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## THE SLOW BIRTH OF NATION

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We were innocent—like birds—and our virgin life was insipid and uniform, short of two seasons heavy with a prospect of change. Every spring, around March, the melting snow filled up the otherwise dry river gully with a powerful flux. The fuscous stream carried trunks and limbs of the fallen trees, stumps, shrubs, and lumps of turf. It was both a busy and a fascinating period, especially for children. Men armed with grapples dragged trees to the shore where they were left to dry before being chopped into firewood and carted home. Branches and twigs covered with wisps of soggy grass, as well as muddy tangled roots contained cryptic hollows, weird and wonderful cavities laden with secrets: dead animals and, once in a while, even a human stiff. Corpses were to be quickly buried before they fell apart and started spreading disease, but first they had to be thoroughly inspected, their pockets searched for money and other treasure. Most of the time this yielded nothing, but once in a while the deceased would have a duceen in his pocket, a clasp knife, a brass cigarette case, or—best of all—a silver timepiece. Women usually brought nothing. They are poor folks up there in the mountains, and they don't waste much on their women. No jewelry, not even wedding rings. Thus the only trophy in such cases was some luck that a woman drowned not too long ago and that she was young and pretty enough to make you suffer. It is implicit that pain purifies your soul. The only case in the community's memory when a woman found in the river was somehow beneficial to her finder was the woman herself. She came back to life and, being buried in a shallow grave, managed to break out of her coffin and dig her way to the surface. Pale as a ghost, naked, shivering, she scared the shit out of the whole parish wandering from house to house and begging for help. Nobody answered her calls, no one opened the door, except for the man who dragged her out of the water. He recognized her face and let her in. Since he had no family of his own, he soon married her. She was a real slogger and gave him five children, all good workers, too. They built a big house and never knew hunger. Thus the man had been rewarded for his deed; but in the eyes of the community, neither the woman nor her children have ever been totally free of some stigma: first, she's never learned to speak our language fluently and, second, she's always been considered to be one of the walking dead, if only a bit of it. To make sure it never happens again, coffins are now made strong and grave pits dug deep.

Every fall, around September, strangers came loaded with goods and news. There were two types of them. Gypsies, riding wagons, buy things we produce over the summer months: sheep wool and goat cheese, rawhides and wild honey. They pay little; but they are our only supply of money, so we don't mind a great deal. Besides, they don't look like they are making their fortunes by cheating us. The fact is they look inferior, even dirtier and poorer than us, and that is pacifying.

Another type of trader, though not that dissimilar, were Jews. They came riding carts loaded with merchandise: fabrics, thread, buttons, needles, axes, knives, medicine, candies for children, you name it. Things we cannot live without and things we can but prefer not to. The money we got from the Gypsies didn't stay in our pouches long, it quickly went to the Jews.

Now and then, strangers would bring random pieces of the puzzling civilization that stretches out there, beyond this small world of ours. These were expensive things that most of us couldn't afford: sewing machines that make stitches so neat it's hard to believe, rifles you can load with several rounds at once, presses that turn your cheese-making into an amusement, magnets that make searching for lost needles so easy, magnifying glasses that help you start a fire by focusing a ray of light onto dry moss, and other marvelous items. Sometimes strangers brought wooden boxes they called photographic cameras and took pictures of us and sold them to us to frame them and embellish our dwellings. Occasionally they carried photographs that depicted naked whores, their beavers shaved off, their breasts—jugs of milk, and their skin so pale you could nearly see through it. There was no way to resist them; every man in the village had one or two hidden someplace in his house; you could look at them for hours dreaming up the wildest things. Even the priest had several of them in the back

of his Good Book. During the mass, when all of a sudden he went silent for a long time, we knew he had opened the wrong page.

Another item in demand were pictures of rather ordinary people, whom they had visited and photographed elsewhere, that we could have for a small price. Someone would perhaps wonder why we would want to possess these? It's because the people in these pictures weren't like us. Not even close. They were handsome clean-shaven men and lovely women wearing bonnets, with smiles on their faces, not a rotten tooth in their mouths, their hair cut neatly and combed, their garments so light you could never plow a field or kill an animal without messing them up at once. Their hands, grasping goblets of wine or long cigarette holders, weren't made for labor. With fingers so long and delicate you could never lift a fork of manure. How did they survive? This was a mystery to us. One theory held they were so different from us they didn't eat at all and, consequently, didn't have to drudge. Although it's hard to be certain, by looking at them, you wouldn't think those women ever took a shit, or even had an excretory opening. When we asked our visitors about it, they answered, "Oh, sure they do. It's just that they wipe their heinies clean with paper afterwards." Either a lie or one more baffling mystery.

Though the sun shines, autumns are cold in our mountainous area. In the evening, we'd sit tight to each other and drink methanol-rich plum brandy that clouds our minds but provides extreme warmth. It was then the strangers would start talking. First tossing the news—and almost everything is news to us—cautiously on the table, dice-like, then, when the sense of the neighbor's elbow grew stronger, spilling them like beans.

Most of the innocent stories, like personal impressions of the villages travelers had visited, went first. But towards the end of the evening, the dense scary stuff would be let loose, and that's how, over time, we learned of things that changed our lives forever.

Among the amazing things the strangers told us was that there is a sea out there and that our birds come from the shores of it and that the sea isn't that far away from us, only about a hundred kilometers or so.

Now, I have to take a step aside here, for there are a couple of things I have to shed light on first. One being the notion of distance. I clearly remember the night they told us about the sea, for it turned into a bone-crushing brawl. The Gypsies said it was one hundred kilometers, the Jews insisted it's less, about eighty or something; and as for ourselves, we were completely lost, because what's a kilometer? The Jews accused us of being too backwoods, we didn't like that. Sure thing we aren't too worldly, but we aren't complete bumpkins either. The way you measure your distance doesn't necessarily make you a total rube. Or does it? So we had an argument about it, and the strangers lost. But that's not important.

What was important, however, was the sea and the birds. Every autumn, the wind blowing from the south would bring exhausted gulls to our country; and that's how people here got some idea about the land somewhere beyond their world, far-off and dreamlike. I remember us, pupils of the school, glued to windows, gazing at the strange drowsy fowl on the piazza. We would feed them corn-bread crumbs, but usually they were too exhausted to swallow. They would fancy nothing from us, neither food nor drink, they would just stand there, still, gathering strength, and then, by night they would be gone, flown away.

Not all of them, though. Some of the birds, the feeblest ones, would be left behind to our mercy. Over time, it has become a routine. We would wait until the birds died, then the home-room teacher would dissect them to show us their innards. And there they had a helluva bunch of fascinating things: remnants of fish, tiny clams, minute crabs, kelp, and other bits and pieces. "These are water birds," our teacher would say. "They must have flown a lengthy way till they reached us." And even though the teacher went nuts after the chapter on the third law of thermodynamics and ultimately hanged herself, which automatically canceled out a large amount of her good judgment, we always felt that there was something like a sea, wherever it may be, but that to reach it one would require wings and maybe even die as the birds did. Therefore we let the matter drop and never touched it again. We simply crawled through our lives realizing that certain things might exist, but, on account of the price, we have never considered them real enough and worth setting one's heart on. And here come the Gypsies and Jews, who try to mess up everything.

But then they did it nevertheless. The tidbits brought by strangers had planted a seed of longing in our hearts and, as it progressed, there was not a day when we wouldn't think of the sea being so near, only a hundred kilometers or so, whatever that meant. We would milk our goats or skin the sheep, and abruptly halt with the tingling sensation that it's achievable. Only one hundred kilometers, whatever that is... It's damn measurable, and if it's measurable, somehow it looks feasible.

One day, unable to stand it anymore, we assembled, about thirty of us, all men, and walked down the mountains. It took four long hours on a bus stuffed with dirty farmers, their unshaved faces the color of earth that makes you envision a graveyard, smoking rank cigarettes and carrying live hens in their haversacks. Good people, actually, all Christians who lose control and go mad only when their rotten teeth start aching; they asked us all kinds of questions and shared wine from their flasks. Toward the end of the journey we all got loaded and slept like badgers...

What we saw upon arrival, when we dropped off the rattling bus, our heads sore, was a country, or a world, with no name yet, melancholic and puzzlingly genteel, all shining with sun. We sat on the dusty pasture near the road and watched it for

a while. The trees seemed impatient in the late afternoon breeze. Ripe fruits, the numbing scent of eucalyptus, minutes so ridiculously alike that they appeared to be just one continuous span, voices that sounded a bit too rowdy in the balmy afternoon, the drowsy hum of flies, and the delicate smell of shit.

Thoughts—irrelevant, aimless, brief, leading nowhere, rolling on and on, wave-like. Silly, too.

After a while, when the first impression wore off, we stood and made for the seashore. We didn't have to ask for directions. We were guided by our noses, the salty stench stuck to the nostrils, all too familiar to us: the birds that came to our village reeked likewise.

The brine was vast. A monstrous mirror scintillating in the rays of the sun, reflecting the flimsy white cloudlets and gulls in the blue, it was grand indeed, albeit not quite what we had anticipated. It lacked any drama. Motionless, it lay there sleeping, too apathetic for our taste. In contrast to the vibrant tension of our mountains, the sea was dispassionate, uncaring. We were pissed off. Sick with disappointment. So many expectations, so many nerves for so little amusement in the end.

On the other hand, it wasn't only the lack of entertainment that irritated us. Our pride suffered, too. Not used to such far-off skylines, we saw the world was huge, way larger than we had thought. In the face of this vast apathy, we felt minute and insignificant. We could be here or there all the same, we could rot in our villages in the mountains and nobody in this world would mind. Our mountains were alive with direct response to our presence there. We would say something loud and the words would come back as an echo or even cause an avalanche. There was no echo here. As if we were suddenly mute. It hurt.

So we watched it for a while and discussed it a bit, while walking along the deserted beach toward a lighthouse we saw in the distance. We couldn't agree whether we should go home now that we'd seen it or hang around for a few hours. It seemed as if our group was about to split, but then something happened that made us stick together.

Halfway to the lighthouse we reached a boardwalk. When we climbed up the wooden steps, we discovered something that took our breath away and soon would be another source of discontent. We found ourselves in the thick of quite a crowd; and it was utterly astonishing, for they were all the people from the photographs that decorated our walls. Dressed in white, they strolled around and chatted under chestnut trees. Women carried umbrellas, men held sticks in their hands, some had small dogs on leashes, families with children, miniature copies of their parents. Stunned, we stood there gazing at them, thinking it couldn't be true, all this polished and smiling race lived only a few hours away from our world and we didn't know it. Impressed, we almost forgot the sea and forgave it for the spasm it caused. But, much like their sea, the people here also took no notice of us, chatting only among themselves as if we were too small to see or behind a wall of some kind.

It wasn't the end of humiliation, though, for soon after that we heard a brass band playing somewhere behind the trees. And what music it was! Earthy, mind-blowing, strange, both provocative and nasty, it made us blush and swelter, like in our adolescent days when we would get caught red-handed screwing sheep.

You should have seen us dashing off to the park, where there was a wooden platform with an orchestra at its side playing tunes so hot and spicy they instantly made your mouth dry and your stomach ulcerous. Most of the crowd, though, clearly taking pleasure in the music, did it in their own urbane way: either pretending they didn't hear what was at its core, or lacking the ear to grab hold of it. Couples were leaping about excitedly, bobbing up and down, but without the genuine thrill.

The music acted on us like kerosene on an exhausted flame. Right away, we jumped onto the platform, each grabbed a girl and went twirling, dancing insanely as the music commanded. But certainly that wasn't the right thing to do; for the lasses were all too scared, and dancing with them was more like throwing around sacks of potatoes. Furthermore, their fathers recovered from the first shock and got in the way. Enraged, shouting something in a language we didn't understand, shaking their swagger sticks, they moved onto the dance floor and yanked their daughters away from us. Having them safely behind their backs, they set upon us and pushed us first off the platform and then out of the park.

Outraged, we were standing there wondering what to do, whether to arm ourselves somehow and attack them now or to come back later. While we were at it, two smiling ladies approached us. In black net gauntlets, holding white parasols, they sniffed the air around us and said something in their tongue. Seeing our confusion, they switched to another language that wasn't ours but close enough to understand. They said they liked the odor we emitted: good old mutton and onions; it jogged their memories about their own homes in the mountains, not in our mountains but similar mountains elsewhere; and that they saw us dancing; and if we really wanted to dance they would show us a place way better than the one in the park with the potty people just pretending they were dancing. They led us into a house up the street where we were greeted with smiles by many beautiful women dressed in slips, nightgowns, baby dolls, silk camisoles, corselettes, and net stockings. However, we were in for a disappointment here, too, for all the smiling was gone as soon as they realized we were poor chaps without much money to spend. In no time, we were herded out and left on our own again, feeling mistreated, disgruntled by all the shoving around.

Hungry by now, we walked up to a cheap joint and ate some bread and fish, which we were not used to. It ended up pretty funny, as I recall it now, because the cooks didn't remove the fish's eyes; and they were looking back at us with such objection that, in fact, eating this fish turned out to be fighting it; and the fish won; and most of us threw up, troubling the waiters very much and adding to the general revulsion we were causing here.

Late in the evening we walked back to shore to take a last look at the sea before leaving. And then this thing happened.

The tide was low; and the sea went all the way back, revealing a multitude of thingamajigs. The view of the naked sea bottom, stripped of water, disgusted us even more than the fish's gaze just a short while ago. Not prepared to be observed it was shameful. More obscene than the flesh we saw at the bawdyhouse because there it was meant that way and here it was an indiscretion happening in front of us. On the boardwalk, nobody—matrons with parasols, mustached cavaliers with sticks, dancers from the park, naked whores and their pimps—just no one gave it a thought.

Tired from the day's events and the rattling bus that brought us back to the familiar crossroads, we walked up the steep hillside: through the wormwood bushes, under the vast star-spangled sky. Silent, we were breathing the fresh mountain air without a trace of salty fetidness.

We came back altered. The same, yet not the same. Not so callow anymore. The world outside might be vast to contain the sea, but there was little room in it for us. We were trespassers there, unwelcome guests, fucking outcasts who are better kept an eye on. And we didn't like it. Not at all. On the other hand, it was a good, sobering feeling that cleared our minds and brought back a sense of balance to our souls. More than ever before, we were one now.

The next day we threw away most of the artifacts we had collected from the Gypsies and Jews over the years, the evidence of the once puzzling civilization that stretches out there, beyond this small world of ours. We burned the stills that depicted naked whores, their breasts—jugs of milk. They were no better than our sheep. Laughing we turned the handsome clean-shaven men and their lovely women wearing bonnets into ashes, smiles upon their faces, not a rotten tooth in their mouths. We were no longer curious about their ability to consume food and to shit afterwards. They were shit...

That autumn, when the wind blowing from the south brought the giant white seabirds to the square in front of the church, we didn't feed them corn-bread crumbs. Instead, men with clubs showed up and slew the birds. By night they were all gone...

Gull meat, when roasted, isn't that bad, just hard to chew. But it wasn't our hunger or the scarcity of food that made us do it. We wanted no trespassers here, no fucking strangers, be they birds or humans. That's why...

Now we are waiting for spring to come...

Standing in a circle, holding hands and smiling, Macedonian.