

ALESSANDRA CARATI

E poi saremo salvi

(lit. "And Then We Will Be Safe")

Translation by Olivia Jung

Chapter 1

The only intact memory I have from my childhood is a premonition of what would happen to us later.

Our life was simple, it ended where the village ended; it was delimited by the woods, the road leading to the city, and the orchards perched on the side of the mountain. There was no other world beyond those borders where we could have lived.

I remember that the grown-ups had taken up a habit of whispering with each other and going quiet when the children came near them. The kids were always with other kids, they played everywhere freely, and they were everyone's children. Mirko and I were the same age: six years old and inseparable like two leaves of a lung.

One day, we were sitting in front of the house. Mirko said, "There will be a war and we will leave." Nobody knew what war was. For us, it was a whispered word that had the power of making adults insecure and turning them bad.

I stood up and yelled at him, "There won't be a war and we won't go anywhere!"

Mirko stood up as well. "Yes, there will be! And we'll have to leave or they'll kill us all!"

He couldn't hit me, so he channeled all his frustration into his clenched fists and darted off. He ran through a brood of hens that were pecking nearby, scaring them and making them scatter in every direction like spiders from a hole.

When I got back home, I asked my mother if it was true, if there was a war coming.

She replied, "No. It will never get to the village."

I believed her.

Chapter 2

"Stay awake."

The heat from the stove filled the entire room and I dozed off.

"Don't sleep. Stay awake."

This time my mother shook my shoulder.

"I can't."

"I'll give you an assignment. Keep your eyes on the door. They could get here any moment now."

I scanned the darkness of night looking for the light space where the door was. We slept in a single room at my grandparents' house, on foam mattresses on the floor. My father was building a larger house for the entire family, just next door to where my grandparents lived. But it wasn't ready yet, so we all lived together while waiting to finish the construction on the new one. My aunt and my cousin Semir also lived with us; he was two years younger than me. When my portion of milk would boil on the stove, Semir would go to our grandfather and ask him for some until he got up to give him half of my milk. It wasn't that my grandfather didn't love me, it's just that my cousin Semir was born a boy, and a son in the village was worth more. My mother would get mad, so my grandmother secretly watered down my portion. Until I got diarrhea this one time and ended up in the hospital. My mother took my grandmother aside and told her, "Don't do that anymore."

She then mustered up her courage, went to my grandfather, and told him, "The milk is for the girl." It was a heroic gesture for her. She was younger than I am now, she had less opinions, less aspirations, and she always felt like a guest in her own life. I understood that after a long time and a lot of anger, when the horror swept away the meaning of everything and left us exhausted on the ground, like cockroaches lying on their backs.

I could hear my mother bustling around, trying to put everything she could in a suitcase. My grandmother was helping her; every now and then she would start crying and they would hug. “Where are you going? All your things are here, your freezer is full of meat and vegetables. Things are fine here.”

“I’m leaving because your son told me to. If things calm down and I can come home in a week, great. But now I have to go.”

“Go to the cadaster,” my father had told her over the phone, “and get the deed to the house and the land. And your documents and the girl’s. And the photos. Leave the rest.”

My father worked abroad. When he came back, he would bring me a basket full of toys, all colorful and sparkling. There weren’t any toys like that in the village, so I would immediately bury them in the garden, in a secret place. They were mine and nobody else could touch them, neither Semir, nor Mirko, nor the other kids in the village.

My father was waiting for us just beyond the border; he couldn’t come to pick us up in person because they were about to close the borders. We had to undertake the journey on our own. My mother was pregnant at the time.

My grandmother brought me a cup of coffee.

“Drink some, *kula moja mila*” (literally “my beloved home,” but also an idiomatic expression for “my precious,” ed.).

That is what she called me, but only when we were alone and no one else was around, it was our thing. When I tasted the coffee, I would have wanted to spit it out because of how bitter it was, but I didn’t know where, so I just swallowed it.

Then the door burst open.

The thundering sound froze the blood in my veins. I stared motionless at the dark silhouette in the doorway cast against the light.

“We have to go now.”

It was my grandfather’s voice. Our hearts started beating again, each at its own pace.

“I need to get two more things for the girl,” said my mother.

“There’s no more time, Fatima. They’re about to get here.”

Chapter 3

We left and it was dark, the grass crunching under our feet, it can still be very cold in April. My mother turned around to look at the house, then she put her hand on my shoulder.

“Say goodbye to grandma.”

And here I don’t remember anything. I can’t remember the warmth of her cheek on mine, nor her faded blue eyes, or the smell of hay that emanated from my grandmother’s clothes. A piece of my life was about to disappear and I wasn’t aware of it.

In an instant, we were in the dark scrubs of the woods. My grandfather was ahead with my cousin on his shoulders, holding my aunt by the hand; my mother and I walked behind.

We were making our way through shrubs and fallen trees, as the animals darted away disturbed from their slumber. It was dark, it was cold, and I was scared.

“Mommy, where are we going?”

“To meet your dad.”

“Where?”

“Beyond the border.”

I was panting and I didn’t ask her any more questions, even though “beyond the border” was an expression without landscape for my six years of age. The woods were always a forbidden place for us kids, we would look at them from afar, enchanted and intimidated. And now my mother was

dragging me brusquely through the thick of it, and the discovery of reality was too fast, too harsh. My feet sank in soft moss, damp soil clinging to my shoes, and with every step it took more effort to keep moving forward. I imagined getting trapped by brambles and vines coiling themselves around me, getting turned into a tree trunk, and being rooted forever into my mountains.

My mother's hand tugged me forward then held me back, as if we had to run somewhere but didn't know where. We stopped. She looked around: we had lost my grandfather, we couldn't see his figure tracing the path ahead.

A rustling noise became louder than the other sounds. We hastily crouched down, she placed her hand over my mouth then pulled me in to hide me with her body. My heart was beating all over the place.

Silence returned. Whatever was coming for us had stopped. In the stillness, there was only the trickling sound of pee running down my legs and onto the moist bark on the ground. I was melting and turning into water so I could go back to my grandmother. To fall asleep, she would tell me the story of the old fat sheep that escaped death by dressing up as a wolf. Anger enveloped me in a cocoon, I curled up and prayed to Allah to punish my mother for snatching me from my bed.

"Fatima."

For the second time, we were saved by my grandfather's voice.

"If you fall so far behind, you and the girl will be the first to get captured."

I would have wanted to tell him that he had scared us to death. He only had my cousin to carry on his shoulders, while my mother was pregnant, carrying a heavy backpack, and dragging me with my legs of a six-year-old. If we had fallen behind it was only because he had forgotten about us. If we had been captured, it would have been entirely his fault.

But my grandfather was already making his way ahead and if we hadn't followed him, he would have been swallowed by the woods again. The wet fabric of my trousers hit my legs with a cold slap at every step; I wondered if my mother had noticed that I peed myself. She hadn't given me a sign of affection since we left. For the first time, I felt a sudden distance from her.

We went down and up, then down and up again. At every hillside, I hoped it would be the last. I kept my eyes down, trying to keep up, not talking, not asking any questions. I had never seen them so scared. No one could fathom it back then, but time was the only thing we had left.

My grandfather was holding Semir in his arms, constantly keeping an eye on us to make sure we were behind him. I suddenly slammed into my mother's leg and looked up. We were out of the woods, there was a road below us flanked by houses, a square full of people, and three parked buses.

My grandfather turned around and looked at us as if we were an apparition, but we were real, in flesh and bone, and exhausted. He placed my cousin on the ground and came up to us with a dazed look in his eyes, as if he just realized that we had walked for twelve kilometers alone in the dark.

He took my mother's hands, kissed them, and pressed them against his cheek.

"I'm sorry Fatima, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Then he grabbed me to lift me up on his shoulders.

"Don't, we're here at this point," she said heading toward the square and dragging me behind her. She wasn't mad at him, she was moved by a desperate hurry to ensure herself a seat.

My grandfather jostled his way through the crowd raising his voice; he had to take a hefty wad of cash from his pockets to buy the tickets. Ultimately, we managed to get onboard, the two of us ahead, my aunt and cousin behind. He stayed off the bus. He was going to head back to the village. We didn't even hug. Everyone around us kept on saying it would be only for a short while, two weeks at most, and then we would come back to our homes.

The bus moved slowly. My grandfather looked at us from the square. He raised his left hand to his heart, an ancient greeting from our area, and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the last glance was for my mother.