

## Of Straws That Break Camels' Backs

On the Croatian wharf this official owned me. His straining police wolves owned me. His handgun owned me. His colleagues 'played chess' with us because they could on this narrow pier kingdom that they ruled.

"You. Against that wall. Yes, now." None of us could rise above the level of pawn as they separated us from luggage carefully packed in an Italian world that I might have merely dreamt I'd left the night before. The wolves nosed cases for explosives, drugs, something to do. I felt a frightened mental hamster board its wheel and I wondered what were the Croatian words for 'checkmate'. For 'cellmate'. Checkmate. Cellmate. Somewhere, a straw fell. An impossibly tall, implausibly bouffant border guard pulled me out of that game, into hers, to question me.

"Why do you visit Croatia during war?" Why, indeed. A thing to do. Because Hemingway's, Burton's, Theroux's exploits had littered my skewed teenaged reading, and a long-unseen brother had business in nearby Bosnia so this was where I had to go to be with him, damn his eyes.

"Vacation."

"O.K. Next. Why do you visit Croatia during war....?"

On the corkscrew road to Makarska the bus driver fell in love with first gear. We longed for him to explore the gearbox above that. Increased engine revolutions synchronized with our strained hopes. Small pleasures. Parked military convoys played havoc with our speed and optimism as we slalomed our way to the Bosnia border.

"Pass all passports forward." Goodbye treasured identity papers. Goodbye armed Bosnian border man carrying said identity papers to who the hell knows where. Goodbye will to live, future possible parenting of children behind white picket fences, years of curmudgeonly old age. The mental hamster had stirred, again. I kicked its cage shut as the passports came back.

But the second straw had already fallen. Outside the pilgrim village of Medjugorje ugliness stood up. This building shelled. That dwelling burnt. On a third structure uncountable bullet holes around window frames pointed to where someone had shown their face for too long.

On a nearby curve was an apartment that had defied all odds and crested the hill unmarked. Perfect. If you didn't mind the drunk, swaying soldier in front of it scratching his chest through an open tunic while eyeballing our vehicle. I turned away as he raised his AK47. To not watch the bullets arriving to end us. When I did turn back he was moving along the street with a bottle, working out his trauma. A third straw.

Michael, the taxi driver parked by the bus stop to meet arriving coaches, let me save 'Jesus' from his car boot. A qualified civil engineer like Michael had, it could be said, no business driving a taxi. Except when all of the 'engineering' and most of the 'civil' had gone from his life. I was his business, now, and out of gratitude he let me help myself to a sample from his pebble tribe of hand-painted icons he tried to sell to tourists for cash. Picasso's flair had eluded him but the effort exhibited an enthusiasm usually found anchored in pre-schoolers and zealots of every persuasion.

"This is a good 'Jesus'. See, sad eyes." Not just Jesus, Michael. Ljubica's greeting had the same pathos seen in Michael. Business was slow. The thanks real. Especially as her 'b and b' might now only be a 'b'. The other 'b'?

" Let's see in the morning. If God has been paying attention there might be some bread, coffee, possibly an abandoned jar of Marmite." Ah, droll. Was it too soon to hug her as the evening closed out a day of unbidden stress?

And then it happened. The straw that broke the back of a camel that had travelled, uninvited, unseen, with me, to Bosnia. At around two in the morning, repeated sprays of machine-gun fire outside the residence burned whatever tranquillity I'd found. What an unacceptable noise a machine-gun makes. May I die to a rhythm rather than a beat. May I not die with a tragicomic Messiah balled up in a sweaty fistful of sandstone lifted to scramble the brain of the first person through the door.

Then silence returned. I have rarely trusted a sound less. Later, the given reason for the burst of mayhem was "young men testing their weapons in a quarry before driving to The Front" to shred more than quartz. Or "young men celebrating getting married" to women who would later watch them test their weapons in a quarry before going off to ruin each other's lives and die to a beat not a rhythm.

In later years I found myself in other trouble spots. But I never counted straws the way I first counted them in Bosnia.