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Suck it up

“C'mon, let's go people, it's the coppers,” she would shout sometimes, out of the blue, but for the most part, Gracijela was saying things to herself on a loop and dragging her feet in shabby men's shoes. The day was cut off by a sharp siren – an air raid. On that note, all the doors opened. People came out of lunch-infused kitchens and headed towards our street. With her hair combed, Mrs. Doma straightened her skirt and calmly locked her green wooden door. Jelka limped fast from her street, so they met at the corner and walked together. Old men, Schmatte and Owl, both awarded the People's Liberation Movement medals for serving in the Second World War, tapped their canes across their rain-soaked courtyards. The 48 Prosciutto walked slowly with hands behind his back and seemingly indifferent, just going out for a walk, no intention of hiding from the planes. He was just passing through the street and saying hi to the neighbors:

“You good, Mrs. Jele?”

“All right, all right, Mr. Schmatte.”

“Is it an air raid or general defense?”

“General defense, this is the general defense,” he was being a wiseacre.

The siren turned us inside out like tongues on a shoe, sleeves on a shirt, everyone to the streets, everyone served up to see themselves in the shiny platter of a brand new war.

Several generations of women, old folk and children now rambled around the stony fishing village. Young mothers were indecisive, did it really mean that all of us had to stop doing what had been, up to that point, serious work, and just sit in a room with sandbags on the windows and wait there? They went in and out of the courtyards, calling out to their children, looking up at the sky as if checking whether it might rain because they had to hang the laundry out to dry. And underneath it all, a silence that settled into the courtyards and streets, silence and unease crept into the taverns and now squatted there and gawked around like a deranged person. The sense that something

eISSN 1847-7755; doi: 10.15291/sic/2.6.lt.2

deadly and important was taking place hovered in the air, while the sun kept shining, cats snoozed in the sun, a ball bumped against the concrete, and capers grew out of the walls. Men left their lettuce fields behind and tied their boats, put on their reserve duty boots if they had any, and those who didn't soon got a pair of their own. At night they shifted position with a small cannon mounted on the back of a truck and waited for the gunboat to start blasting away from the channel. But it didn't. Docked in front of the village for five days it never made so much as a peep. One morning the grey boat with a white number glided into the fog, military men splintering in the scirocco. Gone, abandoned the barracks. Split, adios, farewell. We're out.

I stood at the town's quay with the hands in my jean pockets and watched the white trail they were leaving behind. Some guys at the bar terrace took their pants off and mooned the open sea with thundering laughter. I turned around and went home down a cobbled street next to the church. I was trying to figure out what I was feeling and counted the cobbles. What does this mean? What does it mean to me? The war? It was quiet all around. My father was far away, on the other side, where my voice could not reach him. I stood there, at the shore, mild Indian summer encroached the fields, the shadows changed. That was all I saw, all I saw. Was this the beginning of some new insane phase for me or was it the end of some previous one? How could I tell? I witnessed the new regime being put into place with a lump in my throat. I remembered when I used to sing as a kid in front of the mirror. I was wearing an oversized uniform jacket with shoulder straps and a blue-white peaked cap that belonged to a friend of my father's, singing Swear to me my love, here on my shoulder and forget about the past in this moment. While replaying the late 70's pop tune in my head, I reached the gates in my street.

"Mr. Owl, do you have a box of cookies in your bag?" I saw the old man going into our courtyard without a hello. "Oh, you're not even carrying a bag." I really wanted to get a reaction out of him because all those people piled up in our living room without as much as a hello and stayed until we finally managed to convince them it was safe to go home.

"They said you have to have batteries, a portable radio, clean underwear, a bottle of water and cookies in your bag, Mr. Owl. There you are, have a seat. Hello," I said, making sure he heard me.

"Hello," the old man finally spoke, unleashing a stale stench of garlic, smoke and old age. At first, I found this game of Noah's Arc amusing, when an entire parade of uncanny characters came to our

house, but after a while I could feel the resentment bubbling up like hydrochloric acid and slowly eat away at my hospitality and compassion. They disgusted me. They were a motley crew of dying, smelly, semi-deranged, rude old geezers occasionally farting on our couch and always getting on my nerves. Newly coined words for a newly coined world, new currency and sirens, reveilles and 150-year-old patriotic songs, uniforms, stray bullets, breaking news, all of it came swarming in. It was all getting on my nerves since the first blackout, I blacked myself out, with increasing anxiety and rage as time went by. Posters of the new president with a sash, what a joke, a cruel joke plastered over the windows at the farming cooperative, chapel and barn. Grinning everywhere with hands clasped above his head. He gave me the creeps. I used to take down his posters from the graffitied walls that read Talking heads, Evribadi goez tu fuck your mom, Long live the partisans! Hajduk FC, and so on.

Although soon the siren signaled the end of the air raid, general defense, or god only knows what we were up against, the parade of old people sauntered down the asphalt towards our house because the bomb shelter was in our living room and they could not be bothered to go back since they had already made half the trip.

“It's all over, there’s the siren, you can all turn back,” I tried to intercept them benevolently.

They passed me by as if I wasn't there, and Mrs. Jele always said, “And what are we to do, here we all are. They sounded another one yesterday after we came back.”

“Right, there's no point walking all the way here just to go back again,” I smiled, defeated. Old geezers took shelter from the missiles, shrapnel, dumb bombs, howitzers, blast mines, cluster bombs, and other novelties.

Gracijela, increasingly hysterical like a wind-up toy, paraded in the street, cursed left and right and kept giving out warnings. “Fuck you, Croatian motherfuckers. Run and hide, the coppers will get you,” she yelled. Her dog Srđan was running up behind her. Gracijela was the housekeeper at the Avala Military Resort her whole life, and even though her personality was something else, she had been quite approachable until recently. One day, her eyes shifted into the far distance, her voice boomed sonorous and ubiquitous; she cracked. Screaming all sorts of foul things, relieving herself

in public, she'd just squat and a stream would trickle underneath. Poor thing, always making a mess of things.

“Mom, don't make tea, they’ll never leave if you make them tea and give them cookies. I’m the one who has to vacuum and wash the dishes.”

Tight-lipped, my mom said nothing, and put a large pot of water on the stove.

“Do y'hear me, you don't have to make tea for them, they will never leave,” I whispered standing next to her.

“Leave me be,” the sentence just rolled down her chin like a ball of spit. I saw how worried she was, she said nothing and clenched her jaw. Those strong chin bones sticking out with lips pressed into a thin pink line. Whatever was going on in her head, she did not say it. The sum total of a former treasurer at the former shipyard was Injustice. She sucked it up, the injustice, and did not complain. When I was little, she used to say: “Suck it up!” And I did.

Mother was mincing dry mint leaves in her hands over the pot of water when shouts came from the street: “Call the ambulance, oh, you crazy woman, what have you done, you wretched thing.”

I ran onto the street and saw Gracijela petrified by the dustbin. Bluish liquid ran down her chin, she was throwing up soap bubbles only to swallow them back again, she was choking.

“What the hell is wrong with her, Maja?” I went to the dustbin and Maja, our young neighbor who was scuttling around her and panicking.

“Call the ambulance, the old nut case chugged down a bottle of bleach, must've tried to kill herself. Hey, call the ambulance! Now!”

Convulsions shook the old lady. Balloons flew cheerfully out of her mouth as if from a black hole, the light dispersing in their purples, greens and blues and floating down the street.

The shouting from the street dragged a queue of dying folk off of my couch into the daylight.

“C'mon, call the ambulance already,” Maja told me.

“I can't call the ambulance, our phone’s disconnected because my dad is a Serb, so they disconnected it, just in case,” I said.

“Just in case of what?” Maja spat out.

“See, our phone’s disconnected because my dad is a Serb,” I told her again, matter-of-factly. “What are we going to do about her?”

Gracijela's eyes were rolling and she kept throwing up surrounded by listless old people, the sun was setting.

“For the love of the weeping virgin Mary, they disconnect your phone and then decide your house is the bomb shelter,” Maja said and quickly made the sign of the cross. Old people looked at Gracijela disapprovingly and slithered down the street like mucus.


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