HUSK, ROOT, BONE

by Tamara Lazaroff

I had been in Ohrid only an hour and already I'd been offered two rooms. One by a desperate-looking man at the bus station when I'd arrived at dawn, and the other by a well-dressed woman who said she was the mayor's wife. I had said no to both. I was good at saying no—or so I thought—and so, alone, with my pack on a step outside the one open minimart, I sat drinking from a bottle of buttermilk, watching the town slowly come to life.

Waitresses in skinny jeans were out arranging their tables and chairs on the cobblestones. Fishermen were walking to their wooden wharf. The early summer sun was rising over Ohrid Lake. It was beautiful, too, the lake. Round and deep-looking, almost turquoise in its blueness—like an eye in a volcanic socket. An actual wonder of the world, according to my Balkans guidebook. Here and there, the sun's rays hit its surface and made surprising flashing diamond points.

Of course, that was the moment I saw him.

I didn't want to see him, or ask to, but he came anyway, riding a bicycle with skinny, banged-up wheels. He was pedaling it very slowly, leisurely, as if his life were a holiday, with a bare chest and cut-off shorts. His hair was wet and all slicked back, and he smiled as he passed, and then he stopped and pedaled backwards toward me, which made me think that I knew him. I didn't. How could I? It was almost impossible. But he looked so familiar. Like he could've been a friend or might be, and I needed a friend so badly then—but not at any price.

He smiled again, looking at me through his round-framed spectacles.

"Hello," he said with a near-perfect English accent.

"You speak it? You speak English?"

It had been a long time.

"Of course. And five other languages—fluently. My native, Macedonian, and Serbo-Croatian, German, Russian and French." He was also a philosopher, though what kind he didn't say. "Zlatko." That was his name. "And yours?"

"Magdalena. Maggie, for short," I told him, trying not to trust too quickly.

"You are a student?"

"No," I laughed, slightly flattered. "I'm not that young."

"From?"

I was glad that he asked.

"Australia. But my grandparents and my parents were born

here, in Macedonia."

They had migrated from Yugoslavia, as it was then, after the Second World War. I told him so.

"Ah, so you are here to know your roots?"

I nodded. "Yes, sort of."

I didn't mention that my mother had recently died. But why would I?

"Well, Magdalena," he said, looking at me intently, the lake still sparkling behind him. "I think I can help you. If I may ask, where are you staying tonight and all nights?"

He had seemed so charming at first, too, but when I told him that I wasn't yet sure, he insisted, all extravagant gestures, that I should come to stay with him. He had a flat close by, close to the lake, to Ohrid's cafes, its nightlife. It could be for the long or short term. It was all up to me. Every day he would cook me feasts. He would show me the sights that tourists didn't normally see.

But I did not want him to cook me feasts or show me the sights that tourists didn't normally see. I wanted to discover them for myself, on my own. Even if he did look familiar, like a friend, or like he could be. And especially because he was a philosopher. I was tired of older men with big ideas. Besides, I knew where sleeping in his flat would inevitably lead, and I didn't want things to go that way for so, so many reasons.

So, I said no, thanks, for the third time that morning and found somewhere else to lay my head.

Still, later that day, after I'd showered and settled into my room in the old part of town, he, Zlatko, came to pick me up. Because I'd told him where I was staying. In fact, I'd let him walk me there himself and, on the way, I'd relented, I'd agreed, I'd said yes to letting him show me the special spot by the lake that tourists didn't normally get to see.

So, there he was at the gate.

I let him in and told him what my landlord had told me. About the young, reckless men who, in the height of summer, jumped off the cliffs above us into the lake, into the blue, blue water.

"But I won't be doing that, just so you know," I said, meaning both literally and in terms of any hopes he might have had about me and him.

Still, excitedly, I carried on. I told him about the insides of the traditional nineteenth century hotel-house I was staying in. With its rag rugs, wood fire stove and copper cooking vessels hanging from nails on the walls, I thought to myself, privately, it would've been something like the house my dead mother had grown up in.

Zlatko didn't seem too impressed by any of it. Instead, he was a little sour. He wondered whether my room was too small, too musty, too dark, and if I found my authentic mattress lumpy or hard.

"The bed in my flat would have been softer, more comfortable for you," he told me.

Even so, when my landlord came out and shook Zlatko's hand, Zlatko shook his back. He asked after his health. My landlord asked after his. They addressed each other by their first names, their diminutives: Zlate, Stojche. And when I expressed a pleasant wonder about this, they told me that Ohrid, it was a small place. Everyone knew each other and each other's business. And that made me feel safe. Well, safer. It felt almost familial as we, Zlatko and I, waved goodbye as if to an old uncle and made our way along the cobbled streets back to the center from which we had started.

There, two bicycles were waiting, leaning above the steps at the minimart entrance—his, wonky-wheeled, and another he'd borrowed for me. He hadn't locked them, I noticed out loud.

"Well, we do not have crime here in Ohrid," Zlatko told me flatly.

There weren't any helmets, either.

"And nobody cracks their head in Ohrid?" I said, teasing, joking again.

But Zlatko didn't laugh. He told me what he thought and had always thought: that in the Balkans people weren't as afraid of life as they were in the West, where I came from.

"That is one point of difference."

I said nothing but felt that maybe I had been with him, or

was by nature, overly cautious. Maybe he was right. Maybe I should try to relax and have some fun. I decided I would.

So, off we went, wind in hair. And I was suddenly glad, glad I had agreed to come. We began along the Kej Marshal Tito, the esplanade. It was good to move fast, to use my legs after being so stationary, so stiff on the overnight bus from Istanbul.

We passed the lakeside roasted corn and sunglasses stands and a travelling amusement park with its rusted Ferris wheel and squeaky merry-go-round. At its end, we took a dirt track. Then we came to gravelly road. We cycled along it for a while, went through a tunnel and then took another path back towards the shore. Fast, fast, we went.

Soon, we came across a long stretch of neglected-looking, paint-peeled hotels. Algae-filled swimming pools, faded deck chairs. From behind, curious and enlivened, blood pumping, I called out to Zlatko, asking him what they were, what they were doing here, these abandoned buildings. He called back to say that they were the old Communist people's hotels. That, before capitalism, all citizens could come for one free lakeside holiday every year. But now, now that Yugoslavia had fallen, well, it was too bad.

"It's too bad," Zlatko said again, slowing down. "The hotels are privately owned and the people who bought them from the government thought that tourists would just fall from the sky, that money would fall, too. They thought business is like that. So

easy. We were under Communism for a long time. And now, we don't know how, we've forgotten, how to sell, how to promote. We're ashamed to."

I thought about this as we continued.

Then, after a short time, we came to another path. It was narrower than the ones before. At its opening, Zlatko stopped. I stopped, too, and looked down the steep slope. It was just as Zlatko had told me earlier that morning. It was a place you would miss if you didn't know what you were looking for, grown over with weeds and long grass as it was.

There was nothing to do but go down. Down he went. With only the slightest of hesitations, down I went, following, though after a while I had to get off my bike and walk as the ground was full of stones, hard. Eventually, we came to a clearing. It was a plum orchard left to run wild, just as the people's hotels had. And then, just beyond that, there was the section of the lake, a small cove. Zlatko led me to it, and we stood on the sandy bank silently looking out ahead, having arrived.

"This is it?" I managed after a time. "This is the special place you wanted to show me?"

He nodded. "Yes."

My jaw locked in disbelief.

Really, it didn't look so special to me. It was just a little inlet, not even that. It was a tiny, toy-sized bay for toy-sized boats made by children from sticks and leaves and other bits of debris.

The water was all foamy and stagnant and dirty-looking, and it was hedged in by a wall of tall reeds that blocked the rest of the view of the lake, which was bright and blue and clean in comparison.

"Well, why don't you go in?" suggested Zlatko, brightly.

"Go in?" I said.

"Yes. It would be good for you."

"Good for me? Why don't *you* go in? It would be good for you."

In defense, Zlatko replied that he had already been for his swim that morning, just before he met me. Did I remember his wet hair? I did.

"But how do I know? You could've just washed it under a nice, hot shower," I told him.

He tutted, "Oh, Magdalena, Magdalena. What should we do with you?"

"It's cold," I said, as I tentatively touched the water's edge with my hand, my fingertips.

"Oh, yes. Summer is late to come this year. But go," Zlatko encouraged. "Go in. You will not regret it. You will feel—how do you say?—alive, invigorated. All the people do this at this time of year. It's a local tradition. Besides, you will see. Soon there will be too many bathers from all over the world here. You will not have a chance like this to have the lake for yourself."

And so, what else could I do? I went, wanting to prove to him, to myself, to I-don't-know-who, that I, too, could live my life

without fear like they did in the Balkans, like we didn't, supposedly, in the West. I tried to prove my kinship, my belonging, my fearlessness. I kicked off my boots, I peeled off my top, I pulled down my pants.

Underneath, I was wearing my landlord Stojan's Montenegrin girlfriend's bathers. He had lent them to me—she was away—and they were much skimpier than I would have chosen for myself. A one piece with legs that rode just about up to my armpits, two strips of material that barely covered my breasts. Self-consciously, like that, shoulders rigid, in the loud, multi-colored Lycra, I entered the lake, stick-figure-like.

"They're not mine," I called back, in case he was wondering.

"They suit you. You look good," Zlatko assured.

I couldn't see the expression on his face to know if he was being sincere or laughing at me. Anyway, I didn't care. In measured increments, I waded in. Millimeter by millimeter, an ice age passed. I made it to just above my knees.

"I don't think I can go any further," I called out. "It's freezing."

"Just dive. Put your head under."

"I can't."

"Try."

"No. I can't. I don't want to."

I came back, shivering. My teeth clacked as, failed, I

dropped down next to Zlatko on the sand. He was resting on his side, leaning on an elbow and looking up at me. His hopeful smile was unnerving.

"One day, one day, I will make you go in, Magdalena. And you will go because you want to," he said, as if there really was going to be a future between us.

I doubted it. But, still, he beamed, and he went on beaming. He looked at me—differently. He wouldn't stop staring.

"What?" I said, annoyed now.

He didn't give any answer. He only kept looking in that way that he hadn't before. Like I was the center of his universe. Like a dog. Like he wanted to do something stupid like fall in love. But I wouldn't have it. I wouldn't look back. I picked up a fistful of sand and let the grains drain through the hole my clenched hand made.

I said, trying to divert his attention away, pointing with my chin over at the jagged, snowcapped mountains in the distance, "That's Albania over there, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, but he wouldn't look at it, only me.

"Have you been?"

"No," he said, still staring, dreamy, monosyllabic.

I tried another tack. "So, what branch of philosophy did you say you were in?"

Nothing, no answer.

"What is it?" I exploded in exasperation.

I was angrier with myself than him. How had I let this happen? What was I doing sitting here in these stupid bathers? Why had I agreed to come to this scummy, dirty cove with a guy I didn't know, who clearly wanted something from me that I didn't want to give. I didn't want this. This is not what I wanted. I wanted something bigger. I had come to here, to Macedonia, for a bigger experience, not for some stupid fling.

I sighed. I was so, so tired.

Standing up, I wiped the sand from my backside.

"I want to go," I announced.

Back in town, in the busy, cobblestoned square, with relief I leaned my bike against the minimart and tried to frame an end.

I said, "Well, Zlatko, thank you very much for showing me your special place. Thanks. Thanks a lot. Here's your bike. And now, goodbye."

And then I waited—I don't know why—for him to assent or at least acknowledge me. But he just stood there silent, as if there was something I had not done, had not understood yet about my end of a bargain that I had unknowingly entered into.

"What?" I said again, thinking he would explain, but he didn't. So, I took a wild guess. "Look. I'm not going to have sex with you."

At that he laughed. It was short and sharp. He threw back his head and inside his mouth I saw the missing molars at the

back, the teeth that had been pulled or rotted and fallen out, probably long before we'd met.

"Magdalena," he said, evenly. "I don't want to have sex with you. You're not my type. Besides, you don't move like a lover. You don't have that way."

Those were words that should have put me at ease. And yet, I felt them as a little jab, a stab because I would've liked to have been his type, even if he wasn't mine. I would've liked for him to have wanted me, even if I didn't want him. I also felt, secretly, that he must have been lying to save his pride, to save his face, the same way I would've tried to have saved mine if I were attracted to him.

"Good," I said and turned to go.

"But wait," he said, reaching out to touch my arm but not, hovering over skin.

"What is it?" I said. "Would you just tell me? What? Am I supposed to give you money? Is that it?"

"Don't insult me," he said in a low tone.

So, I didn't. I really didn't want to insult him anymore.

I said, "Look. I'm tired. I just want to go and rest."

And then he said, with a smile of an altogether different kind, the smile of a magnanimous host, "But, surely, you must also be very hungry after the long ride. Please. I can show a very good restaurant, the best, where you can eat the most delicious trout from Ohrid lake."

"I'm not hungry," I told him.

"Well, then, I can show you where you can have a very nice, a very good drink."

"Not thirsty either," I replied, but it was beginning to dawn on me that maybe he was trying to tell me that he was, that this was what this was all about.

"Okay," I said. "Let's have drink. But not from a bar. Let's make this quick. I'll get something from the minimart. What do you want?"

He told me. I listened.

I got it, the juice he specified. Peach.

I got myself something, too. Another bottle of buttermilk. And a bag of chips.

Outside on the minimart step, then, we sat. We twisted off our lids. We drank. We ate, we munched a little angrily, the both of us. We finished our business. The transaction, whatever it was, I felt it had been settled.

Then we wiped our mouths and went our separate ways.

He went his. I went mine, back to the quiet room at Stojan's and my hard, lumpy bed. In it, I slept and slept, and I did not plan or wish or think that I would see Zlatko ever again.

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In the days, the week that followed, I did other things, the bigger

things I thought I had come to do. I went to see the churches, the icons. I watched children picking new, green plums. I climbed a mountain, the Galičica bordering Albania, with two Bulgarians, amateur mountaineers who had arrived the day after I had at Stojan's crumbling hotel-house.

On other days, I took buses to nearby towns. I was looking for nothing in particular, just looking, taking in what could've been mine, was, or never had been.

One Saturday, I came across a travelling book fair in a school yard. I bought a pocket English-Macedonian dictionary. I made use of it. I learned new words. I remembered others I had once known. In the old market—*sta-ra-ta char-shi-ja*—I practiced these words with anyone who would listen, who would talk back. The chicken seller, the old, scarved grandmothers come down from the mountains to sell their potatoes—*po-ta-ti*—rugs—*ke-bi-nja*—and herbs—*bil-ki*—medicines. I gave my compliments to the cheese makers in their hall, after tasting their feta and yellow cheeses—*kash-ka-val*—from the blades of sharp knives.

"Hmmm. *Vkusno*!" I told them.

I wandered the streets.

I wanted to know where the Roma, the gypsies—*gjupcite*—lived.

"What for? Don't go there," said the furrow-browed woman clutching a baby in her arms. "It's dangerous."

I went, anyway. It was fine.

Another time, I went to see an archaeological site, a ruin of an ancient Roman city built on top of a Greek one.

I visited a museum which, during Ottoman times, was a military high school. The father of modern-day Turkey, Atatürk, went there, I was told in the hall by the cleaner lady—*chistachkata*—as she leaned on her mop. She took me, on her way home, to see another nineteenth century revolutionary's headquarters-house—Gotse Delchev's. She had the caretaker's key to open his door. And once inside, I saw, in a glass cabinet, the symbols of oath: a sword crossing a gun over a bible that the freedom fighters (or terrorists, depending on whose side you were on) had to kiss to seal their allegiance to the Macedonian national liberation cause.

Another day, children—*deca*—the future, from countries from all over the world. Well, the ex-USSR, ex-Yugoslavia, Romania, Armenia, Turkey, Iran. On the cobblestones, they were setting up their easels. They had come to paint passersby, street scenes, and also to make friends. It was an international relations activity, the adult organizers told me cheerily.

And yet, when I approached one dark-haired boy and spoke to him in Macedonian, he ignored me. He would not respond. But when I repeated myself in the cold, hard currency of English, then and only then did he look up, his eyes bulging in apology and shock. From that I understood the hierarchy of nations in the region, not just economically, but socially.

Macedonia was the lowest of the low, like the old dog I had seen on the street, on the *korzo*. Patches of fur missing, all bones, he was so weak he could not stand up. But no one would help or feed him. The shopkeepers only laughed at me when, distressed, I called out to them, "Look. He's going to die. Have you got some meat? Have you got some scraps? Have you got a bone?"

Seeking solace and solitude, on another day, I went to visit the graveyards of the old capital, Bitola. I found them peaceful, the Jewish cemetery behind its gate, its toppled headstones, the indecipherable script, and the old Turkish cemetery on the hill grown over with oats and barley, clouds and sky. Past the zoo, too, there was the Christian memorial park, also the home for fallen World War I soldiers from Germany, Britain, France. On that sunny day high up in the Galičica with the Bulgarians, I'd seen the actual battlefront, the wall of stones behind which soldiers had crouched and shot over, and killed, and been killed.

Through the rows of equidistant crosses, separated by their nationalities even in death, I walked.

Tentatively, an old gravedigger, a maintenance man approached me carrying a shovel in his stubby, swollen hands.

"Miss, can I help you?" he asked, his round face friendly, openly curious. "Are you looking for anyone in particular?"

He used the polite, plural of "you"—*Vie*—which always made me want to look over my shoulder to see who was standing behind me. My ancestors, the living, the dead, the ones who had

come before, the ones I had not met.

"No. Just looking," I said, as if I was in a shop.

"Ah, you are not from here?" he said. "Excuse me, but the way your tongue twists, you can really tell."

I nodded and then, wishing me a good day, he made to turn.

"Actually," I called out. "Maybe you can help me. Are there any Catalovskis here?"

There might've been a chance.

"Catalovski? Catalovski?" he said, scratching his head. "Do you mean Chataloi?"

I wasn't sure. Was I mispronouncing?

"Your grandfather," he asked excitedly, "is his name Trajan? Your grandmother, Verka?"

"You know him? You know them?"

"Oh, my. Of course!" he slapped his thigh. "Your grandfather and I used to work together in the Bitola police force. But it's a small world, isn't it. How are they? It's been more than forty years since they left. Are they alive? Are they well?"

"Yes," I said. "They are, but my mother died last year. Do you remember her, too?"

"Not really. She was still a child when they went, bless her soul." *Bog da ja prosti*. "She must have been young. Too young." He patted my hair, and I basked in his kindness, his warmth, his almost-kinship. "Zoran. My name is Zoran." He tapped his chest

with his thumb. "You remember that, and give your grandfather my best, my very best regards. But no, no, dear girl, you won't find any of your relatives here. They'd all be in the cemetery in the village, in Gjavato."

"Gjavato?"

My mother had never mentioned the name. In fact, she had not said much about her early life in the then-Yugoslavia, even when I'd directly asked her. As if the answer was too private, a secret.

"Yes, it's not too far from here," the old man said. "Not far at all. You can go. Of course, it's almost empty. Just the old and the very, very poor. Ghosts. But you should go. You can find the graves of your great-grandmothers and great-great-grandfathers there, if you want. Go."

The next day I made my enquiries. There were no buses that would take me directly to Gjavato, as it turned out, because it was off the main road. I would have to take a taxi. I could share it, I was told—it would be cheaper—for at least part of the way. This I did.

From Ohrid, squashed in the back seat, I travelled with three old, black-suited gentlemen who were only going as far as Resen.

"To visit the grave of a friend," they said.

A country of graves and grave-visitors, it seemed. I was

fitting right in.

Looking out the window, I remembered back to my mother's cold, cancer-shrunken body in the funeral home's small chapel. I'd dressed her myself before the garden service and cremation afterwards. And I hadn't cried. I hadn't since. Everyone had said how strong I seemed. I wondered about that, I really did, when there was a sudden swerve of the taxi and a long beep.

A truck on the narrow, two lane highway had, apparently, overtaken us a little too quickly, but it was alright. Everything was alright, the driver confirmed. Still, shocked back to the present, I held onto the door handle and, collecting myself, listened to the old man up front tut.

"Yep, yep. Did you see the registration plates? He was a Turk," he said, as if that explained everything.

The two in the back with me nodded soberly.

"Aha, aha." The old man up the front had more to say. "They still think they can push us around. Driver, driver, toot your horn again."

I smiled to myself. Those familiar and predictable prejudices. Since I'd been there, so many people, strangers on the street had told me, had wanted me to know, that the reason their country was so backward, so undeveloped was because they hadn't been able to overcome the Ottoman Empire until a hundred years ago. Once, while I was waiting to cross a busy road, a man even kissed me on the cheek when I told him, because he'd asked, that I

came from an Orthodox family.

"We need you," he'd said. "Stay. Come back."

Eventually, the driver let the old men out at their stop. They nodded a somber farewell, paid their share and then, in silence, the two of us, the driver and I, went on for about fifteen minutes or so, until he pulled over by the side of the road.

"Here," he said, gruffly. "Get out here. This is your Gjavato."

Grass and stones was all there was.

"What?" I said. "I'm not getting out here. This isn't Gjavato. No."

"But this *is* it," he argued.

"No, it's not."

"This, Miss, is where you told me you wanted to go."

From his position, the driver would not budge.

"Just take me back to Resen, to the bus station," I said, angry, confused.

When we got there, we argued again, not about the place but the price. He wanted much more than we had agreed upon in Ohrid.

I said, "But you didn't take me where you said you would. I'll pay you what I told you I would but no more."

He was angry now. "Petrol," he said. "It costs money."

"I know," I said. "But you, you didn't…"

Before I could finish the sentence, I had started to cry. It

was a crying, sudden, uncontrollable, that I had not known from myself since when I was child. It was almost a relief. It also stunned me. But what had I expected from these people, from this country? Did I think that everyone I met was going to welcome me home like a long-lost sister, a daughter? Helplessly, I bawled. He paced. We were standing outside the taxi now. We were making a scene. People were staring.

That was enough then. From behind her booth, the ticket seller, a wide-hipped, missile-shaped woman, came out and stood before us. Sternly, she made it her business to find out what the trouble was in her sphere of influence, in her jurisdiction.

In a heaving, hiccupping type of speech, punctuated by nose-blowing and more tears, I told her my part.

The driver told his.

"Idiot. You should be ashamed, Boran," she admonished the man by name. I'd heard the phrase so often as a child. *Sram da ti e.* You should be ashamed. It was just about the worst thing you could say in Macedonian, to a Macedonian. She clipped the side of one of his ears. "And you were going to let her out by the side of the road? Which village was she going to find there? What was she going to do? Get eaten by wolves?"

The driver hung his head.

"The girl's come all the way from Australia."

I nodded at the ticket seller woman. She understood me, I felt.

"Now," she said to me, curtly, "pay him his money."

I did what I was told.

The crowd that had formed around us watched the counting and the handing over of notes.

"And now we'll find another driver who knows where to go. Come on."

I wiped my tears, and then the ticket seller lady found him, the new driver, a man with kind eyes who introduced himself as Milan.

I got in the car, in the taxi with this Milan and, on our way, in a soft voice, as if I might break or startle too easily, he made gentle small talk. He repeated, with carefully chosen words, what he knew about me, what he had already ascertained.

"So, you're from Australia, then? You've come all the way to see where your *Baba* and *Dedo* and your mother come from? Well done."

"Thank you."

I blew my nose, feeling very silly, but still I let him go on placating me some more.

"Gjavato," he assured. "I know it well. I actually have a friend who lives there. I visit often."

Just then we passed the point where the bad driver had told me to get out.

The good driver tried to smooth over that negative memory by saying, "He just didn't know where to go, that is all.

See," he said, in a still soft voice as we slowly turned off the main road. "See. It would be easy to miss if you didn't know."

On and on, he continued explaining everything as it happened, as he did it, so that I wouldn't feel confused, so that I wouldn't cry again, I imagined. I felt gratitude.

"Now look to your right. That is the new Gjavato. They built it after the war. They built it close to the road. They even put up a new church. But we are going to the old Gjavato. Not many people live there now," he said, just as the gravedigger had.

We moved along the windy road.

"Yes, just the old people and the very poor." He added, "But recently—now, this I find strange—some people from the city have started coming and doing up the old houses. Can you believe it? They make them into holiday homes. Sometimes, even tourists from other countries pay to stay in them!" He laughed out loud in his disbelief.

"But who lives there?" I asked, pointing at the lone house we passed on our left.

"There?" he said, as if he hadn't really noticed it before, or he had but he'd stopped noticing. "That house? Well, a long time ago," he began, as if he were telling me a fairy tale, "someone in that family did something wrong, something bad. And then they all had to leave the village. The village ran them out."

"What?" I said, looking back wide-eyed through the glass. "What did they do?"

"Oh, no one remembers anymore," he shrugged. "Stole some wheat, some money. Stole someone's daughter. I don't know."

The tires took on bump after bump. They really took a hammering.

"Anyway, look. See." He resumed his running commentary. "See up ahead. That's the old school. That's the old village hall. They would've held dances there once upon a time."

And then we were turning into old Gjavato central.

The click of car doors. The driver and I stood on the dirt ground now, taking in the fresh air and the view. Over on a green hill, we saw a man with his sheep and staff. He saw us, too. Then an older, stooped man from a house in front of us came out and asked if and how he might help.

Milan spoke on my behalf. He explained my situation, my story.

The man heard it out, and when it was finished, he invited us, he welcomed us to sit with him at his outdoor wooden table. In a thin, warbling voice, he called a woman's name.

"Snezha!"

Immediately, Snezha came, strong-limbed, curly-haired and rosy-cheeked. She was his daughter-in-law, the old man said. And the wife of the shepherd we'd first seen over on the hill. Enthusiastically, the woman brought us coffee, Turkish, and a

syrupy home-preserved plum—*slatko*—in a little glass saucer with a spoon. Then she served us each a cup of water from the *cheshma*, the tap that you couldn't turn off, that gushed thick and fast into the stony trough.

I was worried that it might run out.

"Run out?" said the man. "It comes straight down from the mountains." *Planinite.* They were all around. He waved at them with one arm. "There's never any running out here."

It was sweet, too, that water.

While we refreshed ourselves, the old man who had lived in old Gjavato all his life told me what he could. He remembered, for example, that my grandfather was tall, the tallest man in the village. And the most handsome. Once, when his house caught on fire, he climbed up a ladder to try and save it, and fell on his head and didn't wake up for four days and four nights. But my grandmother, that one, she was a good farmer—*farmerka*. She knew how to work. My mother, however, he struggled to recall.

"What can I tell you? She was young. She used to cry, like all the little kids, because she wanted to help the older ones gather the dried tobacco leaves, but she wasn't allowed."

And then they left, the whole family, like almost everyone else had after the war. To places like Canada, *Amerika*, Australia, to the capital, Skopje, in hordes. Working the land, well you couldn't own anything anymore. Under Tito, it was all co-operatives and handing over your stock. The old man knew that much.

He looked past me, almost through me, into the distance.

I wondered if he regretted it—staying—but something told me he didn't. He had the manner of someone grown philosophical with age, not prone to ups or downs. If he did have any regrets, he wouldn't let himself dwell on them.

"So, you want to see the house?" he said, getting up.

He had some work to do just now, but his two granddaughters, curly-haired just like their mother, would take us right to the door.

And so, they did.

Along the wildflower path, they led me and Milan, who took his place walking two steps behind.

"And no one lives here, no one lives there," the curly-haired granddaughters chanted and skipped as we passed the vacant, often-dilapidated houses.

It was eerie, too, to see them, to pass through a place that must have once been full of life, of the living. How was it to live here now? I couldn't imagine. How had it been for my mother? A wave of emotion, of grief, passed through me, but I didn't cry this time. I felt peace-filled, in fact. Sunlight, yellow, warmed my back. And then we were there.

"Is this it?"

"This is it."

Out the front, there was a boarded-up well—a *bunar*.

There was a house. Well, it wasn't really a house but a

flight of stairs leading to nowhere. I wanted to climb them, but Milan warned against it. The walls and the roof had fallen, or been demolished long ago. By the foundation, I bent down to collect some stones and filled my pockets with them—keepsakes, mementos. And then I looked up at the scene that my mother would have seen when she was a girl: the fields, the mountains in the distance, the sky. Quietly, I started to pace around the ruin, like a pilgrim who'd reached a holy site.

As I did, Milan stood back with his hands behind his back and looked away, giving me my privacy.

Then, when I was done, he moved towards me but not over the magic line of the property, saying, "Okay, so now did you see your grandparents' house? Did you see and hear everything you wanted to know? Are you ready now? Is it time to go?"

These were not so much questions but a polite command.

"Yes," I said. "I'm ready."

There was no need to see actual gravestones.

And so, we went back down the wildflower path, past all the abandoned houses, abandoned-seeming enough. But then, there was a call. Someone was calling from a house's broken window.

"Hey, Milan! Is that you, Mile?"

The voice, of course, belonged to the friend my driver had earlier mentioned.

Long and lean with too many teeth in his horsey mouth,

he was now coming out of a door and lumbering quickly along the path to greet us.

"I knew it was you, brother! Do you think you can come here and steal away without coming to see me first? Huh?" He didn't wait for the answer but turned to look me up and down with some satisfaction. "Well, well, what have we here?"

And that is how we came to go a-visiting. How I came to be the somewhat honored guest sitting stiffly at a table inside one of those surprisingly far from empty houses. The inhabitants, a tiny, old man, an old, toothless woman, three young men, two young women and a howling babe, all already seemed to know about me. Where I was from, what my business was.

I answered the men's curious questions as vaguely as I could about how much, in American dollars, I earned a month in stark comparison to them.

Meanwhile, the two younger women, sour and angle-faced, began to feed the stove new wood for the coffee they were making only for me, since I wouldn't drink the homemade whiskey—*rakija*—they had first offered.

"But why? Are you afraid of how strong it could be?"

In their corner, they cackled and whispered between themselves. I felt sure it was about me. If not, then why did it take the both of them to perform the simple task of preparing the pot with the dark powder, white sugar and water? And how was it, then, that they let the brew froth over? Hot, it hissed on steel like

the quiet curses I felt emanating from their direction.

Still, together, they offered me my coffee on a silver metal tray in an ornate, little gold-rimmed cup with a matching chipped saucer.

As they did, they chanted with one voice, "Welcome. You're welcome." *Isvolte, isvolte.*

And I wanted to say, *No, no, no. It's not the way you think. I don't live the life of luxury you believe.*

And yet, there I was. I felt ashamed—*sram da ti e*—to have come so far to indulge these, my small problems, my little, private griefs.

At that precise moment, then, Milan's friend with the too many teeth wanted to know if I was married.

Quietly, with my eyes looking down, I told him I wasn't.

"Well, neither am I!" he laughed out loud, hoarsely. "What are we waiting for? Let's raise our glasses." He put his arm around the back of my chair. "Let's make a toast. To Australia. To riches, to wealth!"

Uncomfortably, I—we—drank to that.

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Apart from doing these things, these bigger things, I had also found a good and cheap pastry shop near the bus station where I could get a spinach and cheese *burek* for breakfast before I set off

on one of my bus trips.

One morning, I had done just that. I had my greasy little packet in my hands. I was coming out of the shop, taking a left. I was making my way down the cobbled street to the bus station when a car door opened like a barricade, blocking the narrow footpath before me. It was Zlatko, to my surprise, who emerged from inside.

He was smiling, a little sheepishly, I thought, as he stood frozen in one spot before deciding to make a move towards me. Chastely, cautiously, he kissed me on the cheek, and it was only then, when he pulled away and I felt the cool air on the wet mark he had left on my skin, that I realized how lonely I had been—was.

But where had I gotten to all these weeks?

"I have not seen you in the town."

Anyway, the answer didn't matter to Zlatko. He was only happy to see me on this day, he said, one hand up in a gesture of peace or celebration—I wasn't sure which.

In the other hand he was holding a bottle of beer, and I could smell the yeasty breath of it on him, he was standing so close now. I hated the smell of beer. I said so, frankly. I felt I could be—frank.

He shrugged. "Well, what is the problem?"

"So early, drinking?" I said.

"It's just beer. I had a beer with a friend. What is the

problem with that?"

It was my turn to shrug. "No problem."

He was right, of course. It was none of my business. I put my likes and dislikes aside, for the moment, as I was happy to see him, too, despite myself and my earlier misgivings. They had been erased—almost—by time and his absence from my own self-directed experiences. And so, when he invited me to get into the car which belonged, he explained, not to him but to the friend he had been drinking beer with, I did. I got into that car to which Zlatko had no keys and, like that, not going anywhere, we sat in the front driver and passenger seats. We talked. Zlatko continued to drink his beer—I made no further objections to it—while I told him about what I had been doing in the time since we had last met.

It was good to talk to someone in English.

I also thought that he would find it interesting to hear how someone else, someone with at least a connection to the place, viewed his country.

I started from the beginning. I told him about the children I'd seen picking and eating the new, green plums from the trees in Ohrid's old town. And about the mountain I had climbed with the Bulgarians with their amusing checked knickerbocker alpine pants, and their funny feather caps. I told him about the new words I'd learned, too, and about the old market with its cheese makers and chicken sellers, and the rug weavers I'd met. About cemeteries,

reckless Turkish truck drivers, old man gravediggers, and about how I'd found my mother's abandoned village.

But I didn't tell him about the scene I'd made at Resen bus station or how I'd cried uncontrollably like a child. (I didn't even speak to myself about that, but I had almost resigned myself to the fact that I would probably never be welcomed, received or truly belong in Macedonia as I had initially hoped. It was clear that I was seen as just a tourist, a rich tourist at that—which I was not.)

I also still didn't tell Zlatko that my mother was dead, or that so was my father, for all intents and purposes, since I hadn't seen him for more than twenty years—by choice. There was no loss there. I didn't mention, either, the brothers and sisters I didn't have, or my ageing, walker-bound, growing more-confused-by-the-day grandparents who didn't even know where I was, not properly. I didn't want him to think I was alone in the world—which is exactly what I was.

Instead, I told him about apples, the yellow, green and bright red apples I had seen that morning for the first time outside every minimart, every corner store in boxes and boxes, stacked.

"They've come," I said. "They were late this year"—I repeated what the greengrocer had earlier told me—"but now they are here."

"You notice everything," said Zlatko, when I was finished, a little inhospitably, I thought. Like it was a bad thing. Like noticing things about his country was a transgression into his own

privacy, where there were things perhaps that he, too, did not want me to know about.

"Well, what's the—"

Problem, I was going to say, but then there was a sudden, loud knocking on the car window.

It was a woman, a young woman, the knocker on the other side of the glass. She had short, dyed red hair shaved in a zigzag design on one side. She also wore a white, worried face and her eyes were all crinkled up. Squinting, she was looking in at us.

In response, straight away, Zlatko got out of the car. He went to talk to this red-haired, squinting woman and, as he did, she looked at his face and then at mine, back and forth, his, mine, his, mine, with that same wounded, worried expression.

Inside, I just stuffed my face with my pastry and watched the scene unfold through the frame of the window, like it was a movie.

Then she left. Zlatko got back in.

"Who was that?" I said, still stuffing my face.

Zlatko shook his head and explained that she was an old girlfriend of his from Skopje. She was here showing her German translator friend around Ohrid, and she still loved him. She was angry. She didn't want to be just friends. She wanted to be together again, Zlatko told me.

"But it is no good. Of course, I still love her, too. I always will. But our relationship was only cultural. It was not animal. We

understood each other culturally but not physically. It was no good."

I thought that this definition of romantic love was a bit narrow, actually, but alright, I let him go on. Meanwhile, I continued wolfing my breakfast.

"It is like with you," Zlatko said, his brow contracting in seriousness. "When you go, when you leave, I will not miss you with my whole body. I will miss your company, but my body will not crave you like a drug."

Well, I practically spat out that mouthful of cheese and spinach. I told him, swallowing down whatever was left, chewed or not, fast, "Well, my body won't crave you either. What a thing to say! I don't even know you. You don't know me. I come from the other side of the earth. We've met—two—times!"

That made Zlatko laugh, for some reason. He chuckled to himself.

"Anyway," he said, when he was finished, pointing with his chin through the windscreen up to the tall block of graffitied flats in front of us. "This is where I live. If you want, you can come. Anytime, day or night."

"I thought we'd been through that. I have a place to stay already," I told him.

Zlatko chuckled again. "No, not to sleep. Just to visit. I will make you tea. I know you don't like beer." He smiled wryly. "Besides, I think you will find my place interesting."

"And why's that?"

In answer, he offered this information: "It does not matter if I am home or not, I never lock my door. I don't believe in keys. My place is always open to my friends, and to the public. Twenty-four hours, seven days a week. It's a kind of gallery, an installation space, you could say, as well as my home. It's part of my philosophy, my philosophical experiment in living."

"Oh, a gallery?" I said, interested now. "Well, I don't know. Maybe. If I did decide to come, what's the number?"

He said that I would know.

"How will I know?"

He just said that I would.

"How? You've got to, at least, give me a clue."

But Zlatko couldn't. He had to leave on some urgent business in town. What kind he didn't say.

Some other time then—actually, the very next day—I went to Zlatko's flat. Curious, I stood outside the swinging doors of the building. I pushed them open and I went up the grey concrete stairs. Up and down the identical corridors, on every level, I searched for signs, indications of where Zlatko might live, but each door and each doorknob was indistinguishable from the next. Nowhere was there anything special, different, except for the specific piles of holey, worn-out shoes that the various inhabitants and their visitors had removed before crossing their specific

thresholds.

A few times, though, there was a door that had been left open, and I got to peek in at the intimate lives of Zlatko's neighbors, the other occupant-strangers. Inside one, there was an old woman in black sitting by the window darning socks, her paper-thin skin bathed in the afternoon light. In another, there were two teenage boys with dead faces sitting on the couch watching loud music videos, women dancers gyrating. In another, a shirtless man with a flabby gut was grilling peppers on his little balcony. The fumes wafted out, following me down the corridor.

I kept searching. I was enjoying the game, too. I almost didn't want it to be over, when on the seventh floor I came across a door that had a cool blue glowing light above it. This, I just knew, was Zlatko's door as he had told me I would. (There had been no other cool blue lights that I'd passed or seen before that.)

Tentatively, I knocked.

There was no answer.

I knocked again, louder.

Still no answer.

"Hello," I called.

No one called back.

So, I turned the knob. The door was unlocked, as Zlatko had led me to expect. I opened it wide enough to stick only my head through the space between the wood and the frame. And then I saw the strangest thing, a thing I could never have imagined

myself.

Up and down the hall there were nuts, a thick trail of them, scattered on the floor. Some of them were in their shells. Some of them were not. Some had been cracked. Their husks, their meat lay about. They made me smile. I felt heart-warmed by all of them, these nuts. I also felt their invitation. I accepted. I entered and closed the door behind me. Politely, I took off my shoes, though I kept on my socks. In them, I went down the nutty hall to see what I would find at its end.

There was only, as a real estate agent might say, a small kitchenette and a living room, a lounge room, except there was no lounge, just room, mostly space and very little furniture. A small, unplugged fridge that didn't have a door and a tall wooden bookcase pressed against a bare white wall. On it, on the bookcase, there were a few pristine-looking hardcover books. Their spines told me they were: the Bible, the Quran, *American Psycho*, *Tito: Life and Times,* Marx's *Capital* and a collection of fairy tales by The Brothers Grimm. Randomly, I pulled one out and opened it. Its pages were so thin that you could almost see through them, and the Cyrillic script so tiny, so microscopic that it rendered the text almost unreadable.

There were the nuts, too, of course. The walnuts, the almonds, in and out of their shells, liberally scattered around on the living room floor.

And then I heard the door open, click.

I froze like a thief and listened to the hesitant footsteps coming down the hall. I saw Zlatko's head slowly peer around the hall wall as if he really wasn't that used to receiving guests, known or unknown, twenty-four-seven, at all, especially when he wasn't home. But when he saw that it was just me, he smiled. He even looked relieved.

I said, "I came." I said, "I found it, I like it," grinning, looking around at the scene.

Zlatko said, "I knew you would," and then he offered me a pair of thick, crocheted house socks—booties, the kind my grandmother, all Macedonian grandmothers but not mothers, not mine, once made—to protect my feet for the length of my visit.

The perfect host now, he continued with this display of generosity, of welcoming. He asked me if I would like to sit. I did. I cleared a space for myself and sat cross-legged on the floor, making myself comfortable, at home.

Zlatko, then, started to make the tea he had promised he would. From the living room floor, I watched him fill the saucepan with water and put it on the stove. Soon, the water began to boil. I listened to it bubble as I leaned back on the palms of my hands and realized, all at once, that I felt happy, happier than I had been in a long time. Definitely, the happiest since I'd arrived in Ohrid.

Then Zlatko brought the tea in its pot, and two cups.

He sat down next to me and I thought: *Well, maybe we can*

be friends after all. Yes, I could be friends with a man who scatters nuts on his floor.

At Zlatko, I smiled some more.

Still, I had to ask, "What are they about? Tell me."

I picked up a husk and let it fall to indicate what I was talking about.

Zlatko replied, evenly, that there was no one neat answer and that I would have to decide on a meaning—or meanings—for myself, as with art.

I accepted this logic, completely.

Then Zlatko poured the tea. We drank and, while drinking, our conversation opened out. As if we really were already friends, or were beginning to be, Zlatko told me about himself and his life.

He told me about the years he had spent as a young student studying philosophy and languages at the university in the once-Yugoslav capital, Belgrade. He spoke about times even before that: the compulsory year in the army he had served when his country, the country he was born in, still existed and had not yet been split apart and made smaller, small. He wanted to tell me what it had been like. And I wanted to know.

"What *was* it like?" I said.

"They were better times. You could walk into a bakery and say you were hungry, and the woman behind the counter would give you bread."

"And now?"

"And now it is no good."

He told me about his gas and electricity bills and how he hadn't paid them—couldn't. In fact, many people couldn't pay their bills, he explained. Because they were working for companies—factories, department stores, even the one airline—that didn't have the money to pay their employees and hadn't for months, sometimes years. People still went to work, though.

"What else are they going to do?"

"But won't they—won't you get cut off? Your gas and your electricity?"

Zlatko smiled a small, satisfied smile. "They wouldn't do that. If they did, in the winter, people—the old people—would die. There would be riots in the streets."

I said that in Australia, they'd cut you off without anyone losing a second's sleep.

"Well," he said, "that's capitalism. We haven't gone that far yet."

He *hmphed*, proudly.

Changing the subject, then, he told me about more familial things. About his mother who he didn't see so much of—she lived in a town some kilometers away—and his father who had left her, left them, decades ago, during the sexual revolution.

"There was a sexual revolution here?" I said, incredulous.

He said, "There have been many revolutions."

I didn't doubt it. "But," I laughed, "it's just that the sexual

revolution must've happened after my grandparents left the country, after they migrated. My grandmother always told me that I had to be a virgin. For the man—you know, when I got married."

He said, "And are you? A virgin?"

And I said, matter-of-fact, "Well, what do you think?"

"Think?" Zlatko said. "What do I think? I think that I would not marry a woman who was still a child and did not know her own body."

"But you haven't been married," I guessed. "Have you?"

"Well," he answered. "I've been busy with other things. I was a cook in Berlin for some years, I cycled to Iran and back. I have my philosophies and my writing…"

There was a lull, then, in our conversation, but soon we picked it up again.

It was time, apparently—an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, bone for bone—for me to say something about myself, my life, now. Really, I would have liked to have told him about my mother. Not only about her death but about how she and I, like Zlatko and his mother, had grown distant over the years. How even the eight months of living with her again during her illness hadn't healed our grievances. Instead—it felt much more benign to do so—I told him something about my grandparents and what I'd always thought of my origins, or my departure, story. How this body had come to be placed, located, given birth to, given a

nationality in one place and not another—not in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, for example, but in Australia.

Stretching out my legs from their cross, I began, "Well, in the '60s, my mother's father, he left his village to work in a factory in Sydney, to make and save m-m—" I faltered, I stammered as I realized what I was about to say, what I was getting into. "Money." I made that word exit my mouth as fast as possible. "Of course"—I tried to finish quickly what I had started—"he intended to come back. He didn't. He brought over the whole family and they started again. You know, typical post-World War II migrants."

Zlatko nodded, listening.

"And the other grandfather, my father's father," I began, more cautiously, "he was a refugee. He deserted his partisan unit with some other soldiers before a battle they were sure to lose."

"Plus," I added, "he didn't like Communism."

Well, not everybody did. Surely, that would be perfectly understandable. It was understandable, wasn't it?

From there, I began to tag on what I thought was a funny footnote. About how my grandfather had been asked in the camp whether he wanted to go to Australia, but he heard Austria. I didn't get to the punchline. Zlatko cut me off before I could get there.

"Well," he interjected coolly, "it is alright. We have worked things out here without him just fine." There was an awkward

silence that followed, but it didn't take long for him to apologize, looking not at me but at a single whole nut that lay meekly on the floor. "I am sure he had his reasons for leaving."

I swallowed and then half-confessed, "You know, sometimes I do feel a bit guilty. Not about my grandfather," I qualified, "but about the fact that I have had it, well—I've had more opportunities, I think, in comparison, to say—to people—here—like you." I was testing what I was saying as I was saying it out loud for the first time.

Without missing a beat, Zlatko replied, "Well, you can help me, if that would ease your guilt."

He listed the ways. The gas and electricity bills—I didn't need to worry about those. But I could help with the cost of repairing his old computer or, better still, buy him a new one, a laptop, so that he could publish his philosophical papers on the internet for the whole world to read. If I wanted, too, I could buy the tickets to his high school reunion. I could even help him buy a wedding gift for his cousin, and in return he would take me, as his partner, to the church and the reception. I would get to see the culture, the special rituals that most other tourists would never get to see.

Well, I wasn't going to fall for that one again.

"In that way, I can repay you," he concluded.

I sighed and very slowly, windshield-wiper-like, with my forearm and elbow, I cleared some more of the nuts that were in

front of me away.

Then, simply, I got up to leave.

In a cafe on the street, we sat looking at each other twenty minutes after I had taken his house socks off my feet, walked out the door that he did not lock for philosophical reasons, and gone back the way I had come, down the concrete staircase. Zlatko had followed saying, "Wait," but laughing, as if it was all a joke. I had not—waited—but then, at the swinging front doors, I had turned, angry. I had flashed my eyes, I am sure, and Zlatko had said, "Come. It is too soon to say goodbye. Just one drink. I will explain everything." I'd weakened. "Alright."

One drink.

So there we were sitting under an umbrella on a terrace with a view of the lake, a waiter circling around us like he was a shark and we were bait.

One drink.

I was saying, "Tea."

And Zlatko was saying, "Why not wine?"

Finally, I said, "Have what you want, but I want tea. I suppose I'm paying?"

"Are we keeping accounts now?" Zlatko replied. "If we are, then yes. Just now, I gave you a tea in my flat, so you can buy for me one tea here. And then we will be even. Alright?"

He was making fun of me.

Seriously, I said from the other side of the table, "Okay, just tell me. Be straight. What is it that you do for money, for work?"

Zlatko told me openly, very comfortably, "I make money from the tourists."

"How?" I wanted to know. "Exactly how do you make money from the tourists?"

"Well, I go to bus station three times a day when the international buses come in. I wait for them, the tourists, to get out, and then I ask them if they need help."

"You didn't meet my bus."

"Yes, I have often wondered about that. How it is that I missed you."

I said, thinking back, "Well… my bus was supposed to stop in Ohrid, but for some reason it didn't. The driver took us all the way to Struga."

Clearly, I remembered how when we'd all gotten off at the last stop, I'd had to ask one of the other passengers, a local teenaged girl, to show me through that bleary dawn where I could find an ATM—because I had no local currency. She'd taken me to the spot and then waited, watched, hand over mouth, to see the fresh dinar notes come out of the slot and, as if by some strange magic, into the palm of my hand. She'd bounded away, too, like a startled deer, when I turned.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter," I brushed the memory away.

"Long story short: I came by local bus, not international. That's how you missed me. So, tell me, what kind of help did you say you give to tourists? What's your routine? Today, for instance, what did you do?"

And Zlatko told me, again, candidly, "This morning, I met the bus from Berlin. I introduced myself to a German couple, and then I took them to a nice room, a *pensione* in the old part of town. I carried their bags for them."

"And did they pay you?"

"Yes," he said. "From the goodness of their heart, they gave me a hundred dinar note. And I also got a small commission from the *pensione*, from my friend, the owner."

"How much?"

"Twenty dinars."

"That's not much."

"No, it's not."

It wasn't even close to a euro.

"And then?"

"And then, at noon, I helped another couple at the bus station with their bags. A Romanian girl and an American guy. I recommended to them a very good restaurant, and then they invited me to lunch. We drank some good wine and ate some fresh trout. It was excellent, in fact."

"But it's sad," I said.

"Sad?"

"Yes. You are so educated and, yet, you are like a beggar."

Zlatko looked at me, head cocked, thinking about what I had just said.

"Well, I suppose I am," he answered, "but I am a beggar who, today, drank the very best wine and ate the very best trout. What is wrong? Anyway, the Romanian and the American, they were good company. They were nice people."

"Nice people? And what about me?" I said. "Am I a nice person? I don't want to be just nice. What am I for you? Is this"—I opened my arms to indicate the moment, the table, whatever it was we were doing together—"is this work? Am I a customer, like the Romanian and the American couple?"

"No, you are not like them for me. You are different." He smiled. "Besides, you have not bought me trout or wine. Just tea." He added, "And juice. Once."

There was a glint in his eye. It sparkled at me and then, from across the expanse of the table between us, his arm reached out and picked up my hand. It was tense and hard, like porcelain. I made it that way. Still, he held it and stroked it, that hand of mine. He tried to soften, to soothe, to appease it, but I did not want it to be softened, soothed, appeased or allayed. I wouldn't have it. I wouldn't let it. I was still angry. Why? I wasn't entirely sure. Was it because I was being asked to give something I didn't think I should have to in order to receive what I needed in return? It didn't seem so fair a trade. It shouldn't have been that way. But it

was.

In anger, my thumb went to war against his, and his went to war against mine. We did not speak. Our eyes locked and, as they did, I felt, against my will, a shot of desire go through me like a knife.

Zlatko said, "Forget the tea. Let's go back to my place now and fight a little more."

But I did not want to fight. This was not why I had come here, to this country. I told him so. Then I got up from the table, slid out my chair and went back to my rented bed in my rented room where I tossed and turned through the night. I did not sleep, not a wink, afraid of what I wouldn't be able to control if I didn't put a stop to this thing now, again, once and for all.

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Early the next morning, I packed my bags. I paid my bills. I moved up into the hills to a local monastery, the Saint Stefan *monastir,* which felt faraway but, in fact, was only a few kilometers from the edges of the town. Still, there, I thought I might be safe. I could think things through for a while. I could gather my strength—in relation to Zlatko, primarily.

This *monastir*, however, was not a monastery in the sense that I had always understood monasteries to be. There were no monks or nuns, for instance, and no early morning silences or

strict religious observances. There was just a tiny, old church cave hidden in the rocks where someone, a long time ago, had painted the haloed images of some saints. According to the little sign outside the cave church, the icons' eyes had been gouged out by marauding, superstitious enemies—the Ottomans, of course—so that they would be forever blind to the ways of the wicked world.

There was also an old stone house next to the church cave. It functioned as a kind of inn, a travelers' inn with a common kitchen for guests, such as myself. I had my own basic private room. And there was an outside tap and trough where I could wash my clothes and fill a bucket with icy water for baths, which I would have to take just outside the house's backdoor on a concrete slab, under the foliage of a dark, dank wood.

These were the extent of the amenities, including, just a little down the slope of the hill, a squat toilet, probably as old as the icons themselves. Whenever I used it, I learned, I would have to *not* lock the wooden cubicle door so that I could push it open the second I pulled the chain and run as fast as I could. That or else the whooshing, flushing water, along with the contents of the bowl, would leap out like a large tongue and soak my ankles, hems, socks.

The place was perfect—perfect for my purposes in its isolation, and also very reasonable.

Ironically, it was Zlatko himself who had first told me about it. On the day we had ridden our bicycles to the special

section of the lake that he had wanted to show me, he had pointed out the *monastir* amid its surrounding trees in the distance. Now, here I was.

I was alone, except for the caretaker, an old, white-haired widow with a hunched back who only wore black and called herself Rajna. But she was not the kind of kindly older woman who said, "Oh, you are too young to be without a mother. Come. Let me sing you a rhyme. Let me give you a slice of sweet bread." She was the kind of woman who wagged her crooked finger and said, "I know you're laughing at my hump. And I know you think I'm old and of no use to anyone anymore." Even though I didn't, I hadn't. Her hump was the furthest thing from my mind.

Still, she remained bitter, and throughout the day, whenever I saw her, she bemoaned her life and what little she felt it had given her.

We had few visitors, just the odd, solitary figure who drove up to light a candle for a sick relative, to make a wish, say a prayer, push a few coins of donation into the slot of the wooden box and then leave again. The only regulars were those I referred to, to myself, as the zipper-job men.

They reminded me, actually, of my father—so rare that I thought of him now—and all the reasons my mother, so many years before, had left him and their arranged marriage. Relics they were of a particular kind of male chauvinism—entitled, inflexible, tantrum-prone, yet so fragile underneath it all.

Every afternoon after two, feeling raw and exposed myself, I watched the bare-chested troop of them climb the windy path up the hill from the heart surgery hospital below, where they were supposed to be convalescing. They came, throwing all caution to the wind, to smoke and drink coffee and play cards—poker, gin rummy for money—around the *monastir*'s outside table. And, also, to scratch distractedly at their newly-sewn stitches.

While they played, every now and again, they would call out in their hoarse voices to the old caretaker, Rajna, and to me, "Women, make more coffee. And make it strong!"

And Rajna and I would. We would make the coffee as strong as we possibly could, in a generous pot on a little portable gas ring. They were guests, after all.

One time, though, while the grains boiled, I confided my concerns to Rajna.

"Rajna," I said, "do you really think we should be encouraging this? Do you think we are helping the men's recovery?"

The recuperation of a heart required a particular set of healthy circumstances. I knew that much.

But, before Rajna could answer, could even take a breath, one of the zipper-job men, a big ears, raised his voice and said, "Hey! Women, stop your whispering. If you have something to say, say it to our faces."

Then old Rajna, the snake, like some kind of informant,

reported word-for-word everything I'd said.

Another zipper-job man, then, sorely wanted to know, "Well, what? Is she a doctor in the country where she comes from? Is she a surgeon? Huh? Tell us that."

Rajna said that no, I was not, not as far as she knew.

Yet another, a third zipper-job man, piped in now, the one who seemed to smoke the most, the heaviest. He said, "Well then, she should mind her own business, if she isn't a doctor and she isn't a surgeon." He drew extra-deeply on his cigarette to make his point, to take his stand, and then, pushing the smoke out of his two nostrils, bull-like, made further comment to his friends. "They think they can come from their big, rich countries and tell us what to do. They think they always know what's right, what's best." He took another pull, even deeper still, but before he could go on, he began to cough and splutter. He banged his chest with his fist.

The first zipper-job man now, in emergency, raised his arm above his head. "Why, tell us, why"—he spoke pointedly to me for the first time—"why do you come here and upset us like this? Do you want Dushan here to have another heart attack and drop dead? Do you? Is that what you want?"

I said that, no, I didn't.

I didn't like him, but I didn't want him to die.

I hung my head.

Then we, Rajna and I, gave the zipper-job men what they wanted—their coffee, strong. We let them play on and do what

they wanted. I even took the dirty ashtrays off the table and replaced them with fresh, clean ones.

Then, feeling misunderstood, I excused myself and went to pat the lamb—because there was also a lamb at the *monastir*. It was not a guest, like me, but a gift from a man whose brother was sick. Soon, when the priest next came, it would be sacrificed. But, until then, the lamb had to live and sleep in the stone house with Rajna and me, as the old caretaker worried that if we left it outside it would surely be stolen.

Every night, then, the lamb bleated and bleated and excreted pellets on the house's hall rug which, in the morning, we had to sweep and sometimes wash. In the days, though, the lamb was tied by its neck with a rope to the tap above the outside trough—so that it could eat from the nearby lush tufts of grass and keep growing fat.

It bleated then, too, as if it knew its fate.

And I patted the lamb, the lamb that bleated, that was tied with the rope to the tap. I patted its head, and I tickled its throat where soon it would be slit.

Other than that, it was peaceful at the monastery.

There were times, though, that I did have to leave my new home, but only temporarily. I had to walk down the hill and along the lake into town to get to the market to buy fresh food. Then, I always wore big incognito sunglasses and a large hat pulled down

to my nose, and I was careful not to go too close to where I knew Zlatko lived and worked. I travelled only the backstreets. I skulked around the corners and, frightened for myself and of how weak I might become, I would scurry back to the monastery again like a fugitive.

Of course, it was only inevitable that I would see Zlatko again.

It was also only inevitable that he would see me.

And so it happened, when summer and all its heat, though late, had fully arrived.

The orchards around the town were in the midst of being harvested. It was the day or week, it seemed, of oranges. The market was full of them. They made the atmosphere feel festive and citrusy and sweet—and me, unusually, off guard. My shopping done, I was making my way with my full bag down the main street, not a side one, taking in the smells and the sights, when there was Zlatko on the corner where the post office and the telephone exchange stood. He was riding his banged-up bicycle slowly, tentatively, in a wobbling way towards me, but I didn't run or turn the other way. I waited for him to arrive and, soon, we were face to face again.

He was the first to speak.

"I'm sorry," he said. "For what exactly, I am not sure. But I always seem to make you angry, and I am sorry for that."

I said, "Alright."

And it was alright. In truth, in that moment, there seemed nothing to forgive, no reason to be affronted. For how long, I didn't know. All I knew was that I was glad to see him, and he seemed glad to see me, too. Badly, I wanted to tell him about Rajna, the zipper-job men and the lamb and all, or the little, that had happened since we had last met, but I told myself to keep quiet, not to give away my new address.

Instead—it seemed the natural thing to do—we took our seats on the low stone wall that separated the market from the footpath. There, we sat together amongst the townspeople, the vendors, their oranges and the festivity of the late afternoon. We took in the scene, peaceably, not speaking. And while we were doing this, I happened to notice on his handlebars that he had tied a small plastic bag in which there were three small oranges—three oranges compared to my full bag.

He must have noticed me noticing because, to my surprise, he offered me one to eat. I accepted, ashamed, taking the lumpy-skinned fruit in my hands. I held it. It looked so small, so tiny, tender, premature. It jabbed at my heart. What could I do? I peeled it. I ate it and, when I was finished, I kept hold of the rind, not wanting to throw it away.

I said to Zlatko, about it, about the remains, "It smells nice if you crush it in your hands and then put it to your nose."

"Yes, it would," he agreed, looking not at me but straight ahead.

Like this, we sat for a little while longer, not saying too much more, trying, I thought, not to disturb whatever tenuous peace we felt we momentarily had.

After some time of that, Zlatko politely enquired, "So, you moved someplace else?"

I blurted out, even though I hadn't meant to, "Yes, I went to the monastery."

"Oh," he said.

We went quiet again.

Then: "I have been busy, too. I have been attending a Tourism Conference. An American has come to teach us how to work with the tourists, how to make them spend more of their money while they are here."

"And how is that?" I asked, genuinely interested.

"With festivals, free maps and information booths." Zlatko paused. "And by being friendly."

We both smiled to ourselves, although whether or not it was at the same thing, I couldn't be sure.

"I hope it works out for you—with the tourists, I mean," I said, raising my eyebrows and then letting them go slack.

Sighing, Zlatko said nothing but, in one unflinching, sudden movement, opened out his arms as if they were wings. He put one hand around my shoulder and said, "Come, come, old fighting friend. Let's not fight any longer. Why don't you come back with me to my flat? I will make for you tea. Just tea, before

you go back to the monastery. You would like that, I think."

I said that I would, yes.

"Yes."

Up the seven flights of bare concrete stairs we went, passing the cracked, white walls, the neighbors shuffling along the halls.

I said, "I hate to admit it, but I've missed you."

He said, "I know. You like me, but you hate me, too."

"I don't *hate* you."

My laughter echoed up and down the stairwell.

And then we were at his door, the one with the cool blue light on outside it.

We took off our shoes, as was routine, and, once inside, put on the thick house socks, the crocheted booties, before going down the ever-nutty hall. In the living room, again, nothing strange, nothing unusual. Zlatko simply invited me to sit on the floor with the walnuts and almonds in and out of their shells, while he boiled the water and made the tea for us. When it was ready, he brought the teapot and two cups, and we drank unremarkably, still.

After a while of that, I asked him if he was hungry, and he said that he was.

Now—this was the unexpected part—I wanted to be generous, too.

I said that I could make us some food with what I had

bought, with the things that were in my bag. I would have to use some of the electricity and gas that he wouldn't have to pay for anyway—if he didn't mind, that was.

He didn't. He shook his head.

"It has been such a long time since anybody has cooked for me," he confessed, almost mournfully, but I made no reply.

In the kitchenette, I got to straight work. I found a knife, a pot, plates, a board. I washed the potatoes. Busily, I peeled them. I diced them so that they would boil quickly with the eggs. Then I cut the cucumbers, the tomatoes, the peppers, the feta cheese. I cut them like they were precious objects, like I was some sort of artisan paying precise attention to uniformity, measurement, size.

Zlatko observed, "You are good with your hands."

Again, I didn't say anything. I just glanced up, smiled self-consciously and then looked back down at my chopping board and got on with my task.

"You know," he admitted. "I normally wouldn't eat two types of protein at one meal, but you… You can tell from your little pot belly that you like to enjoy the pleasures of life."

Now I stopped my chopping and looked back up, unblinking.

"No, no, no, Magdalena," Zlatko cooed. "I am not saying you are too fat. It is a compliment that I want to give. It is good to enjoy life. A little pot belly is nice. Anyway," he quickly backtracked. "Anyway, you have me thinking. It is also good that

you are good with your hands. Because I have a friend here in the town. He is good with his hands, too. He is a jeweler. Maybe you can start a business with him. Maybe the two of you can sell to the tourists."

"And why would I do that?" I said, confused.

"You would be perfect together," he said. "You could get married."

I said again, louder, losing patience, "But, Zlatko, why would I do that?"

"Oh, you are upset again. I don't understand. What is the matter if I try to help my friends? If I want to see them happy. If I want to see them have success."

"Zlatko, you're impossible. We're just about to eat some lunch. You and me. I don't know anything about your jeweler friend. I don't know anything about jewelry."

"Well, alright." He smiled, he toyed, "Maybe, then, we could get married."

I shook my head, incredulous. "What are you talking about?"

"It doesn't matter about the jewelry." He grinned. "We could just make babies. You with your beauty, me with my brains."

"What?" I said in a deadpan monotone. "Are you saying that I'm not that smart?"

And he said, "No, I am saying that you are beautiful."

Playing along now, deciding not to take any of it seriously,

I answered, "Well, I am vain."

"In that case, then, you are extremely beautiful."

"Well, even so, I thought I wasn't your type. Really, Zlatko." I tried to get back to some reality. "I'm not going to marry you, or have your babies. That would be crazy," I told him, gesticulating with the knife, slicing haphazardly at the air.

"Yes, it would be crazy," he agreed. "And that is why when we get married, they will throw nuts, almonds and walnuts, even peanuts, on us when we come out of the church, instead of confetti."

I laughed again. I couldn't help it.

"But wouldn't the nuts hit our heads? Wouldn't it hurt?"

"Yes, it would," he said. "We might have to go to hospital to get stitches for the cuts. We would grow lumps. But I would kiss yours and you would kiss mine, and then I would lay you down on our honeymoon bed and we would make babies, beautiful *and* smart."

"Alright, alright," I said, putting an end to that nonsense.

And then the food was ready.

And then we ate.

And then, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Zlatko called. "It's open."

Two figures silhouetted, one tall and the other short and plump, entered and came down the hall. Zlatko introduced them

to me, the man and the woman when they were in front of us. Instantly, I forgot their names, but not their nationalities. They were American and Romanian—the couple who had taken Zlatko to eat the best trout and to drink the best wine in an Ohrid restaurant only a few weeks or so ago now. They had to be.

The Romanian woman was funny. She just stood in one spot, looking around, laughing at the spectacle of the walnuts and almonds scattered about.

"What in the hell, Zlatko?" she shrieked. "Why do you have nuts in your flat?" And then she shook her head and her hand. "No, no. Actually, please. I don't want to know."

"Sit," said Zlatko, smiling. "Please." Always the perfect host.

"But where?" she cried out.

Calmly, Zlatko directed us all into another room off the living room where I had not been before. There was a single mattress and the same number of nuts, no less, no more than anywhere else I'd seen in his home.

The couple sat on the mattress.

I sat on the floor.

The Romanian woman was still laughing. She had a great laugh, throaty and wild.

The American just looked around, panting, like a big, friendly dog.

Zlatko announced, "I will make tea."

Then he left.

Alone with the couple now, I tried my hand at small talk. I asked them what they were doing in Ohrid, in Macedonia. Were they on a holiday? Yes. For the whole summer? No, just a month. And did they usually live together in Romania or America, or both? Neither. Leaning in, the Romanian woman explained that it was too hard, in fact, for her to get even a tourist visa to visit her boyfriend in the US. So they had to meet when they could, when they both had time off from their jobs, here, in Balkan countries.

I said that must be hard—not meeting in Balkan countries, but not being able to see each other more. They said it was okay, that they were slowly working things out for the future. I nodded. Then, curious, framing the question as delicately as I could, I asked them how they, you know, how they worked out the economics of their love.

The big, friendly American guy, in all seriousness, said, "Well, we camp a lot!"

"Yes," the Romanian woman nodded. "When we meet, we camp. In Romania, I live with my mother, so it's not really convenient to be there—if you know what I mean."

She gave me a wink.

And then Zlatko arrived with the fresh tea and four cups.

He said, "I put a little grass in the pot. I hope nobody minds."

I said, "None for me. It makes me paranoid."

Everyone nodded in understanding.

Then Zlatko, while pouring, began, "So, about the nuts…"

We had to listen, whether we wanted or not, to him talk in a monologue about his eco-living philosophies, about why he lived the way he did, about his fridge and why he didn't choose to plug it in, and all about why he didn't believe in modern-day appliances or the modern world as it was. It all made sense. Of course, it did. I even agreed, but it was boring, annoying to be lectured at. I tuned out.

The Romanian woman tuned out, too. I saw her eyes glaze over, go dead.

The American tried to suppress a yawn. He put his big paw-hand over his mouth.

Then, when the sermon was finished, the woman said, "Well, I admire you, Zlatko, I really do, but I'm not going to throw my fridge out when I get home. I just want you to know that!"

The American looked at his watch. He was sorry they had to cut their visit short.

"The sun's going down, and we have to set up camp before it gets dark. Our site's way out-of-town, my friend. No fridge there!" he joked.

And then they left.

Soon after, there was another knock at the door.

It wasn't another tourist but a young man of the town, a

friend, who came ambling down the hall after Zlatko had called out his command to enter.

What followed was another introduction.

"Gligor, Magdalena. Magdalena, Gligor."

I looked this Gligor up and down. He seemed harmless enough. He was probably only a few years younger than me and, dressed in dirty work overalls, had to be some kind of laborer or apprentice.

He nodded a greeting at me as well, and then sat on the mattress where the Romanian and American couple had before. Easily, he replaced them, but he didn't make a fuss. He didn't go on about the nuts. In fact, he didn't say anything about them at all. I supposed he must've been used to them by now, as I was.

Instead, he began complaining bitterly to Zlatko, who he addressed interchangeably as his brother and his friend, about the fact that he had been up since six in the morning. At his father's automotive repairs, he'd been working, cutting grass in the hot sun, carrying boxes from here to there.

He shook his head. "I'm beaten," he said.

"Well, usually you wake up at three in the afternoon, so, every now and again, it is good for you to get up early and go to work," Zlatko affectionately chided. "And, anyway, your father, he is a good man."

Gligor looked pleased to hear it, this praise for his next of kin, even if he was beaten, even if the old man was the cause.

Then Zlatko said to me but for the benefit of Gligor, I was sure, "You know, his father was the first person to have a car in this town. When he first took it out for a drive, everyone, the young, the old, came out of their houses to see. It was something wonderful, so red, so shiny. He always took such good care of it, too."

Now, Gligor had a chance to feel proud again. He smiled, bashful.

"Wow! The first car," I said, helping with what I thought to be Zlatko's self-esteem project for his young friend.

Gligor smiled some more.

"And that is why you should listen," Zlatko told him, "to what your father says. He's a good man. He knows what is what and how to take care of things."

Gligor answered, "Well, sure, yeah, my father's a good man, and he knows what is what and how to take care of things, but, still, he's a pain in the arse when he wakes me at six in the morning and makes me work so hard. Come on, man. Don't you be a pain in the arse, too. Come on. Have you got something to make my hard day worthwhile?"

"Well," Zlatko said, "I don't have much, but what I have is yours."

Without losing a second, Gligor fished a crumpled note out of his pocket and handed it to his brother, his friend, in exchange for what was already his but still had to be paid for.

Zlatko then went directly to the kitchenette and came back with the little foil packet— a side business, perhaps, on top of the tourists. I didn't care. I watched only Gligor and how, quickly, expertly, he minced and mixed the contents with the tobacco he'd emptied from a cigarette. Carefully, he poured the new blend back in, lit it, took a few puffs and then offered some to me.

With my hand up in a stop sign, I again said, "No. It makes me paranoid."

Again, no one argued.

Zlatko himself accepted the joint and took the quickest of puffs before handing it back to Gligor.

"All yours, kid."

Alone, Gligor finished it off right down to the last two millimeters of butt, which he stubbed out with a look of utter dissatisfaction.

"All day," he groaned, "all day I've been working for this? Brother, it's not having any effect. Nothing," he spat.

Shaking his head, he then lay down on the floor on the nuts, the almonds and walnuts in or out of their shells, and looked up at the ceiling.

Out of nowhere, he burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"And he says it doesn't work," said Zlatko.

Gligor didn't answer. He just went on laughing. He was really cracking up.

"Brother, you know what? You know what I did today?

You know what I did on my lunch break?" Gligor snickered.

"What, little brother? What did you do?"

"I wrote a little poem on the wall near the lake."

"And what did you write?" was Zlatko's patient question.

The answer was: "It's stupid. I don't want to tell you. I'm embarrassed."

Gently, Zlatko coaxed, "Just tell us. It will be good, I promise. I can guarantee."

I nodded encouragingly.

"Okay," Gligor said, slow, nervous, "but only if you don't laugh."

Zlatko said, "Well, why do you tell us that? Now, for sure that's what we are going to do. Come on, just tell us your poem."

"Alright, alright." Gligor swallowed. "I wrote"—he cleared his throat in preface to his recitation—"I wrote: Little fish / please don't bite my dick / when I swim in your deep waters."

The moment that followed seemed to hold its breath.

Then Gligor let out a laugh, a shout, that seemed to rip open the air.

Zlatko began to laugh, too, jubilantly.

It was me next.

"See," Zlatko smiled, showing teeth. "It is a good poem. An excellent poem."

I agreed. "Yes, it's very good. I'm going to write it in my notebook—for posterity."

Gligor looked on, proud one more time, observing with interest my child-like Cyrillic lettering.

"It's a haiku," he informed me as I completed the last line.

"Is it?" I smiled.

I didn't want to argue or be pedantic about precise definitions.

Then Gligor confessed, "You know, it's a true fear I have. I have a complex about swimming in the lake, especially naked."

Zlatko and I, we tried as hard as we could to take this complex seriously, but then we couldn't help it. We burst out laughing afresh, and poor Gligor had no choice but to join in. Our trio of laughter, it was like an infectious game of disease dominoes. Just when one would stop, another would start up and then the whole loopy business would begin and fall down all over again.

Gligor wheezed, breathless. "Ha! I'm having a good time, now," he said and then he rolled onto his side and looked up at me and Zlatko with new, eager energy. "Hey, hey, we should all go out tonight. There's a new bar opening in town."

He didn't want the fun to end, it seemed.

"Sorry. I can't," I said. "I'm sleeping at the monastery, and it's too far for me to go back up the hill in the dark."

"The monastery?" he said, as if I had to be kidding. "You can pray when you're old. Come on. Stay. You have friends."

He looked over at Zlatko.

Zlatko looked at me.

I looked at Gligor. He was still looking at his brother, as if waiting for him to do, to say the obvious.

"Of course," Zlatko finally agreed. "Of course, you can stay here in my flat—as my friend, not as a tourist. You won't have to pay."

I said, "Really? I can stay? As a friend?"

Isn't this what I had wanted all along? To be welcomed.

Zlatko nodded.

"But where would I sleep?"

He told me firmly, "Please. I told you before not to insult me. There is another room for guests. You will sleep there, and I will sleep here on this mattress."

"See. Stay," begged the young man, again. "Your monastery will still be there in the morning. Don't you know, the summer isn't going to last the whole of the year?"

I nodded my head and shrugged my shoulders. It was true.

I said that I would stay.

And so, I stayed.

……

In Zlatko's flat—five o'clock, six o'clock, seven—Zlatko and I waited for the night, along with its darkness, to arrive. Finally, it did at around eight, at the same time as Gligor. He, unlike us, had

gone to some trouble with his appearance.

He had obviously showered, shaved and doused himself in some sort of diesel cologne. He had dressed himself in fresh clothes. It was a too-tight suit with cuffs and pant legs that were also too short. Standing before us, he looked sweaty, uncomfortable.

"Little brother, little brother," Zlatko teased. "Are you going to a wedding? You didn't say you were getting married."

I tried to suppress my hoots, but it was no good.

With all that thick, dark hair poking out from his chest, his exposed ankles and wrists, I couldn't help thinking he looked, unfortunately, like a baboon from a zoo that had been stuffed into human clothes and let loose.

"I'm so sorry," I apologized, still laughing. "You look good, really."

Gligor only grimaced and then—nothing left to see or do here—directed us, uncharacteristically, to go, to leave the flat now. Under Gligor's command, silently, the three of us walked down the concrete stairs, through the swinging front doors and out onto the noisy street. We turned left, went straight to the first corner of a small public park where there was another young man waiting, a friend of Gligor's who was not dressed in a suit but jeans and T-shirt. After a quick introduction, he joined our group, too.

Together, then, the four of us made our way to the town square, passing by the post office, the new McDonalds, the old-

style cafes, souvenir shops, the cabbage-grater salesman and a still-open mobile phone outlet. At every turn, we had to press our way through the ever-thickening crowds.

"Where did all these people come from?"

Since I had been at the monastery, the town's population appeared to have doubled, tripled in size.

"They come from everywhere," Zlatko said, waving away my apparent shock. "Serbia, Hungary, Poland. From all over the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Western Europe, too. And why wouldn't they? Ohrid is beautiful in the summertime. It is a good place to relax, to swim, and to party."

Through the crowds we continued to move, to find our way. Gligor and his friend were up ahead. Behind them, Zlatko pushed and I followed. I locked my arm into his so that we would not be separated, so that we couldn't lose each other.

Zlatko smiled a supreme smile of satisfaction and, without looking at me, announced, "Together, we look exotic."

I supposed we did. At least, we looked different, as if the both of us did not really belong there in that place, in that town, in that country. Me in my long peasant skirt and loose-fitting, earth-toned top among the other women in their short, tight dresses and stilettos. And him with his blondness, his goldenness and leanness, compared to the short, dark, brute handsomeness of most of the other men around us.

And just then the night felt dangerous, like there was a

knife-edge of threat.

At last we turned down a back street, into an alleyway where we found the new bar we had come to see, and Gligor and his friend standing outside, waiting. As we approached, I let go of Zlatko's arm—I didn't need it anymore—and then we all proceeded inside, single-file, as the entrance was narrow. So was the passageway. At its end, however, it opened out into a dark red, triangular room where we formed something of a diamond shape of attendant observers. We watched the expressionless DJ play his loud Eurotechno to the empty dance floor.

After some moments, then, as if we all shared the same mind, we turned as one and arranged ourselves back into a single line. Wordlessly, we made our way back along the narrow corridor until we were outside the entrance of the bar again. There were a few small tables—for patrons only, a sign said. We squashed two of them together and sat down on the provided wooden chairs, me next to Zlatko and Gligor opposite with his friend.

The music was still blaring—there was a speaker outside—so it was hard to speak or hear each other, let alone the waitress who came to ask what we wanted. Zlatko shouted our order in her ear. It was beer, beer, vodka, and a tea with milk on the side for me. The waitress nodded in understanding and went back inside, presumably, to get the drinks.

Then the mood changed.

Gligor, in his too-tight suit, got up out of his chair and

leaned across the table so that his face was very close to Zlatko's face, close enough to kiss him. He started to shout and spit. What exactly he was saying I couldn't make out as the Eurotechno had morphed into a louder Euro Garage. In any case, Zlatko did not react. He just sat there and took whatever was being given to him with a placid look on his face.

Next, the drinks arrived. The waitress, without so much as a blink at Gligor's aggressive posturing, put the three bottles and one teacup and tiny metal milk jug down on the now shaking table. She gestured, with her hands and the eyebrows of her otherwise blank expression, that we could pay inside when we were finished.

When she turned, Gligor straightened up and dusted down his suit jacket, as if to recover his dignity. By the T-shirt collar, he pulled his young friend away to a table adjacent, but the distance didn't seem to lessen his anger. He lit up a cigarette and smoked it, menacingly. He didn't take his eyes off Zlatko or me. He just shifted focus—Zlatko, me, Zlatko, me—alligator-like.

Then it all happened so fast.

Gligor picked up the chair that he had been sitting in and lifted it above his head. He threw it to the ground. One of its leg broke like a matchstick, a twig. Wood flew. I watched its arc, frozen-faced, slow-witted, confused.

Still on his feet, Gligor then began to pace, two steps forward, two steps back, hand to chin, as if considering his next

action. In a flash, he had made his decision. He was at our table again, not shouting or spitting at Zlatko but now at me. I still couldn't hear what he was saying. I couldn't understand why he was doing what he was doing. Neither, perhaps, did he. He stopped for a moment and began to pace one more time, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, hand to chin—an unconscious parody of The Thinker.

In this lull of action, I looked left to Zlatko and motioned with the tilt of my head that now might be a good time to leave. Zlatko, in response, shouted in my ear that first I should pay.

"You must pay!"

I did so quickly, without question, without the slightest resentment or wince or flinch. I gave the waitress a large note—it was all I had. I didn't even wait for the change.

On the way back to the flat, Zlatko was moving impossibly slowly, in his relaxed way. I, on the other hand, was nervously turning every few steps to see if Gligor was following. He was not, as far as I could see.

Still, I maintained my alertness, my vigilance as we passed the now shut mobile phone outlet, the spot where the cabbage-grater salesman had stood demonstrating his wares, the souvenir shops, old-style cafes, the new packed McDonalds, and, at last, the park on the corner where we had met Gligor's friend. By now the crowds had thinned, but we did not stop. Walk, walk. We had less

than a block to go. And then we were pushing through the doors to Zlatko's graffitied building, going up the concrete stairs and crossing Zlatko's threshold into his nutty interior. I had never been so relieved to see it or to close the door behind us.

Once inside, we did the usual things, though with more of a sense of urgency, at least on my part. We took off our shoes, put on the nut protection booties and then, protected, secure, proceeded down the hall to the living room where we sat on the floor. Zlatko lit a candle. The shadows its light cast danced on the walls.

Finally, I could ask, "Well, what was all that about? What just happened there? Do you know?"

Zlatko told me, evenly, "Gligor thought that you would be with him tonight."

"What?" My jaw dropped. "Why would he think that?"

Zlatko explained, "Gligor is young. He is not well. Mentally, he is suffering. He takes pills, and sometimes he forgets or he does not want to take them."

"Oh," I said, not knowing what else to say.

Zlatko went on. "And it is not only Gligor. It is his whole generation. You see, when Yugoslavia broke apart, here, in Macedonia, we did not have a war like in Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia. The young people did not have a chance to let out their anger."

"So, you're saying," I said, "—tell me if I've got this

wrong—that you think a war would have been good? For the young people?"

"What I'm saying," he clarified, "is that the young people of Macedonia have no future. There are no jobs. There is no security. They are angry, but they can do nothing. They cannot easily leave to go to a better place. You know we are not a part of the EU. And that is why I try to be patient and help Gligor in the ways that I can."

I nodded, taking in the information, remembering back to the way Zlatko had praised Gligor's father and given him the little foil of grass for a little cash—had taken care of him in the ways that he could. Then I tried, I tried my best—my brain performed triple somersaults, in fact—to understand the logic in Zlatko's argument: that a war would help someone, would help Gligor who takes pills and breaks things when he doesn't get girls, feel better in the short and long term. I really considered it.

Then I panicked.

I said, "Listen, Zlatko. I want you to tell me. Do you think Gligor will come here tonight? Will he do something stupid? Will he try to do harm?"

Zlatko smiled gently. "No, he won't."

"But are you sure? Are you one hundred percent?"

Zlatko assured, "I am ninety-nine point nine."

"Okay, that leaves a chance. Listen, listen." My eyes darted around. "I know it's against your philosophy, but, please, do you

think you could lock your door just for tonight? Just in case he does come."

"Of course I can lock the door, Magdalena. If it will make you feel safer."

"It would, it would," I said in my jittery state of agitation.

Calmly then, maybe too calmly, Zlatko rose and glided across to the kitchenette where he fished out a key from a place underneath the sink. With it, he went down the hall and inserted it into its lock. He turned it.

"The chain, too!" I called.

I listened for the metal clanking in and across its slot.

It was done.

And then Zlatko returned, loose, in no hurry, and sat himself down in the same place he had been before.

The irony of the situation was not lost on me.

Since I had first met Zlatko I had been fighting hard against this: staying at his flat, being bound to him without an independent exit strategy. I had resisted successfully. Now, here I was worried about some Gligor kid, seeking refuge when perhaps what I had just done was ask to be trapped, locked in with the real monster.

Zlatko cocked his head.

"Alright?"

I was not.

My mind, having done a sideways swerve, was inventing

possible schemes, plots. The whole bar scene, for instance, I was sure had been engineered so that Zlatko could finally get me here alone. Gligor was in on it as well. Soon, he would arrive with his own key, his own way to open the sliding lock—with a heavy push and a shove. He'd bring with him the friend we met at the park, plus three other angry, young men with no futures and no jobs, and nothing more to lose. I berated myself imagining worst case scenarios: *You're an idiot. You don't even have a phone. No one knows you are here, not even Rajna the caretaker at the monastery*.

Zlatko yawned. He really didn't hold back. His whole mouth stretched open exposing the meaty, pink insides.

"Oh-oh-oh, I am tired," he said. "And you must be, too. I will take you, now, to your room. I should. Oh, but," he interrupted himself, "how rude. You must want to wash your face and brush your teeth. I will show you the bathroom first."

And so, he did.

Inside, alone now, I turned on the tap. I looked at my reflection in the mirror, maybe for the last time, I thought. Then I told myself to breath, to get a grip. I held myself up with the sink trying to decide on my next possible action, if needed. Could I just say that I needed to go out and get something—juice for the morning, a feminine hygiene product—and not come back? I could ask him to unlock the door. If he refused, and worse came to worse, I could climb out of a window. I could shout for help and hope a neighbor heard. How thin were these walls? I knocked

at one, testing.

At the same time, there was a knocking on the bathroom door.

"Do you want me to see if I can find you a fresh toothbrush? You can use mine if you want."

"It's okay," I called, tucking one of his razor blades into my pocket, in case I needed a weapon.

I turned the tap off, steeled myself and came out, ready.

But down the hall, Zlatko was only plodding around being domestic. In the little kitchenette, he was washing up his visitors' teacups and our plates from lunch in a sudsy sink. On the floor, there was a little pile of dirt. The broom was out. He had swept, I guessed, in the spaces between the nuts. Or he had picked them all up and then swept and, in my absence, carefully laid them back down. As ever, he was wearing his nut protection booties. They were pink and green, striped. In them, he reached up to return a cup to its shelf and, as he did, I studied his face, his profile, trying to discern any bad intentions. I could find none.

"Finished, done."

He patted his hands on his front and then, looking at me directly, said that *now* he would show me where I could sleep. I followed him back down the hall and, in a moment, we arrived at a door on the left which I had not noticed before.

"This is the room for guests," he announced. "It is the same room you would have slept in in the beginning, if you had

stayed when I first invited you. Do you remember?"

I did, but what point was he trying to make? That all this was only inevitable?

In answer, he opened the door.

Both curious and afraid of what I might see, I peered over his shoulder, but there were only things any reasonable person might expect to find in a room for guests. From the doorway—he did not overstep this boundary—Zlatko began to itemize the contents and their functions in case I was stupid and did not understand.

"There is the bed. You can lie in it when you feel tired. There are also two pillows. They are for the comfort of your head and neck. A blanket, of course, is provided. You can pull it over yourself if you get cold during the night."

He mimed the action of tucking himself in.

Quizzically, I looked at him, thinking that his whole, unnecessary explication was a bit like the taxi driver's—the good taxi driver's. The one who had actually taken me to my mother's village, known which bumpy road to veer off the highway onto, all the while giving me his calm running commentary, the obvious verbal descriptions about scenes we were passing outside the windows. They were, I'd imagined, designed to comfort me, to make me feel less anxious, more secure. Was Zlatko doing the same?

He nodded.

"The lamp," Zlatko carried on. "You can turn it on when it is dark but you want to see. And, finally"—here he paused briefly as if gathering his last bit of energy—"behind the curtain there is a window. You can open it if you need some fresh air. You slide it like this."

He modelled the sliding action with his whole body.

But what he didn't mention, what he should have at least acknowledged, if not fully explained, was the strange fact that in this room for guests there were no nuts on the floor, no nuts anywhere. The whole room was completely nut-free.

And with that, Zlatko closed the door behind him.

"Good night," he said, wishing me good, sweet dreams.

For at least an hour, I must have sat on that guest room mattress, listening, waiting, eyes wide open. Too on edge, I had not undressed. The only things I'd taken off were the nut protection socks. Hot, I'd slipped them off my feet. Finally, I'd laid the razor down underneath the bed. Time had passed and passed, but nothing had happened.

Gligor had not come. There had been no loud knocks or threats of violence at the front door.

Zlatko had not made any feeble excuses, either, to bother me. In fact, I had heard him, once or twice, snoring loudly.

Only I could not sleep. Sleep was far from me. I felt so alive, so awake. In fact, I had never felt more so, not for the

longest time, not since my mother had gotten sick. I wanted to live, or at least to be connected to life and to the living. So, I got up and went to open the window. I slid the glass across its groove as Zlatko had earlier demonstrated I could. I let in the sounds of the night, of the town and all its holiday hollering and hooting, its drunken laughing and singing. To these things I listened and, from my seven stories of height, I imagined, like a god, all of the associated mistakes the people down there might be making, the things they would regret in the morning—or not. And then I made my own decision.

I walked over to the door to the room for guests. I opened it and, eyes adjusting to the dark, with my bare, unprotected feet, I padded down the nutty hall to see where Zlatko was sleeping. He was there in the room he had said he would be in. On his mattress, he was a lump under a sheet lying on its side with its back to me. I watched that lump rise and fall as it breathed. Then I turned and went back down the hall, not knowing exactly what I was doing, what I was hoping for. Like that, back and forth, up and down, I did a few more laps until, at last, I stood uncertainly at the foot of Zlatko's bed.

In a loud whisper, I called, "Zlatko, are you asleep?"

When there was no answer, I raised my volume slightly. "Zlatko. Are you sleeping?"

Then: "Zlatko!"

"Huh?" He jolted upright and then relaxed back down,

moaning sleepily, "What? What happened? What is it?"

I waited for him to settle.

"Nothing. I was just wondering if you were asleep."

"Now, no. I am not."

He propped himself up onto his pillow.

"Me either," I smiled brightly. "Actually, I'm wide awake."

Zlatko leaned back on his elbows and looked over at me, not saying anything, probably wondering what, if anything, he was supposed to do about it—my insomnia.

I suggested, "You could keep me company? You could come to the room for guests."

He paused as if my proposition was a trick. "Do you want me to come?"

"Will you come?" I said.

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then I will come."

And so, he did.

He got up out of his mattress and, together, we went back down the nutty hall to my bed. There, side by side, we laid down and looked at each other, somewhat sadly, for what felt like a really long time.

Finally, Zlatko closed his eyes to rest.

I did not do the same.

Still wired, I studied his face, the fine lines, the shadows,

the bones under his skin, never growing bored of them. Then I began to touch that face, those lines, those shadows, those bones under his skin, and I was not afraid. I followed the contours of his eyebrows' ridges, his cheeks, his neck, the muscles and tendons that ran down them. I traced his shoulders, his arms, the muscles and the tendons that ran down them, too, that ran along each finger from each wrist. I sculpted them. I carved them out and, as I did, I started to feel even more alive, more awake, as if I were plugged into some kind of socket receiving raw universal energy.

All night, in this way, I continued caressing him, but he did not caress me. That was not what I wanted. I only wanted to make beauty. I wanted to make what was not-beautiful beautiful, in him and in me, if only temporarily. And so I did. With my touch, slow and soft, we became so. We became bathed in a night which no longer held danger or threat but was quiet, still, serene.

Then morning came.

Zlatko opened his eyes.

He confessed, "Nobody has ever touched me with such tenderness. Not even my own mother."

"I know," I said.

I knew myself.

And then, suddenly tired, so tired again, I got myself out of the bed for guests.

I picked up my bag. I tried to leave.

"Wait," Zlatko said. "I will go with you."

"No, don't," I said.

"I can at least go halfway."

"No."

"At least to the square."

"It's not necessary, really," I told him.

And so, for the last time, alone I went down the nutty hall. I put on my shoes. I opened the front door—the key had been in it all along—and, without looking back, I took myself down the stairs. I pushed through the front doors onto the street and made my way along the esplanade back to the *monastir.* It took over an hour by foot, even at my half-jogging pace, but I did not stop even once I got there. Quickly, I packed my bags. I said my goodbyes to Rajna, the caretaker, and the lamb. Then—I was privileged, it was true—I took the first bus I could out of town. Where it went, I cannot definitely remember, though I do know that wherever it was I got on with doing more of the bigger things, in my dead mother's homeland, I thought I had come to do.

Tamara Lazaroff is the author of the autofiction collection, *In My Father's Village & Other Freedom Stories* (Pollitecon Publications), which was shortlisted for the 2020 Woollahra Digital Literary Award (Australia). She has a particular interest in hidden histories, the migrant experience, queer and feminist themes, oral storytelling traditions, and belonging and social connectedness. The Republic of North Macedonia is a place she returns to, in life and in writing, again and again. Currently, she lives in Brisbane. Alongside her writing practice, she works in Community Services, is a yoga enthusiast and teacher, and is completing a Masters in Comparative Religion, with a particular focus on alternative spiritualities and practices of embodiment.