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The Traveler Meets Her Double in the Balkans

You claim you are my double, we were fated to meet at last!

Among rubies unglued from diadems and epaulettes torn off cashiered generals, in the museum, we meet by chance, talk, rush to board the same bus, sit side by side. You are glad to practice your French, interspersed with English and Russian. You are tall, hair reddish brown, high cheekbones, fine nose, yet a slight bump, which on my freckled nose my father attributed to our few drops of Turkish ancestry. I guess the Turks were up here too, time of the Ottoman empire . . . A blue scarf wound three times around your neck, like a French intellectual. My scarf, more turquoise, remains in my backpack.

As the bus swerves along mountain roads, you take my hands. You read my palms, decode my eyes, insist, “We are twins, fraternal, got lost from each other like Romulus and Remus—”

“I’ve barely arrived—But you may still have wolves in your forests . . .” And you may be one of them.

Yet our Slavic genealogies are indeed mirror images, our histories as if carved on one birch tree. We almost resemble each other. And I have studied your country, you have studied mine. A different world you inhabit now, your politics, beliefs, non-beliefs, are not mine. Still, you are hospitable, I am polite.

Flat tire! The bus halts by a river. I explore down a path. You scratch stanzas on the cold sickle of sand, in verses unravel our supposed futures together. I barely decipher your words before a wave cleans the palimpsest of sand.

Tire repaired, the driver resumes our journey. The bus swerves around curves; we cushion each other. Your warmth envelops me like mist. Throughout the corkscrew mountain drive, you argue ideologies. I disagree with your ideas: my forebearers suffered too much under such regimes. Yet every country has its myths and histories; as a guest in your land, I listen, nod, and doze.

The road dissolves in marigolds and mud. The bus stops by a church with onion domes, their gold in need of repainting. Passengers descend. You grab your backpack, help me adjust mine. We touch the dusk of chapel walls, troop inside. Two crones in black, like prunes, recite their toothless prayers. They collect my coins for tawny candles. I light mine from other candles stuck in sand on a small altar beneath the gold-framed icon of some hoary saint. Many other passengers also honor the swarthy martyrs and a smoky Madonna. She watches darkly while I bend to kiss the patchwork bones of boxed-in saints.

“Mere fairy tales with which to enslave the population,” you say loudly, to be heard by the other visitors and the bus driver eating his dark bread.

Then, driver and the other passengers gone outside, your basso chants the familiar mass in Old Slavonic! In this officially godless land! Your chanting lifts me through high onion domes—I am crying into the slit of sky. My tears become sparrows in the eaves.

I am surprised by your devoutness in this officially godless country, wonder why the bus has brought us here, question why you take the risk,. “My grandfather in his later years became a monk.” You hint of a childhood of dangerous religion, forbidden nobility in your family tree, as in mine.

Outside the church again, I shiver with unexpected cold. The priest hands me a pomegranate, a nun pours us fire in gold-rimmed thimble glasses. She asks if we are related, and

you nod. She tucks one glass in my purse, signs the cross over us.

Outside the church, the world smells rosemary. We cross the cobblestones to a café under grapevines. The wine is red, bread brown, stuffed peppers red and green, lamb chops grilled black on the open fire.

You write a poem on a napkin:

In this land with its layers of riddles and myths,

beware the traitor beside you,

believe in the blind, trust the fool.

“What do you know of death?” you ask.

“My brushes with death?” I think of three minor encounters. “Undertow greedy off Rio, camouflaged amanitas, a typhoon somersaulted my plane over Manila. Nothing spectacular. I survived. Camus claimed you can’t cherish life till you face your death. *You* surely risked death in this land of invasions, militia, guerrillas, famine, TB? A handsome child-partisan you must have been!”

“I? No . . . See that mutt in the dust? His tail forms a question mark. Let me throw him your lamb-chop bone. Here, we are grateful for all foreign aid.”

The pomegranate does not want to be cut. Your hands are strong, nails sharp. Someday I will try to recall the sound of your fingers splitting pomegranate rind. You tear it apart like a wound. Pomegranate juice blackens my Swiss Army knife, the knife blackens the magenta flesh over battalions of seeds, the fruit squirts violet blood in my eyes.

“Storm clouds over the Balkans.” I examine the graying sky. “No cliché or myth after all. You promised me your story—”

“My myth? Okay,” you say. “Evening falling, storm coming, I will oblige. I served in our army, of course. Confined to barracks, we all bitched. I took leave. Clandestine. ‘You’ll get shot,’ my friends warned. ‘Go to hell,’ I said, and returned from town bearing shashlik and wine. The fragrance of roast lamb, like ours now. While figuring how to slip in past the guard, I took a piss. Electrified wire was strung on my path. I might have died, but that flash lighted my way to the barracks. My brush with the Eternal was banal, obscene, and caused the death of another: the guard was electrocuted . . . How empty this bottle! Waiter, more wine?”

“First let me finish my glass . . . Tell me more—”

“You, darling girl, wish to collect one more heroic epic? Here, to face life is heroic enough, to stay alive, avoid incidents, the epic . . . Waiter! Another carafe to warm us!”

The waiter warns the café will close soon. “Cognac?” he inquires.

“Plum brandy?” you ask me. “Turkish coffee? Baklava? No? My cousin owns that blue house across the square. He’s away this week, left keys beneath the third flowerpot. Come along—we will be safe from the storm for the night.”

“Can’t—my bus leaves in two minutes.”

“Another ride through our mountains? Then don’t be late for your next brush with death. We will meet in the capital, or the hereafter.”

You kiss my hand, then grab and embrace me, whisper: “Freedom a folk tale here.”

“I have studied your history,” I shiver. “I read papers, books . . .” I don’t even know your name, proffer a tatter of napkin, my pen. “Please write down your name and address for me.”

You toss the napkin aside, pocket the pen, scribble on the wind. “*This*, sweet girl, is my name, my address—”

You pull me closer for one long kiss. My bus stops. I give you the rest of the pomegranate. As I climb the bus steps, two guards seize my arms, warn: “That man— danger!”

Other men chase after you through the square—

The driver jolts me aboard, speeds into the storm.

You filter away through the crowd.

Bony footprints in the snow, frozen drops of noble blood, all disappear in storm that covers your black earth.

The next day’s newspaper reports: *A man without a name is dead. Smudged passport shows no origin. His pockets bulged with poems in tongues no one can decipher. Blood level: high. Ironic smile. Cause of death still undetermined. The “bloodstains” turned out to be pomegranate juice. No witnesses have come forth. Unless his kin are located, the morgue must file a blank report.*

Through life I carry you inside as if the fetus of a royal child engendered by a demi-god disguised as a wolf.

And as in old Slavic fairytales, every New Year’s morning you step from my looking glass, blow a kiss, then disappear.