

## Good Deeds

-Albania, 1986-

It was the sound of a rifle going off in my sleep that woke me. A bullet ripped through the sky and broke the dream's membrane to startle me awake in the early morning, and I couldn't move. My mind reeled from the events of yesterday, though yesterday was already a distant memory, fading into the folds of my consciousness, along with Jusuf.

He had appeared to me in a dream, like so many other times since his death last year. Yet unlike so many of his previous phantom visits, my brother's face was clean instead of bloody; restored and intact instead of broken. The thin streams of blood, like hairline cracks spreading across his face, had dried up and crumbled away. The pain that had been etched in his features was instead replaced with a smile. He waved at me before slipping back into the catacombs of my sleeping mind, and I awoke with the understanding, or the hope, that I had at last received his approval.

The sight of Jusuf in my dream felt more real than the events that had unfolded the night before. I thought about my mother asleep in the next room and imagined what she'd say if I crawled in next to her in bed, reverting back to the old days when I was still her little boy. The image embarrassed me, even in the privacy of my thoughts, the privacy of the darkness in my room. I suddenly recalled a memory of me and Jusuf sharing a bed as kids; the memory of *gogols*—ghouls that came out only in the dark—became real last night when I walked into my room and was greeted by my distorted shadow on the wall.

“Don't let the *gogol* get you,” my mother would say after she tucked us in. Once the lights went out and the door closed behind her, I'd edge closer to Jusuf's side of the bed and curl my feet close to my body so the *gogols* couldn't snatch them. Every black shadow became a monster reaching out towards me, and Jusuf became my lifeline, my protector.

Though only four years my senior, Jusuf already looked like a man to me when he was still just a teenager. Following my father around as a young boy was short-lived as he was arrested on charges of conspiring against the government, and even those memories of our time

together became hazy as I grew older. Though he was a quiet man, I remembered him to be large. In later years when I would look at old family photos, I realized his size was clouded and outsized by my age and own childhood frailty. He had been of average height and only moderately built and I began to wonder in my young adulthood what other details I had wrongly remembered, and the idea of wrong memories scared me more than I would've admitted to anyone.

Soon after our father disappeared, I started following Jusuf around, and while his friends found ways to make me run home embarrassed and ashamed of still being a little kid, he'd usually still let me tag along on their boyish, misguided outings. As I approached my own teenage years, I found myself left on my heels, wobbling between childhood and the cusp of adulthood when we learned of our father's sudden death in prison, truly destroying all hope we had of his eventual release. I could hear my mother crying in her room each night and in the mornings she would talk about murder, assassination, and execution—Jusuf and I told her he was probably sick, in hopes of easing her pain. As children, we never considered that the thought of him being frail and weak and sick was no more comforting than the thought of a bullet to his head.

Like chess pieces methodically sliding into their designated spots on the board, Jusuf took our father's place as the patriarch of the family, and I almost immediately became the baby once again and the center of my mother's world. I became closer to her and often spent the days either in the kitchen beside her or in the yard nearby. I drifted away from the ridiculing of Jusuf's friends and their chest-pounding in the neighborhood streets, and instead began to learn things about my mother that I imagined only my father knew. Jusuf hardened as he claimed his 'man of the house' role; staying out late, getting into fights, and being chased away from neighbors' daughters.

"There is nothing wrong with being a kid," Jusuf said one night before bed, with the knowingness of a thirty-year-old but the maturity of a boy only playacting. "But don't let it get to your head and forget that you will soon enough become a man. Mother needs her sons—both of them. Not just a boy child who will stay behind her skirts forever."

I remember breathing hard to calm the nervous shaking overtaking my body; I felt a sharp pain in the center of my chest as my brother insulted me in his adult voice. I hated his chastising—I hated that I had, at one pivotal moment in my life not only lost a father, but a brother, too. In that brief moment, I hated him.

“What are you talking about? I *am* a man,” I said, sounding as ridiculous as he had just a minute ago. “Mom likes the company and I like helping her.” My fingers fiddled with a loose thread in the blanket as I tried not to cry from my brother’s betrayal. His hand landed lightly on my shoulder.

“Like I said,” he repeated, with his eyes locked on mine. “There is nothing wrong with being a kid.” His voice had softened and he sounded more like a brother again, the one who would scare me to sleep with stories of ghosts and superstitions.

“As long as you don’t forget that you too have to grow up.”

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I was twenty-two years old and it was the first time I had killed a man. My temper was never as quick as Jusuf’s and as a boy I never really developed a taste for blood. Here, it sometimes seemed like most situations, either mild or severe, warranted a certain degree of bloodshed. Perhaps it was a result of centuries’ worth of oppression. Perhaps it was the naked mountains that sat jagged on the horizon like misshapen teeth piercing the sky, and in that geographic nakedness and harshness we found inspiration for bloodlust and revenge. It’s not that I ever considered myself to be a more evolved or complex human being, but how else could I explain that I briefly felt pity for the bastard I shot last night, and what would Jusuf think of me because of it?

Though his eyes never wavered from mine, his body trembled slightly just as my finger pulled the trigger. I pretended not to notice because the only thing worse than having to face your mortality in the eyes of your enemy is for that enemy to acknowledge the fear and humiliation preceding your demise. Don’t get me wrong, I hated him. He was responsible for Jusuf’s death; responsible for the shattered cheekbones and swollen eyes that sent our mother sailing to the floor wailing at the sight of them. But for that brief moment, when the gun felt like a natural extension of my arm, and my own hand and body shook with fear, excitement, and power, I saw

the man's pupils dilate as he reached one arm out towards me in protest. And for one minute—but only a minute—I couldn't help but place God in the middle of our human battles, and thank Him for giving me the courage to carry out this necessary act of hungry love.

My arm shook and went numb after the gun went off, and for a moment, I wasn't entirely sure that he had died and feared that somehow the bullet had missed. Then, just as quickly as the echo of the blast cleared, I saw a thick blackness slowly seep out from under his still body. I continued to stand there, still, in the silence extracted from the bullet hole in his chest. I felt beads of sweat collect around the corners of my eyes and my vision blurred. My arm had grown stiff until I realized I was still holding the gun out in midair.

I ran. I ran at a blinding speed. Or maybe I ran slowly and it was the blur of the decaying apartments around me that lulled me into a false hope of a quick escape. I ran until I forgot it was the dead of winter; until I forgot I needed to button my coat but let it flap behind me instead, like a flag of surrender. I ran until I felt the bile come up from the pit of my stomach and I finally had to stop in a dark corner to catch my breath.

My chest throbbed and I opened and closed my mouth in an attempt to swallow as much cold air as possible, but my nostrils stung and I couldn't escape the black spots dancing just out of reach beyond my face. I sat on the quiet street corner and fumbled around in my coat pocket for a cigarette to calm my jitters. I lit it and the smoke wafted up towards the sky like a ghost breaking out of its body, and in my isolation, I wondered if perhaps no one would notice this man's absence, like a star having burnt out and gone black in a sky filled with a million other stars.

"Fuck," was all I could mutter as I lit another cigarette I could barely keep still between my lips. The gun pulled my pocket down heavily, like a quiet reminder, and all I could do was mutter repeatedly to myself, "fuck, fuck, fuck..." until my voice eventually dissolved with the gray smoke above my head, and I imagined myself to be nothing more than a blip in time in a universe in which I was insignificant, and by consequence, my actions were equally as insignificant.

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I hadn't anticipated my mother being awake when I returned home so late, and I had never before felt so naked or so scared in front of her.

"I'm tired," was all I could muster after we briefly looked at each other in silence. She got up from the couch and walked over to me, placing a light hand on my cheek.

"*Bir i mamit,*" she said. I waited for her to moan or yell, or pull me by my hair in a blind rage for what I had just done to her. I stared sullenly at the wall covered in family portraits and remembered that I was no longer a little boy, nor was she a young woman. The memories of her dragging me by my ear when I misbehaved evaporated as she patted my shoulder after a quick hug and retreated to her bedroom with ease, as if I had suddenly answered her prayers.

I closed my bedroom door behind me, feeling hollow and exhausted. I slipped off my pants slowly, one leg and then the other, like a second skin being shed from my body to expose my true self. I picked the pants up off the floor and gently folded them as I had been taught to do years before. I couldn't tell you why this strange inclination came over me, though it felt necessary to be neat—methodical—about breaking off the remnants of what remained from my act.

I struggled to fall asleep and could only think about the little coffee cup with my fortune stuck against its porcelain walls. I stared at the ceiling until my eyes finally grew tired and when I began to doze, I saw Jusuf with a smug grin spread across his clean face. He put his arms around my neck and we wrestled; I was determined to come out on top. We sat back breathing heavily for a moment and his lips moved though no words came out, as if someone had put a movie on mute. I asked him what to do if they came after me, where would I go? I became annoyed that I couldn't understand what he was trying to say and that he couldn't help me, as I seemed to have become his Actaeon, and he my hound.

Somewhere in the distance I heard the bang of a gun and a bullet ripped through the air, and I woke up.

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"Good deeds," my mother would remind us when we were young. "If you see a deceased relative in your sleep, do a good deed in their honor to set their soul at ease."

We both handle the haunting secretly in our own way as we pay homage to someone who now only exists as nothing more than dirt and a handful of memories. Every week for the last year my mother had made a trip to the cemetery to water Jusuf's grave, replace the wilted flowers with fresh ones, and whisper her undying devotion to her eldest son between muffled sobs. I joined her the first few times after his death and then began to come up with excuses as to why I couldn't accompany her.

After much berating and crying about how she felt like she'd lost two sons instead of one, she eventually stopped asking me to make the solemn walk to the cemetery with her. I was never brave enough to ask if it was because she finally realized it was not how I wanted to grieve, or if it was because she grew tired of being disappointed by me week after week.

My eyes are fixated on the ceiling, even though I can't see it. I try to take deep, controlled breaths, but I choke on them. I think about myself at thirteen, watching my mother chop vegetables with precision and learning of her love for tulips. I think of my mother in her youth, eager for a family of her own to watch grow, and I want the power to bring my father back to life; to give her a second chance.

I worry that I am no longer my mother's son and consider the terrifying truth that Jusuf doesn't exist any more than *gogols* do. I think about Jusuf's broken face and limp body being carried into the house and I become frighteningly aware of how I wish I could have done more to that son-of-a-bitch, and regret not having done so. I begin to understand with a little sadness, as well as a little pride, that I'm perhaps more like Jusuf than I've believed myself to be for all these years.

If after my father's death Jusuf replaced him, then I replaced Jusuf the moment my tongue sounded out each syllable of his name as I pulled the trigger—my eternal deed for my brother. I tell myself it's important to understand that my mother and I will be nothing more than two distantly loving people cohabitating, circling around each other in our small universe with little hope for a collision.

I roll over on my side and learn to live with the fact that whatever was left of me when the gun went off died with Jusuf's killer.