

## July 1991

It must have been around three in the morning, we were going to get there before dawn. Behind the wheel, eyelids creased with exhaustion, James was focused on the road and I smoked with passion as though my life depended on each particle of ash.

- I'm going to marry her.
- Seriously?

The tires hit a rock and sent it waltzing off to the side of the road.

He was a tad jealous of my bond with Alin.

James had stopped talking, and I needed to talk.

- Perhaps the reason I came to Iraq was to meet her.
- How mystical of you!
- I'm not usually like that.
- Do you believe in destiny?
- I don't believe the future's written, but I don't think we know how to interpret it either.

If our car broke down, we'd simply take it as fate. A mechanic would have had the foresight. He wouldn't have taken the car, he'd have passed on this terrible option. And we shouldn't have gone down that road. The stringless puppet made the worst decision of his life.

- What are these lights over there?
- Don't know.

James slowed down and turned off the headlights. We drove slower and slower as a military convoy materialised in the distance. We stopped, hidden behind a large rock, and cut the engine off, waiting for the convoy to disappear down the road below.

Then we started back up.

- D'you fuck her?
- No, you're crazy.
- Her brothers are going to cut your balls off.
- She doesn't have any brothers.
- You're going to find yourself in deep shit.

I lit up yet another cigarette. He took a sip of water.

- You're going to marry her without knowing if she's good in bed?

I looked up at the blood moon, our faithful travel companion. I fantasised about Alîn visiting France, meeting my father. I saw us walk through the streets of Paris. Perhaps she loves the Eiffel tower. Perhaps she loves my neighbourhood and its shopkeepers hailing from all around the world. Then we go back to hers. Presents in tow for her mother and grandfather. We get married in the ruins of Halabja. The men raise their weapons to the universe.

- You didn't fuck her?

The bullet went through the windshield and into my right lung. The shock made me lose consciousness. I felt the car skid when James screamed. And then nothing.

Nothing but darkness swallowing me whole, dissolving my daydream into a cloud of ashes, scattered around a huge ashtray made of lead. My nicotine-laden lungs spitting out everything I inhaled the last few years, filling up the entire car. I thought I was dead.

A flash. The face of a woman in fatigues. A length of blue tarp. I can't understand a word she says with her Texan accent. She utters a few sentences. I grasp a few words. Turkey. American Hospital.

Another flash. My body being tossed around on a stretcher. The thick sound of a helicopter taking off, the intense heat as I fall back asleep.

Isabelle's going to kill me, I didn't make it back in time.

James was driving the Dodge with one hand. The red moon was blinding.

- Did you fuck her?

We made love like young, smitten lovers.

The bullet came from far away. From a hill in the night. It drilled clean through the window in front of me and continued its journey into my torso. It opened and tore through my flesh and violently embedded itself into the headrest.

Another flash of pain, windows, the oddly deformed head of a man in white, casting a look of disdain over me.

I want water. My lips feel dry. So dry. Like the crackled ground of an arid valley.

Welcome on board Swiss Air. Please fasten your seatbelt. Straps holding me back.

I don't want to wake up. The pain is too much. I'd rather sleep in this pain, than live it.

- Did you fuck her?
- Stop asking me this!

The bullet came from the depths of the universe. I waited for it one more time. It went through the windshield, it didn't miss me, and it didn't kill me.

A flash. A hospital room, my father's face. On the radio, or in my head, Bob Dylan sings, *how many roads must a man walk down?*

How many times can a projectile zoom through darkness to hit me? Is this real?

I get back into the car. I grab hold of Alin's hand, discreetly. The night is falling. The red moon spins high up in the sky like a steel pinball. James asks me if I've fucked her, if I haven't fucked her, and the bullet tears through me. I get back into the Dodge, one more time. I glance at Alin, she's crying. The moon is at its zenith, I know James is going to ask me again, and I know it's going to hurt.

My father examines me. He's sad. He asks if I can hear him. I close my eyes.

## Spring 1992

The phone rang on the eve of Easter. My father was in the garage sorting his bolts and screws. I walked across the darkness of the living room with the shutters still down.

- Hello?
- Hey buddy.
- James, how are you? Are we finally getting around to that dinner?

A silence followed, which reminded me of the turmoil of an ocean at night.

- I have some bad news.

The pain in my wound was reignited, and a tepid vertigo obscured my vision.

- I went to Kurdistan.

I sat down, clutching the varnished pedestal table my mother loved so much. I counted to sixteen, in my head, before moving on.

- Did you see her?
- No.

Perhaps that was the bad news. Perhaps he hadn't been able to find Alîn. I'd ask him to return to Halabja. To look for her again. To tell her about me.

- Where are you ?
- At the Turkish border. Things are getting really dicey here. They've put a price on the heads of Westerners, and a journalist was killed.

He stopped there. I didn't dare ask anything else. We just drifted on the waves of silence. I heard my father come in and remove his dirty shoes. He made his way to the kitchen, he didn't see me there, folded over with my head down on the varnished table.

- What happened?

A crackling sound rang out of the receiver.

- James?
- She's dead.

I swallowed a huge gulp of air. It sounded repulsive, like a bathtub, draining. I saw Alîn's smile, just for a moment.

- Are you joking?

He retorted almost angrily that no one should joke about these things.

- Why didn't you call sooner?
- Well, I had to stay in Yugoslavia for a while. Then I went back to Vermont for Christmas. I'm sorry. I didn't have time to get there sooner.

- When did she die?
- I don't know.
- How did she die?
- I don't know. An accident, I think. I didn't really ask.

I stayed silent as he talked about Halabja, old Saadi who was ill; and her mother who didn't want to talk to him, and Kesra who wanted to leave the country and the Kurds on the verge of a fratricidal war. He said I should try to forget, that it would be better for me, and that he'd come to visit me in France. He said we'd go on another trip together, but in South America this time. He suggested calling back later, he didn't want to keep me, that I needed to rest and think about all this. He said he didn't know how to mourn because all four of his grand-parents were still alive. He said good bye buddy, and tried to sound joyful. And still I said nothing. I stayed with my forehead against the table, unable to focus my thoughts. Alin slowly crumbled, and pieces of her gravitated around me.

My father walked by and asked what I was doing, but I didn't answer, so he apologised for bothering me. I hung up the phone without looking up. The church bells rang two. I went to pee and I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I saw the quasi blank stare of someone I didn't recognise looking back at me. I put on my boots and I opened the heavy door. My father, with his usual restraint, wanted to know where I was going. He asked me to get him some cigarettes if I was heading to the village. I walked down the path above the house. I reached the top and entered the woods. I listened to the crunching sound of my feet over fallen branches. I smelled the aroma of spring coming from the humus, teeming with millions of insects, and the noise became deafening. And my eardrums threatened to burst. My entire being curled up and collapsed on a bed of dry leaves. And then, a heavy emptiness. Life had vanished from all things and a black moon rose in the daylight, spreading its shadow across the dreary plains and the roads, now deserted, with no one having any reason to go anywhere anymore. I slept in the middle of the forest. I slept among the oak trees, with their roots a thousand years old. I slept, hoping that my entire life had been a nightmare and I was finally waking up. Becoming a child. Opening the curtains on a Sunday morning. Looking out into my parents' garden. Hopping back under the sheets. Grabbing a comic book about *The Phantom, the ghost who walks*. And starting my life anew.

I went into the storeroom and grabbed the cardboard box where my father stored my equipment. There were traces of dried blood on my bag and it smelled of old fish. I sat down on my bed. I

rewound the photos still in the camera and locked myself into the bathroom with a developing tank and a thermometer. I turned off the light. I loaded the film onto the reel, meticulously. I poured developer into the tank and gently agitated to distribute it evenly. Once the silver grains set, I turned the light back on and I unfurled the film to let it dry. Each section revealed a negative image. On one of the last pictures: a portrait of Alîn. Behind her, the willowy outline of perfectly white trees formed an arch. Alîn's hand was resting on a low wall of heavy stones. It almost looked like she could be staring at me, but her eyes were focused on something else in the distance, behind me.

Perhaps it was the road I was to take a few hours later.

Perhaps it was the disapproving look of her grandfather, who realised what was going on between us.

Perhaps it was Kesra, trying to make her smile.

Perhaps it wasn't anything, just the emptiness of her grief, cackling indecently from within her belly, churning it into a danse of death.

The negative, which had reversed the values, still held onto the secret of her eyes. My father knocked on the door. He wanted to use the toilets.

That night, we ate carrots from the garden and a piece of steak. We listened to the radio. They were talking about the siege of Sarajevo organised by general Mladić and – at length – about the opening of the Disney park.

## Novembre 1992

I would defy death where it stood.

I would dive in with all my soul.

I would swim in the troubled waters of my time.

I would become the storyteller of the horrors of our world.

Sarajevo had been under siege by the army of the Republika Srpska for the last seven months. I shot up in its arteries and waited for it to start raining bullets.

I made love in a partially destroyed hotel room with Joe, who was on her first assignment.

We met hiding behind a burnt out bus speckled with gunshot holes. She was wearing a pair of mustard yellow trousers that didn't fit and a huge jacket that a peacekeeper had given her to shield her from the bitter cold. I said hello, she said hello back, as if it had been a normal day. She laughed at one of my jokes and I remember loving her laugh. She looked like a little piece of life amongst the terror.

Joe tensed up when she saw a panicked housewife bolt into the street as if she'd thrown herself into a rushing river. The woman wasn't really running. She moved her legs as fast as she could but her bags weighed her down. The bullet went through her spine and she collapsed in a quiet moan. She was probably dead before she hit the mud. A man rushed over to help and Joe threw her arms up around my neck. I held her tight, as tight as I could with my left hand, and I raised my F3 with my right hand. A second bullet hit the rescuer in the leg as I pulled the trigger. He dropped his umbrella.

- Take me with you.

- Where?

She answered, crying something into my ear that I didn't manage to translate. She had the slightest Southern accent that clashed with the snowflakes sticking to her hair.

We walked slowly, listening to our footsteps cracking along the frozen path. I was thinking about the sniper, hiding on the tenth floor, and the frog print umbrella, now discarded in the mire. In a room with windows blocked by mattresses, I slowly started to undress Joe. It was too cold to get naked. We huddled together and tried to forget about the shells exploding over the city. I thought this could be a beautiful way to die. A death, to forget. I decided not to die when I thought of the grief my father would feel. But I wanted to die again when I remembered Alfn. Joe pressed her lips against mine and her tongue in my mouth tasted like metal. She was

twenty-four years old. I told her she was beautiful, and she said she thought she didn't look that good.

- What don't you like about yourself?
- Everything, except my breast.

I found that funny, because she was the type of girl who men were attracted to. She asked me if I'd rather sleep.

- I'd rather sleep, but I won't be able to.

She slipped her trousers down to her ankles and brought my hand into her knickers. That's when we heard shouts coming from the corridor. In English. A man and a woman fighting over a kettle. The woman must have won because the man was the only one still screaming. Joe was starting to moan, and the finger I'd put inside her was wet. Behind the door, the angry man kicked a metallic object which rolled for what seemed an eternity. Joe asked me to get inside her. And I imagined I was like a bullet entering her body. I pulled her legs apart and penetrated her, removing the least amount of clothes.

- I love your hair.
- Me too.

She pulled a strand of hair covering my eyes, twisted it around her finger, and opened her mouth wide as my penis took possession of her vagina. Our lungs filled with the air smelling of gun powder and omelette. She kept her mouth in an O shape as an 'oh my God' perished from her lips. To get a laugh out of her, I told her I'd rather leave God out of this. I think she got a bit vexed, or embarrassed, that I caught a glimpse of her pleasure and made fun of it. So I started thrusting to apologise and she asked me to go harder, but I couldn't achieve the desired range of motion with my knees locked in my jeans and the ski leggings underneath. She insisted, and I probably gave quite the pathetic display. I think she came, because she also started thrusting, hard, when I ejaculated. The night had caught up to us. I didn't feel safe.

- Did you come?
- Who cares.

I wanted to know but I didn't dare insist. I was sure we'd never see each other again. I pulled out of her and she noticed it was dark out. We shared a cigarette because she didn't want to smoke a whole one. She put some lipstick on. I took off my shoes.

- I'm cold.
- So am I.
- Next time, I'm doing a report in California.

We joked about all the places we'd enjoy visiting for work. Switzerland, because nothing ever happens. Vietnam, because we love shrimp spring rolls. Egypt, for the pleasure of seeing the pyramids. She told me about her childhood but I wasn't listening anymore. I was on the edge of a waterfall. Alin was telling me about a meteorite that crushed a man.

The shock of celestial bodies. 1400 meteorites fall on earth every year.

An explosion rang out near the hotel.

2000 bombs fell over Sarajevo every week.

Joe kept going, as if everything was normal.

- And then we went to Toulon. Because my dad's a ship repairman. At nine years old, it was so amazing. Are you listening?
- Yes, at nine years old, it's amazing.

Alin had slipped her bare feet into the cold water. She watched the shimmering, silver reflection wrap around her toes. I regretted never having photographed her feet.