



## THE SNAKE COLLECTOR

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It was March 13, 1992 when the military summoner rang the doorbell of our house in Trogir. He interrupted my mother's Turkish coffee to deliver a piece of paper with an official stamp. That is how the war started for me. The timing of this event was awkward. I know that there is no good time for things like the draft, but in my case it really came at the worst possible moment. On the morning when the summoner interrupted my mother's cup of coffee, five weeks had passed since the opening of my store in Kastela. It was a simple, small place where you could buy ice cream, newspapers or beach necessities. Not long before that, I had also rented a bigger place nearer to the seashore. I was hoping to earn my first million by selling wall tiles. Packages of Italian tiles were already at customs when the little white paper reached my house.

I remember that morning perfectly. I had been painting the walls of my new store, and I stopped when I heard the two o'clock radio news. I washed all the paintbrushes and went home for lunch. My mother held out that little piece of paper

while opening the door for me, and I thought to myself: this is the worst possible time.

The seven-thirty news showed Sibenik on fire, artillery attacks forcing people from Zadar and Zupanja to move into shelters. It looked like war was going to break out in Bosnia, too. But I was not thinking of the Croatian banner, my debt to it, the smile of our beautiful homeland or its golden fields of wheat. I was thinking about the rent of both my stores piling up, and the one closer to the shore was damn expensive. I was thinking about Zeljkica, the afternoon salesgirl in my smaller store, who was filching me, though I could not catch her red-handed. I thought about all those tiles being stuck right where they were, at customs. They had really drafted me at the worst possible time, and Trogir was different from the big cities; draft dodgers were talked about and pointed at.

The notification required me to report to the mobilization centre on Sukosan Street in Split. No deadlines were specified, just an intimidating NOW, written in capital letters. I was not allowed to come in my own car. My mother phoned my uncle, explained everything and asked him to give me a lift.

In fifteen minutes, my uncle parked his stojadin in front of our house. In the meantime I packed a razor, toothbrush, jack knife, can opener and a bologna sandwich. I also took a sleeping bag, and placed everything in the trunk, which smelt of thinner and gas.

The building at Sukosan Street had a large driveway riddled with shrapnel. My uncle turned off the engine when we reached the entrance. He put his hand on my shoulder. I looked at him, then I looked at the gate, said goodbye and got out. I had to continue on my own because there was nothing he could do anymore.

The hallway was full of young, anxious machos. You could see right through them: urban guys in Diesel shirts, with earrings and dyed hair. They were still playing tough, but you could easily see how tormented they were. Just yesterday they had watched the news, swearing at those Serbian pieces of shit. Now it was different, they were involved.

‘We could seriously use a truce now,’ said a guy sitting next to me, offering me an Orbit. I suppose you could have called him good-looking; he had a yellow, messy mane. I refused the gum. If I had put it in my mouth, I would have thrown up all over the garrison hall.

‘I’m Edi,’ said the yellow guy, taking back the gum.

‘Dino,’ I said, shaking his hand.

Some pen pusher collected our notifications and wrote our names down. They took us to a room resembling a classroom, only larger. After we waited for some time, and it seemed too long, an officer walked in and the commotion stopped.

He had a rank sign on his shoulder, a bunch of interlacing stars I could not decipher. He was stiff, in a perfectly new uniform that was hiding his round stomach. He greeted us. We stared at him in silence.

‘Let’s get one thing straight,’ he said. ‘This ain’t no military exercise. You’re not going to a manoeuvre or the reserve forces. You’re going to war.’

As he said that, a sharp, cold pain pierced my guts. It felt like someone sticking a wire in my appendix.

‘I know you want to find out where you’re going. You’re going to the south, near Dubrovnik. The place is called Hutovo, and don’t try to look it up on a map ’cause you won’t find it. The buses are waiting outside to take you there. I have nothing more to say to you.’

He stood there in silence and then he added, ‘Good luck. Some of you won’t come back, but most will. Keep that in mind.’

I glanced at the crowded classroom. It was full of young men and the officer scared the shit out of them. That fatso talked like we were competing for some great job, or trying to pass our SATs.

The buses were really waiting outside. There were a lot of uniforms around—drivers, officers and military police. An unshaven driver stood by a jeep, smoking.

Edi stepped up to him and asked, ‘We’re going to a place called Hutovo. What’s it like, is it bad?’

‘Same shit,’ said the driver, throwing the cigarette butt on the floor and stepping on it. ‘Same shit anywhere you go.’

We went into the buses and sat down. They were old and colourful; requisitioned from God knows which firm that had gone out of business. I sat there, staring at the back of Edi’s yellow head.

I remembered again what the fatso had said. Some of you won’t come back, but most will. Keep that in mind.

I was bearing that in mind non-stop. The only question, important and final was—when the line was drawn, which side would you be on?

We slept over in some village near the Neretva River, in a school situated on a curve and surrounded by silty water. Like that school, the whole village was a trapped backwater of swamps, moist and dirty. All around it shallow riverboats were rotting away. As the night grew closer, the water would reach the dark thickness of mazout oil and mosquitoes would rise from its surface in clouds.

They drove us into the village in pinzgauers [military armoured vehicles], at sunset. The children gathered round us, amazed: we were neither civilians nor soldiers—soldiers without uniforms. The children smelt of silt. They seemed to be coated with a thin layer of dry, porous ochre mud. We saw the adults later; their skin looked like that, too—filthy and yellow.

We spent that night in our sleeping bags laid on the parquet classroom floor. I took a place underneath a map of Asia that was hanging on the wall, Edi settling right next to me. ‘Look what I got,’ he said, taking a pack of cards for briscola and tresette out of his bag. He outplayed me: in briscola he beat me four to zero.

Coldness woke me up before dawn. The classroom smelt of mould and burnt parquet. It was still dark outside. I was too frozen to get out of my sleeping bag so I lay there staring at the ceiling, listening to the snoring and breathing of thirty people. At half past four I heard a car outside, then some voices. After that, everything was silent again.

But not for long. The classroom door opened and someone turned the light on.

Some uniforms walked in. ‘Good morning,’ said one of them, wearing a beard and round-rimmed glasses. He looked like a bookworm, a philosophy teacher.

‘Get up!’ said the philosophy teacher. ‘You’ve got some white coffee and a breakfast waiting next door. Then we’ll give you the equipment.’

Edi’s appetite was unbelievable. He gorged three chicken pâtés and a quarter of bread. I drank some white coffee (it was in fact ersatz with milk) and tried to chew on a piece of bread crust. When I left the building, I was struck by the smell of silt, and I spat the bread right out. I went to get my equipment.

They gave us the uniforms, boots and belts. The clothes smelt like seat-covers and the boots like leather. Then they gave us the weapons.

When we entered the classroom, the automatic handguns lay innocently on a table covered with baize. Each of us signed into the book and took a gun. When the ceremony was over, we stood there for a while like a bunch of stupid kids, handling our new toys with uneasiness. I remembered how we used to play war when we were little, hanging around the yard with big, knotty mulberry branches. People grow up and some things never change.

The philosopher got into the classroom, carrying a Kalashnikov himself. He said his name was Boris, Major Boris, and that he would be our commanding officer. ‘Is there anyone here who can’t shoot from a ciganka?’ he asked. [Ciganka literally means ‘Gypsy woman’ in Croatian, and was a soldiers’ nickname for an AK-47.]

Everyone was silent. No one answered. Who wouldn’t know how to shoot from a Kalashnikov? This might not be a common skill in an average Swede or a German, but here—anyone can tell you how to take a Kalashnikov apart, charge it and shoot from it.

‘Fine,’ said Major Boris, and walked out.

We got into the pinzgauers and took a lengthy ride. At first we drove on asphalt, and then the vehicle turned onto a dirt road. I looked at Edi: he winced back at me.

The asphalt was over. The normal, civilized world was over—we were there, the fucking middle of nowhere, Vietnam.

The sector we were in charge of resembled a pair of buttocks: two rotund, small hills separated by a creek. The road went through that creek, winding down the valley and disappearing somewhere on their side of the line.

We held our positions on one of the hillocks. The trenches were shallow, carelessly dug. Whether they were the work of our men or theirs, you could see that whoever was digging them did not think he would be here long. When you looked over the sandbag barriers the view was beautiful. The entire valley could be seen, the serpentine road to Dubrovnik; further away the peaks of Herzegovina coated with snow. The Montenegrin ditches could also be seen, their tank entrenchment and camouflaged vehicles. We watched them, they watched us, but in most cases nothing happened.

We slept in an abandoned village, in huts scattered among fig and chestnut trees. It was twelve kilometres away from the high stands, which meant a two and a half-hour walk to the settlement. Major Boris told us that it was the only suitable place, considering the insecurity of the front and the wandering squads.

We settled there at dusk. Edi and I were sent to a hut formerly used for drying meat. Its concrete blocks were dirty with soot. Hooks long ago used for hanging homemade sausages and prosciutto now dangled empty from the wooden girders.

When we laid down our sleeping bags, the major entered the hut. He sat on a chopping block and asked if everything was all right. He wrote our names down in a notebook, and asked us about our jobs as civilians.

‘I’m an electrician in the post office,’ said Edi.

I stated my occupation, too; and asked: ‘What about you?’

‘I’m a professor,’ said the major.

‘Philosophy?’

‘No.’ He laughed. ‘Biology.’

Then he stood up. ‘We’re neighbours. I sleep in the kitchen, right next to you.’

The walk to the high stands took three hours, and we took turns in 24-hour shifts. The soldier on duty would wake the team whose turn it was at four in the morning,

so they could get ready and reach the stand before dawn.

It was a quiet period; the front would be stale and calm for a while. By the middle of the morning, the artillery would start shooting on both sides; tanks would leave their entrenchment and start fire—that was it, more or less. There were no infantry attacks, and we hadn't seen the enemy for months. While the artillery was roaring, we would bury our heads in the shallow ditches and wait for it to stop. The high stand was bearable.

The day was not our problem, the night was. It got dark early and you had to stay awake even though the previous night, you had probably not slept more than a couple of hours. Until then, I was not aware of the pain brought by sleep deprivation: real pain, just like hunger or frostbite. It made us see things that were not there: skeletons among the tree-tops, a branch that looked like a hand with a grenade, mist that took the shape of human bodies. The less experienced would shoot the phantoms and throw bombs at the mist covering the hornbeam grove. Then, the whole front would answer with a panicked thunder of weapons, just like one village dog waking all the others with his barking.

The road in the valley was not as rough and rocky as the one we first took when we came here. It was soft, covered with dust and easy to sneak onto. It was much easier than the rocky ground that snapped loudly as you walked on it. Professor Boris told us that this dusty road was the main reason we were there. 'We mustn't let them pass this spot. If we do, they'll get behind our backs and we're fucked,' he said. If one of their squads got behind us, we would be done for. That is why we had to watch the road.

The professor ordered a group of soldiers to dig a ditch near the road and place a counter-armour weapon in it. The guys dug it in the soothing shade of an oak tree. It faced a long curve of the dirt road. A cannon was dragged in. 'No more shifts for you,' said Major Boris to the cannon guy. 'You're going to be here 24-7.' The cannon guy did not object: it meant no walking, no high stand, no dishes and no camp guarding. He would sit under the oak tree for the rest of the day, wait for lunch and see that they didn't come near. The major pointed his finger at Edi.

‘You’ll stay here with him, for security. Go and get your things.’

So Edi and the cannon guy were there permanently. At noon the food would arrive, and the major would send someone to bring them a backpack with cans of food and some bread. Finally he decided it would be me.

I did not like the idea. It meant two walks a day, two walks during which I could be hit by a grenade or get caught in the middle of a mortar attack. I was spared the high stand shifts, though. I did not have to fear possible infantry attack, and I would sleep all night. But I walked the field each afternoon carrying the food, looking at the sharp-edged stones. If they start shooting, each of these rocks could be smashed into hundreds of flesh-severing limestone shrapnel, breaking vertebrae and limbs. I envied Edi, who lay in the shadow waiting for the phantom tank that would never emerge from behind that bend.

And so our days went by. In the morning, we could hear artillery fire. It was too far away to reach us, and it ceased towards the end of the morning. The lunch truck came exactly at noon. I would eat up quickly, pack the food and carry it to Edi and the cannon guy. I would pace hastily along the soft, warm dust. Months of war had chased away all the animals, so the valley was ghastly quiet. I listened to the silence, fearing only one sound: mortar fire.

The people around me were plain—you could see them every day on the bus or in the market, without noticing them or thinking about them. They were young and old, fat and slim, junkies and alcoholics, chicken-shits and heroes. The older ones were greedy-guts: as soon as the truck arrived, they would lurk for beans and sausages, or an extra candy bar. The younger ones would settle comfortably on the threshing floor, take some weed out of a plastic bag and roll a joint, smoking and staring into the clear blue sky. Every single one of these people was plain. Except for Professor Boris.

He was no regular guy, he was different: he rarely left the kitchen and never drank one drop of alcohol, always went to sleep as soon as it got dark. He would read some huge book while doing the night shift. The radio transceiver would crackle every once in a while, sparkling like some device from hell. Boris used it

for reports every morning and every evening; he listened to it, read the big book and made notes. Once, when he was out, I used the opportunity and took a peek at it. It was about insects. Drawings of maybugs, cockroaches, stag beetles, fireflies and praying mantis covered the pages; and the margins were filled with professor's tiny handwriting. I kept thumbing through. The next chapter was about ants. Each page showed a different kind of ant, dozens of various sizes, colours and patterns of behaviour.

'They have wars too,' I heard a voice behind my back. Professor had caught me snooping around.

'You're free to look if you want,' he said as I put the book down timidly.

'People usually read novels.'

'I'm writing my doctoral thesis. Actually, I was.'

'On bugs?'

'Yes.'

'About their wars?'

'No, not that. Although it did cross my mind, especially since this started.'

The light of the petroleum lamp was shivering, making it seem as if the room was moving. The radio continued to crackle and sparkle, reproducing fragments of orders and reports. We listened to scraps of conversations from other people in other places. From an opened page, an exotic, colourful maybug was staring at me. To someone else, we look like that, I thought. Collared, foreign, a bit repulsive. A simple race in a war with another race similar to it, for some reason only we can understand. An object worthy of studying, a species handled with tweezers while thin rubber gloves are cautiously protecting your hands.

A jeep arrived from the headquarters in the middle of morning. It was a brand new, shining Puch, obviously not ruined by dirt roads and rocky ground. It stopped in front of the post and an officer got out. The professor came up to him and saluted. Since I had been mobilized, that was my first time actually seeing someone perform a salute.

The driver opened the back door. The professor and the officer moved to make way, and then I saw the privileged passenger.

He was a kid.

Not really a kid, of course. But he looked like one: barely over eighteen, smooth-faced. He kept his shoulders bent and his obscenely huge uniform made him look ridiculous: as if he had stolen it from his dad. In spite of that, the senior officers stepped aside like he was an heir, a medium or a visionary who chit-chatted with the Holy Virgin Mary on a daily basis.

It was the Malyutka-guy.

The major had told us that he was going to come. ‘The road is not secured well enough. A cannon and two men are not enough,’ he had told us, adding that the headquarters had already approved his request for a Malyutka.

Anti-tank cannons were a common thing, they were used practically everywhere. The Malyutka was special: as peculiar as a rare insect, a precious sort of weapon—there were less than a dozen of them along the entire Dalmatian coast. Its purpose was similar to that of an anti-armour missile launcher: to destroy pillboxes, tanks, trucks and all mobile and immobile targets. What made it different was the three-mile coil of resistant steel wire around it. The wire was attached to the expensive projectile of devastating power. While it sped to the target, it was attached to the Malyutka and you could guide it: there were no shortfalls, overthrows nor miscalculations. You would look at your victim through the screen, drive the missile with something similar to a joystick—and hit it. The Malyutka was precise, exact, expensive and rare.

Everyone was talking about its price as the main problem. One missile costs a fuckin’ grand, you can’t just give someone fifty of ’em before he gets a grip, they would say. So when the army needed Malyutka operators, they turned to the ones who already knew it all—the kids. They recruited video arcade champions, boys whose hands were used to operating a joystick. They gave them two or three missiles each on the training area and that was it. The younger they were, the better: sharper eyesight and quicker reflexes. The ones who had spent the most time in

front of video games, killing aliens and destroying purple booby traps, were the right ones for the job.

The boy they had just driven in was one of them. See-through and pale, he looked like someone who had never seen any light, except neon. His thin arms gave the impression that he could lift nothing heavier than a beer. Then I looked at all the farmer-tanned dimwits hanging around the post. Their complexion was clearly the result of open air, homemade wine, weekend ranching and olive picking. The Malyutka-guy looked like an ant who had wandered into the wrong anthill.

‘The kid kicks ass,’ said the professor that evening, while Turkish coffee was being made on the post. ‘One hundred percent efficiency in training. Hawk-eyed, his hand is one with the joystick. We’re lucky to have him.’

While I was having coffee that night, I found out that they had given him the spot right next to me; it was Edi’s old place. When I went to sleep, he was still tossing and turning in his sleeping bag. I shook hands with him and said my name. ‘Toni, the Malyutka-guy,’ he said, as if the latter was his surname.

Edi and the Malyutka-guy became constant tenants of the trench under the oak tree. I brought their lunch every day. I would usually start the walk around noon and get there before three. We would eat together, peas or meat sauce, and after that I would spend a part of the afternoon in the shade with them. Sometimes we could hear artillery thunder from the sea, and bursts of gunfire or shouting from the hill. The afternoons got shorter as time went by, and the battlefield was calm at night. I used to greet Toni and Edi at sundown, just before walking back to the village. I would listen to the sounds that surrounded me. Whenever I heard the hiss of a rocket launcher or the thudding of tanks, that old feeling of raw fear would grasp me for a moment—the same feeling that had filled me that morning in the mobilization centre, only to be washed away later by months of routine.

One morning I reached the oak, carrying minced-meat steaks, some vegetables and rice in my haversack. As I placed the containers of food on the ground, I noticed a white, fleshy strip hanging from one of the branches. It was a snakeskin,

carefully peeled off.

‘Look,’ bragged Toni, the Malyutka-guy, showing off like a five-year-old.

‘I taught him how to catch snakes,’ said Edi.

‘With a cleft stick,’ added Toni.

The valley was crowded with snakes and snake-lizards. All the other living creatures had already gone: the foxes, pheasants and hares had been chased away by gunfire, and the birds had flown away from the forest fires caused by missiles. Only the snakes were still there—mostly harmless grass snakes, the occasional horned viper. Bored soldiers would break away pieces of the dry stonewalls in the fields until they found one. Then the hunt would start. They would press its head down with a cleft stick, decapitate it with a pocket-knife and skin it. I had seen that sort of recreation back home and here on the battlefield. Edi obviously had enough free time to indulge in it.

I looked at Toni’s malicious device in the ditch. The Malyutka did not look like a weapon; it looked more like some wicked, expensive geodesic instrument. The sight of it made me respect the kid. He did not understand. He was too busy bragging about his new skill—snake hunting.

That afternoon I came back to the village earlier than usual. The major looked at me and asked if the ambush by the road was all right. I nodded, remembering the white strip of skin swaying from a branch. Had it really come to this—sending the most infantile teenagers to war?

I would find Toni and Edi in the same position every afternoon: laid back sluggishly in the trench, their weapons and binoculars scattered around like dead cattle. You could hear gunfire and artillery from up the hill, but here nothing ever happened. Toni and Edi were lying, napping and farting; sometimes they would take a look at the road through their binoculars. I knew Edi well enough to see he was bored to death. But Toni had found entertainment for himself. He was crazed by the snakes.

The collection on the lowest oak branch grew daily. By the end of the week,

there were about a dozen snake skins up there, mostly grass snakes, some common adders and horned vipers. Some were long and light, some short, some black or stripy. From a distance, they looked like fish being dried by some weird Polynesian tribe, or women's socks on the washing line of a large household. In short, Toni was acting crazy: as soon as I arrived in the trench with the daily portion of beans or meat stew, he would show me the new acquisitions in his skin museum, all the reptiles he had executed with a cleft stick and a pocket knife. He sometimes wandered too far from the ditch in search of them, and Edi was reasonably disapproving of that.

In those couple of weeks, Toni's appearance changed. The sun had darkened his complexion, and the skin on his palms and face got rough because of the fine, red dirt he was lying in. He began to follow the trend of Croatian warriors: a black bandana round his head, his ammo in the net pockets of his prsluk [ammo jacket], his sleeves rolled up to show his unimpressive, white hands—like a violin player's. Soon he began to decorate his uniform with snakeskins, hanging them around his neck and tacking them onto his belt. He was trying to look macho, but it made him look ridiculous. Maybe that was why he hunted snakes, maybe he just wanted to leave his neon-lit past behind and become an Indian, a tanned creature in touch with the nature around him. He might have wanted that, but I am not sure if it was working.

One day Major Boris came with me to supervise the outpost. While I was ladling spaghetti bolognese, he observed Toni's collection with fascination. I watched him, unsure whether he was looking at it from the perspective of a biologist or a psychiatrist.

He did not comment on it. He scolded them for neglecting the trench, went past the curve checking the landmarks and went back. I followed, carrying a half-empty haversack. 'An impressive collection,' he said right before we reached the village. 'That kid caught a lot.' Then he added: 'Be honest with me, has he, like, gone mental?' I said nothing.

It thundered as hard as hell that night. As soon as darkness fell in the village,

artillery fire started from the sea. It roared the entire night. Around three I got nervous, and got up. The hilltops around us were the red of slowly burning, wet bushes. The front was alive, something was happening.

I lay down and went back to sleep. I dreamed of the Malyutka-guy, his belt supporter decorated with snakeskins—but in my dream the snakes were alive. The oak was black, scorched and dreadful. I woke up early, with a headache. It was five in the morning, and the artillery fire had not ceased.

I walked through the village. Others were nervously pacing around too, listening to the drumming of the artillery and gaping at the leaden sky. Anxiety was choking me, and I quickly forgot my dream of the snakes and the burned oak. Who could have known it was an omen of things about to happen that day, things after which nothing would stay the same?

Around noon, I took the lunch and headed off to the outpost. The firing had ceased by then. After an hour and a half I got to the ruined chapel, about two-thirds of my way. Up until then not a single grenade had fallen near, although artillery from the sea could constantly be heard.

I was barely a hundred yards from the chapel when it exploded.

It went off near me, although not near enough to present any danger to me. The bang was so loud I felt dizzy, and the buzz in my ears was unstoppable. Immediately after that, another went off right across the road.

The worst thing about them was that they seemed to appear out of thin air. In war you can hear missiles all the time. They hiss left and right; their shrill noise rips the air. These did not hiss. They exploded as if they had been there forever, like someone had planted them and waited. Soon, the location of the third and the fourth detonations made it clear: they were aiming for the road.

I hid behind a steep rock and waited, all ears. The grenades hit the field randomly, raising smoke puffs. When one of them went off closer to me, a shower of tiny limestone splinters would cover the rock I stood behind.

I did not know what to do. I could not go back to the village, not only because I

was further from it than the trench, but also because the detonations were going off in that direction. The shelter I had found was less than lame: it protected me only when I was lying on my stomach. And if the cliff-top next to me took a hit, which was likely, I'd be done for. Choked by a panic attack, I managed to put two and two together. I had to go further, to Edi and Toni's trench.

The shit could have hit the fan in any case. But the fire was moving away toward the village, and the trench Toni and Edi were in was deep and solid, the only decent protected place in the entire fucking rock-covered valley. To get there, I only had to run the last two and a half miles.

So I started running. First I listened carefully to the discharge. I would run, throw myself on the ground when I heard it, and continue to run after the missile went off. I planned to reach the trench like that, but it was an illusion: the gunfire and the artillery were coming from both our side and theirs. Soon the explosions and detonations from both sides got so mixed up I could not count the missiles nor know who was shooting and from where. So I ran and threw myself down by chance, trying only to get there as soon as I could.

After half an hour, I saw the silhouette of the hills and the creek that reminded me of a butt. I could even see the oak. What disturbed me were the sounds coming from above: gunfire, shouting, flashes and detonation. I had never before seen an infantry attack, but this sure looked like one.

I rushed toward the oak. The cold air was tearing my throat and my spleen was burning. Grenades were hitting the ground all around me, but I no longer took

any notice of them. I decided to run those last hundred yards to the ambush without stopping. If it hit me, it would just mean that I was out of fucking luck.

I ran until the blurred image of the oak tree got close, and then stopped to see an unexpected scene.

Toni and Edi were not alone. Actually, there were so many men around the tree you would think they were waiting for a bus.

Edi and Toni were there, of course—in their uniforms, their guns ready to shoot.

The other men had camouflage uniforms too, only different: the yellow pattern

was brighter, the material of lighter colour, with different boots. Edi and Toni's company was made up of soldiers from the other side, their soldiers.

After months spent at war, I was seeing them up close for the first time.

Luckily, it seemed like Edi and Toni had everything under control. They were pointing their guns at the disarmed intruders, who stood with their hands over their heads. Their guns and bombs were in a pile behind Edi's back. Both of these crews stood upright in the middle of the skirmish, like there wasn't artillery roaring around.

'Look what we caught,' said Edi when he noticed me. He said it perkily, like he was enjoying himself.

'Their patrol,' added the Malyutka-guy eagerly. He had his war colours on—snakeskins, net prsluk and a bandana. I had the impression that the Montenegrins were unsure whether to be afraid of him or consider him an utter nutcase.

There were three of them, the ideal number for surveying or a smaller sabotage. They seemed as scared as I would have been in their place. They looked hungry and run-down, too; but I suppose they thought the same of us.

One of them differed. He was tall, terribly thin, and you could tell by his long hair that he was a reservist. The other two watched him like he was their mentor or homeroom teacher. They looked down; he did not. He looked straight at Edi, as if he considered him to be our boss.

'Friend!' he addressed Edi cautiously, as if taming a wild animal.

We were stunned. Not one of us expected them to talk to us. When I come to think of it today, I think we were amazed by the fact they could speak.

'Friend, listen to me!' he repeated.

'I'm not your damn friend!' replied Edi crudely.

'Listen to me! It's hell here, your people and my people are gonna killed if we stay like this. Let's get down on the ground, and hide before we get hit.'

Edi looked at me. I nodded my head so lightly it was barely noticeable. 'Okay,' said Edi. 'Get down on the ground, in front of the ditch! Hands behind your head!'

You move—you die.’

They did as he ordered them straight away, sagging slowly to the ground. They were frightened. Right after they did that, a grenade exploded near us. The three of us threw ourselves down, drawing our weapons. We could hear gunfire and shouting from up the hill. I looked up, but the only thing I saw was the thick oak branch with the snakeskins hanging from it. Toni’s snake lizards and grass snakes were swaying in the breeze, like they were trying to remind us that this mess stopped being their business a long time ago.

‘What are you goin’ to do with them?’ I asked Edi.

‘Fuck, it’d be best to kill the Chetnik scum.’

As he said that, I looked at the men still lying there. They had not moved an inch. But Toni winced; I could see clearly his self-satisfied smile freezing.

‘You won’t kill ’em,’ I said. ‘We’ll wait for this to stop, and then we’re taking them to the village.’

Edi seemed relieved when I said that. ‘True, we can use them for an exchange,’ he murmured.

I took a look at the sky. We needed to wait for the artillery fire to cease, but it went on and on. The stony field blossomed in little clouds of grey smoke, a bang following each of them. It was thundering and the end did not seem to be near.

I looked at the Montenegrins. Their faces were grey and tired, their wrinkles filled with fine dirt. I thought that I could find out about them if I looked carefully enough, maybe find a hint that would reveal them as bakers, tyre repair-men or teachers. But I found nothing. They all had similar faces, anxious and sombre, looking like they had been in the army forever and always would be. I remember perfectly well how I wondered at that moment: do they see us the same way, resembling each other like eggs, with no past and no unique characteristics.

The radio transceiver under the oak was buzzing. ‘Oak, Oak, this is House.’ It was the voice of Major Boris. I was surprised by the way that patronizing tone comforted me.

‘Oak, can you hear me?’ crackled the radio again.

‘We’re here,’ answered Edi. He was still watching the Montenegrins who were lying on the ground.

‘An infantry attack started up there. Can you hear me? An infantry attack started.’

‘Roger that,’ said Edi. The gunfire from the hill was getting worse.

‘We’re on the way, but it’s gonna take some time. We got two guys out already. You watch out, they’ll attack the road too.’

‘They already have.’

‘What?’

‘They already have. They sent raiders and we ambushed them. Three of them. We captured them. What am I gonna do?’

The radio was silent.

‘What am I gonna do?’ Edi repeated in a louder voice.

The radio was still silent.

‘Wait for us to come,’ said the professor after a long break. Toni was nervously tapping the breech of his Kalashnikov. The Montenegrins were still, but you could see they were all ears. ‘He said to wait,’ said Edi, and as soon as he did everything melted away into light and ear-splitting, unbearable detonation.

I’d never felt such pain in my entire life. I howled like a madman, and my right leg burned from the knee down like someone was breaking it and skinning it with a metal comb at the same time. The only thing I could hear was the quiet, constant buzzing in my ears. I looked at my leg. Still there. Bloody, according to the pain, probably pierced through—but still there. I was afraid that I would see only torn muscles and a stump. I could see my leg, and at that moment nothing was more important.

I turned around. The Montenegrins were still there, covering their heads with their hands. They seemed okay. Edi was down, his upper arm covered in blood.

I saw Toni. He was standing right under the tree, in the most dangerous spot, completely intact as if he had just been beamed in from somewhere else, still aiming at the Montenegrins.

When I remember that afternoon now, I am usually paralyzed by fear again. The truth is that we were plain lucky that day. That 60-mil could have turned a yard or two aside and hit the treetop. It would have gone off somewhere among the branches above Toni's snake gallery. In that case, the shrapnel would have fallen down on us like steel rain—and every one of us would be dead. Toni, who was standing right under the tree, against regulations, would have been turned into an amorphous bloody pulp.

But it hit the ground a bit further along, shoved into the sand and lost its power. The Montenegrins were lying down so they got off easy. We were kneeling and aiming at them, so we were riddled by shrapnel and stone slivers—but alive. Edi's shoulder was carved by a large knife-like piece of limestone. My leg was hurt. Toni was untouched.

He suddenly snapped out of it and hurried to help us; probably intending to bandage our wounds, stop the bleeding or something. Edi stopped him, mumbling a warning. 'Are you fuckin' crazy? Leave the two of us alone, watch them!'

We looked at the Montenegrins. A split second would be enough for them to get a hold of weapons. Then we would become the prisoners, and they the jailers.

'Get on the radio. Ask for House,' Edi barely managed to say and Toni grabbed the transceiver. Everything around us echoed with the sound of explosions. At first only a few crackles came from the transceiver, then the professor's voice broke through.

'House, this is Toni, the Malyutka-guy.'

The professor sounded surprised, 'Toni, where's Edi?'

'Down. Him and Dino.'

The professor sounded like he had enough trouble already. 'What happened?'

'It came down on us,' said Toni, almost bursting into tears.

'What about the prisoners?'

Toni looked over his shoulder: 'They're here.'

For a moment or two, only buzzing and noise could be heard, and then detonations from the other side of the connection. Wherever the professor was, it

was pretty bad.

‘Toni!’ Rustled the radio.

‘I’m here.’

‘Go to the high stand as soon as you can! Can you hear me, leave as soon as...’

‘What about the prisoners?’

The professor was silent. Edi and I looked at each other. Edi was lying on his hip with a bloody arm, and I was on my back. My leg was in a sloppy, improvised bandage. We were both aware what was going on and how it would end. Toni was the only one who still didn’t get it.

‘Toni,’ said Edi, fighting for air because of the pain. ‘Toni, we got to get up there. Our men are up there. The medic is up there.’

‘What about them?’ Toni was pointing at the poor bastards lying there and listening.

‘Toni, you can’t take ’em up there during the attack. It would be bringing the enemy behind our men’s back.’

‘I’m taking them to the village, for exchange.’

‘You can’t get to the village. There is no village. No one is there anymore.’

‘I can’t just let them go...’

‘Right. You can’t. They’ll surprise our guys from behind.’

‘What am I gonna do then—kill them?’

Edi said nothing. I looked at the Montenegrins and realized they had given up all hope. Toni was still the only one not getting it.

‘I can’t do it to them, no.’

‘My arm is crushed and Dino can’t get up.’

‘I can’t do it.’

‘Toni, there is no other choice,’ Edi answered patiently, like he was lecturing an idiot.

Toni looked at me. I was silent very briefly, and then nodded. I still swear it was the hardest single sentence I had ever uttered. ‘There’s no other choice,’ I said, looking at the Montenegrins.

The tall one stood up looking at the ground, dignified and rigid. The shortest one's jaw started to shake before he burst into tears. His fear gave him colour, in my head. I looked at his light hair and thought to myself: back where he came from, he might be a teacher, a jurist or an accountant. He did not look like someone who had a family, but you could not tell for sure. If he had, he would never see them again.

'I can't kill them. Not like this!' Toni was sobbing seriously, almost beginning to cry. 'They have no weapons, nothing.'

'Are you insane? What the fuck do you want? You want us to give them their weapons back? What do you think this is, a duel, the OK Corral?' Edi was outraged, and it did not seem fair to me. Toni had a healthy hand and he had to do it. It was hard enough already; there was no need to make it worse.

We stood like that, and all around us was gunfire and chaos. The shorter Montenegrin was sobbing. The tall one was staring at the ground as if trying to figure out some last, insoluble riddle hidden in the grass before he died. Toni was gasping with horror; his gun aimed at them, his eyes staring at us. Edi's bled more and more. We had to hurry and end this.

'House, House, this is Oak,' yelled Toni into the transceiver, like it could make a difference.

'Roger,' the professor's voice encouraged Toni, who still had his hopes up.

'House, I'm taking the wounded and the prisoners to you.'

'Toni, go up to the high post.'

Toni did not answer at once. The professor called out in a worried, impatient voice.

'House, what will I do with the prisoners?' Toni asked for the last time.

'You know what,' said the professor.

'What?'

'You know what, Toni.'

Toni put the transceiver aside. He was pallid.

I looked at the Montenegrins. That was it, they were done for. The professor had

condemned them although, like everyone else, he never used the ‘K’ word. No one wanted to mention what was about to happen in its true name.

I closed my eyes and heard the unnaturally long sound of Toni’s automatic; then silence.

When I opened my eyes the Montenegrins were dead, Toni’s Kalashnikov was on the ground and he stood petrified under the oak. He could not look away from what he had done.

The three lay dead, expressionless, like they were taking a break from a job they would finish later.

I regret having looked at them. If I hadn’t done that, I would not dream of them now. But I do—not every night, but often. I dream of the three dead bodies watching the sky. I dream of their eyes looking, but unable to see. They cannot see the clouds, the branches or the dead snakes carelessly swaying back and forth in the afternoon wind.

‘Let’s go,’ said Edi. ‘Let’s go before another one goes off.’

Edi was the most self-possessed of us all, or maybe the worst person. We did as he told us. We were alive, and those who are will do anything to keep on living.

•••

I never went back to the oak on the turn of the road. Toni went there one more time, the morning after what had happened, to fetch the Malyutka. He told me that the bodies of the Montenegrins were still there. One of our men poured quick lime on them so they would not smell. So the quick lime smelled instead, which was almost as bad.

That October morning, as they said on the radio, we repelled the enemy’s infantry attack along the entire combat line. Two days later, our men counterattacked the Montenegrins and forced them to draw seven miles back. The trench under the oak became obsolete. It just stayed there as a reminder of a stupid war that took place a long time ago. Maybe it is still there, filled with leaves, getting shallower because dirt is constantly filling it. I doubt that anyone covered it over: scars on people barely have time to heal here, so who would want to heal

scars on the earth?

If the ditch is still there maybe the snakeskins of the Malyutka-guy are, too. When I asked him about them, he told me that he had just left them there. They could still be swaying on the wind, now black and dry. Toni no longer needed them; he had become the hardened being of nature, the Indian he had wanted to be.

It would be better if he hadn't. It would be better for him to push the rewind button and go back to the morning he stepped out of the jeep, pale and slouching, with his hands resembling a violinist's. But you cannot rewind life and Toni can never stop being a killer, just as I can never stop being an accomplice.

Two days after the incident under the oak tree, our soldiers counterattacked and made the Montenegrins draw seven miles back. They call it history. We were no longer a part of that history. We were not there—neither Toni, nor Edi, nor the professor, nor I.

I spent those two days at the medical corps, where some pre-med took care of my leg. I could move, so they sent me to Split with the rest of our shift. I limped over to the bus and took a seat by the window. Through the dirty glass, I could see Toni returning the Malyutka. He got on the bus, saw me and greeted me with a melancholic nod. But he did not sit next to me.

We travelled for a long time. Before sunset, the bus hit the asphalt—it was the same spot at which we had said goodbye to our regular life. The German engine was purring pleasantly and quietly, but it no longer meant anything.

Late at night we went over the mountain and hit the bypass. The view of Split and the bay opened in front of us. From above Split looked like a metropolis. Blast furnaces were burning, the spotlights of disco-clubs, the airport, construction sites, the stadium. A wobbly cluster of a thousand lights burning together made the city surreal, like some futuristic habitat from Star Wars. The bus was sliding down towards the sea, towards the epicentre of light.

Down there, people were eating, reading newspapers, sleeping, fucking, watching movies, drinking cappuccino or wasting time among the medieval alleys. Down there was the parallel floating of anonymous lives, including my folks,

neighbours and acquaintances. Down there nothing big or important had happened: people will read newspapers tomorrow, too; Zeljkica will filch me, my old lady will solve crossword puzzles while the coffee grounds are slowly clotting in her cup. For them nothing had changed, but for us it had.

I glanced at the professor. He was sitting in the front, eyes closed like he was meditating or praying. Maybe he was asleep or writing his doctoral thesis in his mind, thinking about the thoraxes and antennae of coleopters and maybugs; all the species mating, growing and waging wars, guided by a plan that they neither understand nor question. Perhaps he was thinking about the three bodies covered in quick lime—although I doubt it.

Toni was thinking about them. He was sitting at the front of the bus, at a safe distance from me, his accomplice. He was staring at the darkness of the Dalmatian autumn. I was positive that, through the dark, he could still see those lifeless eyes gazing at the sky.

I knew what was going to happen when we reached that light down there. The buses would leave us at the dockyard parking. Free, the soldiers would crawl all around the city in their dirty uniforms. The alcohol deficit in their blood would soon be recuperated in bars, with shots of Stock or grappa with herbs. They would drag themselves, smashed, to the nearest peep show. Then they would lustfully watch the plump stripper from the safety of their cabin. That was the purpose of war for middle-aged men—the last breeze of adventure, a respite, a break from their fat wives and daily routine. War was good for that, even better than evening classes, chorus singing or fights with soccer fans of the opposition.

The problem with Toni was that he was not middle-aged, he did not have a fat wife and a bunch of kids, and he had never spent the New Year's Eve with his family, built a weekend cottage or grilled a pork roast. When we hit the light hatch, instead of going to a peep show Toni would go to his teenage room with posters over his bed.

Thinking about him made me uncomfortable. I closed my eyes, trying to think of soccer, sex or fried fish. But the eye-trick was no good. As soon as my eyelids

dropped, I would see the thing I was running away from: bodies covered in quick lime and black snakeskins swaying back and forth under the grey sky.

What I saw, Toni saw too. That was what made us unique, lonely specimens in this bus—a bus full of ordinary people rushing to their ordinary homes, their sanctuary and their happiness.

Translated by Marija Dukic

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