

Dan COMAN

The Bulgarians

Father put on his black cassock and hit the road. That evening we were supposed to go pretty far, all the way to the next hill, to attend a wake, so I asked him if I could come along. He made no reply, but I tagged along all the same. Evening was falling, I climbed through the cemetery and, as I reached the hilltop, where the two pines stood, I turned around and looked down, towards our house. The light was on in the front room. For a moment, I considered going back.

Father plodded on silently, without looking back. Are we nearly there, I asked, but he ignored me. We were making our way among the few houses huddled together along the cartway. Their lights spilled out to the track sunk into the dirt. I heard several cats meowing. I almost broke into a run trying to keep up, always on his right. He kept blowing his nose and then shook the snot off his fingers against the ground. As we made it all the way up, to the hilltop, the house sailed into view. We could make out its windows, dimly lit by candles. Several men were chatting in the courtyard, strung out on a bench. They jumped to their feet the moment they saw Father. They were holding on to plum-brandied glasses. As soon as Father entered the house, they drained the spirits in one gulp and then filed in after him. A brood of old women draped in black were flanking the coffin and nattering in hushed tones. No one was crying. The deceased was an old man clad in national costume, his face waxen and haggard. It's the last time I watch, I resolved as I eased into a settee and waited. Dad said a prayer, and then the man next to him started reading in muffled tones from a book. A fat woman approached me with a plate piled high with slices of sweet bread. I shook my head, but the woman forced a slice into my hands anyway. The deceased can't eat anymore, being deceased and all that – Mom's words flashed through my mind. She'd tell me this whenever I refused to eat the meat-stuffed cabbage leaves, the sweet bread or the cakes she brought back, wrapped in a kerchief, on returning from the odd wake. Dad bellowed another prayer or two, always mentioning the dead man's name – the Lord's-own-servant, Ștefan. His being so loud

kind of pissed me off. Whenever ministering, father would raise his voice greatly, to the point he no longer sounded like himself. I felt embarrassed and hung my head. I hated it when he sounded like that, but that was exactly what the old women loved their priest for – that way, they could finally make out the holy words he was saying. Though, truth be told, most of them knew every single word by heart – some would constantly rush ahead of him and speak out whatever it was that he would bellow next. It really galled me that I'd tagged along. I was at a loss what to do with the slice of sweet bread that had gone limp and soggy in my hand. I could hardly wait for the whole thing to finish, so that we could make our way back.

It was pitch dark outside. I left the house the same moment as Father. In the courtyard, I once again saw the men clad in black, clinking their glasses. I only knew the one holding a small grey TV set in his hand. He was our neighbour.

I'd never seen such a small TV set before. It looked like a toy.

The men had been waiting for Father. They downed another round before setting off. Let's head for The Bear's Hill, the neighbour said. We'll get the Bulgarians there, no two ways about it. Dumitra's hill can't possibly be any higher. It had slipped my mind completely. That night they were playing the world-cup finals. At noon, I'd heard Father talk about it with the deacon outside the gate. The deacon threw me an apple over the fence. I didn't bother to retrieve it from the ground. In our village you can't get the Bulgarians, but I knew for a fact that my uncle could manage it from his own flat, no need to take to the woods. Once, when Mother and I visited him in the city, as soon as the Romanian broadcast came to an end, my uncle gave Mother a wink and switched to the Bulgarian TV station. I did watch, but for a very brief spell. Up on some stage, Ștefan Hrușcă was singing, and that Hrușcă guy got on my nerves whenever I set eyes on him because, on several occasions, I heard Mother say that, though he was so revoltingly ugly, she'd marry him any day, just to have him sing to her on a regular basis. Those shameful words had stayed with me for a long time afterwards.

The village men knew that Father was crazy about football, so they took him along.

If you join us, Father, it may be that the good Lord will help us get the Bulgarians, a bearded man quipped, puffing away at a cigarette. OK, let's give it a try, Father said, as the others made room for him to take the lead. I was quick to follow. The man with the beard and the neighbour with the TV set came immediately behind, with two other men in tow. I didn't know any of them, but I could hear them betting. The one with the high-pitched voice said 2 – nil to Holland. I couldn't see him, but his voice did get on my nerves.

I was two steps behind Father. Whenever we had to walk across furrows, he would hitch up his cassock like a skirt and then plodded on, burning candle in hand, without a word, without ever turning his head. The way was neither easy nor short; it would take us at least half an hour to make it all the way to the Bear's Hill, according to the neighbour, whom I'd overheard as he sad that. I was hanging close to Father, constantly attempting to touch him. The darkness around us scared me. At times, the candle blew out. Then the bearded man would rush forward and say, easy does it, Father. And he'd light it up once again from a matchstick. He was smoking incessantly, the bearded man was, and whenever he slipped or stumbled against some mound he couldn't discern in the dark, he'd cuss mightily, then go, *forgive me, Lord*, while the others would laugh and tell stories as we filed on, like that, towards the grand finals.

I'd never been so far before, and not at night, anyway. In spite of my growing fear, I was thinking of the day when Virgil, my friend from the city, would come and I would recount our extraordinary adventure for him: at night on the Bear's Hill. He might not even believe me. It was a good thing Father could endorse the story.

When we got there, the neighbour eased the TV set onto the grass and, before he switched it on, I got rid of that slice of sweet bread, casting it behind my back, into the dark. The screen lit up abruptly and gave a beep, swarming with black and grey flea-like dots. Nothing more. The bearded man took hold of the aerial and started turning it right and left. There was absolutely no change we could see. The TV set was shedding a puddle of light on the ground and sounded exactly like when the broadcast was off, although the bearded man, aerial held high above his head, was pacing to and fro.

How about changing the spot, just a few steps forward, the neighbour said and we all climbed on, to the very top. Once again they started turning the aerial whichever way. They repeatedly switched the TV set on and off, all to no avail.

I was freezing and clung to Father like a limpet. Behind us, the darkness was getting more threatening by the minute. All I did was strain my ears and jump at every little noise coming from that direction. If Mârza saw us here, tomorrow we'd all be in the slammer, said the man with the high-pitched voice. Don't you worry, the neighbour laughed as he shifted the TV set behind the bearded man, if Mârza comes, we'll tell him we've come here with the Father to pray. As if Mârza wouldn't like to watch the finals, the bearded man replied. If he were to come, he'd be watching with us, I'm sure. Come, someone hold this aerial for me while I have a smoke. One of the men took the aerial and jiggled it, fiddled with its angle. But static kept swirling on the screen, with no change to be seen. To hell with the TV set, the neighbour hollered, the game's already started, I reckon. Now didn't I tell you, man, someone else said, we should of gone to Dumitra's Hill? Now we'd be having a beer *and* watching the game, nice'n'easy. Still, how are we supposed to have gotten there? My cousin's clunker gave up the ghost, he told me there's no way he could move it. An', come to think of it, travelling all that way for a mere football game isn't really worth it.

Hey, the high-pitched voice suddenly said, what if we get the TV set up in the tree? Here, in this walnut. If it's higher up, it might get some signal.

You're nuts, I'm tellin' you, the bearded man said as he threw the cigarette. But OK, it's worth a try. Get up there, then, and I'll give you the TV set and the aerial. Next thing, the man climbed the tree and the bearded man followed him up, took the aerial from him and climbed a few branches higher. Just be careful up there, mind you don't fall. They switched on the TV up in the walnut, but the screen remained unchanged – a squarish lantern casting light around and making that annoying beep. Father had hitched up the skirts of his cassock and eased himself onto the grass, with me huddling by him. Just moments before, they'd been talking about Mârza and I was downright terrified at the thought that the fat policeman might find us on the hill.

It's not working from here, told you so, a voice said. If it worked, everyone would flock to the Bear's Hill. It's not 'cause they're stupid that they've chosen to go all the way to Dumitra's Hill, mark my words. They'd be here, otherwise... You shut up, the bearded man retorted, climbing one further branch and shoving the aerial higher still.

What time's the burial tomorrow, Father? Another man asked, dropping by us in the grass. One o'clock, after the holy service, Father replied in that voice of his I was ashamed of – and the TV screen suddenly came alive with two thin black stripes rolling up and down. There, man, the fellow hollered as he jumped to his feet at the same time with Father. Something did stir, after all. Let's keep on trying. Come, Bristles, jiggle that aerial, that's the way, bit to the left, right! The bearded man obliged and a few moments later we heard a man talking in a foreign language. The men in the walnut called out *it's working! it's working!* I didn't stop to think. I climbed into the tree right after our neighbour. I was an expert climber. I overtook him by moving sideways and

using, on one occasion, his shoulder for a footrest in order to gain the topmost branch. After snuggling as comfortably as I could, I realized that from up there you couldn't see the screen, just the white light flickering before it. The signal had gone lost once again and the man with the high-pitched voice was blaming the bearded fellow for it. Serves you right, he was saying, for being unable to hold it for just a few moments longer. Motherfuckin' asshole, I heard the bearded man say, how 'bout havin' your butt kicked? You just come up here an' I'll show you. The bearded man was saying all that while still trying to jiggle the aerial as he lay on his side on one of the thicker boughs, incessantly puffing on his cigarette. Stop it, you two, the neighbour said. It was then that I saw Father trying to climb the walnut, like the others. He was left down with no one but the man who was sitting next to us in the grass – and who was now clasping his hands into a stirrup of sorts, wherein Father had wedged his foot and, having hitched up his cassock, was now attempting to grasp the nearest branch. He grasped it alright, but as soon as he did that, his foot slipped through the man's hands and he started dangling. Come, Mr. Priest, the man said, raise your leg and hook it over the branch. Father said nothing. He was just dangling on. Neither did he drop to the ground, nor did he attempt to raise his leg. I smiled. I knew how afraid he was of climbing trees. The man grabbed his knees and tried hoisting him up. The man with the high-pitched voice, having climbed almost next to me, went on making disparaging comments and cussing the bearded man. Shut up, bloody wimp, the bearded man was saying, shut the fuck up, or I'm coming to get you. Hold this aerial till I go up, he called to the neighbour, who bent down and picked it without a word. Father had managed to climb on the lowest bough of the walnut. The man helping him was already up, one branch below the bearded man. Fat lot of good climbing up did for me, he was saying, I'm seein' the same difference. 'Course, the high-pitched voice cut in, that beaver-face is good for nothing... You, son of a motherless goat! The bearded man was climbing to us. Come 'ere, you, shitass, come 'ere an' I'll give you reason for comment! The man with the high-pitched voice climbed another branch and squatted next to me, ready to jump to the opposite side of the walnut, in case the bearded man came any closer. Cut it out, you two, I heard the neighbour say, why don't you take the aerial up there, it's higher. Father was laying prone, holding on to the branch with both arms and losing his balance only occasionally and for very brief spells. He didn't say a word. His cassock would flap to one side whenever he tried to regain balance. The man with the high-pitched voice kicked the bearded man, who'd come within reach, and the bearded man almost toppled into the void. It was only at the last moment that he managed to catch a lower branch, though not without scraping his knees and damaging his hands. Fuckin' bastard, I heard him say, I'm gonna kill you with my own hands! He started climbing again. The man who'd been helping Father attempted to hold him back by grabbing his coat. The bearded man delivered a backhanded slap in his face. You, prick, what'd I do to you that you hit me, prick? The bearded man did not answer, but the fellow started chasing and cussing him. The neighbour no longer paid any mind to the aerial. He was holding it upside down as he was watching the others. I wanted to climb down. I was afraid one of them might bump into me. But the man with the high-pitched voice had grabbed my shoulder with one hand while kicking constantly towards the bearded man. The bearded man ducked a couple of times and then managed to grab his opponent by the trousers. He was on the point of pulling him off his bough, but at that exact moment, the one who'd given chase caught the bearded man by the hair of his head and started tugging at him. When the bearded man's nape came to rest on his shoulder, the fellow punched him hard in the face. The bearded man immediately tried to hit him back with his elbow, but the fellow dodged just in time. Sock 'im, sock 'im in the kisser, the high-pitched voice went on as its owner leaned out gingerly, kicking his foot in the general direction of the bearded man. I was holding fast unto the bough with both hands. The idiot had almost toppled me more than once. Get down, the other guy was urging the bearded man, as he tightened his grip on his hair. Get the fuck down, you prick, or else I'll beat the shit out of you, what have I ever done to you that made you hit me? The neighbour shifted slightly towards the end of the bough he was perched on, to make room for the two to descend. Then, having dropped the aerial to the ground, he cautiously descended himself, causing an abrupt shift of the beam radiating from the TV set. They all got off the tree, deftly wriggling past Father, who was still lying prone, as he clung motionlessly to the lowest bough. I wriggled past him in my turn

and only after the avenger kicked the bearded man a couple more times, did he raise his arms and helped Father down. In the darkness of the tree, we could sense the man with the high-pitched voice shifting about, but his voice could be no longer heard. The neighbour hadn't switched off the TV. He was still holding it in his hand. Since no one said anything anymore, he took the floor. We could have another try in Dobodea, he said. Fuck Dobodea, I'm not going all the way there, the bearded man said, and anyway the first half must be over by now. Let's better go home. Fuck Ceausescu and his whole fuckin' breed, the bearded man said as he wiped his nose with his sleeve. Hush, you fool, the high-pitched voice cut in, hush! Are you back at it? the other man retorted.

We went down the hill in silence. This time, Father and I were bringing up the rear. We could hardly keep up with the rest. When we reached the house where the dead man was, the bearded man and two others in the party stopped. We're going in for another drink, they said. Through the window we could see the candles flickering by the coffin. Good night, Father, good night. The neighbour, who was now holding both the TV set and the aerial, was walking at the front. He was taking long strides down the narrow path leading into the cemetery. I'd ended up walking between Father and the man with the high-pitched voice. Father had lagged behind, since he kept tripping on the hem of his cassock as we went downhill. Just before the cemetery, the neighbour made one more attempt. He switched the TV on once again and started swaying the aerial above his head. When we caught up with him, we stopped. Aw, c'mon, man, forget it, the high-pitched voice said, to hell with it all! At that exact moment, the screen flared bright and, instead of the beep and the static, a woman came into view. She was making the kind of sounds I initially associated with agony. I got closer and saw her spread-eagled on a bed, her bare ass in full view. I opened my eyes wide, but the image vanished and static invaded the screen once again, just as Father's heavy hand made full contact with the nape of my head. I was thrown out of balance and plumped to the ground. I didn't hurt myself, but the blow had been heavy, indeed. My ears were roaring with pain and annoyance. I couldn't understand why, not one bit. I got to my feet and walked, crying, in his wake.

Father had lit his candle once again and made his way among the graves towards home. Behind us, we could hear the TV beep, just like when the broadcast is over, while the high-pitched voice was giggling in the dark, try again, Nelu, try again...

Translated from the Romanian by Florin Bican