

## "Interlude"

The man wearing garbage bags approaches the bin. Coke. Fanta. Water. Bottles. Cans. Empty. With urine. Without urine. Spoiled milk. Rotting chicken. Green bread. Grease. A diaper. Another. Decaying cat. Blood. Not his. The garbage bag man knows his body as intimately as a surgeon knows his scalpel, more than the drunk knows his drink, and his body tells him to move on. He extricates himself from the handle he leans on for an inside view and shuffles onward. Long ago, when the bags he wore were new, he'd rustle and crinkle from bin to bin. Now, the bag on his chest is soft with age and weather but the bottles tied to his feet as shoes still make crackling sounds, a peremptory warning to other scavengers and a signal to non-invisibles to keep their distance. They always do.

The next bin is promising. Two half-loaves of day-old bread are tied to the handle. He checks them for color, turns them over his scabbed palms, digs a hole through the plastic and smells. Still good. He pulls them from the handle and sets them in his grocery bag then he lifts his heels and inspects the mound within the metal. More bottles. Oil-stained cardboard boxes. Brush rubbish. A half-eaten orange. A miniature toy soldier affixed to a small square of green plastic by one leg and the butt of a rifle. The soldier's other leg had been ripped off, a wisp of fictile web in its place. His breath sticks with memory and he looks up, searching for the crow. There are two on a tree and another on the bin beside him, none of which are his tormentor. *Come black devil, come. Take my eyes in your beak, pull them until they are mine no longer and our partnership is done. You owe me that.* The parching Serbian sun rises, the kind he used to shelter from but now he lets it burn his back, singe his lips, scorch his tongue. He moves on, thinking about Bujanovac.

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Milica was a teacher, a fine one, at the grammar school in nearby Presevo. She made the children laugh. "Gather, little ones, we have another story." Squeals could be heard all the way in Kosovo, their invasion of innocence not altogether unwanted, held with sympathetic ears. "But first!" Laughter. Tender arms were up, reaching, pleading. *Me! Me, teacher, pick me!* She studied the group with one eye, always one eye, pretend patched like a pirate because the children thought it was funny and it made them more attentive. She picked Andjelka, far in the back, whose own left eye was closed with considerable determination, as evidenced by the peek of her pink tongue in the corner of her mouth. "Rise Andjelka! Captain Milica picks you, the bravest, most courageous hero our world has ever known!" The rest of the children dropped their hands, defeated, while Andjelka stood and fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. "Are you ready to be our hero today, Andjelka?" The child nodded. "Then make haste and let's have your wisdom!" The child moved to the cabinet behind her teacher, considered for a moment, then pulled from a small selection of old books, settling on *One Thousand and One Nights*. She fingered the pages until she reached her favorite, "The Story of The Three Sisters", the one she herself called, "The Talking Bird". Slowly, because the complicated words made chalk of her tongue, she spoke about Periezade and the talking bird and how the Persian princess outsmarted a clever trap and saved her brothers from an enchantment that turned them into stone. The children gasped. The storyteller liked it when they did that. It meant they were listening and, perhaps, hinted at the softening impediment of her tongue.

The man remembers this clearly. He had been observing quietly in the corner while he waited for Milica to be finished. Sometimes he would come early on purpose, just to catch the newest hero, sometimes to see the magic that was his wife. That day he needed a part for the tractor so

an early trip from the village was necessary. School finished, the children rushed out, and they were accosted around their waists by Djuro, who giggled when they were caught surprised.

"What took you so long?" the child asked.

"But we were here," his father replied. "Waiting for you." He ran his long fingers through Djuro's soft hair, kissed his head.

Djuro pondered this and squished up his face the way he did when he was trying to think of something smart to say. "When can you sit in my class?"

"When your teacher asks me."

"There'd be too many people if Papa came, Djuro. The other fathers would get jealous and would want to come, too, and then there'd be over a hundred people in a room built for ten. It would be so crowded you wouldn't even be able to see him and Ms. Garic wouldn't be able to teach and we'd have to put you back in the same grade to learn it all over again." Milica winked at him.

"There's thirty-seven in my class, Mama. If the other papas came there would only be," he calculated slowly, "not even eighty."

They smiled at their boy. "One day, Djuro, maybe when all the heroes in Mama's class are gone, I'll sneak into your room in a cape of my own and surprise you."

The boy giggled. "You'll have to wear a mask so no one recognizes you."

"Of course."

The ride home was slow, during which the boy regaled them with his own feats of heroism, something they pressed the importance of upon him since birth. "I gave Luka my cookies and helped Ana tie her shoes."

"Well done, Djuro."

"What else?" his father asked.

Milica turned to him. "Isn't that enough? He's only eight, my love."

"Sure, sure. It's enough. But are we asking our son to be a regular hero or a superhero?" He drove on, his foot barely touching the gas pedal, wanting to extend this time as long as possible. He looked in the rear view mirror, Djuro's pouty baby lips were pressed together, concentrating. "Well, my boy? Are you a regular guy or a superhero? Tell me, what have you done today that'll make you fly?"

Quickly, the words fell from his mouth. "I opened the door for Ms. Garic twice today and I read a book to Aleks. Oh! And I got a teacher to help Ivan. His leg was bleeding and he was crying."

From the driver's seat, eyebrows shot up. "What happened?"

Djuro shrugged. "He caught his leg on the slide." The man knew the slide the boy was talking about. Rusted, broken, sharp like a blade, the one he instructed Djuro to avoid. "Was it bad?"

The boy shrugged again. "I guess."

Silently, the parents cringed. "Good boy. You've definitely earned a hero's reward, then." The man nodded to Milica, who then passed the boy a small bag over the front seat.

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A dog . The garbage bag man, with his own smells and smears and pheromones, lets the creature near and allows it to sniff until it huffs disinterestedly and trots away. Beasts like him, nature's own, never bother. It's the talking ones that are dangerous. Above him, a charcoal colored sky settles in so he moves on, down the hill toward home. The bilious rumble of his stomach tells him a bin was bad, that the meat from what he thought was a good bone had turned

and was now rotting inside him. Take. Take. Take. Take. Take. That's all his godforsaken country had done to him, its kleptocratic fingers flensing every last bit off him like a starving vulture until his own bones were hollow and brittle and the marrow of his very own soul was void of anything nutritive or worthwhile. He reflects that he had been hollow for a long time but that even his emptiness is worth something, another badge of dominion in the nepotic system. Still, as long as he moves, breathes, as long as he continues, there is always more to take, which he would give willingly but the crow is patient, temporizing his end like a plaything for so long that the man anguishes over it. *Be done with me!* He begs and throws his brittle bones at the crow, but the crow won't have him yet. There is more to be picked from him.

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At home, Milica prepared dinner while the man worked the field. Sugar beets and sunflowers. Djuro joined, alternately pulling weeds for the man and posturing his new toy soldier in the dirt, readying ambush for some unsuspecting spider or dragonfly. When he finally managed to catch a slow-moving, matte-black beetle, Djuro pressed the base of the soldier onto the insect's back and crushed it into the earth until its squirming legs stopped moving. He showed his father, proud of his kill. The man, dirty and sweating, set down his bucket and crouched beside his son. "Tell me, Djuro. Is your soldier a hero?"

The boy nodded. "Yes, Papa."

"Then tell me why he kills." Djuro couldn't answer, the enormity of the question evading him. "Do heroes kill for the sake of killing, Djuro?"

"No Papa. They save."

"Let me ask you again, then. Is your soldier a hero, Djuro?"

"No." The boy whispered, sullen until his face regained its spirit. "But he will be, Papa. I promise."

The man folded his son into his arms. "Good. Always remember, Djuro, that the world only needs one kind of hero. It has enough criminals already." Slowly, the pair worked the inner field toward the outer, where the apple trees and raspberry bushes budded along the perimeter, a little beyond which a different kind of fruit festered in the earth. Lethal iron relics waiting to be unleashed.

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Rain. He shuffles quicker now, passing the nursery school and *posta*, away from the open market, past one café, another, two more, all busy with the comings and goings of oblivious life. They don't know the crow like the man does. They don't know the crow is watching, waiting for a stumble, a moment of weakness, just long enough for an opening to be had. Then they will be split and further wrenched apart bit by microscopic bit, the slow tearing creeping up on them like a pack of silent bandits until they are powerless to do anything but pray for a quick and total theft and all will be done. Even the air stings, though he feels it more acutely than the rest, the polluted aviary that is the Belgrade sky keeping the scavengers in, always in, always hungry for more.

Water soaks his skin, douses his matted hair, weights his beard, drips from his bags. He hasn't been clean in weeks, hasn't wanted to be clean, his skin a fecund plane for bacterial and fungal growth, yet he feels this downpour a tonic for his dying soul. When the man reaches the fence he slides through a steel seam and makes for the concrete pipe, peeling the plastic off his body, continuing naked, letting nature lash and drown and push him until he is inside.

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Milica called them to dinner but the boy and the man were enjoying their time in the field so she carried plates out to them where they ate together and the evening was good. Here, far in the outer field where their small orchard was beginning a new season, where husband and wife were full and content, a boy yearned to be a hero. Djuro could not think of anything but that and it pulled his attention from the insects and the weeds near his parents toward the trees and the earth in the place where he must not go.

There. A crow.

A splayed wing rested where it shouldn't have, but the bird's spasms did not set off any of the iron fruit. A wide arc the bird raked into the broken grass suggested to the boy that the crow had been struggling quite a while, yet no ordnance had been activated. Maybe there were none, Djuro thought. Maybe the buffer was wider than his father told him. Seeing the bird and the area it unsettled made Djuro believe it so. He tested his theory by throwing a stick. It landed beside the bird without incident or sound, the soft earth and tall grass, long undisturbed, cushioned the object like a pillow. The boy gathered five sizeable rocks and tossed them where the shortest path to the bird would be. He threw a few more sticks. Nothing. He looked behind him, saw his parents' backs, their murmuring happiness, and decided to be a hero.

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It is still dark when the man wakes in the early morning and he has little light by which to fetch his bags. Eventually, he finds them, rain-soaked, against the fence and puts them on. Like a thickened condiment, he squeezes out into the world and begins the trek back to his bins, knowing that the rain would have soaked everything and he might not eat today. Sometimes water is a good thing, cleansing, even, makes him believe that the discarded scraps he puts to his mouth have been washed and so better for him. On days like this, however, when the predawn

heat steams water off the road and quenched trees are already sagging in thirst, water in the bin means a putrefied heap.

The heat intensifies by midmorning and after checking all of his bins, he knows he will have no luck today. He will have not a scrap of meat or even a speck of bread, everything ruined. The heat is so fierce by midday that his bags threaten to melt to his skin so he discards his plastic shirt and carries on, bare-chested, far into the area where people are much less tolerant of him, but where he might find something clean to drink. Soon his tongue gets heavy and weights his mouth so he lets it flop out and hang and he has to keep his jaw open to keep from biting it off. He talks to himself partly out of delirium, partly because he is afraid that if he doesn't, his throat will seize and dry shut and he will no longer be able to speak to the crow and beg it for mercy. The man walks on, clutching the one-legged soldier, mumbling to himself, searching for the crow.

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Silently, so as not to disturb his parents, Djuro crept into the place where he must never, ever go. He had not thought of heroes as children. He thought of them as mature warriors and brave risk-takers. He could be brave, too, though. The bravest. He straightened his back, pulling his shoulder blades together, his chest high and heaving, when he took his first step into the bad place, the area behind the string perimeter his father made him know as soon as he took his first steps. *Djuro. Don't go there, Djuro. It can kill you, Djuro.* Yet the boy tiptoed past the string toward the crow. When he finally reached the bird, he was so happy he was not dead that he laughed loud, feeling a bit silly. Hearing this, his parents turned. Now cupped in the boy's hands, the crow shifted its head and regarded the man on the other side of the string barrier, where the earth was safe.

"No, Djuro! No! No! No!" Milica was on her feet, running toward the boy before the man could comprehend what was happening. "Don't move! DO! NOT! MOVE! Stay where you are, Djuro! I'm coming to get you!"

It was not until the bird released the man from its spell that the man was able to speed toward his son. "Milica!" he cried. "Don't go in there! Djuro, stay where you are! Everyone, just stay! Do not move!" He was in charge now, but Milica did not listen. She only saw and heard her son. "Milica!" he begged, almost upon them. "Don't..."

But she was already in the buffer zone and over the string enclosure. One step, two steps, and mother and son were reunited. She hoisted Djuro onto her hip, hugging him hard until he protested, clutching him more, crying into his hair and leaking snot onto his ear. When the boy showed his mother the crow, he realized that it was, in fact, dead, that it was past the point of salvation when he picked it up, and his mother had likely squeezed out whatever was left inside that kept it alive. Defeated, he let the bird drop from his fingers onto the explosive soil.

*God. Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. Please God, no. Please. Please God. No. No. God. No. Oh God. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. God. No!!!*

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Anyone close enough would hear the garbage bag man's whispers, his silent pleadings. The sun is high in the sky, sucking every last drop of moisture from him, drying him like one big meat snack. He slumps on the sidewalk outside a *kafana*, leans his failing body against a bin and lets the hot surface sear his shoulder, ribs and thigh. His skin blisters and swells and for a moment he suspects he might even be on fire. Believing that this is what they felt in that final moment sends him into a paroxysm of grief so deep he vomits on himself, lets the sour, half-digested meat and stomach acid run down his chest and through his splayed legs. His tears are

dry, like puffs of air, as he grieves over Milica and Djuro and his goddamned penitent existence. He curses his birth, his slipping into a country whose congenital venality stole everything from him, whose endemic rapacity authorized the misdirection of resources intended for clearing the minefield and culled his wife and son without so much as a blink. He looks up, around, his clouded eyes searching for the crow. *Take me already! Take me you leech! Fill your belly with my blood and be done with me!*

A person. In his stupor, the man doesn't hear another approaching until he feels something cold against his calf. It startles him and he jerks up, half-blind with dry eyes, then reaches for the thing against his leg. Plastic. A bottle of water. The man screams. *Why? Why keep me here when there is nothing left for me?* He kicks it away but the movement is clumsy and the bottle rolls back to him. He lifts his face to the blazing sky. *Please. No more. Please. I have no more to give. Take my rotting flesh and make it good again, where it may be reunited with Milica and Djuro. Please.* He rolls onto his back, closes his eyes and relieves his bowels. The man cannot see the crow watching, he does not know that the crow is waiting, that his prolonged agony is the very thing the crow wanted from the very beginning. Since his birth.

Hours later, when his excrement has dried and baked onto his skin and fused him to the sidewalk, the man sees what he has so long waited for. The boy takes his hand, his wife takes the other, and when they lift his clean body up, feathers shed from his body onto the ground where they will wait another life.

Somewhere, in another field, in another Balkan village, in another hospital, a baby is born. Before the infant can meet his mother, before his first breath, his milky eyes regard a black thing.

The crow waits.