

The Smell

Even in Plato, the myth of the cave is also the myth of shelter.

—Blanchot

Sometimes I think the only real home for a refugee is an endless road.

In the second place, it'd have to be a bus. I've spent more time on different buses than in all the camps.

Refuge camps. Of course. These shelters end up in third place. I have nothing to put under number four. I don't seem to even have a 'Top Five' list.

But this, you already know. I will not offer you dull, simple stereotypes of the idea of a refugee. You need to hear something that elucidates the being of a refugee in a different way. It's not a parable or a metaphor, even though it might look like one. It's a true event. It shows what it's like to be well accommodated in a foreign country and yet long for a home to nestle in. And this goes even for a question-mark-inscribing girl like myself, for even though I view 'home' with suspicious eyes, I too long for it in my own peculiar way.

I want to tell you about 'The Myth of the Smell', about the iridescent incenses rising from the simmering myth of Bosnia, as it streams through our refugee bodies. I was at first reluctant to describe the homeland, its fragrances, tints and texture. Honestly, no refugee really has a clear memory of these things. Rather a vague feeling about something that might be causing our quirks, scribbling them down on our genes with an iron quill.

The moment you cross the border of your country, as if carried away by a ferocious wind, you find yourself chanting

like little Dorothy, 'There's no place like home.' Sometimes, nauseating homesickness carries even me away. It makes me think I belong to a people, not the Bosnians, rather the folk of refugees.

At the beginning of our sojourn here, in this silent village at a lakeshore clearing, dug like a hole in the evergreen forests of southern Sweden, we started off the new life by facing a new language. The tongues of the adults twisted and bent in desperate attempts to pronounce even three-word-sentences. 'Oh, come on, for God's sake,' I used to tease them. 'Thank goodness we're not in China or Eskimo land. You wouldn't learn how to say, "May I have some bread?" by the time you'd hit your deathbeds. Be grateful they have supermarkets here so you can see and just take what you need, instead of asking for each item sitting behind the counter.'

I exaggerated, of course. But you should have seen us, walking those clean, broad streets, afraid to look at the scarce passers-by in case they should ask us something. We could not possibly have been mistaken for the locals. I guess the locals hadn't had too many *Gastarbeiters* from the Balkans in this place, so they told us we were surprisingly white and not too dark-haired. Some of us were blond and blue-eyed. Still, you could recognise us from a mile's distance: the ambling, the lowered eyes, the mismatched second-hand clothes, hair styled by brain-numbing winds. But we progressed. Time came when translators were no longer needed. And we learned that the locals didn't walk about so much; when they needed to buy something, they just jumped in their cars.

The new hometown prostrates down a hill-slope to the mirror surface of a little lake that freezes over in winter.

The ice can be so thick that people drive cars across it, to the other side where there is a hotel and an art school. The area is still developing. There are few buildings higher than three storeys, so there's no worry you will kill yourself if you—gazing beyond the horizon—happen to fall over a balcony.

The refugee camp is made of long, two-storey houses, with four to six flats in each. Unlike so many other times, there were now not more than two families sharing a bathroom. Picture frustrated husbands, constantly smoking, whining about the good ole' days, and starving for news broadcasts: *Deutsche Welle*, *Free Europe*, *Voice of America*; their dishwashing, food-cooking wives telling them to move their arses for once; kids taking every opportunity to watch MTV.

'Can you think of a worse place for a refugee than this?' I once asked a Swede who was part of the camp personnel. He was curious, even liked walking among us. Maybe it made him feel the stability of his own being, realise the perks of his own condition. The factory job he'd had was a pest, his marriage was diving into an abyss, and all that jazz, so in need to make a difference in his life, in the world, he was searching his luck here.

'Of course I can,' he said, looking at me with ice-blue eyes. He looked almost like an albino. And straight from a forties film, the hair bright and sleek, an Errol Flynn moustache. He always breathed as if rushing somewhere. It made me keep a distance. Nothing like my novelist lover, Lars. But that story belongs to another camp.

I was afraid he would see the question as ungratefulness, a sign of some Slavic pride. I asked him what he meant.

'You know why,' he said, looking incredulous.

‘Because there is no place like home.’

I just looked at him, my mouth agape. He took me by surprise.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ he went on. ‘Such a cliché, ha? But I’ve been observing you Bosnians for a while now, and I just don’t get it. I mean I do, but it seems to me that you love this—if you will excuse the expression—Bosnia, *över allt annat*, more than anything. You see, these last six months, now that the war’s ended and all, I’ve seen people go back to their homeland for a month or two. In fact, they go as far as buying expired foods, dig for clothes in those yellow UFF containers, walk out on early Saturday mornings, gathering deposit cans and anything else to save for a bus ticket back. They tell me people there expect them to come back with money.’

Since they did not defend the country they might just as well pay back something, it struck me.

‘When they return, they have a different zeal in their eyes and a disappointment at being here. I don’t understand why they don’t just go back there for good?’

Because there really is no place such as home, I thought, but granted him a smile instead of an answer. I used to tease my fellow countrymen for their homesickness, telling them if they longed for their hearths and doorsteps—oftentimes the only remnants of their burnt-down houses—why didn’t they just pack their bags and leave this place where they can’t find fertile soil to nourish their roots. I would say, ‘Bosnia is a rather free country now, so why not set your feet in motion and get the hell out of this paradise with apple trees and leaves big enough to cover your groin?’

Because we are cowards? Is this the correct answer?

Or maybe because we, in our most intimate nooks, in our à deux conversations, really do not believe there is a place-like-home. We suspect that the moment we passed that booth with the sulky face of a border-guard, our homeland was erased and turned into someone else's tabula rasa, left for others to carve the marks of their lives into it. I would tease them, but it would hurt me to see them sag their lips and mutter, 'You're such a wet blanket. A killjoy.' And, with any indication of even the faintest thought that there maybe was nothing left to live for in Bosnia, sneering looks and suspicion—even from those who had begun to think in the same groove—would fall upon the turncoat. It was not an easy confession.

The Swede continued, 'They always talk about Bosnian smells, how wonderful it feels to breathe there, while here they are choking. I find it so condescending. I love the way my country is. What is so better about Bosnia?'

'She can tell you,' I said, pointing at Nijazeta, waddling towards us with a tray, three glasses chinking, lemonade running over their brims. Nijazeta is an old maid, as people have a nasty habit of saying, as old in face as the dress she's been wearing since she was a young woman. Childless, homeless, almost friendless, always shaky as if freezing, her lids only slightly open, the bags underneath dark and swollen. She's been taking care of me for two years. Hers were the first pair of arms around me after my parents and my seven brothers had died. I don't even know how. I hadn't been there to see it, but lying under a sweaty, panting slob, miles away. Damn, it sounds so senseless and matter-of-fact as I say it. I'd rather

someone else tell it. But it's important. It's my background, what drives me as a character, as the manuals of narrative say.

'Nijazeta,' I said, as she shyly put the tray in front of us, avoiding the guy's eyes and uttering a silent 'Hej'. 'This man asks what Bosnia smells like. Could you tell him, and I'll translate?'

She sat down beside me, looked at the little plastic table before us, then began, first softly and diffidently, then more passionately, fiercely and indignantly. 'Our houses smell of cold and fresh lime on early summer mornings after the regular spring whitewashing. This pungent, tickling smell fades away a little for every day that goes by as the year turns around. The summers pullulate with a myriad of outdoor smells, budding trees of lilac, bramble, quince, plums, pears and apples. Meadow flowers bloom in their iridescent colours all the way into wintertimes. The winds never blow like here, incessantly, making you drowsy. They come and go, carried by the smells of seasons. Eddies withdrawing through space like Ramadan moves through time. Sometimes moody, like old people. Sometimes just tired. Or strong, confining you indoors until you start sweating nervously. Or they disappear completely, to later breeze by when the worst heat comes over us.

'In winter, the lime evaporates stingily, fusing with the softly bitter smell of dry tree sap that seeps through the crevices of the stove where it smoulders in burning logs like big incense. These then flow up and down in confluence with other plumes from the stove: veal and mutton, tomatoes, strong red paprika, beans, clove bits scattered over the hot

plates, plum and pear compote, simmering milk turning into a fat crust at the surface that we eat with apple syrup and dark bread. These smells embrace cold afternoons and evenings, rubbing themselves against the cool air, as one would rub one's hands to warm up.

'These Swedish flats smell only of dirty wallpaper, linoleum floors that don't creak when you walk over them, and other building odours. These windows face only the walls of other buildings, or a tree crown, or other windows with shades rolled down to blot them out from foreign eyes.'

The Swede could hardly wait till I finished translating. He seemed to have understood what she was getting at from her face twitching, the oscillations in her breathing and vehement arm movements. 'But for Christ's sake, you're in a refugee camp. Our homes and yards have all the nice smells as well.'

'No, no.' Nijazeta flailed with her arms. 'It's a quality difference. You just don't get it. It's, as people say, indescribable. Bosnian smells are special. They have a certain texture as they move in the air, like fine cashmere. They are sweeter, sourer, bitterer and mellower in their ripeness, like the greeting arms of a father.'

'I think he's got it now, Mum.' I caressed her corrugated cheeks. The Swede was upset and tried to match Nijazeta's patriotism. He said, 'I've read that Bosnia is so war-torn now, that streets are like fetid rubbish containers. Nothing works there. The locals dump garbage in rivers and abandoned backyards. I've heard that people there don't think the world of the country. They are hungry, jobless and frustrated.'

They long to get out and look for a better life elsewhere.’ Then he heaved a breath as if he had plunged out of water, and went on rumbling about everything that that just stank: corruption, drug flow, something about his friends serving in the ‘blue helmets’—better known as ‘Smurfs’—who were constantly offered sex by young girls who reputedly wanted to get pregnant and so cheat their way out of the country. Even I could not listen to this, let alone translate it to Nijazeta. I sipped at my tasteless beverage, avoiding his eyes, turning him the deaf ear till he gave up and said good-bye.

And that is all there is to it. It always cuts both ways. There are no winners or losers. Or maybe there always are losers, and only that. However, I think my Swedish friend was right, in two ways. Such mythologizing, romanticising, and embellishing of the little piece of land that you are born on—and do not learn to appreciate until you get driven from it—is just silly. But he noticed one more important thing—it is an incurable condition. I asked him if there was a worse place for us than this, and he correctly answered, yes. A city would not be better than this forest town. It would bring back memories of the throngs of emaciated people in school gymnasiums and the high ceilings of religious buildings where they’d lived the first weeks of their lives as refugees (as if it were the beginning of a career). All the city stores and boutiques would speak of the things they could, but didn’t dare, buy, for they had to focus on travelling light. Smells from street-kitchens would conjure food to be devoured before somebody else pushed them out of the queue. No, a city would be an even worse refuge.

Still, wherever we are, there remains the *MYTH*, all de-

fined, capitalised and italicised, built up from scratch into one of the most magnificent air castles between Heaven and Hell—inscribed at the nub of the two conjoined H's.

I wish my Swedish friend had been there when Rabija came back after a two-months' visit to her village somewhere in northern Bosnia. Then he would have seen how ridiculously homesick we could be.

Rabija's house was no longer occupied, and the government wanted her to register a 'wish' for her property to be returned to her. She needed to register as a returning refugee. So she hurried back to her place of birth to make sure the administration was working on her case. The authorities had assured her that her house would be emptied of the people then living in it, and returned to her within a year or so, all according to the Dayton convention and the current mood in the neighbourhood. Awaiting the date of the transfer, she kissed her rusty doorknob goodbye and returned to Sweden, even though she had no family over here. She was hoping to get the pecuniary aid that the Swedish government promised to the potential 'returnees'.

As she stepped down from the train in the Swedish forest, the camp folks gathered around her like bees around their queen, and asked what ought to be asked, 'What was it like?'

What could it be like, other than what the Swede described? But every time someone visited the homeland, everyone else spent the time lag between waving farewells and opening greeting arms, in biting their nails, anticipating news, gasping for impressions of the post-war home. The impressions of others that were to become their own.

But almost never would you hear about disappointments. Whatever was said was slanted over with the common closing sentence, 'What can I tell you, even the soil is fragrant back there.'

Then, everybody would relax as if set free, exhaling a month or two of piled expectations. They laughed and chattered, for a moment intoxicated by this happy message that the land itself had sent them, 'Tell them I'm fragrant. Tell them I'm sweet. Tell them I'm beautiful. Tell them I love them.' And a transparent amendment hanging under erasure, 'Just don't send them back for a while, will you! I'm so damn tired.'

Rabija took her time. Reticent. Expressionless. Breathing ceased. Then she reached into the pocket of her washed-out cardigan and exclaimed, 'I brought you a piece of the land.'

My urge took hold of the steering wheel. I lunged forward and buried my nose in that piece of pale dirt and grass, and heaved a deep breath. A second later I was pushed outside of the circle. Everyone wanted to smell the piece of Bosnian earth that had travelled about three thousand kilometres and rekindle their nostrils.

But it had no smell whatsoever. Then again, before smelling it, we knew it wouldn't. Still, everyone happily exhaled, bursting out, 'It smells wonderful,' and chattered for a moment about the peculiar qualities of Bosnian smells, and about how Bosnian food, its breads and meats, were sweeter than the dozens of kinds found in Swedish bakeries and shops. It was all as Nijazeta tried to convey to the Swede.

What about the truth? I wondered, and looked up along the broad road that led to the refugee camp, scoured the

surroundings with my squinting, fallow eyes and waved my hands.

What about it? It doesn't smell good.