

HIS

By JASMINA ODOR



The young soldier lay near the edge of the forest, in the brush behind a hillock. He'd lain there for several hours, propping himself on his one good shoulder and alternately watching and not watching his other shoulder bleed through the jacket he'd tightened around it. Morning fog was just lifting. Not far from the edge of the forest was a large meadow, with streams and bushes, and beyond it the start of a village, with narrow house fronts and orchards or vegetable gardens extending behind the houses. Old Mr. Hrgović, better known as Hrga, scanned the grass and the brush and the line of trees, and spotted the soldier not far from where he stood. Hrga could even see the bloody shoulder and could read the awkward unselfconscious posture of a person in all-enveloping pain. The front line had been near Hrga's house for months now, and he had lived in his house, here in Eastern

Croatia, for some forty-five years before that. He remembered that other war, and had fought in it too; this war was still young, but already he was full-up with what he'd seen and heard since the first blockades of the summer, the first mortar attacks, and the first news of burning houses and bodies at the sides of roads. The roads, the forest, the hillocks and the grass, the orchards of this Slavonian village, could not be anyone's but his—he knew this without needing to articulate it, without complication. Those trying to occupy it were insane, that was clear to him. He felt both sides—the Serb side and his own Croat side—to be intrusions. And his side he had to tolerate. The soldiers, some of whom he knew from the village and most of whom were decent and ordinary, came by his house and he fed them when he could and shared his brandy with them.

Last night there had been heavy fire and by sunrise he suspected something had moved, the Serb forces had been pushed back. Through the night he'd smoked cigarettes in the dark under the walnut tree. It was his tree and his yard. He did not want to stay inside. Whose business was it whether he hid in the house or sat on the bench he'd built under his tree? Now the morning was dewy and cool with a smell of wet earth and wet leaves. He'd walked out to see how things looked. He kept walking, beyond where he should have, into a small wooded area that had recently become no man's land. He kept walking because he had felt some new anger during the night. His sons and daughters were in turn angry with him for living like this, alone, so near the front. For weapons he had a rifle he had hunted with for decades, a handgun and a few hand grenades. His children all lived abroad and two of them had grandchildren of their own, and he kept all the photographs he was sent in a neat row lined up next to the bread box.

The soldier reclining against the hillock heard the steps coming toward him, the shifting swoosh of the grass. His head was too stiff to move and he angled his eyes as far as he could to see who was approaching.

To Hrga, the man's eyes seemed at first dead and then insanely focused. He

took off his cap and leaned over the man, as much as his back would allow, not very low. "Where are you wounded?" he said.

The soldier's right side was all blood, blood that had spread from the right shoulder, had soaked the jacket tied around it. The left hand was bloody. He wore faded fatigues and a black shirt with lettering—a sports shirt. His rifle, a Kalashnikov, was in the grass next to his good left arm. Near that arm was a wet pack of cigarettes—Hrga looked at the brand, but he had already understood whose side the soldier was from. The man let out a croak and Hrga knew immediately he was thirsty, dried out. He'd been that dried out once. He straightened himself and looked out towards the river, and then back in the direction he'd come from. He knew these fields but he could not stay here now.

"Nothing but for you to come with me," he said, more to himself than to the man.

Everything was quiet, at the moment, in all directions. Hrga was further from his house than usual, but not especially far—had he not used to set fox traps not far from here, in the years before the war? He thought he knew where the Croats were standing guard, and he knew the Serb side was even further in the other direction.

"I'm going to move you now," Hrga said.

"Where to?" the soldier croaked. In the hours he spent in this spot he'd dragged himself to, shapes like clouds of gas, in colours of black and rust and pale green, had inflated and deflated in slow succession in the darkness behind his closed eyelids. In the last hour they had been appearing in front of his open eyes too, obscuring the grass and the trunks of oak trees. Their inflation and deflation had a rhythm, and he thought that if he was forced to move and lost this rhythm he would not be able to control himself anymore.

"Don't worry," the old man said and crouched beside him. He felt he was with one of his children when they were very young and had been caught in a transgression and hurt—there was in the soldier's body and eyes the same terrified, hopeful, naked surrender. And in Hrga,

the same parental anger toward the child who had caused the disaster, yet also pity at the child's pain.

"Your shoulder's gone," he said, "but did it get you anywhere else?"

The soldier wanted to speak but after those first words he could not activate the mechanism again. Instead he looked toward his twisted ankle, the left one.

"We'll start anyway, slowly," Hrga said. He moved the man to sitting. He picked up the pack of smokes, put it in his own pants pocket, and slung the Kalashnikov over his shoulder. He put the man's good arm around his neck and his hand around his torso. The man smelled metallic, and yeasty, like a drying mushroom, and sour. His pant leg was wet.

The two men stood up. The grass under their feet was still wet. The day was not sunny, but lit by brightness that comes from behind clouds and gives hyper-real sharpness to everything. In front of the soldier's eyes clouds and balls of light were exploding and threatening to topple him.

"Steady now," Hrga said. He didn't know if this was a dying man or not. When he'd lifted him he'd seen the blood that had soaked the ground under him.

When they'd reached the hillock before the road, the soldier said, "I can't." They stood for a moment and then the old man began moving again and the young man did too. They crossed the road and made it to the house from behind, through Hrga's orchard.

Hrga had taken to sleeping in the room that was both kitchen and living room and kept the sofa bed pulled out all the time. On it he now laid the soldier. His own arms trembled with exertion. "All right," he said, mostly to himself. "It's good now."

He brought a glass of water to the man, which he filled by dunking the glass in the pot of water he'd boiled last night. After the man drank it he brought him another. Then he brought out his brandy and poured two small glasses, which they drank at the same time.

The soldier winced in swallowing. "It's a good one," he said. His chest had expanded after he'd drunk the water and his voice was clearer now.

"It burns, doesn't it." Hrga crouched by the sofa, feeling the crunch in his

knees, and unlaced the man's boots, took them off with a grunt, and then found a clean bed sheet and gauze and a towel and scissors. He cut the man's shirt straight across the front and pulled it away from his body. He wet the towel with water from the pot and squeezed the water from it on the man's wound.

"It's gone to hell, hasn't it," the soldier said. The removal of his stinking, soggy, leaden boots was a great, if temporary, relief.

"You have your head and you have your legs," Hrga said. He stuffed gauze and bandaged, cut the sheet into squares and wrapped it around the shoulder, under the opposite armpit. The soldier passed into unconsciousness for minutes at a time and then returned into pain. He was young and scruffy, with a dirty beard and bad skin. Hrga brought aspirin, four in the palm of his hand, a pointless offering. The next thing would be food, he thought. He was hard up for bread. He opened a can of pork and heated it up.

The room was blankly dark, with only the broadest outlines. It smelled of blood and stale bedding.

"Listen," the soldier said, "I should go to the bathroom." His eyes were glassy and bloodshot, and his face shone with fever.

Hrga nodded and stood up.

"No, I'll do it myself," the man said—but he found he could not prop himself up with his good arm alone.

So they went together down the long hallway to the bathroom. The old man helped him sit on the toilet, and then he turned away, started scraping at the grime of the sink. Then it occurred to him to give the soldier a new pair of underwear and pants. "Wait here," he said.

He found clean things he hadn't worn in a long time—he'd been wearing his overalls for months now. When he returned to the bathroom the man was crying silently and there was a new line of sweat around his hairline. The old man asked him if he could stand. He kept crying. Hrga waited. He held the folded wool pants, underwear and socks in both hands, and he waited, and the man kept crying.

He looked out the small, high window at the bit of sky and a branch of his walnut tree.

"All right," he said, "all right." He got down to his knees, with difficulty, and pulled off the man's pants, then his underwear.

"Some things just have to get done," he said, with more shrillness than he'd intended. His knees hurt a great deal, as always when he tried to kneel or crouch. This pain, and the soldier's unrelenting soft crying, made him irritated, so he shook out the clean underwear, shook out the folded pants, and worked as quickly as he could to pull them both up halfway to the man's thighs.

Then he could not bear it anymore and creakily lowered himself to sit on the floor and lean against the tub.

The man stopped crying. To avoid looking at Hrga, he looked up, and he noticed the small window high in the wall, and he saw the sky and the tree branch.

He imagined standing on top of the toilet bowl and opening the window to look outside: there'd be new air, and the sight of a familiar yard—a shed, a water pump, a defunct chicken coop, grass between concrete. Driven by this vision, he managed this time to use his right arm to hold on to the edge of the bathtub and raise himself to standing, and Hrga, seeing this, stood up with difficulty too, and pulled up the underwear and the pants quickly over the man's hips. As Hrga tugged up the zipper, the soldier said thank you, which sounded odd to both of them, a politeness suited to cafés and grocery shops, to favours done between friends. Hrga said nothing in return and they silently made the long walk down the hall together.

Throughout the day and evening Hrga pattered about and the man stayed on the sofa, finding the rhythm of his pain and sometimes blacking out or dreaming. His face in repose was blank, his mouth slightly open—fleshy lips, straight nose, and straight, thick

eyebrows on a wide face, pockmarked from acne. A handsome man, the old man thought, despite the bad skin and dirty beard and too-long hair.

Late in the evening the man was most present, and they ate and drank and smoked.

"Do you have children?" Hrga asked.

"No. Wife can't have any."

The television was turned on, with the sound low, and the living room smelled of warm food and cigarette smoke.

"I have five. Not one of them lives here. My wife died two years ago. It was hard for me when she died, but I see now that it was for the better."

"I think my wife could do without me. Only my mother will miss me. Where are all your children?"

"Is your mother old?"

"Seventy-one. She was old when she had me. She has a bad heart." The man's voice was strained. Hrga brought him more water, then refilled his brandy glass.

"Whatever made you leave her and come down here?" Hrga said.

The man looked straight ahead.

Hrga then walked out into his yard and sat on the bench and looked into the darkness over the low wall surrounding his yard and orchard.

In the night that followed the man slept on the pulled-out sofa and Hrga on a small bed that had stayed in the corner since the children used to take their naps on it. The soldier did not move much in the night, but he often exhaled heavily. The room was blankly dark, with only the broadest outlines. It smelled of blood and stale bedding. Hrga focused his eyes into the darkness and imagined the outlines of the furniture. In the night the reality of what he could and could not do became stark. Officially, he should have turned the soldier over to the Croat side so they could exchange him for one of their own. But underneath the rules, underneath the neat line-up of men simply changing sides on some crossroad, some former school house, lay a dark corridor of unofficial space and time, ruled by those with the guns, and what could Hrga control about what they did with those guns? All their violent longings, all the beautiful certainty of self-validating power—you have it, and

therefore you must be entitled to have it—what could Hrga do with those?

And Hrga could not return him to the man's own side either. Odd, then, how the soldier's existence seemed now like a kind of non-existence—he was not any place, not any place where he could be found by those caring to find him, not anywhere where he could stay. Hrga thought of the soldier's men, why they didn't return for him—maybe they were planning to after daylight and Hrga had beat them to it.

He knew later that he'd fallen asleep because he dreamt—himself, in the shade of his tree, and outside the gate, crunchy noises, like wheels on gravel, and light gun fire, and distant rumbling, and he knew that he should be threatened and also that the noise was irrelevant.

He woke up when the soldier's phlegmy snoring broke through to his consciousness. He rose out of bed and walked over to him—his eyes were glazed again and he was sweaty. The old man thought, he will die here, and what will I have had to do with it?

"What can I bring you?" he whispered. He found more aspirin and made the man swallow it, and went back to his bed.

In the early morning they shared bread with big spoons of rubbery cherry jam. The soldier could not eat much. The day outside was bright and the window let in cool air. After the bread and jam breakfast, Hrga sat in a kitchen chair next to the sofa smoking the man's cigarettes. Hrga was thinking of his children, and then of this man and his mother. There were things he wanted to understand.

"When my youngest son came to say goodbye," Hrga said, "before he was to fly on a plane to Toronto, I wouldn't walk him out to the gate. I just sat on that bench and watched him and his mother at the gate, she holding his face and crying. He probably thought I would get up and follow. But I didn't. Then I raised my hand to say goodbye. They both stood facing me, like they didn't understand. Finally he nodded and left."

"I know," the man managed to say. Every time he closed his eyes the familiar clouds of gas inflated in great rapidity and in acutely bright ugly colours, and with increasing intensity he felt the screaming

yellow and lurid oranges pressing on his retinas, his eye sockets, his brain.

He wanted to say more, but when he began to speak again his words devolved into gurgles.

Hrga thought he could still be rallied. He thought there were things they might still tell each other. He made some cold compresses out of old towels, and once they were applied the man started to breathe evenly and to fall into a kind of sleep.

Not long after, a group of under-trained, malnourished soldiers came through Hrga's gate and walked into the house without knocking, not expecting anything but breakfast and drink and a table to sit at. They saw the man and they took him away—after eating and drinking and washing up and cursing and re-lacing their boots. Hrga said they should take him to hospital. They said they would though he didn't deserve it. The young soldier seemed not quite conscious as they moved him out to their car. They were, variously, shifty-eyed and boisterous and decent and tired and out of their depth and in a perfect depth. Hrga watched them pull the man along, forces within them aligning or conflicting.

Hrga followed them outside the gate, and after watching them drive away, the back of the man's black-haired head visible through the back window, he stood looking, across the road, beyond the houses and their fields and orchards, in the direction of the forest, which was just visible from where he stood. The old man saw now that the fields and the forests were not really his, after all, no more than anything was anyone's, no more than his children, whom he'd also tended and lived alongside of, were his, not in the way that word, possessive pronoun, could be used to mean freedom to control. He loved them—or were they just a part of him, intensely familiar?—but that did not entitle him to anything. He went inside, to the kitchen, and took a side of bacon out of the cupboard. No one is entitled to anything or anyone, he said to himself, slicing his bacon into small squares. He placed the pieces one by one into an uneven-bottomed pan in which he always fried bacon and eggs. He lit a match to turn on the burner.

A quiet whoosh, before the restrained sizzle of the fat. No one, nothing, he said, as he moved to the fridge and carefully took out the three remaining eggs with his calloused, stiff hands. He lined them up next to the pan, the fat really lively now, shooting up, and cracked them one by one. Before the whites were cooked, he took the pan off the burner and put it on the table. The bread in the bread box was hard and he patted it down with water. He sat at the table and cut up the eggs into bite-sized pieces. The yolks spilled over and mixed with the whites and with the bacon fat, and all of it covered the bacon pieces. He tore off chunks of bread and threw them into the pan, then used his fork to pick up egg and fat and bacon on each piece of bread.

This was the way he'd eaten eggs for many years. Only this time his hand trembled slightly and occasionally he lost a piece from his fork. He stopped saying things out loud. He ate this way until he had sopped up everything, until he moved the last piece of hard bread in a circle around the little black pan, leaving nothing behind. Then he washed up—the table, the pan, his hands and face. He walked out to his shed, where the soldier's Kalashnikov was propped up. He picked it up. Then he closed his eyes, pictured the face of each of his children, from oldest to youngest. With a tired, stiff heart, he lifted his arm, managed to put the barrel to his temple, and pressed his finger to the trigger.

Three days later, three soldiers found him. The oldest among them had known Hrga since the start of the war, and although he was full-up with all of it too, and they were all tired and stiff, still he insisted that they carry the old man's body to the sofa in the living room, and there they laid him out, straightened the limbs, wrapped a shirt around what was left of his head. In the shed they cleaned up as best they could the human tissue clinging to the wood, the shovels, the old flower pots still filled with soil. They poured buckets of water on the blood stains. Only then did the two younger soldiers look through the old man's cupboards and find the side of smoked bacon wrapped in brown paper and the bottles of brandy underneath the sink, all of which they took with them. ☒