

EDVIN SUBAŠIĆ

*Thug*

My interviewer, Ted, has no time to talk to me. All my relevant experience is lost between his multitasking and my accent. He's on the phone, going back and forth between customers, foremen, and suppliers. He doesn't even hear that I've learned my trade in Germany and have eleven years of combined experience there and in the States. He puts his conversation on hold and tells me to buy safety boots, get basic tools, and show up again on Monday. He finally makes eye contact and says he'll pay me ten bucks an hour.

"My experience and training? Ten bucks?" I say, my tone even. If I've learned anything, I know staying calm and saying short phrases can persuade Americans to listen to an immigrant.

Ted skims through my résumé. "Okay, twelve-fifty!" he says. "We need help pulling wire. If you prove yourself down the road, we might have something better for you. Now good luck, and see you here Monday morning at seven. I'll introduce you to Ron, your foreman."

I leave Portland Networks hopeful. I need income. I know my savings won't last more than two months. Twelve-fifty an hour is enough to pay my education loans, food, and rent. I call April. When she gets out of OHSU, it's dinner at Hoda's. They serve hot flatbread like in Bosnia, she says.

I arrive ten minutes early. Ted, my busy interviewer, sees me on his way in and gestures with his bratwurst finger to follow him. He steps into the storage room and returns with a helmet covered with stickers of alcoholic beverages, scratches, and traces of sweat salt.

"Here. Wear it today and take it home. Wash it. And make sure you wear your safety glasses and helmet every time you enter the construction site. OSHA is on our backs these days." He hands me a pair of brand-new safety glasses and starts up the stairs, then turns around abruptly and looks at my feet.

"You got the boots. Looks good . . . new and all. I have the

same. Very comfortable.”

My toes disagree. They curl up. My feet have already started sweating in anticipation of humidity, construction dust, and blisters from the stiff soles and steel toes. I moved to Portland from Boston two weeks ago. Although I hear it rains every day in Portland, I’ve only seen a few drops of rain since my arrival.

Before leaving, Ted mumbles something. I get the last few words and his gestures: “Wait here. . . Ron. . . soon.”

Ted hurriedly ascends the stairs toward his office on the second floor. The heavy-framed man in his late forties is much more agile than I’d have ever guessed. His torso is at a standstill, but his legs are working hard, propelling him upstairs. He disappears behind the obscured glass door.

I’m standing in the middle of the warehouse, staring at the stairs in front of me. My toes emit a great discontent that crawls up my spine. I try to uncurl them, but they stay hunched. I hear the warehouse gate reeling toward the ceiling. I turn around and see the black tires and the running muffler of a white Ford F350.

The truck rolls in before the gate is all the way up. It’s swift and smooth, knows its way in. A moment later, I see a golden head with a neat crewcut beside the truck. Its face is handsome, like one of those in bad Hollywood movies. Its pale blue eyes are squinting. They inspect my appearance before looking behind me. They walk past me and go straight for the pile of cable boxes, scrutinize the paper slip sitting on top of the pile, and ascend the stairs. Their boots skip steps and disappear behind the same door Ted had previously entered. It’s him. Ron. I’m sure I’ve met Ron before. A soft ripple travels up and down my skin. I smell the wet bark and feel cool drops of rain dripping down behind my neck. I look away from the gaping hole in front of me. I see hazelnut bushes nearby and heavy ropes of smoke rising from the homes down the hill. *Kapetan* Dragi kneels next to me and whispers into my ear, “If it wasn’t for your grandparents, you’d be lying in the ditch already. It’s only because they helped my folks while I was in prison.” I keep gazing forward. My head is throbbing. *Kapetan* Dragi smells urine on me. He spits. “A mutt’s a mutt,” he says. “You have a Serb name, but I smell the Ottoman bastard in you.”

I gawk at the concrete floor in front of me, then at the boxes of cable, then at the glass door at the end of the stairwell. I survey the truck. Its bed is enclosed by a large commercial cap. I can see

through the side glass panels that it's stocked with familiar materials and tools. The goosebumps on my skin soften. Grandpa's forest is thick and rough, but always gentle toward me as if it knows I am a child. "You found me," I hear Grandpa say. His beret is perched on his head, his cigarette stuck in a mouthpiece he holds between his thumb and forefinger. He is sitting on a fallen tree on top of the ravine. "I've been waiting for you, Grandson. Haven't eaten since this morning," Grandpa chuckles. "Thank God I have this bottle to keep me alive." He taps on the bottle of *rakia* by his feet with his wooden cane. It's dark in his forest, and it smells of rain. Slim rays of sunshine slice between the clusters of oak leaves above me, illuminating a swarm of mosquitoes between us.

I hear a door open and see Ron descending the stairs. Ron opens his mouth, stretching his pale lips that look like they're covered with face instead of lip skin. "Load the boxes." He unlocks the cabin door and points at the middle of the truckbed.

I'm worried. There's hardly any space. I scratch my head, reply with a simple "Okay," and start loading. He goes over the paperwork again. His cellphone rings, and I hear a nasal, male voice through the speaker. Ron gives directions, talks about drilling, installing a cable trellis.

As I'm starting to run out of space, he turns around and assesses the situation, holding the cellphone to his ear. With brisk gestures, he points at the two boxes left on the ground and then motions toward the seats. I jam them in the middle. He is still on the phone. Finally, he hangs up and signals to take the passenger seat. We get in the truck with the boxes between us. In my lap I'm holding the tool bag I bought eight years ago when I first arrived in the States. Since then, I've used it on many occasions, putting myself through college by wiring, connecting, and disconnecting. I climb up the slope, carefully digging into the mud and roots of the trees. I find Grandpa resting on a fallen tree and breathing in his forest as only he can do. His eyes are closed, and he is humming a song. "Did I tell you about that Nazi unit I led into these woods?" Grandpa ruffles my hair as I sit next to him. "We're friends now. They keep this bottle for me in the bushes." He stops chuckling and gives me a soft, dreamy smile. He unfolds the red kitchen towel our supper is bundled in, takes the warm bread out first, and breaks it in half. He produces his pocketknife and cuts into a large, meaty tomato, then slices the yellow cheese and smoked sausage for us. "Your parents visit. They ask me

about you. I tell them you're a good boy." He finds his *čokanj*, a miniature bottle he always keeps in the deep pockets of his coat, and fills it with *rakia*. He hands it to me. "Time to learn to drink with ghosts, my boy," he says, and we both raise our bottles. "Živjeli!"

Ten minutes down the road, Ron finally opens his mouth. "About half an hour to North Portland. Hope we don't get stuck on I-5. Gotta get through the downtown first."

I nod.

"We'll stop at McDonald's before we hit the downtown. . . . dodge the traffic. I'll get my breakfast. Get yourself something if you want."

"Sounds good. I'm not hungry. Ate already."

He looks at me briefly as we wait for the green light.

"I hear you're from Germany. Ted tells me you got experience from over there."

"Huh, yes. I learned the trade in Germany before moving here," I reply after a short pause, undecided if I should let him know that my pedigree has a Yugo written all over it. But I decide not to share any of that yet. I have a strong feeling Ron is a *mangup*, a dick and a dimwit, a grandiose ignoramus—the ruler of his world. The noun is masculine only. *Mangups* come in all shapes and sizes, or nationalities. They are electricians, professors, or presidents. They lack no confidence, but they see only what they can see—or more precisely, what they want to see. In their much-valued opinion, the world is always flat.

"So, Germany? You're far from home."

I grunt in agreement and keep my eyes on the road.

"Beautiful country, smart people. German cars, man! German technology. . . that's something."

"Good cars," I grunt some more.

"I know some German. Both my great-grandfathers were Germans, immigrated here. I learned German in school. Some Spanish too."

I nod in slow motion, raising my brows to show that I'm impressed. Pretty good for an ignoramus! I've already anticipated this conversation. My experience tells me to never overestimate an ignoramus. I certainly hope he doesn't try any German on me. It's depressing starting a conversation and stopping at the second line because the ignoramus remembers only a few generic phrases, or just one word: *Autobahn*. Someone once went as far as to sing *Neun*

*und Neun Luftballons*. I want to ask him which Spanish he speaks. Is it the American Spanish that's so much ignored and yet so vibrant with all its communities living in the shadows of a permanent eclipse brought on by white America? Or is it the tourist Spanish along with German and French? Does he speak these languages learned by the American romantics enchanted by Europe and its historic beauty? The truth is that Europe is as ugly as any other place. Even more so, in its violence brought by wars, inquisition, poverty, racism, fascism, communism, and just simple historical hate hidden among the walls of old buildings, hardly recognizable behind their restored façades.

I know I can't discuss this with him, or with most Europeans. I know I can only keep quiet and nod at this fine German-American specimen next to me, only the two boxes filled with blue computer wire separating us from the truth—the blue of which is creeping from the inside out. He doesn't offer any German. I'm grateful. After all, he isn't that bad when he's quiet.

We pull up to the drive-through window. He orders two Mc-Muffins and a coffee. A sleepy-eyed, skinny girl with a neatly tied ponytail hands him the paper bag and the cup. She smiles and gives him his credit card back. I'm glad she can smile at this hour. I'm happy she can give us that smile along with a standard order—that something extra no fast-food menu offers. And she seems genuine, to my surprise. I hope she continues that way until she gives her smiles away for the day. And I wish she keeps one for herself.

Ron takes his order, says nothing to the girl—not even a nod. He parks in the back of the McDonald's, facing the interstate. Cars zoom by, and the closed windows don't silence them. "You took your first steps in these woods," Grandpa says and gestures down the ravine that splits the forest in two. It's tucked in the brush. The vast canopies of the oak and maple trees on top of the slope drape over it. Gray boulders peak out of its soil like sleeping heads of buried giants. "Right there, by the well, you held onto those rocks." He shakes his cane toward it. "They'd just brought you to us, right after the accident. We took you here to say farewell to your parents. You fell over and over into the mud and leaves. You looked like a baby boar. Your *rabmetli* mother and father would've been proud of you."

The truck fills with the smell of the McMuffin sandwich. Ron bites in, and cheese sticks to his lips—the American cheese, the mysterious substance, recyclable yet not compostable. The fast-food essence reaches my nose too, and as unappetizing as it is my empty

stomach craves it. It's growling and roaring, but the outside noise and radio inside disguise it.

"So, you done this before?" Ron starts, his mouth still chewing the bits of the sandwich.

"I worked part-time mostly. Went to college meanwhile."

"Got a degree? What in?"

"Literature and writing," I squeeze the words out. I look away, hiding my reddening cheeks.

"What? Literature? Writing? Is that like. . . novels?"

"Yes."

"What's that for? Wanna be a writer? Professor?"

"Maybe."

"Nonsense. Not for me. College isn't for me. Not spending my money on something that wouldn't help me get ahead anyway."

"You're right," I reply, thinking maybe this guy has some smarts after all.

"You write in English?"

I want to say in German—actually Serbo-Croatian—but I tell him the truth, "Yes, in English."

"Do you first write in German and then translate?"

"No, just English. The first, the second time, and over and over again."

"That must be hard for you."

"Yes." I'm thinking of all the reasons I should believe that. I'm fluent in English, with some accent, especially when I'm under duress or in anger. I'm still grappling with articles, often omitting and sometimes overusing them. And then there are syntax and word-choice issues. Sure, these are all important factors in language, but overall, I'm at near-native fluency. So, why did he assume writing in English is very difficult for me? Am I not an American now? My passport says I am.

"If I was you, I'd first write in German. You know, I'd write in English first, my language, and then translate in German. Say I was to live in Germany and become a writer there."

"I think you're right. I'll try." I feel a tingling on my lips, yearning to correct his conditionals.

"I'd love to go to Germany. Awesome country!"

Huh! I knew it would come to this—that he'd be in awe of Germany and Germans. This's why I hesitated to say that I spent only three years there as a refugee. I was a Yugo in Germany, a

nobody, but lucky enough to get job training while there. I was one of those who came to take away German jobs, German values — an impostor. I also knew, had I mentioned I was a Yugo who came here as a refugee, he'd become suspicious of me — my presence, my skills, my abilities. I'd be a nobody from nowhere where other nobodies fight over nothing, kill over nothing or nowhere that had dissolved into smaller nowheres, insignificant to big nations, to the important people of the vast, conglomerate countries such as the United States of America. And Germany is there with all its weight, tangible and simplified, broken down and mollified by Americans after the World Wars. It's beautiful to the American eye, tasteful to the American mouth, respectable even when it loses the war or commits atrocities. Germans live forever, as do Americans.

"Where do you live?" Ron asks suddenly and bites into his McMuffin.

"Southeast, off of Hawthorne."

"Hippies, liberals," he hisses between his bites.

I am quiet, gazing at the black dashboard.

"We're in Lake Oswego, a new neighborhood. Very safe. Gated community."

I nod and raise my eyebrows, acting as if I'm impressed.

"Married?" he asks.

"No. You?"

"Yes, two kids. A boy and a girl. When did you move here?"

"A few weeks ago."

"Where from?"

"Boston," I say. I don't mention that before Boston I'd lived in Twin Falls, Idaho; St. Louis, Missouri; Manchester, New Hampshire; and New York City.

He frowns. After a short pause, he continues, "Big city, very crowded. Boston, New York. It's all too much for me."

"Right. Expensive too."

"Yes, very expensive. Here I can buy a new house, three-car garage, kitchen with granite countertops, for the cost of an old apartment over there."

"Exactly." I nod in approval. I don't want to explain that I moved to Portland only because my girlfriend is in school here. When April takes me to Cape Cod, I tell her that I'll move with her. "Are you sure?" she says and looks me in the eye. "Boston is your home now." I have a feeling she knows that I can't stay. I look down

and run my fingers through the sand mound between us. A gust of wind picks up grains of sand from my hand. I don't tell her that in the three years I've lived here, I've never been to the beach.

Ron finishes his last bite, takes another sip of coffee, and backs the truck out of the parking lot. Shortly, we're back on I-5. We pass the downtown intersection, get through the busy maze of highways without slowing down. He was right. The traffic is moving again after the eight-o'clock wave.

We arrive at the construction site. The walls are up, the stucco is finished and painted brown. The windows and doors are freshly installed, stickers still on their glass. The sign is up: *Multnomah Medical Clinic*.

I unload the wire boxes as Ron walks around and finds the electrical equipment room. I follow him. He orders me to stock the boxes by the room. I see two men inside sorting out bundles of blue wire. Both men are on the short side. One has thick, black hair evenly buzzed. He hasn't shaved recently. He has a rather large, flat nose and a wide-eyed smile. The other man is curly-haired blond and slender. His face has two freckled spots on his cheeks like clusters of red currants. He keeps quiet as the other guy talks to Ron. Ron looks around methodically as if he's thinking hard, as if he's deep-scanning and studying every wall, every wire, and every piece of equipment inside. He's definitely a decision-maker, I think. I'm not sure how great a decision-maker he is, but I know that even *mangups* can be good at something.

I keep bringing the boxes in. The familiar smell of drywall, fresh paint, and carpet glue infuse my mind. In my three years working in Germany, I'm doing the same work I'm doing now: loading and unloading, drilling, digging, hammering, and cleaning up. My cranky Italian electrician rides my ass because he skips breakfast, drinks Red Bull and Coke, chain-smokes, and can't wait for lunch break. I pretend I'm tough—a tough kid in his tough refugee pants, a survivor. I'm happy to take it from my boss, as long as I stay away from home.

I'm done piling up the boxes. Ron waves me over. I enter their crammed electrical room.

He introduces me. "Guys, this's Milan. He's from Germany." He points at the dark-haired, smiling man—Ron's age, in his early

forties. "Jeff," he says. Then he nods at the blond who seems to be closer to my age, late twenties. "And Chris." He raises his voice. "You guys take care. I'll be back this afternoon." He looks at me and frowns. "Put your helmet on. Safety glasses too."

I nod. I don't wonder why I have to wear them while Ron, Jeff, and Chris don't. I feel a drop of sweat behind my neck. The air in Grandpa's forest is raw and dewy. Grandpa and I drink the plum brandy and take bites of food. Birds chirp at different beats from all directions as if an invisible conductor is waving his baton at them. "Grandma says not to take too long," I say. "You still have work at home." He chews slowly and swallows. "What's she doing?" he asks. "She's gone back to the market," I reply. "Uncle Ahmet sold her a bad cut of lamb. All bones." Grandpa winces. "Oh, Ahmet. Poor bastard." He laughs. "Did you bring the pick?" He squints at me. I nod in the direction of the ravine. "I left it by the well," I say. He stands up and staggers down through the bushes toward the bump in the middle of the slope where the well sits. He'd already cleared most of the landslide. I follow right behind him. He takes the pick and swings it at the base of the limestone boulders. He's agile—tall and wiry. He's young again. The rocks roll to the bottom of the ravine. He retrieves one and carries it up to the well, where he lays it carefully. He turns it several times until it settles into the ground. He asks me to bring the rest to him. He lays the boulders one by one around the pool of water about six feet wide. He leaves an opening for a rivulet to flow and cut the ravine deeper and deeper into the future.

I get acquainted with Jeff and Chris. Jeff keeps me always updated. Our job consists of pulling the wire through the ceilings and walls between the outlets and the computer hub in the electrical room. Business as usual.

I go through another discussion about Germany with Jeff just as I did with Ron. Jeff is a much chattier and friendlier version of Ron—perhaps a better one. He tells me Ron is not just a boss. His father is one of the company's owners. He's a boss boss. Chris is a quiet guy, well-mannered. He's from Chicago. Most of the time, Jeff and Chris talk about football. I know nothing about football, even though I've already spent eight years in the States. I know everything about basketball. I played it back home, and basketball in Yugoslavia was as popular as the real football.

Chris soon figures out I'm not from Germany. He knows my

first name is Slavic. He asks for my last name to confirm: Omerbergovich. He easily guesses its origin. He has a high school friend from Serbia named Milan too. What were the chances? Zoran barges into my room. "They're setting up checkpoints everywhere!" he cries. I gawk at him over my book. "Uncle says you've got guns. Is it true?" he continues, pacing around the room. "He says Muslims are going to fight. Tell me it's not true! Tell me you're not part of it." Zoran dishes out questions and demands. I'm still unable to make a sound. The book in my hands shuts on its own. "The military is closing the roads." He sits on the chair by my desk and shakes his head. I look at Zoran for a long time, searching for words, hoping his face will soon give away the joke. "Uncle found out you were transferred to Belgrade, but someone destroyed your records. What happened in Zagreb? What was the real reason you left the academy and came back? Uncle says you're a deserter, but he'll be able to keep your secret while this mess is still on." I throw *Steppenwolf* at him. "You'll make a fine writer one day," I say. I imagine him as Gogol and laugh. I get up, light a cigarette, and open the window. Muffled sounds of the mortar from the hills across the river reach us from time to time. The Serb forces are finishing off the Croats.

That afternoon, Ron returns to the site and beelines to the blueprint laid in the middle of the lobby. Then he quietly parades around the rooms, looking up and down, left and right. We follow him the whole time.

"It looks like our German friend is doing well," Ron says. "Pretty good!"

"German? No!" Chris says, "Better than German. He's from Yugoslavia — Bosnian."

"What's that?" He gapes at me, raising his eyebrows, then crumpling them. "You said you're from Germany."

"I said I learned the trade in Germany." I reply.

Ron frowns. "Huh!" he grunts. "Well, whatever. Do your job, that's all."

I nod and force myself to smile. I go back to sorting out the tangled wire. Grandpa finishes laying boulders around the well. Then he grabs a tin cup he always keeps there and skims the leaves and residue from the top. He fills the cup with cold, sweet water and gives it to me to drink. He drains a cupful too. The sun sets behind

the hill above us. A quieting shadow spreads along the tree canopy and sinks to the moist ground. Grandpa climbs back to the fallen tree, sits on it, and rolls a cigarette. He finds his bottle and drinks a mouthful. His face contorts from the burning pleasure. He pours the rest onto the ground.

Chris helps me pull the wire down the wall. Ron and Jeff stand and talk. They laugh and gesture. They deliberate college football conferences — Ducks, Beavers, and so on. They debate the rankings and opponents. It's all gibberish to me: voting, ranking, conferences, blitz, bowls, bombs, bumblebees. Chris chimes in every now and then, crouching over an outlet in the wall.

"What do you think, Milan?" Jeff suddenly asks. "I don't think the Ducks have a chance this year. Maybe in two years."

I'm up on the ladder taping the wire. I stop for a moment and reply, "No idea, man. I don't know football."

"Europeans." Chris tries to help me. "There's only one sport for them, and that's soccer."

"Is Yugoslavia in Europe?" Ron asks.

"Well, Yugoslavia is no more. Now there're ex-Yugoslav republics, and I'm from Bosnia-Herzegovina."

"I thought Bosnia was somewhere in the Middle East."

"Close. About a thousand miles."

My comment doesn't sit well with Ron. I can see it on his blushing face. Ron, the man, the foreman, the decision-maker. I know he thought that Bosnia was in the Middle East because Muslims live there, which for many Americans automatically places Bosnia somewhere in the Middle East. I'm a Muslim too, a Bosnian Muslim with a non-Muslim name, named after my dad's best friend. By identity I'm a Bosnian Muslim, a Bosniak, yet by religion I'm nothing, believing in the ever-expanding, beautiful nothingness that consumes us all and turns us into the fire that will warm our children and help them find their way.

It's 5 p.m., and it's time to go. Ron tells me to load the truck with scrap wire. As soon as I'm done, we get in the truck and leave. Ron doesn't talk. He turns up the music on the radio. I look away and watch the passing cars on the road. Zoran finds me and my grandparents eating dinner. He's wet from the drizzle outside. He joins us. He's always hungry. He's tall and bony. I've come to believe he'll never stop growing. Grandma stuffs a hot *somun* with butter, black pepper, and cheese for him. She cuts up the last

cucumbers, peppers, and tomatoes from our garden. “They closed off your neighborhood,” Zoran says. “I snuck in along the canal. It’s pitch-dark tonight.” Then he puts his hands on his stomach and scowls as if stabbed. “Uncle tells me I can’t come here anymore,” he says. Grandma stops chewing. “Listen to your uncle, son,” she says with a loving smile. “He knows something.” Grandma serves small bowls of rice pudding. When we reach the bottoms of our bowls, Grandpa unseals a bottle of plum *rakia* from his reserve and pours for everyone. It’s from the year I was born. We drink to our health and life. He tells us one of his war stories again. We tease him again. Grandma says she must finish her embroidery. It’s almost done. It looks like an unknown star constellation, and I trace it the way she’s taught me. On the way out, Zoran shows me a letter. It’s a summons from the Yugoslav National Army—now the Serb Army. He’s due to report tomorrow morning. “I have no choice,” he says. Then he laughs. “Vlade got one too.” Vlade comes to class in fatigues, gun in its holster and a grenade dangling from his waist. He tells me this country is for Serbs only. It belongs to its people. He’s trying to tell me I’m not a person. I think about Vlade’s older cousin, my Serbo-Croatian teacher, and how a few years earlier I’m falling in love with her as she reads Crnjanski’s *Sumatra* in class. Zoran steps between us and asks Vlade about Jelena; she’s so into him.

Thirty minutes later, we’re in front of the shop. Ron orders me to unload the scrap wire and dump it in the recycling container behind the warehouse. He unlocks it first, runs up to the office for a moment, returns, and locks it again after I finish my part.

“Let’s see,” he says, sitting behind the steering wheel, looking straight ahead. “Tomorrow you drive straight to the site.”

“Sounds good.”

“Be there at eight.”

“Yessir.”

Two Mondays later, I arrive at the site early. Nobody is there yet. The place is locked. It’s been two weeks since I’ve started working, and this whole time it’s been only Jeff, Chris, and me. Ron stops by at the end of the shift, talks to Jeff and Chris, and ignores me. I keep quiet, keep working. Something bugs me, though. Ron bugs me. His existence bothers me, or perhaps my existence in close proximity to Ron bothers me. But Ron doesn’t stay long and doesn’t talk to

me, and that alone helps me bear my existence next to Ron. April asks me how my work is when I meet her and her school friends at Tugboat Brewing Company. "Getting my first check soon," I reply and ask April about her classes, inciting a riot from her colleagues. Med school is the end of their lives, they cry. A young band starts playing, and I get lost in bebop as April and her crowd go on about their school. Zoran thrusts a key into my hand. "Aunt Milka's," he says. The house is just up the street, and it's vacant. Zoran's aunt is a guest worker in Germany. "I put up a flag. They won't touch it," he whispers, leaning in. "A few hours ago, they killed men downtown. Right on the street." He smacks me hard in the shoulder. "Why did you come back?" he mutters and runs into the darkness behind our house. "See you, Gogol," I call after him, massaging my shoulder.

Last Friday, Ron steps into the room where I'm installing data ports. He pretends to be checking on my work. It's almost time to go home. Finally, after several minutes of quiet examination, he says, "Good for you that you have a job here and all."

"Yes, it's good for me," I sigh.

"Your family must be happy over there in Bosnia."

I think about that first. I contemplate explaining, but I know my power is in silence. I decide to play along. "Yes," I say, smiling.

"Well, they're lucky you can earn dollars here and send it to them," Ron says after an awkward silence.

"Huh!" I focus on cutting the insulation around a wire. I press hard on it. "Sure. Do you think I cut into the wire here?"

He hunches over me, inspects it, and nods importantly. "There is a cut underneath the second layer. You'll have to start over. You're lucky there's enough left. You should use a wire stripper instead of the knife. I think I have a spare. I'll bring it on Monday."

"Thanks. I'll get one this weekend."

"Good. Keep going. See you Monday." He starts toward the door but stops for a second as if contemplating something. He speaks without turning, "Put your helmet on. OSHA could show up anytime." He leaves as I stare at the back of his bare head.

Waiting in my car and thinking of our last encounter makes me uneasy. I slide the window open, stick out my head, and breathe in the wet air. "She's a beauty," Grandpa says and waves his cane around him. "This forest, this land . . . she's deep. This water is her blood. It runs far under the mountain to another world . . . the real world. More real than this one, but never exactly real and

never perfect.” He sinks the empty bottle into a bush behind the well. “When we return, it’ll be full. It’s always full as long as we come back.” He puts his coat on, feels through the pockets to make sure he didn’t forget something. He takes his cane, lays it on his shoulder, and says with a smile, “We don’t want to keep Grandma waiting.”

Jeff and Chris drive up in the company van, Jeff behind the steering wheel. He has the key to the building. Right after we enter, the carpet installers arrive and start unloading. They’re Mexican. They speak Spanish and never talk to us. The carpenters clock in too. The place livens up. Shortly after the project is completed, this building will forget that someone built it from scratch. It’ll be alive in a different way, fulfilling its purpose of hosting doctors, nurses, administrators. Its waiting rooms will be filled with patients sitting, watching TV, reading magazines, and worrying—simply worrying. And that’s life, or the part of life that we all like to forget. We don’t ever want to think that we get sick or that shit happens, that sometimes in our lives we must put up a fight against the ever-present, imminent end. We think of ourselves as invincible, knowledgeable, and everything unfamiliar is a threat to that. Or we simply believe there is God, and He will take care of us because we’re the chosen ones. *Kapetan* Dragi says, “Listen, boy. There’s only one true religion. It’s *Pravoslavlje*. The name says it all.” He waves Grandpa’s cane in my face, slips it along his arm, and dangles it over his elbow. “Your ancestors betrayed God. Someone’s gotta pay for their sins.” I stand in front of him, quiet and gone. I see Grandpa’s white robe whirling in the *tekke* suspended above the canyon. The white eddies bounce around the empty room and spin toward me. The pulsating stars above the ragged mountains reach me through the windows. I taste the sweetness of the cherry lollipop in my mouth. I fall asleep and split into pieces.

It’s too early to talk. Even Jeff can’t manage to say much. He points on the blueprint at the rooms we’ll cover today. He shows me around again, explains our quota for the day. It’s a large building with four floors. It will take a while to finish. We’re here for the next month and more. I’m content—job security.

Right before lunchtime, Ron shows up. Without saying as much as a hi, he tells me to bring in the boxes from his truck: the

data jacks, wall plates, and wire hooks. I want to remark that he could've carried something on his way, but I keep quiet.

I'm hauling. They're talking. Ron goes over the usual business again: quality control, new orders. Then I hear laughing. Jeff is loud and animated. He motions throwing a football. I get everything inside, pile it in the corner by the electrical room, and join them.

Ron looks at me, his right eye squints, his cheeks pull tight. "You're here because of the war?" he starts.

I nod. I realize he's read Wikipedia.

"Been in the war? Fighting?" he asks.

I want to say that I was running most of the time, outrunning vicious criminals and staying alive. But I dig deep into his eyes and step closer to him. I smell him. I feel him. I hear *Kapetan Dragi*: "Little shithead! Should've shot you right away." I hear his gang running around high on Ecstasy. Their laughter is farther and farther away. It's quiet again. I exhale and lean against a tree by the ravine. I hear dry branches cracking closer and closer. It's warm and dry in my grandfather's forest. It's speckled with fresh stumps, the golden coins strewn everywhere like in a wedding. People have been stealing lumber. I hear Grandpa laughing again, narrating how he took those Nazis into the ditch and how his comrades ambushed them. "Here, Grandson. She'll take you in. She'll love you as long as you find your way back." I hear the stiff boots cracking another dry branch and feet shuffling. *Kapetan Dragi*.

That look on Ron's face, those eyes probing me, have already formed an opinion. So, I give him what he wants. "Yes," I say. "Been in the war."

"Did you kill anyone?" Ron asks.

"I don't know. Just shot at stuff."

"You people there. You don't know how to fight."

"Yes?"

"We have the best military in the world."

"Yes?"

"Small countries like yours shouldn't get involved in politics."

He makes zero sense, but I have a feeling I know where he's going with this.

"Okay. If you say so," I reply.

He turns to Jeff and Chris. "You ask me, I say nuke them all. Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan. . ."

I feel my mouth moving to say, "Nuke your mom!" but a series

of numbers flash in front of my eyes: rent, utilities, loans, beer. I tighten my lips.

“What side were you on?” he says.

“I’m a Bosniak, a Bosnian Muslim.” From Ron’s face I read: *A white man and a Muslim?* What he doesn’t know is that human skin is only 2 millimeters deep. It takes a leaf to cut through it.

“You people really should stop all that.”

“All what?”

“All that stuff.” The thin vein on his forehead pops up. “You know what I’m talking about. You think you’re better than us. But you’re nothing, mean nothing to us. You’re nothing but little tribes. Simple thugs.”

Now I’m tied into something new which has no connection to me or reality. “I guess you’re right. We’re violent, you know. That’s why I’m here. We’re thugs. Violent, dumb tribes. A dangerous mix of bad blood.”

“Dude, you’re all fucked up. You start wars, deal drugs, and then you come to us for help.”

“All fucked up, Ron.” I try to conclude this conversation. I go back to work. *Kapetan* Dragi mutters, “You’re mine, boy. I gave you a chance. I’ll find you, and I’ll end you.” Grandpa holds his mouthpiece and exhales smoke. “This is you, Grandson,” he says, looking down the ravine. “These trees are your parents. This well is you. It’s clear, and it’s alive.” *Kapetan* Dragi’s boots stride toward the wide oak where I lie. Its roots run down the slope, uncovered like tentacles, grasping the buried giants’ heads. I can’t see him, but I feel him. He feels me too. I have to move. The wind picks up, swaying the tree canopy, cracking its branches, causing a shower of leaves. I can smell brandy and naphthalene brought by the wind. There is only one way I can go. I slither down the slope to the well and slip into the water. I can’t feel the bottom. I push myself down—deeper, deeper.

I throw a wad of wire back on the floor and step closer to Ron. “We just bang on people’s doors and start it,” I say in a whisper. I can’t hold back what’s already inside me, what I have carried for so long. “We beat the crap out of them—or shoot them.” I march away into another room. *Kapetan* Dragi would be proud.

Ron’s cellphone rings. He picks up. Jeff is smiling sheepishly, his face stiff. Chris is visibly upset. He goes back to helping me. He looks at me and shakes his head.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Chris murmurs. “Friday night we went out for drinks after work. He was like this then too. I thought he’d stop. It’s like he’s lost his mind.”

I realize Ron is full of angst. I know fear. The only problem is that an ignoramus like him is unable to understand why. That’s when an ignoramus turns into a real dick, a *mangup*. Sometimes he can hide it, but today. . . today he can’t, not even at work. He’s always been that way. He’s afraid that one day someone will come and take his world away. What he doesn’t understand is that he himself has built his world—and therefore its end.

As soon as he hangs up the phone, Ron finds me. Jeff is back in the electrical room. I’m on the ladder again, pulling the wire through the ceiling, while Chris is in the adjacent room sending it to me.

“Hey, Milan,” Ron says, “I have a Franklin F17 semi-automatic. A Glock 45 too. Always by my bed. If someone knocks on my door at eleven at night, I answer with my Glock. That’s if someone gets past the gate.”

I grin. This is amusing. This person has gone from seemingly sane and, to some extent, respectable to a complete lunatic. I imagine him in his gated community. Him and his family in their house that looks exactly the same as the house next door. I picture him punching digits to drive in and out, the heavy metal gates swinging open and closed. I hear the buzz of the automatic lock as he enters. This man with his wife and children, this perfect citizen, locked in, sleeping between his wife and his Glock. I see the irony of him living behind the gate with his artillery, afraid of death while awaiting it at the same time, in his idyllic world where nothing could go wrong. And if it does, he knows he can manage it; he can protect himself because he is *the man*. He’s an American, belonging to the great nation that knows how to fight or how to talk politics.

I walk outside and breathe the fresh air, moist and green. This is new to me. It’s only my third week, and I’ve already run into Ron. Since I left home, I’ve had my share of dicks and ignoramuses at work. I’ve seen the mistrust on their faces when they find out I’m not like them, not one of them. I’ve heard them question me: *Why are you here? What happened over there? Who killed who again? Why? Why don’t you go back home? Where is home?* I’ve heard them even when they silently worked next to me. They’ve never pushed too far, though.

A long time ago, I learned to live at any point in time simultaneously but never in the present. I’ve always managed to ignore

ignoramus and continue, but Ron takes the cake. I look around searching the ground and the bushes by the parking lot as if hoping to find the full bottle Grandpa left for me. A powerful gust blasts through the forest. The sun drills through the swinging canopy into the well. The last bubbles of air leave my lungs. A shadow creeps up over me. Soft ripples spread above my head. Beyond them I see the leaves cascading toward me and a hand sinking Grandpa's tin cup into the water. The earth trembles, the soil crumbles. A stream surges from under me, curling my skin and molding my face. I soar toward the surface, my arms stretching forward—a thick steel blade wedged between my teeth.

I look past the skyline of the neighboring buildings into the hills of Washington Park. Amid the rain-saturated clouds, there is a patch of the brilliant, blue sky—a deep, narrow crack between the dark curtains of ceaseless moisture. I look down at the wet concrete under me. I see April traveling the world and healing children that run barefoot and laugh. She's a doctor. Her husband is a doctor too. They swim in Cape Cod. I turn around and try to find the blur of Mt. Hood on the canvas beyond the city. I can't see it, but I feel it.