

2024 Short Story Prize

The Invisibles

by

MASHA SHUKOVICH

On the day the bombs began to fall, Gaga turned eight.

Most children his age would have found this to be both a terrifying and unfair twist of fate. But Gaga wasn't afraid of the NATO bomber planes, and justice was a luxury his people had little time for.

His real name was Gavran, which means raven, but everyone called him Gaga. Gaga was also the sound that ravens made when they flew over the golden fields near sunset, twisting like black ribbons borne by the wind against the painful blue bruise of the sky, calling to each other: Ga! Ga!

Planes were like ravens: loud and beautiful to watch, even if every adult Gaga knew hated them and cursed at them, brow furrowed like a dry river bed waiting for the rain that never comes. Both planes and ravens, the grown-ups thought, were there to take something away from the people who had nothing left to give: their meager crops, their homes built with more cardboard and tin than brick, their already comically miserable lives.

But Gaga was born a stargazer, the love child of Father Moon and Mother Night: in the dark all men appear equal and bomber planes look like stars.

Gaga was small and wiry, his hair dark and glossy even in moonlight, his milk teeth white against his olive skin. His eyes were black and shiny, like the beetles his grandmother, Baba Lena, would pick out of flour, her thumb and forefinger made into pincers, her tongue a pink foot of a mollusk, protruding

between her golden teeth to make the tsk-tsking sound of annoyance and acceptance of life as it is.

And what is an old Roma woman, a Gypsy, to do but pick the black beetles out of flour and count her blessings on the fingers of one hand? She had three children, two of whom lived into their thirties and stayed away from drugs and booze, and seven grandchildren, all healthy and in their right minds, God bless them. She had a husband who never laid his hand on her in anger, except once when he got drunk on free beer for May First, the Workers' Day. She also had flour (with beetles in it), sugar, coffee, enough bread to eat, a roof over all their heads, an apple tree, and an old well that never ran out of water, even in drought. What else is there to ask for?

Baba Lena was the one who named her eldest grandson Raven.

"Why did you name me that, Baba?" he asked her once, when he was five.

It was nighttime, and their one exposed lightbulb, fueled by the power taken from the electric post just up the road from their little shack, blinked as if wondering the same thing.

"I am already dark enough as it is. Why remind everyone of that?"

"Never apologize for who you are, Gavran," his grandmother said. "If your name walks ahead of you boldly, no one will ask why when you arrive after it."

So Gaga stopped asking why, but his name never felt like it fully belonged to him. It belonged to his grandmother and the black birds in the golden fields, who shouted their hunger loud enough for everyone to hear. But no one paid attention to them. Who listens to ravens anyway?

At night, when thunder raged and rain drummed her wet fingers on the tin roof of their house, too small to hold all its people in, so it had to be fortified with any old scrap of metal to keep the children from pouring out of the cracks like stormwater from an old bucket, Gaga's grandmother would

soothe the little ones and tell them stories older than she was.

In these stories, Romani people became birds, flew over the Moon, collecting stars like marbles in their feathery pockets, and brought them back to the Earth to shower the children in gold. But the children, who had never seen gold before or knew what it was, were hungry and tried to eat it and broke their teeth and cried until their mothers dried their tears with corn silk and gave them milk with honey to drink.

“Is that why you now have golden teeth, Grandma? Because you ate gold when you were a child?” Gaga asked, and Baba Lena smiled and replied, “Yes, that is why,” her teeth glittering in the soft darkness like the lost stars that they were.

And so, when the bombs started to fall, and her grandchildren began to dream about dark staircases and rawboned black dogs howling into the night and lost needles and broken brandy glasses, Baba Lena made a sign of the cross over each of their glistening brown foreheads as they slept, and she began to eat their fear.

She plucked the wisps of fear out of the air around the children’s heads like smoky feathers, her thumb and forefinger turned into pincers again, like a slender beak, her soft mouth open to swallow what was never meant to be ingested, by any living thing, however small.

And the children awoke into the new morning of their first war, unperturbed by the sounds of bomber planes and air raid sirens and the explosions that made the walls of their overcrowded little house, equally fortified by cardboard, straw, and mud, shiver like a wet kitten and spew dust onto the kitchen table covered with a yellow oilcloth with flowers dancing upside-down.

That is how Baba Lena made the fear disappear.

Once, before the end of war was in sight, Gaga woke up in the middle of the night, moonlight spilling from the open window like a river of milk, and saw his grandmother with a halo of gray, feathery smoke floating around her scarf-covered

head, her black eyes shiny like oiled plums, her forefinger poised on top of her lips, the soft hush of her breath lulling him back to sleep. And he knew then that Baba Lena never was just a woman or simply his grandmother but also a bird, and something else too, something made of warm bread, starshine, and wind.

On the last night of April, the sky shuddered with rage and from the bloodied womb of the mistreated Earth an earthquake was born. All the children, dreams still leaking from the corners of their rosy mouths, rushed to hide under the kitchen table, the only solid piece of furniture to be found in the house, and there they sat, lined up like starlings under eaves, shuddering with nervous giggles. It is strange how laughter can creep in alongside death sometimes, to sweeten it.

These planes were so good at hiding in plain sight, people said, they could slice a bird in the sky in half and it would still keep on flying, not knowing that it was already dead.

As the house shook and squealed like a kicked dog, the adults swore at the accursed mothers that gave birth to the NATO pilots who dropped their bombs on penniless people with nothing to their name but the skin on their backs and wailed about the cruel destiny that chose to put them right there in between the burning sky and the damned, crumbling land that never gave them anything but rocks and grief.

But Baba Lena got up from under the kitchen table as the ground convulsed and retched, and marched over to her eldest son, Gaga's father, who stood in the doorway wearing only his underclothes, for the earthquake had descended upon the sleeping people still warm in their beds, and she slapped him

across the mouth, hard enough to draw blood, for cursing at the land, their feeder. She said that it wasn't the land's fault but men's, and that the wretched NATO bombs, each carrying a thousand curses, must have awakened Pçuvuš, a mole-like spirit of great power that lives deep underground and waits for an opening to squeeze himself in among the humans and turn their world up on its head.

The bombing lasted for seventy-eight days, which also happened to be the exact number of cards in Baba Lena's oily tarot deck that she kept by her bed, wrapped in a red handkerchief. Gaga often shuffled the cards, inhaling their musty fragrance that reminded him of root cellars, winter apples, and his grandfather's old hats, all things that were somehow both dead and alive at once.

Gaga heard talk that Baba Lena was a *chovahàne*, a witch, but witches lived in deep dark forests and ate children, so he knew these stories about his grandmother could never be true. But he did believe that Baba Lena was cleverer than any man that ever lived and could even outsmart the Devil himself, if it came to that. And if that's what made a woman a witch, he was glad his grandmother was one.

People talked about all kinds of impossible things in those days; they even said that Americans had some sort of invisible plane that could sneak up on you like a snake in the grass and drop a bomb right down your back without you even noticing. These planes were so good at hiding in plain sight, people said, they could slice a bird in the sky in half and it would still keep on flying, not knowing that it was already dead. And if that wasn't witchcraft, Gaga didn't know what was.

So it was no wonder that each man Gaga knew dreamed about downing one of these invisible planes and showing the NATO that they were not some small fish they could bury in impoverished uranium; they too counted for something. And women kept their tongues behind their teeth and drank their Turkish coffee in silence, smirking on one side of their mouths

only, so as not to make the fools with idle fists angry.

Gaga never took the men seriously; they were braggards and liked to pound their hairy chests more than to eat bread, but when Baba Lena drew the Wheel of Fortune card one night, he knew that that the wind had shifted, and that a curious kind of magic was flying in the air, like a bird with iron wings and eyes made of thunder that knows no fear.

Next morning, when the news spread that Lieutenant Colonel Zoltan Dani shot down the invisible F-117 bomber plane piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Dale Zelko, Gaga didn't think that men with their naked fists and big, empty words had anything to do with it. But he did wonder if a bird-woman, like the ones that lived in Baba Lena's stories, might have guided Zoltan's hand as he drifted in and out of dreamless sleep brought on by exhaustion and despair to the exact place in the sky where the plane no man could see was hidden.

The American pilot miraculously survived and was rescued six hours later, but the wreck of the plane was appropriated by the people of Gaga's village faster than you could snap your fingers. Within mere minutes, as women danced shoeless on car roofs, men downed brandy like spring water, and brass bands played like they were drawing their last breaths on Earth, the parts of the invisible plane were collected with utmost care and built into crumbling houses everywhere, to fortify them and perhaps make them invisible, too, like the people who never mattered much in the eyes of the big white world that had the power to make even death impossible to see.

This was when Baba Lena began to cough into her red handkerchief, night after night, her tarot cards spread on the kitchen table before her like an intricately adorned fan, the inescapable music of her coughing a lullaby.

Between coughing fits, Gaga could sometimes see his grandmother in the soundless hours right after midnight, framed by the window, her lips pursed into a whispering brown bud with a lit cigarette at its center, her pincer-like fingers

swirling the smoke into billows, away from the children. And the children slept on, their little chests rising and falling like water rippling in the breeze, gentle and steady, never having known true fear.

When she died only a year later of galloping lung cancer alone in the hospital, Gaga didn't cry. He held onto his throat with his thumb and forefinger made into pincers to hold the tears inside.

"It was the cigarettes," the doctors said. "Roma women smoke too much."

But Gaga knew it was the bombs and all the fear that Baba Lena ate. The ravens had told him so. And ravens never lie.

The strangest thing was that once she died no one could find her tarot deck; it was like it had fallen through the cracks in the earth to join its once owner in death. The only thing that Gaga had left from Baba Lena were her red handkerchief and her three golden teeth, which his father pushed into his clenched fist like hard seeds into willing soil.

"She wanted you to have them," was the only thing he said.

Gaga held onto them for a whole year, kept them in his pillowcase at night and in his shirt pocket near his heart in the day like talismans, not knowing what else to do with them, not ready to let them go.

Once a year had passed and he knew that Baba Lena's spirit was home at last, Gaga collected her golden teeth carefully, like fledgling birds out of a nest, and took them to the raven fields, still green and fragrant like fresh-baked bread.

And there he opened his fists and threw the golden teeth to the skies, not in anger or even sorrow, but because the sky is the only place that holds the stars forever.