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A marvel and a delight.”

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WHERE

YOU

COME

FROM

Original title: *Herkunft*, by Saša Stanišić

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WHERE
YOU
COME
FROM

SAŠA STANIŠIĆ

TRANSLATED BY DAMION SEARLS



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

GRANDMOTHER AND THE GIRL

Grandmother saw a girl on the street. Don't be scared, she shouted from the balcony to the girl, I'll come get you. Don't move!

Grandmother goes down the three flights of stairs in her stocking feet, and it takes time, it takes time, her knee, her lungs, her hip, and when she gets to where the girl had been standing the girl is gone. She shouts, she calls for the girl.

Cars slam on the brakes and swerve around my grandmother in her thin black stockings on the street that once bore the name of Josip Broz Tito and today bears the name of the vanished girl as an echo, Kristina! my grandmother shouts, shouting her own name: Kristina!

It is March 7, 2018, in Višegrad, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Grandmother is eighty-seven years old and eleven years old.

TO THE ALIEN REGISTRATION OFFICE

I was born on March 7, 1978, in Višegrad, on the Drina River. It had been raining uninterruptedly for days. March in Višegrad is the most hated month, as drippy as it is dangerous. The snow melts in the mountains, the rivers rise up over the heads of the riverbanks. My Drina is nervous too. Half the city lies underwater.

March of 1978 was no exception. As Mother's contractions started, a mighty storm bellowed over the city. The wind shook the windows of the delivery room and discombobulated feelings; in the middle of one contraction, lightning flashed too, so that everyone thought, Aha, I see, that's how it is, the Devil is being born. Which was fine with me—it's not a bad thing for people to be a little scared of you before it all really gets going.

It's just that this didn't exactly give my mother a positive feeling with respect to the birth process, and since the midwife was likewise dissatisfied with the situation at hand—keyword: "complications"—she sent for the attending physician. As for the doctor, she didn't want to drag out the story unnecessarily any more than I do now. Perhaps it suffices to say that the complications were simplified with the help of a suction cup.

Thirty years later, in March 2008, I was applying for German citizenship and had to submit at the Alien Registration Office a handwritten chronology of my life, among other

things. Nightmare! On my first try all I managed to put down on paper was that I was born on March 7, 1978. It seemed like nothing had happened since then, like my biography had simply been washed away by the Drina.

Germans love bulleted lists. So I put in some bullet points along with some names and dates—“Elementary school in Višegrad”; “Slavic Studies major in Heidelberg”—even though none of it felt like it had anything to do with me anymore. I knew the information was correct but I couldn’t possibly leave it at that. I would never trust that kind of life.

I started over. I wrote my date of birth again and described the rain and how my grandmother Kristina, my father’s mother, gave me my name. She took care of me a lot in my early years too, since my parents were studying (Mother) or employed (Father). She was in the Mafia, I wrote to the Alien Registration Office, and if you’re in the Mafia you have a lot of time for children. I lived with her and Grandpa, and with my parents on weekends.

I wrote to the Alien Registration Office: My grandfather Pero was a Communist, heart and soul and Party book, and he took me with him on walks with his comrades. When they talked about politics, and actually they were always talking about politics, I dropped right off to sleep, it was great. By age four I could join in.

I erased the part about the Mafia. You never know.

Instead, I wrote: My grandmother owned a rolling pin and constantly threatened to beat me with it. It never came to that, but to this day I have a rather aversive relationship to rolling pins and, indirectly, to pasta.

I wrote: Grandma had a gold tooth.

I wrote: I wanted a gold tooth too, so I colored in one of my incisors with a yellow marker.

I wrote to the Alien Registration Office: Religion: None. And that I'd grown up among, more or less, heathens. That Grandpa Pero called the Church the greatest Original Sin since the Church invented sin.

He was from a village that honored Saint George, George the Dragon Slayer. Or maybe people were really more on the dragon's side, at least that's how it seemed to me at the time. I was visited by dragons from an early age. They dangled from relatives' necks as pendants; embroidery with dragon motifs was a favorite gift; Grandfather had an uncle who carved little wax dragons and sold them in the market as candles. That was nice, when you lit the wick and the little critter looked like it was breathing miniature fire.

When I was almost old enough, Grandfather showed me a picture book. I thought the dragons from the Far East were the best. They looked ferocious, but fun and colorful too. Slavic dragons looked ferocious only. Even the ones that were supposed to be nice, uninterested in laying waste to villages or abducting virgins. Three heads, giant fangs, that sort of thing.

I wrote to the Alien Registration Office: The hospital where I was born doesn't exist anymore. God, the amount of penicillin I had pumped into my ass there! I wrote, but I didn't keep that. One mustn't offend potentially namby-pamby bureaucrats' feelings with such vocabulary, now. So I changed "ass" to "posterior." But that seemed wrong to me, and I deleted the whole fact.

When I turned ten, the birthday present I got from the Rzav River was the destruction of the bridge in our neighborhood,

the Mahala. I watched from the shore as this branch of the Drina pestered the bridge with spring in the mountains for so long that finally the bridge said, Fine, take me with you.

I wrote: There's no such thing as a biographical narrative without childhood leisure activities. I wrote in the middle of the page, in capital letters:

SLEDDING

The expert course started up near the highest peak in town, where a tower had watched over the valley in the Middle Ages, and ended after a tight curve right before the ravine. I remember Huso. Huso used to clamber up the hill with an old toboggan, out of breath, laughing, and we too, the children, laughed—laughed at him for being scrawny and having holes in his boots and gaps in his teeth. A crazy man, I thought at the time; today I think he just lived his life without paying attention to the consensus about things like where to sleep, how to dress, how to pronounce words clearly, and the condition your teeth were supposed to find themselves in. He just went about his business differently from most people. Strictly speaking, Huso was nothing but an unemployed drunk who didn't brake before the ravine. Maybe because we hadn't warned him about the last curve. Maybe because he'd drunk his reflexes into oblivion. Huso screamed, we ran over, and then it was a scream of joy: Huso was sitting in his toboggan, which was caught in the underbrush halfway down the slope.

“Keep going, Huso!” we shouted. “Don't stop now!” Fired up by our cries, and especially by the fact that it was easier from

where he was to go down than up, Huso heaved himself out of the thicket and hurtled down the rest of the slope. It was unbelievable, we were over the moon, and Huso was shot in 1992, in his shack on the Drina, in his house of planks and cardboard, not far from the watchtower where—as the old epics sing of—either the Serbian hero Prince Marko found refuge from the Ottomans or, depending who you ask, the Bosnian hero Alija Đerzelez leapt across the Drina on his winged Arabian mare. Again Huso survived; he disappeared and didn't come back. No one ever conquered the expert course as expertly as he had.

I wrote out a story beginning: *When anyone asks what "Heimat" means to me—home, homeland, native country—I tell them the story of Dr. Heimat, DDS, the father of my first amalgam filling.*

I wrote to the Alien Registration Office: I'm a Yugoslavian and yet I've never stolen a thing in Germany, except a few books during the Frankfurt Book Fair. And one time in Heidelberg I rowed a canoe into a swimmers-only bathing area. I erased both of those, since they might be criminal offenses and still within the statute of limitations.

I wrote: *Here's a number of things I had.*

SOCCER, ME, AND WAR, 1991

Here's a number of things I had:

Mother, Father.

Grandmother Kristina, my father's mother, who always knew what I needed. When she brought me that little hand-knit jacket, I'd actually been cold. I didn't want to admit it, that's all. What kid wants his grandmother to always be right?

Granny Mejrema, my mother's mother, who told my fortune from kidney beans. She would throw the beans and the beans would throw pictures of a not-yet-lived life onto the carpet. One time, she prophesied that an older woman would fall in love with me. Either that or I'd lose all my teeth, the kidney beans were somewhat ambiguous on that count.

A fear of kidney beans.

I had a well-shaved grandfather, my mother's father, who liked to go fishing and was nice to everybody.

I had Yugoslavia—but not for long. Socialism was tired, nationalism was wide awake. Flags, each their own, in the wind, and the question in people's heads: What are you?

Interesting feelings toward my English teacher.

My English teacher invited me over to her house once. To this day I don't know why. Off I went, as excited as the birth of spring. We ate homemade English-teacher-cake and drank black tea. It was the first black tea of my life. I felt mind-bogglingly

grown-up but acted as though I'd been drinking black tea for years, and even came out with the sophisticated comment: "I like it best when it's not totally black."

I had a Commodore 64. My favorite games were the sports ones: *Summer Games*, *International Karate Plus*, *International Football*.

A mountain of books. In 1991, I'd discovered a new genre: *Choose Your Own Adventure*. You as the reader decide for yourself how the story continues:

If you shout, "Out of my way, spawn of Hell, or I'll slice your jugular open!" turn to page 313.

And I had my team: Crvena Zvezda, Red Star Belgrade. In the late eighties we won the championship three times in five years. In 1991, we were in the quarterfinals of the European Cup against Dynamo Dresden. A hundred thousand people came together in our Belgrade stadium, Marakana, for important games. At least fifty thousand of them were insane. Something was always set on fire, everyone always sang.

I often wore my red-and-white-striped scarf to school (and in the summer too) and made plans for the future designed to bring me into the vicinity of the team. The path of becoming a soccer player myself and being bought by Red Star for 100,000,000,000,000 dinars (inflation) struck me as unlikely. That meant I wanted to become a physical therapist, or a ball boy, or a soccer ball for all I cared, as long as I could be part of Red Star.

I didn't miss a single game on the radio or the highlights on TV. For my thirteenth birthday, I wanted a season ticket.

Granny asked the beans and said, “You’ll get a bicycle.”

There was no realistic chance of my wish being granted, if only because Belgrade was a cool one hundred and sixty miles away. The only child in me nevertheless speculated that my parents might decide to move to the capital for my sake.

On March 6, Red Star crushed Dynamo Dresden in the first game, 3–0. Father and I watched the game on TV, our voices already hoarse after the first goal. After the closing whistle, he pulled me aside and said he’d try to get us tickets for the semifinal, if the team qualified. By “us” he meant Mother too, but she just tapped her forehead with her finger.

The second game, in Dresden, was called off due to rioting when the score was 2–1 and ended up counting as a 3–0 victory for us. The semifinal draw was Bayern Munich. Even back then theoretically unbeatable. Again Father and I followed the first game on TV together. During halftime, there were reports of unrest in Slovenia and Croatia. Shots had been fired. Red Star shot too and scored two goals, Bayern one.

Here’s how it is: The country where I was born no longer exists. For as long as the country still existed, I thought of myself as Yugoslavian. Like my parents, who were from Serbian-Orthodox (Father) and Bosnian-Muslim (Mother) families. I was the child of a multiethnic state, the fruit and avowal of two people who were drawn to each other and whom the Yugoslavian melting pot had liberated from the constraints of different origins and religions.

It must be added that someone whose father was Polish and mother was Macedonian could declare themselves Yugoslavian too, assuming they cared more about self-determination and blood type than blood and being defined by others.

On April 24, 1991, Father and I went to see the second game in Belgrade. I hung my red-and-white scarf out the window because that's what real fans did on TV. Once we got to the stadium, the scarf was unbelievably filthy. Nobody tells you that'll happen.

On June 27, 1991, the first acts of war took place in Slovenia. The Alpine republic declared itself independent from Yugoslavia. Next came skirmishes in Croatia, atrocities in Croatia, and the Croatian declaration of independence.

On April 24, 1991, the Serbian defender Siniša Mihajlović put Red Star in the lead with a goal off a free kick. It had been awarded for a foul on Dejan Savićević, a technical genius from Montenegro. The roar from eighty thousand throats was deafening, almost monstrous. Today I could say that people were letting off anger, suppressed aggression, deadly fear. But that wouldn't be true. Those feelings were to be discharged later, faced with guns, and from guns. Here there was only one thing: cheering for an important goal.

Torches were lit, red smoke rose up over the stands. I pulled my scarf up over my face. People all around us were cheering, almost all men, young guys. Mullets, cigarettes, fists.

In the midfield, Prosinečki was still causing all sorts of trouble for Bayern, his bright blond shock of hair like a little sun rising over the pitch or—when an opponent didn't know what else to do—setting. A Yugoslavian like me: Serbian mother, Croatian father. Short shorts riding high up his legs. His pale legs.

In the back, Refik Šabanadžović was cutting off Bayern's space: a harrasing Bosnian, stocky but fast. My favorite player—Darko Pančev, known as Cobra—was lumbering around in front of the opponents' penalty area, seemingly half-asleep. The

Macedonian forward, goal scorer in the first game, kept running across the pitch bent forward, shoulders pulled up, as though he weren't feeling well, today of all days. The crookedest legs in the universe. I would have loved to have legs like those.

What a team! There'll never be another one like it in the Balkans, it's not possible. After the collapse of Yugoslavia, new leagues were created in each new country, with weaker teams, and nowadays the best players are traded abroad at a young age.

Bayern tied the match in the middle of the second half on an Augenthaler free kick, the ball rolling right through Stojanović's fingers. Belodedić, the Romanian (Serbian minority) center back, comforted his captain lying on the grass.

My father, this rarely loud man, bellowed and cursed and swore, and I imitated it, imitated Father's anger. I have no idea what my own anger was doing, maybe I didn't have any because everyone around me had so much, or maybe I knew everything would turn out all right. And just when I was about to tell Father that—everything will be fine—Bayern took the lead.

Father crumpled.

Almost exactly one year later he asked me, circumspectly, what objects were important enough to me that I couldn't live without them on a possibly long trip. And by a long trip he meant fleeing our occupied hometown, where drunken soldiers were singing their songs as though cheering for a team. The first object I thought of was my red-and-white scarf. I knew there were more important things. But I took it anyway.

Father said: "Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

If it had stayed 2–1, there would have been extra time since we'd won the first game. Maybe Bayern would have had the

stronger legs and better ideas, enough to make it into the finals. And maybe then absolutely everything would have turned out differently—war wouldn't have come to Bosnia, nor I to this book.

I didn't see it become 2–2. At that moment, in the nintieth minute, everyone was standing, the whole stadium was on its feet—in fact maybe the whole country was standing as one, standing behind something together, for the last time. I could see the winning attack up until the moment the ball, deflected by Augenthaler, started its journey toward the goal, but then the men in front of us, next to us, moved, the whole stands moved, to the right, upward, I was pushed, and for a second I lost my balance and sight of the ball . . .

How many times have I watched a replay of that goal? Definitely a hundred. It is burned into my memory down to the smallest detail, like only those moments linked to great love or great misfortune. Augenthaler was trying to defend the flank, his foot hit the ball at an unlucky angle, and it looped up and into his own goal.

Here's a number of things I had:

A childhood in a small town on the Drina.

A collection of reflectors unscrewed from cars' license plates. The only time my parents ever hit me was because of that.

A grandmother who had mastered the language of kidney beans and advised me to work with words, for the rest of my life, and if I did, then admittedly not everything would work out but some things would turn out better. Or else work with precious metals. The beans hadn't made a final determination between these two options.

I had two parakeets, Krele (light blue) and Fifica (don't remember).

A hamster named Indiana Jones, to whom, in the final days of its much too short life, I gave an Andol headache pill ground into a little spoonful of powder (that's what I took for headaches myself) and read Ivo Andrić's short stories aloud.

Frequent headaches.

An improbable trip with my father to an improbable game played by an improbable team, who after making it through the semifinal in Belgrade would go on to win the tournament and thereafter become completely unthinkable.

An unthinkable war.

An English teacher I never said goodbye to, and will never see again.

A red-and-white scarf that I refused to wash after the match in Belgrade, but then it ended up in the washing machine anyway. Today, Red Star Belgrade is a team with a lot of aggressive far-right fans. Back then, I took the scarf with me to Germany, and I don't know where it is today.

OSKORUŠA, 2009

To the east, not far from Višegrad, there is a village in the mountains, hard to reach at the best of times and absolutely impossible to reach in inhospitable weather, where only thirteen people still live. I don't think those thirteen people have ever felt out of place there. They didn't come from anywhere else and they've spent most of their lives in that village.

Equally certain is that these thirteen will never leave. They will be the last. Up in that village (or in a hospital in the valley) they will end their days and with them their farmsteads—their children won't take them over—their happiness, and their creaking hip joints. Their schnapps, which blinds the sighted and makes the blind see again, will be all drunk up, or maybe not; soon no more will be distilled here (a wooden cross in the bottle). The fences will no longer separate anything that has meaning, the fields will lie fallow. The pigs will be sold or slaughtered. I don't know what'll happen to the horses. It'll be an end to the leek plants and the corn and the blackberries. Though the blackberries might make a go of it alone.

I was here for the first time in 2009. I remember that when I saw the power lines I stupidly wondered out loud whether the electricity would be turned off after the last person here died. How long would the current still hum between the poles?

Gavrilo, one of the oldest men in the village, spit a juicy glob into the juicy grass and shouted, “What’s wrong with you?! Almost the second you get here you’re talking about dying. Let me tell you something. We’ve survived *life* here, death’s not the problem. As long as you tend to our graves, maybe put some flowers on ’em and talk to us every now and then, things will continue here. With or without electricity. But no one needs to put any flowers on me, what’m I supposed to do dead with some flowers? So. Off we go, open your eyes, I’m going to show you a few things, you clearly have no idea about anything.”

Oskoruša, the village was called. The old man had come to get us on the side of the road, with hands that looked as if baked from clay. I say “us” because I wasn’t alone. The trip was my grandmother Kristina’s idea.

Stevo was there too—he’d driven us. A somber man with incredibly blue eyes, two daughters, and money troubles.

Grandmother was wearing black, unimpressed by the day-time sun. She talked a lot, remembered much. In retrospect, it seems like she had an inkling that her past would soon be slipping away from her. She was showing Oskoruša to herself once more, and to me for the first time.

Grandmother had her last good year in 2009. She hadn’t started forgetting yet, and her body did what she wanted it to. In Oskoruša she walked up and down the roads she’d walked half a century before as a young woman with her husband. My grandfather Pero had been born here and spent his childhood in these mountains. He died in 1986, in Višegrad, in front of the TV, while I was in the next bedroom shooting at plastic cowboys with plastic Indians.

Earlier, when I was ten or five or seven, Grandmother had said that I would never lie and deceive, only exaggerate and make things up constantly. I probably didn't know the difference back then (and even today I don't always), but I liked that she seemed to trust me.

The morning before our trip to Oskoruša, she repeated that she'd always known: "Exaggerating and making things up—that's what you make your living from now."

I had just arrived in Višegrad and wanted to relax after a long reading tour for my first novel. I had a copy of it with me, as a gift, but it was in German, which made no sense.

Is the book about us, Grandmother asked.

And I was off: Fiction, as I see it, I said, creates its own world, it doesn't portray ours, and the one in here, I said, slapping the book's cover, is a world where rivers speak and great-grandparents live forever. Fiction, in my view, I said, is an open system of invention, perception, and memory that rubs up against real events . . .

"Rubs?" Grandma interrupted, coughing, and she heaved a giant pot of stuffed peppers onto the stove. "Sit down, you're hungry." She draped the book on a vase like a museum piece on a pedestal.

And then came the line about how I made my living.

The stuffed peppers smelled like a snowy day in the winter of 1984. The Winter Olympics were happening in Sarajevo and on my sled I was pretending to be an athlete like our Slovenian heroes racing down the mountain in their splendidly tight-fitting, crazily colored suits. I won every race (by going down only when there was no one behind me who might catch up).