

Translated by Ellen Elias Bursac

1.

I am sitting in an old hut on my grandfather's "ranch." Night bursts into the valley and splashes across the forest and the shrouded hills. I have been here for some time now, and there is no more turmoil in me. I feel like someone who once meant to write a story but wasn't able to, because the story took control. It was no longer clear what was real: the story or life. And whether life was writing the story or the other way around.

The light bulb on the ceiling flickers on and off. Above it, a mouse scampers around the attic without permission. One night I woke and saw its tail pop out from under the worn sofa on which I was sleeping. It disappeared into the hole in the wall above the curtain rod. The walls are full of holes where the plaster has crumbled away.

The "ranch" is a small tract of land, just under two acres in size. My grandfather bought it when he retired, and planted a plum orchard here. Now he and grandmama and my mother all are gone, and the orchard is overgrown, full of brambles and neglect. The land belongs to Aunt Zika, who has allowed me to stay here as long as I like.

The plums are rotting on the ground because no one harvested them. Summer is nearing its end. During the day the hornets buzz in battle formation and gorge on the juice of the over-ripe fruit. Birds of different sizes squawk while hopping around the gullies, pecking at the little plums, and at each other, too. Fat weedhoppers are joining the fray now, along with those unbearable tiny flies that buzz straight into your eyes.

2.

For some time now I have been hearing voices. There are several. I recognize some of them, and know they belong to me—the others, I'm not so sure. They surface as if from the depths, speak once or twice, and then disappear forever.

One of the familiar-seeming voices goads me, saying it was not entirely convinced of my so-called attempt at drowning. The voice contends that I merely slipped awkwardly and splashed into the mucky shallows. It rails against me, saying I haven't got the balls to do something like that for real. And, reluctantly, I have to admit that the voice is right.

Two years ago I threw myself into the Sava. I can see myself as I stood, distracted, on the bank, a cigarette in hand. I was watching the river, the cawing crows all around me, my heart stabbing in my chest. I knew that one of my attacks was imminent. Panicking, I dropped the cigarette into the mud and went to stub it out with the sole of my tennis shoe. I watched my foot wiggle back and forth and saw the ground under it shifting.

The feel of the cold water brought me back to my senses. I swam in a frenzy toward the bank, about two feet away, before I realized that the water was only waist-deep.

3.

When I clambered to my feet that October two years ago my nipples were poking at the damp cloth of my shirt. As I gasped I thought about my former wife and her breasts. They were only a little larger than mine, but their form was poetic and entirely different. Nipples sharp and hard like the tips of Prussian helmets from the First World War. If you bit into them your teeth would crack, your cheap amalgam fillings would fall out.

At the time I was trying not to think about her, to push her away like a bad memory. I told myself that I did not love her anymore.

—The question is, did you ever love her? piped a voice from some dark corner of my mind.

—No, the question is, can he ever love anyone? rasped the hoarse voice of a psychiatrist from another corner.

—Love yourself, love only yourself, only yourself! croaked a new, unfamiliar voice.

—Love yourself least, interjected the psychiatrist.

The voices began pursuing me when she left. I held on for a few more months in Oslo, working at the university, and then, at the end of the winter semester, I packed up my backpack, took all my money out of my bank account, and fled to Brazil. I wandered for a time without much purpose, then settled down a few months later on the little island of Tinharé, in the north of the country. There I fell in love with a girl who was like a twin to my former wife.

She had the same arched brow, the same impudent eyes, the same full lips, the same lithe body and skinny, nearly non-existent fanny. The only difference was that she was black. We were in love for more than two months, and the voices inside me stilled. I began to imagine that I would stay on the island forever. I could see a throng of my dark-skinned children chasing each other around on the sandy beaches. And then one day she told me she had to move on. She admitted that her husband was in jail, and that her three children were waiting for her in a little town in Mato Grosso, with her mother. Then she asked me for money. I gave her all I had and went back to Oslo.

The university had fired me because I had taken off for more than half a year without notifying anyone. Perhaps that could have been smoothed over—Professor Pettersen, my mentor, liked me. But there was no point: I knew I would be off again at the first chance I had, as soon as I'd saved enough money.

I managed to stay on in Oslo until the fall, working every day. When there were translations to do, I translated, and when there weren't, I worked in construction. In the fall I was overcome again by the itch to travel, and so I left

again, first for Croatia and then for Bosnia. I thought about what it would be like to throw myself into the Sava and be gone, but it wasn't that easy.

4.

I wake with a jolt before dawn, completely soaked in sweat. At first I cannot think where I am; my heart pounds in my chest. The vestiges of a dream are still dancing around the hut. I jump quickly to my feet and pull apart the curtains to draw reality into the room. Light, pale as death, sifts through the window, too wan to chase away the terror.

The dream: I am an evil spirit. Three good spirits are pursuing me. We hurtle, comet-like, around a vast building that reminds me of my elementary school, the National Hero Zaim Mušanović school. They hunt me the way unflagging hunters pursue their prey. While we fly furiously down long corridors, up and down sets of stairs, through familiar classrooms, they tell me what awaits me when they catch me, and I hurl every curse I can think of back at them. One of them chases me lightning-fast toward a closed window; I spin around abruptly, stepping out of its way; it crashes into the window. I push the window open, shove the good spirit out, and slam it closed. Then I zing like a bullet through the school auditorium, where we used to maintain an honor guard by Tito's portrait. The two other good spirits writhe after me in pain and rage. I realize with horror that the waking world is nothing but a dark chimney in which I find momentary respite from pursuit.

I usually have these dreams when I stop smoking hashish. I've smoked for some ten years, every day, with the occasional break. I've stopped sometimes because I couldn't get any, or sometimes to clear my thinking. Then the dreams come back.

5.

After the fall into the Sava, two years ago, something akin to hope, a feeble and phantom-like flame, began to burn within me. Two weeks later I flew back to Oslo. On the plane I tried not to look at the faces of the people around me, or listen to their voices. I wasn't interested in their dismal stories of how they'd spent their vacations, how much they'd paid for rooms, how many grilled squid they had eaten in a wine cellar on Hvar. I ordered a beer, opened it, and clumsily spilled half of the contents on the pants of the young Norwegian man sitting next to me, who was speaking somewhat ecstatically to his girlfriend. She was skinny in an unhealthy way, with fake breasts and small red pimples on her face. The young man looked at me first in shock, then in anger. He started to brush the foam from his pants, swearing loudly in his north-Norwegian dialect. I said nothing, and watched him the way a person watches a nit that will ingest a half liter of his blood as it grows to be a louse. I sipped a little beer, popped a Valium, and turned to look in the other direction.

Before I sank into the bliss of unconsciousness, I thought about how it would be best if the plane were to crash while I was asleep. Somewhere in the Alps, if possible.

6.

Whenever I was in Norway, everything got on my nerves: Norwegian music and musicians, literature and writers, newspaper headlines, television news, the language and all its dialects, the mountains and the fjords, the endless, dark Nordic winters, the endless summer days, the king, the queen, the people on the street, the obnoxious, precocious little boys and stuck-up little girls, the frustrated women with pumped up buttocks and pushed-up tits, the self-conscious, natty young men, the soccer and the politics and the history and the laws.

Meanwhile, everything having to do with the Balkans seemed so right: the people were genuine, warm, defiant; they didn't have that sheep-like Norwegian obedience; they were not constrained by a spider's web of regulations. Negligence, carelessness, and chaos ruled the day—that fertile clutter which, with all its bad sides, is closer to human nature than a cold, metallic, perfectly organized social structure. Chaos is life, I'd muse in one of my rented rooms in the eastern part of Oslo, listening to Balkan, Oriental, or African music and reading books written in my language. I'd light joint after joint and conclude: To rein in chaos means to step toward the void.

There was truth in all this bullshit of mine, but no one was forcing me to stay in Norway. I could have gone back to the Balkans. And it isn't as if I didn't try. But when I returned to Croatia, or to Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, or Macedonia, after the first weeks, filled with wild parties and encounters with friends, everything would assume a different form. I would wake up one morning in Rijeka, or in Split, or Zagreb, or Sarajevo, or Mostar, or Tuzla, or Belgrade, or Novi Sad, usually hung over and exhausted, my consciousness narrowed by one drug or another, and all of a sudden everything would flip. I'd be swamped by a mixture of disgust and panic, a feeling of utter failure. After two weeks of that I'd retreat into isolation, listening to Norwegian music and reading books in Norwegian, and if I did drink, I'd start blathering on about the beauty of the Norwegian countryside, about their refined culture, their sophisticated democracy, and other such nonsense.

7.

I woke before the plane landed at Gardemoen airport, some fifty kilometers from Oslo. A wave of fear washed over me. That is how it has always been: the fear has been with me forever.

I remember getting off the plane, numbed by the Valium, and walking toward passport control with a yawn. The policeman greeted me kindly,

examined my red Norwegian passport, and asked where I was coming from. I answered him in slow motion, through my nose. He stamped a blank page and said: "Welcome home!" I glanced at him in wonder.

At customs there was a police officer standing on either side of the passageway, one of them accompanied by a dog of indeterminate breed. As I approached, the animal grew visibly agitated, wagging its tail and jumping toward me. The policewoman, on the right, asked if I might come with her into a room down the hall. I went without a word.

Inside, she asked whether I knew why they had stopped me. I said that I did.

—Do you now what kind of dog that was?

—I do.

—Do you know why it selected you?

—Maybe because I recently had weed in this backpack, I answered, yawning.

She seemed overjoyed. She repeated my sentence, word for word, and then started poking around in the little backpack that I had carried as hand luggage. She asked if I had anything like that on me now.

I looked at her and said nothing. She asked again, and I asked her if I really looked that stupid.

—You smoke hashish, too? she asked, and briefly stopped digging through the toiletries.

—I smoke, I answered, feeling a fleeting but gratifying glee at being so cool. I knew this was from the Valium I took on the plane, but I didn't care. The policewoman asked when I last smoked.

—At the airport in Split.

Another police officer took me to the next room. He kindly requested that I take off my clothes. I undressed without a shred of embarrassment and, for a moment, thought about breaking into dance.

While he searched my jacket, pants, socks, shoes, he inquired politely about where I had been traveling, what I was doing, my profession. I stripped off

my underwear and handed it to him. I told him I didn't feel like talking; he should just do his job and I'd do mine.

—Okay? I added.

—Okay, he answered.

He examined my mouth, my armpits. In the end, all that was left for him to do was stick a finger up my rectum. But I saw that, at the last moment, he decided against it.

Better that way, I thought maliciously. Even I wouldn't look there.

## 8.

The door opened with a harsh electronic beep. I stepped across the green line on the floor and entered Norway. A crowd of people was waiting for someone they knew to come out. A young woman walked by me and a young man with a bouquet of flowers strode toward her; she ran into his arms, but instead of kissing they just stood there embracing for a long time, while he whispered in her ear. I stood with one backpack on my back and the other in my left hand and peered around, pretending to look for the person waiting for me. A short man with a moustache held a slip of paper with the name HELENA written on it. In the other hand he held a little Norwegian flag.

I walked slowly, expecting something, a surge of emotion, memory, someone calling my name, grabbing me by the shoulder... Nothing. Even the voices in my head had stilled. My feet felt soft, as if the black marble floor was transforming into the Sava mud. I started turning, by then completely lost, like a catfish in a trap. From somewhere in my spinal cord, I heard a voice speaking with scorn about the years I'd already wasted in Norway. An elderly couple passed by, peering into my pupils. And then my knees finally buckled.

Someone splashed cold water onto my face. I came around slowly. Above me, several heads nodded knowingly, happy to have witnessed something out of the ordinary, to finally have experienced something beyond everyday life. I

reached for the hand that was splashing me: it belonged to a middle-aged saleswoman from the kiosk in front of which I'd collapsed. On her left breast she has pinned a small sign that said CATHRINE. Cathrine was a blonde. She had a haircut like Ljupka Dimitrovska and was chattering on, anxiously, in south-Norwegian dialect. At first I thought she was talking to me, but then she leaned over, thrust her breasts down in front of my nose, and slapped my cheeks, and I realized she was talking to herself. I moved her hand away, but the only thing I managed to say was:

—Sugar, give me sugar...

She brought me a soda. After I sipped a little of the sweet, bubbly drink, I got up, and the people around me began to disperse. The show was over.

8.

I boarded a train for the city, got off at Oslo Central Station, left the station building, and stopped. It was evening, neon lights were going on and off, trams were trundling and chiming, traffic lights were changing from red to yellow to green, people were stopping and going on command. Left of the station building was the Plata, a spacious green park where the druggies hang out. They rambled in clusters, organized their merchandise, exchanged profanities and the information that mattered to them, mooched money aggressively from passersby, and squabbled with the police who would chase them away from time to time.

I descended into the gloom of the metro and caught a train to the eastern part of Oslo, to the Tøyen stop.

From there I went up the slope at the Hagegate. Three young Somali women passed by. One was wearing a headscarf and a veil over her face; the other two were in skin-tight jeans, jabbing at the sidewalk with their high heels. They were giggling and gesturing broadly in the air. At Tøyen square, two unnaturally thin young men sat on a bench. One man's head had dropped to his

chest; the other was staring at something he was holding in his half-open fist. The first lifted his head for a moment, cursed, then dropped his head again.

Up a side street, on the doorbell of number 52, I found my friend Egil's last name, Johansen. I buzzed, and a voice answered. I gave my name and the door opened. Egil stood in the open door on the third floor, and greeted me warmly. There was none of the hugging or kissing that we have in the Balkans.

Egil didn't talk much—he didn't show emotion in a noisy way. When he wore a hat he looked like Clint Eastwood. He was ten years younger than me; I had taught him South Slavic literature at the University in Oslo a few years back. That was how we'd become friends. We'd light up a joint together or have a beer after class, sometimes. I introduced him to gypsy music. Now he was studying Arabic and working as a DJ.

One of the rooms in the four-bedroom apartment would be available within a week, he told me; if I wanted, I could move in. Until then I could sleep in the living room on the sofa. Aside from Egil, there were two other men living there. One of them was moving out the next week.

I agreed, and then we had nothing left to talk about. After a few minutes of silence Egil said he was going to go into his room to study, and I went off to take a shower.

## 9.

I made my bed on the sofa in front of the television set. Egil and the two other roommates went in and out of the bathroom, and then withdrew to their rooms. Tomorrow was another work day—they had to get a full night's rest. I lay on the sofa, covered myself with a sleeping bag, and thought about what I was going to do in Norway. Find a job, work from 8 to 4, smoke hashish in my room from 5 to midnight, get drunk on the weekends, try to get laid, be hung over Sundays, watch porno films or lie in front of the TV, wait for Monday, wait for Tuesday, wait for Wednesday, wait, wait, wait... Or fall in love with a woman, spend the

weekends with her, go on excursions, give her little presents, make love in strange places, cheat on her, wait for her to cheat on me, break up and then console her, wipe away her tears, drag out the relationship until one of us found someone else or she got pregnant. I thought of this and almost laughed because, of course, it made me think of my ex-wife. Sometimes I wasn't sure if she was real or if she had just been a demon sent to torment my soul.

After thoughts like these I couldn't fall asleep. I had no hashish and I went through a minor crisis until I found a Valium. Then I swallowed it and turned toward the armrest.

Five days passed. I would get up after Egil and the roommates. shower, shave, and get dressed as if I were on my way out. Then I'd sit on the sofa by the window and look at the street.

Nothing changed outside. The same gray sky, the same wet street, the same intersection, the same hurried silhouettes that strode with big steps toward their destinations. At some point, a little after noon, I would go to the store, buy a newspaper, bread, and a can of mackerel in tomato sauce. Then I'd come home, read the headlines, and chew the fish. In one can of mackerel in tomato sauce is everything a person needs for a day.

When the roommates came home, around five in the afternoon, they would greet me in passing, and then go off to make dinner in the kitchen. I'd wait for them to prepare their meals and then I'd go out so that I didn't bother them while they were dining. They ate in the living room, watching television. Egil invited me to join them, but I thanked him politely and declined. On the sixth day of my stay in the apartment, on Saturday, the departing roommate moved out, and I moved in.

10.

I brought in my two backpacks and dropped them into the corner. The room was spacious, with a bed, a desk, two chairs, and a wardrobe. The windows looked out on the same street the living room windows did. I stood and looked at the white walls, which had acquired a dirty yellow sheen. Here and there you could see little holes or torn scraps of wallpaper. I went to the bed and sat down. I thought, well, now something has begun to move. Now you have your own room and you can furnish it any way you like. You can sit on the bed all day long and watch the street. You no longer need to move out of the way when they come home to have dinner. You needn't go out anymore and climb up to the roof of that building where there is a sweeping view of Oslo.

From that roof you could see a mosque that had been built several years earlier. In the eastern part of Oslo there are many immigrants from Muslim countries. The mosque had been built from stone they'd brought all the way from the Middle East. It had two slender minarets, but the Norwegian government didn't allow them to broadcast the call to prayer.

I got up off the bed and went over to my backpacks. I pulled the big backpack over to the wardrobe and began to unpack my clothes and arrange them on the shelves. When I was done, I pulled out my laptop and several books and notebooks from my little backpack, and put them on the desk. I turned on the computer, ran a short porno film and masturbated. After I came, I sat on the bed and stared out the window at the street.

Three months later I moved back to Croatia, to start a new cycle, a new story that might have a happier ending.