

## **The journey into the hills**

‘Fill your pockets with bread Ardian. And put on at least three layers of clothes. As many as you can. You must choose your warmest jumpers and thickest socks. Do what I say, as quickly as you can, *zemer*.’ said his mother.

He asked her why they must do this, but her face, grey, like the grain silo menacing their town, showed him that there must be no questions.

He obeyed her. Mechanically, he dressed himself, layer after layer, peeling woollen socks up his legs and forcing another t-shirt over the three underneath. He felt warm, suffocated, as fat as the mayor. He wondered how the mayor would fit on so many layers of clothes. There wouldn’t be any room, and if the mayor tripped as they walked on the long journey mother had said the whole town was going on, he would roll right back into the town! He would be a ball of clothes and too many baklava, with his face puffing in that red, sweaty way, the way he looked when he made ever-so important speeches to the town.

He laughed a little to himself, as he ripped bread from the loaf and began stuffing it into his pockets. How funny, to think of the mayor like that!

‘Why are you laughing Ardian?’ said father, ‘This is no time for laughing, no time at all. Be ready. We are leaving.’

Everyone was so angry these days. Their faces so stern, like photographs sent from Albania of distant relatives each year. Their jaws so fixed and solemn. Their eyes so empty as they barked more orders to him.

Mother, greyer than ever, cross with him all the time, yet each evening, picking him up onto her lap like he was a baby—he wasn’t a baby anymore, she should know this—and trying to cradle him, with tears in her eyes. Of course, he fought her off. He was a big boy now. He flailed violently against her. She cried and cried and begged him to sit with her for

just one night, but he would not be treated like a baby. He scowled at her and told her to leave him alone. He was nearly as tall as Ehad now—she should realise this.

It was all the Serbs' fault, he felt. Everyone was talking about them, and since they'd been introduced into conversation, everyone had gotten sadder and more serious. Since they'd been on everyone's lips, shoulders had hunched and eyes were darting around all the time. He had to stay in, he couldn't see his friends, and even the makeshift school at Uncle's, the one interesting thing in the day, had stopped.

And now this tiresome walk into the mountains with everyone as silent as trees. He just wished things would go back to normal.

The tractor, pulling a trailer full of relatives and neighbours, came by early in the morning. They were waiting by the door and they all, Grandmother included (Grandmother in the back of a tractor!), crammed into the back. They sat on hay bales and bags of clothes; blankets and jars of flour, wheelbarrows, bottles of milk and boxes of turshi were rammed between them. They were like peppers in a jar, squashed and misshapen, he felt, and getting slowly softer and more bruised.

He stood between Grandmother and someone who used to be a policeman, before everything had changed, and tried hard to think of other things. He had a small toy car in his pocket, the paint nearly all scraped from it from years of play, and he felt each ridge on the bottom of the car again and again. He knew father would be cross with him for bringing it. Father said that they must bring bread and that is all, and he knew Ehad would laugh at him, call him a little boy for needing a toy. But for now it was his secret and he flicked the wheels in his pocket, spinning them round and round, trying to forget the jolting beneath him and the policeman's elbow in his shoulder blade.

Grandmother hadn't been well. Since Grandfather had died, an accident at work three weeks ago, her hands had stiffened and she hadn't been cleaning her teeth or washing her face. Ardian had been frightened to go near her recently. The stale breath from her mouth put him off and she seemed to clench him, like a cockerel will clench its perch, if she managed to get hold of him. He had to sleep in the same room as his grandmother and he'd been woken by her screaming Grandfather's name in the night. She shouted curses at some invisible person in her chair in the afternoons. Mother said she was grieving. Ehad and Ardian thought she was going mad.

When they reached the end of the path into the mountains, the path from Bes's uncle's farm, the man driving the tractor told them to get off.

'This is as far as I can take you,' he said.

Family by family, they got down from the trailer. Men pulling wheelbarrows and women pulling small children, they began their slow walk into the hills. They went their separate ways; large crowds could be found, Ardian heard his father say to another man. Grandmother was finding it difficult. Her legs, unused to much walking, especially since Grandfather's death, seemed to be seizing up. Father, trying to lead them as fast as he could and telling the children to hurry, slowed to a pace Grandmother could manage. She tripped over a rock after about half a kilometre. Mother and Father ran to pull her up and Father told Ehad to take Grandmother's arm and lead her.

'I'm holding you back. You must leave me,' she said.

Father told her to stop speaking like a fool and said that all would be well. He said this, but in his eyes Ardian could see a look he had never seen before.

They heard shouting from behind a peak and father told them all to crouch and to be silent. Ardian knew better than to question. He heard the all too familiar language again and heard laughing and gun shots. They stayed very still.

The voices faded and Father, breathing heavily, told them to carry on.

Grandmother, having been crouched against a very cold rock, could not stand again.

‘Then you will just have to get into my wheelbarrow,’ Father said. He began to move towards her, ready to pick her up.

‘And what about the little food you have? And the blankets for the night time?’ Grandmother said, ‘You’ll never survive if you leave them and take me—there isn’t room for both.’

‘I’ll stay here and you come back for me tomorrow, or the next day, on your way down,’ she said, ‘Leave me blankets and some food and I’ll be fine. I will not come with you now. My legs have made their decision.’

Mother told them to keep on walking up the hill, with Ardian leading the way. They were to only go for fifteen metres and then to wait for their parents. They must not look round, as Grandmother must change her clothes, and it wouldn’t be right for them to see their grandmother in this way. Mother said this all very cheerfully—the most cheerful thing she’d said in days.

Mother and Father caught them up in a few moments. Mother’s eyes, red and sore, stared at the ground, fixedly.

‘Mother, why—?’

Father cut him off and said that Mother was not feeling well. He told him to ask no more questions and to keep walking. From his tone, Ardian knew that he must do as he said.

Ehad pinched him in the arm and Ardian made a mental note to pinch him back, when it was dark and he would find it harder to return the pain. They kept on walking.