

The Twelfth / The Beggar

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The Twelfth

Gregor Lozar

She was a mean old bat. Glued to the balcony for days on end, she would rat to parents about who she had seen smoking and who had come home from school too late. And if anybody should send their football flying over her balcony railing by chance – that's where she grew tobacco, tomatoes, and potatoes – and be caught in the act, it meant not only saying goodbye to the ball, but also watching her cut it into pieces.

But her grandson was one of the cheekiest devils for miles around. Not only was he a smoker since the third grade, and rumour had it that the oil bottle underneath the seat of his red moped was always filled with schnapps, the word was even that he slashed the tires of a police car, because he had once been detained overnight. Although we all believed that this last story was a bit blown out of proportion – because, what cop would bother dealing with neighbourhood kids when the world is full of proper, solid criminals – Njofra still wasn't the kind of guy you would mess with.

One day, it was soon after the old bat had cut up Pekec's original world championship football, Boki was on the playground next to the other kids. A good five years older than us, he was smoking as usual:

"Guys, what would you give me if I got rid of the old bat?"

"Don't know. What is it that you want?"

"One of your weekly allowances every month, and she won't ever bother you again."

"And how do you plan on doing this?"

"Now, that's my problem. Your problem are footballs and tomatoes!"

"True that."

"So, it's a deal?"

"Deal!"

"Each of you gives me one week's allowance every month, to get rid of her. Are we on?"

"We're on!" we agreed and shook hands. Frenki, Boki's friend, and Primož from the playground next to ours, who was just on his way back from the store, served as witnesses.

The next day the old bat fell down the stairs. She was carrying a

sack of potatoes down to the cellar when she tripped, fell and got hurt so badly she was left in a wheelchair from that day on. With her being unable to take care of herself, and Boki unhappy at home, they agreed that Boki was to live at his grandma's from there on. There were also whispers about him getting her apartment after her death.

Boki still hadn't finished moving in, when we met him again, smoking on the bench. Of course we ran to him to find out what happened. He let us linger for a little bit, and then asked:

"Do any of you know what it means to dare?"

"To dare, means to push an old granny down the staircase and then ask her what the hurry is!" – at least one of us knew the answer.

"Boki nodded his head and flicked his cigarette, then showed us his phone with a picture of his grandma lying in an unnatural position in the cellar next to the stairs, with potatoes scattered all around her.

"The funny thing is, I still don't know what the hurry was."

He added that he expects to see the money the following Monday, at the end of the month, and that we shouldn't forget that Boki knows how much allowance each of us got. Oh. And another thing. If anyone should dare change their mind and not pay, or even call the police, we shouldn't forget that we had agreed to pay him to get rid of Pehta, and that he has two eye-witnesses to confirm that. This is how we all became the sponsors of a failed hit.

Naturally, there was a lot of revulsion expressed between us boys, when we were alone, and many began wetting their beds again in those days, but on Monday, we all delivered the money, and I can proudly say that nobody ratted anyone out. Parents, teachers, the police, no one knew nothing.

Life moved on, basically, and soon settled back down in the new normality. Gradually, we got used to collecting the money, and even became more relaxed and better at playing football, although, truth be told, we played it much more seldom.

Every now and then you could hear rumours, mostly from elderly women, that the old bat was not happy with her caretaker. Whispers of her plans to move to a nursing home grew louder as well. Of course, Boki would be the one paying for the nursing home – for which he had no money – or, he could sell the apartment – for which he had no interest. Some day, on his way to the store, one of the other boys overheard Boki talking to a friend, saying he is not all afraid that Pehta would take off.

If the neighbourhood kids wanted to get rid of you, what do you think is going to happen to you at the nursing home, he would say to her. Besides, you should think about smoking, if you really want to quit. You can't smoke in a nursing home, and I'm the one buying fags for you. Just in case, he took her phone, too, claiming that it was too expensive and that she could borrow his cell. Even when she had coffee with her friends, he preferred to stick around.

But the old lady did try to run away one day. She managed to get the attention of someone passing by under her window, and gave him a story about how her nephew had locked her up in her apartment by accident, and that she must urgently go and visit her sick sister on the other side of town. After some persuasion, the kind man not only agreed on lifting her through the window and even going into the apartment himself to fetch her wheelchair, but he was even willing to drive her to the other side of town. But right in that moment Boki returned, telling him there was no problem and that he would take over from there. He kindly thanked the stranger, and took the old bat for a spin around the city, past the police station, the nursing home, her sister's house, and back home, where he used her as a punching bag late into the night, as the neighbours reported.

Two days later, he sat on the bench again, smoking a cigarette. As it was not even close to the end of the month, this was strange. One of us went over to ask him how he was doing, but he wanted to speak to the whole gang. He had a proposition for us: he would forgive each of us one fourth of our debt, if we agreed to come to his place once a year for a party. But the devil is in the details, of course; the party was scheduled on the twelfth, i.e., on the same day of the month as the day the old lady was in such a hurry to get to the cellar. Because Boki was not a man to be rejected easily, – he would have taken that as a sign of disrespect – we agreed and tried to find some comfort in the fact that we would at least save some money.

The party, namely, went down like this. We gathered at Boki's place already on the eleventh of July, in the afternoon, and for starters we organized a competition in running on stairs. From the highest floor to the cellar. We jumped through most of the eight-step staircases: two, two, four; or two, three, three. Only the last flight of stairs before the cellar required jumping across six steps. The old bat was sitting at the finish, clocking us. And in all these years, she never had the luck to see any of us sprain an ankle.

Later on, in the evening, we baked potatoes on a wood-burning stove – yes, the old bat still had one of those archaic devices – and made tomato salad, while Boki was smoking large cigars.

During this, we talked and made jokes, mostly about the pranks we pulled on the old bat and about how mean she was to us. The highlight of the evening was, of course, Boki's story about Pehta tumbling down the stairs, about the funny expression on her face, and about one potato hitting her straight into the forehead, which made Boki laugh heartily and forget entirely about his *what's the hurry*.

The old bat sat with us, of course, and she even had the strength to eat some potatoes! But this was only uncomfortable in the beginning, later on, we not only got into the habit of it, but even found some satisfaction in the payback for all the slashed footballs. Cellar or no cellar, she was a mean old broad, something of which we grew increasingly aware with each new story.

But the most memorable part was the following morning, when we played a game of football in her atrium, with the old lady forced to cheer and encourage us. When the party was over, Boki brought one of the pieces of her fine china – this was accompanied by a speech – and then smashed it solemnly. After that, we went for a picnic, and Boki went into the cellar to tinker with his moped.

There is redemption in every story, except for this one. Boki is forty-four years old and never had to work a single day in his lifetime. He lives off the substantial annuities paid by his childhood "friends", many of whom have become quite successful businessmen in the meantime. In just under a week, we will be celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary in a row, and no ankles have been sprained to this day. And as for the old bat, god wasn't kind enough to grace her with a quick death. This year she will turn eighty-six, and she is still of sound mind. Many believe this is a sign that our actions were just.

The Beggar

Gregor Lozar

1.

You walked with your son among the bookshelves,
where in those days I was getting art across to people
and you asked to borrow my phone,
because you needed to make a quick call.
I told you not to leave the store
and watched you closely with suspicion
as you were opening strange menus on a familiar device.
I remembered you from years ago, when you
circled around me on your bike, offering me
used cell phones and Davidoff cigarettes.
I mistook you for the man who mugged me
and asked rudely if that was you.
You struggled to keep smiling,
but you did, kudos to you, you kept smiling
as you asked me if I was sure it really had been you.
I failed an exam and when I accused you years later
that you wired yourself money by phone –
just some new trick using messages
and codes sent to an automated phone system –
I fell into the same trap for the second time.
I accused you of theft in front of your son
and publicly told you to fuck off.
You left and I was thinking about
having perhaps wagged my tongue too soon again.

2.

You stole nothing and when that same day
I met you in the street, I walked up to you
and offered you a sincere apology. You were
pretty offended, but somehow you pulled through.
A horrible thing as such things are, you fell into a story,
with no fault and no blame.
But it did happen, about a year ago, on my way home,
from a girlfriend I had argued with a lot,
I was stopped by a young man on a bike who
asked me if he could borrow my phone.
I had a bad feeling but gave it to him anyway
and when he could not reach anyone he decided
he liked the device and he was going to keep it.
I sensed the only way to get
the little box back was to fight him,
but I felt that if I hit him,
a bunch of brothers will turn up from somewhere
and they will strike down together on my family jewels.
Rather, I gave him the phone and left,
but it was so hard not to say: Oh, you fucking Gypsy!
Bloody Gypsy, they're all the same anyway
and when you came smiling on your bike,
trying to sell me a cell phone,
in that moment, that gypsy happened to be you!

3.

Out of guilt I gave you ten euros
and in this time when I was becoming a racist,
afraid of it and disgusted with myself,
you somehow turned into my own personal beggar.
You came around a lot and always sat down for a while,
and in time, I put together your story,
about the epilepsy that troubled you through school,
where teachers perhaps let you pass,
to avoid unnecessary problems,
seen as you probably missed more classes than you attended;
about the fact that shame probably made you decide
that you don't know how to read or write, –
oh, the sweet times we had
amidst a stack of secondhand books –
and that you will walk the earth an illiterate man;
about the wife you met perhaps
only a day or so before the wedding, and she knew nothing
of your illness; and about the children you
had when you were twelve and who often
couldn't have diapers or medicine;
about how you decided in prison
to lead an honest life, distancing yourself from your
family and finding god to the mockery of your neighbors;
about the eighty cell phones
stolen from your basement, which meant
kissing your business goodbye;
about the suitcase full of papers with which you
navigated between offices that
were cutting off electricity you didn't pay for,
kicking you out of your social housing unit
and teaching you that going to bed early
helps with hunger;
about your son for whom you decided
that he will not get married but
finish high school first,
and about a lot of things I have undoubtedly
forgotten to mention, but which are important
to my idea of the life of a Roma person,
who, unlike Halgato, doesn't like
to be called gypsy by anyone.

4.

For a long time you were inviting me to come visit you
And in spite of our habit of giving each other Christmas gifts
I was somehow trying to avoid this.
It is in general that I prefer meeting people
outside – on neutral ground – but I was
also afraid of the scent of foreign food
and the feeling that the apartment might be dirty.
One evening we got together to see
a concert by Esma Redjepova on Štuk,
where you told your friends that I was
a detective wearing a gun under my coat,
and surprised me by calling Esma
the queen without a hint of irony
and talked with all seriousness about the dresses
worth thousands of euros, which she wore, about the big
house in Skopje and the children she adopts
and who then become her band members.
There was a touch of bitterness in the name queen
and on the way back I first heard
that you refer to the group of houses and apartment blocks in Studenci
as the center. Your grandfather's house is there, too,
too many kids, you said, and they're up to mischief,
which you have been trying to avoid your whole life
and not far away the apartment from which you were kicked out.
Once you moved though, I could no longer postpone,
and when I visited I saw how dirty
my place was.

5.

One day we're having coffee and I'm thinking,
I was told about the gypsy soul:
about children who walk up to their father, asking him to buy them
new clothes, because they want to go to a party.
I would buy you new clothes kids, but I have no money.
They ask again, a little older, for some money
to buy a car, to see a bit of the world,
I would buy you a car kids, but there's no money,
and almost grown-ups now, they ask their father for money
to buy an apartment for their wife and children,
and again the father would buy it, but the money isn't there.
Years later, the father is dying and the children gather
around his bed, as he speaks to them:
I loved you so much, my children,
I would have bought you clothes, cars and houses
and half of the world to go with that, but what can you do,
life is hard and there was no money.
Ever since you noticed that I would take off
my socks for you from my shoes, you've stopped pressuring me.
If there's no money, there's just no money. You are no longer
a beggar, we've become friends a long time ago
and even though lately I've been neglecting
most of my friendship bonds, it is only in your
eyes that I see sadness because of this.
And unlike in the beginning, I am sorry for that in the end.