

A. MEDVEDENKO

Two Weeks at Most

LEJLA'S BOSS LEFT TOWN suddenly and without notice. No one knew when to expect him back. In the absence of a stern, attentive gaze, staff came and went as they pleased, and increasingly stopped showing up for work. At a quarter to ten, Lejla was second in the office. Mr. Sadiković was reliably seated at his desk, posture erect, tilted slightly over the newspaper spread before him. He passed the day with a lit cigarette extended over a ceramic ashtray, going first through *Oslobođenje* and the other dailies, slowly working his way to the political magazines. Calmly, with deliberate turns of the page, he pored over the news with detached commitment, never passing comment, only occasionally shaking his head with bemusement, as if he were no longer able to make sense of this world.

At lunchtime, Lejla met an old friend for coffee. She checked the offerings at the butcher with a distasteful frown and then walked to the piazza to haggle over the rising prices of vegetables. Waiting her turn at the tomato scales, she recognized a language teacher from the primary school. The man informed her that a student performance was being planned in the memory of a deceased colleague, the sudden victim of a heart attack. The outgoing class would sing a song in her honor. "It did not occur to anyone until I suggested it," he added bitterly. Also, the parent-teacher conference for her youngest had been delayed until next Tuesday. But she should know: Sasha had been fighting with another boy.

"He didn't tell you, did he?" said the teacher. "When I was a child, my father knew everything I did, thought, or felt, and he knew it all before I was half aware of it myself. I didn't dare have an improper thought. Now everyone thinks what they want, does what they want. All standards are declining: moral, educational, living standards especially. One day soon, we will all be swimming in the gutter." The problem was that no one under fifty would listen. "It used to be that we respected our elders. Now the older you get, the more suspicious you are—like a tub of sour cream!"

The conversation upset Lejla and made her irritable. Their Mirza, the eldest, was competitive, temperamental, known to pick a fight. But Sasha was a sensitive boy: sweet and thoughtful, easily frightened. A few years earlier, the death of Lejla's mother dawned on him like some ghastly

fortress out of a fog. “Mama,” he had asked, “What does it mean, ‘dead?’”

Though Sasha was only four at the time, and in spite of her own grief, her husband refused to let her provide a comforting answer to this question. To not prejudice the boy in favor of Lejla’s theology—or his own, he argued—Dražen instead presented the boy with a number of the most popular theories. “Some people believe the dead go to a beautiful, sunny place and everyone we love will be there forever. Others believe we are born again as lions or ants, or maybe fish. And others still, they think this life is all there is. Death is the end, and there is nothing more and nothing else.”

Slowly at first, and then with alarming frequency, the morbid subject began to occupy the boy. Soon he brought his questions everywhere, like other kids bring their favorite toy. At the dinner table, through a mouthful of peas: “If there is nothing after death, what is nothing like?” In the bath, covered with suds: “And in the next life, Mama, will you still be my parents?” At last it was decided that all the family would be frozen in icy temperatures and reunited a century after their deaths. This resolution offered great solace to them all.

Lejla was back home at 15:00, carrying chopped liver wrapped in a newspaper made translucent with fat and blood. The kids arrived, then her husband. After dinner, Dražen invited Sasha to the bedroom for a talk. Closing the door behind them, he began a cursory investigation of the events that had led them here. The details were childish and petty. Satisfied with the information gained, Dražen removed the slipper from his foot and reached down for the tool of discipline.

The whipping was swift and vigorous, punctuated by life lessons. “Will you embarrass your mother in public again?”

“No!” said Sasha, kicking his legs out to avoid the blows.

“What does fighting accomplish?”

“Nothing!”

“Nothing at all, that’s right,” Dražen said breathlessly, tossing his slipper down and stepping back into its warmth. Cursing the rotten job and the energy expended, he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. The telephone was ringing in the hallway, droning four or five times before Lejla reached the receiver. “You’re too big for us to be having these conversations,” said Dražen, stroking his youngest tenderly. “Use your head—it isn’t there just to grow hair, you know. Now wait until she’s finished on the phone, then go apologize to your mother.” The boy assented in resentful silence and father and son stepped out into the hallway.

“Here he is now,” said Lejla. She was leaning on the doorway to the kitchen, worn down with stress and worry but still pretty as ever. The same soft eyes, high cheekbones, firm chin—a young girl’s beauty matured. She held out the receiver with apparent disapproval and said, “It’s Nevin.”

“Kum!” said Dražen with earnest joy, perhaps a touch exaggerated. “Where have you been?”

“Working, only working,” said the voice on the other end of the line. “How goes it?”

“Oh, the same,” said Dražen. “Same as always.” He said these words automatically, by habit and without reflection, a stock response that was anything but true. It had been some time since the friends last talked. Growing up together in this town of no account, nestled on the way of the river between three hills, they were once as close as brothers. Inseparable until their wedding days, when they served as best man to each other, they were not unaware of each other’s faults, but regarded the other’s character as essentially beyond reproach. Their relationship, like their lives, had once been simple and straightforward. Now, without any overt dispute or even so much as a discussion, months had passed since their last evening together. These days, when they saw each other in the street or a café in town, conversation was always and only about family, about kids, about nothing, really, and so it was on the phone.

“Are you taking yours down to the coast this year?” said Kumashin. No, Dražen answered. Given the situation at work and otherwise, with everything up in the air, there was little sense in making plans. Kumashin pressed him, “No plans at all?”

“I’ve considered it, of course,” said Dražen uncertainly, pacing all the while around the kitchen. “At least to send Lejla and the kids out, just until everything blows over.”

There was a long pause on the other end, the sound of a man measuring his words. “I think you should,” said Kumashin.

The directness of the advice drew Dražen to a halt. He stood before the kitchen window with the sun disappearing into the valley, the dim shades of the evening filtering through the glassy reflection. “You think so?”

“You should,” said Kumashin again, firmer still.

Dražen understood at once. He resumed his stride around the kitchen, wrapping the telephone cord around his fist, his mind suddenly clear on the proper course of action. “How much time is there?”

“The sooner, the better.”

“Where is safe?”

“The only safe route is to Macedonia, via Belgrade. You know the man down at the station, don’t you? Go on, give him a call. See if he has anything in the next couple of days.”

So it is a matter of days, Dražen thought. What then? Setting the thought aside to do as instructed, he dialed the man at the train station, who knew his father well, and begged the favor.

“You’re lucky,” said the man. Not five minutes ago, someone had rung to cancel a booking. Now he was leaving the office but if Dražen headed to the station immediately, he would instruct his colleague to hold the tickets for him. But he had to go now, not in the morning, not soon, but right this minute and he had to pay in cash.

By the time Lejla emerged from the children’s bedroom, Dražen was in shoes and coat. He kissed his wife softly on the head, told her not to worry, but to call her father and begin packing. He withdrew an envelope from a law book in the shelves, thumbed through the papers inside, and headed to his brother’s house. Sharing the grim advice that he had heard, Dražen handed over the envelope of deutsch marks and received a wad of dinars in return. He brought this stack to the counter at the station where the tickets awaited him as promised.

The following morning, with frost still upon the shivering leaves, Dražen woke the boys while Lejla prepared sandwiches for the trip. She wrapped the sliced tomatoes separately, so they would not soak the bread, and stuffed aluminum foil packages into her handbag, between carrot cake and a small green box embroidered with a yellow thread. There was some petty jewelry in it, necklaces and rings that she could live without, if they needed to be sold. A large chest and two duffel bags lay unzipped at the door. She checked their contents again and took a couple of photographs from their frames, sliding them into the pocket of her purse, next to a conservative estimate of deutsch marks, just in case. The trip they planned was a short one, and when the kids had their breakfast and it was time, the couple roamed the apartment in a nervous panic until they had everything and were absolutely sure.

Assuming a brave pose, Mirza stood ready at the door. His brother, four years younger and barely upright against the wall, hugged the miniature briefcase that Tata bought him in Tel Aviv, to remember him when he was away on business. Rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand, Sasha was slowly coming to his senses. This time, Tata did not wake him to see their Yuga outplay mighty Argentina on the biggest stage—and with ten men, too—until the heartbreak in penalties. This time, sleep had given way to

a different sort of darkness, a mystery for which everyone is odd and quiet and boys are hugged long and tight, told there is no reason to worry, and to just listen to Mama and your brother, and everything will be all right.

The bit he knew, but was much too young to connect, was that some of the older kids had recently begun to brag of circumcisions and fore-skins. New words were all the talk on the playground. And when they asked him, “Are you baptized?” Sasha blinked uncertainly.

“I’m vaccinated,” he said.

“Well, what are you?” Older kids added to his confusion.

“What do you mean? You know me—I’m Sasha.”

His Bosnian birth certificate, the possession of which Lejla confirmed several times, indicated “Saša” on the first line and “Josipović” on the second. The former was a diminutive of a common Serbian name, uttered with two soothing syllables, like a loving whisper, that his parents bestowed on him on the day of his birth. The family name had not been chosen. Dražen assumed it from his father, who assumed it from his own father, and so on since time immemorial. It marked them as ethnic Croats, an incidental fact, a piece of trivia as far as Dražen was concerned. On censuses that would later help classify the dead, he invariably marked the Yugoslav box.

None of this existed for Sasha. Sava, Bosna, and Neretva were only rivers to him, Bosnia and Yugoslavia the lands he knew as his own, and his people were Mama and Tata, Mirza, his grandparents, and the boys and girls with whom he played. But while he remained in the dark, others had learned to distinguish Slobodan, Franjo, and Aljo, the Muslim from the Croat, the Serb from the Muslim, and the Croat from the Serb. Slowly over many years and then suddenly overnight, a name became a dangerous thing to have.

The barking of stray dogs gave voice to the night. Lit dimly by streetlights and the pale beaming moon, the markings of the neighborhood—the dirt patch where the boys flicked marbles, the cement playground with goals for three-on-three football, the parking lot where they played hide-and-seek, the faded residential squares where Djed and Majka lived—felt new and strange, their familiarity concealed by a dark, eerie shroud. Each step led to less-known parts of the world: the littered bus station, the rushing river, and finally, the train stop on the outskirts of town.

“Something is missing,” said Lejla suddenly, tearing the handbag from her shoulder. She sorted through the contents in a frenzy, “We’re forgetting something.”

“You have everything, darling.” Dražen smiled softly, seeking her eyes. “And if you forgot something small, I assure you they have toothpaste in Skopje.” He took his wife’s hands and kissed them and spoke tenderly in her ear. “Everything will be all right. You’ll be home soon. It’s just a few weeks, two or three, a month at most, just until things go back to normal. Think positive. No matter what, you must think positive.”

While the train operators took their cigarette break at the coffee counter of the station, Dražen loaded the luggage onto the racks in the cabin. He gave his wife, his firstborn, and his youngest two kisses each, then one more to all, and one more to Sasha, and stepped off the train. The passenger cars began to be drawn into the darkness ahead and Dražen blended into the pastels of the awakening landscape. Lejla drew sunglasses over her eyes and bit down on her lip. Black was over her eyes, the dawn of a new day imbued in it. Suddenly a panic overtook her, she placed the sunglasses on top of her head and searched through her purse.

“Dear God,” she said. “What did I forget?”