

SHORT STORIES OF BELGIUM  
2023

WRITERS FESTIVAL OF BELGIUM

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*This collection is a result of the first Short Story Competition of Belgium in 2023. The power of storytelling shines through diverse journeys, whether they be just for a moment or a whole period in time. They transport us far from the quotidien.*

Alia Papageorgiou

Artistic Director

Writers Festival Belgium

*We are delighted to partner with the Writers Festival of Belgium for their short story competition. We have been hugely impressed by the quality of the entries, which show that there are some wonderful writing talents here waiting to be discovered. It is also an honour to publish Heli Parna's winning entry in our November magazine.*

Leo Cendrowicz,

Editor

*The Brussels Times*

*We were thrilled with the high quality of writing from these selections and the partnership with the Writers Festival of Belgium to judge the short story competition.*

Judith Henstra,

CEO

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*When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left, I buy  
food & clothes.*

*Both by Desiderius Erasmus*



## INTRODUCTION

This booklet is the result of the first short story competition, which ran between July and September 2023. The Belgian Short Story Competition was open to all writers writing in Belgium. A fine selection that was artfully curated, judged and prepared for online publishing thanks to [bookhelpline.com](http://bookhelpline.com). We extend many special thanks to the two editors from Book Helpline Joanna Booth and Judith Henstra who, with the help of a short story judging schema, ensured a transparent evaluation of all short stories submitted. This booklet is a sample of the highest-ranked short stories as judged by Book Helpline.

Many congratulations are extended to Heli Parna the winner of the 2023 Short Story Competition! Thank you to all who helped make this happen; to Leo Cendrowicz and *The Brussels Times* magazine for printing the winning story, ‘When Rebecca doesn’t go to church’ by Ms Parna in the winter 2023 edition of the magazine. And thanks to all of you for picking this booklet up to read.

We will be returning annually so if you have been writing, first, keep writing! And, second, look out for our next submission dates in 2024 for inclusion and prizes related to the short story competition.

Enjoy this fine selection of writing from Belgium.



# WHEN REBECCA DOESN'T GO TO CHURCH

BY HELI PARNA

THE STAINS REFUSED to come out of the carpet, no matter how hard Rebecca worked with the brush and the homemade cleaning product that she was so proud of. Equal parts water, apple cider vinegar, baking soda and a few drops of orange extract.

She noticed the clock on top of the fireplace and upon realising it was past three in the afternoon, let out an 'Oh Christ almighty,' followed by an apology and a cross sign over her chest. This was all taking much longer than she would have liked and at this rate, she was in danger of missing the evening mass.

Her concoction had always worked on other stains, even red wine, why would blood be any different... Perhaps if she added more baking soda?

Rebecca dropped the brush and carefully took off the yellow rubber gloves. She placed them next to the dark red circle decorating one side of the cream-coloured rug that had lived

in this living room for nearly twenty years. It would be a pity to have to get rid of it, Rebecca thought to herself.

Resolutely, she leaned on the wooden coffee table with her right elbow to help herself get up. This was not an easy task for a body that had more mass than was recommended by doctors after fifty-six years of fried food and coffee creamers. Her effort was assisted by a soft grunt as she heaved herself upright, letting out a sigh of relief at having accomplished at least one task.

She would have to get more baking soda from the pantry and give this another try. But it was Sunday, for crying out loud!

She removed the apron protecting the green summer dress that she was wearing and made her way into the kitchen, placing the garment on the back of a chair. She opened the door of her pantry and started rummaging through the tins and cans and the occasional half-opened box of cookies and cereal.

She had really made an effort today, even adding a belt to her dress conjuring up a memory of a waistline. She had gotten up at 7 am, which, as her husband would confirm with a nod of his head, was not the time Rebecca would ever voluntarily get up on a Sunday. Sunday was the day for rest as it had been for God. And so, after six days of diligently cleaning the house, cooking meals and ironing shirts, Rebecca would always rest on the seventh. She pursued resting with the same kind of perfection and meticulousness as any other task she undertook. She would usually not come out of bed before noon. If she did happen to prepare coffee at home (the one from the diner did actually taste better), she would leave the cup right where she had taken the last sip. Sometimes it

happened to be the kitchen sink, but more often it was the bathroom, front porch, or even the toilet. There would be no cooking and her husband was left to fend for himself.

Today though, she had made an exception. For God. She was not going to disappoint him by letting her husband divorce her.



Rebecca found the magic ingredient behind an unopened box of cereal, next to the tinned tomatoes. She really needed to organise the pantry again. She felt the need to pray, as she usually would, but currently, God and her were not on speaking terms.

Every decision Rebecca had ever made in her life, had been discussed with and approved by the Lord. Even as a twenty-year-old woman, with a more visible waistline, sitting in her future husband's car at the drive-through movie theatre. As soon as he had exited the car, Rebecca had put her hands together, closed her eyes and started praying. 'Dear God, this is Rebecca Russell...'

Even though she had been talking to God since she could in fact talk, she never skipped the formal introduction. This would usually be followed up with an apology for having inconvenienced such a busy individual. That night she was asking God whether it was alright to let her future husband do what normally only husbands would be allowed to do.

At the end of their last date, she had allowed him to kiss her on the lips. She had made sure to negotiate it beforehand. With God, not with her date. It had been the seventh time

they had met – six times during the day and then finally an evening date. But on that particular night, he had taken her by surprise.

As soon as the car had come to a halt at the parking lot, he kissed her again. This time it was no ordinary kiss on the lips, but an invitation for more. Rebecca was not displeased, quite the opposite actually, but this was new territory and she had not yet cleared it with her biggest adviser. So, she had stopped and asked her date to get her a drink. It was an excuse to have some time alone; she didn't actually want the drink. She never drank during films, due to a really small bladder. Same reason why she would make sure not to drink just before driving to the next town to visit family. Not many places on the way to relieve yourself. And in the movies, you would always end up having to go to the toilet and missing a part of the movie. No, that just would not do. If you were to undertake something in this life, you made sure to follow through. So, if she was to watch a movie, it would be the whole movie.

Just like when you marry someone, you don't just quit mid-way. You do not simply pack your bags and announce one morning that you are going to leave to go live with a woman named Christy. Rebecca had hoped that Christy was just like a full bladder that needed to be emptied, but her husband thought differently. He kept going on about love and feeling alive again but Rebecca couldn't remember the actual words anymore.

She had stopped him in the middle of his pathetic teenage dream soliloquy. She had not been given time to make a better decision, he had been standing in the living room ready

to leave. So, for the first time in her life, Rebecca had made a decision without consulting God first. She had not really cleared it with Him beforehand but she assumed that widow was more acceptable than divorcee.



## A STORY OF TWO EUROPESES

BY LJUBA RADMAN

ZERBST, DUCHY OF ANHALT, GERMAN EMPIRE,  
1911

When Hildegard let out her first cry, it could be heard all the way to Zerbst Castle, the childhood home of the legendarily strong-willed Catherine the Great. On that hot August day, the officers and their families living at the barracks, including little Hilde's parents and siblings, paused for a moment, taken aback by the newborn's powerful voice.

Contrary to Ida's and Otto's worries, the late and unexpected addition to their family of four was anything but frail. Like the Prussian Princess Catherine II before her, this roly-poly girl was less of a cherub and more of an ebony-haired lion cub, in accord with her astrological sign. Her dark, sparkling eyes and vivacity brought great joy to her family. As the household's baby, she learned to walk to the sound of her brother and sister playing the piano, and of her father playing the violin, when he wasn't busy providing for his family as a royal gunsmith.

They often reminisced about those happy days when, just a few years later, the First World War broke out and put an end to their brightness and happiness. Her mother's light-hearted nature gave way to a furrowed brow, while her father seemed to be ageing by decades.

As Europe's lands were changing hands, and one set of rulers was exchanged for another, the family's relatives slowly made their way from their native Danzig<sup>1</sup> and Strassburg<sup>2</sup> to cities within the new borders of Germany. And yet, despite the heavy atmosphere at home and the rationing of food, Hilde always managed to keep her spirits up. The lively girl was light on her feet, was known for her nimble fingers on the piano keys and, as the most gifted swimmer on her team, she dove into the twenties and thirties with all her heart.

After successfully finishing her music studies, she finally found the time to look closer at her many admirers. And there he was, Otto! Not only did he bear the same name as her father but he resembled him, too. He was tall, slender, elegant, and full of wit. He may not have been a musician but some called young Otto a finance artist.

#### MASLINICA, ISLAND OF ŠOLTA, KINGDOM OF SERBS, CROATS, AND SLOVENES, 1922

On this first day of spring in Maslinica, a tiny village on the Adriatic island of Šolta, Marija gave a final push, and her baby came into this world. She was a welcome girl in a family with three boys, and was named Vesna after the Slavic goddess of spring. Her first cry was more of a whimper, as she was a puny little thing.

Island life was hard, but Vesna's parents did all they could to make sure she survived the first years, which were critical for



kids on Šolta. Three more siblings followed her into this tight-knit family. The Mediterranean climate was harsh. The summers were arid, and the winters humid with icy winds.

Like all the children around her, Vesna had to work as soon as she could walk, carrying large baskets filled with fish on her head, and selling the day's catch from village to village. Still, she was allowed to go to school, and during those delightful hours spent in a small classroom with thirty pupils of all age groups, she came to be known as the brightest mind. Across the island, she was renowned for her beauty and clear singing voice.

One day, an Italian sailor, himself from a musical family, heard her sing and begged Vesna's family to let her attend a music academy in Zagreb. But she was needed at home. Food and money were scarce, and the family could not do without their hard-working wiry girl. The island, though unrelenting, also offered the young girl moments of laughter and joy.

She was only thirteen when she gazed upon a handsome sailor, native to Maslinica. She enquired about him and learned that his name was Nikola, that he was twenty-two and unattached. He was well known for being honourable, hard-working, and smart. Vesna soon fell in love with him and decided that one day she would marry him.

#### KIRCHHAIN-DOBERLUG, PROVINCE OF BRANDENBURG, GERMAN REICH, 1944

In the final stages of the Second World War, Hilde's home was occupied by Russian officers on their victorious march towards Berlin. The young mother of two was saved by music in more ways than one. The commanding officer, a passionate

music lover, forbade his men to touch Hilde as long as she agreed to play for them every night. She was one of few women in the region whose virtue was spared by the Russians.

One evening, as she was desperately trying to breastfeed her baby, the officers called for her to come play the piano. She reluctantly put her daughter back in the crib and made her way downstairs to play with a heavy heart.

The only thing that kept her going was the letter she had just received from Otto. She had not heard from him in months, and her growing fear for his safety had become almost unbearable. While playing Brahms, Chopin, Beethoven, and some Russian folk dances that evening, she was thinking of her husband's letter.

*Hildchen, dearest,*

*Many months have passed since I was last able to sit down and write. I think of you and our children every day. Has our baby come into this world yet? How very much I long to see all of you! I do hope that you are all well. And you, my dearest, how are you bearing being the head of the family? What you must be going through! I wish I could have taken you far away before this war started, to keep you safe from all the suffering.*

*I have just been posted on a paradisiac island in the Adriatic Sea. In normal times, I could have considered myself lucky to be here.*

*But I cannot enjoy anything as long as this war continues and I am far away from you. I try to remain healthy, even though the Italians took all the food when they left the island. A few days ago, we received the order to evacuate the locals to the mainland. I spotted a young woman with thick black hair, just like yours. She was heavily pregnant, and I made sure she was able to make it aboard the ship that was taking them to safety. She reminded me so much of you.*

*The news we receive from the home front worry me exceedingly. Be patient, dearest, I am sure that I will soon be able to join you. For now, I wish you courage and strength until we are united again.*

*With all my heart,  
Your Otto*

A tear rolled down her cheek as she remembered the scream of air raid sirens in unison with her baby girl's first cry. How could Otto imagine what his daughter's first days on Earth had been like? Hilde had left the hospital on the outskirts of Berlin with her newborn in her arms, to join her two-year-old son, left in her sister's care in Zerbst. That very day, the Berlin streets had been on fire from heavy Allied bombing, and she had started to doubt whether they would make it out of this inferno alive. Somehow, she had found the strength to walk with blistered and bloody feet, finding shelter for a few

hours in some basement. She had even managed to shut out the sound of bombs for a moment, by closing her eyes and remembering her Italian honeymoon with Otto. In the end, Hilde and her baby had found their way back to her family, and her son had finally met his little sister, Birgit.

As a Russian officer sat down by her side to accompany her at the balalaika, Hilde was brought back to the present moment. She finished playing this last piece at the piano and then folded the lid over the keys. While walking up the stairs that night, Otto's hearty laugh rang in her head, and she smiled.

SPLIT, REGION OF DALMATIA, KINGDOM OF  
YUGOSLAVIA, 1944

Vesna was sitting in a dark basement, which served as a bomb shelter, as she lit a candle. She pulled out a piece of paper and pen and started writing a letter to her beloved, away fighting their just war as a Yugoslav Partisan.

*My love,*

*I don't know where you are. I hear about the savage battles against the occupier and the Ustashi, and I tremble for you. My Miko, I don't know if this letter will ever reach you or if you will ever know that we have a son. I did not really want to bring a child into this world, which is on fire, but he was determined to be born.*

*If only we could have been married before you had to leave for the front, my mother wouldn't have thrown me out. She didn't believe me when I told her you were going to marry me. I thank the good Lord for your mother, who took me in as one of her own. How I cried, my Miko, remembering all the dreams we had that might never come true. But now, my only concern is keeping our little boy healthy and strong.*

*I named him Miroslav, in the hope that peace will return very soon and bring you back to me, safe and sound.*

*I dearly miss you. I love you. I pray for you.*

*Come back to me soon.*

*Your Vesna*

MASLINICA, ISLAND OF ŠOLTA, FEDERAL PEOPLE'S  
REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA, 1946

As he stood on the deck of the boat, bringing him home after years of gruesome battles, Nikola looked eyes with a sprightly boy of two, whom he recognised right away as his son. Vesna and Nikola were married that year.

It wasn't the wedding Vesna had dreamed of as a young girl. It took place at the town hall instead of St. Nicholas Church, she was wearing a simple skirt suit instead of a traditional

wedding dress, and, of course, she had never imagined that their son would already exist and be attending the ceremony.

Thereafter, the couple never spoke of their wartime ordeals. Vesna never told her husband how their son had almost died because she had no milk, as a result of hunger and stress. She also kept silent about the days and nights spent in basements, in complete darkness, while bombs were falling over their heads; when she thought she would go mad.

Nikola never said a word about the horrors he had witnessed while fighting a guerrilla war against armed and structured armies. Vesna would never know that he had had to kill men with his bare hands. Only his nightmare screams, which continued for years, reminded them of those years they tried so hard to put behind them.

#### BRUSSELS, KINGDOM OF BELGIUM, 1974

As she licked the stamps for the letters to their parents, Birgit looked over at Miroslav. He smiled back and winked.

‘Here we go!’ she said, before putting the sealed envelopes in her bag and leaving their house to post the letters. The contents of both were the same, but one was written by Birgit to her mother in German, while the other was in Croatian, and was written by Miro to his parents.

*Miroslav* means the celebration of peace.

*Dear family,  
The day you have all been waiting for is*

*finally coming. At long last, Birgit and Miroslav are getting married!*

*We are delighted to invite you to our wedding, which will take place at the Saint-Gilles town hall on 30 August 1974. We dearly wish to have you by our side for this important event, so we will send you tickets to travel to Brussels.*

*And a special guest will be with us that day. Not fully baked, not fully ready, but somehow there, you will be able to welcome your first grandchild in the making. Hurrah!*

*We send you all our love and await you with open arms in our new home.*

*Birgit and Miroslav*



Hilde arrived at Brussels-Midi Train Station, after a six-hour journey from Hanover. She had been living there since 1951, after illegally crossing the East-West border to join Otto in Western Germany. Upon her arrival in Brussels, as always, she pushed along two heavy suitcases, filled with gifts and food, on a trolley.

Birgit met her at the station, and as they sat in the car, Hilde started complaining, as always, about the tiresome journey. But then, she turned to her daughter and told her how radiant she looked.

At the same time, Miroslav was picking his parents up from Zaventem Airport. It had taken them twenty-four hours to travel from the island of Hvar, where they had been living since 1950; first via Split by boat, then via Zagreb by car, and finally to Brussels by plane.

It was their first time on an aeroplane and their first visit to Belgium, where their eldest son had moved for his doctoral studies. When they spotted his curly head in the crowd, they went to hug him, his mother commented on his pale complexion, as usual, and then they were off to Saint-Gilles.



That evening, just one week ahead of the wedding, they all gathered around Birgit's and Miro's plentiful dinner table. Luckily, the parents shared their love of good food, wine, and a great sense of humour. The young couple had feared that communication between their parents would be difficult, due to linguistic and cultural barriers. But with Vesna's basic knowledge of German, thanks to the German tourists they rented guest rooms to each summer, with Nikola's fondness of physical comedy, and Hilde's infectious laughter, everyone was in high spirits.

After dinner, Vesna helped clear the dishes from the table, and on her way to the kitchen, she noticed some framed pictures on the wall. One portrait caught her attention. She held her breath as her hand flew over her mouth.

'Who is this?' she asked.

Birgit returned from the kitchen, looked at the picture, and replied, 'This is my father. He died in 1956.'



Vesna asked how he died, and Birgit explained that he had never recovered from his time as a prisoner of war in Russia.

Vesna looked at the photo more closely and slowly said, 'I know this face!' She walked back to her chair, followed by her daughter-in-law, who looked perplexed.

The generally cheerful atmosphere at the table gave way to a heavy silence.

Looking at the four questioning faces, Vesna recounted her memories of the evacuation of Šolta in 1944, mere days before Miroslav's birth. She hadn't been able to get on the ship because the gangway was broken, and she was too heavy to jump over the large gap. Several German soldiers, wanting to save time during this emergency clearance, had said she should be left on the island. But one soldier of higher ranking had insisted they get a stretcher to carry her onto the ship.

That night in 1974 in Brussels, Vesna recognised Otto as the soldier who had saved her life and that of her unborn child, thirty years earlier.

#### BRUSSELS, KINGDOM OF BELGIUM, 2023

In December 1974, a little black-haired boy was born at St. Peter's Hospital in Brussels. He was named Mikula, after his paternal great-grandfather. He grew up in multicultural, multilingual Brussels, speaking French at school, German with his mother, and Croatian with his father. He was raised with a deep awareness of his cultural heritage, both good and bad. He learned to live with the weight of the Nazi German past, and with the disintegration of the Yugoslavia he loved.

Mikula always preferred to look to the future rather than to his family's complicated past. He lived his life in the present tense until his own daughter started asking questions about her heritage. So, he decided to write the story of his grandparents for her; of the three grandparents he had gotten to know, who all died just years apart from each other, and that of the grandfather he only knew through anecdotes told by relatives. When he was done transcribing the extraordinary interwoven paths of these two sides of his family, he agreed to take his daughter on a journey to find her roots.

First, they travelled to Hvar, to Vesna's and Nikola's graves, where they had been laid to rest, side by side. Then he took her to where Hilde's ashes were buried alongside her long-gone husband's, in Lower Saxony.

On their way back home, the father and his young daughter talked about the countries Mikula's grandparents were born in, which no longer existed. They talked about wars and peace, despair and hope, and about all the personal tales that will forever remain untold. The girl looked over at her father and concluded that somehow, his family's history was that of two Europes that became one.

In loving memory of Hildegard Steinke-Schiedung (1911-2016) and Vesna Jurić-Radman (1922-2007). Family archives provided by, and research done with, Birgit Schiedung (2023)





# ONE, TWO, THREE...

BY SALIMA TIAMANI

THE OLD, abandoned house fascinated me. Every time I passed it on my way to school, its narrow top windows stared back at me with tired old eyes. The wooden tiles on the roof were peeling off like decaying skin. A family of birds had settled its nest on the chimney, dangling off the side like an old-fashioned hat.

Sometimes, I swore I could hear the house sigh. The sound would petrify me, sending shivers down my spine. I would look down at my shoes to focus my racing mind on a familiar sight. That morning I had worn two different coloured sneakers. Not on purpose. I had forgotten my sketchbook and had had to hurry back to my room to get it, so I'd put my shoes on in the dark to avoid wasting another minute.

For some reason, I needed to see the house. I was drawn to it. It was calling me. So here I was, my notebook held tight against my chest, like a protective leather armour, eyes locked with the dark windows. The notebook was a gift from my grandad; somewhere to lock away my nightmares. I

figured, if I drew the old house, it would be trapped in the notebook before it could reach my dreams.

I felt the pebble hit my head before I heard the laughter. I didn't need to turn around. I knew who it was. I clutched my hands around the soft, sturdy cover and sighed, my gaze still focused on the house. Another pebble hit my shoulder this time.

'Hey, dipshit! Visiting family?' called Bobby MacBain.

I didn't need to look to know who it was. It was always him. He and his fine friends; always there to torment me; laughing at his petty jokes. I couldn't stand his jokes. Or his laugh. Or his face. Everything that made Bobby, Bobby, I hated.

'Whatcha got there?' he asked, as he and his minions closed in on me. 'A book of fairy tales?'

They all burst out laughing.

It wasn't even funny. But whatever Bobby said sounded funny to his mates.

'Give me that book,' he said as he tried to rip my precious gift from my arms.

The house seemed to breathe in all the mockery and hatred. I felt it expanding as if filling up its lungs with the atmosphere of disdain and bile. Then, a gust of wind gushed out, lifting our hair slightly, like the soft touch of a hand. It felt warm and damp, almost sticky.

As the door creaked open, the laughter stopped. I knew it had opened for me. But I wasn't sure I wanted to go in.

'Let's get the hell outta here,' said Bobby to his minions.

I heard them rushing away as I took my first step towards the old ruin. I knew it wasn't the best idea, but my feet had decided for me.

As I set foot on the porch, a colder wind whirled around me, forcing me in. Before I realized what had happened, the door slammed shut behind me.

Inside the house, everything was quiet. It felt like I had entered the room and everyone had stopped talking. But there was no one else there. The light was dim and soft, almost like a soft cotton candy sunset over the sea. Instead of the cries of the seagulls, I could hear the house's deep breaths, soothing, hypnotizing. A round table and four chairs occupied the space in the middle of the room. The creaking of the wooden floor and panels seemed to tell a story from the past. Old tapestries covered the walls, scenes woven into old, thick fabric.

I felt the soft touch of an immaterial hand on my shoulder, inviting me to sit at the table. My feet moved of their own accord again, as I continued to wonder what had pushed me forward. I wasn't scared. I'm not sure how I felt, really. But when I sat at the table, a sudden urge to draw took over me. As I laid my notebook and pencils on the table, I dared a look around the room. The framed tapestries of different sizes covered every square foot of wall.

As my sight adjusted to the semi-darkness that was slowly enveloping the room, I noticed that the illustrations represented children's games. Scenes of boys and girls chasing each other in a park, or climbing on trees, or jumping rope. They were so vivid, I swore I could see them move.

Another soft draft brushed the back of my neck, bringing me back to what I was doing. Creasing as I opened it, the fine

leather of my old notebook reminded me of what my grandad had said after he had brought the notebook back from a yard sale. He had told me that the man who had sold it to him looked like he had lived a thousand lives.

The man had been wrinkled and grey, with long, curly hair falling to his shoulders like that of sorcerers of old; his knuckles creaking as he handed him his old possession. He had promised my grandad that the owner of the notebook would never miss a day of play in his life, once he or she knew how to use it.

When I had asked my grandpa about what that meant, he had said that the old man was probably rambling.

The pages started turning on their own and stopped at a blank one, encouraging me to fill it with the images that had been haunting me. I started to draw the house. I began with the roof and drew the rest by memory, my pencil scratching the paper as I tried to engrave every detail, slowing down only to change pencil. After a while, I felt a shiver run down my spine, goosebumps causing the hair on my forearms to stand on end. I knew what that meant. Sketcher was here.

I have an imaginary friend I call Sketcher. He only appears when I start drawing, and he helps me get things right.

He looked over my shoulder, scrutinizing my work like he often does. This time, he did not point out what I had done wrong; he seemed content with the result. He stood next to me and smiled his soft enigmatic smile. I could never tell if he was happy or mocking me. He never said much about his feelings. He asked me if I could draw him. It was the first time he had ever asked me to do so. As I started pencilling in the shape of his body, he put his imaginary



hand on mine and said, *Inside*, in an almost inaudible murmur.

I looked at him for a second, then looked down at my first attempt and erased it to start again. This time, I drew him behind one of the upstairs windows. I made sure I had all the details right. His dark curly hair falling in front of his eyes, his plaid shirt, the stains on his blue pants, every last detail was there.

A noise upstairs startled me and made me jump out of my chair. I was so focused on my sketching that I hadn't noticed my friend was gone. I stood still, waiting to hear the noise again. And I heard footsteps. Hurried footsteps, like someone was running.

I turned around and followed the sound. I climbed up the old creaking stairs. As I was reaching the first floor, I heard laughter. High-pitched, tinkling laughter. Then I heard counting.

'One, two, three... you're it!'

Was someone playing tag? Was I not alone in the house? How come I hadn't heard anything before?

It was dark and I could barely make out the shapes of the doors on each side of the corridor. But it had been morning when I had entered the house. I hadn't made it to school and yet it was as dark as dusk. I carefully put one foot in front of the other, barely breathing as I stepped into the thick darkness before me.

I heard a door slam but could not see which one it was. My heart was beating hard as my mind raced, trying to make sense of each sound; the muffled thump of my heavy feet on

the thick, rugged carpet; the distant footsteps running around behind closed doors. And the counting... 'One, two, three.... One, two, three...' over and over, almost like a nursery rhyme.

I was reaching the middle of the corridor when a door on the far left opened, a ray of light slicing into the blackness. I stopped, waiting for someone to step out, but no one appeared. I weighed my options. Should I go back downstairs and make a run for it? Or should I face whoever was in that room? Surely, it could only be a child...

Just as I was taking a first step forward, a shadow slid through the door, carving out a silhouette on the now lit carpet. The shadow stretched, dragging behind it a real live boy. At first, I could not see his face; still hidden in the dark. But as he got closer, I could make out his curly hair, the red checks of his plaid shirt, and even the stains on his blue jeans were there.

'Sketcher...?' I asked in a hoarse voice I barely recognized as my own.

'Hello, Billy. I'm happy to see you,' he said, grinning. 'Would you like to play a game with me?'

'What game?' I asked, my throat dryer by the minute.

'Do you know tag? It's fun! Do you wanna play, Billy? I wanna play with you. Please, say yes.'

His enigmatic smile was plastered on his lips. He made me think of those wide-eyed puppets you saw on kids' TV shows, with frozen expressions.

'I... I don't... umm... Ok...', I said, not sure I should.

‘Awesome!’ cried Sketcher. ‘Now, remember the rules. If I tag you, you’re *it*. You can go anywhere you want in the house. I’ll be it first. Ready? I’ll give you a ten-second head start.’

As he turned around to start the countdown, I remembered something.

‘Wait! Where’s the safe zone?’ I asked.

Sketcher turned back. He stared at me with his sparkling eyes, his smile slightly crooked, and answered, ‘It’s outside, beyond the porch. If you can make it there...’ And he resumed his counting. ‘One, two, three...’

I ran down the stairs as fast as I could, trying not to stumble and fall.

‘...seven, eight, nine, ten. Here I come!’

I rushed towards the door as if my life depended on it – and it probably did – when I heard a small voice call out to me.

‘Wait! You’re forgetting something!’

I turned around but I could not see anyone. Only the table and the paintings.

‘Don’t forget your sketchbook!’ said the voice.

My eyes fell on my notebook, quietly sitting on the table where I had left it. As I reached out

to get it, a swarm of children’s voices reached me all at once, each one shouting a different

warning, ‘Watch out. He’s here!’

‘Careful, behind you!’

‘Run! Run for the door!’

As I lifted my head, I saw that the characters in the tapestries had stopped playing their games and were looking at me, some almost leaning out of the frame of their canvases. Some seemed to be cheering for me, others had terrified looks on their faces. I didn’t know what to make of it. Was I dreaming? Was this a nightmare? The thumping steps on the stairs brought me back to my reality. I had to get out of this house.

I gathered my stuff in my arms and made a run for the door. But it looked further away than it had been when I had first come in. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Sketcher reaching the last step. He was taking his time but he was walking faster than I was running.

I sped up as much as I could, now out of breath, but felt as if I wasn’t moving at all. I looked down to check whether the floor was slippery but it was as dry as sandpaper.

I managed to gain some distance. I was almost at the door. Only a couple more steps. The door was within my reach. I stretched out my arm; my fingers almost touching the door-knob. I jumped and turned the handle just enough to open the door and feel the warm rays of the morning sun.

I almost lost my balance when a heavy hand grabbed my shoulder.

‘Tag! You’re it!’



The room was bathed in soft morning light. The door had just closed on a new visitor. The young girl was carrying a backpack filled with her favourite books and a snack for when she

got hungry. She had been on her way to the park, where she liked to sit under an old oak tree to read and draw when she'd noticed the old, abandoned house. She wondered why she had never noticed it before.

She dropped her bag on the floor and went to check out the paintings on the wall. As she drew closer, she noticed that they were not paintings, but tapestries embroidered with playful scenes. The walls were covered in them. What an odd way to decorate a house, she thought. She tried to recognize the different games depicted in the embroidery.

One scene stuck out. It looked newer than the others. The children in it were playing what looked like tag. The little girl took a closer look and smiled. The kid who had just been tagged was wearing two different coloured shoes.



## CANINES

BY KJERSTIN LYSNE

WEDNESDAY, 15 JULY; 10:01 P.M.—

WE ALL CAME, in the end. Because that was the solution all along. We don't know for how long (we haven't booked our return flight yet), but we did the right thing. We showed up.

I thought I'd made up my mind to go home for a visit with Lil while Almos gets his parents set up with the support they need. My skin was already anticipating the Southern California sun; my mouth was already salivating in anticipation of tacos. I was looking forward to having my mom and sisters around and eager to babysit Lili. But Almos convinced me that this is an opportunity for me to meet his parents, and for his parents to meet their granddaughter.

'Who knows how many more opportunities there will be?' he asked cryptically. He had a point, and I agreed. We'll bring Lil to meet my family another time.

Next summer??

My father-in-law appeared moved to see his son's child. He was the one who greeted us this afternoon when we arrived at the familial compound. We found him – Laszlo – working in the garden, where I had déjà vu. This must be how I imagined, then anticipated, meeting him, digging in the earth. I've heard so much about them. Almos has described his parents so vividly, I saw this very image before I witnessed it: Laszlo, patiently tending to the flowers that his wife takes such pleasure in.

And where was his wife? Sleeping. Judith sleeps most of the day, Laszlo told us. She's more active after sunset when it's cooler.

My father-in-law looked tired and preoccupied. But through this, he also looked delighted to meet Lil and me, and relieved to see his son.

We dropped our bags in the little house, where we'll be sleeping, then joined Laszlo in the big house. While Almos helped his father prepare the table for lunch, with Lil on my hip, I had a self-guided tour of the big house as I looked for the bathroom.

That's how I first encountered Judith. I chose one of several closed doors off the entry hall, and it opened into a living room. With the shutters and curtains drawn tight, it was fresh in there and as dark as a cloudy night. The light from the entry hall illuminated the room enough for me to make out the base of a lamp a few feet away. Approaching, I felt for the switch and turned it on. By the light of the lamp, I found the familiar furnishings of any living room: a few chairs, a low table. On the couch was Judith.



I gasped involuntarily when I saw her. She looked much older than I'd imagined her, frailer too. She was sleeping with her mouth wide open. Her skin was taut across the angles of her bony face, which was thrown into dramatic relief by the single source of light. She looked— dead. Her hands were even lying on her chest as if to complete the composition. Wrapped tight in her blanket, she could have been a mummy.

As she hadn't reacted to my entry, I verified that she was, indeed, sleeping. Once I was reassured by the slight rise and fall of her front body, I realized that she could still wake up and find me here. Terrified by how awkward a first meeting this would be, I quickly turned off the light and quietly exited the room.

But there's Lil crying now. And I'd been hoping to start *Frankenstein* tonight.

FRIDAY, 17 JULY; 6:22 A.M.—

Just after I put my book down last night, Lil woke up. I had to laugh. Her timing is impeccable. Almos stirred slightly and half lifted his head to listen, but when he sensed me sitting up, he rolled over and went back to sleep.

Then she woke up twice more—the last time, just as I was falling asleep. It was nearly 2:00 a.m. at this point. Nearly 2, and I hadn't yet fallen asleep! In the end, she slept the rest of the night with us. She slept, I slept, we all slept. Poorly.

It must have been her teeth again. Her first two teeth are coming in—her top two canines. Her vampire teeth, I call them. I like to joke that these are the first two to come in because her grandmother's family is from Transylvania. Almos never laughs.

Or maybe I'm not producing enough milk anymore?!

SUNDAY, 19 JULY; 11:11 P.M.—

God, I'm so fucking agreeable.

TUESDAY, 21 JULY; 10:40 P.M.—

It took me several days here to understand what Laszlo means when he says that their house exists outside of time. They live with only slight variations in their rhythm, which is partly determined by the season, but mostly by my mother-in-law. Consistency is best for her dementia.

It is intensely hot here. There is no air-conditioning, of course—this is Europe, after all—so there is this wide margin in the middle of the day when we simply cannot go out—we are confined to the familial compound and either the shade of the garden or the shadows of interiors.

The hours between 2:00 and 4:00 p.m. are nap time. Shortly after 4, Laszlo stirs. He boils water for instant coffee, puts out the biscuits, cuts up a few peaches from the orchard. After a snack, he goes out to water his garden.

I've barely seen Almos since we've been here. In the morning and late afternoon, his father has a program of projects for the two of them around the house or in the orchard. They often have errands to run in the village, and they went to Budapest three times last week on some business of his father's.

Judith sleeps most of the day. If she wakes during daylight hours, she does not wander from the dark front-half of the house – the living room, where I found her the other day, and her bedroom beyond. I haven't seen her outside before

sunset. I usually find her on the front porch of the big house as I leave the little house opposite, after I've put Lili to bed

I never know if she knows who I am, why I'm here, how we're related. Every time I see her, she seems to see me with fresh eyes, as if for the first time. At least she always looks happy to see me. At least I'm a welcomed apparition.

Almos tells me that she often sees people who are not there, which is a common symptom of her dementia, he says.

She must have been an incredibly intelligent woman. I can still see traces, early in the evening, when she is most active. Her pace requires patience now, but she is still capable of conversing in English.

'How many languages did we speak,' she mused tonight, 'when we were little? Hungarian, German, Dutch—'

'French?' I offered.

'French,' she confirms. Then she murmured something that I barely understood, something about a problem.

'Was this a problem?' I asked, not comprehending how speaking four languages could create problems for a kid.

'If you're the teacher,' she said with a hint of a smile about her lips and a twinkle in her eye. She must have been smarter than any teacher she ever had.

WEDNESDAY, 29 JULY; 6:49 A.M.—

I dreamt about water last night. It just came back to me as I put pen to paper to write this—the image of the rippling, wind-tossed surface of water, glistening. And a thrill. A

knowing that the water is deep and that unimaginable life-forms inhabit another world below the surface.

Then I woke up to vague and familiar cramps in my lower belly, which have only intensified as the morning's brightened, bringing the first period I've had since I got pregnant.

THURSDAY, 30 JULY; 10:37 P.M.—

I took Lil with me to the supermarket this morning before the heat made it impossible to leave the familial compound. I volunteered to make a birthday cake for Judith. Because it's something to do. Because – for a day – it gives me a purpose beyond taking care of Lili, which, I suppose, is purpose enough. But to be honest, I'm bored. I need to do something other than play with a baby. Who I love dearly, don't misunderstand me. But I seldom have any other company.

So, I gave myself a mission, although I regretted it as soon as the full weight of menstruation made itself known. I broke it down into several steps, each of which felt like its own mini-mission impossible with my flow, my fatigue, and my baby in tow. Today, I found a recipe for a chocolate zucchini cake on the internet (because my father-in-law's greenhouse is overflowing with them), made a list of the ingredients I need in English, then translated the list into Hungarian with the help of Google Translate.

All the way to the supermarket, while shopping, all the way back—I was paranoid that I was soaking through my clothes. I was paranoid that everyone I passed knew that I'm on my period; that they could smell me. I attracted a lot of stares. Probably because I'm clearly not from around here. But in

my discomfort, I'm more self-conscious, more paranoid than usual.

Tomorrow, we bake.

Oh, why did I volunteer to make this bloody cake?

SATURDAY, 1 AUGUST; 12:49 A.M.—

The cake turned out beautifully. I strapped Lili to my back so I could make it. She fell asleep there, numbed to the pain of her descending canines by a full dose of Ibuprofen. I even decorated it (the cake) with flowers from my father-in-law's garden. Almos was touched, grateful.

The party took place in the covered dining area at the back of the garden and was attended by only a few guests—the neighbours and a cousin. The cousin comes from Judith's side of the family, from what I understand. Their resemblance is striking—or maybe it's just the unnatural pallor that's striking (he has it too). As well as a gentlemanly charm. He brought me a box of Raffaello, which, he insisted, was just for me. I took this to mean that I was not obliged to share them with our guests.

At dinner, we sat directly across from each other. There was a moment, sometime during the entree, when he became still in his chair with his hands folded in his lap and his spine long and rigid. He abandoned the conversation for several minutes as he stared straight ahead – at me, I felt. But when I tried to catch his eye, I saw that his gaze was directed just above my head at a painting hanging behind me. A piece of Transylvanian religious folk art. There are similar paintings hanging in the little house. This one – that the cousin was staring at – is of the Crucifix: Jesus is on the cross; two white-winged

angels pray at his feet; and bright, gayly painted flowers create the scene's cadre.

My eyes loitered on the cousin, watching for the rise and fall of his chest—a sign that he was still breathing. He was so still, he almost looked dead. Like Judith napping.

From these two, at least, I could not keep my secret. I saw Judith smell me coming across the garden. Her cousin too.

I'd just put Lil to bed and had come out of the little house when I saw the two of them standing together at the edge of the circle of artificial light coming from the sheltered dining area. As I walked across the garden, I saw their conversation trail off suddenly as they both took a deep breath and held it an instant while they turned their gaze in my direction and followed me as I walked over to join them. They must have smelled me—there is no way they could have seen me, it was already so dark.

Dinner was good. Almos prepared a feast from the neighbour's homemade blood sausage. And the homemade wine flowed liberally. But at Almos' recommendation, I let it pass. I do not want to take care of Lili with a hangover tomorrow morning.

And my cake was a success. Everyone ooo'ed and aaa'ed over it, and Almos translated their complimentary remarks. Then, after the neighbours had said their good nights, the family moved to the front porch for a last (homemade) *palinka*.

SATURDAY, 8 AUGUST; 10:10 P.M.—

I'm too tired to write much. I just want to check in to say that we're still here and still sleeping poorly. Lili wakes often in the night and fights her naps all day long. Our mattress is lumpy, our pillows are flat, and my body hurts. The days are full, but empty, unbearably heavy, and hot. There are moments when I'm content to only be occupied with my baby, but mostly I'm painfully restless.

And there never seems to be a moment to discuss when we're leaving, let alone plan our escape. I just want to go home now – wherever that is.

TUESDAY, 11 AUGUST; 9:56 P.M.—

I'm so lonely I could cry.

SUNDAY, 16 AUGUST; 10:17 P.M.—

Last night I dreamt of Judith. She was in a hyper-lucid state. Her clarity heightened and sharpened, like the images of my dream. I see her whole body come alive in response to something she sees in the dark. It's night, and she is standing on the edge of the porch in front of the big house, looking into a consuming blackness where the garden should be. Then she moves into that darkness so swiftly and silently she appears to float. Concerned for her safety, I call after her, tentatively stepping into the black where I trust the garden to be. I feel a chill wind proceed her. And when I see her, she comes toward me, reaches for me, with a look of horror on her face. For a moment, I am confused: is she hunted? Or is she hunting me?

I hesitate only an instant before I turn to run. But I'm now in that familiar nightmare where I need to move – fast – but I can't. My legs are weak, and space is viscous. I fall to the ground. What should be the lawn is now a landscape of stuff. The stuff that fills her home: family heirlooms, ceramics, woodwork, knickknacks, folk art. In desperation, I clumsily propel myself forward over the stuff with my arms, my hands and fingers grasping at cheerfully painted chairs, glaringly embroidered tablecloths, wooden butter moulds and wooden spoons, old photographs and paintings. And then there's the Virgin Mary standing right in front of me, arms stretched out at her sides, blocking my escape. The same Virgin from the painting hanging in the little house, but a surreal, slightly larger-than-life-sized version. Behind her, as if to reinforce her message, is a brick wall.

And now the image feels static. Like all the air has been sucked out of this scene, and the light burns orange in the sky behind the Virgin.

I woke up panting, covered in sweat.

TUESDAY, 18 AUGUST; 6:20 A.M.—

It happened in the night, in the witching hour. I hadn't had a nightmare, Lili hadn't cried, but I was suddenly wide awake. Perhaps my body had anticipated my daughter's needs – I got up to check on her.

It was a clear night with a full moon, and it shone through the window in her room. Quietly, I pulled up a chair to bathe in the light while I waited for Lil.

I hadn't been sitting here for five minutes when she woke up to nurse. I brought her back to the chair, our front-row seat



for the full moon. Then, as she latched onto my breast, she bit down hard with her new teeth, her half-protruding canines.

With a sudden rush of an inhale, my head fell back, my mouth fell open, but no sound came out. The scream evaporated on my tongue. And there was an intensity in my head, like a head rush, like I was about to lose consciousness.

But I didn't. And when the sensation passed enough for me to see again, I looked down upon Lilith drinking my milk mingled with my blood, her baby teeth still sunk deep into my areola. She was sucking with a new-found force. It was intense, but it wasn't unpleasant. In fact, it was – euphoric.

Am I a monster? To let her drink my blood? But as she gazed up at me, her green eyes shining in the moonlight, we came to an understanding. We made a pact. Finally, for the first time, I felt her at ease in my arms, satisfied.



## WHISPERS ON THE FERHADIJA

BY YOLANDA VALASSOPOULOU

*Some of the elements in this story are fictional: there was no Irish Embassy in Sarajevo in 1999. The US Ambassador at the time was not a woman. The High Representative was not German. Then again, some others are not.*

SARAJEVO, DECEMBER 1999

IT WAS the fiercest winter since the war, so the locals said. The old war, not the recent one, which had left the city cold, pockmarked and dark, each street a testament to those who had died and those who had survived. The falling snow was so thick that customers staggered half-blind into Boemi, limbs stiff from the cold, cheeks already pinching as blood circulation was suddenly restored.

Inside, locals and internationals huddled together around wooden tables, Sarajevsko Pivo and orange juice in front of them. Naively, when he had first arrived Cliff had thought that the locals drank orange juice because of religion, internationals because they watched their alcohol intake. Only later

was the disproportionate – for the size of the country – use of ecstasy pointed out to him.

‘Sure, you can go up to Pale,’ the little girl from the Irish embassy was insisting. ‘I went there myself last week, to the trout farm.’

Younger and younger, these diplomats were, mused Cliff, drawing on a Marlboro. Most of them on their first posting, eager to explore the Balkans, waiting impatiently for the slopes to re-open, if it ever stopped snowing.

‘It may be okay for you, Louise, but we are not allowed,’ Cliff explained for the umpteenth time.

‘You mean you OHR guys?’ asked Timo, who had assured them that no, Finland never got so cold in the winter.

‘I mean us Americans. Brenda would go ape, and sorry, pals, but having the ambassador on my case was never my strong point.’

The door opened, letting in a good dose of fresh snow and Pedro, the depressingly young and prematurely grey Portuguese deputy head of mission.

‘Record broken!’ he shouted excitedly. ‘I just checked, it’s -30° outside!’

Cliff couldn’t see the point of celebrating the lowest temperature of the last sixty years, but he let it pass. Pedro was one of the good guys, just sometimes too bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for his own good.

‘Do you have a light?’ Cliff looked up to see a woman towering over him – as most locals did.

‘Sure.’ He fished a lighter out of his jacket pocket and lit her Avra. He considered offering her a Marlboro, then decided it would look patronising. Nothing wrong with Avras if you had made it through the war in one piece. She shrugged her thanks, went back to her own table. Just before sitting down, she glanced his way again, raised an eyebrow.

‘Cliff’s got a new admirer.’ Timo smiled.

‘Shut up.’ He laughed, embarrassed. ‘Not all of us are here for the pleasure of meeting the locals.’

‘Most of you are.’ Louise scowled. ‘Have you seen what goes on between the UN police and the local girls?’

‘I’m OHR. I’m above all that shit,’ he retorted.

‘Yeah, right,’ Louise snorted, then concentrated again on her drink.

The beat of nineties Euro-pop got louder.

Pedro got up. ‘Anyone want to dance?’

Louise joined him eagerly on the dance floor.

Timo went to talk to some Finnish blue helmets by the bar, leaving Cliff alone with his beer. He stole a look at the tall woman’s table, then looked for a longer time, waiting for her to catch his eye. When she did, she eased out of her chair and walked over.

‘Hi, American. My name is Dunja.’



She was from the village of Sokolac, just outside Sarajevo, and had fled when the war broke out, seeking refuge with her

family in the city. Even the siege and the constant bombing were better, she said, than being a Muslim girl in a Serb-dominated, or Croat-dominated, village.

Cliff could only nod understandingly. He had been dealing with war criminals long enough to feel his stomach tighten at Dunja's story.

'Do you work anywhere?' he asked, wondering if she was an interpreter. Her English was good enough – excellent, in fact. But she shook her head, drawing deeply on her cigarette.

'I work in a *frizerski* salon, hairdressers, you know. They are everywhere. It's the easiest job to do; you just get a few friends who can hold a brush and open your salon. The boys, they open *autopraonica*, places to wash your car. Girls open frizerski salons.'

'And can you? Hold a brush, I mean?'

There was nothing coy in her reply. 'Would you like me to show you?'

He should have known better. But he waved at Pedro and Louise, still rocking it out on the dance floor, and climbed into his arctic-weather jacket, pulling on skiing gloves, a college scarf and a woollen beanie.

Dunja laughed. 'It's not the North Pole!'

She was wearing a heavy jacket with a smart hat, short boots and leather gloves.

'Yeah, well, forgive me for thinking otherwise.'

He braced himself as they opened the door and walked into the frozen night. Working silently by the river, Bosnian

soldiers were shovelling snow onto army trucks to clear the streets.



The next few days would have been very pleasant for Cliff, except for the fact that the snowstorms stopped, and Sarajevo's temperature dropped even lower, turning the city into a freezer. And except for the additional fact that his flat was broken into. In any other weather conditions, this would have been a minor inconvenience. He had nothing worth stealing, lived in a furnished flat full of potted plants which the owners came back to water every day or two. His briefcase lay open but all the documents he had stupidly taken home from work were still there.

But the window had been broken, and it had taken the use of all his contacts in the Bosnian administration to get a *majstor* to repair it before he froze to death. It had been such a relief to stumble into Boemi that evening, swapping his usual beer for a bracing *Vinjak*.

'What could they be looking for? Everyone knows you work for the wussies.'

A fellow American, Embassy security officer Bobby – he joked that his last name was too long for anyone, local or international, to say – had never shied from pointing out that Cliff was making presentations about war criminals, while the US army was out hunting for them. Recently Bobby had added veiled and not-so-veiled warnings to his repertoire, advising Cliff, again and again, to keep his head screwed on when fraternising, as Bobby called it, with the locals.

‘I’ve heard it whispered down the Ferhadija that OHR is going to arrest a Croat war criminal next week,’ shrugged Timo.

‘When did you last go down the Ferhadija? Who told you this?’ Cliff asked, annoyed that not even this bit of information could be kept secret from the denizens of the main pedestrian street of Sarajevo.

‘Relax, Cliff,’ said Louise and laughed. ‘Even the embassy drivers know these things before we do.’

Cliff scowled at them but lightened up when Dunja walked through the door.

‘I’m off. See you later.’

‘Yeah, later.’ Louise waved.

‘Careful out there,’ added Bobby gravelly. ‘I mean it.’

Cliff didn’t look back.



The only restaurant that had stayed open during the deep freeze was Jez. It had also been the only restaurant to stay open all through the siege; its underground dining room turning it into a natural shelter during the worst of the bombing.

Cliff ordered in his broken Bosnian, not really having made the effort to learn much beyond the basic food groups of *pivo*, *vino*, *voda*, *meso* and *kafa*; beer, wine, water, meat, and coffee would get you far in this country.

*‘I malo kruh,’* he heard Dunja finish her order.



The waiter gave her a sharp look, then shrugged and walked away.

‘What’s that?’ Cliff asked. ‘I’ve never heard this word before.’

‘Just ordering some bread.’ Suddenly she looked flustered and turned her attention to the wine bottle – the imported *Vranac*, a rarity in Sarajevo and a wine that Cliff had become addicted to, following a few late nights in Jez.



Much later, alone in his dingy flat after Dunja had left, Cliff had turned on his TV only to hear that the Croat war criminal he had been following, the one whose imminent arrest was apparently common knowledge down the Ferhadija pedestrian street in the old part of the city, had been sprung from his hiding place. The operation had been -- allegedly -- carried out by Croatian agents. A sinking feeling settled in his stomach: the details had been in his briefcase when the flat was broken into. But he could not imagine any of his international, or Bosnian, friends, caring that much for a Croat war criminal. And he didn’t know any Croats.



Dunja had let him know that she would be late meeting him in Boemi that night. Thank God that mobile phones now worked in the city, even if the signal dropped as soon as you were outside Sarajevo.

Cliff joined the others as Louise was explaining that she had taken up proper language classes.

‘So, I don’t see a sign with Sretan Put and think it’s a place, as most of you do.’ She looked accusingly around. ‘Or see *putarina* and think it’s a swear word.’

Timo snorted into his drink.

‘No, seriously, it means highway,’ continued Louise valiantly. ‘Plus, it can become a matter of life or death if you say the wrong word in the wrong country. Just try saying *belo* instead of *bijelo* in Bosnia, or *kruh* instead of *hleb* in Serbia or instead of *hljeb* in Bosnia.’

‘Really? Why’s that?’ Cliff tried to sound just mildly curious. ‘Because *belo* is saying white with a Serbian accent, and *kruh* is the word for bread used only in Croatia. Even Bosnian Croats don’t use it. I’m telling you, you are much better saying you speak Lokalni instead of making this kind of faux pas!’

Cliff was not surprised when Dunja called again, to cancel their date. Nor could he stop his stomach plunging to his feet. He stumbled to the bar and came back with a *sljiva*.

‘Hey, are you ok? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.’ Louise was the only one to notice that his hands were trembling.

‘Just a chill. They left the door open again. Idiots.’

She nodded knowingly. ‘Come on, let’s dance. It’ll get your circulation going.’

He swallowed the *sljiva*, enjoying it burning his throat. ‘Sure. Why not?’



Bobby came to the OHR building to see him the next day, his face longer than usual. 'I thought you might want to have a look at this.' He slid an envelope across the desk.

Suddenly Cliff was sure he did not want to see what was inside, but with Bobby standing there, he could not avoid it. A single sheet of paper fell out. It was a copy of a photo ID card, identifying Dunja, or, according to the ID, Marija Lipić, as a member of Croatian military intelligence.

'You think I am not your friend, Cliff,' Bobby said tiredly. 'But I'm just trying to look out for all Americans here. I found out too late about your girl. This is my fault as much as yours. Now, it's too late to do anything. So, I'm leaving this with you. You owe me one.'

Bobby didn't wait for Cliff to reply. He walked out, leaving Cliff with his head on the table.

After a long time, he glanced outside the window. It had started snowing again. At least that meant that the temperatures would rise to just below freezing instead of nearing absolute zero. Boemi would be packed again. Cliff resignedly put his jacket on, locking the envelope in his desk drawer. Suddenly he needed to see the little Irish girl and the annoyingly cheerful Portuguese deputy more than anything.

THE END



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See website: Writers Festival of Belgium ([writefest.be](http://writefest.be))

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# NOTES

## A STORY OF TWO EUROPEES

1. Now Gdansk
2. Now Strasburg

