The Poet From Mostar

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The checkpoint is on Rude Hrozničeka, between the building I grew up in and the one I occupy now as a soldier. Behind my former building the land runs down to the Neretva River, green, transparent water sloshing against blue and grey rocks. The Serbs destroyed the nearest bridge a year ago; a small dam formed from the debris where the river curves narrowly. I walk around my old neighborhood in a soldier's uniform, jungle-colored, tight around the shoulders, and boots in whose black I can never see my reflection. Our headquarters are in a couple of third floor apartments (#9 and #10) whose prior occupants left when war broke out a second time. There are birds on the useless telephone wires and children below in the yard of my former building. The gap echoes and glares. The birds are sparrows. The barefoot girls, in the shade of a skinny linden, clap their hands and sing an old rhyme, while the perspiring boys, heads bowed, rummage in the overgrown grass, their pockets bulging with bullet shells. People in the neighborhood recall when a Jeep full of drunk Serb paramilitary drove over the bridge that wasn't there, the nothingness that stretches from one side to the other, and crashed into the rocks and debris. At night all one can see is the moving darkness of the water.

All we shoot are birds, Mario says. He says it all the time. He falls on his knees in front of the open window, grabs his rifle and puts it into position. He closes his left eye and, slitting the right, lets his finger slide up and down the curve of the trigger. Even when I can't see them, I hear the cling clang of the shells in their pockets and know where they are. Leaning out of windows, their mothers constantly check on them, shouting instructions in bright, exhausted voices. Mario was one of the young men who dived every summer from the crowded Old Bridge into the cold water below. Sometimes he shouts threats down on the street at Prof. Abdić, who walks from his building to the checkpoint and back in a dirty shirt and sweatpants, his hands clasped behind him, one shoulder held higher than the other. Imbedded in my mind with the bridge itself is the straight, stoic form of those bodies, startlingly balanced in mid-air, plunging into the green transparency of the river and producing a sharp, ripping sound on
entry. You’re in the crosshairs, Emir, Mario yells from the pedestal of our third floor window, and Prof. Abdić waves meekly at the jokes of his former student, his other hand shielding his eyes from the sun. Death is instant, and what’s left of the sparrow is only a kaleidoscopic puff of feathers.

This is Mostar, a place the children in the yard have heard called home by the same mouths that unashamedly call it hell. Prof. Abdić walks the allowed length of street he grew up and lived his entire life on, reciting poetry to himself like a madman. Before the war, he was a professor of Russian Literature at the University of Mostar, one of the four professors who for years gathered each Friday in our living room to play cards. I remember a room filled with blue cigarette smoke and the bitter whiff of plum brandy; the strange harmony that existed between the voices and the night, the former growing louder as the latter grew darker; I remember the rolled up sleeves and undone top buttons, the black chips shining in the center of the table. I watch them play, unfolding my chair in front of my old building and acquiring a full view of the oval yard, consisting of a grass-less patch of pebbles in the center where the children congregate shoulder to shoulder before a game of dodgeball, facing Sanel, who holds a blue rubber ball in his hands. Sanel is the oldest—he is thirteen—and tallest of them all, dark-haired and in denim overalls. Tina, the captain of the opposing team, is long-legged, pony-tailed and sleepy-eyed. I remember my own childhood and the games we played, and I think to myself that growing up during war is the most unnatural thing in the world.

The front is three kilometers from our checkpoint; we get almost no direct fire and there is nothing to do. The smell across the river is ash; the sound, man-made thunder. When the war came to Mostar in the spring of ’92, my family and I escaped to Croatia, an uneventful journey, half of it spent with my head between my knees. The Serbian siege of Mostar ended in June and we returned home in early August. But there was no home. There was the caved-in roof, the blackened apartments, the crumbling staircase, and the wonder of why the Serbs chose to bomb our building, but leave untouched the one connected to it. It was to Rodoč then, to my

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grandparents' house, where we lived out the uneasy peace. Cafés reopened amongst the rubble and, dutifully, people came to drink. A halfhearted reconstruction of the city began. From time to time, the Serbs lobbed a bomb from the mountains to remind us of their close proximity. Then, in May of '93, the new war started (within the still-ongoing war north and east of us) between the Bosnian Catholics and Bosnian Muslims, ending the increasingly sinister peace in Mostar.

Mr. Abdić writes poems in his empty apartment; sometimes during his evening walks, he reads them aloud to me, his most perceptive student in peacetime, his only student now. Some are about the sparrows on the useless telephone wires; others are about the boys hunting for bullet shells, their pockets singing. By the end of the first week of the new war, most of the male Muslim population on the west side was either deported to the east, with their families, or detained, alone, in Heliodrom, the prison camp in Rodoč that was previously a military airport. In rare cases, like a visit from the Red Cross, men are allowed to temporarily leave the camp and go home. Such a privilege was given to Prof. Abdić, because of his chronic back pain and connections within the camp. His wife and two daughters are in Germany. They fled before the Serb invasion; he came back alone during the short peace – which lasted just long enough to get his hopes up, he says – and was arrested when the new war started. Most of his poems are about the past: two lovers illuminated by the milky glow of a lamp on Lučki Bridge; an impromptu family picnic on the pebbled bank of the Neretva; an aproned baker on Fejić passing loaf after loaf to a blue-uniformed delivery man. I tell him I hear in his poems the moan of a sidewalk accordion and the ragged chorus of voices in Old Town cafes. I don’t ask him why he returned because it’s a stupid question and he expects better of his best student.

In the bedroom of #10 the windows are always open. Bottles of beer and homemade plum brandy, cans of soda and old newspapers are scattered all over the room. The wind sweeps up crumbs of food and sends them across the parquet, but it can’t clear out the damp, acidic smell of
sweat that hangs in the air. Graffiti covers one side of the wall, the others punctured with bullet holes. Occasionally, a cockroach crawls up and down the floor. It's the regret with which Mario says it that irritates me. He is on his knees, his left eye closed. Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lot of Love" jerks out of the radio he has brought from home, blending with the howl and wail of the children outside, drowning out the distant gunfire. I have never fired a shot, except in the air. His finger stops moving; a cigarette, unlit, dangles from the corner of his mouth. Sometimes I want to pummel him with all my strength, beat him into an awareness of suffering beyond his own. But then I think of what will happen if he fights back. Or worse, if he doesn't? The mess and the music gives the place a dorm room atmosphere, and I often imagine we are students freely indulging in this lifestyle rather than soldiers confined to it by war. We are twenty.

Don't shoot, Mario, I say. There are children out there. Prof. Abdić says that the nature of memory and time is like the nature of darkness and water and I don't quite know what he means. I met Mario in Rodoč, where I spent my weekends as a child and where he was born, and where our games consisted of chasing frenzied chickens and tormenting a chained goat. Once school started, we progressed to more ordinary games like dodgeball and soccer. Mario takes out the Makarov pistol he bought in Bulgaria before the war; he points it at the side of his head. He is in his undershirt, cargos and boots, forgetful of past and present. The sweat shows underneath his armpits. The sky is dark and enormous, and after the laughter hushes and the clinking of bottles stops, the only sound comes from the mad concord of the crickets around us. Children move invisible in the night, real and imagined, their eyes bright and feral in the dark. Prof. Abdić carries photographs on him at all times, inside the waistband of his sweatpants: one of himself and his wife, snowflakes melting on their black coats, one each of his two daughters, and one of a crowd of Velež fans running onto the field to celebrate the Cup win in 1983 (a man has both feet off the ground at the moment the snapshot is taken, seeming to levitate). The past, Prof. Abdić likes to say, is a world of echoes and half-forgotten songs.
I remember a blue-eyed boy with long blond locks, a boy who got
carrot-red freckles in the summer, a boy who, following the very first day of
school, ran after the teacher, pulling on his jacket, to ask him if we needed
to come back tomorrow. In one of his poems Prof. Abdić compares the
destruction of the Old Bridge to an angered child tearing up the Mother’s
Day card he had so carefully crafted because he desired, in his malicious
rashness, to inflict the most immediate pain. But that’s just metaphor. Prof.
Abdić’s eyes are spinach-green and he’s as short as Pushkin. In sweet grimy
adolescence, when I began to write poetry, Mario took up the guitar, each
envious of the other’s limited talent. For hours everyday he strummed on
that acoustic guitar of his, while I intermittently sang. Or we’d both be
singing along to Western songs on the radio. In the evenings, we went out,
always together, watching movies in the overcrowded cinema in the city
with friends whose ethnicity and religion seemed completely unimportant.
It will all come back to us one day, Prof. Abdić says, and then we will
stand in front of each other cleansed and ashamed. His poem ends when
Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, whose image I remember from
a painting in which he is depicted in profile, wearing a black shawl and an
outsized white turban, commissions the building of the bridge.

Mario, mumbling to himself, lays the Makarov on the ground and
leans back in the folding chair. He complains loudly of a headache because
he is drunk. The light of the lamppost shines off his shaved head, and I
feel betrayed by the sight of it. He smiles a wicked smile but its wicked-
ness is halfhearted. Do you hear me? I say. Don’t shoot. He is silent. Are
you listening? I come closer. Under the strain of their shared fatherlessness,
Prof. Abdić intones, gesturing with one hand, the other holding the paper,
though he does not read off it. Shaved and gaunt, he looks older than he
is, with dark-colored pouches under his green eyes. The perspiring boys
hop from hot concrete onto cool grass, hunting for bullet shells. But in an
instance their task is forgotten, when the white tank slinks closer, slowly,
like an armored cloud. We give the UNPROFOR soldiers a hard time at
the checkpoint. Smurfs, we call them, though we know they can destroy us
But they won’t. Blue and white are colors entirely too cheery for war, boys, Mario yells as they pass in their wheeled tanks. We are as much observers as they are, but this is our country and we don’t pretend to be able to will the war out of existence.

“How useless this is. Being a soldier, I mean.”

“Because there’s nothing to do?”

“Because it’s just useless. Bombing our own city. You can’t cross the Neretva, can’t go to the other side. But that’s Old Town. That’s where all the good restaurants are.”

“Would you prefer if the entire city was bombed?”

“Yes. I mean no. No because I live here. I don’t know. All I know, all I have ever known with any certainty, is that I don’t want to kill or to die.”

“So that’s your point. You’re a coward.”

This conversation only happens in my head and even there I can’t make him understand. It’s a lack of imagination, Prof. Abdić would say.

Prof. Abdić says he began writing poetry at fifteen, when it became impossible not to. His early poems were terrible, contrived and quickly abandoned, barely worth the cheek of the girls they were dedicated to. There were many, he says. As a student at the University of Mostar, where he would later teach, he started writing political poems and imagined stopping tanks with his pen, sparking peaceful revolutions, imagined his poetry being recited in crowded city squares by zealous youths, hungry and betrayed. But there was no spark and no fire, no knock on the door by the authorities, no condemnation or medal. My country didn’t need my poetry, he says, or my silence. Mario picks the Makarov back up from the ground and points it at Robert, who has a screwdriver in his hand. The drunken cheering begins again and Robert dares him to do it. Mario’s eyes are red; he says the gun is not loaded; he leans back in the chair, his stomach lowering and rising as if from great exertion. Someone has set a tire aflame; the orange and white-paneled barricades gleam in the bonfire. Sweat runs down Robert’s neck and he groans under a sky enormous and dark, charged with

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our madness and fire. There is a military van in the yard, a yellow Jugo
missing a tire. Once the laugh dies down, there is only the sound of the
blinking crickets. Through the thin envelope I can read the last lines of
Prof. Abdić’s letter to his wife, which I send for him: I’m as unthinking and
unfeeling as a stone. I have only enough for these letters. Breaking up parts
of what I have written here into stanzas might yield a poem. Not a good
one, but a familiar one, and maybe of some comfort to you. Love, Emir.

Out of the bedroom of #10, “Gimmie Shelter” can be heard,
above us the chirping of sparrows, and behind us the pop of an occasional
explosion. On a manhole in the yard of my old building, bullet shells, lined
up in ascending order, glint in the sunlight. Tina walks an alley looking for
her vanilla pudding among the leftover candies the UNPROFER soldiers
have distributed. She stops suddenly, only to rub her foot against her calve.
Prof. Abdić and I walk up and down the street we grew up on, talking of
literature, and the soldiers working on the lights of one of the barricades
call “Muslim lover” and “dead man walking” after us. I have taught my
daughters, Prof. Abdić says, to be blind to religious differences, to consider
themselves the only ideal ethnicity, a Yugoslav, and to follow the ethics,
the rainbow-bright ethics, of humanism. Should I regret now doing what’s
right? And how can you, the son of a Catholic man who never practiced
and a Muslim woman who didn’t either but couldn’t just forget where
she came from, how, forced to wear the uniform of the Croatian Defense
Council, how can you display with any genuine inner passion the outer ap­
pearance of a Catholic and a Croat, or show any real desire for the destruc­
tion of a city you love and a people you never hated. When he speaks like
that I wonder if the only difference between my view of the war and Mario’s
is a Muslim mother. If my anger is only disappointment? If you can right
someone who you have already forgiven? Tina is offered other candies but
refuses. She sits down cross-legged in the pebbled clearing of the yard and
throws her arm across her shoulder to scratch her back. We walk up and
down the street, talking of War and Peace, Crime and Punishment, Dead
Souls.
I come closer. "Mario, don't shoot" I say, and kick the rifle off target with my foot, tipping him over like a tower.

"What's the matter with you? I wasn't going to shoot," he says, ascending slowly, in stages, like an illustration of evolving man we saw in books from school.

"I bet you weren't going to shoot."
"If I said I won't then I won't, and if I want to shoot then I will."
"Why are you being an idiot?"
"They're just fucking birds."
"What did they ever do to you?"

From my folding chair I watch the children in the center of the yard, one half standing behind Tina, the other half behind Sanel, who flips a coin in the air, catches it in his right hand, brings it down on his left, and rejoices after slowly revealing which side it is, number or flame on the old Yugoslav dinar (slowly, as if extra time would have transformed it if it wasn't in his favor). Then I hear Tina shout and she begins running down the street. The children spring magically to attention and follow after her. Turning into a side street, the tank stops and is surrounded. They bang on the armor, producing a dull, tinkling sound, until a helmeted head pops out of the hatch. The young man, a boy really, looks at the crowd assembled before him and starts throwing candy with a strangely flamboyant flair, like he's on top of a float in a parade. The little beggars push and shove each other, frantically un-tucking their shirts to use them as pouches. Only Tina refuses to push and shove as she searches for her vanilla pudding. After dispensing with all the sweets, the boy disappears into his hole and the tank goes the way it came. Under a green and brown thicket of trees at the edge of the yard, the children gather to eat.

In the folding chair, Mario stretches his arms above his head as if to touch the sky. A child's idea of endlessness. The humidity is unbearable, a heavy wet weight. Or maybe it's the fire, still burning, throwing shadows on the wall of our building, shadow flames dancing in a tribal circle. The Makarov is in his hand again but nobody is paying attention anymore. He
smiles at me, a sad lost smile. I'm silent. He points the gun at the side of his head again, slides his finger up and down the smooth curve. I close my eyes. Glass shatters brightly as somebody drops or throws a bottle against the concrete. Mario laughs. The crickets buzz like fire. Time is a river in the dark, Prof. Abdić once said, and we remember against its current. Before my eyes I see twenty pairs of legs run after one ball and kick at it blindly, hitting bone more often than rubber, while faraway adult voices hopelessly instruct us to spread out. I feel the warmth at my back. The sound reaches me before it's made. My eyes are closed. On the other end of the yard, opposite where I sit in my folding chair, the children silently and busily eat, chimerical in the tall grass. Tina gives up her search and walks over to where the others are. One by one she inspects their loot, finding nothing. She turns her bare feet toward her building as the crack of a rifle rings out. Then the sound of the bullet striking brick. Then silence. Huddled together in the high grass, the children wait for a sign to move. A few women stray out into the yard. Tina wipes the palms of her hands on her shorts. Overhead, the sparrows reassemble on the useless telephone wires.

When the time comes, it is up to me to chaperon Prof. Abdić back to the camp. I wait outside of his building for Mario to arrive with the car. When he does, we go upstairs together to the third floor, and Mario raps on the professor's door with the butt of his rifle. You are a selfish idiot, I tell him. He looks at me stupidly and hurt. The door opens and the professor greets us kindly, in dirty shirt and sweatpants, dropping his bagful of belongings on the floor and getting down on one knee to tie his worn sneakers, only the right, for the left has no laces. Halfway down the last dusty flight of stairs, he suddenly stops. "I have to go to the bathroom," he says, his eyes fixed on the curved end of the banister.

"No, absolutely not," Mario says, pulling open the building door a touch, the light squeezing in like a cat. "Just hold it."

"Please, I must go."

"You should have gone before."

"But I must go now."
“Just let the man go to the bathroom,” I say. Mario slams the door shut and leans against it. He lights a cigarette. “Let’s go,” I say to the professor.

“Thank you,” he says in the doorway of his apartment, putting his bag down. His smile is childish, his green eyes moist and deep. I look away. “Give my regards to your father,” he says, and goes into the bathroom.

Hearing the click of the lock, I go down the hallway that has a door on either side and leads into the living room. Filled with light because there are no curtains, the living room is empty of furniture except for a couch and a makeshift table. The soft innards of the couch jut out through a rip in one of the red cushions, and the table is a shaded window glass laid on the flat seat of a back-less chair. On this table, along with a thick lilac-gray coating of dust, is a copy of Dostoevsky’s The Possessed. I sit down on the couch and begin to read. I read for a while before I hear the hard, flat pounding of boots on the stairs outside the apartment, which I then can’t un-hear. I re-read the same sentence, word by word, but it reveals no meaning I can understand. The front door opens with a splinter and a thud. I throw the book on the table and run to the bathroom; in the hallway, I tell Mario to shut up and get away from the bathroom door. I put my ear to the wood. No sound. Prof. Abdić, are you ready? I say. No answer. I knock once, then knock again; I beat on the door with my palm; Emir, I yell. I turn the knob with force and the door gives easily. He lies on his stomach, heaped on the floor, a black puddle spreading from under his throat like velvet, like ink. The blade half of a straight razor glints coldly on the tiles. Mario drags his body out from between the toilet and tub and puts one hand over the other and pushes against his chest. His movements are slow and vague, as if performed underwater. He yells at me, tells me to do something. I just stand there. His hands sink slowly in and rise slowly out. On the wall, reaching the ceiling, a dark splatter of blood, warm as cooked jam.

I walk around my old neighborhood, hunching my shoulders against the wind. My boots hurt my toes as I walk. I turn toward Prof. Abdić’s former building and run into the boys by the rosebush-flanked...
entrance, forming a circle around something on the ground; I yell and they scatter. Ringed by rocks that they must have gathered, the carrion of a small bird lies prone on the grass. One wing is spread out and the other half-covers its gray belly and dark throat. Its bronze head is turned to one side, the lead-blue beak slightly open. The bird is a sparrow. Ants are moving over its corpse, wrapping it in a quivering black blanket. I stare down at the diminishing sparrow. I feel the sun on my neck. The wind makes me shiver, but I keep staring. And if one of the boys happens now to come back, he will see me bent over and shivering in the sun, frozen like in a picture, and he will think I am shedding tears over a dead bird.