

Someplace Between *Them* and *Us*, *Now* and *Then*

1.

Where is that son of mine again? I can't believe I brought him all the way across the Atlantic, across all that happened to us, the stupid war, the refugee convoys, camps, uncertainty, just so I have to search for him all around Everett every week. I don't know what to do anymore. We live on this stinking continent and have no time for anything but work. And here, I have to chase my ungrateful son like I don't have enough on my plate every day, like I don't work twelve hours a day, even on Saturdays. I don't have a life, I can't recognize myself. He deserves a good honest beating. Oh boy, I don't know what to do with this kid. His mom will hug him and smother him, tell him that this is just a phase. She'll say, 'He'll be a good boy again.' I have to curse him here, to rage constantly because I can't take it. I'm upset and worried at the same time. It doesn't have to be this way, but it is. All because of that little brat, *mulac*. That mule is at the god forsaken place again. I got away from that damn wormhole in that cursed soil, those people, those damn people there. Ever since we had come here, I have been cleaning American toilets, and working construction jobs. Those bastards at work. *They* think I'm their bitch. *They* think I came here to be raped every day. But it's for his future—for his, not mine. And see what I get. That big-headed principal, that dumb steer, had to talk to me. I had to hear it from him. My son is skipping school again. What is he doing there? Is he on drugs? Is he drinking? Perhaps I need a drink now. Damn them all. I don't want to go there. I should park right in the front of this bar on the right and forget about everything outside that door. Oh the damn kid, I swear I'll twist his little neck like chicken's.

"Move your big ugly car you idiot! Look at him. Look at him! He can't park and he lives in Boston. He's a waste of space, a dumbass. Go back to your woods, you stupid redneck!"

I should've been home by now, having dinner, relaxing a little. Oh, damn it, it's Thursday and I have to do the damn part-time tonight. Another slaving session to buy him his damn games, one-hundred-dollar jeans. These kids nowadays. You see what America does to us.

It's all her fault. She thinks we have to be patient with him, show him we love him. This is what happens when you listen to women. *Back home* I knew what to do. No woman would be able to convince me not to make a man out of that little weasel. Actually, it wouldn't come to this. He would've been a man by now. He would've been planning to go to college or get a good trade at least. Instead, he'll probably end up like his idiot friends. I don't want to see them in my house anymore.

"*Majku vam vasu!* How many red lights am I going to run into today? It's Thursday. I can't do this anymore. Not now, not today, not this week."

The phone is ringing. Must be him. Where's that miniature American crap of technology now? *They* make them so small now that you can't find them anymore. Is it in the back pocket? Huh, here!

"Hello!"

"Damir where are you?"

"Oh, it's you."

"Did you find him?"

"No dear, I did not."

"Be nice. Please don't explode again. It will just have the opposite effect on him."

"Hmmm...okay. I hope I can. I don't know. I wish I knew what to do or say to him."

"I think you know."

"No, I don't. Anyway, are you out of work?"

"Yes, I'm on my way home. I called him. I texted him again. No reply. Just get him home. We'll talk to him together this time. You'll have to talk to him too, not just me. You have to talk to him like to a person, your son, not shout and make empty threats."

"Yes?"

"And stop telling the stories from your childhood. You know it's not even true."

“Okay, I guess I’ll have to try. Alright...listen, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Call me as soon as you get him. And please be gentle!”

“Okay, bye.”

I hate rush hours in Boston. It’s May and people still spend most of their lives driving *back home*. Whatever happened to people here? What happened to people *back home*? How is it there now? Are *they* waiting in traffic every day? Or, is it as it used to be? Damn it all, I can’t remember. I wish I could remember something, or at least to make up memories. All I can recall nowadays is the past seventeen years. As if someone robbed me from my memories. Did I have parents? I can’t even remember how *they* died. I wasn’t there to remember, or was I? Damn it all. I thought my son would create memories for himself. Good memories though. That was all I wanted him to do, to finish high school, maybe play some sports, get into college and open the door to endless possibilities, in peace. And look at what he is doing now.

And Ena would say, ‘Oh, please don’t burden him with your junk. You have had a chance to be a child. You’ve had the chance to grow up at home before the war and before you had to leave everything behind. He’s just trying to find out who he is. He told me that he wasn’t sure what it meant to be us—you and me, in this world here.’

But how do I know if I had childhood? We talk about it but I don’t even remember. Or I never can be sure that what I remember is true. I am not sure if I grew up on the streets of Bosnia, on the streets of Yugoslavia then. I don’t remember playing football on the playground, some five or six blocks away from our house and fighting all day long to get on the team, putting up with some spoiled kids with real leather balls made in Germany. We would stare at it first with open mouths, evaluating, wondering, checking if it’s real lather, reading aloud “M-a-d-e-i-n -G-e-r-m-a-n-y.” But we read it phonetically like in Serbo-Croatian. It sounded like some kind of hybrid or children English.

We had to let them—the little brats who owned the real football— score a few times to keep playing with their beautiful FIFA balls. All we had was a fake football that turned into an egg as soon as we kicked it a few time, all of a sudden distorted and transformed from a football to an oval, useless piece

of junk. Try to play with that ball. Every time you kick it, the ball would end up in the audience, bouncing in the street, or in someone's garden stuck in the cabbage patch. But no matter what our spirit was never dead. A couple of months later we would still be kicking the damn huge egg with the black spots until the fiber inside fell out through its stitches.

Now after all these years and all these places, I've become that messed-up, old, egg-shaped ball with its inner organs sticking outside. Perhaps if it held long enough and we played harder... and yes, I don't remember any of this. How can I be sure I had the ball? Maybe it was Emir's. He always played soccer. He was the boy carrying his ball stuck in one of his lanky elbows at all times. I liked books more. Maybe because I sucked in football. Wasn't it the way we were classified all the time? You're a mathematician, or you're a cool kid, you have a lot of friends, or you're always quiet and therefore nice. Isn't it like that here in school too? How do the kids in America create their memories? Who is Denis? Who is my son?

“Let me in you headless bastard! Can't you see that I am trying to change the lane? Ignorant fools, those brainless robots!”

Yes, I don't remember anything concrete except a few blurry pictures in my head and the smell of the flower gardens in my neighborhood and of grass, the wet green grass in May. The spring here smells like *back home*. Maybe that's why I insisted on staying here. I'm afraid that the spring *back home* might be gone just like everything else. I must've been making this up but I don't care anymore. Hmmmm, I don't remember going to school at all. It was nice to see Amir last year visiting from visiting from Seattle. He remembered how we went to Dubrovnik together on one of our school trips. He remembered the fight in the club we had started and Jasna punching a huge guy right in the face. She cut his lower lip. What a girl Jasna was. I wouldn't want to mess with her. And then there was Dragana. She'd convince me to start a rebellion and skip classes with her. But I was a great student and I had talent and smarts for school. At least that was what Amir remembers. I can't. Not right now or tomorrow. Maybe I'll remember when I

get old enough, a senior citizen of Boston with a free MBT pass. Maybe I'll cave in to time and slowly drift away, *back home*, the *new-old home* and it will not matter then.

Last Saturday Ena reminded me that we'd left our old lives once and everything that accompanied it. We'd left our families to come here alive. She asked me if I remembered when we met in the ESL school. She told me about our ESL teacher, and how she talked in her teacher voice that we loved and later looked back at with fondness. But we were difficult at the time and we hated everything, from pronouncing 'strawberries' to not being able to order a simple meal at the local sandwich shop. She made an impression of me, of my dumbfounded face when *they* asked me what I wanted on my sandwich. I just wanted a damn beef sandwich. Why did the girl ask me if I wanted bacon on it? And I had to explain what kind of mustard I'd like. Like I would know what kind of mustard I wanted or *they* had. And *they* had all sorts of mustard—Dijon, stoneground, plain yellow. *They* had different kinds of mayonnaise—light, reduced fat, regular. And not to mention all those American salad dressings. Had I known what I wanted, I wouldn't have left home. Huh? This doesn't make any sense. What am I saying? We had to leave and everything else was just life, the part of it. Besides, *back home* we only had one kind of mustard and one kind of mayonnaise. We've never had those fancy salad dressings.

I can't believe Ena tells me I'm difficult. As if she's easy to live with. She is much easier to deal with as a friend than as a spouse. And she remembers everything, while I'm still trying to make up a few memories. Maybe I should write down everything I come up with, so I don't forget those most likely fake pictures in my head.

"God damn! Almost there, less than a mile and look, another jam, cars on top of each other."

2.

He's not answering. I know what's going on in that big, male head of his. I've told Damir to stop being so hard on Denis. Why can't he leave him alone and let him be? He's just a typical teenager. That idiot husband of mine is so stubborn. There're times when I want to kick him out of the house. And then

there're times when I just want to take his hand and kiss it, kiss his chin and hug him, cover him with kisses and hold him on my bosom, tell him that everything is going to be alright. If things were only so simple with Damir. I don't know why he keeps telling me that he can't remember anything from his life before we came here. Perhaps it's better that way. He doesn't have to deal with the memories. Sometimes I wonder if a part of his brain was surgically removed.

He rarely talks to me now. Instead, he goes on and on, pushes the limits. Damir, and immigrant from former Yugoslavia. Damir, the immigrant in America, the self-made man, the man's man. He embraced his role here, what maybe Americans would call the American dream or perhaps more of a lifelong ambition, a destructive reality for anyone born into this or immigrated into this. Nevertheless, it's a dream to me. I only remember the time before we came here. Everything else is just a fast-paced walk down the road. Even Damir and Denis. Everything happened so fast, and years, the years here switched as fast as these subway stations, as these people around me. *They're* pushing against me, squeezing my last fresh breath, unnerving and weary, only to get off the train and be replaced by others entering the train. It's same as everything here, those people at work, me. The administrative assistant position is the only part of my job's description that hasn't changed. Everything else has. I have, others have. And when I get my degree soon, I'll become an accountant. What would *they* say *back home*—back there and then, when I was graduating from high-school with flying grades? What would Sanja say? She would laugh at me. She'd ask me what happened to my dreams of studying and teaching literature, editing books and writing my own. Or maybe she would get it. She lives in Australia now. It's not as if she didn't have to give up her future too, if I could call that. She is probably in the same deep mess, only on a different continent. It's as if the world outside *our Balkans* is persistently being replicated and multiplied.

Uh, these people, that tiny dark-skinned older woman with red glasses and dark red hair like overly ripened cherries. She has it regularly dyed at the neighborhood salon—three times a year. Maybe she came here when she was twenty-one. Perhaps she's from Puerto Rico or Mexico. Her sons and daughters are nurses, bankers, or maybe *they* own a family business. Is she happier now that she has seen *them* moving into their comfortable homes with a bedroom for each child and separate living and dining

rooms? Are *they* happy? Her eyes look tired, but at peace I believe. Oh god, what's wrong with me? She's probably not what I imagine at all. She grew up here. Maybe she's tired of it. Maybe she doesn't have children or a husband. I can't see her hand. She might have a ring on.

Oh please, stop it! Where's Denis? He's not texting back. He must be with Dino and Amir at the Club Sarajevo. It's not such a bad place. Diana told me that she saw them there the other day playing pool, drinking their cokes, joking, horsing around. *They* are just trying to fit in somewhere. Maybe it's not as bad as Damir thinks. He'd rather have him cut all the ties with our world. He wants him to grow up American, to grow up at *home*, with other people. But why does it matter? Our son doesn't have to be what we aren't. He'll be alright. He is still just a kid. Being sixteen didn't make Damir a man *back home*, but he insists that *back home* children would mature earlier and take care of their responsibilities. He really either doesn't remember, or he constantly makes up his memories, for his own convenience.

I remember being very stubborn when I was almost sixteen. I started smoking and hiding it from dad and mom. I think *they* knew it, but *they* had patience with me. *They* knew that I wouldn't quit if they gave me a beating. And I deserved all of the beatings I'd never gotten. I remember going out with Elvir. He was the one who lured me into smoking; then we hung out downtown after school, smoking and listening to rock n' roll with Boki, Sova, Jasna, and Sanela. I remember that song. It ran all the time at the Café Danube. Oh, what was the name of the song? *Maljciki* by Idoli. I can hear it now. I want to sing it aloud. Ha-ha, funny. That's would be hilarious. To sing aloud right here among all of these strangers. And the song...the song's just right given the circumstances.

Jasna was so small, so thin and blond with her long curly hair. Sanela was somewhat nerdy, very intelligent, with voluptuous dark-brown hair and natural tan. Her perfect waist highlighted her pronounced perfectly round buttocks. Sova was a real nerd, and that nose, that beautiful owl nose. I appreciate it now so much after having so many flawless, proportionate noses to deal with here. Those two were such a weird couple, so quiet yet so full of energy that emanated from their beautiful minds and colorful hearts. Boki was a typical teenager then who wanted to try everything. He and Elvir would always get in trouble, from school to parents and neighbors. But they were such good people—always

eager to do unthinkable, to learn unlearnable, to pleasantly surprise with their eclectic personalities deeply buried under their thick oak bark like skin. And that was what I saw in Damir when I met him here. He was an angry young man, but skillful in hiding his emotions. He always made me smile. When we were alone, he was my clown—my personal fool—and I was his queen, his personal royal audience, an illusory companion. Nothing else mattered when we were together. But now he is so difficult, so hard to handle when he's angry. And he's always angry. Denis will be alright. He just needs more time to digest everything now that he's an adolescent, very perceptive yet confused and mostly frightened. He's beginning to fathom the world around him. However, he's only at the beginning of this long and mostly forlorn journey towards adulthood. He needs to learn more who we are and why we are here, why he was born into this family. It wasn't his choice. Sometimes we take him for granted and expect from him to understand us. But he has to figure it out on his own. Meanwhile, we need to make sure he doesn't get hurt.

These rides *back home* take forever. It can be exhausting sometimes thinking about all this, about us, and them, about us and them a long time ago, and now. I'm exhausted. I feel the lethargy crawling up my skin, some sort of spider spinning the web of fatigue all over me. I still have to prepare for my exams next week. Two more exams and I'll graduate. I hope my crazy husband stops working two jobs. I told that idiot to work less, but he wouldn't listen to me, as if we'll live forever. He yelled back explaining he was an immigrant, a refugee, and he had no time left. He was old—too old. He could have gone to school too, I have told him. Maybe he'll still do it sometime soon. He's very smart and he loved school *back home*. But now, he is comfortable with his role. He'll make it here. He is the man. He'll show everyone he can do it. He carries his burden. He'll work on the constructions around Boston and keep living in his little world, quiet and distant. He'll be all the immigrants here. He says he is *them*, and everybody else here is a *different them*. And I have to be *here between them all*, so does Denis too and Damir doesn't see it.

Look at all those lights up there! Another accident. How many people get into accidents every day in this damn city? Oh man, that looks bad. Did they survive? Did they really? What happened to that little child *back home*? I hope he's still alive. I can't recall it, the end. I was standing there on the playground. It was a Roma child, a little dark child, probably not older than six. I was standing there when the boy ran across the street. I was a goalie. I was looking away waiting for others to finish the play on the other side of the field. There were no cars. I don't remember any cars driving by. I think it was a Sunday afternoon. But I was there, and the old white Lada showed up right behind the corner, speeding up freely, so lonely. No, I just heard it. I don't think I saw anything. The terrifying, screeching noise, rubber against the asphalt. And the next moment I saw his parents running out of their door which was right out on the street. The boy's legs hung motionless in his dad's arms while the short, stout man ran up the street towards the hospital. He didn't wait for the paramedics. He ran and ran. Or maybe he didn't. I don't remember. He walked slowly. He knew. And the kids stopped playing soccer, and it was Sunday, and the afternoon never happened. I can't remember. It never happened. I was only maybe twelve. Or maybe I was eight. It probably never happened.

Okay, there's a free spot down the street in front of the convenience store. I can park there. I don't know if I can do this anymore. I'm too tired to argue. I'll just get in and out. What's the sign saying? Thirty minutes parking limit? Like you could do anything in this crazy place within a half-hour. I need a lifetime, and that may not be enough.

Here we are, this place reeks of refugees. *They made their* little Bosnia on the corner of nowhere, and I happened to live in the neighborhood. Why have we never moved away, at least to the other side of Boston? Maybe Brighton or Watertown? The last time I came here was a few years ago. And I told them all. They come here to complain and to awake so-called memories about the '*good life back home*'. Idiots, they're all idiots. The coffee-drinking, cigarette-smoking imbeciles.

"Hey Lova, how's it going?"

"Hey Damir! Long time no see. Welcome back, come in."

"Yes, long time no see."

“Would you like a cup of Turkish coffee, or espresso?”

“No thanks, I have to go.”

“You look tired and scruffy.”

“Oh yes, my beard. You’ve got any of those youngsters in the back room?”

“Yes, your son’s here too. They’ve got some funky music on.”

“I’m gonna take a look inside.”

“Go ahead. But be good. He’s a good kid. I am sure that you and I both got in a lot of trouble when we were his age.”

“Did we?”

“He-he, Damir. I can see that your sense of humor didn’t wear off. Just be careful my old friend.”

That Lova can be a piece of work. Is he a psychiatrist now? Doctor Phil? Or even worse than that—a priest. I’ll show that little rat that he has no business here, especially after skipping the school and getting me into dealing with the school principle over the phone. I was at work. And *they* were talking to me like to a baby, slowly, repeating sentences, and then giving me suggestions like I needed help raising my son. Those fat American assholes. What do they know about raising children? They feed their kids like livestock for years, and kick them out as soon as they turn eighteen. Oh god, that music. That rap, hip-hop, or whatever. Couldn’t they turn that down a little? Look at them. Look at those baseball hats and hanging jeans. They look ridiculous. Who are those girls with them? They must be cold in those tiny t-shirts. And they speak English all the time. But they come to the Bosnian café. They are all ‘Bosnian kids,’ or at least that’s what they think of themselves. Soon they’ll realize that they were born here and move away, come back for Thanksgiving once a year, maybe not even then. Ena and I will still see our friends here and talk about the good old days before we came here, how everything was perfect there. Perfect where? In the god damn land of no memories? What do we remember? Do we remember the war? Because I don’t. But we are all here because of it. And all we can remember when we are together is the time before the war. But I can’t. I cannot say that I remember anything. They told me to remember. How could I recall everything and then move on the next day? How could I remember anything that I am not

sure of? I'm tired of trying to make things up to live a happier life here, to get up every morning and go on with my life made of fake memories. That's what we do. And our children will never come back.

"Denis, hey! Let's go!"

Huh, he's playing it cool now. He doesn't even bother to be surprised or scared. Look at them! They don't even shake hands or say something to each other. They nod like it's not cool to talk or to shake hands.

"Hey Dad, did you finally find me?"

"Yes, I have, let's go. Call your mom back. She's worried. Tell her I'll beat the crap out of you, like in the good old days when our parents would do us a favor and kick our asses."

"I'm not coming with you."

"Shut your mouth you little ...oh boy! Have I ever hit you?"

"No."

"So?"

"But I don't know. You're like...you always act like you'd kill me when you're upset with me."

"I don't. I'm angry with you. Oh boy, I'm so angry with you. You could use a beating for what you put us through in the past several months. What's going on? What do you want?"

"Maybe you should sometimes give me a beating instead of giving me lectures ever since I turned twelve.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know...you always say, something like about how hard it was to grow up *back home*, like how you were responsible. And you had to go through the war. You moved around the world for a better life, for me. Then you'd say how I needed to be a man, go to school and get away from here. From where?"

"From here! Look around you."

"But why? What's wrong with this place and my friends here?"

"Well, I don't know. I can't explain. It's for your own good... I don't really know."

“It’s like you hate being Bosnian. Everyone here thinks that you hate *them*, that you think you’re better than *us*.”

“*Us*? Why...well, I don’t. But I don’t need to make stuff up about myself and my past in order to feel good. It’s better for you to be what you really are and look forward instead hanging out here.”

“And what am I? You see Dad... you never listen. I just want to be like you and mom.”

“Why’re you telling me this now? Why have you never talked to me like this before?”

“I don’t know. It’s like... I’m tired of everything. And you came here this time. I know what you’re thinking and...

“And what?”

“And I was like... afraid. But now I just want you to know how I feel.

“Hmmm. Okay, I guess you’re right. I see what you’re talking about. You know...it’s going to be alright. I promise. Go ahead and call your mom. We’ll talk more about this tonight, but I swear I won’t talk about *back home*. I’m not giving you any of my speeches. I’m done working, not going to my other job tonight. Did you have any food today?

“I had some Cheetos.”

“Okay Son, let’s get some real food. Let’s drive home, have supper together with mom. Oh please, not again! Only a mile away from home and completely stuck in traffic again.”

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