

The Scent of Rain in the Balkans

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Winner of Golden Bestseller

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To mother and father



Il faut que le roman raconte.
– Stendhal

CHAPTER ONE

SARAJEVO, 1914

“Mama! I want a new frock!” wailed Riki for the twentieth time that day, in her small childish voice. Every inch of her little face reflected determination. She had tried every trick in the book. She had pouted, whined, sulked, thrown a tantrum, flattered, cried, stamped her feet and tossed her dark curls. But nothing had worked. She had even pretended to be ill again. Still no reaction. Under normal circumstances Mama Esther could never have coped with this barrage of tricks from her youngest daughter without giving in, but this time she really didn’t have the money to buy material for a new dress.

Papa Leon was not exactly a hard worker, so he didn’t earn very much. His attempts to succeed in the numerous businesses he involved himself in were rarely more than half-hearted: and he had his wife Esther and seven children to feed, five daughters and two sons.

“I simply must have a new frock when Franz Ferdinand comes!” persisted Riki, as if the Austrian Archduke were coming to Sarajevo just to see her. “I’m going to go right up to him and ask him for a bun, so there! Bet you he gets them baked fresh every day!”

Blanki, who was four years older than her sister but just as tiny, kept quiet as usual. She was thinking how Riki always got what she wanted. First of all, because she demanded it, loudly – for how could you ever get anything if no one knew you needed it? And secondly, because she was so persistent and she pestered the entire family until they did as she wished just so that she would leave them in peace.

Riki and Blanki were the best of friends, but they couldn't have been more different. For instance, Mama Esther, who was absent-minded, hardly ever set foot outside the house. Every hour or so, she'd send one of the children out on grocery errands. If she sent Riki, her mission was bound to end up in a muddle, for Riki would head straight for the first sweet shop, buy herself an ice-cream or some dates, maybe even a pastry, then meet other children and start playing, completely forgetting why she had gone out in the first place; but whenever Blanki went shopping, she'd make a beeline for the store and return immediately with her purchases. She knew that Mama had to be obeyed, even though she had been asking herself recently whether maybe Riki wasn't the smarter of the two, since things always turned out so much better for her.

It was just the same with sweets. Blanki would never dream of asking one of her older sisters to take her to a sweet shop, but after a while she had worked out a scheme. All she had to do was to say 'sweets' to Riki, and her little sister would cling to Nina's or Clara's skirts until one of them, or sometimes both, would give her some money. That was why Blanki concluded that even if there was nothing she could do about her own shyness, she could at least exploit the talents of her enterprising younger sister.

The girls never asked their mother for money. Her main role was to explain what they didn't understand, then to feed them and serve as a go-between in their dealings with their father, and, apart from that, to look after them if they were sick. Mama always had a lot of work to do, but as she bustled around the kitchen, Blanki would keep bothering her with questions to which Esther responded with inexhaustible patience. Blanki was convinced Mama knew everything. She told her about the Egyptian Pharaoh, Ramesses II, who had been forced to release the Jews from their slavery thousands of years ago, long before Blanki and Mama Esther herself had even been thought of, and even before white-haired Grandpa Solomon whom they called *nonu* Liacho, had graced the world with his presence. And the man who was the leader of the Jews then was Moses, and he had called all his people together and told all the women to make haste and bake loaves with nothing but flour and water – like the bread Blanki ate at Passover, which they called *boyu*, and so they were led out of the land of bondage to the Promised Land.

Blanki could recite by heart all the Ten Commandments that Moses had given to the Jews when they had arrived at Mount Sinai. But then Mama would come to the strangest part of the story: their ancestors had never spoken Ladino, as all of her family did now, but Hebrew, which neither Blanki nor any of the others could understand at all, except for the most learned Rabbis. Papa Leon would sometimes throw in a few Biblical quotations in the Holy Tongue but no one in the family would understand them, except Buka who could even say phrases from the Talmud. Then came all the Hebrew kings: Saul, and David, and Solomon, who was the wisest one of all, and who had built the first Temple, just like the one Papa went to at Yom Kippur.

Blanki adored stories but it was often a struggle to get someone to tell her one. Most of the stories came Riki's way, for she was frail: she was Mama's fragile *jugatona*, her little scamp, her special pet. Riki sometimes even got the best bits of the watermelon, or 'the heart' as they called it, a delicacy Blanki had never tasted. And the fairy tales which were spun to lull Riki to sleep! Blanki thought it unfortunate that she was usually brimming over with good health. If she ever felt ill, she kept it to herself because she was too timid to complain, until Mama Esther would say anxiously: "*Fijika mia, tienis temperatura!* My little one, you've got a fever! Why didn't you tell me?" Then she would be treated to legends and tales without having to ask. Thus she even looked forward to being ill. When she had mumps, Mama Esther told her about a horrid man called Torquemada, who had tried to force all the Jews in Spain to start worshipping a different God. "How many Gods are there, Mama?" she asked then, seriously worried. Mama reassured her that there was only one. Since the Jews refused, Mama continued in her melodious voice, they were driven out of Spain, where they had lived happily and luxuriously for one thousand years. As a result of this story, Blanki named her ugliest doll, the one she had pieced together with her own hands, Torquemaditta. Although she knew that Queen Isabelle and King Ferdinand of Spain were enemies of the Jews, she imagined herself as a beautiful princess dressed in pink muslin, who was rescued by a courageous Spanish knight on a white horse and carried off to the far corners of the world. The two of them would retrace the same long winding routes as her grandmothers had travelled before

they had come to the Ottoman Empire, all the way to Bosnia, where they had been welcomed and allowed to settle. In Bosnia the rulers were Turks, but they had left the newcomers to their own devices and treated them well. The Jews had built their first houses right on the spot where the Temple now stood and where Riki liked best to play.

There was also a fascinating legend about Juan Garcia Galan de Olivares, the notorious Spanish Inquisitor who was said to be one of the Salom ancestors, but Mama Esther never wanted to explain the intricate details of how a Catholic dignitary could have been the forefather of a Jewish family. After refusing to talk about it she'd always add that clarity came with age.

Yes, Mama's role was cooking and telling stories. The eldest sister Laura, whom they called Buka or Bohoreta, which was the usual nickname for the first born children, had the job of teaching the youngest ones to read and write. Nina's and Clara's only responsibility was once every now and then to give them a copper *kreutzer* with the Austrian Monarch's head on one side and the Hapsburg coat of arms on the other. As for Papa Leon, all he had to do was punish them if they were naughty and intone songs in his rich voice while they all sat around the enormous carved table and waited impatiently for a pause between the prayers, so that they could chew an apple or a fig, a walnut or two, or some dried fruit.

Blanki took care of little Elias and Papa Leon was in charge of Isaac, nicknamed 'Athlete', but he was already grown up anyway and, being the eldest son, the world was his oyster. Only Riki, who was everyone's darling, was looked after by all of them. There was order in the Salom family, a chain of command. And so there should be, thought Blanki. Otherwise baby Elias would start bossing Grandpa Liacho, and Mama would do the children's bidding. With no order, there would be no family, and without family the world would collapse. So, although to be obedient sometimes irked her, Blanki liked the fact that everyone in the household knew who was who.

"Mama, which of us do you love most?" asked Blanki, dunking a piece of bread into the oily, sweet-sour pickle brine they called *mindrugus*, which was a favourite among the children for its delicious flavour and among the grown-ups because it was cheap.

“Well, *fijika mia*, my girl-child, how many of us are there?”

Blanki started counting up on her fingers, murmuring, “Me, Elias, Riki, Nina, Buka, Athlete, Clara, Mama, Papa, Grandpa... Ten altogether!” she said triumphantly.

“And how many fingers do you have?”

“*Dies*, Mama, ten.”

“*Buenu*, all right, Blanki. And what do you think: which one of these fingers would you like to have cut off?”

After pondering this problem for a moment with both hands splayed in front of her nose, Blanki answered, “Not one of them! *Ningunu!*”

“There, you see? That’s how it is with all of you. You’re equally precious to me, and I would never give up a single one of you... When you were very little and we were still living in Istanbul, there was a good, kind, rich man, a friend of your Papa’s, who wanted to adopt you. When he came to our house for the first time, he thought you were a doll because you sat there so quiet and well-behaved in the corner of the *minderluk*. Only when you blinked your pretty eyes, he realized you were a living lovely girl and he took such a fancy to you that he said he’d give me a big bag of gold if I would let him have you... Ah, we were so poor at the time we had only one small fish a day for the whole lot of us, but I didn’t give you away. I’d never let you go, ever, not for all the gold in the world! When he saw how much I loved you, he gave me some money anyway, without telling your Papa.” Mama Esther’s blue eyes glistened with tears. “What would I ever do without you, my little angel?”

Happier and prouder than ever, and emboldened by the story, Blanki continued with her questions. “So why do you have blue eyes and blonde hair, Mama, when all the rest of us have dark eyes and dark hair? I’d much rather be like you!”

“Now then, *alegria mia*, joy of my life,” said Esther, “you know very well why. How many times have I told you already?”

“But I don’t know! I don’t!” fibbed Blanki who wanted to hear her favourite story again.

“All right, this is how it was,” began Esther in her velvety voice, the succulent Spanish words, sweet as ripe grapes, rolling from her lips. “Once upon a time, your Great-grandpa Liacho lived in Vienna.

He was tall and handsome and fair-haired and he married a beautiful lady who was blonde, too. They lived in a huge mansion with towers, and lots and lots of rooms and hallways. And do you know, in the garden there was a lake with swans gliding on it... It was always spring there, because whenever it got chilly outside, they would go inside, and there'd be huge fires blazing in the fireplaces in all the rooms... They were never cold like we are here. And there was so much light from the candles that the sun seemed to be shining all the time. Every room was decorated with flowers: chrysanthemums, aging hydrangea, lilacs, and violets. So, during the winter they made the house into a garden, and in the summer they lived outdoors, in the real garden... They had seven daughters, and every daughter had a maid of her own. As time went by, the girls grew up and soon they were old enough to get married, so bridegrooms had to be found. But, there were very few Sephardic Jews in that part of the world, and even fewer who spoke Ladino, like us. Of course, Grandpa wouldn't hear of asking any of the young men from the available Sephardic families, because they were all cousins of one sort or another. As I've told you, it's not good to marry a cousin, even though our religion permits it, because there's often something not quite right with the children from those kinds of marriages. They may be sickly or deformed... But of course there were plenty of Ashkenazi suitors..."

"Are they the carpetbaggers?" interrupted Blanki.

"Yes, that's what we, the senior arrivals, call them sometimes, but it's not fair because long ago we too came here carrying only bags in our hands... Yes... Anyway, it was around that time that Great-grandma Sarah got sick, and died soon after, God rest her soul. The *kaddish* was recited and the family went into mourning for her. When it was over, Great-grandpa began wondering where he could find some young Sephardic men. Finally, someone told him there were many of them living in a place called Sarajevo. Since he had to have grandchildren, he gathered together his seven daughters with their seven maids and twenty-one trunks and set out on the journey. Many days and nights later, they arrived here on the cobblestones of this city. All the local people stopped and stared at them because of the big ballooning skirts and the frilly lace and ribbons and bonnets and gloves they wore. 'They have

come from another world!’ people cried, while Nonu, his daughters and their servants were all just as flabbergasted to hear everyone talking in a strange language called Serbian and to see their big baggy pantaloons, and all the turbans and fezzes, and long-stemmed pipes and colored slippers with glittery toes! But they did find what they had come for: so many Sephardic young men! Thus, every one of the daughters and every one of the maids found the prince of her dreams and they were all happily married and bore many children. Shall I tell you now what was the most important thing of all and why Great-grandpa travelled such a long way? It was to preserve our customs and our holidays and our language and our memories of the past and to save them from fading. They never learned Serbian and nor have I, but that didn’t bother us at all, because everyone we know speaks Ladino...”

“I will learn proper Serbian!” Blanki murmured.

“You should, my child. Spanish the way we speak it, with this mixture of Turkish and Serbian words, is not enough. You should learn French and German as well, like Buka...”

“Mama, what happened then?”

“Well, the great Sephardic tree grew another big branch, that’s what happened! One of Great-grandpa Liacho’s daughters had a daughter too, whose name was Esther, and I don’t need to explain who that is, do I, now I’m telling you this story all over again for a hundredth time? So, that’s why I am blonde, because I take after my Grandpa Liacho. And the rest of you are all dark because you take after your Papa Leon.”

“But why does *Nonu* keep asking me whether I’m his grand-daughter or his great grand-daughter? Doesn’t he know?”

“Of course he knows, *querida*, darling. It’s just that when people grow old they become a bit forgetful and we have to prod their memories. Gently, of course! Remember, he is over a hundred years old...”

Riki dashed into the kitchen like a whirlwind.

“Mama, Mama, would you sew me a new frock?” she chirped, as if asking for the first time.

“Oh, *linda mia*, my pretty one, when will you ever listen? Haven’t I told you a thousand times that I don’t have the cloth to make one with?” countered Esther patiently, as she went on with her work.

* * *

The next morning, as they were being washed and dressed to go out and see Franz Ferdinand's procession, Blanki listened in delight to Buka's story about the great Archduke who had come all the way from Vienna to visit them and how he would ride in with his wife in a big automobile with golden handles and with a whole cavalcade of generals in bright new uniforms, headed by Potiorek, the Governor General of Bosnia himself.

"Just look at the decorations, *ermanicas*," said Buka opening the window. "Little sisters, look: Sarajevo is preening herself today like a bride before her wedding!"

Indeed, Blanki had never seen this town of hers decked out so lavishly. Yellow and black flags of all sizes were fluttering in the breeze. As Buka tied her sisters' bows and fastened their shoe buckles, she told them how Bosnia had once been independent under its own king, until it was seized by the Turkish Sultan Mehmed II. After that it had belonged to the Turks for a long while, and then it was wrested from their hands by the Austrians.

We must be very precious if everyone's fighting over us, thought Blanki to herself, and then went on to say aloud: "You know what, Riki! I'll ask him for a bun and you can ask him for a dress!"

"*Buenu*, all right," answered Riki in agreement and added, "When I grow up I'm going to marry a Jewish Archduke and always have plenty of dresses and lots of buttered buns!"

"You cannot!" said Blanki sadly.

"Why not!? Why not!?" Riki protested.

"Because there are no Jewish Archdukes."

"How inconvenient," Riki shrugged. "Then I'll have to find a rich merchant."

* * *

Blanki knew that this warm, hazy day, the twenty-eighth of June, was the date the Serbs of Sarajevo called St. Vitus's Day and celebrated as a great holiday. The Muslims, Jews and Catholics did not. It was a

good thing for people to have different holidays, Blanki thought, because it evened things out and prevented confusion. If Serbs, Muslims and Catholics, for example, were to try to squash into the Temple for Passover, there would be an awful crowd; and if, say, Jews, Serbs and Catholics celebrated Courban Bairam, then the Mosque would be so jam-packed that people would have to queue up to wash their feet in the fountain; and what if the Muslims and Jews and Serbs were to go to Mass in the Cathedral, or if Muslims and Jews and Catholics were to... No, it would be impossible, especially because of the problem of space, which was the most difficult in the tiny Serbian church. Perhaps this was why, instead of going to church they celebrated their family's saint, Slavas, in their homes and the priests would come to them there to cut the Slava cake.

Blanki also knew that St. Vitus Day was the sad anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, when the Serbian King Lazar, way back in 1389, had lost to the Turks. It was little short of a miracle to Blanki that the Turks of Sarajevo, who were called Muslims as well as Bosnians like everybody else, spoke Serbian, the native language of their former enemies! And it was even more amazing to her that the Serbs consented to speak to them at all! Hadn't all those Serbs been killed by the Turks at Kosovo? Hadn't they been tortured and impaled on stakes? Hadn't their children been taken away as tribute to the Sultan? Perhaps lately they had decided to make peace, after they had counted up all the dead on both sides and discovered that the numbers were equal.

Blanki would have asked Buka about it on the spot, if Riki hadn't been fidgeting so much while Buka brushed her hair, and nagging her for a *kreutzer* to buy flowers to toss in front of Ferdinand. Her round cheeks were ruddier than usual, decided Blanki, looking at her own cheeks which were pale anyway, and even more so today. "It must be because we're so excited," she murmured to herself.

Finally, holding hands, with little Elias tucked safely between them, off the three of them went.

Blanki had never seen anything like it in her life: the streets were packed with people all dressed up in their best; it was like a sea of red fezzes, parasols, and broad-brimmed hats adorned with flowers. And every one of those hats was stitched together by her sisters Nina

and Clara, thought Blanki with pride. How important they were! If it weren't for them there would be no milliner's shop, and if it weren't for the shop there'd be no hats, and if it weren't for the hats not a single woman would ever set foot outside her front door!

It was fabulous to stroll about a city with so many policemen, so many gleaming sabers, swords, scabbards and uniforms with braided epaulettes and polished buttons! Riki should marry a policeman rather than an Archduke. But she wasn't sure if there was such a thing as a Jewish policeman. She would have to check.

The shallow River Miljacka gurgled and tinkled its accompaniment to the crowd's deep murmur as Blanki, Riki and Elias arrived at the Apel Quay.

Delightedly, Blanki peered over its stone parapets at the water rippling along, on and on, always in the same direction. What would happen if someone stopped it somehow and the waters began to rise? It could flood the whole city together with Tzar's Walkway, Chehaya Walkway, Latin Bridge, and Goat Bridge as well!

The white dazzle of all those bobbing parasols reminded Blanki of the soft, slippery carpet of fresh-fallen spring blossom that she so much loved to walk on. Ah, what indescribable beauty everywhere! She sighed deeply.

It was quite difficult to get through the tight circle of huge grown-ups, she thought, but she certainly couldn't miss the chance to go up to Ferdinand and give him her greetings.

"Everybody's taller than us!" exclaimed Riki furiously as she tried to squeeze between the splayed feet of a colossal gendarme, whose boots were planted like rocks in front of her. Her lips pouted, and an impish little smile flickered across her face. Blanki knew that she was up to something, so she called to her, "Riki! Come here! *Ven aqui!*", at which the gendarme shifted his stance, so Riki's piece of mischief collapsed.

"Is His Majesty coming this way?" Blanki asked the gendarme timidly, while Riki tugged at his sleeve and yelled at the top of her voice, "Where is he!? Where? Where? Tell me!"

"Hey, that's enough! Run along, kids!" retorted the policeman.

Although she couldn't see anything, Blanki suddenly heard a piercing shout. The crowd began shoving and jostling, hemming them in

entirely. Then people started running. A terrifying noise was followed by an ominous silence. As the mass of bodies around her thinned, Blanki caught sight of a white skirt, with funny red markings spattered over it. “*Vamos de aqui, prestu!*” she cried in a frightened voice. “Let’s get away from here!” She glanced at the faces of the grown-ups around her. She had always considered faces far more interesting to look at than animals or trees or sky. But now they scared her. Something was wrong here, very wrong. On every side she was surrounded by a multitude of feet scurrying hither and thither. Through tears, she stared paralyzed at the whirling rainbows of clothes, uniforms, slippers and shoes. Scenting real danger now, she grabbed Riki and Elias firmly by the hand and started to beat a retreat.

“Something terrible’s happened!” she gasped. “*Aydi! A casa!* Let’s go home! Quick!”

But Riki wanted to stay right where she was, and going against her wishes was never easy. Blanki tugged at her with all her might.

“I don’t want to go! *No quieru! No quieru irme!* ’Fraidy cat, that’s what you are!” Riki shrieked mockingly. “I like it here! Boom-boom! Like firecrackers! Let go of me, will you! *Deja me!*”

Enraptured by all the uproar and tumult, Riki kept breaking free, so finally Blanki grabbed her by both hands and simply dragged her along, but a moment later she was left empty-handed. She stood stock still for a moment and then called, “Riki! Riki!” Since there was no answer, she set off, amidst all the confusion, racing along the streets in search of her sister. She flitted everywhere. She shouted until she was hoarse. Not a sign of Riki. She had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed her, vanished into thin air!

As tears trickled down her cheeks and Elias wept with exhaustion, Blanki thought how unfair it was that today of all days such a misfortune should befall her. Instead of witnessing untold beauties of the resplendent arrival of the Archduke, she had not even seen Franz Ferdinand, and, what was even worse, she had lost her little sister.

Sobbing bitterly, she walked home with a terrible feeling of self-reproach: her parents had entrusted the two younger children to her care, so it was her duty to bring them back safe and sound. Her strong sense of responsibility made this failure weigh even more heavily on

her. By the time she reached home, she was completely worn out and terrified.

She stopped in the courtyard to gain courage. What would her parents say? Papa was bound to give her a hiding. And how would they find Riki? Maybe someone had stolen her and taken her away forever! Maybe the police had arrested her. Maybe she'd never be able to play with her again! She decided that if Riki was not found, she would commit suicide. She wasn't quite sure what that meant but she assumed that it was something ugly one did to oneself.

Mama Esther needed little by way of explanation. No sooner had she caught a glimpse of Blanki weeping, with only Elias beside her, than she grasped the situation. She did not scold her frightened child. She lifted her up, gave her a big hug and wiped her tears away, which made Blanki cry all the more. Mama Esther said that there was nothing to worry about, that she would tell Papa Leon, and everyone would be out looking for Riki, so that she would be home in no time. Riki was probably playing hopscotch somewhere.

Even so, as soon as the family found out what had happened, they were thrown into confusion. Hurriedly, they all dressed to go out. Father Leon, who was hot-tempered at the best of times, flew into a rage and shouted at Mama Esther for letting them go out in the first place. Buka tried to calm them down by saying that Riki could take care of herself and that she, the wise eldest sister, was not worried at all, but as she pinned her hat on, her hands were shaking. Nina was wailing loudly and when Blanki noticed that even her mother was putting on her *tukadu* then she realized this was a very serious matter indeed. Papa Leon's eyes flashed fury and vexation. With his fez already perched on his head, he paced up and down waiting impatiently for his wife to get ready.

Papa lined them all up in the courtyard and decided who would go where in search of Riki. Athlete was detailed to search Vratnik, the Turkish quarter, named after its massive gate. His brief was to start from Podzebhana and to work his way downwards, investigating every walled enclosure, every courtyard and garden, every little street and alleyway, every nook and cranny. Although it was most unlikely that Riki had wandered into the Muslim district, it still had to be checked.