
Opening Extract from...

Sworn Virgin

Written by Elvira Dones

Translated by Clarissa Botsford

Foreword by Ismail Kadare

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To my daughter Iuna

FOREWORD

Elvira Dones is one of the most distinguished Albanian authors writing today. Astonishing, brilliant, and unabashed by taboos of any kind, she is as much at ease in Albanian as in the rest of European literature. This is not only because she writes in two languages – Albanian and Italian (a tradition that goes back to the late middle ages, when the Ottomans prohibited written Albanian and our writers used Latin as a second language) – but because her vision of art and of the world is in harmony with both Albanian and European culture.

Her novel *Sworn Virgin* takes an apparently exotic subject, but one drawing on literature's oldest archetypes: the creation of a double, and the transformation of a human being. Hana, the attractive young woman who is the protagonist of this novel, agrees of her own free will to 'turn into a man.'

The story refers to an ancient if rare Albanian custom that has been preserved into the modern era, according to which, for various reasons – such as the absence of a man in a household or, as in Hana's case, the fear of rape – a 'conversion' was permitted and a woman could change her status from female to male. She would gain all a man's rights and freedoms, adopt male behavior and dress, take part in assemblies of elders, and go out to cafés to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes, with the sole condition that she preserve her virginity.

This apparently paradoxical and anomalous custom also has a surreal dimension: it presents a loss as a privilege, and offers subjection in the guise of freedom.

The protagonist of this novel passes through all the tribulations of this frightening transformation like the actor in some extraordinary role in a classical drama that hurtles towards its dénouement.

Ismail Kadare
Translated by John Hodgson
September 2013

The vast, infinite life will begin all over again,
a life not seeing, not talking, not thinking.

From ‘Quatrains’
by Nâzim Hikmet[1]

OCTOBER 2001

'So, Mr Doda, you're a poet,' says her traveling companion, who has occupied the seat next to Hana on the plane for the last seven hours.

The line of passengers waiting to get through passport control at Washington International Airport snakes tiredly.

'Not really.' She tries to smile.

'But you write poems, if I've understood you correctly.'

You can't write good poems with a dry cunt, she says in her head. She looks away. A woman is touching up her lipstick, her husband watching with slight disgust, tapping his fingers on his passport. Hana catalogs the scene under the heading: 'Man out of love, woman still hopeful, marriage ceasefire about to expire.'

You can't write good poems with a dry cunt, she thinks to herself again, annoyed. Why the hell did she tell him she wrote? He pins her down with his look. It's no good,

she thinks, your enlightened male brain will never be able to guess. Hana smoothes down her man's suit. The sports jacket is a bit big, but not too much.

Her traveling companion stared at her in the same way during the flight.

'Here's my card,' he now says. 'In case you need anything, information about the capital, any suggestions. If I'm not traveling around the world or at my house in Geneva, I'll be in DC. Seriously, call me whenever you want, Mr Doda. I'd be happy to help out.'

Mark concentrates on his carry-on. On his shoes. On his cell phone, which he wants to turn on. I'm sorry, she pleads in silence. Hana reads the name on the card: Patrick O'Connor. The man is of Irish origin. She smiles. Christ, we country folk can sniff each other out.

Her left breast begins to itch. She tries to scratch herself without using her hand. She started feeling the presence of her breasts a year ago, as soon as she got her green card and decided to emigrate to America. She can't seem to stop the itching.

'Mr Doda,' Patrick O'Connor calls, indicating with a nod of his head the passport controller's narrow cubicle.

The line has moved on. Hana kicks her bag forward. Her brown shoes, one on either side of the bag, look like little hibernating bears.

'What is the purpose of your visit to the United States, Ms Doda?' the officer asks as he opens her passport.

It's too late to go back now. Even the village knows he left holding the passport of a woman.

The village had observed, with penetrating, attentive eyes. The way he was dressed on the day he said goodbye was the object of quiet scrutiny; there were no comments. It was a dark time, and people had little energy to spare. Past glory had faded into the howls and excrement of stray dogs. Shreds of history; the moans of gangsters whose only law was the code of honor; suns that were afraid to set for fear of being surprised by death.

Patrick O'Connor – impatient now, the rhythm of everyday life suddenly printed on his face – holds out his hand.

'It was a real pleasure talking with you. Too bad you don't have a phone number here in the US yet. Maybe we can talk again before I go back to Albania. Look me up if you want, I really mean it. Well, good luck.'

Hana shakes his hand shyly. She's a little sorry they're parting ways. For seven hours this man was her safety net. O'Connor spent part of the time tapping on the keyboard of a sleek white computer with a picture of a bitten apple on its top. What a beautiful object, she had thought. Then he started talking. He was a great conversation-maker, not at all formal.

'Use that phone number, really!' O'Connor shouts for the last time, as he turns to leave. 'I'm pretty sure you'll need it.'

She gets through the first stage of passport control and breathes a sigh of relief. They point her to an office where she has to go through more formalities. A half-empty room with thin plaster walls. With her limited vocabulary she finds it hard to assemble answers to the officer's questions, but the man is patient, and Hana is grateful to him.

'Welcome to the United States of America, Ms Doda,' he says at last. 'That's all we need to know. You can go now.'

She runs into the nearest men's room, catapulting herself towards a washbasin. The face in the mirror is angular. Hana shifts her gaze to a man waiting to go into one of the stalls. Others, unabashed and hasty, relieve themselves at the urinals. The door opens and closes to the irregular beat of the travelers' footsteps.

Hana takes a deep breath, hoping to tame her panic. The family is waiting at Arrivals. There's her cousin Lila, her thirteen-year-old niece Jonida – whom Hana hasn't seen since she was a baby – and their husband and father Shtjefën, as well as some other people from the village who emigrated years before. 'Proud to be American,' as they had said in their badly written letters. They've come from various places in Maryland, and from Virginia and Pennsylvania, and even from Ohio.

Hana had spent a great deal of time poring over a map of the United States, but her imagination had melted at the sheer size of the country. America is immense. She had been living in a village of 280 people.

Out! Now! She says to herself almost aloud. Get out and be a man.

That's what the clan expects. They want to see what they left behind, a young man gone gray with the weight of duty, a much-loved relative but an oddball. Mark's arrival is meant to bring them back to the mountains, to the smell of dung, to the splutter of guns, to betrayal, songs, wounds, flowers, to brutality, to the seduction of the mountain trails inviting them to throw themselves over the edge, to love.

Hana shakes her thoughts away. This restroom in Dulles International Airport is so real and tangible, and yet she feels so alien here. You need balls to deal with all this, she thinks, balls she doesn't have. And that's not all you need. Why balls? Why? Why me?

Get out of this bathroom, she tells herself. Get out of here, for Christ's sake!

'Do you need anything, sir?' asks a voice to her left.

She turns around. It's a boy of about fourteen. Or even fifteen, or sixteen.

'Are you feeling ok?' he persists, in an accent that sounds familiar to her.

Hana swallows, smiles, straightens up from the wash-basin. Says she's fine, thanks. Almost apologizing.

The boy looks at her, not as self-assured as before. A man – it must be his father, the resemblance is uncanny – comes out of one of the stalls, approaches his son and rests his hand on his shoulder.

'Is everything all right, Hikmet?'

The boy's face doesn't look at all Turkish, or Arabic; he's almost blond. The father, on the other hand, has a polished face but dark, marked features.

'This man isn't feeling well,' says Hikmet.

Hana denies this, shaking her head, and says, 'Hikmet? That's a beautiful name. Turkish, right?'

The man doesn't seem concerned that the stranger is feeling unwell.

'How do you know?'

'I'm Albanian.'

The man pauses a moment, granting a sliver of transient trust to the word Albanian, before doubt returns.

'*Arnavut,*' he says, looking for confirmation in Turkish.

'Albanian,' Hana repeats.

'We live in London. I often come to the States on business and this time I brought Hikmet with me.'

She doesn't know what to say. Her poor English paralyzes her. The boy is almost at the door.

'So, you are feeling better,' states the man, dropping the question mark.

Hana nods.

'Good luck.'

'You also.'

Father and son exit.

More time passes before she decides to face her

family. She emerges from the restroom like a man on death row, like a fool in a flash of lucidity.

Arms are waving in the air; she hears a girl's voice shout, 'Uncle Maaaaark!' Out of the corner of her eye she glimpses the threatening tail of a German Shepherd on a leash, held by a man in uniform. Her cousin Lila throws herself into her arms. There is much agitation.

'Hello, cousin!' Lila cries. 'Here we all are. But where were you? Where were you? We thought you'd been sent back.'

'Why would they do that?'

'How should I know? All the passengers from Zurich came out ages ago.'

'*Tungjatë, bre burrë*.'* Shtjefën Dibra, Lila's husband, greets her with an energetic embrace.

'*Tungjatë*, Shtjefën.'

'Uncle Mark! I'm Jonida, do you recognize me?'

'Jonida, you're so big now!'

They order coffee, which is served in plastic cups. The coffee is sad, tasting vaguely like rainwater.

She's had coffee like this in Scutari a couple of times, where the barmen save money on coffee grounds: one day you might get supplies from the other side of the border,

* 'Well, man, how are you?' (A greeting typically heard in northern Albania.)

from Montenegro or Kosovo, and the next day you might not. In Tirana, the capital, you can get hold of most things, but Tirana is remote and hard to think about.

Jonida pierces Hana with her look. She sucks on her orange juice, making too much noise, and is scolded by Lila.

'Uncle Mark, now I get it,' she says at last.

'What?'

'That you're totally weird.'

'Oh yes?' Hana smiles. Lila shakes her head as if to say sorry. Shtjefën looks awkward.

'Yeah, weird.' The girl's attack continues. 'I mean, like, your clothes look borrowed. Nobody in America wears stuff like that. And you don't have a beard.'

'Jonida, shut up,' Lila implores. 'What are you doing? I begged you to behave yourself . . . '

'If you keep busting your uncle's balls, he'll turn right around and go back to Albania,' threatens Shtjefën, without much conviction.

Jonida starts laughing, shrugging her shoulders, free and stubborn. One of the relatives, Pal, belches noisily; his wife Sanìja's cell phone rings.

'He can't go anywhere,' the young girl argues. 'And stop being such a know-it-all, Dad. How's he going to go back with no money? The ticket costs like . . . '

She's still laughing. Two amazing dimples in her cheeks. She's beautiful, so different from the way Hana had imagined her.

'Tell me, Uncle Mark – you don't have the money to go back, right?'

'That is right.'

'And Scutari is the ugliest place in the world, right?'

'That is also true.'

'And half of the village has emigrated like us, right?'

'Yes, that is true too.'

'The north is the poorest part of Albania, right?'

'Unfortunately.'

'And you don't have a beard, right?'

Sanìja gets up and moves away to finish her phone call. Lila blushes. Shtjefën is furious. Pal looks down awkwardly at his chewed nails. Cousin Nikolìn and his wife Rudina freeze to the spot.

Hana tries to change the subject. 'So you know quite a bit about your country?'

'The internet. Do you know what the internet is?'

'A little, yes.'

'But you really don't have a beard!'

'No, I don't.'

The women stare blatantly, in silence. Lila smiles and murmurs words of encouragement to her cousin but avoids saying her name, though on the phone and in her letters she has always called her 'Dear sister Hana.'

Hana feels calm now. She doesn't mind her family; it was the limbo of expectation that made her feel sick.

'At home I've made chicken pilaf and a chocolate cake,' Lila whispers in her ear. 'It's typical American food,' she adds proudly.

She expects Hana to be impressed, but Hana can only mutter, 'Oh yes, that's good.'

'You'll be sleeping in the kitchen, Uncle Mark,' Jonida informs her. 'So every time Dad gets up to smoke or have a snack he'll wake you up.'

'Yes, Shtjefën keeps strange hours. Sometimes he goes to work at three or four in the morning. It's bad, so he can't sleep like regular people and he gets up to smoke or eat. You know, at home things are a bit cramped – I already told you on the phone, right? But don't you worry about a thing.'

How do I look to her? Hana wonders, stubbing out her cigarette. She observes mother and daughter; they don't look at all alike. Lila has gained some weight, but her face is still pretty. She's a natural blond, her eyes are a limpid blue, she's tall and solid, her teeth are wrecked like most Albanians'. Jonida's gaze is dark but warm, her hair long and parted down the middle, her eyebrows curved and bushy. Big mouth, straight nose and a really beautiful forehead.

'So, Mark, why don't we go, brother?' Shtjefën suggests. 'It takes over an hour to get home with the traffic the way it is, and you must be jet-lagged. And it's almost dinner time.'

'It's up to you. I don't know.'

'Anyway, we'll see you next Sunday for a dinner you won't forget,' says Pal. 'Today was just to welcome you, now we really should . . . '

Under the communists, Pal was the elementary-school teacher in the village. Something in his voice has stayed nasal and pedantic. This is the first time Hana has seen Sanìja and Rudina, the cousins' wives. Of course, they must know the whole story and be dying to fire questions at her, like rounds from a semi-automatic; but they realize that it's not the right time or place.

Hana can't take her eyes off Jonida. The girl winks at her.

'Uncle Mark,' she concludes as she gets up, 'you're the funniest guy I've ever met.'

'Jonida!' shouts Shtjefën. 'From now till we get to the house you keep that mouth of yours shut!'

'Yes, Dad.'

'That's an order, in case you haven't got the message.'

'It was clear, Shtjefën,' says Lila, trying to smooth things over.

'Sorry, Dad.'

'It's your uncle you should apologize to, not me.'

'Sorry, Uncle.'

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