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PEPA HRISTOVA

SWORN VIRGINS

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### Prologue

Countless summers ago, when the world was still small, in a valley of lush green meadows surrounded by barren, inhospitable mountains that stretch up to the heavens; when the sun defined the daytime and the stars the night, the families who owned these fields still had numerous members. The days in *Bjeshkët et Namuna*, the Accursed Mountains, were trying. But everyone knew his place – the men out under the open sky, the women sheltered by the roofs of their huts. Everyone sought guidance in the words of the *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit*, the customary code of law passed down from father to son. The good of the soul was inviolable, and its desecration could only be washed away with blood. The *Besa*, the word of honor, was considered more important than life itself. Many years have flowed downstream into the valley since those days. But up in the mountains, change is slow to come.

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“The man is strongest. He has to hold up the house like a pillar.” (Rahime)

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“It's not far off,” says Diana, with a resoluteness that brooks no objections. We have long since left the paved road behind us, along with the sun, the daytime. Like a frail donkey, the old Mercedes drags itself up the mountain, curve for curve, pothole for pothole. After hours of persistence, a thick fog envelops us – us and our thoughts. If we could, we would turn around. Diana is unfazed by our ill humor. She begins to sing with a powerful voice: “*Janinës ç'i panë sytë – Janina, what have your eyes seen? It happened on a Friday, by the five wells in the ravine ...*”

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“This is the way I want to live. That’s my decision, my path. I didn’t want to take a different road.  
You come into this world alone and leave it again alone.” (Lule)

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“As a man I feel stronger. That gives me inner strength.” (Have)

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The *Paraklis* stands near her house, at the end of a rambling garden surrounded by high mountains. Hakije is custodian of the key to the small memorial, in which the three dervishes who once lived in the region are laid to rest. When she enters, she first circles the coffins three times. She touches every one, first with her hands, then with her forehead, and finally with a suggested kiss – always at the end where the heads lie. Before Hakije’s birth, one of the dervishes had prophesied to her parents: “A girl will be born to you, but she will be boy and girl at the same time. Her mind will lead her. Let her have her way.”

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“I didn’t want to get married and have a man rule my life. I’m the one who says what to do!”  
(Shkurtan)

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“For my father I was always his son. But still, when he saw me for the first time with my hair cut short he cried. He tried to hide it, but I saw him. I was 7 years old at the time.” (Sami)

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“Gasuar!” shouts Ilmije, and the glasses clink together. With her strong, rough hands, she breaks the shells of the nuts, opening some of them with her teeth. When she eats and laughs, she opens her mouth wide, showing her blunt teeth, discolored from smoking. Ilmije laughs a lot. When her mother died, she was eight. She didn’t want to leave her father all alone to deal with the household, but she also wanted to play with the boys in the street, to go off on horseback to gather firewood, to spend the summer with the flock in the mountains. Ilmije is still young, but she has already made the most important decision in her life.

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“Only a few people who have known me for a long time are aware that I was born as a woman. For everyone else, I’m Osman. Everybody here knows that Osman is a man.” (Osmani)

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“I am the only child of a very strong woman. When my mother found out that she would never be able to give her husband the son he desired, she arranged a second marriage for him with another woman. Now I have two brothers.

I saw my own husband for the first time in a dark room on the day of my wedding. I didn’t know what was in store for me. Six months after my son was born, I got a divorce. I went to the council of the elders and declared that I wanted to live henceforward as a *Burrneshah*. I raised my son alone and chose a wife for him. I am proud of what I’ve done for him.” (Qjuste)

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“A man is stronger and more free. He doesn’t have to justify himself to anyone.” (Drande)

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Tears run down the cheeks of the frail old woman as she tells of her daughter: “She was such a beautiful girl with her long, dark curls. The Lord wanted her to be a woman, to serve a man and to bear him many sons.” But Sanije’s father called her “my boy” and treated her like a son. When he died, Sanije vowed to always stay the way he would have wanted. She turned a deaf ear to all attempts to change her mind. “The young people don’t know what it means for their future,” the woman with the sad eyes continues. “Enough, Mother!” interrupts Sanije. She never felt like a girl. She wanted to become a driver and never let anyone push her around.

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“I have no regrets.” (Qamile)

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### Epilogue

*“They came four-strong, calling themselves ethnologists, newspaper writers, interrogated me for days on end; I put on my red sweater that doesn’t have any holes, and they followed me, questioned me, watched me doing the milking, baking bread; I was ashamed, because that’s women’s work; the strangers were surprised when I dried my hands on the large leaves of the sorrel plant [...] The foreigners did not understand my life and they asked more and more questions, and I realized that they would have liked to ask about my period, when I was still at that age, but they didn’t dare to ask that question; it would have been their last. [...] They brought oranges from the sea; I am not familiar with oranges; I don’t eat oranges; I was never at the sea, why would I want to go there? No grass grows on the sea.”<sup>1</sup>*

The strangers come and ask many questions, because they do not understand this life. This life that is so different from that in Western Europe, so different from the life in Albania’s cities as well. They cannot imagine why these women have cast off all that is feminine. Why they dress and behave like men. Why they have sworn to live forever as virgins and to renounce love, marriage and sexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> Man-woman Stana Cerovic, quoted in: Erwin Koch: “Ich bin ein Mann – geboren als Frau,” in: *Brigitte* 12/1998, p. 108ff.

They have heard of the Kanun, the traditional law passed down from man to man since medieval times, which has regulated coexistence for centuries in the remote and otherwise lawless *Accursed Mountains* of northern Albania. It is a collection of laws that views honor and hospitality as values more important than life itself, and which dictates that their violation can be atoned for only with blood. The strangers have learned that, up until the 1920s, almost one third of the male population of Albania died through vendettas. And that it is the men who provide for the family, defend its honor and exact revenge; only they can inherit the family property: “Where there is no son, there is no future.”<sup>2</sup> They surmise that life as a man is associated with more rights and liberties, with autonomy and independence. And they have learned that things in the mountains change only very gradually. Will they interpret these paths of life that are so foreign to them as being the result of social pressure, as reactions to social structures, or as choices for a better life? Never will they be able to quite fathom this persisting custom and to explain it in their own words.

While the strangers brood, the *Virgjineshtë*, the Sworn Virgins, sit with the other men of the village in taverns, drinking coffee and liquor, playing cards and smoking cigarettes. They talk about hunting, about the harvest and about whether it will rain. Their masculinity has engraved itself deeply into their faces, and colors their every move. They are admired for their will and their strength. They have made a sacrifice to which they owe the deference of the community and the respect of the other men.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*