

Refugee

BOSNA I HERCEGOVINA
БОСНА И ХЕРЦЕГОВИНА
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



Adnan Mahmutovic



‘Motherland—home.’ I pull my forehead from the lukewarm bus window as the words bounce inside my head. My name is Almasa, and I’m an anonymous woman on a bus full of Bosnians that is heading for the Swedish west coast, to Uddevalla, another stop in the line of refugee camps. It is December 1993. The bus is full and the air is fummy, but no one sits next to me, not even the two boys who are my age, especially not those ugly teenagers. I told them I’d bite off their little penises if they didn’t stop singing Bosnian pop songs about booze and sex on the beech.

Ho?me, I write on the window, inscribing a question mark in the word’s core. As if tasting unfamiliar food, I move my thin, pale lips, whispering, ‘Ho?me, there’s no place like it.’

I want to be consumed in longing—in tear-shedding, heart-aching, mind-burning longing for my motherland—but nothing takes hold of me. Crossing thousands of borders does not make me homesick. Not even crossing a line of no-turning-back, back where I should belong by the rule of birth. I fail to be a normal refugee, a cliché of a woman.

I hate my eyes. They are dry like explosive powder. I want to break the warm window and thrust a shard in my thigh, just to see if my body will thrash in pain.

I start thinking about the bus, as if urged to place myself into a proper setting, a world where I could be taken seriously. The evergreen Swedish forests between the two camps look like the numerous countries I passed through on my way out of the Balkan war. The countryside is like scrambled eggs with spinach that Mum made on Sundays. Even now, everything seems to be on the way away from me, like a wind running a hurdle race over clouds. But not the bus, this Swedish bus, which smells bitter with its clean black and grey seats big enough to shield me from the passenger in front of me. The ceiling is high with soft light for those who like reading, and air conditioning for those who like to be cooled even on a winter day. This bus is the antithesis of the rattly vehicle in which I left Bosnia: people sat in the aisle, children jumped on the torn seats as in a pillow war setting wafts of dust. Like a bus from exotic films about fortune-chasers in South America, with luggage and bigger animals on the roof and smaller poultry flying back and forth inside. Ho?me sweet ho?me.



I do not need to close my eyes to be back there where it all started, six months earlier. I do not suffer from flashbacks, no, more like slow motion reruns of my old life.

Kurban Bayram, June 1993. The old bus was smouldering in the early summer heat. I put my point finger at the dirty window, trying to draw a face without lifting its tip off the glass. The bus bobbed up and the drawn character's hair turned wavy just like mine.

I whispered, 'There you are, Father, pretty just like I am, perm and all, and just as dusty. If I clamp my lids really hard, I can see us there, in the tub: you imitating my giggle as I sprinkle you in the face, mother all sweaty and panting, scrubbing our heads and backs, splashing dirty foam down with steaming water. My brothers are hiding all over the place to escape the Sunday bath. Mum cries, "Come on boys, I haven't got all night!" Only I can't be remembering this. I was too small; my brothers were too big to let Mum wash them. Maybe it's just your story of our childhood that wafts through my head. Your voice. Your face. You know, you're the only bearded person I can stand.'

I caressed the sketchy features and the image pulled a wry face.

A female voice itched my ears, 'She's crazy. I won't let my Jasmina sit close to her.'

'They killed them all. It's a miracle she's alive.'

'She doesn't look alive.'

I pressed my palms against my ears and counted to ten. As I put my hands down, the buzzing chatter invaded and nobody's voice was clearer than any other's. I put my hand over my nose as if the sounds smelled bad.

I wrote my magic word "Dad" under the simple sketch. I stared it as if waiting for it to begin to dance and leave me, betray me. I scowl at my pale reflection in the clean patches of the surface, thinking, You look like me, girl. Your clothes are ugly, your hair is greasy. Pinch your cheeks. Show there is still blood in you.

The bus stopped.

'Passport check,' the bus driver yelled out. People became silent and started digging in their pockets and handbags as if they had no idea



where their documents were. The driver waddled down the aisle, stretching his back and gathering red passports with yellow lettering, SFRJ.

He tapped me on the shoulder. 'Yours too, honey.' I took him by the wrist and twisted. He pulled his hand back and eyed the rest of the bus in case somebody had seen what had happened. He leaned over me, and hissed hoarsely under warm, nicotine breath, 'Show me your passport or I'll kick your arse off the bus.'

I opened my handbag—my only luggage—took the passport from the top, slapped the man on his willow-branch moustache and gave him a gentle smile. He backed and looked over the bus once more. People were still busy rummaging in their bags, making cross signs, muttering Quranic prayers, flicking rosary beads, or rubbing their passports for luck, all according to what creed sat closest to their hearts.

The driver folded my passport in the middle, continued down the aisle and went on hollering, 'Passports, please!'

I looked out at the insouciant clouds and the mercilessly blue sky. The clouds had no boundaries to cross. Their home was a place so desolate it mocked destinations.

A boisterous voice made me lift nose from the glass. 'Let's have a laugh? Come on, gather around me.' A hefty, wide-toothed woman walked by me and winked confidently, like an ancient, big-breasted statue coming alive. A moment later, a little group of men mustered in the back.

She said, 'Have you heard the one about Tito going to the States and forgetting the medals?'

A man came from the middle of the bus and sat at her feet, 'Go on tell us.'

'For God's sake,' his wife yelled at him. 'We've hardly left our country, and you're already making a fool of yourself.'

A voice added from the front, 'Telling jokes? Please, we should be crying and not acting like fools, as if we didn't care.'

'Oh, come on, what's this whining? We're running from bullets and knives and you want to long. Long for what? Cheer up, for the late Tito's sake. You're like old maids. And we know what old maids need, don't we?' The woman made herself comfortable and she winked at the couple of men who were waiting for her funny stories.



A toothless, scrawny man said, ‘Tell us a joke.’

‘What kind would you like, honey?’ She pinched his cheek.

For me, telling jokes was a particular and peculiar talent, an art.

Most people forget a joke as soon as they have laughed at it. I did. My father had been very fond of political jokes—they gave the people a chance to have a say.

I stood up to see who was doing what. The woman signalled me to come and join them. She spat in her palms, rubbed them against each other and commenced, ‘You know how an American, a Russian and a Bosnian were tested to see if they could keep a secret?’

I sat down, at a safe distance from her.

Her pack of men chanted, ‘Tell us, tell us.’

‘Now, all three of them were told a secret. They were tortured, one by one, and I mean nasty shit. Not some cultivated stuff like the truth serum.’

The man with a toothless gab giggled. ‘I know that one.’

She slapped him in the head and he shut up. ‘So, the Russian lad threw in the towel after four days, the American after five, but after ten days the Bosnian was still silent. They couldn’t bloody believe it. Our bloke was adamant. So they stopped the procedure and went to his cell to give him the good news. They found our super-silent guy banging his head against the cell wall crying out, “Remember you fool, remember, they’ll fucking kill you! Why can’t you remember?”’

I laughed and hit the seat edge with my head. The woman’s mouth was like a sieve, all her energy just pouring through. I felt infected by the same germ. I wanted to cringe at her feet, embrace her rebellion.

I sat still.

‘Did you hear the one about a sixty-year-old maid who was living alone in some Godforsaken village the Serbs pillaged?’ The woman’s eyes opened as she remembered that one. She dried her forehead and exhaled as if preparing to take a leap. The men came closer, almost climbing over one another.

‘Well, the old maid heard about torches, glistening blades, daylight thefts and above all, raping. She was so moved she would not even cringe in a corner or something. She spent her time nailed to the window, waiting



for her fate. So when a Chetnik plunged into her house, rifled through the place, took what little chattels she had and suddenly was on his way out, she cried out after him, “What about raping?”

Her crowd swayed like dancing dervishes. A man took a paper bag, put it over his mouth and panted into it. ‘Huh, you’re bloody killing us.’

I stood up. Stiff. I moved towards the back of the bus. I could not quite see the woman. I saw a girl. Familiar. Scrawny and pale faced and curly haired. My arms, big and hairy, shot out to grab her. It was like a recording I could not change no matter what I did, or thought, or desired.

I pushed away the merry men and hissed, ‘How about rape?’ I grabbed the woman’s ears and threw her on the floor. I tore open her blouse, exposing her breasts. She screamed. I hit her over the mouth with the back of my hand, yelling, ‘Shut up bitch, I don’t like noisy whores!’

I pushed myself from her, sticking my hand between her legs, as if I was trying to grab something and pull it from out of there. The woman’s body bent as if her own stomach was trying to dislodge her from the floor, jerking her more and more until she shrieked.

‘I told you to shut your mouth up, not your cunt, you Muslim bitch!’ It was like speaking in tongues. ‘Open it! Open it! It’s dry! I don’t fucking like it dry!’

Then I jerked my hand up and down above the woman’s face as if emptying a bottle on it. ‘Here’s to make you wet! Drink it! Loosen up! Fucking open it!’

I felt a smell of nicotine and a hit in my head.

I woke up on another bus with a pulsating horn.

An old woman was combing my hair and holding a wet handkerchief over my bruised face. She recited short prayers as if to disperse evil spirits.

‘Dear child, what came over you? What made you do that?’

I did not speak, not even when we arrived in Swinoujscie, Poland. I gazed at the harbour. There it was, a border, a new one. On the other side of the fog was Ystad, Sweden. I wished I were Vist, the mythical Swedish giant who tore off a part of land and threw it into a vast lake to make a crossing for his lady-giant.

Whispers sneaked from behind, enveloping me. I clamped my

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teeth shut and wished over and over again my Dad were there to scold me for what I'd done. Or, maybe he too would take revenge on the woman for ridiculing my pain. Maybe he'd tell me I was not the bad guy, or bad girl. Had he not been over and done with, like the rest of the bathing crowd, I would not need these unfamiliar, milk-smelling fingers to comb my hair.

The bus drove onto a ferry ship.

The bus enters the yard of the Uddevalla refugee camp, my third. A wood of Christmas trees glistens in the evening light, then disappears. Two dirty-yellow buildings outside the window. Above, two crescent moons rise in the naked twilight. It is cold, and the haze from my breath covers the window. Once more and perhaps for the last time, I draw my father's face: eyes, eyebrows, nose, and give him a smiling mouth. 'You look so funny, Mr. Storyteller. I love you even though you're dead more than anybody alive.'

I pucker my lips and kiss the forehead, giving it a third eye.

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