned on it with all his weight. When he walked, it made a dull tapping sound. The other leg rustled. It was stiff and didn't bend at the knee even when walking. The grey trouser leg flapped on it, so it was a wooden replacement for a missing limb. That's why he had his stick, which creaked when he propped himself up with it on the stony ground in front of Gila's house. The one-legged man also lacked an arm. Under one sleeve of his faded grey greatcoat was a firm hand holding the stick; the other sleeve had been folded up and tied at shoulder height. The man without a leg and an arm might also be missing an eye. He looked at Gila's house with one, resting on every detail of the small stone structure, while with the other he squinted; perhaps it was closed, perhaps partly open. Hidden behind the curtain, Gila couldn't tell if the man had a second eye. A man without an arm, a leg and an eye is half a man; only his soul was perhaps still whole, but Gila couldn't see that from the window.

Behind him, the young man who drove the cart now unloaded two goats. He lowered them onto the ground one after another and tied them to the wooden wheel. The two white goats, fat and well-fed, stood beside the cart and looked around to see if there were any tufts of grass

to browse. The youngster was impatient; he stretched, patted the harnessed donkey and glanced every little while at the man without a leg, an arm and perhaps an eye, expecting him to go on and do what he'd made this journey for, but the man seemed in no hurry. He still stood and looked coldly at the house.

Gila had seen enough and understood everything. She released the curtain and opened the door for the guests.

"The Lord be with you," she greeted him from the doorway.

"I'm looking for Gila the crone."

"That's me."

Before him stood a woman who didn't fit the description of the one he was seeking. He'd expected to find a wrinkled and hunched old hag, whom life had worsted and broken, and who would have viewed him with distrust and suspicion – once bitten twice shy. But Gila looked him in the eyes with a cheerful face. She was barely thirty and bore her years with ease and grace. Her hair the colour of beech ash spilled over her shoulders, an undyed homespun jacket stretched over her firm breasts, and she made no effort to conceal her youthful and exuberant femininity.

"Gila the crone?"

"Gila the iron-toothed, Gila the witch and fury. Call me what you like – it doesn't matter. You've found who you're looking for."

She led him into the house, brought out wine and offered him a seat at the table. He stood and took in the interior. His gaze passed over all the dark ornaments and paraphernalia that hung on the walls, and she sensed that he was more pleased with the surroundings than he'd been with her appearance. Bunches of dried herbs hung from the rafters, and it was almost impossible to walk through the room without brushing against one or the other. Rabbit furs were nailed to the walls, together with bones of unknown animals, bound with straw, and an unspun skein of wool. A grey cat lay on a wooden chest, whose paint had peeled but the motif a smiling sun could still be seen, and ignored the guest. A trough in front of the fireplace was full of walnuts, and glowing embers warmed the room from the hearth. Although winter had begun, everything smelled of sage and rosemary, and the guest found the smell overpowering.

He cleared his throat and asked: "Do you cast spells?"

"I do."

"And do they work?"

"Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't."

"When do they work?"

"When luck wills it."

"When luck wills it –," he repeated to himself, then pulled a metal cigarette case from the pocket of his greatcoat, opened it with the same hand and lifted it to his mouth, took a rolled cigarette in his lips, clacked the case shut and returned it to his pocket. She watched as he adroitly took out a tinderbox with the same hand and lit the cigarette. She realised this man had been a half-man for decades. The stranger blew out a few puffs of smoke, keeping his gaze fixed on Gila's face.

"You're all liars and charlatans. You live off the unfortunates who you sell false hope to," he told her his blunt opinion.

Gila now had a good view of him. There was no eyeball behind the half-lowered eyelid, which hung like a curtain and did little to conceal the empty socket. A barely visible scar ran from its edge to the temple, from where it branched into a fan of deep wrinkles. His whole face was lined – from the deep, straight furrows on his forehead to the unexpected pathways on his cheeks.

"Hope cannot be false," she replied. "Hope is neither a truth nor a lie, but a condition and a will."

"Hope is a lie because it's merely a wish for something that hasn't come to pass, and probably won't," he spoke without raising his voice, which was measured, steady and frighteningly cold.

"Hope is a necessity because, without hope, a person falls into despair and apathy. They become like you: a shell that has no faith in the future."

"Hope is fraudulent because it doesn't change the future."

"The future is fraudulent because fate is not certain."

"Then why all the incantations and pretence?" he raised his voice for the first time since entering her house. "You admitted that your charms and magic don't work."

"I didn't say that. I said they sometimes work and sometimes they don't. I said they work when luck wills it."

"Luck? What luck?"

"The luck of happenstance. If luck wills it, things will be as people hope, and if it doesn't – they won't."

"Although you have no part in that luck, people leave you silver guilders. You're all like toll collectors. Like the imams or priests, who first say, 'God is great' and make it rain to stop your fields from drying out, and later, 'Give me a sack of flour because God was so merciful'. It's a levy on luck. You're the tax collectors of chance."

"I'm neither an imam nor a priest."

"I went to both the imam and the priest. The one gave me a rosary and the other a surah pendant. At least you admit your spells don't work."

The man finally sat down at the table, reached for the wineskin and took a long swig. Two types of people came to Gila's door – those who believed and those who weren't sure what they believed. Both were willing to pay for the uncertain chance of others mitigating their woes. No one happened by her house by chance. When the man with one eye sat down at her table, she knew she'd earned those goats.

"You don't believe my spells work, nor do you believe in gods or fairies, yet you came here and are willing to pay dearly for my charms. I know why. I can help you."

"What do you know?" he shrank on his seat as if a weight were pressing down on him.

Several stools stood around Gila's table, and whoever sat on them was immediately lower, especially compared to Gila, who sat on a tall chair and towered over her guests like the priestess of this small oracle.

"You were in the war, and you saw horrors like no one else. Time has passed, but they still pursue you, and now you want to put it behind you. That's why you're here. You came for a charm against evil."

The man scoffed, but she continued:

"You've been half a man for a long time, so you must have carried a rifle when you were very young. You have an officer's greatcoat, meaning the emperor paid handsomely for your arm and leg. You've come with two goats to pay for a charm that's not worth a couple of kreuzers. You pursued Napoleon around Austria or Bohemia for the emperor, came within a hair of death in his battles, and maybe you were even a prisoner of war. But you were there when Bonaparte fell, and that's why the emperor was so generous."

His silence confirmed her words. She saw his forehead beaded with sweat. Behind the wrinkled facade, all those images came back to him.

"You're here now because it left you with scars, along with wounds like that slash below your shoulder, which cannot heal. The body adjusts, but no one can escape the wounds of the soul. You seek protection from such a fate."

"For my son," he said.

"You have a son."

"He was born last Sunday."

At the mention of the child, the wrinkles on his face changed direction.

"Have you saved the placenta?" she asked.

He nodded, meaning he'd planned this from the beginning. There is no talisman more potent than a baby's placenta. He'd been to the imam and the priest, and he left guilders and kreuzers for them, but he only brought the placenta to her. She watched him in silence. She let him say what was seething inside. He stared dully at the empty table, and his flexing eyebrows divulged his feelings. Gloom, then uncertainty, love and worry – the outlines of happy memories and shadows of troubling ones. His eyebrows bobbed up and down, slanted this way or that, the wrinkles on his forehead rippled and smoothed, and every image in his mind created a new expression on his face. Finally, he looked up and spoke.

"I want him to live like a human being. I want him to never see war, to never have to take a rifle and shoot at another man, and to never have to run from another man's bullets. I want him to live like a man, to fear wolves and disease, not bombs and bayonets. It wasn't like that for me, nor for my father or his father before him. Not one man in my bloodline, for as long as anyone can remember, has lived his life without losing his head or his soul in war. No man in this entire world has lived without knowing war. And it's been that way since time immemorial. There isn't a man born who hasn't felt the talons of war. I want my son to be the first. I want that curse to be broken. Who put it on us, and what did we do to deserve it? If I have to go to a crone, I will. If I have to deny God, I will. But my son won't suffer because of exploiters and parasites who only long for his blood. Do you have any charms for that?"

He let out a long sigh and leaned over the table. She could smell his sweat. His breathing was heavy and ragged, like that of a condemned man waiting for his sentence.

“I do,” she said calmly. “There’s a spell for that. A very strong spell.”

His eyes lit up. She felt him mellow, exhale deeply and relax his shoulders.

“Does it work?” he asked softly, almost tenderly.

“It will work, but you have to do everything I tell you. If you do it all, it will work.”

“Are you sure?” he spoke as if he knew and understood nothing.

“I’m sure,” she averred.

“You’re sure,” he repeated as though he believed completely.

The ruin of a man, immured in an officer’s greatcoat and concealed behind his scowl, trembled gently. Doubts and accusations trickled away like sand through his fingers, leaving nothing but a deflated, shrivelled heart on the chair before Gila.

She rose from her chair and began to work up her magic. She took a prayer book bound in black goat hide, opened it at random, ran her finger over the lines and mumbled. Then she went to the fireplace, where pots hung from the rafters, produced dry twigs, blackened bones and various other unrecognisable artifacts, and scattered them over the table. She brushed aside the cat, which reluctantly jumped from the chest onto the earth floor and waited, while Gila opened the chest and withdrew a linen bag. It contained a bundle carefully wrapped in light-coloured leather. She opened it gingerly to reveal a tuft of coarse black fur. Finally, she took a blank white sheet of paper and a pencil from the drawer of the table.

“Now, write down what I tell you. First, take this black wolf fur and sew it into the baby’s pillow.”

The man understood and nodded.

“Are you writing?”

“I don’t need to write, I’ll remember.”

“You have to write it down. Magic doesn’t take effect until it’s written down. There’s no magic without words, and the written word is strongest of all.”

The man shrugged. He leaned over the table and raised himself from his chair with the help of his stick. He hobbled to the door, *thump-swish-knock*, opened it and bellowed:

“Stipica, you ninny, get in here!”

Stipica, the youngster, had seen fifteen or sixteen summers. He wore a starched, immaculately white shirt and was constantly trying to twirl the fuzz under his nose into a moustache. He held the pencil as if it were a knife.

“Come on, write. I paid for your schooling. Now let’s see what it’s good for.”

The youngster squeezed the pencil tight as if he didn’t know what to do with it. Gila began to dictate:

“Now, first sew the tuft of black wolf fur into the pillow. A black wolf is a unique beast that will not be born of two grey wolves, and the tuft gives protection against all spells.”

The scribe sweated over each letter, but he wrote them down painstakingly and licked his lips at the beginning of each new line.

“Let me see the placenta.”

The man took out a bundle of linen cloth tied with cord and laid it on the table. Gila unwrapped it and looked.

“It’s neither blue nor red – that’s good. Nail it to the bedhead. Then take your pistol, fire two rounds at the door of the house, and hang it above the door with the barrel pointing down. Then cut down an oak sapling no more than five ells tall, strip off its branches and drag it home, and there chop it and put it on the fire. When it ignites, throw this into the flames,” she pointed to the twigs and bones on the table. “Be careful not to lose any because all of it has to burn. And lastly, find a dead horse. You mustn’t kill it, but find a dead one. Cut off its head and bury it in front of the threshold.”

“Got that?” the man turned to the youngster.

“Almost,” he gasped, still wielding the pencil. When he finished, he wiped the sweat from his forehead and smiled with a deep sigh of relief. Gila checked the sheet and handed it to the man. He folded it and thrust it into his pocket.

“What should I do with the paper when I’ve finished all that?” he asked Gila.

“Guard it. When the first hairs begin to grow on the boy’s body, do it all over again. Find a tuft of wolf’s fur and fire your pistol. That will protect him as long as he lives under your roof.”

“And when he moves out?”

“That means he’s no longer a child, so you won’t need to protect him any more. He’ll be a man.”

“That’s not enough. It won’t do.”

“That’s all a parent can and should do.”

“Too little, too late,” the man turned dour, wrinkles framed his eyes again, and his face clouded over. His hand clasped the pocket in which he’d put the sheet of paper with the spells. He repeated how little it was and that he’d gained nothing in that house, but he still held on tightly to that nothing.

“When he becomes a man, look for me again,” she said as if it were certain the boy would survive childhood and come of age, and that his father wouldn’t lock him up forever in that house so he’d be protected by higher powers that do and don’t exist; sometimes they’re just a false hope, other times they’re true magic that parents believe in more than anyone. The same thing has happened a hundred times already: a man believes he’s a world unto himself until his loneliness multiplies, becomes a multitude, and then a family. Then his spirit turns in circles and seeks help. Mothers light candles in churches, fathers clean old pistols, and everyone hopes for salvation because the realisation of the cruelty of the world and our virtual inability to influence it is just too great.

The dispirited man opened the door an inch, and the December wind brought a few snowflakes that melted on his face.

“There’s no salvation in this house either. There’s no salvation anywhere.”

*They thought for a moment: Gila is caged! / But motherly instinct saw her enraged
Gila will never surrender to fate, / morals at gunpoint are clearly too late*

Chapter 21

in which Gila arms herself with a rifle and takes what the law of humanity says is rightfully hers, for there can be no excuse for a man becoming an animal, even if he has to be an animal to prove it.

There's no salvation anywhere. Not in this house either. The dispirited man opened the door an inch, and the December wind brought a few snowflakes that stuck to his face. He lowered his eyebrows, tilted his moustache, said they had nothing – everything had been taken from them – and slammed the door. He didn't take a proper look at the woman who'd knocked, nor did he see the bundle she was pressing to her body. The less he knew, the easier it was for him to shut the door. The suffering of others is contagious, and people are not immune to it, which is why they have doors. A sharp turn of the hand for quick relief from the suffering of others.

Doors were closed in front of Gila with great ease, even solid oaken ones that had come unhinged due to their weight and scraped against the stone threshold, so they had to be pushed hard to move at all. Softer doors of beech, knocked together by an unskilled hand, were also closed. Finely crafted expensive doors, with intertwining decorations and guarded by two angry dogs that foamed at the mouth as they barked at the stranger, were closed. Burnt and blackened doors with cracks that let through the snow, so a screen of heavy cloth was nailed to them to keep out the cold wind and the misfortunes of others, were also closed. Even non-existent doors were closed in Gila's face – stone frames with protruding rusty hinges, on which no door hung any more: even such houses accommodated living souls, but they were not willing to share their misfortune with the grey woman either.

Gila stumbled through the white landscape. Snowflakes clung to her overcoat, and the crust of ice on her head and shoulders grew ever thicker. Her coat became heavy, a leaden weight, she tripped over the ends that dragged along the ground, and every step was half a fall. She pressed the little being wrapped in thick woollen blankets to her body, put her face to its to see if it was still breathing. The baby hadn't cried for hours and Gila counted its shallow breaths. She shook it so it would know she was still there, and she rubbed her painfully frozen hands against the little body's woollen wrappings.

The day was fading fast and darkness closed in. Night filled the east, the light in the west was dying, and only the moonlight still gave contour to things. A thick mist rose from the ground and every view became blurred, the shadows formed into shapes, and in one of them she saw the outlines of a wolf. The silent animal sat on a mound; Gila knew it had been after her for hours, and she sensed its presence every time despair overwhelmed her.

She banged once more on the door that had just been closed. *Open up, please*, she begged. *I have a baby*, she shouted. *There's a wolf*, she moaned. The door opened, and the grim-looking

man was now holding a flintlock. *Go away*, he snarled, pointing the barrel at her. *Clear off, you're not welcome here. Your people did this to us.* Which people? Gila wasn't theirs, whoever he meant, whatever they'd done. She didn't know what happened there; she'd walked too many hills and didn't know where she was, who "her" people were, or the others. She went by the smoke from the roofs under which she sought refuge.

This was the last house of the miserable village. She had nowhere else to go. Behind her was a closed door, in front of her a new hill for which she no longer had the strength. She looked around and trudged behind the house. Without taking her hands off the bundle on her chest, she clambered over a low wall and dragged herself to the back of the house, where firewood was stacked under the eaves. In one place, wood had been taken inside for the fire, leaving a recess, and she crawled into it. The grunting of a pig and the voices of people came through gaps in the stone wall. She laid the baby behind her, then knelt down and started building a wall of firewood as a shelter from wild animals and the snow. She stacked the wood and it seemed to be going well, a little den began to take shape, but then one piece slipped and brought the whole flimsy structure down with it. Even that little wall of wood had collapsed. She huddled in a corner, wrapped herself around the baby and sang to it softly. Snowflakes stuck to her headscarf. The snow was gradually hiding her from the world. The shadow of the wolf came closer. Gila closed her eyes and let her fatigue take over. She breathed deeply and felt sleep coming on. When Gila was almost asleep, the baby coughed and the tiny tremor jolted her awake. She shook the baby again, but it hardly reacted. A pinch on the cheek, and it puckered its face. Now Gila put her little finger to the baby's lips, and the baby took it and began to suck.

Meanwhile, Gila felt her body. The cold was painful. The skin on her hands stung, and when she tried to curl her toes she felt only pain. As night fell, the air became markedly colder and the wind picked up. The smoke from the house swirled and merged with the fog. Between the shadows of a bay bush and a holm oak, a familiar outline reappeared. Her wolf was nearby again, just a few steps away. It sat there as always, resting on its haunches and observing her. She couldn't see its face, but it was looking at her for certain. It watched her strength dwindle. Her sinister companion was always there, lurking and waiting.

Gila sang. She whispered a nursery rhyme in the baby's ear. *It's hard for a mouse without a hole, for a priest without a scroll. It's hard for an inn without a guest, for a babe without a breast. It's hard for a lid without a jar, for a boy without a pa.* She sang on, but ever more softly. *It's hard for a hawk without an eye, for a girl without a guy. It's hard for a cook without a pan, for a town without a nan. It's hard for grass without dew...* the bitterness in her throat stifled her voice... *for me without you.* The song ended, and Gila wept without tears. Snow fell on Gila the bony-legged as she lay at death's door.

How could it be that terrible Gila – Gila the fury, Gila the witch, a beast among men, the witch who brought the Austrian emperor to his knees – was drawing her last breaths in the woodpile of a stone hovel in the Kamešnica foothills? In her mind, Gila counted all the doors that hadn't opened, all the roofs she hadn't been allowed to warm herself under, and all the villages that had rejected her. All the faces came back to her of people who could have helped but turned

their backs on her instead. How did Gila, the commandress of will, come to depend on the good will of others? How can good will decide if someone is going to survive or freeze to death like a mouse that fails to find its hole? No, good will cannot be the deciding factor between life and death because it isn't a question of will. A man must not turn his back on another man. There can be no excuse for a man becoming an animal.

She looked up and saw a familiar shadow before her. The wolf was sitting and grinning, gloating at her predicament. *No!* she shouted and the wolf cloud dissipated. *No,* she repeated softly. Only one beast was there, and it wasn't the phantom of a wolf. Now she moved. She put the woollen bundle on the ground and carefully fenced it in with firewood, this time taking care how she stacked it. When a small, sturdy fortress stood, she took off her coat and carefully covered the wooden nest, and heavy pieces of wood pinned the coat in place. Then she dashed to the bay bush and broke off a few branches. The frozen skin of her palms cracked as she ran her hand down each branch and tore off the leaves. She lifted her skirt, making it into an improvised bag, and filled it with leaves. The cold wind blew under her thin linen; her skin burned, but she didn't stop. She sped on nimble feet towards the house.

Since the hovel stood on sloping ground, the stone-slab roof barely came up to her chest when she approached it from the rear. She climbed onto the roof and, taking care not to slip on the snow, tiptoed to the chimney. She shook the leaves into it, then took off her skirt, shirt and scarf, rolled them into a ball and stuffed it in too. She pushed it in deep, making sure to block the passage of smoke completely; then she slid down the roof naked, took a piece of firewood and strode quietly to the door. She stood beside it and flattened herself against the wall. Its chill penetrated her skin, but her body was honed into a weapon, her breathing quickened, and she no longer felt the cold. Her eyes gleamed. Gila the fury. She heard coughing and cursing inside the house. The door flew open and a child came running out in a cloud of smoke, coughing and spluttering. When the man came out, she growled and brought her wooden club down on his head with all her might.

Gila the beast.

It wasn't until a good half hour later that he let out a groan. He now lay in front of the fireplace, his belly pressed against the stone floor and his arms stretched out above his head – the same position in which they dragged him in from the snow. His whole family was sitting in a row next to him: his wife, three children and an elderly couple. In front of them, naked Gila leaned back in a chair, holding the flintlock and taking aim at each of them in turn. A pile of soot-stained clothes lay at her feet.

The woman on the bench was holding the baby. She dipped a linen cloth in a bowl and brought it to the baby's lips. The baby sucked greedily.

"Sugar water is better than nothing when it's hungry, but it needs to drink milk," the woman said. "I know a Naduša in Aršulići near Vratina who's breastfeeding. She can wet-nurse your baby."

Gila nodded but didn't lower the gun.

The man on the floor groaned again and came round. He grasped his aching head and looked at the blood on his fingers. He muttered as he tried to get up, but then he saw Gila and stopped. She motioned with the gun for him to stay sitting where he was. The man looked around the house: the table was overturned and the chairs scattered. His eldest son had scratches on his face, and the old woman was holding her head in one hand and moaning softly. She'd fallen into a trance and just kept repeating *O Mary, pray for us, o Mary, pray for us*. A naked woman with grey hair sitting before them, her cold gaze aimed at their chests, was a fright for them.

"Take anything you want, please just leave us," the man said.

Gila said nothing and held the flintlock firmly. It may have been rusty and old, but it was loaded and cocked.

"We have a pig. Take it, just don't hurt us. You can have everything."

"I won't take everything, only what's mine by right and nothing more – what you should have given me willingly."

"These are hungry times. The Turks carried off our poultry, and now the pig is all that's left. We don't even have enough for ourselves."

"So what if they're hungry times? Does a man stop being a man when he's hungry? Do people eat each other?"

The man spoke no more. The old woman crossed herself, *Virgin Mary, pray for us*. One of the children hid its face in its mother's skirts. Silent tears ran down the cheeks of one of the others. They were all looking at the naked woman's face and the tip of the gun barrel; only the baby was looking up, cooing and gurgling.

"A crust of bread, a jug of water, and a little warmth from the fire – that's all I asked of you," Gila continued. "Even when a man has nothing, he still has a soul. And his soul is the only thing that tells a man apart from a wolf. A man is only a man when he considers another man to be so. And what are you?"

They didn't speak. No one knew the answer. Gila didn't either, but she knew that a gun can only be used to teach a man when it's loaded. She lowered the barrel towards the floor but still held the gun tightly in her hands. The family breathed a sigh of relief. All that could be heard was the baby smacking its little lips.

"That's not your baby," the old woman reproached. "Who did you steal it from, witch?"

"You were going to let it freeze a moment ago, so what do you care?"

One of the children couldn't restrain its curiosity:

"Are you a witch? You've got silver hair like an old lady, but your face is like a maiden's."

Gila's hair shone silver in the firelight of the hearth.

"It's Gila, the white-haired witch, with a wheel incised on her forehead," the old woman told them. "Word travels faster than her – people know about her here."

"What are you going to do with us?" they asked.

"I'm going to curse this house," she answered coldly.

The mother started and covered her mouth with her hand. One of the children squealed. The old woman wailed and crossed herself, *Have mercy on us, o mother of God.* The man knitted his brows.

“You’ll never be able to do to anyone what you almost did to me. The next time you turn a deaf ear to others’ misfortune, the house will burn down with you inside it.”

The baby gave a little burp and closed its eyes.

“It’s fallen asleep,” the woman said.

“Bring it to me.”

The woman put the baby in Gila’s lap, then went and sat back down on the stone bench. Gila stroked the baby on the head but didn’t let go of the gun or take her eyes off her captives.

“Do you have a cart?”

“We do, but they took our horse,” the man replied.

“Is there a donkey in the village?”

“There is, at my uncle’s.”

“Now listen carefully. This is what you’ll do. I’ll lower the gun, you’ll lift up the table, and we’ll sup. You’ll get out what food you have and we’ll eat, as you’d treat any guest. You’ll give me a blanket to wrap myself in until my clothes dry. Then we’ll sleep. At dawn, you’ll fetch the donkey and take me to Aršulići. When you come back here, you’ll tie a bell to the door of the house with red thread. Whoever rings that bell, you’ll welcome them like your own kin. Only those who enter your home with force deserve a bullet from your gun. If you don’t do as I say, the devil will come down the chimney and your children will never see the light of day again. You’ll never be able to remove this curse. Do you understand?”

He understood.

They brought out a loaf of bread and some broad-bean stew, and the father went and got thick slices of bacon from the barn. They all ate together without many words. The children gagged on the oversized chunks of bacon, and for the first time their parents didn’t scold them for it. The baby slept soundly in Gila’s lap. She raised its cheek to hers and felt its soft breath. She kissed it on the lips.

“Is that your real hair?” the girl pointed at Gila’s long grey hair.

“Yes, it’s my real hair.”

“How can it be silver if you’re a white-haired witch?”

“It was white once, but with each new spell I cast it gets a bit darker.”

“Have you cast another spell? Will it get darker again?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes. It’ll get darker now.”

“I’ve never seen hair like that before.”