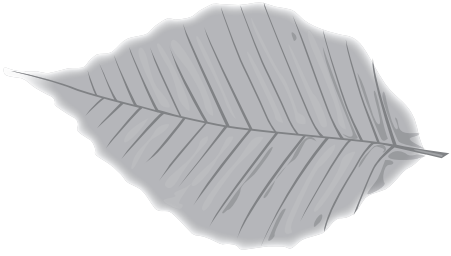
Changes



They were cutting the branches off the trees again. When Zari first arrived in East London, she had wondered about the trees. She had never seen any fields and farms in London, like there were at home in Kosovo. But there were more trees. Or at least you noticed them here. In Kosovo, there were entire forests, but no one thought about them because they were just there. In London, the trees looked uncomfortable growing out of the pavement, as if they were refugees in a foreign country, too, maybe, with their branches sawn off so they wouldn't bother anyone. They bothered Zari. They grew great green leaves from their stubby branches anyway, which shaded her in summer and sat in slippery brown piles on the pavement in autumn, but she thought the trees must be

unhappy, unable to stretch beyond the terraced houses which hemmed them in.

Zari stretched since they couldn't. Apart from the amputated trees, it was a lovely day, and warm for February. It was too early for leaves, so she could especially notice the blueness of the sky. If she tilted her head way back and squinted, nearly the only thing she could see was blue. Even the peaked roof of the school disappeared. Zari imagined she was lying in a field at the farm where her grandparents lived in Kosovo, and that there was nothing around her but grass. Her eyelashes, which were thick and got rather in the way, could be the grass.

"Zarifeh!"

Zari's head snapped forward to its upright position. Her mother was coming through the noisy crowd of school children who were waiting, like Zari, for their parents to come and collect them. Her mother always called her just like that, as if she were angry. She wasn't really. Zari supposed sounding angry in the school yard made her mother feel as if she knew what was going on. The crowded yard, the hordes of children from countries she had never heard of before, the chattering in unknown languages, made her nervous. Well, Zari had been nervous at first, too. But not now...

"Noneh!" she cried, running toward her. "Noneh! Guess what we did in school today?"

Her mother wasn't listening as she grabbed Zari's arm and gently pulled her to the part of the school yard

where the older children were waiting. Ekrem saw them first. He was the younger of Zari's two brothers, but he was enough older than she that he sometimes acted as if he thought she were still in the Infants' School. Sometimes. Sometimes he was her hero. Today was one of the hero-times. Today she didn't mind when he got to tell his story before hers.

"Guess what happened in school, Noneh?" he asked in nonchalant Albanian through a slightly swollen lip as they headed home.

"Oh yes, *guess* what happened!" Zari chimed in. "A Paki tried to steal my lunch!" She glanced around quickly to make sure none of the South Asian children walking home with their mothers had heard her rude name for them. None of them seemed to have, or else they didn't recognize it when it was surrounded by Albanian.

"He did steal it," put in Ekrem dryly. "But I caught him, didn't I?"

Zari laughed. "Noneh, he came huffing over like this." She stomped along the pavement for a few steps, snorting through her nostrils. Ekrem had been so angry she could have sworn she saw little puffs of smoke coming out of his nose, like the old bull on grandfather's farm. "And then he said, 'You…'" Ekrem suddenly wrapped an arm around her stomach and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"I *said*," he cleared his throat dramatically, "'Hand over my sister's lunch and clear off!' Well, he wouldn't."

"He said, 'Why should I?'" put in Zari, freeing herself from her brother's clutches.

"So then I said it a little louder: 'Hand over my sister's lunch and clear off!'"

"'Or else!'" added Zari.

"Or else," agreed Ekrem. "So I gave him 'or else'." He crossed his arms smugly over his chest as his mother unlocked the door of their house.

Most of the houses in East London were tall and thin and all stuck together, without any more room to stretch than the trees had. The roofs were of red pottery or black slate shingles mostly; they were the only part of the houses Zari liked. Her family's house in East London, which really belonged to East London and not to her family at all, was the kind with red shingles.

Zari remembered the houses in Kosovo were big and wide and short. She thought they sprawled over the land comfortably and lazily, maybe kind of like American houses but not quite. She knew what American houses looked like even though she had never been to America, because she had seen them on television. She couldn't remember Kosovar roofs; they might have been made of straw, or she might have been thinking of something she saw in a book at school.

She never admitted it to her brothers, but her own memory of Kosovo wasn't really very good. She hadn't even been old enough for the Infants' School when she arrived in London with her mother and brothers

and unmarried sister. But her mother remembered everything—even how many chickens grandmother had had. So Zari memorized her mother's memories and talked about them as if she knew. The rest of it she did know. She couldn't exactly picture the farm, or the house where they had lived before they came to England. But she remembered when everything changed.

They were still in Kosovo then, and the change began with a phone call from her father. In the time when she could still see and know the farm and the house, she had no real memory of her father. He had gone to England when she was only two. They said it was to make money for the family and send it back to them, but she was sure there was some other reason they weren't telling her as well. He had had a job in Kosovo, hadn't he?

In any case, he had been in England for most of Zari's life, and phone calls to Kosovo were expensive for him, so it was always an occasion when he made one. The boys, who couldn't go to school since the Albanian ones had been shut down, would dash in from whatever trouble they had been getting into and tear the receiver out of their mother's hands, quarrelling good-naturedly over who would get to speak first. Jasmina, their older sister, would sit in the corner waiting her turn patiently, with a silent smile on her face.

Zari never wanted to speak to her father. He seemed loud to her. Maybe like her oldest brother Agron. But she knew Agron, and she didn't know this boisterous

voice in the telephone. "How's my Zarifeh?" he would bellow after her timid hello.

"Fine," she would say. Sometimes it was hardly more than a whisper.

"Are you taking good care of your mother?"

"Yes."

"Are you staying away from the cows?" She had had an accident with her grandfather's bull, the one that blew smoke from its nostrils. She still limped because of it.

"Yes."

"Have you got anything to tell your old Boba?"

"No."

"Give the phone to your mother then."

Zari was not sure if her mother wanted to talk to her father either. Whenever the phone rang, Noneh turned white, and smiles and frowns would flit across her face faster than clouds across a day that couldn't decide whether it wanted to be sunny or stormy. She would grip the receiver with knuckles as white as her face, and talk in single syllables like Zari until she got used to it.

From what the children could hear, the conversation was nearly always the same. First Boba would ask about the family—not just his children, but Noneh's parents, and his parents, and their brothers and sisters. Noneh loved talking about family, and by the time that part of the phone call was over, she was a bit more relaxed. Then they would talk about money: Boba had found a

job. Boba had lost his job. Boba had got a better job and would be sending them some more money this month. He hoped it would get there. Noneh always repeated everything he said when they were talking about money, so the children would know. Zari knew the money part was over when her mother got very quiet all of a sudden and then giggled. The giggle always sounded nervous and relieved at the same time.

When it came, Jasmina would say, "Let's see what Grandmother's up to," even if Grandmother was only in the next room. Or, "Shall we go say hello to the chickens?" Or, "How about coming to Gona's with me? She'll be happy to hear about Boba's new job." Antigona was their oldest sister, who was married and had a little girl of her own. Then Jasmina would take Zari's hand and lead her out of the room, so Zari never got to find out what the last part of the phone call was about.

"Doesn't Noneh like to talk to Boba?" Zari asked Jasmina once.

"Of course she does! It's just the telephone makes her nervous. You know how Noneh is about machines."

Zari knew. But even the telephone? Well, maybe. Maybe that was why Zari didn't like talking to Boba either. Maybe it would be different when she actually saw him.

One day there was a phone call, but when Agron wrenched the phone out of his mother's hands, he immediately gave it back. "Boba says he can't talk to me

now," he said, puzzled. Noneh shooed them all out of the house, and then she talked on that telephone for a long time.

When Zari came back in later, having gone to visit Antigona and the baby by herself, the house was in quiet uproar. "Hush!" her mother hissed, pulling her through the door and closing it quickly behind her.

"What--?" Zari asked.

"Zarifeh, precious, you mustn't talk loudly—the police will hear us."

There had been trouble with Serbian police in the past, but it was before Zari could remember. She knew about it only because of her brothers' talk—maybe it was even before she was born. Sometimes they heard of an "outbreak" of the Serbs against the Albanians in another village. Sometimes even families close by still had trouble with the police. But her family hadn't had any in ages, except for once when a couple of officers decided it would be fun to steal some chickens. One of the Serbs was even friendly to Zari. He knew her name and gave her sweets when her mother wasn't around and his friends weren't either. Her mother would not have approved.

"So what if they hear us?" Zari asked. "Are we being bad?"

"No!" Her mother, who was cramming too many things into a very small box, sat back on her heels and looked indignant. "The Serbs are the ones—never mind.

We're going away, lovely. We're going to visit Boba."

This was a new thought. For as far back as Zari could remember, her mother and sisters and brothers had talked about "going to visit Boba." "When we go to visit Boba," they said, again and again and again. But no one had ever actually gone to visit him, and Zari supposed they never would. Where was it he lived? England? Was it very far away?

It was ages away. The day after the phone call, Noneh spent the whole of it looking as she did at the beginning of a telephone conversation with Boba. That afternoon, Uncle Mufail came with his little white car, and the family packed a few small boxes into the back of it and crammed themselves into it, too: Mufail, Noneh, Zari, Ekrem, Agron, and Jasmina. Antigona and the grandparents had to stay behind. The grandparents were too old, and Antigona was married and had her own family. Noneh waited until the car left the village before she started crying. Then she really cried—sobbed and sobbed. She had not been able to say goodbye to her oldest child. Not a proper goodbye, anyhow. Late the evening before, she had taken Zari with her and they said hushed goodbyes at Antigona's house. Noneh and Antigona had cried then, too, but it had to be quiet and brief. If any of the police on the lookout had heard any of it, they would have known the family leaving their village in a little white car was not, as they claimed, going on a picnic with their uncle in the mountains.