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THE SACRIFICIAL OFFERING

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“Mum, Bela says she is going to send some money for Eid. Dragan gave it her specially to send to
you.”

“Tell her I don’t give a shit about his money. I’m supposed to use Serb money to sacrifice a ram, now,
am I? Not a chance. Not if it means never being able to sacrifice again. Tell her he can keep his
money.”

“Okay, look, mum says thanks and that you shouldn’t have. Send it as that thing in my name again
and I’ll sign for and collect it. How’s Benjo? Give him a kiss from his aunt. Put him on the phone a bit.
Oh, in kindergarten? Okay. Don’t send too much. We’re not totally tapped out here. But, you know,
enough to pay for the animal and we’ll manage the rest. By the time it gets here, we’ll have
everything ready.”

Dada practiced all her diplomatic skills, but it was obvious Bela’s first visit would not go smoothly.
Mum spent the morning grumbling, shaking her head, and smoking. Her anger hadn’t abated in five
full years and there was little prospect of that changing soon. The hope was that finally meeting her
first grandchild would help thaw the ice-armour the old woman had girt herself in ever since her
elder daughter, Belkisa, had secretly married outside the faith and left the country.

“Have the whole world laughing at me and put a brave face on it? I don’t want even to set eyes on
her. I told her that ages ago. Sarajevo is full of hotels. She has her choice of them. And don’t you say
a word in front of the Hajji and his wife.”

“Say what in front of them? I never see them,” Dada protested.

“Of course you will. You’ve never been able to hold your tongue. And tell her not to turn up here and
definitely not with him.”

“Will you not at least see Benjamin?”

“If I decide I want to see him, I will decide where and how. She is not to bring him here,” repeated
the old woman, unwaveringly. Bela had been 38 when she had her first child. Benjamin had been
long wanted and she couldn’t contain her excitement: she was always photographing him and
sending pictures to her mother, but the old woman wouldn’t let them be seen anywhere in the
apartment, except in Dada’s room.

As far as her mother was concerned, Bela had never married and had no children. At least, that was
how she talked in front of the neighbours next door, the Hajji and his wife, who she drank coffee with
or would pop around to during the day and went to each evening for prayers. Her mother simply
never mentioned Bela and, if the neighbours asked a direct question, she would answer vaguely:
Belkisa’s fine, she calls regularly, she’s very busy, doesn’t get much vacation time, America is so far
away, it’s not worth the hassle of making the trip.

But, now, Bela was coming for the first time in five years, with her son, and Dada could hardly wait to
see them. When Benjamin was born, she’d gone to Marshalltown for a full month, to help look after
him, but that had been so long ago, and he had grown-up into a fine young boy since then.
What little she’d seen of America then hadn’t impressed Dada much. It was so different from the
country she knew from television. Marshalltown was a lot smaller than Sarajevo and they went
everywhere by car, even though there wasn’t really anywhere to go. Just noisy shopping centres and
fast-food restaurants, where the grease hung in the air like humidity and stuck to you, to the
furnishings, and the walls. There had been that one time when Dragan had a day off and took Dada
to the cinema, but Bela had had to stay home with the baby. Dada had spent most of her month in
America in her sister’s house on the edge of town, hypnotised by Benjamin and the

rhythm of his
needs. Still, her heart had been heavy when she left them, him especially.

Their mother had taken Dada's visit as a betrayal and it was never spoken of in the house.
"Do you want to slap on a fresh coat of whitewash before they come? At least in the kitchen and the
front room," Dada persisted, trying to win her mother round.

"It does need a fresh coat, all right, you can see how sooty it's got. I'm ashamed to let anyone in the
house. But I haven't the strength any more, my shoulder is at me, and I need to go to the doctors to
see it isn't a trapped nerve. And the carpets need to be taken to the young fella for washing. Tell him
to put some elbow grease in it. Last time he didn't get the stains out," her mother replied, and it
seemed the plans for spring cleaning were improving her mood, at least a bit.

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Dada was holding a car-shaped helium balloon and a small bunch of flowers from the market in her
hands. She checked the arrivals board for the third time. They would be here in 15 minutes and Dada
didn't quite know how to shorten the wait for them to land. She went to the toilet again, with the
balloon and the flowers, bringing them into the cubicle with her and attaching them to the broken-
off hook on the door. She checked herself in the mirror again, fixing her hair nervously, hoping
Benjamin would recognise her from the pictures and wouldn't make strange with her.
She peered anxiously into the press of people pushing through the arrivals gate and, when she finally
did catch sight of them, it took her a moment or two to recognise them. She waved at them
euphorically and then caught them both up in a hug. They'd come on their own, without Dragan, and
that made Dada's plan that much easier.

As they settled in the taxi, Dada gave their home address. Bela was confused, as the agreement had
been to make a reservation for them at a guesthouse in the old town. Dada said nothing, explained
nothing. This was her act of rebellion, her secret plan. She was going to bring them right to mother's
door, and then see whether she was big enough to let them in. She was relying on the shock and the
fact that the ice-armour of her mother's anger had never frozen quite solid.

Bela was worried, concerned about exposing the child to an angry scene, but out of love for her sister
she held her tongue. She was much thinner than last time they had seen each other, seemed
exhausted, probably from the trip. Benjamin grabbed the flowers and the balloon eagerly, hugging
Dada as though they had last seen each other five days and not several years before. He was
repeating words, trying out the sound of them as he voiced them out loud: “My Dada, Dada,
Dadana!”

The taxi pulled up in front of the building and the three of them got out. Dada didn’t notice twitching
curtains on any of the windows, but she knew well at least a few curious heads were squinting
through them, to catch a glimpse of their arrival. She had some difficulty getting the two enormous
cases out of the car boot, while the taxi driver pretended not to notice, impatient to get to his next
fare.

“Look who I’ve brought back. You’ll have help tomorrow in bringing the sacrificial meat round the
neighbours,” Dada informed her mother, the barest hint of a tremor in her voice. Her mother,
confused, pulled back from the door and let them in, with all their baggage. “Get them some
slippers,” she said to Dada sternly, “the ones for guests, the little ones for him. Put them on. It’s
always cold on the feet in here.” She closed the apartment door behind them and then pulled them
towards her, briskly and stiffly, first one and then the other. Then she held them at arm’s length,
looking them over and continuing, angrily: “Well, go on then, wash your hands, you’ve been
travelling. You’ll be wanting something to eat. I’ll get you something, it’ll take just a moment. This old
witch never said a word. I’ve not been feeling myself, so I’ve made hardly anything.”

Benjamin was looking around himself, in confusion, as Dada and Bela exchanged conspiratorial smiles
behind their mother’s back. She bustled from kitchen to front room, in a daze, carrying a tablecloth
and cutlery and then going back twice for plates. “Well, girls, what are you sat down for? Give your
mother a hand. What does the young one eat? Does he like pie? Maybe mummy will cut him some
beef jerky? Children like jerky….” The boy got up and took a plate from the kitchen,

put it down on
the table, and then went for another one. The old woman gazed at him in confusion, handing him
napkins too, saying “Okay, there you go. That’s the idea. That pair is all at sixes and sevens, no good
for anything,” she told him, smiling for the first time.

Himzo Polovina’s voice came over the radio and it seemed to Bela as though nothing had changed in
the house for decades. The crocheted doilies on the furniture, the fruit bowl on the table, the Ka’aba
calligraphy and the embroidered pictures on the walls. While Benjamin and their mother set the
table, Dada and Bela carried the cases into the smaller bedroom and conferred in whispers. Closing
the door behind her, Bela quietly confided in her sister: “I’m getting divorced from Dragan. He left us
three months ago. He says he can handle it anymore, that it’s smothering him. The house and me,
the kid, everything.” Dada gaped at her sister, her eyes widening in disbelief. Through clenched
teeth, stifling a groan, Bela forced out: “Just don’t say anything in front of mother… Not a word…”
Then, they left the room, washed their hands, and sat down at the table. Their mother brought out
platters of savoury pie and roast meat. Then she brought out the stuffed vegetables. “There is no
salad, I’m afraid, my nerves have been at me, and I forgot.” Himzo was singing an old sad song about
a Pasha and his wife not even death could separate. There was only the clatter of the cutlery to
interrupt him, and Benjamin’s laughter and their mother’s rhythmic insistence: “Take some… Go on,
it’ll go cold… Try a bit of the meat, this bit’s tender… Go on… Why aren’t you eating?”

Translated by Desmond Maurer

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