

## I didn't want to live

Azra Zahirović, Bosnia & Herzegovina

I didn't want to live. Didn't want to die either. I didn't like where I was living, and what was ahead of me sounded even less appetizing. I existed like a zombie – walking, but I can't say I felt my heart beat. It was a stranger to me. I was a stranger to myself. Perhaps then I was the same as my heart, because neither one of us knew or felt warmth – it of love, me of an embrace. Perhaps I was the same as my brain, because neither one of us knew respect. And what about my body and soul? Those two did not go hand in hand, because my body was accepted by all, soul by none. Was I then my soul, or did I simply not even possess it, or had its flame been extinguished like a tribal torch as soon as I was born – so as to remain unseen forever.

“Oh my dear, I'm so sorry,” were the first words my mom had heard on the day I was born. Sour looks mixed with sadness and sympathy shot at me and her though I did not see it at the time. Mom had given birth to a completely healthy child, but that did not prevent tears from inundating her face.

“A girl,” she sobbed as she took me in her arms. She was not happy, and her tears were not of joy. She knew that because of that fact, in the family of which we were both prisoners and in the rest of the world which was already set to trample all over us there was no safe place for us.

Women gathered around her trying to comfort her. They told her it was not her fault. Somewhere deep down in my oldest memories I feel the warmth of her body as she holds me and mourns, thinking that she will thus magically be able to change what happened or turn back time. Thinking that suddenly I will turn into a boy the family had eagerly awaited.

“Nadia, giver her to me. I'll take her somewhere else. Tell them she didn't make it. C'mon, God will give you more children.”

“No!” mom cried out and held me even closer, pushing away the woman who was trying to take me away.

“Nadia, come to your senses! It will be better for you and her, if she doesn't stay!”

She knew all that. She was aware of it all. Still, there was an inner force preventing her from letting go of that small, bluish bundle her womb had carried under her very heart.

“She is so beautiful,” she whispered and kissed that tiny creature – me. This was also probably the last time she would kiss me unconditionally, without having to justify or prove anything. There was a silence of a few minutes, as she was staring through the window, and then uttered through a thin smile: “Olivia.” She had just put the first dot on the clean, white sheet of my life by giving me a name – something that was mine, even when I'd think I didn't own anything, not even myself. I was named after my grandfather's olive grove which was best seen from the window of the room in which I was born. I liked to think it was because of the bluish green of my eyes, which reminded of the leaves of those same olives, but it was probably more because of the bitter-sour looks I was getting.

That's how my life began, if you can call it that. It was in a stone house from the 50s, overgrown so as to remind of the one from cartoons, and built close to the sea shore. The scent of nearby olives inundated the whole neighborhood, but it didn't seem to bother anyone. Perhaps it would have had it not all belonged to my grandfather – the most

influential man in the town. He was one of the first people to have finished school back in those days and managed to turn void into opulence. He had a restaurant, which was now in his twilight years taken over by my father. And after him... Well, in that regard one couldn't say they lucked out because they got me – the first female child after generations of men. We differed only in that one chromosome they had made into such a specter as if the world was coming to an end just because in their bigoted minds a woman was merely and solely a subordinate being. Like a dog who could talk, though I think even dogs would have had more rights than women. In the eyes of others, women were acceptable to be seen, but not heard. They were perfectly sculpted clay figurines, totally empty inside so they could be broken down and reassembled until the fragments completely ruin the outside, so they put them away somewhere where they will not be seen or even remove them altogether. It pained me even more that it had become so socially acceptable, that women taught their daughters this was the way it was supposed to be. As if the world should rely on men who can't even control their eyes, let alone countries.

Any girl or woman who showed even a smidgeon of academic capacity, understanding of the issue of gender equality or anything that filled the void of the clay armor, was seen as a sort of threat and all effort was made to marry her off as soon as possible or destroy her dreams in any other way. "Be quiet!", "Don't talk so much!", "Lower our eyes!", "Nod your head!" All this seemed more like training than upbringing, but because of that training I couldn't say anything or cry for help, because I myself thought it was a misfortune that I was a girl. I wanted to cut my hair, draw on a beard with coal and put on a woolen suit to see what it was like to live like a human being, though I

already was one, but was not recognized as such.

And then I met her, and with her I came to know life. With her I felt a heart that was beating as if it was alive and lungs struggling for breath from all the laughter. With her I experienced what it was like when you finally do something you want so badly, instead of sticking to your comfort zone and giving absolutely no damn what others thought about it. Never in my life had I seen more life in a single pair of eyes. Never had more life shone in such a tiny person.

"Pssst! Hey!" she kicked me in the leg under the table on the day I'd seen her for the first time. She and her family had come to us for dinner, for our fathers to settle some business. I did not want to sit there and despised the looks of other people – from women who seemed to pity me and my life and those superficial men hiding the lust within. When I saw a girl my age entering the dining room, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Hey, you! Wanna get out of here?" she kicked me again.

"Where do you wanna go?" I cut her off with my eyes as if wanting to reprimand and warn her of behavior not complying with the "training" we had both gone through.

"Ma'am, where is the toilet here?" she asked my mom and then turned to wink at me.

"Olivia will show you. Go on, Olivia, get up with her," she signaled with her eyes for me to get up and follow her. To be quite honest, this was not a bad idea. No one will probably notice.

When she saw me hesitate, she took my arm and pulled me with her. We ran all the way to the sea. She took off her shoes, threw them on the gravel and stepped into the soft waves in the shallow water, wetting

her blue dress almost half-way up. She spread her arms as if wanting to fly off and her face broke into a wide smile.

“Hesitating again?” she noticed, “If you don’t go in yourself, I will personally throw you into the sea.”

“Why did you want me to come with you? You could have gone alone.”

“If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, then walk together. You and I both know very well that what we are living is not life, and that these houses of ours, however opulent, are not home. And we know that those embraces and presents we receive are not warmth. It’s all artificial.”

Her words gave me goosebumps. From her mouth I heard what I had felt this whole time, but couldn’t say out loud even when I was alone, for fear that the walls and needlepoints on them had ears. Both of us were the first female children in our families after many generations. Though she had an older brother and I didn’t have anyone. At least they paid no attention to her, whereas I was given some forced, sour importance with shame for who was to inherit them.

“I don’t want to live like this. I am a human being, not a future wife. I am a human being, not merely some trained animal. Was it up to me to choose if I’ll be born as a man or a woman?” tiny tears glistened in her, just a second ago, merry eyes. “I can’t just stand here anymore while they’re ruining our lives, knowing they will do the same to my granddaughters. I can’t, Olivia, it pains my heart!”

After that last sentence I, myself, felt a sharp pain in the chest. It was like a ray of sun. As if it was made from incandescent star dust. If she herself did not find happiness and meaning in all of this, who else could. I didn’t even know her name, but I had a feeling no one in my life was closer to me than her. I felt as if with her words she

had gifted me with a part of herself to guard, and I was suddenly so afraid of losing that part.

As if sensing what I wanted to know, she said: “Helena. My name is Helena. They named me after sunlight, and they are the ones striving to extinguish it.”

“Stars don’t shine – they burn. And they burn until they explode, and then they take everything with them. It all began with the sun and will end with it.”

“Are you trying to say I’m not the one who shines?”

“And what do you want to be?”

“Most stars can be seen even when they’re gone. I want to shine even when I’m gone.”

“Aren’t you too young to be thinking about that?”

“Perhaps. But I know I’m not too young to clean up the mess in the world, it’s just that this mess cannot be cleaned with a cloth and suds.”

The rest of the day Helena and I spent doing all the things we couldn’t on our own, for fear of other people looking. If we are going to be an embarrassment to our families, at least we’ll be an embarrassment in pair. In her I saw a sister my mother had never given me, a friend I had never found and warmth I had never felt warmed by. We swore to change the world, however pointless it sounded. However, to change the world, we first had to change ourselves, selves who were small worlds – microcosms in which the heart was the center, and the soul was cosmic space around it and all its trajectories. Our world map consisted of the sea and the sun, and of everything that relies on it, and we were a compass.

Not long afterwards, I expressed my wish to go to university. I wanted to start over and get away from a place where everyone knew my steps better than me. Of course, father would have none of it. He

refused me even before I had managed to finish my thought.

“A woman entrepreneur? Forget that nonsense, girl, and start looking for the one who will give you my heir!” he snarled hitting his newspaper on the table.

“You mean my heir, dad?” I clenched my fists to accumulate the fear welling up inside me, so that my eyes could be icy cold.

“Excuse me?” he shot me a look from under his glasses.

“If I give birth, I’ll give birth to my heir, because I am your heir.”

A glass flew by me and smashed against the wall behind me, and his howl was the next thing I heard: “You and the winemaker’s daughter have really gotten the nerve up! What rights are you trying to pursue? What kind of world are you trying to change? The world has worked just fine without you, and you think you’re the ones to change it! You have a roof over your heads, everything you could possibly need and you’re still not satisfied!”

“I am a person, dad! I am a human being just like you!” I banged myself on the chest, as if my soul was thus going to be my witness. “What are you so afraid of? Just because you have a daughter doesn’t mean you have a slave! Or are you, perhaps, as a man the one who is more of a slave here? Just a slave to tradition! A slave to protocol! I was not born to be looked at, I was born to be respected! If you men need women to prove your superiority, then you are nothing! And you are aware that as such you are nothing! For once in our life can we consider things as people, and not as men and women?”

Mom quickly pulled me into the room while he remained in the same spot I had found him. I tried to break away from her grip, as she looked at me with disappointment in her eyes. That image will never fade from my mind. I felt as if I was

losing her and as if she only then regretted having me.

Helena married the son of a sea merchant a few months later. I no longer heard anything about her after that. Her family visited many more times, but they behaved like she had never even existed. Moreover, they looked all the more pleased, for having getting rid of what they were most afraid of – a woman who wants and a woman who is not afraid.

“It was then I realized that the world was simply not ready for what was ahead of it. It was slowly sinking and refusing anyone’s help, because it was afraid that what it grabbed on to would change it. I was not afraid of anything other than people, and perhaps not even of people as much as I was afraid of their despair. Despair turns people into animals – it makes them regress. I was not born to be swallowed by despair, just as none of you were. Mankind should be moving forward, not backward, because the backward has already been and the backward has already finished. People are not divided into men and women, but into those who climb and those who fall just so they wouldn’t need to climb. Men and women were never supposed to be against each other for their differences, but were supposed to complement and guard each other during the fall. You are not alone in the world even when you are falling. You are a phoenix, and the world is your immortal feathers.”

I received a thunderous applause from the audience, and the loudest among them was the one who had made me into what I wanted to be. Helena and I were destined to change the world, even after what had befallen us both. She was my publisher, while I was a writer and spokesperson. She was a ray of sun giving the olive branch the strength to grow and mature.

AZRA ZAHROVIĆ

Through the multitude of faces, I saw the wrinkles of my mother choking with tears. Had she let me go then, perhaps it would have been easier for me, but I don't know if the tiny seed would have grown into

the tall olive whose scent would spread far and wide. Perhaps I did not inherit my father's seafood restaurant, but I was proof of something far better – that one small half-burnt torch could light up the world.