

WHEN THE BIRCHES UP THERE ARE GREENING

by Breda Smolnikar (translated by Lili Potpara)

those were Greek ships that were coming to the harbour, she was waiting as a faithful wife would wait for her sailor to return from distant seas, waiting with bags full of beans and dried mushrooms, she spoke English or she would not have been able to talk to foreign captains, she was waiting for them on Sušak when they came ashore from anchored ships in little boats and looked at her, first in surprise, and then with interest and respect, they exchanged their goods, she gave them dried mushrooms and beans and walnuts, they gave her figs and raisins and lemons and oranges, sometimes she took back a full lorry, and if it was the cherry season the driver on the way to the port stopped at the market place full of those huge baskets of cherries, and while he unloaded or loaded his wares she quickly sold the cherries as well, the cherries that were picked for her by the farmers up in the hills, they needed to be sold quickly in order not to rot, she had everything well organised, from the hills there rolled bags filled with beans and dried mushrooms which she inspected on arrival, she poked her nose into every bean-bag, and if the beans were not carefully picked out, she yelled at the bringer that Americans would never eat such rubbish, that it was all right that time, but next time she wouldn't take it, and then she emptied the bags onto the table before her children and they had to pick out the bad beans all evenings, for the merchandise had to be good and pretty, nobody was to complain to her because of poor quality, only once did a captain reproach her for filthy beans, and she remembered her mistake and never repeated it, she particularly liked to poke her nose into the mushrooms, they had to smell fresh, not musty, they had to be evenly sliced, to every mushroom picker she gave instructions about what mushrooms should look like, how to dry them and how to keep them, the mushrooms had to be stored in white-washed canvas bags otherwise she refused to take them, she was very particular about the mushrooms, not so much about the beans, they can't go wrong with the beans, the kids will pick them, she was saying to her husband who sometimes contradicted her if she was being too tough on the highlanders supplying the merchandise, I won't pay for this rubbish, she told them to teach them to bring better-looking goods next time, which she then took to the shore, on the way back, after she'd finished her business, she was usually sitting next to the driver or else, without saying a word, sat at the back of the lorry among the bags containing raisins and figs if somebody else was taking a ride and there was no room for her in the cabin; she didn't care how and where she rode, if only the business ran smoothly as it should, she'd wash herself at home, she was never upset on the way back as long as those on the shore saw her neat and tidy, upright, with American jewellery, it really didn't matter on the way back, she'd made an impression, she had her merchandise, the rings, earrings and necklaces and the golden wrist-watch she took off immediately upon mounting the lorry for the ride back, she put the jewellery in a big purse, wrapped it in a kerchief and put everything together in the two-handled bag, which she covered with a cardigan, took off her high-heeled shoes she'd used to impress the captain, threw them down before her onto the dirty floor of the lorry and, barefoot, told herself, well, now to work, on Friday to Moravče for the fair, on Saturday I'll go to Črnuče and then next week to Mengeš for the benediction on Sunday, and to Kamnik and to Nova Štifta I'll go too..., she was talking to herself among the filthy bags that had seen the vessel's hold and the rats in it, then threw a blanket over the bags, sat on the floor, put the bag with her lunch and jewellery in front of her, just in case, in order not to get robbed, broke off a piece of bread she kept in the bag wrapped in a fresh napkin, ate an apple or two depending on how hungry she was, and then put her hand into the handles of the bag and so, finally safe from the thieves, put her tired head down onto the bags next to the carelessly thrown glittering modern shoes which here, at the back of the lorry, no longer needed to impress anyone, and before the rocking vehicle lulled her to restless sleep she was figuring out how much she

would make and how much would be left, and thinking about how next time she would wait again on the shore, and then, in the years between the two wars, she was selling her ware at home, the raisins in the shops went for eight dinars, but she was offering them for four up in the hills and villages, people were pouring down from distant hills to buy the raisins and the figs, she was to be seen at every fair, and when her daughters grew up they did the selling, she knew exactly how much they were to bring home, that much produce, that much money, she was saying and stuffing the coins into her pockets before she took everything up to the attic, there was so much profit that she was weighing the money, not counting, why bother counting the metal nickels and dimes the people were paying with, if she was pressed for time she weighed the coins, every denomination had to be piled separately for the weighing, she knew exactly how much money she had, it was impossible to cheat her, not even for a single dime, the children knew it very well, various people were coming to their house for the raisins and figs and bought them in great quantities to sell them up in the hills, so that for Easter and Christmas the housewives could knead the golden Greek dried grapes into the cakes, the driver Pretnar was the connection and would say, Rozina, harness the horses, and she harnessed them and took the merchandise to Pretnar's, Pretnar and Brinovic hauled the bags onto the lorry, she sent the husband home, let's go, come on, let's go, she hurried Pretnar in excited expectation and didn't listen to Brinovic who was telling her to be careful not to get cheated or robbed, I robbed, she snubbed him in her Sunday dress, with her best earrings, a huge gold medallion and a thick necklace round the neck, with a gold watch with a thick golden strap and embellished with diamonds, and with the high-heeled shoes, polished so carefully that they shone brightly, and with a huge two-handled wicker bag she had woven and stitched herself, half of America and Europe used to wear her straw hats, let them try cheat on me if they dare, and she mounted the lorry as if getting ready to bake a loaf of bread or do the cooking, fearlessly she climbed up into the old ramshackle lorry, and once she was up there she no longer thought of her husband, children, the farm, she was counting and recounting the bags, piling up the money in her mind, and riding, as she was dreaming, towards her happiness, she owed nothing to nobody, after the second war she, old but still vigorous and quite herself, was often visited by the local chronicler Stražar, she received him a few times and when she grew tired of his questions, for what true trader would reveal their plans, even in old age certain things had to be kept to oneself, Rozina knew it, there are things true merchants never talk about even when they recount their memories, perhaps they give out a few secrets to one of their grandchildren, carefully and in confidence, after having made sure the person was worthy of trust, she refused to talk to the village historian when he wanted to learn about various events in her life, and so he kept coming and asking her all sorts of questions, and he came again, but she opened the window and said, oh, you're here again, and he said, yes, and she said, opening up her oh's as strongly as she could, so that they reminded her of the English of her youth, oh, oh no, no more, she shut the window before his nose, he had to be off, she didn't want to talk any more, but during the years between the two wars the children had to sell what she supplied, she didn't consult her husband, her strings reached all the way to the distant America, the captains liked dealing with her, they were amused by her determination and obstinacy on the distant foreign Sušak, they were approaching the island with curiosity in their boats, and she would stand there all prettied up and glittering with jewellery on her high heels in her best dress, firmly determined not to get cheated, they tried, of course they did, but she didn't give in, all right, she would say, I'll sell it to somebody else, the Finns are coming tomorrow, I'm not giving my beans and mushrooms so cheap, and you can take your bloody raisins wherever you want, she was saying, although she felt a lump in her throat and was afraid that the men would simply turn the boat and sail back to the ship which, alien, heavy and distant, lay there half sunken in the sea, with her belly full of raisins and figs and lemons and oranges which Rozina wanted so badly; the

samples that the captain and the crew brought ashore in little bags for Rozina to judge with her nose, tongue and hands to determine whether the merchandise was good or not she carelessly threw before the hesitant captain while still nibbling on the foreign, sweet Greek fruit dried in the hot southern sun, contemptuously curving her lips, I'm not taking it at this price, her heart was pounding because she didn't know how the men would react to her gesture, if the Finns don't take it tomorrow, I'll carry the beans back, she said, I'll sell them to the Hungarians, they go like hot cakes, I'm not talking to you any more, she said, looked at her gaudy gold watch which she had bought in America years before with prohibition money when she and her husband were secretly brewing brandy and selling it, the driver Pretnar was standing next to her in silence, afraid, the big sturdy sailors were known for liking to pick a fight, if they were drunk, they were dangerous, but Rozina wasn't afraid of them, she half turned as if she were about to leave, and then leant down to the bag lying at her feet, she'd placed it there when she was tasting the Greek merchandise packed in little bags, the huge medallion on a long fat gold chain was swinging gaudily, when she leant down to the bag, she slowly reached in, the diamonds on her gold watch glittered splendidly, the garish earrings part of her national garb, the biggest pair she possessed, and she possessed quite a few, glimmered when she straightened her hair, she bent over to the bag and pulled out her last trump card, a litre bottle containing home-brewed brandy, here, she said, so that you don't waste time with me for nothing, and she handed him the bottle with fiery water, he grabbed it without further ado, drew out the cork with his teeth, put it in his hand and was pouring down Rozina's brandy which had no match in the entire Kranjska region, the brandy was truly Rozina's final trump card, if she managed to fascinate the whole of America with it, she would enchant that hairy man, too, standing erect she turned her back on him, wait, woman, I'll take it, said the captain, under my terms, Rozina said at a high pitch before she turned round, her voice allowed for no objection, *va pái sto diálo*, he said when he could see her face again, the bottle in hand he picked up the bags with his other hand, those she had thrown at his feet, *gamó to kerató mu*, the sailors stepped forward to get at her, but he laughed, spat into the sea, threw back to her the little bags, which she skilfully caught, *gamó to Hristó*, he motioned to the sailors to move away, *palii pústes*, he laughed again, shook his head and slouched back to the boat with his men still mumbling his *gamó to kerató mu*, you've got the cheek, Pretnar mumbled stiff with fear, but she only laughed drily and said, shut up, mind your own business, only once was it rough, one of the sailors, the biggest and the strongest, a true giant, wanted to touch her during the bargaining with the captain, he winked at the men, stepped behind her back when she wasn't watching, and grabbed her from behind, all tiny and fragile, gripped her, forcefully ripped open her blouse that the buttons tore off, reached for her breasts, touched them and put his bearded face right on her neck, the sailors surrounded them, leaned forward, *o, paliomalákas*, go on, go on, they grumbled, but she shook in surprise and terror, let the bag drop on the ground so that the apples she'd brought for lunch rolled along the shore, she squealed in shock, and bit into his hand, he jumped off as if bitten by a snake and knocked her to the ground, *skatá*, the sailors moved away, went silent and stiff, all one could see was their bulging eyes and the yellow, rotten teeth and swollen, rough green-grey tongues poking from their mouths, from the undone Sunday blouse glittered Rozina's breasts, she was lying on the ground, her thighs showed from under the broad skirt, the starving sailors went numb, go at her, go, but she grabbed her pointed shoe with one hand and readjusted her blouse with the other, screamed oh Mary of Brezje, help me, jumped up, almost flew at the intrusive sailor and started getting at him with the heel of the shoe with such force and speed while awkwardly hopping before him, one foot bare, that the goliath, taken aback by her savagery, started backing off and, when he was right on the edge of the water, she, aflame with the fight, charged at him, stopped for a moment as if thinking what to do with him, then banged against him with her entire body shouting, I'll show you, here, here, now

you've had it, and pushed him over into the water like an empty bag that his weight made the water splash into the air, then, fragile and gentle, with her hand holding the shoe, she swiftly turned towards the others who, their mouths gaping, were standing still in shock, and she shouted, who else would like to get wet, for a single hostile moment they were ready to get at her, but her courage stopped them, her little hand was telling them there would be no surrender, she was capable of throwing herself into the sea although she couldn't swim, the next moment they were laughing, roaring with laughter and mocked their soaked comrade who, further down the shore, climbed out of the water, there, where she'd pushed him over the sea was deep for they were in a port and it was impossible to get out, let's decide it among ourselves, she said to the captain when she put her shoes back on, and they stopped laughing and helped her pick up the scattered apples and the buttons, too, she ordered them with such determination that they started looking for them immediately, and when she reached a deal with the captain and they shook hands,