

Sasa the Gypsy Dog

By

*Elizabeth Karageorgevic
Princess of Yugoslavia*

Once upon a time, there was a great, big, fluffy Sar Planina dog called Sasa. He lived in a comfortable house with a large garden. A family lived there too, a father, a mother and one son called Toma, who was seven years old as well as three white cats. They lived outside a town in the south of Serbia up on the side of a hill overlooking a large lake.

Sasa and Toma were best friends and Sasa slept on Toma's bed every night. Around 11 pm when the boy was sleeping deeply, Sasa, the dog, would slip into the garden through a special door, to see if everything was quiet outside.

Lots and lots of stray cats with their kittens crept into the garden after dark looking for scraps of food. They were all different colours but they did not play with the pure white cats who lived in the house, even though they were probably related. The white cats hissed whenever they saw the unwelcome visitors and hopped up and down on stiff legs to frighten the kittens. The fancy white cats had thick furry tails and had one blue eye and one yellow eye each. Sasa was very fond of all the cats and felt sorry for the hungry stray kittens. He let them feed from his bowl because he was very well fed and always had enough to eat. The kittens were not frightened of him at all and ran in and out of his legs and tried to swing on his tail. One brave one even took a swipe at his whiskers.

Four fat brown chickens and a large rooster slept on the branch of the large tree in the garden near the kitchen window. At five o'clock every morning, the rooster woke up and crowed as loudly as possible to be sure he woke everybody in the neighbourhood. Often, because he liked sleeping on one leg, he would fall off the branch at three or four am and squawk and mutter furiously while he scrambled back up the tree. Of course he crowed, as usual, an hour or so later, 'Cock a doodle doo, doodle doo doo doooo.' He was not

very popular, especially with the cook, who lost her temper one day and wrung his neck.

'I have had enough of you!' she yelled and promptly put him the soup pot.

On one particular night, Sasa came out to the garden on his usual look out to stretch his legs and drink some water. The chickens were sleeping quietly, the cats were hiding and the night watchman was sleeping under a tree. The moon went in and out of the fast moving clouds and the wind began to wail louder and louder, whistling and howling down the hillside. Sasa stopped in his tracks and, with his head on one side, listened intently.

Floating in and out of the wind was the sound of dogs barking in his language and he could understand everything they were saying. The hairs on his neck stood up because he hadn't heard this dog language for a long time, ever since he was a puppy. He felt he had to go right away to find these dogs and see who they were. So, he decided to find them by following the sound of the wind that wafted down from the top of the hill.

He was turning off into the woods behind the house, when little Toma came out of the kitchen looking for his friend and companion, Sasa.

'Sasa, Sasa, I was scared in the dark without you and the window kept banging in the wind and you weren't there!' he complained, pulling Sasa's tail with both hands. Sasa turned around and licked Toma's face until the boy felt better and then he trotted off into the woods and up the hill with Toma holding onto his tail.

'Sasa, where are we going?' muttered Toma, as he stumbled along behind Sasa. Sasa couldn't hear him but stopped suddenly in his tracks to make sure they were going in the right direction. Toma bumped right into the dog's bottom and fell over.

'Sasa, why did you stop so fast? Now I have got fur in my mouth!' he gasped. He picked himself up and Sasa cocked his head on one side so he could still hear the dogs' voices, before they both ran on again.

Fireflies came out to light their way and soon the dark woods and bushes were shimmering with thousands of specks of light. They clung to Sasa's fur so

that he glowed all over and they stuck to Toma's hair and eyebrows too. Toma now had a luminous tail to clutch and could see clearly where to put his feet. The fireflies were obviously enjoying themselves and so they decided to accompany the adventurous pair all the way up the hill.

On the top of the hill, a family of gypsies was celebrating their new campsite and the fact that they had just arrived from the east. They were singing and dancing and eating around a huge blazing fire and their dogs joined in, running around in circles, baying at the moon and at each other.

Panting and covered with fireflies, Sasa and Toma arrived at the edge of the camp. Sasa made a special barking sound and a low growl which the two gypsy dogs heard. They stopped baying when they heard this sound and looked around until they saw an enormous monster covered in flickering lights at the edge of the clearing. Behind the monster, there was a little figure with a sparkling head. These two apparitions terrified the two dogs even though they heard the familiar sound of their own language. Sasa went on barking softly not realizing that the fireflies made him look frightening. Toma hid behind Sasa not knowing what would happen next.

Suddenly the two gypsy dogs rushed over to Sasa and began licking his face and bouncing up and down with joy. They recognized him as their brother they hadn't seen since they were puppies. The three of them threw back their heads and barked happily and ran around in circles. The fireflies rose up in a cloud and hovered above the merriment like a giant fireball.

The gypsy family turned to watch the dogs and laughed. They remembered selling Sasa to a man who said he wanted this particular dog for his son, six years ago. Toma crept round Sasa where he could hold onto his collar and he too danced around in circles with the three dogs.

The gypsy king whistled and the dogs raced to the fire where he was sitting. He was dressed in magnificent blue trousers and a gold and red vest. He had a big black mustache and was smoking a pipe. The king was very surprised to see the young boy, who was not a gypsy, with fireflies in his hair and eyebrows.

'Come here son. Who are you and how did you get here?'

'Sir,' replied Toma breathlessly, 'I live in a house half way down the hill and my name is Toma and I am seven years old. This is my dog, Sasa. He brought me up here.'

The king was very amused by the story and called to one of his sons. 'Johnny, come to your father. I want you to shake hands with Toma who is your age and introduce him to the family.'

Johnny took Toma by the hand and took him round the campsite to meet the clan. He met the queen of the gypsies, dressed in a beautiful gold and blue dress and enormous gold earrings. He met all the uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters.

The fireflies flew above the gypsy camp and hovered in a luminous cloud above their heads like a glowing chandelier hanging from the sky. The king clapped his hands and beckoned to Toma.

'Please enjoy our food and be our guest. Sasa is welcome too of course. I remember him when he was a puppy!'

Toma happily accepted a bowl of soup and drank it while Sasa gnawed on a juicy bone. His brother and sister sat next to him making contented growling noises and occasionally licking their brother's face. After Toma finished the soup, he and the five gypsy children all danced wildly to the music of violins and harmonicas.

The three dogs jumped around licking each other, deliriously happy to be together again.

The gypsy king exclaimed, 'This is indeed a magical night we shall always remember. There is so much joy and happiness. Fireflies are illuminating our celebration and Sasa has found his sister and brother again and my children have a new friend. Please come back and visit us again soon, dear Toma and dear Sasa. You will always be welcome at our campsite.'

He then put a little blue stone into Toma's hand.

'This is a lucky turquoise stone for you, my son. It comes with the blessing of the gypsies.'

Toma sat on the ground and showed his gift to Sasa who sniffed it, not knowing whether to eat it or not. Toma felt a bit sleepy, so he leaned his back against Sasa and yawned.

When Toma opened his eyes, he was in his own bed and the sun was pouring through the curtains. Sasa was lying there at the foot of the bed looking at him with one eye open. Toma stretched himself and, when he opened his right hand he found he still had a little blue stone in it.

That night, when Toma's mother had turned out the lights and kissed him goodnight, he pulled open the curtains so he could see the sky. He was sure he could see a ball of light pass by the window, winking and twinkling; hovering just long enough to shine firefly light into his room to remind him of the party they had been to together the night before.

Sasa had had a wonderful evening too, and was very happy. He thanked the wind for bringing the sounds of the gypsy camp and the dogs' voices to his ears. From that night on, every time the moon was full, Sasa would race up the hill to play with his brother and sister all night. Sometimes a shadow would flit along behind him, in the shape and size of Toma.