

I

They Both Fell

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The war in Zagreb began over a pack of cigarettes. There had been tensions beforehand, rumors of disturbances in other towns whispered above my head, but no explosions, nothing outright. Caught between the mountains, Zagreb sweltered in the summer, and most people abandoned the city for the coast during the hottest months. For as long as I could remember my family had vacationed with my godparents in a fishing village down south. But the Serbs had blocked the roads to the sea, at least that's what everyone was saying, so for the first time in my life we spent the summer inland.

Everything in the city was clammy, doorknobs and train handrails slick with other people's sweat, the air heavy with the smell of yesterday's lunch. We took cold showers and walked around the flat in our underwear. Under the run of cool water I imagined my skin sizzling, steam rising from it. At night we lay atop our sheets, awaiting fitful sleep and fever dreams.

I turned ten in the last week of August, a celebration marked by a soggy cake and eclipsed by heat and disquiet. My parents invited their best friends—my godparents, Petar and Marina—over for dinner that weekend. The house where we usually stayed the summers belonged to Petar's grandfather. My mother's break from teaching allowed us three months of vacation—my father taking a train, meeting us later—and the five of us would live there together on the cliffs along the Adriatic. Now that we were landlocked, the weekend dinners had become an anxious charade of normalcy.

Before Petar and Marina arrived I argued with my mother about putting on clothes.

"You're not an animal, Ana. You'll wear shorts to dinner or you'll get nothing."

"In Tiska I only wear my swimsuit bottoms anyway," I said, but my mother gave me a look and I got dressed.

That night the adults were engaging in their regular debate about exactly how long they'd known each other. They had been friends since before they were my age, they liked to say, no matter how old I was, and after the better part of an hour and a bottle of FeraVino they'd usually leave it at that. Petar and Marina had no children for me to play with, so I sat at the table holding my baby sister and listening to them vie for the farthest-reaching memory. Rahela was only eight months old and had never seen the coast, so I talked to her about the sea and our little boat, and she smiled when I made fish faces at her.

After we ate, Petar called me over and handed me a fistful of dinar. "Let's see if you can beat your record," he said. It was a game between us—I would run to the store to buy his cigarettes and he would time me. If I beat my record he'd let me keep a few dinar from the change. I stuffed the money in the pocket of my cutoffs and took off down the nine flights of stairs.

I was sure I was about to set a new record. I'd perfected my route, knew when to hug the curves around buildings and avoid the bumps in the side streets. I passed the house with the big orange beware of dog sign (though no dog ever lived there that I could remember), jumped over a set of cement steps, and veered away from the dumpsters. Under a concrete archway that always smelled like piss, I held my breath and sped into the open city. I skirted the biggest pothole in front of the bar frequented by the daytime drinkers, slowing only slightly as I came upon the old man at his folding table hawking

stolen chocolates. The newsstand kiosk's red awning shifted in a rare breeze, signaling me like a finish line flag.

I put my elbows on the counter to get the clerk's attention. Mr. Petrović knew me and knew what I wanted, but today his smile looked more like a smirk.

"Do you want Serbian cigarettes or Croatian ones?" The way he stressed the two nationalities sounded unnatural. I had heard people on the news talking about Serbs and Croats this way because of the fighting in the villages, but no one had ever said anything to me directly. And I didn't want to buy the wrong kind of cigarettes.

"Can I have the ones I always get, please?"

"Serbian or Croatian?"

"You know. The gold wrapper?" I tried to see around his bulk, pointing to the shelf behind him. But he just laughed and waved to another customer, who sneered at me.

"Hey!" I tried to get the clerk's attention back. He ignored me and made change for the next man in line. I'd already lost the game, but I ran home as fast as I could anyway.

"Mr. Petrović wanted me to pick Serbian or Croatian cigarettes," I told Petar. "I didn't know the answer and he wouldn't give me any. I'm sorry."

My parents exchanged looks and Petar motioned for me to sit on his lap. He was tall—taller than my father—and flushed from the heat and wine. I climbed up on his wide thigh.

"It's okay," he said, patting his stomach. "I'm too full for cigarettes anyway." I pulled the money from my shorts and relinquished it. He pressed a few dinar coins into my palm.

"But I didn't win."

"Yes," he said. "But today that's not your fault."

That night my father came into the living room, where I slept, and sat down on the bench of the old upright piano. We'd inherited the piano from an aunt of Petar's—he and Marina didn't have space for it—but we couldn't afford to have it tuned, and the first octave was so flat all the keys gave out the same tired tone. I heard my father pressing the foot pedals down in rhythm with the habitual nervous jiggle of his leg, but he didn't touch the keys. After a while he got up and came to sit on the armrest of the couch, where I lay. Soon we were going to buy a mattress.

"Ana? You awake?"

I tried to open my eyes, felt them flitting beneath the lids.

"Awake," I managed.

"Filter 160s. They're Croatian. So you know for next time."

"Filter 160s," I said, committing it to memory.

My father kissed my forehead and said good night, but I felt him in the doorway moments later, his body blocking out the kitchen lamplight.

"If I'd been there," he whispered, but I wasn't sure he was talking to me so I stayed quiet and he didn't say anything else.

In the morning Milošević was on TV giving a speech, and when I saw him, I laughed. He had big ears and a fat red face, jowls sagging like a dejected bulldog. His accent was nasal, nothing like the gentle, throaty voice of my father. Looking angry, he hammered his fist in rhythm with his speech. He was saying something about cleansing the land, repeating it over and over. I had no idea what he was talking about, but as he spoke and pounded he got redder and redder. So I laughed, and my mother poked her head around the corner to see what was so funny.

"Turn that off." I felt my cheeks go hot, thinking she was mad at me for laughing at what must have been an important speech. But her face softened quickly. "Go play," she said. "Bet Luka's already beat you to the Trg."

My best friend, Luka, and I spent the summer biking around the town square and meeting our classmates for pickup football games. We were freckled and tan and perpetually grass-stained, and now that we were down to just a few weeks of freedom before the start of school we met even earlier and stayed out later, determined not to let any vacation go to waste. I found him along our regular bike route. We cycled side by side, Luka occasionally swinging his front tire into mine so that we'd nearly crash. It was a favorite joke of his and he laughed the whole way, but I was still thinking about Petrović. In school we'd been taught to ignore distinguishing ethnic factors, though it was easy enough to discern someone's ancestry by their last name. Instead we were trained to regurgitate pan-Slavic slogans: "Bratstvo i Jedinstvo!" Brotherhood and Unity. But now it seemed the differences between us might be important after all. Luka's family was originally from Bosnia, a mixed state, a confusing third category. Serbs wrote in Cyrillic and Croats in the Latin alphabet, but in Bosnia they used both, the spoken differences even more minute. I wondered if there was a special brand of Bosnian cigarettes, too, and whether Luka's father smoked those.

When we arrived in the Trg it was crowded and I could tell something was wrong. In light of this new Serb-Croat divide, everything—including the statue of Ban Jelačić, sword drawn—now seemed a clue to the tensions I hadn't seen coming. During World War II the ban's sword was aimed toward the Hungarians in a defensive gesture, but afterward the Communists had removed the statue in a neutralization of nationalistic symbols. Luka and I had watched when, after the last elections, men with ropes and heavy machinery returned Jelačić to his post. Now he was facing south, toward Belgrade.

The Trg had always been a popular meeting place, but today people were swarming around the base of the statue looking frantic, milling through a snarl of trucks and tractors parked right in the cobblestoned Trg, where, on normal days, cars weren't even allowed to drive. Baggage, shipping crates, and an assortment of free-floating housewares brimmed over the backs of flatbeds and were splayed across the square.

I thought of the gypsy camp my parents and I once passed while driving to visit my grandparents' graves in Čakovec, caravans of wagons and trailers housing mysterious instruments and stolen children.

"They'll pour acid in your eyes," my mother warned when I wiggled in the pew while my father lit candles and prayed for his parents. "Little blind beggars earn three times as much as ones who can see." I held her hand and was quiet for the rest of the day.

Luka and I dismounted our bikes and moved cautiously toward the mass of people and their belongings. But there were no bonfires or circus sideshows; there was no music—these were not the migrant people I'd seen on the outskirts of the northern villages.

The settlement was made almost entirely out of string. Ropes, twine, shoelaces, and strips of fabric of various thicknesses were strung from cars to tractors to piles of luggage in an elaborate tangle. The strings supported the sheets and blankets and bigger articles of clothing that served as makeshift tents. Luka and I stared alternately at each other and at the strangers, not knowing the words for what we were seeing, but understanding that it wasn't good.

Candles circled the perimeter of the encampment, melting next to boxes on which someone had written "Contributions for the Refugees." Most people who passed added something to a box, some emptying their pockets.

"Who are they?" I whispered.

"I don't know," Luka said. "Should we give them something?"

I took Petar's dinar from my pocket and gave them to Luka, afraid to get too close myself. Luka had a few coins, too, and I held his bike while he put them in the box. As he leaned in I panicked, worrying that the city of string would swallow him up like the vines that come alive in horror movies. When he turned around I shoved his handlebars at him and he stumbled backward. As we rode away I felt my stomach twist into a knot I would only years later learn to call survivor's guilt.

My classmates and I often met for football matches on the east side of the park, where the grass had fewer lumps. I was the only girl who played football, but sometimes other girls would come down to the field to jump rope and gossip.

"Why do you dress like a boy?" a pigtailed girl asked me once.

"It's easier to play football in pants," I told her. The real reason was that they were my neighbor's clothes and we couldn't afford anything else.

We began collecting stories. They started out with strings of complex relationships—my best friend's second cousin, my uncle's boss—and whoever kicked the ball between improvised (and ever-negotiable) goal markers got to tell their story first. An unspoken contest of gore developed, honoring whoever could more creatively describe the blown-out brains of their distant acquaintances. Stjepan's cousins had seen a mine explode a kid's leg, little bits of skin clinging to grooves in the sidewalk for a week afterward. Tomislav had heard of a boy who was shot in the eye by a sniper in Zagora; his eyeball had turned to liquid like a runny egg right there in front of everyone.

At home my mother paced the kitchen talking on the phone to friends in other towns, then hung out the window, passing the news to the next apartment building over. I stood close while she discussed the mounting tensions on the banks of the Danube with the women on the other side of the clothesline, absorbing as much as I could before running off to find my friends. A citywide spy network, we passed on any information we overheard, relaying stories of victims whose links to us were becoming less and less remote.

On the first day of school, our teacher took attendance and found one of our classmates missing.

"Anyone hear from Zlatko?" she said.

"Maybe he went back to Serbia, where he belongs," said Mate, a boy I'd always found obnoxious. A few people snickered and our teacher shushed them. Beside me, Stjepan raised his hand.

“He moved,” Stjepan said.

“Moved?” Our teacher flipped through some papers on her clipboard. “Are you sure?”

“He lived in my building. Two nights ago I saw his family carrying big suitcases out to a truck. He said they had to leave before the air raids started. He said to tell everyone goodbye.” The class erupted into high-strung chatter at this news:

“What’s an air raid?”

“Who will be our goalie now?”

“Good riddance to him!”

“Shut up, Mate,” I said.

“Enough!” said our teacher. We quieted.

An air raid, she explained, was when planes flew over cities and tried to knock buildings down with bombs. She drew chalky maps denoting shelters, listed the necessities our families should bring underground with us: AM radio, water jug, flashlight, batteries for the flashlight. I didn’t understand whose planes wanted what buildings to explode, or how to tell a regular plane from a bad one, though I was happy for the reprieve from regular lessons. But soon she began to swipe at the board, inciting an angry cloud of eraser dust. She let out a sigh as if she were impatient with air raids, brushing the settling chalk away from the pleats in her skirt. We moved on to long division, and were not offered a time for asking questions.