

# Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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## Through Plum Orchards and Meadows

Muharem Bazdulj

*The borders of great civilizations, as we know from the 'new historians,' are drawn by the zones of the major agricultural cultures – of the olive and the grapevine... Bosnian everyday culture is characterized by.... the plum.*

Ivan Lovrenović

When Simo is at work, I always watch Sarajevo TV. Well, it's not called Sarajevo TV any longer, rather some sort of title like B H T V, <sup>1</sup> but to myself, I call it TV Sa. <sup>2</sup> There are some people who were there before the war, and they've gotten older, it's true. We couldn't get Sarajevo TV during the war; one could only watch the Serbian broadcasters from Pale in Bosnia. The others were destroyed.

I myself don't know what I watch. It isn't any particular program, except what's on before three PM. In the morning there's some program on culture, some guy with long hair is recommending some books, then it's the news, and a foreign documentary, then the first news of the day. I listen to all of this with only half an ear. What I like best are the reruns. Not those that are replays from last night, but some shows which are from twenty or thirty years ago.

Yesterday, about eleven AM, there was a program about plums. It's strange to watch those old shows on today's TV set. It's not a plasma TV or something super trendy now, but it's got good resolution, etc. And these old shows, even when they're black and white, were somehow made for earlier TV's, like the first one I remember, with some surprise, that it stood on the floor, and was called a stabilizer, which you had to first turn on, and only then turn on the TV. You know, on those programs the picture was always a little foggy, and the sound was lower, not exactly like when there's static on the radio, but as though static was just about to start. It's strange for me to watch them on a modern TV.; I can't tell you how strange, like it appears to you, when in a photograph from a museum, a hundred-year-old photograph, you see one of your neighbors. You should watch shows like that on those TV sets, that when you turn them off, a single, bright spot remains on the screen, which first gets bigger, and then slowly gets smaller and then, somehow in an instant, suddenly, disappears completely. You can tell by these shows that they were made at a time when there weren't any satellite channels; somehow the shows went by slowly. It wasn't like it is now, when the speed alone prevents you from changing channels. It's not only that there weren't any satellite channels, but that there was only one channel, at most two channels, and the second one would start around five or six o'clock, so honestly, you couldn't change the channel, even if you moved the TV, you'd only get snow.

That show about plums, it was some sort of educational show. What plums are called in Latin, *prunus domestica*; it seems to me, then how much plums are valued in our country, what plums are used for, how many plums Yugoslavia produces. I tell you, it's an old show, and what's more, I think Tito was alive then. And there were several interesting facts that come out in the Politika entertainment program, that the plum is a symbol of a girl's early youth in China, because on the trunk of a plum tree the blossoms appear before the leaves.

That suddenly reminded me of Mahir. I've never told you about him. You know that I'm from Zvornik, from Bosnia; I arrived in Mali Zvornik in '94. Mahir was my first love, as they say. Well, you know what, maybe he wasn't, but I, definitely, I was his first love.

He was older than me, but he was a little bit of a nerd. You know guys like that: he was sweet, but sort of gawky. But his being gawky was the sweetest part for me. I knew that he fell in love with me already in grade school. You know, when the boys look at you in the aisle, and when you look back at them, then they look at the ground, and sometimes they even blush. You're always meeting him in the evening promenade.<sup>3</sup>

You know that he's fallen in love with you, and you know that he knows that you know, but both of you act a little crazy, and that's the way it is. We also lived close to each other, not exactly the same group of apartment buildings, but in the neighboring group. You don't know Zvornik, so I won't describe things to you in vain, but I'll tell you this:

I realized that when I started going to high school, and he was already a junior, he would look out the window when I passed by, and then he'd come out as if by accident, right at that moment, to meet me, and then we'd go on to school together. My classmates right away asked me if I was going out with him, but I told them there was no chance of that, although every morning, I was still happy just to walk a little while with him. But he was unbelievably shy. For months I waited for him to ask me, but he didn't say a thing. You know, that's how the girls would talk to me, 'Did he ask you?', meaning, 'Did he tell you that he wanted to hang out with you?' At that time I used to attend meetings of the Young Linguists' League; I was good in grammar; and then I thought up a sort of funny definition, some guy – if he asks her about an intransitive verb, then it's a question of male-female relationship.

And I tell you, that means I was in middle school, then from September on, we would go to school together every morning, and sometime in November, he began to walk me home from school. In the beginning, it was all as though accidentally, but now everyone was already thinking that we, you know, were officially going out together, but Mahir didn't say anything. It was only sometime in the spring, I don't remember the date, believe me, although I myself can't believe that I don't know, but it was sometime around the end of March, the beginning of April, that he asked me, and it was in the morning, somewhere half-way to school, something along the lines of how his buddies often asked if he had a girlfriend, and he didn't know what to tell them. So now he asked me how he should answer them. "As far as I'm concerned you do," that's what I said to him, and at that, in the middle of the road, he kissed me five or six times. He'd never even hugged me before, but now she shoved his tongue in my mouth, totally inexperienced, sort of naïve; if I hadn't waited for it so long, he would have disgusted me. "Take it easy, Mahir," I said, "we've got time."

And that's how we started seeing each other officially, so I don't use the expression 'going out together' again, I sound like my mother when I talk like that. Everything was more or less like it used to be: we walked to school together as before, only now he waited for me in front of my

building. “Hey, guy, Mahir, don’t come by for me, it’s not on your way, you end up going double the distance, wait for me in front of your building like you used to up ‘til now,” I’d keep telling him this, but he wouldn’t even listen. I remember that this pleased me then; it was a kind of proof of his love for me – not that he waited for me, but that the neighbors saw him, not that he was showing his care for me, but that he got up earlier than me. You know how it is when you’re going to school, nothing is sweeter to you than sleep; it seems as though you’d give everything for five minutes more of sleep, and because of me he got up fifteen minutes earlier. And the mornings were cold, it seemed to me, all the way ‘til June, if they weren’t actually cold then as well. Maybe they were cold in July as well, but when summer break came, I used to sleep until almost noon. But I want to tell you, it’s as though I can see him today, in front of my old entrance-way, all wrapped up in some jacket, with his face still a little sleepy, but he’d smile as soon as he’d see me, and it was as though that smile wiped the sleep away from his face, like when you drink strong coffee in the morning.

When summer came, we began to go out more in the evening, to garden cafes, and the like. Now we’d become a real couple for my parents knew about Mahir, and his knew about me, and all. And things were good for us. You know, in those several months, he’d somehow gotten braver, for he was surer of himself, and I was glad. It’s true that there’s a kind of gawkiness that is nice at the beginning, but you really can’t date someone who’s awkward. Then he began to kiss better. For the first month or two, I suppose, he was afraid that I would leave him, and then it was as though he began to take as much as he could get. He kissed me too wetly, he got my face all drenched, and as for my breasts, he grabbed me like you knead bread. But, I’m telling you, by summer, he got a little more choosy. We used to go and walk along the Drina River, and every few steps, we’d stop and kiss, tenderly, gently, more lips than tongue, you know, in a feminine way. I used to wear little summer dresses, and he’d stroke my sides just with the tips of his fingers, totally tenderly, like when you catch butterflies, and you make sure that you don’t remove the powder from their wings, which they need to fly. I really went wild with this, and he saw this, but he still wasn’t aggressive.

In September, school started up again, I was a sophomore, and he was already a senior. Several of my female classmates were already saying that they’d lost their virginity: one of them on vacation at the Adriatic coast, one in Germany, and one in Sarajevo. And they somehow seemed important, and so I agreed that I’d slept with Mahir, and all the while I’m thinking that they can tell by my face that I’m lying.

And I realized that we’d have to make love as soon as possible. And that’s how, one morning he was waiting as usual in front of my building, I came down, and right away I told him that I’d forgotten my purse, and I called to him to come upstairs with me. My family had already left for work. As soon as we got upstairs, I said: “Come on, come on in, we don’t have to go to school today, five times skipping school are nothing.” And he moves aside a little, and I see that he’s shaking a little. He knows what’s on my mind, I suppose. And we go to my room, I put on some music, we sit down on my bed, and begin to kiss each other. I was wearing a white blouse with red dots. I remember as though it were yesterday, and with shaking fingers, he unbuttoned all of my blouse, and kissed my nipples, and kissed me on the part of my breasts that my bra didn’t cover. I didn’t know at all where I was; I only knew that my hand was in his hair, and that Mahir was unbuttoning my jeans. And I know that my hand went into his pants, and that he somehow shuddered in a different way, and soaked my hand, and said that he had to go to school. I saw how he avoided me during recess, and that he didn’t wait for me after school. The next day I woke up earlier, and was there in front of his building. He didn’t see me from the window, nor did he watch for me. He came down some ten minutes later, with circles like bags under his eyes. When he saw

me, he turned back to the entrance, like he was going to go back, and I shouted at him: “Hey, Mahir, don’t be stupid.” And he came slowly to meet me. “You know what,” I said to him, “today let’s not go to school or to my place; let’s go to your place.” We go upstairs. He wants to sit in the living room, as though we’re going to watch TV, but I want to go to his room. The bed there is unmade, clothes are hanging over chairs; it’s a real boy’s room. On the bed there’s a green book. I look at the cover: on it is written: *Closey Watched Trains*, by Bogomil Hrabal. “What’s the book about,” I ask, more just to have something to say, and he goes on how it’s about some guy. Milosh is his name, who shamed himself as a man in front of his girl, a certain Masha, and so he cut his veins. “What do you mean, ‘shamed himself’, I asked, and he dropped his eyes and whispered, “He wasn’t a man with her, like I wasn’t with you yesterday.” I almost burst out laughing, but I didn’t dare laugh like that in front of him. “You don’t really think that you’d kill yourself,” I ask him nevertheless. “He didn’t kill himself,” he said, “he cut his veins, but he ended up living, and spent some time in the hospital. Masha visited him there, and told him that she still loved him. “Ok,” I said, “and then what happened next?” “The psychiatrist in the hospital told Milosh that he should practice with some older woman, and he sleeps with this woman called Victoria, and the same night he dies. I forgot to tell you that the book takes place during the war,” he said and lifted his eyes to me. Now I really had to laugh. “Now you see that it’s not worth practicing with an older woman,” I said.

And so not to drag this out for you, we made love that morning in his room, and not in that unmade bed, but on the rug. Afterwards, we ate some plums, and he showed me that in that book which he had retold for me, that some dead birds were compared with overripe Bosnian plums. That’s exactly the wording, I memorized it: “overripe Bosnian plums.” Mahir found it really surprising, that a foreign writer would mention Bosnian plums. I laughed. “That foreign writer is a bad one, Mahir,” I said, “the hero of the books is called Milosh – like my grandfather, and one of my neighbors has a two-year old daughter, and her name is Masha, like the woman in the book.” He began to tell me how the Czechs are Slavs, and that these are Slavic names, but I continued to laugh, and through my laughter I told him that I was joking.

We didn’t go to school at all that day, but in the following days however, we had to go. And the fall came, the rain was falling, you couldn’t be outdoors. We saw each other mainly in school. He told me how every night before he fell asleep, he thought about me. And I thought about him, but I didn’t want to tell him. I was already thinking about marriage, you know how that goes. Once, more as a joke than anything else, I mentioned something about how some year we’d get married, and he laughed a little, and said how it wouldn’t be fair to his family. I was confused; I’d always greeted his parents well, and thought that they loved me, and everything. He realized that I hadn’t understood, so he said: “You know, it’s nothing to do with you, but it’s rather that they’re against mixed marriages, how you’ll bring up the children, etc. “Who mentioned children?” I turned it into a joke, but I didn’t like it.

That was in 1991, the war in Croatia had already begun; there was tension, but I didn’t follow the news, nor did it interest me. Mahir and I celebrated New Year’s 1992 together; at the last moment my parents decided to go to Zlatibor, and we were happy that we had somewhere to be together by ourselves. If this year would be like New Year’s night, I thought, 1992 would be the best year of my life. The TV was on, we were kissing without paying it any attention, and the only time was that just before midnight Mahir was singing along with some old singer on TV., that love-song, you know, the one that goes ‘Make me some coffee, darling, etc, and I will come around midnight to lie down next to you.’ And you know, we also went to bed around midnight, but not to sleep, and I don’t think they were thinking of sleeping, either.

The next day we were together for the whole day, for my family was coming back only on January second, and everything was fantastic. I remember that Mahir was watching the daily news on TV., he was more interested in that kind of thing than I, and they said that some sort of agreement was signed, and that Mahir said that probably there wouldn't be war.

Winter vacation quickly began, and we were together every morning, either at my place or at his. And it wasn't just every morning, but somewhere until 2:30 PM. That January and a little of February, 1992 were the best days of my life. But you know, there's that stupid saying, which I heard a hundred times from my late grandmother, everything that's beautiful only lasts a short while, and that's a fact. Or that spring came with foreboding, at the end of February, and the beginning of March, trouble began. Until then I could ignore everything in the world except for Mahir, but I couldn't any longer. There was a referendum, and then those barricades went up in Sarajevo, and there was a lot of tension where we lived. After school I flew home; I didn't dare think of going out.

The last time I saw Mahir, I remember it well, was early in the morning of April 4th, 1992. He was waiting for me in front of my building; we went off to school together, but he wasn't waiting for me after school. In a day or two, Arkan came to Zvornik, and the mosques were destroyed, and the Muslims who weren't killed left for Tuzla or Srebrenica.

Until some time in the fall, I didn't know what was happening with Mahir; I didn't even know if he was alive. I had just started my junior year, when I heard that he was with his family in Srebrenica. One of my classmates told me. My memories of that time are gray. My life was school and home, and nothing more.

I was already finishing senior year, when Simo began hanging around me. I knew him already from childhood; he was six years older than me. Our parents kept an eye on us, but when his family moved to Mali Zvornik, we saw each other less often. I ran into Simo more often now, but you know how it is when there's a huge gap in age: when you're twelve or thirteen, and he's nineteen, that's a lot; now when I was eighteen, and he was twenty-four, he'd gotten rich somehow from business, and he was polite to me, nice, kept an eye out for me. And look at this: I expected that he'd want for us to go out together, and I'd already figured that I'd rebuff him gently, but he proposed to me. Whoa! I was really surprised, I could hardly turn him down. I said: "I'll think it over." I came home, and my family already knew. Probably he'd told his family that he was going to propose, and they were happy that they were going to become related to their friends, so his mother called mine, or something like that.

I sat with my mother and father in the apartment where I'd spent my whole life, on the old, worn-out couch which could sit three people; I looked at the dirty walls which hadn't been repainted in three years, and I thought of what lay in front of me: get a job in a factory, study at the university in Pale, wander around the city like a ghost, or get married? "I'll get married," I said in a barely audible voice. "You're right," said my father, "Cross the river, it's better over there, and there's also a mill."

We got married as soon as I finished school, in June, 1994. I wanted a small wedding, and Simo wanted a big one, and it ended up being something in between. Twenty or thirty guests, dinner, and music. It was a village band, and a man and woman took turns singing. I was afraid that the man would start singing "I will come around midnight." I was afraid that I'd burst into tears, but these singers didn't sing traditional love-songs.<sup>4</sup> And everything was fine, even a raucous celebration,

until the woman began singing that song of Dragana Mirkovi? — “Here, at our old meeting place, tonight I’ll wait for you, but you won’t come.” There was a lump in my throat, and when it got to the chorus, I burst into tears. You know that chorus, you must know it; don’t start singing it now, or I’ll start crying again. “If you knew how I yearn for you, how I wait for you without hope, for you to come to me with a smile, through plum orchards and meadows.”

I was crying, tears upon tears; my mother hugged me. I told her that I was sorry to be leaving home, and she comforted me, but I was only thinking about Mahir. He loved that story by Joyce, which was made into a film, which we’d watched together in January of 1992. Snow was falling, and Mahir said that it was good that it was snowing. At the end of the film, the protagonist thought that his woman had never loved him, and that she only loved some guy with whom she fell in love from high school, but who had died from TB. That hero was thinking about that dead guy whom he’d never seen, and was looking out the window, where outside snow was falling. With this story, I was thinking that this singer was singing about waiting without hope. And I said to myself in an inaudible voice that I wasn’t waiting without hope, that Mahir was alive, that once the war ended, he would come for me.

I got pregnant quickly. You know yourself how everything changes then, how pregnancy is not called in Bosnian ‘the other condition’ in vain. Milan was born on July 17th, 1995. Mahir was already dead, but I didn’t know that. I wanted to give my son Mahir as his name, but I didn’t dare to mention this to Sima.

You know how it was shown on television: Srebrenica was liberated. I thought that perhaps Mahir was imprisoned, but I had no idea that he was dead. But my neighbors quickly began to talk about the shootings, that all of the men had been killed. One morning while we were drinking coffee, Simo told me: “We killed a whole crowd of the Turks.”

It was September of 1995, and Milan, my darling boy, was sick. It was exactly four years since the first time I slept with Mahir, and in an instant that morning, I suddenly realized that Mahir was dead. I knew it, I simply knew it.

And it wasn’t until seven more years had passed that they were buried. Milan was already going to school, and I was watching a show on Sarajevo TV, where they listed the names of the victims. They gave the first and last name, the father’s name, his age, and where the body was found. The body of my Mahir was exhumed in Zvornik; he was killed just outside Zvornik, as though he was coming for me.

More than anything, I’d love to go to his grave, but I know that I won’t. And because of that I watch Sarajevo TV. They often show the cemetery in Poto?ari where Mahir lies. And when they shoot pictures of the graves from far away, it seems to me that I see a plum orchard in spring, when they paint around the base of the tree trunks so that sun doesn’t kill the buds.<sup>5</sup>

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Notes

1. Bosnia-Hercegovina TV ?
2. TV Sarajevo ?
3. In the Balkans, the *korzo*, or evening promenade, takes place on the main street, along the sea-front, or around the main square of a town, where boys and girls, each in their same-sex groups, look each other over, chat, and flirt, and sometimes pair off or merge into mixed groups. ?
4. *Sevdalinke*, or traditional Bosnian love-songs, are a major part of the culture, celebrating the bittersweet pangs of love. ?
5. The writer, translator and journalist Muharem Bazdulj was born in Travnik, Bosnia in 1977. He has published twelve books, including *Druga knjiga* (*The Second Book*,) published in English translation by Northwestern University Press ( 2005). He is best known for his short stories, of which several have appeared in major anthologies of recent fiction. Bazdulj won the Soros Foundation's award for *Druga knjiga* for the best collection of short stories published in Bosnia-Hercegovina in 2000. ?

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