

***Ir-Re Borg***

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# 1

## L-Irċevuta

“Iż-żgħir jibqa’ ż-żgħir u ebd’Alla mhu se jidhol għalih!”

Mikiel Borg, magħruf mar-raħal bħala ċ-Chopper, sabbat idejh fuq il-bank u l-laned tat-tonn taż-żejt triegħdu. Iż-żewġ nisa weqfin quddiemu barmu xofftejhom u xenglu rashom jaqblu miegħu. Tharsilhom minn wara ma kontx tqishom daqstant żgħar; bejniethom kienu jwasslu minn tarf għall-iehor tal-bank li warajh kien qed jitmashan Mikiel. Imma! F’dal-pajjiż minn tagħna hekk l-affarijiet: aktar ma fik anqas ma ssarraf – perla oħra li kien hareġ biha Mikiel Borg, li reġa’ heżżeż il-bank b’zewġ ponnijiet magħqudin.

“Ebd’Alla!” irrepeta biex żgur ikun sammar il-punt, u sallab idejh fuq żaqqu.

Iċ-Chopper kellu ħanut tal-merċa fih daqs konfessinarju. Kien wiehed minn dawk il-ħwienet werrieta tal-antik, bit-tabella tal-perspex fi gwarniċ tal-aluminju dehbi fuq il-bieb, bil-bank tal-injam bil-wiċċ tal-formajka u, fuq ġenb, maqfula fil-plastik, il-cash register trabbi t-trab.

Mikiel iċ-Chopper kelma kien jgħidha. U għal kelma jgħidlek tnejn jew tlieta. Inkella taqbd u l-indiġestjoni.

Mhux anqas żbukkti kienu l-parruċċana. Aktarx imdahhla fiż-żmien, ta' kull filgħodu kienu jingabru biex jixtru l-istess erba' b'ċeġjeċ ta' kuljum – dak il-kwart perżut, ħobża mqattgħa kemxejn maħruqa u kartuna ħalib – u, waqt li jagħmlu dan, itaqtqu bla heda, donnhom il-membri ta' xi setta medhijin ifasslu kif se jahkmu d-dinja. U jekk dawk il-parruċċana kienu setta, Mikiel Borg iċ-Chopper kien il-Qassis il-Kbir tagħhom; leħnu jkarwat fuq ta' kulhadd, mimli bl-awtorità li kienet tagħtih l-istiker “I'm the Boss” imdeffsa bejn il-gwarniċ u l-ħġieġa tghatti l-harsa ebetika ta' Dun Ġorġ jifli sieket lil dik il-miġemgħa ċkejknata' opinjonisti.

“Isma' Mikiel, aghmilli l-kont xbin, ghax illum ma nistax indum,” werżqet Ċetta, tqabbez sidirha jrid jinbezaq minn bejn il-buttuni se jisparaw.

“Mela mghaġġla Ċett?” staqsieha Mikiel, filwaqt li għemizha kollu nelh u nkejja. “Jaqaw? Irid illum?”

“U hallini minnek Mikiel! M'ghandekx xi tghid għodu għodu jew?” hatfitu l-ohra. “Ara, kwart perżut tal-koxxa, ħobża u kartuna mill-bluni. Aghmilli l-kont!”

“Tuni ċans ħa naghmlilha l-kont,” qal Mikiel lill-bqija, “ghax mid-dehra illum honeymooner Ċetta!”

U mingħajr ma stenna twegħiba lura, ġibed il-ktieb daqs regjistru minn taht il-bank, tefa' l-biro bejn snienu u fethu min-nofs. Hażżeż erba' numri fil-kantuniera t'isfel tal-paġna safranija, imbagħad ħasadha minn mal-bqija u newwel it-trijanglu tal-karta lil Ċetta.

“Mela reġa' għola l-ħalib?” staqsietu dik.

“Issa jien xi tridni naghmel Ċett? Lanqas li għollejtu jien!”

“Ma nafx jien. L-affarijiet jogħlew hekk, mil-lum għal

ghada. Fejn se nispiċċaw? Li biex tixtri kartuna ħalib trid tissellef mill-bank?”

L-ohrajn qablu magħha, ibarqmu minn taht l-ilsien donnhom ħamiem, jitkażaw b'kemm għoliet il-ħajja, kif bil-pensjoni ma tlahħaqx u li jekk l-affarijiet jibqgħu sejrjn hekk aħjar Alla jiehdok milli jikkastigak tgħix ta' pensjonant. Ċetta bħal donnha nsiet x'kellha jistennieha daqstant mgħagġel u qattgħet kwarta oħra ttaqtaq u xxejjer il-ponnijiet kontra l-gvern, bħallikieku minn ġo dik it-toqba xi hadd f'Kastilja kien se jisma' l-ilmenti tagħha. Imbagħad meta kienet għoddha nħanqet sellmitilhom u dabbret rasha 'l barra.

Bilkemm kienet għadha nizlet l-għatba tal-ħanut li ma sabitx quddiemha ġuvnott bl-ingravata m'għonqu u nuċċali tax-xemx. Bis-saħna li kien għad kellha fuqha kienet digà lesta biex tohroġ idha u twarrbu min-nofs, imma hu kien eħfef minnha. Għolla idu bħal tat-traffik u amrilha biex tieqaf.

“Xi trid?” staqsietu.

“L-irċevuta,” wegħibha.

“Xi rċevuta? Ta' xiex?”

“L-irċevuta fiskali,” reġa' dak, “tax-xirja li għadek kemm għamilt.”

“U mur warrabli min-nofs li ma ngħidlikx,” reġgħet hi se taqbad il-pass biex titlaq 'l hemm.

“Sinjura ...”

“Sinjura xejn, warrabli.”

“Sinjura ma nistax inħallik titlaq. Qed nitlobok l-irċevuta.”

“U jien ma rridx intiħielek l-irċevuta!”

“Sinjura, bil-liġi ...”

“U jien nitnejjek mil-liġi.”

“Inharrkek!”

Habat se jibda jgħolli leħnu. U ma' Ċetta hadd ma jgħolli leħnu, lanqas żewġha li daħal il-ħabs darbejn.

“Ismagħni x'ha ngħidlek,” fethitilha. “Warrabli min-nofs għax rasek ktieb niftaħhielek. U lili tiġinix bil-liġijiet u mhux liġijiet. Mhux biżżejjed it-taxxi li nħallsu u l-prezzijiet dejjem jogħlew! Xi tridu aktar? Tqaxxruna hajjin?”

“X'gara Ċett?”

Kien Mikiel, li kif sema' l-għajjat ġej minn barra feġġ biex jara xi nqala'.

“X'gara Mikiel?! Ġej jitlobni l-irċevuta, ja wiċċ ta' mahmuġ li hu!”

Mikiel daħal bejn Ċetta u l-ġuvnott tal-ingravata.

“Sir, fehemha ftit. Jien hawn xogħli qed nagħmel. Bagħtuni mid-dipartiment.”

“Allura minn Malta u Għawdex kollha hawn bagħtuk?” staqsieh Mikiel, b'subgħu ppuntat anqas minn pulzier bogħod minn imnieher il-ġuvnott.

“Jien fejn jibagħtuni mmur, ħabib,” wiegħbu l-ieħor mingħajr ma tmeżmeż.

“Ħabib xejn,” għolla leħnu Mikiel, “mhux biżżejjed kemm inhallas taxxa? Għax ma bagħtukx wara l-bieb ta' xi pampalun milli jaqlgħalhom il-belli liri għall-partit, mela wara biebi!”

“Sir, kulma rrid huwa li nara l-irċevuta.”

“U dabbar rasek 'l hemm ja purċinell!” reġgħet Ċetta, li bl-intervent ta' Mikiel bdiet tħossha eskluża mill-azzjoni.

“Purċinell!” wiegħbu f'kor in-nisa l-oħra, għonqhom imġebbed minn bejn il-ħjut tal-purtiera tal-lewlu, herqanin li huma wkoll juru d-diżapprovazzjoni tagħhom.

Iż-żagħżuġħ ħabat se jinfixel.

“Jekk mhux se nara rċevuta se noħroġ taħrika u nagħmel rapport!”

“U lil min se tħarrek bħalek?” staqsieh Mikiel, wiċċu vjola.

“Lilek u lil din il-mara!”

“Ma tħarrikx ‘l ommok hux!” qabżet Ċetta.

L-istoriċi ta’ dan il-pajjiż jaqblu li dak li seħħ dak il-ħin kien il-murtal tal-ftuħ għal episodju li jibqa’ mfakkar fl-istorja ta’ dawn il-gżejjer. Mal-kelma ‘ommok’ u l-bżieq kollu li ħareġ minn ħalqha, Ċetta refgħet idha bil-borża tal-plastik b’kulma kien fiha u bdiet il-proċess li tfajjarha f’wiċċ il-guvnott. F’nofs il-proċess, l-id żvelta ta’ Mikiel dahlet fin-nofs biex tilqa’ għad-daqqa ta’ Ċetta imma, bis-saħħa li kienet laħqet ġemgħet dik l-id armata bix-xirja, id Mikiel tħarriet ‘il quddiem sa ma sabet il-wiċċ bla leħja tal-guvnott u n-nuċċali tax-xemx dlonk tar minn fuq imnieħru donnu missila, li l-ewwel sparat ‘il fuq u mbagħad dawret ir-rotta ‘l isfel sa ma nfaqgħet mal-art.

Iż-żagħżuġħ instaram, Mikiel tnixxef, u Ċetta barmet il-ponnijiet fuq qaddha lestha għat-tieni rawnd.

Il-kor tan-nisa wara l-purtiera leħhen ‘O!’ twila, b’vuċi waħda, ‘O!’ ta’ stennija mdendla b’ħajta tħassib.

Kif għaddielu kemm kemm ix-xokk, iż-żagħżuġħ mexa sal-fdalijiet tan-nuċċali, ġabarhom u dar lejn Mikiel, li kien għadu wieqaf donnu l-arblu tad-dawl f’tarf il-bankina. Xengel tnejn rasu u telaq ‘l hemm, bla kliem u bla sliem.

Għal Ċetta dik kienet rebħa. U magħha qabel il-kor.

Imma Mikiel ma kienx daqstant ċert. Filwaqt li Ċetta nisġet panigierku shiħ dwar kif dawn ‘tal-gvern’ tmurilhom il-pulikarja kollha malli teqfilhom u turihom li taf x’inhu

d-dritt tieghek, Mikiel baqa' b'fommu mitbuq, imtertaq minn g'ewwa, jistenna li minn hin g'hall-iehor jara lis-surgent g'ej wara biebu.

Ma kienx zbaljat. Bilkemm il-kor kien ghadu intona l-Ammen wara l-panigierku ta' Ċetta li ma tfaċċawx is-surgent u kuntistabbli miegħu, inemmsu minn wara l-purtiera tal-lewlu. Qalb Mikiel g'hamlet tikk. Ir-rappreżentanti tal-bonordni ferqu l-hjut tal-lewlu u daħlu fil-hanut.

“Mikiel, tiġi magħna sal-għassa?”

“Sal-għassa?” tenna skunċertat Mikiel.

“Għandna rapport li ma tajtx irċevuta fiskali, li hebbejt għal uffċjal pubbliku u li g'hamiltlu danni fi hwejjeg personali tiegħu.”

“Imma Surgent, jaħasra, dak inċident ...”

“Mhux aħjar tiġi sal-għassa tispjegalna kollox?”

“U l-hanut?”

“Mikiel, il-hanut tagħlqu. Ejja magħna bil-kelma t-tajba. Isma' minni.”

Mikiel haress lejn il-parruċċana. Quddiem l-uniformi hadd minnhom ma tniffes. Dlonk nibet f'moħħu d-dubju jekk isibx ruh fosthom li titla' tixhed favur tiegħu. Lanqas Ċetta, li issa kienet rasha baxxuta tistaħba wara żewġ membri tal-kor. M'hemmx x'tagħmel Mikiel. Mhux aħjar tmur tagħlaq u tara kif se tfehemhom li ma kinitx l-intenzjoni tiegħek li tfajjarha f'wiċċ dak il-guvnott?

“Niġi Surgent, imma żball qed tagħmlu. Żball kbir! Għax jien ma ridt nagħmel hsara lil hadd. Inċident kien.”

“Issa nitkellmu l-għassa,” qallu s-surgent. “Aghlaq, sadanittant aħna se nkunu qegħdin nistennewk hawn barra.”

Mikiel fetah idejh donnhom se jsallbuh u l-parruccana hargu mill-hanut f'purcissjoni. Is-surgent u l-kuntistabbli kienu lahqu qabbdu sigarett. Mikiel ghalaq il-hanut u rhewlha t-tlieta li huma lejn l-ghassa.

Ma dewmuhx aktar minn nofs siegħa. Talbuh il-verzjoni tiegħu ta' kif sehew l-affarijiet, iffirma l-istqarrija u baghtuh 'l hemm. Qabel ma hareg mill-ghassa s-surgent wissieh biex imur ikellem avukat u jelenka x-xhieda li ried itella' l-qorti favurih.

Kif hareg minn hemm la kellu hajra u lanqas sahha jerga' jiftah il-hanut. Martu Karmena nhasdet kif ratu geg lura d-dar qabel il-hin. Mill-ewwel basret li nqalgħetlu xi haġa u mill-bixra ta' wiċċu ntebħet li l-haġa kienet kbira sew. Ma kellux aptitha. Ried jitla' jorqod imma kien jaf li jekk ma kienx se jitmghalha l-kurzità kienet se tibqa' tippersegwitah u xorta ma thallihx imidd rasu fuq l-imhadda. Malli qalilha li kien għadu geg mill-ghassa u rrakkuntalha kulma ġara hasibha se tibqa' sejra dritt id-dinja l-oħra.

Is-sagħtejn ta' wara qattagħhom magħha l-poliklinik.

...



## 2

# Hati

Mikiel temm ir-rakkont tiegħu dwar kif seħhet l-affari ta' Ċetta u l-uffiċjal żagħżuġ tad-Dipartiment tal-VAT. Dik l-istess Ċetta issa ma riditx titlagħlu tixhed il-qorti. Wissietu mill-ewwel li lilha mqar il-ħsieb li tinfes l-għatba tal-qorti jtellgħalha l-pressjoni m'oghla s-smewwiet. Għamlithielu ċara li, anke jekk jiftillu jharrikha, kienet se ċċapċaplu ċertifikat tat-tabib li ma kinitx tajba biex tixhed minhabba l-kundizzjoni ta' qalbha. Mikiel ma kienx jaf x'kienet il-kundizzjoni ta' qalbha, imma seta' jobsor kemm taht il-piż ta' sider bħal dak tista' tkun imtaqqla l-qalb. Għalhekk ma baqax jiġri warajha biex titlagħlu tixhed.

Issa l-Avukat Marcel Mifsud Maempel kien qed jilgħab bil-pinna jomgħod dak li kien għadu kif tarraflu Mikiel. Fetah id-djarju u fittex id-data tas-seduta. Il-pagna kienet diġà nofsha mimlija taħżiż li wiehed jissoponi li kienu ismijiet u numri ta' awli. Taht nett tal-lista ħarbex erba' sinjali illegibbli bħal ta' fuqhom u, maqfula bejn żewġ nokkli, donnhom par widnejn ta' ljunfant, b'kalligrafija ffit aktar ċara, niżżel 'Awla 2'. Imbagħad għalaq id-djarju

u haress lejn il-klijent tiegħu, li sadanittant kien għadu bilqiegħda dritt xemgħa, f'tarf is-siġġu, subgħajh marbuta ma' xulxin bħallikieku qed jitlob. L-avukat neħħa n-nuċċali minn fuq imniehru u għajnejh telqu waħda Lvant u l-oħra l-Punent, bħallikieku n-nuċċali kien li qed iżommhom miġbura flimkien f'direzzjoni waħda. Mikiel infixel, ma jafx aktar l-avukat hux iħares lejħ jew le.

“Qed tgħidli li m'għandekx xhieda Piet?” staqsieh l-avukat.

“Mikiel jien, dottore,” wiegħbu l-klijent.

“Skuzani. Għidli Mikiel, għandek xhieda favurik?”

“Naħseb li jirnexxili ntella' waħda. Lieni naħseb li titla'.”

“Lieni min hi?”

“Parruċċana tiegħi, Sur Avukat. Mara sew u tar-ruħ.”

“Għandha kunjom din Lieni?”

“Lieni Grech.”

L-avukat reġa' fetaħ id-djarju, qalleb ftit paġni sa ma reġa' sab fejn niżżel isem Mikiel u l-awla tas-seduta u fejnhom ħarbex isem Elena Grech (Xhud).

“U lil din Lieni, hemm bżonn inħarrkuha jew titla' waħidha?”

“Lili qaltli li aktarx titla'.”

“Sur Brincat ...”

“Borg.”

“Sur Borg, il-qorti mhix se toqgħod fuq l-aktarx tiegħek. Jew din ix-xhud se titla' tixhed jew mhijiex. Jekk m'intix ċert inħarrkuha. Mhux se mmorru quddiem il-maġistrat u ngħidulu li din is-sinjura aktarx kellha titla' u fil-fatt ma telgħetx! Għax taf x'jgħidilna l-maġistrat? Taf x'jgħidilna?”

“X’jghidilna?”

“Žikk! Dak li jghidilna! Iċapċaplek l-ogħla sentenza li jista’ jtik. Dak li jagħmel!”

Biex jenfasizza kliemu, l-Avukat Mifsud Maempel sabbat il-pala t’idu fuq il-wiċċ tal-iskrivanija. Mikiel inqata’ pied minn mas-siġġu. It-tmashin tal-avukat ġieġhlu jhossu hati – ta’ dak li kien akkużat bih u ta’ hwejjeġ ohra li ma kellux idea x’kienu.

“Sur Avukat, mhux aħjar tghidli int x’inhu l-aħjar li nagħmel. Li tghidli benefatt għalija.”

“Tajjeb, Sur Buttigieg, qed nara li qed niftiehm.”

“Borg.”

“Min hu Borg? Xi xhud iehor? Fil-każ inharrkuh ukoll.”

“Le, jaħasra. Jien Borg. Mikiel Borg huwa jien.”

“Eh, allura? Tista’ tispjega ruhek sew, forsi nibda nifhmek?”

Mikiel gie f’dubju kellux jinfaqa’ jidgħi u jsabbat huwa wkoll jew inkella jhalliha għaddejja halli jimxu għal li jmiss.

“Xejn, xejn,” qallu, filwaqt li xejjer idejh halli żgur ikunu ftiehm. Imbagħad kompli: “Allura, Sur Avukat, x’se jiġri eżatt meta jien inkun il-qorti?”

“Xi tridu jiġri? Tgħid mhux se jġeġhluq tiżfen! Xejn, inti tpoġġi bilqiegħda, halqek magħluq u thalli lili nagħmel il-biċċa tiegħi.”

Mikiel waqaf jixtarr.

Għajnejn l-avukat kienu telqu f’avventura separata jduru donnhom żewġ pjaneti f’universi paralleli. Imdendel fuq rasu kellu gwarniċ bil-lawrja tal-Università maqfula fih. Maġenbha gwarniċ iehor, bil-warrant maħruġ mill-Gvern. Imbagħad, fit-tielet gwarniċ kien hemm ix-xbieha

tal-avukat – donnu żring imlibbes toga, xagħru diġà beda jibjad u jehfief – jiehu b'id il-Kanċillier tal-Università waqt Jum il-Gradwazzjoni.

“Jiġifieri jien mhux se nġhidlu l-bieċa tiegħi lill-maġistrat?” staqsa Mikiel.

“Le, nitkellem għalik jien. Mhux għalhekk ġejt għandi?”

“Imma ... jien m'għandi xejn x'naħbi. Mhux ahjar li l-maġistrat jisma' mingħandi, nġhid jien, ha jintebaħ li jien sinċier fi kliemi, li jien onest?”

L-avukat infaqa' jidhak u mill-ġdid sabbat idejh ma' wiċċ l-iskrivanija.

“Inti xi ħsibtu l-qorti, għid! Mela l-qorti jinteressaha intix raġel onest u sinċier fi kliemek! Jew taħseb li qorti se tiġġudika l-fatti fuq jekk sehħewx jew le!”

Mikiel tbikkem.

Mela fuq xiex kienet se tiġġudikah il-qorti?

“Il-qorti,” issokta jipponentika l-Avukat Mifsud Maempel, “il-qorti tiġġudika fuq kemm l-avukat jirnexxilu jargumenta tajjeb il-punt tal-liġi. Inti taf x'inhu l-punt tal-liġi, Sur Bartolo?”

Mikiel baqa' ma tniffisx.

“Qed tara! Ma tafx x'inhu l-punt tal-liġi u mingħalik li se titla' quddiem il-maġistrat u se taqbad xi diskursata miegħu biex tikkonvincih li int innocenti! Isma' minni, Pawl, ix-xogħol tih lil min jaf jagħmlu.”

L-avukat sallab idejh fuq żaqqu sodisfatt li ġab lill-klijent b'dahru mal-ħajt. Hekk kien jgħallimhom lill-istudenti malli jiftaħ l-ewwel lezzjoni tas-sena akkademika: Il-klijent dejjem hati. Anke jekk innocenti, xorta huwa hati. U qabel ma tikkonvincuh mill-ħtija tiegħu ma tistgħux tibdew ix-xogħol veru tagħkom. Għax

aħna, bħala avukati, il-mira tagħna hija dejjem li neħilsu lill-hatjin! Għalhekk, l-ewwel pass huwa li nimmansaw lill-klijent sa ma ngibuh kelb ubbidjenti. It-tieni pass hu li nikkonvinċuh mill-ħtija tiegħu. It-tielet, li jifhem li jekk ma nkunux aħna għalih, m'għandux tama. U r-raba' u l-aħhar pass, nofs il-ħlas qabel u n-nofs l-iehor dakinhar tas-sentenza.

“Mela, Sur Baldacchino, inti se titla' l-qorti, se tpoġġi fuq il-bank u se toqgħod kwiet. Jien min-naħa tiegħi se nargumenta l-innoċenza tiegħek, avolja int hati.”

“X'jigifieri jien hati? Jien innoċenti!”

L-avukat infaqa' jidħak.

“Int? Innoċenti? Lil Ċetta tajtha rċevuta tal-VAT? Tajtha jew ma tajthiex? Wegibni!”

“Le.”

“U lill-uffiċjal tal-VAT, tajtu daqqa f'wiċċu? Iva jew le?”

“Imma mhux għax ...”

“Tajtu jew ma tajtux?!”

“Imma ...”

“M'hemmx imma! Idek misset ma' wiċċu?”

“Iva ...”

“Mela qed tara kif tajtu daqqa ġo wiċċu! Hati ta' dik ukoll. U bid-daqqa, in-nuċċali tal-vittma tar minn fuq imnieħru? Ġie mal-art u nqasam biċċiet? Wegibni!”

“Iva hux. Imma, Sur Avukat ...”

“M'hemmx imma, Wig. Int hati! Tat-tliet akkużi li għandek imdendlin fuqek. U jekk ma nkunx jien għalik, Sur Bajada, f'ċella l-ħabs se tispicċa.”

Mal-kelma ħabs Mikiel bjad, intreħa b'mejt iboss fuqu u li ma kienx għax żamm b'idejh it-tnejn max-xifer tal-maqgħad kien jibqa' jizloq 'l isfel għal mal-art.

“Sur Avukat, f’idejk jien. Ehlisni mill-ħabs. Nitolbok.”

“Halli f’idi. Jien noħorġok ħieles. Fuq il-gazzetti kollha jġibuha r-rebħa li se nrebbħek.”

“Grazzi Sur Avukat, grazzi,” qallu Mikiel, għajnejh jgħumu fid-dmugħ. “Jimporta nistaqsik, kemm se tiġi tiswieni din il-kawża?”

L-Avukat Mifsud Maempel qarras wiċċu, bħallikieku mqar il-kelma ‘flus’ kienet iddarrsu u tqanqallu l-brim fl-istonku. Fetaħ kexxun fl-iskrivaniġa u minnu ħareġ calculator. Habbat subgħajh fuq it-tastiera xi tlieta erba’ darbiet, kemmex xofftejh, dendel geddumu, ħakk widnejh, libes in-nuċċali, zekzek tnejn u fl-aħħar qallu:

“Ara, mela illum tagħtini hamsin ewro ta’ din il-laqgħa tagħna, mitejn u hamsin ewro spejjeż tal-qorti u hames mija u għoxrin bil-quddiem biex nidher għalik. Imbagħad dakinhar tas-seduta tista’ ġġib miegħek il-ħames mija u għoxrin l-oħra li jkun baqagħlek u mitt ewro oħra spejjeż amministrattivi.”

Mikiel hass sidru jingħafas u l-għaraq ixoqq għalih. Alla habbu li qalbu tħabbat daqs magna niexfa miż-żejt ma xpakkatx dak il-ħin u baqa’ taħtha. Din il-kawża kienet se tiswieh aktar mill-VAT kollha ta’ sena shiħa. Ahjar qabad u hallas il-multa u kienet tieqaf hemm. Ma kinitx Ċetta!

“Kollox sew Sur Bugeja? Qed narak abjad wisq!”

“Borg jien. Mikiel Borg, Sur Avukat!”

...

## 3

# Ġurnata l-Qorti

Mikiel kien bilqiegħda fuq bank li xi darba, qabel mal-ghakar qagħad sewwa, kien jixbah lewn il-kawba. Igiddem difrejh kien qed jistenna li jghajtulu.

Malli daħal fil-bini tal-qorti, wara li kellu joqgħod jistenna bħal kulhadd biex l-ghassiesa aċcertaw ruhhom li ma dahhalx miegħu armi jew splussivi, Mikiel kienet ghoddha se ttiħ rasu. Nies ġejjin, nies sejrin. Nies quddiemu, warajh, maġenbu, se jghaddu minn fuqu jekk ma jwarrbilhomx min-nofs. Fejn kien sab ruħu? Il-qorti jew is-suq? Lanqas il-biċċa monti li fadal il-Belt ma jkun mifqugħ b'daqstant nies. Possibbli hawn tant kriminalità u battibekki f'dal-pajjiż?

Mikiel qatt ma kien daħal il-qorti qabel. Ma kellux l-iċken hjiel fejn kienet Awla 2. Għalhekk ittanta jistaqsi. Lemah wiehed liebes ġagaga sewda. Mikiel ipprova jwaqqfu, imma dan żgiċċalu u baqa' għaddej dritt. Forsi, min jaf, dawk tal-ġagaga sewda huma l-imħallfin u mhux suppost tkellimhom? Mikiel dawwar harstu u mil-lemin kienet riesqa sinjorina, tinnavika donnha ġifen fil-maltemp

fuq takkuna għolja pied. Xhin waslet qribu harsitlu bl-imqit u lanqas imqar hallietu jibda jlissen il-mistoqsija. Baqgħet għaddejja titbandal u tizzegleg. Mikiel qatagħha li ahjar jibda jfittex waħdu, li ma jmurx ikunu għajtulu u ma sabuhx f'postu. B'xortih, awla numru tnejn kienet wara l-kantuniera.

Mal-hajt faċċata tal-awla kien hemm żewġ bankijiet. Kienu qegħdin jerfgħu mat-tużżana nies b'kollox, marsusin bħal sardin fil-landa. Ihufu fil-madwar, donnhom huma wkoll jistennew li jkunu mgħajta, kien hemm xi żewġ tużżani oħra, min jippassiġġa 'l fuq u 'l isfel, min jithaddet ma' ta' maġenbu, xi hadd saħansitra kien mistrieh mal-hajt bil-gazzetta miftuha quddiemu. Mikiel intefa' f'kantuniera, jittama li ma jdumx jistenna. Malajr intebaħ li tiegħu kienet tama fiergħa, hekk kif sar jaf – mingħand waħda li għamlitha l-missjoni tagħha li tintroduci ruhha ma' kull min kien fiċ-ċirkolazzjoni – li dawk miġbura hemm kienu lkoll imsejha għad-disgħa ta' filgħodu!

Kien ilu jistenna mhux hażin, jistaqsi lilu nnifsu x'sar minnu l-avukat, meta rah ġej min-naħa l-oħra, idejh mimlija faxxikli, liebes huwa wkoll il-ġagaga sewda. Mikiel resaq lejn l-avukat:

“Bongu Sur Avukat.”

L-avukat dar lejn Mikiel u filwaqt li baqa' miexi staqsieh: “Iva? Nista' naqdik f'xi haġa?”

Mikiel instaram.

“Sur Avukat? Jaqaw insejt li llum għandna s-seduta?”

L-Avukat Mifsud Maempel waqaf. Hares lejn Mikiel, li minn moħħu għadda jlebbet il-ħsieb li bin-nuċċali l-avukat ma kienx jitlef għajnejh daqstant.

“Fakkarni ftit x'jismek,” qallu Mifsud Maempel.



“Mikiel Borg Sur Avukat! Kif? Insejtni?”

L-avukat qalleb fost il-faxxikli li kellu f’idejh, fetah wiehed minnhom u fost hafna ‘Eh!’ u ‘Hmmm’, xengil tar-ras u zekzik, qalleb kull karta li kellu.

“Tajjeb tajjeb. Stenna hawn ta! Xhin jgħajtulek idhol u jien niġi. Tinkwieta xejn.”

Mikiel xtaq ma jinkwetax, imma mhux li l-avukat tiegħu kien qed jagħtih wisq serħan il-moħħ! Fl-ahħar, meta saqajh ma kienx jiflahhom aktar, lemaħ toqba fejn jiddeffes fuq il-bank u daqs l-aqwa akrobata b’nofs gabrijola nfilsa ruħu kexxun bejn żewġ nisa li kienu bilqiegħda, wahda tilgħab bil-mowbajl u l-oħra thares donnha rieqda b’għajnejha miftuhin. Din tal-ahħar kienet b’xagħarha magħmul, miżbugħ ahmar li jgħammex l-għajnejn, wiçċha mpitter donnha maskarat tal-Karnival u fuqha kellha libsa li mill-bogħod kont tistħajjilha ġnien miexi fuq is-saqajn. Mikiel għarafha.

“Haw’ Lien! Ilek hawn tistenna?”

“Mid-disgħa Mikiel. U jien ġejt niġri għax hsibtني se nkun tard!”

“Skuzani, lanqas rajtek.”

“Tahseb li jgħajtuli biex nixhed Mikiel? Għandi tferfir! Digà mort sal-kamra l-baxxa darbtejn, ngħidlek il-verità.”

Damu jistennew erbghin minuta oħra żgur. San Ġwann kien qed idoqq il-ħdax meta hareġ wiehed mill-awla u fl-ahħar għajjat: “Mikiel Borg! Mikiel Borg! Mikiel Borg!”

“Hawn jien,” qallu Mikiel.

“Ibqa’ diehel u mur sib postok fuq quddiem.”

Mikiel daħal. U miegħu dahlet ukoll Lien. Il-kamra kienet imballata bin-nies. X’ġew jagħmlu dan-nies kollha? Aktar ma qorob lejn il-bank mgħolli tal-maġistrat aktar

hassu jickien. Pogġa bilqiegħda fuq quddiem kif qalulu u dlonk deher diehel l-avukat, li baqa' miexi dritt dritt bla ma mġar qallu 'Haw' bhima', sakemm wasal hdejn l-avukat ta' kontrihom u ntefġhu jfesfsu f'widnejn xulxin. Sadanittant, Mikiel refa' ħarstu lejn il-kurċifiss imdendel quddiemu. Kemm hu pulit dal-kurċifiss, ħaseb, lanqas tbengila jew qatra demm m'għandu. Forsi l-maġistrat inzerta bniedem sensitiv u d-dmija u t-tbengil iqallbulu l-istonku.

Taht l-għajnejn magħluqa tal-kurċifiss, il-maġistrat kien qed iqalleb fil-mowbajl. L-ewwel messagg li daħallu kien jaqra: *L-għajeb isiefer nbar il-Ġimgħa. Għandna l-weekend taġbna*. It-tieni wiehed kien mill-mowbajl privat tal-ministru u kien jaqra: *Fniek l-għalqa s-Sibt*. Il-maġistrat kien diġà qed iħoss il-laħam tari tal-fenek jitrambel bejn snien u xhin ftakar li ma riedx jinsa, kif ikunu l-għalqa jmaxtru l-fniek, li jistaqsi liċ-ċermen tal-Planning dwar il-permess għall-pool. Forsi sas-sajf tkun lesta. Għolla ħarstu minn fuq il-mowbajl u l-ewwel ma lemaħ quddiemu kienu lil Mikiel u lil Lieni.

"Hoġ, int," beda jgħajjat, jipponta subgħajh lejhom.

Mikiel għolla kemxejn idu, titriegħed, u dawwarha lejn sidru: "Lili qed tgħid?"

L-awla siktet. Iż-żewġ avukati daru jħarsu lejn Mikiel.

"Lilek u lilha," reġa' l-maġistrat. "Lilek biex taqfel l-għonq tal-qmis. Fejn ħsibt li qiegħed, Sur Żmattat? Ħsibtek qiegħed ix-xatt ta' Tas-Sliema, tippassiġġa?! Aqfel dak l-għonq minn hemm."

Imbagħad dar fuq Lieni: "U int? Jidhirli li l-Karnival għadda! U ilu! X'nies tkunu intom?! Hawnhekk awla tal-qorti u l-qorti trid tkun rispettata! Ma nwaħħallekx

tletin ewro multa għax għax. Għax sibtni burdata tajba, għalhekk.”

Jekk b’dik l-għajta Mikiel inkiser u wiċċu ħmar, Lieni kien għoddha taha hass hażin. Żewġ qatriet iżzerżqu minn ma’ xfar għajnejha u mqar minn wara dik il-maskra ta’ tikhil u żebgħa kien jidher li wiċċha tilef il-kulur.

“Sur Maġistrat, bil-permess tiegħek ...” qabeż l-Avukat Mifsud Maempel.

“Xi trid Sur Avukat?”

“Nitlobok iżżomm kont li dawn huma nies tar-raħal, nies sempliċi ...”

“Hekk sew, Sur Avukat,” reġa’ nfaqa’ l-maġistrat. “Li tkun mir-raħal saret skuża tajba biex inhallu għaddej kull oltraġġ lejn is-serjetà ta’ din is-sedja!”

Mifsud Meempel baxxa rasu u fetaħ idejh u l-maġistrat deher jilqa’ dik l-apoloġija siekta għax hammem tnejn u stieden lill-avukat biex jibda.

“Sur Maġistrat, il-kollega fuq in-naħa l-oħra u jien thadditna dwar is-sitwazzjoni tal-klijent tiegħi u wasalna għal qbil.”

“Jiġifieri nistgħu nipproċedu?”

“Jekk joghġob lill-qorti, iva.”

“Nipproċedu.”

“F’isem il-klijent tiegħi, qegħdin naċċettaw l-akkuża u l-ħtija dwar in-nuqqas ta’ hrug ta’ rċevuta fiskali. M’ahniex naċċettaw li l-klijent tiegħi konxjentament jew volontarjament wettaq vjolenza fuq l-uffiċjal tad-Dipartiment tal-VAT, u dwar dan hemm xhieda li lesta taħlef li l-aġir tal-klijent kien – anzi! – li ndaħal biex jipproteġi lill-imsemmi uffiċjal, imma – nonostante dan – l-inċident ikkumplika ruħu proprju għax il-klijent ma

rnexxilux iwaqqaf l-id vjolenti tas-sinjura li hebbet għall-uffiċjal. Għaldaqstant, f'isem il-klijent qed nilqa' t-talba tan-naħa l-oħra u l-klijent tiegħi jhallas l-ispejjeż materjali maħluqa akkawża tal-imsemmi incident."

Il-maġistrat dar fuq l-avukat l-ieħor: "Ir-rimarki tiegħek."

"Naqbel mal-kollega u min-naħa tagħna lesti li naċċettaw it-termini kif esposti minnu."

"Tajjeb," għolla lehnul-maġistrat, u mbagħhad, lill-iskrivan tahtu: "Hu nota. Is-Sur Mikiel Borg huwa kkundannat li jhallas il-multa stabbilita għan-nuqqas li johrog irċevuta fiskali u l-ispejjeż lill-uffiċjal imsemmi. L-ispejjeż tal-qorti jmorru għalih. Seduta magħluqa. Min imiss!"

Dak kollox? Mikiel u Lieni baqgħu jharsu lejn xulxin. L-avukat għamlilhom sinjal biex johorġu miegħu barra mill-awla.

"Għedtlek jien li nrebbahhielek il-kawża?" qallu l-avukat filwaqt li taptaplu fuq spalltu. "Iss' għall-hlas ejja llejla l-uffiċċju. Ikun ahjar."

Reġa' taptaplu fuq spalltu u bewweg 'l hemm mingħajr ma hallieh ifendi kelma.

"Sieheb, insiblek sigarett?"

Kien raġel imdaħħal fiż-żmien, bil-beritta f'rasu, liebes qmis tal-flanella u qalziet bil-bażwa mdendla kollu tbajja'. Mikiel dar lejha u thassru.

"Jiddispaċini ħabib, ma npejjipx."

"Ma jimpurtax," wiegħbu l-ieħor. "Illum it-tifel wehel tnax-il sena u nistqarr miegħek ma nafx fejn se nagħti rasi. Mishuta droga. U mishut jien li daż-żmien kollu ma stajt nagħmel xejn għalih."

Mikiel ma kienx jaf iwieġbu. Fil-ħanut kemm-il darba pprietka li min jieħu d-droga ħaqqu l-ħabs għal għomru. Imm' għal dak ir-raġel kien qed iħoss, anke jekk forsi mhux għal ibnu.

“Jiddispjaċini,” qallu, “jiddispjaċini ħafna. Ma nafx x'ngħidlek aktar.”

“Grazzi ħabib. Int l-uniku bniedem sinċier li ltqajt miegħu hawn ġew.”

...

## Translated into English by Kat Storce

“The little man will always be the little man, and no god will ever stand up for him!”

Mikiel Borg, known as Chopper to everyone in the village, slammed his hands down onto the shop counter and the tuna cans trembled. The two women standing in front of him pursed their lips and nodded their heads in agreement. Looking at them from behind, you wouldn't exactly consider them little; between them, their figures took up the entire length of the counter behind which Mikiel was simmering with rage. Nevertheless! That's how things are in this country of ours: the more of you there was, the less you were valued – another of Mikiel Borg's pearls of wisdom, who shook the counter again with two closed fists.

“No god!” he repeated, to really hammer the point home, and crossed his arms over his belly.

Chopper owned a grocery the size of a confessional booth. It was one of those old-style shops with a cast acrylic sign set in a golden aluminium frame above the entrance, and a wooden counter fitted with a formica top. The cash register stood to one side, secured in a plastic bag, gathering dust.

Mikiel was not one to mince his words. Whenever someone said something to him, his retort would be as immediate as it was lengthy. Any restraint risked giving him indigestion.

His regular customers were just as chatty. Mostly older in age, they'd congregate every morning to buy the same four daily items – a portion of ham, a sliced loaf, slightly toasted, and a carton of milk – and, in the meantime, they'd natter away endlessly like members of a sect scheming about how they were going to take over the world. And if those customers had indeed been a sect, then Mikiel would've been their High Priest; his voice booming above everyone else's, filled with the authority bestowed upon him by the words on the sticker “I'm the Boss” jammed between the hanging frame and its glass, and obscuring the idiotic gaze of Dun Ġorġ Preca quietly observing that small gathering of opinionated critics.

“The bill, Mikiel. I can't stay long today,” screamed Cetta, her bosom bouncing up and down threatening to burst through the stretched-out buttons on her shirt.

“In a hurry are we Cett?” asked Mikiel, winking saucily at her. “How come? In the mood, is he?”

“Oh leave off Mikiel! Haven't you got anything better to do this morning?” she snapped. “Listen, some ham off the bone, a loaf and one of the blue cartons of milk. And make up the bill!”

“Just a second, let me add up her bill,” said Mikiel to the others, “because by the sound of things Cetta's a honeymooner today!”

And without waiting for a reply, he pulled out the giant ledger book from under the counter, and taking a pen between his teeth, opened it somewhere in the middle. He

scribbled four numbers in the bottom corner of the yellowing page, then ripped it out and passed the triangle of paper to Cetta.

“Price of milk’s gone up again, has it?” she asked.

“And what do you want me to do about it, Cett? It’s not like I put the price up myself!”

“Oh, I don’t know. Everything’s becoming more expensive, just like that, from one day to the next. Where will it leave us? We’ll all have to borrow money from the bank just to buy some milk.”

The others agreed with her, cooing under their breaths like pigeons, shaking their heads at the cost of living, at how their pension didn’t take them far, and that if things continued the way they were going, you’d be better off dead than being condemned to life as a pensioner. Cetta had forgotten whatever it was that was waiting for her in such a hurry and spent another quarter of an hour babbling and waving her fists at the government, as if from that hole in the wall someone in the Prime Minister’s office could hear her complaints. Then, when she’d shouted herself hoarse, she said her goodbyes and left.

She’d barely stepped beyond the shop’s doorstep when she found a young man standing before her, sunglasses on and tie knotted around his neck. Still feeling riled up, she was prepared to push him out of the way, but he was quicker than her. He lifted his arm like a traffic controller and gestured to her to stop.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“The receipt,” he replied.

“Receipt? For what?”

“The fiscal receipt,” he continued, “for the stuff you’ve just bought.”

“Get out of my way, you...” she said, ready to take off again.

“Sinjura...”

“Don’t Sinjura me, out of my way.”

“Sinjura, I can’t let you leave. I’m asking you for the receipt.”

“And I don’t want to give you the receipt!”

“Sinjura, the law states...”

“And I don’t give a damn about the law.”

“I’m warning you, I’ll take you to court!”

He was starting to raise his voice. But nobody raised their voice with Cetta, not even her husband, who'd been to prison twice.

"Now you listen to me," she said. "Get out of my way before I smash your head open. And don't come to me with your laws and not-laws. Isn't it enough that we pay taxes and the prices keep rising! What more do you want? To skin us alive?"

"What's wrong Cett?"

It was Mikiel, who when he heard the commotion coming from outside, rushed to see what was happening.

"What's wrong?! He's asking me for the receipt, this grubby-faced shit!"

Mikiel stepped between Cetta and the young man wearing the tie.

"Sir, please explain to her," he said to Mikiel, "I'm just doing my job here. They sent me from the department."

"Out of all the places in Malta and Gozo they sent you here?" Mikiel asked, with his finger pointed less than an inch from the young man's nose.

"I go where they send me, my friend," the young man replied without blinking.

"I'm not your friend," Mikiel said, raising voice, "isn't it enough that I pay my taxes? Why didn't they send you to the door of some fat cat who donates regularly to the party, why to mine?"

"Sir, all I'm asking is to see the receipt."

"Why don't you get the hell out of here," exclaimed Cetta, who felt left out of the action after Mikiel had arrived.

"Purcinello!" chimed in the other women, their necks poking out from in between the beaded threads of the curtain, enthusiastic to show their disapproval too.

The youth was looking flustered.

"If I don't see a receipt I'm going to issue a fine and file a report!"

"And who do you think you're going to fine?" Mikiel answered back, purple in the face.

"You and this woman!"

"Why don't you go and fine your mother!" Cetta piped in.

Maltese historians are in agreement that what followed was the opening firework in an episode that will continue to be remembered in the history of these islands. As she spat out the words 'your mother', Cetta lifted the arm carrying the plastic bag



with everything in it and started the process of launching it at the young man's face. Mikiel's hand got in the way to break Cetta's swing but, with the force of the arm loaded with the shopping, Mikiel's hand flew forward and connected with the youth's bearded face, causing his sunglasses to fly off his nose like a missile shooting upwards then changing route and smashing onto the floor.

The young man was stunned, Mikiel remained speechless, while Cetta stood with her hands on her hips, ready for the next round.

The choir of women behind the curtain let out a big 'Ooo!', all together, an 'Ooo!' of anticipation hanging by a thread of anxiety.

When the initial shock had subsided, the youth walked over to the remains of his sunglasses, picked them up and turned to Mikiel, who'd remained standing still as a lamppost at the edge of the pavement. He shook his head to and fro, and left without uttering another word.

For Cetta, this signalled a victory. And the choir agreed with her.

But Mikiel was less certain. While Cetta let loose with a long tirade about how these 'government lugs' lost all their bravado when you stood up to them and showed them that you knew your rights, Mikiel kept his mouth shut, petrified on the inside, expecting to find the police sergeant at his door any minute.

He wasn't wrong. The choir had barely finished singing the Amen to Cetta's sermon when the sergeant showed up with the constable in tow, looking in through the shop curtain. Mikiel's heart jumped. The representatives of law and order parted the beaded threads and stepped into the shop.

"Mikiel, will you come with us to the station?"

"To the station?" asked Mikiel.

"Yes, we've received a report that you didn't issue a fiscal receipt, that you assaulted a public official and that you caused damage to his personal belongings."

"But Sergeant, please, it was an accident..."

"Hadn't you better come with us to the station and explain everything?"

"And the shop?"

"Close up the shop, Mikiel. Come away quietly. Take my word for it."

Mikiel looked at the customers. No one breathed a word in the presence of the uniforms. A doubt came creeping in as to whether any of them would be willing to testify in his favour. Not even Cetta, who was now hiding behind two members of the choir with her head bowed. There was nothing to be done, he thought to himself. Hadn't you better close the shop and figure out how you were going to explain to them that it hadn't been your intention to smash that boy in the face?

“I’ll come along Sergeant, but you’re making a mistake. A big mistake! I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. It was all an accident.”

“We’ll speak at the station,” the sergeant said to him. “Close up, we’ll be waiting for you out here.”

Mikiel spread his arms like he was about to be crucified and the women left the shop in procession. Meanwhile, the sergeant and the constable lit a cigarette. Mikiel closed the shop and the three of them made their way towards the station.

They detained him for no longer than half an hour. They asked him for his version of events, he signed his statement and they sent him away. Before he left the station the sergeant advised him to consult a lawyer and to gather the witnesses he wanted to testify in his favour in court.

By the time he left the station he had neither the will nor the strength to open the shop again. His wife Karmena was surprised when she saw him coming back home so early, long before closing time. She knew immediately that something was wrong, and by the look on his face she realised that it was something serious. He wasn’t in the mood to explain what had happened. He wanted to go straight up to bed but knew that if he didn’t satisfy her curiosity she’d continue to hound him and wouldn’t let him rest. When he said he’d just come back from the police station and recounted the whole incident to her, he thought she was going to die of shock.

He spent the following two hours by her side at the doctor’s clinic.