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“How many governments have fallen,” the prince had gone on, “And how many kingdoms have been swept from the face of the earth, and Orosh is still standing.”

The story might have well begun with the words, “In the beginning there was the *Kanun*.” The *Kanun*, a set of traditional Albanian laws, passed down through generations orally and codified in the twentieth century, dictate every aspect of one’s life in the highlands. It is said that the time of one’s death is preordained by God. Albania’s *Kanun* dictates how and through what intricate formalities blood can be shed. For blood must be shed, and family feuds continued through generations of spilled blood till there is no male member of the family left to avenge their kin. And with every spilling of blood, the blood tax must be paid to the Castle of Orosh, the seat of the law governed by the prince, who is the keeper of the code and is exempt from its rituals. The *Kanun* has ordained that these things be done.

Ismail Kadare’s “Broken April” is the story of the *Kanun*. Said to be set between the two world wars, the book paints a gloomy picture of the two Albanians—one successively ruled by governments as we know them and another in the highlands, immune to change and where nothing is beyond the Code.

The story begins in the highlands with Gjorg Berisha, who has been chosen by his family to avenge the killing of his brother by murdering a male member of the Kryeqyqe family. He calls aloud a warning as his target approaches and shoots. He cannot miss, for if one only injures a man, he must pay a fine. It is already his second attempt, the first having cost his family dearly. This time, Gjorg succeeds, and after he has placed the rifle of the dead man by his head, he returns home. Now his brother’s blood stained shirt, hung up in his house as a reminder that there was a man to be avenged, could be taken down. The killing is announced in the village, and a truce of a month has been granted, before the Kryeqyqe, whose turn it was to kill Gjorg, can start continue the cycle that started seventy years ago when a guest to the Berisha’s house was killed by a Kryeqyqe. For Gjorg, it is time to take the blood tax to the Orosh. For the blood feud has rules. Gjorg is now marked for death, and as soon as the truce ends mid-April, he is sure to be killed.

All this Kadare writes in a brutally simple style that suits perfectly the grim and morbid dictates of the Code. He shows how the blood feud, though only one chapter in the *Kanun*, starts governing Gjorg’s life. The *Kanun* deals with the everyday in fact: from specifying the length of roads, houses and how guests must be treated. And yet, as Gjorg comes to understand:

“the other part, which was concerned with everyday living and was not drenched in blood, was inextricably bound to the bloody part, so much so no one could really tell where one part left off and the other began. The whole was so conceived that one begat the other, the stainless giving birth to the bloody, and the second to the first, and so on forever, from generation to generation.”

What Kadare himself portrays, almost journalistically, is flipped in the other arc of the story: that of a writer, Bessian Vorpsi and his wife who come to visit the mountains. Vorpsi exoticises the ways of the mountains, refusing any moral judgement. His young wife is horrified at the senseless killing that only seems to benefit the keepers of the law. As Gjorg heads to the castle to pay the blood tax and the writer couple, too, as visitors to the prince, their paths briefly intersect.

Kadare’s prose is dark and haunted: it is that of a man not writing fiction, but recounting what he has seen. “Broken April” blurs the boundary between the past and present; the fact that Kadare never overtly mentions the time period when the events are taking place, adds to this. A particularly poignant part of the book is when the keeper of the blood feud records thinks of the horror of what would happen if there was a day when no blood would be spilled. As he contemplates with pleasure the fallow fields of the families who hide indoors as it was their turn to be killed, he decides

LIVING AND DYING BY THE CODE

BROKEN APRIL BY ISMAIL KADARE

MOYUKH MAHTAB

“each man chose between corn and vengeance. Some, to their shame, chose corn”.

“Broken April” is a strange book, in the way Kafka’s books are strange. For Kafka, the endless rules which are imposed without any justification, and which one had to obey, were absurd, and his writing turned that truth into twisted fables. For Kadare, the absurdity is not exaggerated: it is. If Kadare’s plot is a little unfulfilled and the ending not altogether satisfying, it takes nothing away from the story. Between Gjorg’s coming to terms with his approaching death and Vorpsi’s endless fascination with the ways of the mountain folk, one finds a world dominated by tradition. The castle does not, as some in the outside world do, see the *Kanun* as a transaction of blood. It is to them what has always been, and thus should be. Historically, Albania has seen the advent of Islam, Christianity and subjugation by foreign governments. The *Kanun* lived through it all, entrapping the villagers

and those in the Orosh by its authority of being the past. Ismail Kadare, the inaugural winner of the Man Booker prize, arguably one of the most important literary figures of Albania, through this novel from 1978, shows a world which hinges on the shedding of blood. He shows the tenacity of traditions and a life dictated by the price of death:

“Successive generations had been accustomed to the feuds from their cradles, and so, not being able to conceive of life without them, it never entered their minds to try to free themselves from their destined end.”

When I picked up this book I knew little of the man who wrote it. But, for readers who think there is much to learn from the past, Kadare’s “Broken April” is a beautifully gloomy read. Not a book to read in leisure, but one which grips you with its sheer strength till the very end. Faulkner’s wise words echo throughout its pages: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

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| SPORT |

It really does not seem fair. This man, who ruled the roost like no other from early 2005 to late 2007, then gave up a bit of his kingdom from then till 2010 and, finally, after 2012, seemed to be fading, cannot be mounting a comeback for the ages. He cannot, at the age of 35 in a sport where 30 has generally been the cut-off point for championship aspirations, be talked about as a possible number one in the not-so-distant future.

Concurrently, the great rival to whom the aforementioned genius had to cede ground from 2008, and who—four years younger—also seemed on his way out after winning nine out of 10 championships at one particular event from 2005 to 2014, is making another comeback after what seemed his umpteenth injury and looking to win said championship a record-extending 10th time.

If by now you do not know who the two being talked about are, you probably do not watch a lot of sport and certainly do not watch even a bit of tennis. Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal have not just rolled back the years, they have laid down a new gauntlet for the younger players, most of whom must be cursing the resurgence of two of the greatest players to ever pick up a racket.

A bit of context. Federer had not won a Major since the 2012 Wimbledon. When at the age of 34 he took the latter half of 2016 off because of a knee injury—his first major injury—players all across the world must have breathed a sigh of relief because they would not have to run into the Swiss maestro in the late stages of slams, and have their hopes summarily and elegantly dismissed. He had a good 2015, contesting two of the four Major finals against the runaway champ of the time, Novak Djokovic, but that was seen as a kind of swansong for Federer. There was of course always the hope of winning an eighth Wimbledon, but that was about it.

But greatness is not slave to armchair forecasts, thankfully. Making his comeback to competitive tennis in this year’s season-opening Australian Open, Federer yet again confounded spectators with the absolute ease with which he breezed through the early rounds. But, with his swanlike elegance across the tennis court, he has always been too good for younger, slightly lesser players. It was when he came up against players nearer his calibre that the old man of tennis seemed to want for



Roger Federer

PHOTO: STAR AFP

THE RETURN OF THE TITANS

SAKEB SUBHAN



Rafael Nadal

PHOTO: AFP

stamina in longer contests. But the early exits of world number one, Andy Murray, and world number two, Djokovic, seemed to have cleared the path for a fairytale comeback.

But there was Nadal, who in the mid to late 2000s made it a habit of thwarting Federer, and who had a decided advantage over the Swiss. They had also played perhaps the greatest Grand Slam final of all time

in Wimbledon 2008. But with an attritional game style that punished the player himself as much as his opponents, Nadal looked on his way out even more than Federer before the Australian Open. He had last contested a Grand Slam semi-final in 2014, and he too was making a comeback from a wrist injury. But, against the odds, it was a dream Federer-Nadal final in a Major once again and a 35-year-old Federer won his

18th Grand Slam (Pete Sampras and Nadal sit second on the list with 14).

Federer then went on to win Indian Wells and the Miami Open (again beating Nadal in the final in the latter), and now has a 20-1 record in 2017. Nadal’s defeats against Federer should not be very discouraging for the Spaniard. He is, after all, known as the King of Clay and we are in the midst of the clay court season. After enduring defeat in the 2015 French Open and withdrawing through injury in the 2016 edition, he is now back with full force on the red dirt, heading up to the second Grand Slam of the year. He has already won his 10th titles in Monte Carlo and Barcelona, both unprecedented feats in tennis. Now, he is gearing up for his tilt at the French Open -- the Grand Slam that may as well be called the Rafa Nadal Open -- later this month.

No, it really is not fair if you are Murray, who has had to suffer serial defeats at the hands of Federer, Nadal, and Djokovic, before finally making it to world number one and probably thinking that now is his time to dominate. Neither will it seem fair if you are Djokovic -- you may have thought that with Federer and Nadal out of reckoning you could perhaps overtake the latter’s Grand Slam tally and challenge the former’s haul. If you are a youngster like Nick Kyrgios, Dominic Thiem, Alexander Zverev or one of the mid-20s upper-echelon campaigners like Milos Raonic and Kei Nishikori, the return of the senior citizens may as well induce you to pack your bags and leave.

But if you are a tennis fan, you are lucky to be alive to see the final bursts of utter genius of two of the greatest players of all time, and even more tantalisingly, the final throes of arguably the greatest sporting rivalry of all time.

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