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Across the River

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Before the war you actually had to ask people's names to know who they were. Now you can just observe what side of the river they live on. On the east side are the Bosniaks — Muslim citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the west are Croats, Catholic by faith. The two groups split my hometown of Mostar down the middle like an overripe pomegranate.

The Eastern Orthodox Serbs — who prior to the war made up one quarter of the town's population — have all but disappeared. I am one of them.

"I'll only be an hour or two," I tell my aunt as I skip down the steep white stairs.

"Be careful, please," Aunt Jasna says. She would prefer that I just believe her when she tells me that the Neretva is now polluted and no longer the beautiful river I remember, but I can't. It's my last day in Mostar after an eight-year absence, and visiting the river is part of my long-cultivated fantasy of return.

I walk through what was once the thriving Kulidžan family compound and is now a partly destroyed and abandoned set of buildings sitting on a neglected plot of land. I cross a desolate courtyard, pass my grandparents' demolished home, and skirt the house of one of my uncles, where another family now lives. Only the fig, pomegranate, and cherry trees look the same as they did before the war, ready to bear succulent, sweet fruit.

I leave the residential neighborhoods behind, cross the railroad tracks, and descend into a meadow where my girlfriends and I used to spend hours watching boys play soccer and making our own feeble attempts at gymnastics. Without kids, the once teeming meadow feels forlorn. Across the highway I follow a trail that veers off toward the river. Strolling down streets I have not seen since I was twelve, I feel as if I'm sleepwalking.

My hometown was my first true love. The smells of blooming linden trees and roasted chestnuts, the sounds of rambling railroad cars and rushing water, and the touch of the warm Mediterranean breeze all helped shape my senses and carve out in me a sense of identity. And when my family fled the fast-spreading civil war just before the spring cherries ripened in 1992, losing Mostar became my first heartbreak.

The war reached my hometown on April 3, 1992. A thirty-ton trailer full of explosives detonated directly across the street from my building, eradicating its entire western side. (My brother later joked that the explosion transformed our three-bedroom, one-balcony condo into one that had three-balconies and only one-bedroom.) We left soon after.

For the first few months following our departure, as we moved from one no-longer-safe town to the next, I wrote long letters to my friends, telling them how eagerly I awaited our impending reunion: the craziness the adults had stirred up could not go on much longer. When, a few months later, my family finally found shelter in a dinky studio apartment in Belgrade, Serbia, I spent most of my time barricaded in a window alcove just large enough for a chair and me, channeling my anger into thousands of words that all boiled down to a single idea: I would rather die than live anywhere but Mostar. Over the first few years, I also never failed to inform my Belgrade hosts of all the ways in which their city was inferior to the town of my birth. By the time I turned fifteen, I had changed my strategy: I began to bargain with the invisible forces that seemed to govern my life. If only I could see Mostar one more time, I promised, I would become an upstanding citizen. As the years went by, my anger subsided, and gradually I became a Belgrade party girl. When, at the age of eighteen, I came to the United States as an exchange student, it was Belgrade I missed, not my quaint hometown. Yet now, in the summer of 2000, on my first visit back to the old country, nothing could have stopped me from visiting Mostar.

I arrive at the spot on the river where perfectly vertical cliffs widen to reveal a few wading pools and rocky islands. And I see the Neretva — the beautiful river of my childhood. It’s still as green as emeralds and brilliant with sunshine. This is where, having dived off a rock that many boys thought too high, I first tasted self-satisfaction. This is where, having swum across when Dad wasn’t watching, I first tested my nerve.

As my aunt predicted, the riverbanks are deserted, but contrary to her warnings the water is clear and clean. I turn north and walk deeper into the canyon. I hop from one rock to the next, the soles of my feet warmed by smooth stone. Finally, I find what I am looking for: a sheltered spot at the edge of the glimmering river.

I spread my towel, take out a book and lay down to soak up the sun. When the water becomes too tantalizing to resist I lay the book down, walk to the edge of the rock, and splash my head and shoulders with water the way my dad always did. The cold drops trickle down my back and make me shiver. I count to three and leap into the shimmering greenness. When I open my eyes underwater, the rays of sun piercing the surface reveal endless shades of dark pine and lucid emerald and deep jade. With each breast stroke I glide farther through this explosion of color. You don’t so much swim in the Neretva as fight against the current for as long as you can stand the water’s temperature. Then you get out, rejuvenated and triumphant.

I have barely settled back on my towel when the sound of voices startles me. A group of teenage boys rounds a large rock. My annoyance at their intrusion quickly passes. I am glad to know that this beautiful place hasn’t been entirely forgotten by those who live here.

After a brief stare-down, the most daring among the boys asks, “Where are you from?” He assumes, correctly perhaps, that no local woman in her right mind would come to the river alone.

“From here,” I say.

“Yes, but where do you live now?” The boy is clearly familiar with summer birds who return to their former nests only on vacation. I tell them about myself, then ask them about their lives. Their families stayed through war, so unlike mine, their childhood memories are of death, destruction, and division. After Serbian forces retreated from Mostar in June of 1992, Croats and Bosniaks divvied up the city, fighting for every street and corner. Bosniaks took the east side of town, Croats the west. Families on both sides took shelter in homes abandoned by those who had fled.

“So,” the leader of the boys asks, “have you been on the other side?”

“I have,” I say. The segregation of the town, I come to realize, does not apply to us “foreigners.”

“What’s it like?” he asks, as if the neighborhood across the river were a distant, exotic land where chocolate flows from the faucets.

“It’s the same,” I lie. “Only they don’t have the Old Town.” The truth is that the Croatian side has advanced farther along the path of postwar recovery. Yet, despite all the signs of prosperity — rebuilt houses, chain stores, expensive cars — I found it less charming. The Old Town, a neighborhood of cobblestone alleys and craft stores dating back to the time of Ottoman Empire, is on the Bosniak side.

“I heard they have karaoke there. Is it true?” the boy asks.

“They do.”

The boys exchange looks.

“Why don’t you go and see?” I say. “It’s just across the bridge. It doesn’t say on your forehead where you live.”

The boys laugh and wave off the idea. “We can’t do that,” they say, and they leave, heading farther upriver.

The physical destruction I’ve witnessed on this visit has been dreadful—my grandparents’ house reduced to a roofless skeleton, playgrounds turned into cemeteries, the buildings along a wide boulevard shot to pieces like so many worthless practice targets. But that I was prepared for. What has really jarred me is the resolute sense in everyone I speak to that reconciliation is impossible.

My aunt Jasna and uncle Neđo have only recently returned to Mostar from Germany, where they had lived as refugees since 1993. They are an ethnically mixed couple: he is a Serb, and she is a Bosniak. Having found their apartment on the west side occupied by a Croatian family, they settled on the east in the house of my other uncle,

who, like my parents, had no intention of returning. Uncle Neđo and Aunt Jasna have done their best to put on a happy face for my visit, but they cannot conceal the fact that Mostar is a broken town and not the place they once loved so much.

Just as I settle back to my book, I am interrupted again.

“Good afternoon, Miss. How is the water?” This time the voice comes from across the river. When I look I see two tall men making themselves comfortable on the rocks.

“Have you gone in yet, Miss?” the stranger on the other bank hollers. The formal address, rather than seeming odd, is charming.

“Yes, it’s as good as it’s ever been,” I shout back.

“Then it’s got to be really good.”

I am just about to return to my book when the stranger asks, “Are you from around here?”

“Once was.”

“And now?”

I tell him I live in the U.S., skipping the part about six years in Serbia. He says he lives in Amsterdam. We shout back and forth for a while before he suggests that he swim over. I agree that conversing on the same side of the river might be easier than hollering ninety feet across. I watch him swim, his crawl stroke powerful and even. His friend stays on the opposite bank.

When he reaches my side of the river he lifts himself out of the water. He is blond and round faced, and his lips curl into a mischievous smile as he asks, “What’s your name?”

In this war-ravaged country, asking someone’s name is not an innocent question. Names carry meaning that isn’t imprinted in our facial features or in the color of our skin. I give my new friend a look that says I understand what he’s up to.

“I am Nikolina,” I say. “And you?”

“I am Denis,” he says, still dripping with cold river water.

Foreign names, like ours, are hardest to figure out. But with a name like Denis, this man can’t possibly be a Serb. Considering that he came from the west bank, I decide that he must be a Croat. Still, I take the next step:

“What’s your last name, Denis?”

“It’s Keler,” he smiles. “Does that tell you anything?”

“Maybe,” I say, though his last name neither confirms nor denies my suspicion.

“And you?”

“Kulidžan,” I say. “Does that tell you anything?” In Mostar, my last name is as Serbian as it gets.

He laughs and nods. “Only the best.”

I am charmed by Denis, but as much as I like being charmed, I do have one last matter to attend to while I’m in Mostar.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Denis, but I should probably be heading back now,” I say. “It’s my last day here, and I promised my mom I would visit my grandparents’ grave.”

“I’ve never been ditched for dead grandparents before,” he says, not giving up. “The good thing about graves is that they’re always there.”

I find it difficult to disagree, and I invite Denis over to my towel, where we spend the next hour talking. We establish that Denis is, in fact, Croatian. We tell each other where we were on that fated April Friday at twenty minutes past five when the war started in Mostar: I was a twelve-year-old coming home from school; Denis was a college senior, back from Sarajevo for a weekend with his girlfriend. He’s an architect and an artist, and we talk of books, aspirations, dreams. The next time I say I ought to leave — not even firmly enough to convince myself — he brushes it off and offers to show me how to catch lizards with a blade of grass. By the time we agree on a place to meet that evening it almost is evening.

My aunt is beside herself when I show up at her door. “I was about to send the police looking for you,” she says.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I met somebody.”

After I wash up, I come to the kitchen to eat, and I tell Aunt Jasna about my new friend.

“Keler,” she repeats, and her eyes grow wider. “That’s got to be Jagoda and Slavko’s little boy. I went to school with them. Goodness, what a small world! I remember Jagoda so well.” The memories make my aunt forget that I have nearly given her a heart attack. “So, what does the little Keler do now?” she asks while I sit down to fried chicken and baked potatoes.

Before the war a thick net of family and friends kept everyone here rooted. Few people moved away; even fewer moved in from elsewhere. No more than a couple of degrees of separation existed between any two individuals. Now, Mostar is like a cup of stirred Turkish coffee: muddy and unsettled. On top of the division between the east and the west, there is a division between the natives and the newcomers. It’s a good thing Denis has family here. Had my new friend been one of those who had only recently “descended the mountain,” my aunt would not have been so quick to forgive my tardiness.

Denis and I have agreed to meet by the flimsy, improvised suspension bridge that is

now the Old Town's main connection to the west. Unlike my Croatian friends who never left Mostar, Denis has no qualms about meeting me on the east side. Again, the segregation applies only to those who would stay in Mostar past the summer heat.

When I see Denis on the busy pedestrian street, he is hand-rolling a cigarette, licking the edge of the paper. He spots me and returns the cigarette to the tobacco bag. We kiss on the lips naturally, as if we were already a couple, and I lock my arm in his. We are soon swept up by the flow of people on the street.

"I couldn't help smiling at dinner tonight," Denis tells me as we walk. "Mama kept looking at me suspiciously. She asked me what I was up to, but I just kept smiling."

I can't help smiling either.

We stop to have drinks on the jam-packed terrace of an Old Town cafe, high above the darkened river. When Denis goes to the bathroom, I leave our table and lean on the rail. A light breeze rises from the water and lifts my hair, which tickles my shoulders and neck. Mostar's most evident war wound is right in front of me: the gap where the Old Bridge used to be. Once the source of pride for every Mostar resident and of wonderment for tourists, the bridge was built by Ottoman architects in the sixteenth century. It was, at the time of its construction, the widest single arch in the world. Now it is nothing but an empty space between the graceful white watchtowers on either side. Lit from below by spotlights, the towers face each other helplessly, like horrified parents whose child had suddenly disappeared in a crowd.

I remember my shock one November evening in 1993 when footage of the destruction of the bridge was played and replayed on Serbia's evening news. From a hill to the south, the Croatian artillery fired with flawless accuracy, reducing the centuries-old monument in a matter of minutes to rubble and dust that was swallowed by the river. Perhaps the military officers or politicians who ordered it destroyed thought they were eliminating a symbol of Muslim pride, but the bridge belonged to every resident of Mostar, Croats and Serbs no less than Bosniaks, the same way a river belongs to both its banks.

Just down the river from the western watchtower, a scaffolding has been erected, and on top of it, large white rocks — pieces of the demolished span fished out of the river by volunteer divers — are laid out to dry. When the bridge is eventually reconstructed the preserved remains of the original will be used. Because I have seen the graceful white arch so many times my mind now reconstructs it instantly.

Denis hugs me from behind and whispers a local joke: "Don't worry. They'll build an even older one."

If my life were a movie, this is where I would groan and roll my eyes. The young woman returns to the town of her childhood, the place she has longed to see for years, only to meet a desirable man, who will lay his hands on her hips and whisper in her ear. But who am I to argue with life's unoriginality?

"Should we get out of here?" I ask. I turn and press my lips against his. He holds me not so much with passion as with tenderness, as if I am as broken as our town.

I have not made love to a man since I left Belgrade two years ago. My love life in Utah was a source of culture shock and frustration: I repeatedly became involved with strong-willed, devout Christian men who would not yield to temptation. Now nothing seems more natural than for my charming, morally unconflicted compatriot and I to make love. So when Denis whispers: “Are you sure?” I say, “Absolutely certain.” I have only a vague idea of who Denis is — a loner, an eccentric, an intellectual, a bashful romantic — but I feel I can trust him. After all, my aunt knows his mom.

For a long time after we lay embraced. Denis tells me about the houses he wants to build; I tell him about the books I want to write and publish — and, if that fails, about the bookstore/coffee shop/community center I want to open. It’s past 1 A.M. when I remember my already edgy aunt.

The town is deserted as Denis drives through the vaguely familiar streets. We cross what used to be Tito’s Bridge, another structure destroyed during the war and only recently rebuilt. From there, one left turn, and it’s a straight shot to my aunt and uncle’s house. But Denis doesn’t make the left. I look at him, and he puts a finger across my lips. “Shhhh,” he says. We go beneath an underpass, turn onto a narrow street that winds uphill, and merge onto a highway. Suddenly I know where we’re going. At the first chance Denis exits the highway and parks his car — a Volkswagen Golf with EU license plates — in front of the tall, wrought-iron gate of Mostar’s main Serbian Orthodox cemetery.

“I can’t be responsible for your disobeying your mother,” he says. When he reaches to open the heavy gate he adds, “My grandpa constructed this gate.” I look at the gate more carefully than ever before, noticing how the two black wings come together to form an intricate arch at the top. I step through, and the gate squeals shut behind us.

The cemetery is built on a hill overlooking the town. The granite crosses, tombstones, and statues have been reclaimed by weeds and wildflowers: the town’s Orthodox population is no longer here to take care of their dead. Walking ahead of Denis, I locate the aisle where my mother’s parents are buried. Using an aboveground tomb as a bench, we sit facing my grandparents’ grave.

I have no memories of these ancestors of mine. My grandpa died six years before I was born; my grandma, when I was two. But I have heard many times that my grandmother, a Croat from Dalmatia, was a fierce, hardheaded woman who did what she wanted. She married my grandfather — a soft-spoken Serb who loved to tell stories and was easily seduced by a violin — against her family’s wishes, and together they multiplied.

Denis pulls me closer, and through my hair his lips touch my neck. The city sleeps below us. A hundred thousand people dead, 2 million displaced, and still a Croat boy can sink his face into a Serb girl’s hair and inhale the flowery scent.

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