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Nataša Kramberger

Blackberry Heaven

A Novel in Stories

*Translated from
the Slovenian
by Kristina Helena Reardon*

*With an afterword
by Matej Bogataj*

DRUŠTVO SLOVENSKIH PISATELJEV
SLOVENE WRITERS' ASSOCIATION

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For my roots

*Malna and Lenart
Mama and Primož
ed a Daniele*

with love

She bought apples instead of a bicycle.
Three kilos, twelve apples, and the market vendor's raincoat laughed along with her.

- When it rains, they are even better.

In Amsterdam, at three in the afternoon, raindrops fell across the earth and down the raincoat.

Puddles swelled over the bridges and across the outdoor market.

Thieves were selling bicycles by the canal.

- Bikes, bikes.

She bought apples instead of a bicycle.

Her great-grandfather was a village musician and played the horn at baptisms and funerals. Her grandfather was a gravedigger and before that a payment collector for TV subscription packages. He sealed off the televisions of those who did not care to watch or to pay. With wax and adhesive tape.

Her mother wrote eulogies. And she delivered them, sometimes in a black blouse, sometimes in black shoes.

She did not know where to look when the bus arrived and opened its doors.

She shoved her backpack and bag on first, and Mama said:

- Do you have money on you?

Instead of nodding, she remembered that the elderberry bushes were about to bloom at that very moment. Then Lojz came by and messed it all up. He asked if the two of them had a stiff drink at home, and Mama said hang on, and she stared at the elderberry bush and the birch trees and at the slope and down the long street, and then Fanika shouted after Lojz:

What are you begging for this time, you damn idiot, and after that the driver was not very kind to her either, and he said let's go, damn it, before she had even stepped onto the bus, before she had even told Mama that she did have enough money, after all.

And yet.

And yet.

And yet it was always that way.

...

...

It's important that you always have a kaleidoscope
in your pocket, Mama said at just the right time.

She bought apples instead of a bicycle. Three kilos, twelve apples, and the vendor laughed. And her raincoat laughed, too, and it was raining in Amsterdam, absolutely pouring, and she said:

- Where did you get these, ma'am, these golden deliciouses?

Everyone had disappeared, oh, how it was pouring, how the water washed over Amsterdam, how the city might have dissolved if it were not made of stone, and the lady was shaking her head, she did not understand English, she did not understand Slovenian, she did not understand anything, only Dutch, and she was drenched, beg your pardon, Miss, she said, I do not understand.

Then the woman handed her a bicycle bell, she did not know why, but it did not matter, oh, how it was pouring, and she left.

She stood in the rain with apples and a bell in her hand, looked across the wet bridge and saw a man on the other side, selling a single live fish.

Live, live.

With whiskers and a white belly.

If you went through the Pacaraima Mountains to Mount Ayanganna, you would find the Potaro River rushing into the Essequibo. It crosses Kaieteur Falls and runs along the Tumatumari Falls, bringing with it a great deal of gold and many diamonds. And men and women and children pan for gold and diamonds beside Tumatumari Falls, and sometimes, just sometimes, down there in the Potaro River, amidst the silt and gold, sacred fish surround them, with their whiskers and white bellies.

- Señor, are you OK, Señor?

If you went to the Guosongmucha Mountain in Zadoi County of the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province, you would find the Zaqu River, which becomes the Jiang River, which is also called the Dza Chu, the river of rocks, which crosses the Yunnan Province, which means south of the clouds, where it changes its name to the Mekong, in which fishermen once caught a great river monster, with whiskers and a white belly, which they then proceeded to eat, seeing as the monster was sacred and as such prolonged their lives and blessed them, too. None of the fishermen knew the source of the Mekong, the one they called the sacred river, for the Mekong—which crossed the province south of the clouds, and Tibet before that, and the Qinghai Province before that—originated far away and high up in the snow-covered mountains. That

is why, for a long time, and in the very beginning, no one knew the source of the river, nor what it was called. Not long ago, only recently, some travelers, who were following eagles and retreating from avalanches, went straight to the source and said that there was no doubt: the Mekong River was once called the Zayuqu and came from the Guosongmucha Mountain in the clouds.

- Señor, are you OK, Señor?

During the rainy season, no one fishes in the sacred Urubamba River beneath the sacred heights of Machu Picchu because the river is mighty and the waters are wild and the spirits of the Incas take the fish for themselves and for their Incan sons, and wild currents whisk them below ground and into the skies. He who dared to cast his fishing float then would be blighted; both he and the float would be carried away by the sacred Urubamba River beneath the sacred heights of Machu Picchu, while the Incan spirits would take them underground or to the skies. He did not see the current under his feet, nor did he hear the oncoming rain, nor did he know where to look, when the old woman shook him up and down so much he felt sick to his stomach:

- Señor, are you OK, Señor?

Instead of nodding, he remembered that the grapes were about to ripen at home at that very moment. Then the rain poured down on him, more and more rain, and the old woman said, hang on. Then she rose like a dove, shaking her head like a dove and wrapping two long plaits of black hair around her fingers, and tucking them under her hat like a dove. Then she left.

- Eat, Señor, eat.

The old woman was good to him, peeling boiled potatoes and putting them on a plate for him, and there was another old woman who bandaged his foot, and a third old woman who watched over his fishing float, as if it were enchanted, as if.

As if.

As if.

And it was like that until he left.

...

...

Old women along rivers are important, he thought at the time, because they have connections with other old women.

In Amsterdam, at three in the afternoon, she stood with apples and a bell in her hand, looking across the wet bridge as the man on the other side sold a live fish with whiskers and a white belly.

- Oh, Sir. How much is the fish?
- Oh, Miss. How much were the apples?
- Oh, ...an entire fortune for one kilo.
- Oh, ...and for four apples?

Oh, she said, we can do the math together, Sir, we can make math a game and do multiplication tables on our fingers, we can stand here without a word until the rain stops, and if we release your fish now that the world is so full of water, it might just swim off into the sky.

Oh, said the man, I'm sorry, Miss, I get it, please excuse me. Are they good?

- When it rains, they are even better. Why is it live?
- What, the fish?

White, with whiskers and a zigzag tail, and if you looked at it through a kaleidoscope at the just the right moment, it said:

- What now?

Part One

In the afternoon the sun always shone sideways across the church, and the clock always read ten past two. It was ten minutes behind, the clock on the bell tower, and the two girls played beside the village stream, which was something of a cesspool beneath the bridge, the one which had once almost been washed away by a flood, leaving it uncrossable for two days. Oma still gets dizzy when she has to cross bridges—that time, the water had pulled her from the church to the chapel and swept away her left shoe.

In the afternoon, the sun always shone on the rocks on the stream bank and the algae sizzled if it was tossed over them. The two stood right beside the water, and the first one said, what now, and the second one said: don't worry, I know how to do it.

They had been a funny pair since the first grade anyway, and sometimes they went to the stream. The first one was a bit near-sighted and wore goofy red glasses on a goofy chain that the optician had insisted was exceptionally practical for small children and would not hinder her play. The second one was a little mouse from the sacristy who wanted to become an altar server but wasn't allowed to because she was a girl.

In the afternoon, they went to the stream, and as they played with the algae, frying it on the rocks, the one from the sacristy said, hey, how come you're not

baptized? Jesus, what a question, said the one with the glasses, I'm just not (she had no idea how to explain that her mother carried a torch for Tito and had helped install waterlines throughout Benedikt with the Yugoslav voluntary youth work brigade, and that her father, also a red, even believed in the theory of religious rape, which is what he called the baptism of two-month-olds). Then you don't have a mother or a father, the little Christian pushed on, in baptism we all receive the Holy Mother, Marija, and God the father. My mother's name is Marija, too, said the one with the glasses, and the church mouse smacked her on the nose. You really don't know anything, you don't even have a name, you fool, God gives everyone their names in holy baptism.

And the first one said, what now, and the second one said: don't worry, I know how to do it. At ten past two, church time, the sacristy mouse exclaimed: in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I baptize you with your God-given name, Saint Jana. She poured half the stream over her head so that Jana's hair smelled like the cesspool for the next three days. And earth received a new holy child and the sun shone on, sideways as always. But I don't want to be Saint Jana, said the child. When you're two months old, no one asks you want you want to be either, said the one who knew how to do it. And it doesn't matter anyway, the name is just a formality.

In the evening, when the sun had gone away, the clock on the bell tower still read ten past two. Saint Jana worked on problems from her *Math Is a Game* workbook, and she thought to herself, dang, that poor thing really was the object of religious rape.

Two days later, at ten past two, she enrolled in catechism out of sheer formality. Her mother Marija almost ascended to the Father in shock.

In the afternoon

she always brought lunch home from work in stoneware containers, and her little girl was always already there when she got home. There were three—stoneware containers with lunch, that is—and today it was mashed potatoes and chicken stew. All the teachers were entitled to school lunch for each member of their family with their pay, and they could eat in the school cafeteria or take it to go. It always smelled like overcooked pasta and pork rinds in the school cafeteria, and the old woman who worked as a cook always filled her containers with three times as much as she needed: come on, come on, for your little boy, he needs it to grow.

She stood in the middle of her kitchen in her apartment as steam rose from the lunch containers. Outside, beneath her window, steam was also rising from a Yugo Skala, a new washing machine still jutting out of the open trunk as four men argued around it. Spark plugs, said the school janitor, it's the engine, said the gym teacher, it needs water, said Roškarič. She put lunch on the stove and cursed the spark plugs that had burned out and the engine that would not start, God-knobs-why. She went to the balcony for mineral water, got some wine out of the fridge, and handed the men spritzers.

- Hinko!

The old cook shouted from the school: Hinko!, you lazy drunk, come back here and replace the gas cylinder. The janitor took the glass of spritzer and chugged it, ugh, that was watery, he leaned over the engine and took a drag from his cigarette, saying, yes, yes, spark plugs/engine/water, for sure, then he straightened up, swung the glass toward the lawn, and as the last drops of water and wine flew out, exhaled a puff of smoke and raised his hand toward the cook, oh, what are you yelling at!, I'll be there in a second! Then he lifted

his glass toward her, motioning for her to pour him another spritzer, more wine, less mineral water, and the other three lifted the washing machine out of the trunk. There had been no border patrol at customs, per an arrangement with Drejč, and if smoke hadn't started coming out of the hood just over the border, it all would have been over in a heartbeat. Luckily for them, it was almost all downhill from the Austrian border, and for a little while they were able to cruise along in neutral, and then they were towed for a while, and they only had to give the car a push up the last hill.

The washing machine was gleaming on the lawn in front of the apartment block, and the neighbor was excited. His wife had given birth to twins, and now they had a new washing machine from Austria, they had smuggled it across the border in the Yugo with the help of a real friend at the border. They had also smuggled in a twenty-kilo bag of laundry detergent along with a liter of fabric softener. To our health, he hooted, to our friends.

She poured them another round—spare spark plugs are under the seat, Hinko—and the old cook roared once more from the school:

- Bloody idiot, if you don't come here right now, I'll shove the gas tank down your throat!

The janitor paid her no mind, replaced the spark plugs, topped off the water and the oil, and the engine started. He motioned toward the lawn with his empty glass, oh, like I said, it was the spark plugs, and then flung himself onto the grass and lit a cigarette. He left the engine running so that the Yugo idled in place for quite some time. All the residents of the apartment block had gathered in front of it, the washing machine was shining white as linen, and it was not clear to anyone how they had shoved it into the trunk of the Yugo.

- And with only one rope to tie it down! Good heavens...

She picked up the empty bottles and went back inside. The stoneware containers with mashed potatoes were already cold and the apartment was full of the smell of chicken stew. She glanced at the clock: I have to pick up the little boy at my mother's, good-thing-the-car-started. She switched on the burner at the lowest level so that the mashed potatoes wouldn't burn. She fixed her hair with two blue barrettes as she went. She got three plates ready, the little girl wouldn't be eating. The little girl had already eaten at school, with her classmates, after classes, and she should have been home already: I went to the store to buy a little ruled notebook and then I went to catechism with Natalija and Simona.

...

I went to the store to buy a little ruled notebook.

And then I went to catechism with Natalija and Simona.

To catechism.

Cat-e-chi-sm.

...

The clock on the bell tower read ten past two, the residents of the apartment block were having a party out front, and the little girl had left a note on the table that said she went to catechism with Natalija and Simona.

The priest

was quite young because the old one had breathed his last back when Oma took her to church where they all sprinkled the dead man using twigs that had been set in a bowl of water. Oma said that the water was holy because it was blessed and that the twigs came from olive trees that grow by the sea. Then everyone prayed over the dead man and some old biddies cried.

After that, the altar servers brought out the censer, from which smoke rose, and the church began to stink. Oma crossed herself and one of the old biddies fainted.

The young priest wore a black surplice and a wooden cross over it, and he stood by the door to the rectory and made sure that everyone had changed into slippers in the front hall. She did not have slippers on her, dang, Natalija and Simona had not mentioned this.

- Why did you leave your bag at home? You should have taken it with you.

- Father, she doesn't have her slippers.

- Father, tell her that she has to go barefoot in the classroom now.

- Father, look, I have new earrings.

The church mouse positioned herself right in front of the priest and stood on her toes. On Saturday, she had had her ears pierced in Maribor, and now they were all infected, but that would go away within two weeks. The earrings were small and round with diamonds in the center. Not real ones, fakes ones, like in the movies.

- Father, she isn't baptized.

She took off her shoes and went barefoot, almost saying hello, but at the last minute she heard what Simona had said, and the floor was mud stained because it had been raining the day before, and she had a hole in her sock. She held the small ruled notebook in her hands, positioned herself next to the church mouse, and looked at the priest, who was young and wore a cross on a chain around his neck. He nodded and smiled at her. She did not know why, but she almost genuflected, bending her knees slightly, and said, just like the others:

- Praise Jesus.

- Ma'am,

she said to me, be careful so that what happened to my sister won't happen to you: when her husband

died, she forgot to withdraw his money from the bank and after half a year she lost the rights to it, he'd had a twenty-year pension in his account, and it all disappeared in the blink of an eye, be careful, ma'am, though your husband drank, of course, that kind blows through everything, she said to me, she didn't even shake my hand, I had a flower arrangement in my arms, fourteen yellow gerberas, and I cried my eyes out on the grave like a drunk...

She stood in astonishment in the middle of the kitchen, handing over tissue upon tissue and then a roll of toilet paper. She was completely silent, leaning on the stove, while the widow in black was crying, sobbing, crying, bawling, talking, talking, she bent over her table, over essays that had been written that very day in the fifth grade, over tests and over the teachers' union newspapers, Mrs. Marija, Mrs. Marija, don't judge me, but I could just hang myself.

The bell had not rung and the knock had been too soft, and when the door had opened, she was standing there in just her bra, replacing the bag in the vacuum cleaner, and her apron with the logo from the voluntary youth work brigade was caught on the radiator. I'm sorry, she said, I was just cleaning the house.

The woman at the door could only stare at her at first, covering her mouth with a black handkerchief as tears streamed from her eyes. Mrs. Marija, she said, I could just hang myself.

She was the head teacher of the widow's son's eighth grade class, her first class of students, and the boy had flunked math, though he was quite good in phys ed, and he wanted to be a police officer, Mrs. Marija, Mrs. Marija, the two of us are all alone, he even left us the farm, thirty bulls and fifty pigs, I just... Mrs. Marija, don't judge me.

She said to the widow, don't be ridiculous, well then, and she made her Turkish coffee and sat beside her. The woman must have still been young, her eyes were uncommonly blue and dreadfully, dreadfully deep, she put away the batch of tests so the ink would not run more than it already had, and tossed two piles of tissues in the trash and said:

- My condolences.

The coffee grounds were slowly settling in the bottom of the cup, the silence was good for them, the widow stared blankly ahead and sobbed in short bursts, and between one of them said, thanks for the coffee, I really needed it, and then remembered that she had to buy a hundred-watt lightbulb at the store.

- Instead of helping us, everybody just laughs. Why did I let him go to the pub every night? But it isn't true at all, he wasn't a drunk, Mrs. Marija, he turned the farm around all on his own, and he loved his little boy so much that he signed over a new tractor to him so that he'd gain an appreciation for the land, and now he's gone and flunked math, and it's already the second semester...

She couldn't have been much past thirty, no, no, they must have been the same age, or maybe she was even a bit younger (and, oh, God, she already had a son in the eighth grade), her eyes were so blue, so dreadfully, dreadfully deep, and if she hadn't been crying, her face would have been stunningly beautiful. She told her, stop by any time and we can chat, and don't worry about math, your boy is bright. The woman stood up and turned toward the living room, glanced at the bookshelves, and almost inaudibly said:

- Mrs. Marija, don't judge me, but might I... borrow a few novels? I used to read sometimes... and now, at night, I am so... I'm so alone.

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