

"Fieldwork"

There is an obituary board that hangs beside the post office at the end of my street. I've visited it many times over my six plus decades. There, where we congregate evenings after late supper when the punishing Serbian sun finally retreats, I see faces of my friends, living and dead. I am always surprised when they go from one state to the other, finally presenting their past selves on rain rippled paper until another of us takes their place and our own papers are placed on top. Whether Vlach or not, our placement on this board is inescapable. I am not Vlach, a practitioner of black magic, as much of Zaječar is. I do not stand naked on riverfronts burning bats wings or red strings. I do not cast spells to make a boy like you or make his sex dysfunctional to all others but you. I wouldn't wear a wedding dress to a funeral, but I would respectfully mourn the groom. I am an Orthodox Christian like my Vlach friends, but that is where our similarities end.

"Terrible," says a voice behind me. Milena rests her hand on my shoulder, studying the new breed of dead. Every night she drifts in from her hut on the hill. She is older than I am so it takes her time. "So young, but that's what you get when you leave the window open." I nod. The silent mass murderer that can never be caught: *promaja*. Laugh if you will, but drafts can be deadly. We all know that.

"You getting on all right?" Milena asks me as we scan the board.

"I'm okay, *moja draga*, my dear," I say and settle on a picture of an old woman at the top of the far right corner of the board. She replaced my Nikola and I had to let her. I had no say in the matter and she had every right to be there. The crispy edges of Nikola's obituary are still visible beneath the woman's obituary so I kiss my finger and press it against them. Milena rubs my back.

"But I need to find work. After rent, I have almost nothing left now." I've already rationed my blood pressure pills but they will have to spread even longer. The realities of death.

"I'll be right back," she says and returns after a while with a newspaper, folding my arm in hers, and we shuffle, elbow to elbow, to our favorite bench between the playground and the library. She opens the paper to the employment section. It's the most sparse part of the paper with just two entries. Someone always knows someone else looking for work so ads are almost never necessary. *Softwear Developer*, the title of one is in English.

"Softwear? They're missing a space, I can't work for someone who can't spell." I snort. Most of us know at least a little English and even I know where the spaces go.

"What is softwear anyway?" Milena asks, her nose scrunches so far up that her thick glasses slide and she has to push them back up her face with the tip of her finger.

"Fashion designer, I think."

"Maybe something with socks?"

"You're both wrong," Milena's son, Miroslav, surprises us from behind. He kisses our cheeks and spreads his arms wide to delicately embrace us old ladies as though we are fat and fragile birds. "Software has to do with computers. See?" He points to the advertisement we are puzzling over. "It's actually spelled wrong here. It's *software*, with the *e* over here." He points to the offending letter.

"Well then, that won't do, will it?" I shake my head and we laugh at how old we've become.

"You looking for work?" Miroslav asks. The question is shameful but coming from the man I've known since my own boy was in diapers, and that was over thirty years ago, but I take no offence. He is the son I wish I still had. I nod. "I'm sorry, aunty. Is there anything I can do?"

"Bring Vladimir back."

He hugs me and sighs. "I wish I could, aunty, I wish I could. But where he is...well...your guess is as good as mine. "

"Ungrateful, that's what he is," Milena grunts. "After all you've done for him, when plenty of other people would have given him to the government and let them deal with him."

"Mili —"

"No, Lidija. It's been too long, running off like that. Who does he think he is? I'll tell you, if Miroslav did that to me, I'd string him up and let the birds get him. That's what I'd do."

"Mama!" Miroslav chides.

"I love you, my boy, I love you more than God's green earth but to abandon your own mother?" She lets the rest of her statement hang.

Vladimir wasn't born properly. Not in the real sense. He came out with a foot as curled as a ring of sausage. The left was perfectly straight and normal but with the right, well, you could have taken his leg and spelled any number of words with it. *Java. Coffee. Jabuka. Apple. Jaganjac. Lamb. Jadovan. Miserable. Jalovo. Hopeless. Jednostran. Uneven.* They wanted me to put him in an institution, but I knew his brain was good. One look into his eyes, even from birth, and you knew he was assessing you, calculating your capabilities, your misdeeds. He was moral to a fault. *Is.* I should say *is* because, even after eleven years without a word from him, I feel he is still alive, in a better country somewhere still telling people what they should or should not be doing, protesting for the greater good. He was there when they rushed the streets, rallying against the steel smelter that choked people out of their homes in Smederevo. He hid in the bushes along the riverbank, filming a hospital dumping human waste into the water. Body parts and blood. Vladimir stood against bribery, thievery, intimidation, deception, the tenets on which the very brow of our government rests. Vladimir stood against it all.

There was a protest against the landmines in Preševo, the old ones and the new ones, in downtown Belgrade. Vladimir went. Four days later, he came back. They had taken two of his toes on his bad foot and he almost died from infection but that didn't stop him. He went again, and again. "I'm going to change the world, Mama," he told me with that sideways smile of his.

"If they don't kill you first." I warned him. Then he kissed me and I forgave his risks. That was back in 2008, when Nickola was still alive, almost ten years since we survived the war.

I look back to the paper, where the next ad is more promising. *Day laborer required, call Ćedomir*. The number is not familiar, saving me from embarrassment.

"You don't want that one, aunty," Miroslav immediately says.

"Why not?" I ask.

"Laborers usually mean, forgive me for saying this aunty but it's true, it's man's work." *It's not for an old lady like you*, he respectfully keeps to himself.

"But maybe not. It doesn't say anything about the type of job it is, does it now?" I circle the advertisement with a pencil. Miroslav gives Milena a look. She frowns and shakes her head, almost imperceptibly. "What? Do you think I'm too old to work?"

"That's not it, aunty."

"Then what? You don't think I'm capable? Look, Miroslav, I don't have much choice. Opportunities are not exactly dropping from the clouds, now, are they? Especially for people my age. If I were in the city I could clean houses but no one here needs that kind of work."

Milena pats my wrist with her rough fingers, "I don't think this is the right job for you. Just wait a bit and something better will come along. Maybe you can watch Andje Petrovic's kids. I hear she's going back to work soon. You used to love that, remember? Weren't Sonja's sons a blessing?"

"When they weren't pissing on the carpet," I shush her.

"Come on, Mili, you know what I mean," she urges me, taking her glasses off. She uses the hem of her blouse to rub them clean, squinting with near blindness until she puts them back on.

"A call doesn't hurt anything."

"Please, aunty. Don't. Not this one. Wait a little, okay?"

I throw my hands up and stand to face my two closest friends in the world. "What? What is it? Will one of you please tell me what's going on?" I flatten the rough fabric of my skirt and wait.

Neither of them are quick to comment but then Milena sighs heavily, rubbing her stiff knees. She pulls at her scarf. "You told me to keep our superstitions to ourselves but this one, this one is no good for you, Lidjia. No good."

"How do you know?"

"It's not new, aunty," Miroslav says. "It's been there for months."

"Ahh!" I dismiss their concern with a wave of my hand. "You two and your superstitions. I can name at least a dozen people who sat at the corner of a table and *still* got married. Just because the ad's been there so long doesn't mean it's bad luck."

"Ten of those marriages ended in divorce, if I remember correctly," Milena says wisely. "And I hear the other two aren't far behind. Besides, it's not the ad that's bad luck. Tell her, Miro." She tips her chin to her son, who has taken my spot on the bench. I look down at him as he speaks.

"Aunty, don't you think everyone in town would have called that number? There had to have been at least twenty guys I know who checked it out but when they heard where it was, well, none of them took the job. I'm telling you, aunty, the land is cursed."

Men don't turn jobs down. Not here. Not ever. It's just not done. "Go on," I say.

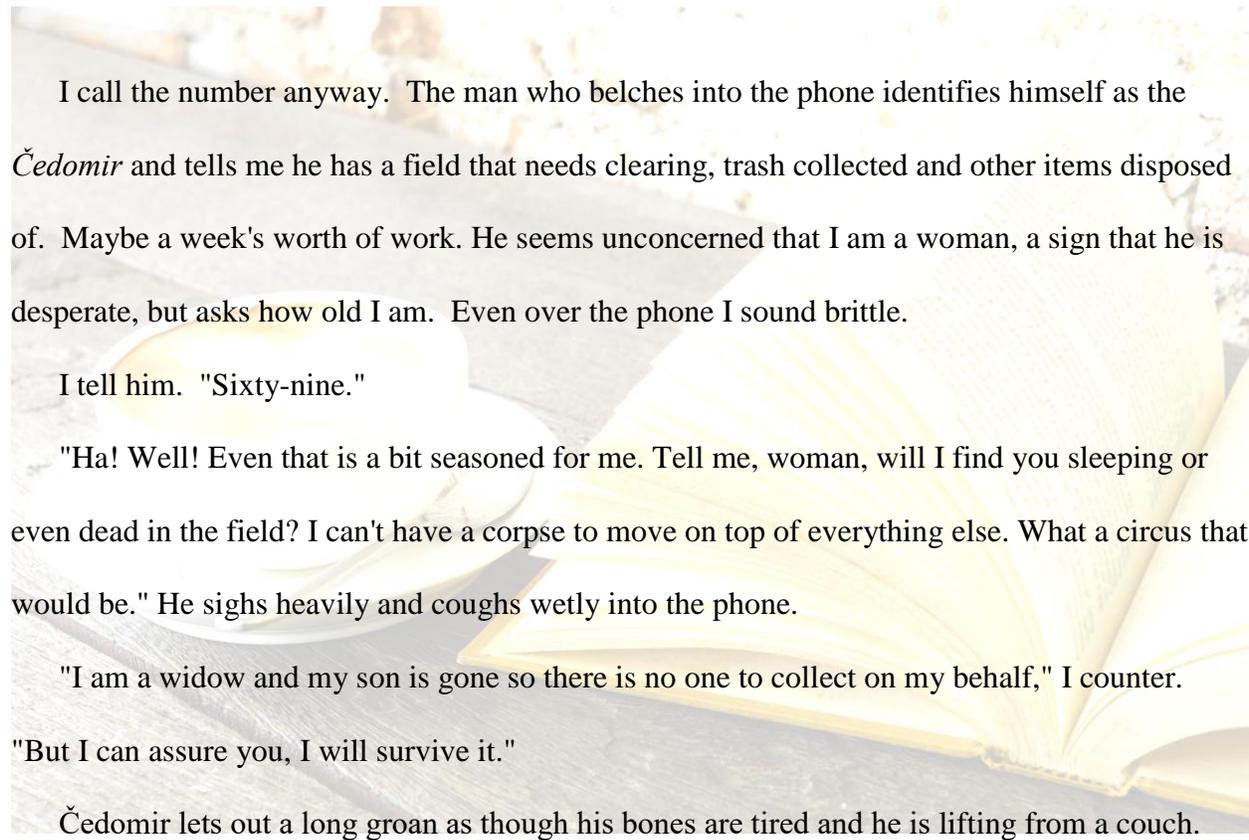
"Zeljko Milošović".

"The developer?" I blink. A city employer.

"Only one of his many hats, "Miroslav says.

"Why would he need work here?"

"Ask yourself that question, aunty."



I call the number anyway. The man who belches into the phone identifies himself as the *Čedomir* and tells me he has a field that needs clearing, trash collected and other items disposed of. Maybe a week's worth of work. He seems unconcerned that I am a woman, a sign that he is desperate, but asks how old I am. Even over the phone I sound brittle.

I tell him. "Sixty-nine."

"Ha! Well! Even that is a bit seasoned for me. Tell me, woman, will I find you sleeping or even dead in the field? I can't have a corpse to move on top of everything else. What a circus that would be." He sighs heavily and coughs wetly into the phone.

"I am a widow and my son is gone so there is no one to collect on my behalf," I counter. "But I can assure you, I will survive it."

Čedomir lets out a long groan as though his bones are tired and he is lifting from a couch.

"Come, let's see you tomorrow, then, woman. If you prove yourself, maybe you'll last the week." He gives me the address of a field along the highway toward the village Nickola grew up in, about forty minutes out of town. I will have to ride the bus to get there.

My strongest shoes are fastened tight to my feet when I meet *Čedomir* in an old farmhouse withering in a copse of rotting trees set far from the highway. He greets me on the porch beside

an ailing dog. "Ah! Woman! There you are! Today is the day you become young again." He laughs and spits something thick onto the floorboard beside the dog.

"It's Lidjia," I tell him, extending my hand.

"Of course, of course. Hello Lidjia." He pulls my hand in an apparent test of strength, to appraise my pains but I do not give him the satisfaction. I squeeze back. "Well then, Lidjia, if you're ready, the bags and pails are over here..." he starts, stepping away from the house, pointing left, toward a crippled once-red shed, hunched so far over that the roof nearly touches the ground on one side.

"You want me to crawl in?"

"Don't let it fool you," Čedomir says. "It's much stronger than it looks. Totally safe." We duck inside the building. Dusty sunlight slices through cracks in the walls so we are able see what needs seeing. I take my supplies — rubber gloves, two pails, a roll of trash bags, a spade and short rake — then Čedomir points to my work area, nearly six acres of trash strewn land. He looks at me. "Better survive the day, woman, I don't want your ghost coming around here." He is superstitious like Milena and Miroslav. A Vlach, maybe, but there's no red string around his wrist.

I don't see Čedomir for hours, long after my muscles gave up and my bones had to lobby the rest of my body to continue the work. My ankles, swollen over the tops of my shoes, are now as thick as my calves and push against the cuff of my pants, which are now tight and unsightly. I am mottled gray all over, dry with dirt, and slimy brown under my arms. I pulled sixteen buckets of paper and buried twine and soda cans and cigarette packages and plastic wrap. All this near the house.

My aching knees lug my worn body up the stairs to the house. The dog hasn't moved. Just when I think that only one of us survived the day, he catches his breath and emits a long, low snore. We both have sleep apnea, then, poor mutt. The screen door screeches open and Čedomir exits with a bottle of beer in his hand, throwing his throat back and taking a long drink. "Still here, huh?" He scratches his stomach and slides a bill into my hand, the equivalent of ten dollars —worth a litre of milk, loaf of bread, a cabbage, a package of coffee and fourteen pills — telling me that I'll be on my own for the next two days but that he will leave money in a pail in the shed for me in his absence. His eyes bulge when he sees my inflated feet. Our sour smells percolate, my odor of hard work, his of negligence, rolling my stomach into a sea of nausea. Before I leave he says, "anyone know you're out here working like this, woman?"

He means, *you shouldn't be doing this, old bird. Look at you.*

I swipe the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand and stuff my empty lunch bag in my pocket. "Friends," I shrug.

"Some friends."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"It's not worth any more than what I gave you."

"Huh? Oh, no. That's not it. I'm just curious, well, I guess I'm wondering why an old lady like me? There's got to be a number of younger men who would be better suited for this type of thing, you know. And I heard your advertisement had been posted for months." Better yet, the sloven could have done it himself.

He takes another swallow of his beer and spits beside the dog as if to scare him awake. The dog extends his front paws and back legs, stretching long and lean, yawning into another position away from where the spit landed. Čedomir shrugs. "You know."

"My friends say the land is cursed."

"Maybe it is."

I have a red bracelet on my wrist when I return to the field, something Milena and Miroslav insist will ward off evil, but I wore another crucifix anyway. Čedomir doesn't scare me. Air raid sirens, *those* scare me. Things falling from the sky, *that* scares me. So it is with little reluctance that I greet the dog and take my things back into the field at dawn the next morning. Low clouds and hovering mist compress my view, forcing me further away from the farm house and down a slope toward the breezy highway, where the field is edged by wild grass and hip-high shrubs. In an hour, I collect soda cans and beer bottles and more than a few pornography magazines, a few which look too fresh to have been settled long. Vladimir would have liked them, I think, Nickola, too. I flip through a few ungodly pages, thinking of what my life has come to, when I spot something beneath a raised growth of weeds.

Something whitish and long.

The dead like to present themselves. Any Vlach will tell you this. My own Nickola came to me in a dream, telling me to do the dishes. Mirena's husband, Ostoja, appeared to her in Prerast. His soul is trapped there for seven years so she visits him when she can handle his bitching. I've never gone to visit him. It doesn't seem fair. The bone that reveals itself beneath the grass isn't fair either. It speaks of foul play or indifference. I'm not sure which is worse.

"What the hell is this?" I speak to the two Jesuses on my chest. They don't answer but they know. I know they know. Together, we brush dirt away, first with my spade, then with the delicate fatless pads of my fingers, smoothing the thing that used to be inside a human. Cars pass, uninterested in the shaking old woman crouched in the grassy field alongside the road. If I

were a different person I would have taken the leg right out of the ground and thrown it at their windows, maybe shock them to attention, or sympathy at the very least.

There are at least three people buried where I sit. Two skulls, three spines and seven feet tell me this. In another life, I would be free to involve the police, but this is my life, with second-world sensibilities. My brethren, for that's what they are, whether Serbian, Albanian, Bosniak, Romanian, indebted, unconnected, vocal, or just plain poor, fell to the great kleptocratic trap, the sinews of their resistance at last snapping into eternal submission. They are indebted no more.

I take the buckets home with me, filling them high, tucking my lunch cloth and scarf tightly over their shameless jutting as the bus jerks us toward home. Even now, they want to be revealed, they've forgotten about the furloughed sympathies, the unrewarding allegiances. They haven't been dead long enough.

I say nothing to Milena and Miroslav because no magic, black or white, will make this any better. By the end of the week, I've collected twelve more buckets of resistors. Čedomir asks nothing so I offer nothing. Our silences have gotten longer, conversations shorter, meetings even more brief, whether because he knows or because he doesn't want to know or he wants deniability, though I cannot help but to look at him as a murderer. The pretense of ignorance only makes it worse. My buckets are full before lunch so I take some time to rearrange the cargo, fitting the caps and long bones into rib cages and skulls to make more room. A gentle rain begins to fall and my dead friends are made clean again. Fat puddles collect in divots and in muddy cavities along the field so I scoop my buckets in the crooks of my arms and hustle toward the farmhouse, carefully manoeuvring around the craterous slicks that threaten to pull me in. The clouds grow darker and soon a hard rain roils the turbulent earth, sucking at my feet, weighing down my buckets. Halfway to the house.

I run fast for an old lady. War has taught me that dawdling gets you dead. My feet move quickly but the flesh of the earth has opened on me, oozing over the tops of my shoes, into my socks and between my toes, making a filthy sucking sound as though the torrent is draining downward and I might cork the hemorrhage. I lose a shoe on my next step but when I fish through the muck to retrieve it, my fingers settle on something hard. A toe. Decency insists that I either leave the toe where it is or gather whatever adjoining parts I can. I cannot take half a man. Where would his soul rest? Nickola would tell me to carry on and leave the toe and my buckets, that I've tempted trouble too much. But Nickola is dead. He has no say in this, nor, I suppose, do I.

Two more toes reveal themselves, long, skinny things that once ventured and gripped and kicked. There is something about the shortest toe, though, its side is a bit flatter than the others, as if it had been worn down, the way old rocks smooth under running water. I dig some more. Only three toes. I do not want to search any more. I can't. *Please God, save me. Be merciful for once and finally grant me a heart attack. Kill this old servant of yours. Please.* My stomach sours, and then I am cradling my boy's club, his blessed *J*, in my arms.

Good and bad Vlachs alike will tell you that a crow doesn't scavenge its own. Common interests demand acquittal, no matter the fault. But I am no Vlach and Čedomir is not my brother. Milena could cast a spell for me, one of those spooky things, and maybe give Čedomir cancer or bad luck, but that is not enough. I am stronger than I look. Strong enough to drag warm flesh into the field of bones and bury it among the others. Strong enough to feed an old dog some new meat and carry my boy home.