

CHRISTOS BOULOTIS

THE WATERMELON THIEF

On the narrow crossing of Bosphorus, where the Mediterranean merges into the Black Sea, lies the City. The crown jewel of East and West alike, its glory is renowned in the four corners of the earth casting terror on its enemies, who know it by this name only: the City. Caravans travel in the desert for weeks to reach it, animals laden with silks and satins, precious jewels and alluring perfumes. So in that City, where land and sea come together, one hot summer sprang a miraculous watermelon plant.

Ever since the days of old, all sorts of wondrous and astonishing things happened in the City, exciting the imagination of its storytellers and perplexing the wise, who dabbing their pens in blessed ink recorded all happenings for future generations. But the wondrous and the astonishing embarrassed them; for despite their wisdom, not even the learned scholars could discern fact from fiction in that dim boundary between myth and what we call...a true story.

But the miraculous watermelon plant and the events that followed its budding were truly beyond the grasp of human mind. As if the soil of the earth wasn't fertile enough for it, the watermelon plant grew –who would have thought!- on the sky, six hundred feet or more above the domes of glowing silver. One day the wind brought a strange cloud that resembled a transparent goatskin over the City. It rested there without shifting, and soon enough a miraculous watermelon plant had taken root producing a single gigantic watermelon, which cast its cool shade over half the City on hot August days.

As the giant watermelon was swelling, another peculiar event took place: the fields around the City suddenly withered and yielded no more fruit. The City's people were not to taste the watermelons of the earth ever again. And in time, when the giant watermelon had ripened, the great lord decreed a hundred pairs of geese to be harnessed with red ribbons and a hundred young men to hold onto the ribbons to ride the skies and pick the wondrous fruit. And the bells of every church were to chime festively until the watermelon was brought down to the central square.

So this is how it was on the first year. They brought down the gigantic fruit and when they cut it open, they found it to be sweeter than honey. And there was so much of it that everyone had his fill - all the people of the City and of the neighbouring town too, the caravan cameleers, the passing merchants, the wandering acrobats and musicians, and the street builders and coppersmiths.

And it was even better the next year, because as time passed and the watermelon ripened, it became even bigger and sweeter than last time. The legend of the wondrous fruit spread throughout the land and reached every town and village. Bards sang of its sweetness, girls embroidered its likeness on their wedding sheets, artisans painted it on wooden chests and stonecutters carefully carved it on fountains and over the doors of great mansions.

But on the third year, while the people of the City were gazing proudly at their watermelon hanging ripe and inviting on the August sky, a great misfortune befell them. One night before the City's youths rode their geese to the clouds to pick it, the watermelon suddenly disappeared, as if it had vanished into thin air. Grief mixed with wrath fell on every house, from the great palace to the humble huts by the city walls. Who had stolen the watermelon? What hand had dared pick it in secret? And if it had only been a mortal man, then his punishment would be death! But if it had been a spirit or a sorcerer or a demon then... then things would be different.

The great lord immediately sent his army to the four corners of the world to look for the stolen watermelon. The soldiers searched high and low, asked in every town and village but couldn't find it; no-one had seen or heard anything about the giant fruit and its thief. The great lord then sent for the wise men of the East to shed light into this mystery. For days on end they carefully studied the smoke patterns in the hearths and listened attentively for the fluttering and the calls of the birds in the forest but they received no sign, until they were finally forced to resign and return to their homelands empty-handed and humiliated.

Neither did anyone savour the magnificent fruit the following summer. Just like the year before, the night before the picking and as everyone was preparing to receive it in the central square with celebrations and festivities, and distribute it to everyone in the City and in the neighbouring town too, and also to the cameleers, the foreign merchants, the acrobats, the builders and coppersmiths, the giant watermelon vanished. How could that be? The whole City had kept watch for many a night against the thief; thousands of eyes were tirelessly scanning the skies waiting for the tiniest trace of the scoundrel, so as to arrest him and give him the punishment he deserved.

But the thief came to the City at the break of dawn, when the long vigils had made the people's eyelids sweetly heavy like honeyed iron. So they had all closed their eyes for but one instant, for as long as it takes a little bird to hop from one branch to the other. But it seems that even those crumbs of time were enough for the thief to do his deed; and as no-one had seen him, rumours spread like wildfire. Some said that the