

**AN EXCERPT FROM NIHAD HASANOVIĆ'S NOVEL
*ON BARBECUE AND SUNDRY DISORDERS***

Or

How War Never Forgets its Pupils

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PART ONE

Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

Seamus Heaney, *The Tollund Man*

It was obvious he had command of the basics of paddling, though he did display a certain insecurity in steering. He held the paddle clumsily, but his course was straight and he bested the frothing whitewater at the foot of the waterfall with ease. But when he came closer to the land, he started to act as if it weren't a paddle he had in his hands, but rather a white-hot sceptre he didn't want to let go of. He was losing control over his boat, better suited for a lake than a capricious karstic river. He feverishly stabbed the water with the paddle, attempting to direct the bow. His silly-looking yellow rubber boat, in which he barely fit, was only spinning faster.

At first glance the young man seemed glad of his inability to steer the vessel, he seemed to relish the comical situations his clumsiness got him into. That was just bad acting. His yelping sounded false, his panicking no one took seriously, because everyone knew who they were dealing with: a man in his late twenties, whose yelps were at odds with his age. It was obvious that he was putting on a show for the audience on the bank of the Una, that he wanted to make them laugh, and garner sympathies. The results were dismal: some were indifferent to the paddler's monkeying, others smiled and pitied him, or furrowed their brows in vicarious embarrassment... Such were the reactions of the small party Erol had gathered on his property by the river bend, which looked out on several eyots in a state of ecological crisis and a sensual waterfall opposite.

The lad, stocky and hairy-chested, tied the boat to a willow tree. He went up the steps made of railway sleepers. Erol was happy to see him. He knew him superficially, like he knew his

father who had also bought a parcel for next to nothing in the sacked Serb village. He also knew the young man was troubled by strange fears, which may have been the very reason for the cordial welcome Erol extended. He invited him to eat with them, which the guest accepted without hesitation.

The newcomer went unnoticed only by the two workers hired by Erol. They stood on a pile of boulders, testing their strength. Their employer wanted to fortify the bank, eroded by vernal and autumnal floods, with stones; he was going to cover this protective rim with a layer of soil and plant a row of alder trees. But it looked as if the two of them were out to thwart his plans. In their drunken revelry they were pushing a boulder towards the river. They yelled more savagely with every push, the excitement grew with every echo the surrounding hills returned. The boulder tumbled and rumbled down into the river, splashed and sank into the pellucid depths. The duo roared with joy. Their reasonless act amused the company at the table. Erol, who was talking to the guest from the boat, enquiring as to whether life was good, laughed too. He forced himself to say, "Hey, are yer off yer..." and continued to pick at his chicken wing. "The sor' of people I employ..." he mumbled.

Although it was May Day, it had been decided that the custom would be flouted, that a lamb would not be slaughtered. They made do with barbecuing, because that required less effort: no slaughtering, no skinning, no hassle with the spit. The meatballs Erol had brought from Travnik were eaten in the morning, in the first sitting. Later, t-bone steaks, shish kebab and chicken were put on the table, one after the other, as well as hot sausages which squirted jets of fat when pressed with a fork.

Selver had no reason to delight in the feast – he was a vegetarian. At some point, the aroma of hot trouts prepared in their own juice and seasoned with parsley and garlic spread about. He nervously glanced towards the fish and the American who was sprinkling them with lemon juice. Selver was frowning, unsure of whether it was because they were eating what he had given up on, or because he had given up on what they were eating. He caught himself relishing the air saturated with barbecue smoke, his mouth watering. Still, he wasn't giving in to the temptation. He stuffed champignons with Gouda, topping each with a sprig of wild mint and seasoning them with a mixture of spices he'd devised himself. He lined up the mushrooms in a tray he fashioned out of aluminium foil. Then he covered the tray and put it on the embers. Tasty as it was, that dish could not serve as reliable lining to a lad who had opted for domestic beer.

Šefik, too, endeavoured not to attach too great a deal of importance to the feast. He was closer to an ascetic than a glutton; truth be told, he did help himself to a bite or two of the shish kebab, although he preferred the salad. Moreover, he wasn't in the mood for alcohol. (Not as of late, that is. He drank in cycles: for months he wouldn't have a single drop, only to binge for weeks, almost to the point of self-destruction.) He quenched his thirst with fizzy drinks, unless someone opened a bottle of beer and shoved it in his hands, without asking if he wanted one, wishing to see him in better cheer. Still, alcohol couldn't help him get rid of the anxiety which seldom left him. He did relax, to an extent, earlier that day, when he was starting the fire for the barbecue, arranging the kindling into a miniature wigwam, with great commitment and pedantry. "These twigs, they're like those Tibetan

mandalas,” he expounded, in Selver’s presence. “The more trouble I take with them, the more I’ll gloat watching them swallowed by flames.” Later, Erol and the American found him alone, staring at the flames that licked the twigs and splinters. They startled him out of his pensiveness. Leaving the two of them to tend the fire, he went over to the long bench, fudged together out of four by twos, without a word. He sat to watch Selver and Mirela play badminton. Cigarette in mouth, he kibitzed half-heartedly. Finally, he wandered off towards the shady grove of willows by the river. He hung about the groups of picnic-goers scattered in the meadows and orchards. They were playing cards, getting drunk and ruminating in the May Day sun, which portended heats unusual for that time of year.

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The day would be remembered for the hot wind and the wide sky borrowed from July. The wind and the sky contributed to the festive delirium, people bathed, though the river was still too cold. The surroundings echoed with the clamour of the bathers, those rheumatics and kidney patients in the making, who leapt into the water from the willow branches or the ferry stranded on the bank. Some plunged in swinging from a fire hose vine.

The American was giving a lecture on dowsing to a young man who came with his wife and two children. He had inherited the gift of divination from a distant, nameless ancestor. He was boasting that he’d found a well with his dowsing rod at somebody’s property near Petrovac. The husband listened attentively.

“Now everyone goes to that lucky guy, you know,” he stressed proudly, in his dignified, soft English, “to get water.” He lived on the first floor of a house, which Erol let him. In the first week after he’d moved in, he simply couldn’t get a good night’s sleep. As an experienced dowser, he had determined that his entire bedroom had been exposed to ground water radiation. Rather than moving his bed to another room, or simply moving out, he had devised a contraption. “I put a copper rod under the bed and plugged it into the wall outlet. It creates an electromagnetic field and protects the sleeper from the negative underground radiation. My insomnia disappeared. In the olden times, they used to build houses by first letting a flock of sheep wander around. They’d dig the fundamentals where the sheep lay down to sleep. Dogs have a sense for that, too: a dog circles around till he finds a good sleeping spot. Never build a house where it’s teeming with ants, where cats sleep or snakes hatch. If a cat sleeps there, it must be a bad place.” He took a swig from his bottle of Guinness. He was the only one drinking it: not once did he point to the crate of his favourite beer for the company to help themselves. No one held it against him, nor did they think him a miser, presumably because he was an American, a fat American, at that. They knew he wouldn’t mind if someone reached for a bottle of Guinness, but it went without saying that there was an invisible line of private ownership drawn around the crate.

Stiff with curiosity, one person listened to the American’s English rolling through the hot air. It was the young man from the boat. He fixed his gaze on the fatty and cocked his ears. His eyes were sparkling. He couldn’t understand anything of what he was hearing, he’d only catch a word here and there and repeat it

triumphantly, which some found amusing. Finally, he said to the young husband: "Could yer translate for me? Ask him where he's from."

At that, the American smiled to the stranger, making sure his smile was not condescending. He said he was from the sticks in the prairie, and that he was a humanitarian worker. That was just an overture, for the youth chattered and chattered, and the questioning didn't cease for almost half an hour. His fit of inquisitiveness was of such magnitude that the fatty was unable to apply himself to his sausage, which was smiling up at him from the plate. Stuttering with impatience, the lad inquired about American megalopolises: Los Angeles, Chicago, New York... The young father, who taught English at a secondary school and various situational English courses, fluently rendered his broken questions and remarks which showed the lad's fascination with the splendour of great North American cities. "St. Louis is a wealthy city, right? I've go' relatives there", he boasted. Then he hung his head and stared at his empty, greasy plate.

"Well, why don't yer go t' them, t' St. Louis?" a plump blonde, the interpreter's wife, teased him. She was playing poker dice with Mirela, watching over her child, asleep in the pram.

"No, no, no!" He waved her suggestion away. The young man's bristly hair seemed to stand on end. Not only was he expressing exaggerated fear, he was also giggling, aware that the blonde was joking. It seemed that he liked the role. "There's grea' big spiders in St. Louis. And snakes, too. Giant snakes. Don't wanna... ge' bi'en. Don't wanna."

Her attempts to convince him that there were no venomous snakes or giant black widows in the streets of that city, and that he

could live nicely there, just like his relatives, were futile. He listened in disbelief, crooking his lips into a disgusted grin. “D’ you really think there’s no spiders there? You sure?”

She turned her head towards the table and cast her dice, feigning annoyance. Obviously, she didn’t care about the game as much as she wanted to spur Erol’s weird neighbour. She expected a riposte, but the young man just shrugged and went mute. He stared at their score sheet. Without pen and paper, relying solely on the capacities of his mind, he started to add the numbers in the columns out loud, with extraordinary speed. His routine rewarded with laboured admiration, he quickly moved on to demonstrate his mastery of more complex mathematical operations: he converted metres into inches, and vice versa, motivated by the presence of the American. Mirela then gave him random numbers, from which he extracted square roots, to the sixth decimal place. He shot the results out with such confidence that no one suspected their accuracy. That was, presumably, the satisfaction he got for his retreat before the blonde a moment ago.

“We measure length in metres”, he turned back to the American, “an’ t’ Americans measure i’ in inches. Is there owt smaller than an inch, like we’ve go’ t’ centimetre, millimetre?” In his confusion, the man pondered before concluding: “Well, no... you say half an inch, quarter of an inch, but, as far as I know, there isn’t anything smaller than the inch.”

“I knew it!” the lad exclaimed. He turned towards the blond provocateuse. She didn’t pay attention to him, as she was busy with a more pressing matter: she was looking for a safe shady area for her baby in the pram.

About hundred metres from there, a whimsical car rushed across the derelict railway tracks and went down the macadam road which snaked towards Erol's property. At the wheel of the battered Renault 11 was a much beloved character. His girlfriend, petite, barely visible, sat beside him.

Everyone was gladdened by Kornelius's arrival; the euphoria caught even those who didn't know him well, like the two young spouses. His friends patted him on the back and hugged him as he laughed, bulging his manga-eyes. Instead of a hand to shake, Erol offered him a bottle of beer cooled in the river. "What's this? A relay baton?" said Kornelius, and quaffed down a deep draught. He was one those strapping people, popular on account of their simple cordiality, benevolent appearance and penchant for silly antics. Kornelius's extreme hospitality was much talked about. His small house in Brklja, people said, was open to all visitors, at all times. He invited everyone to his carousals. He'd stand on the threshold and announce to the guests: "Do whatever you like!" That principle he didn't relinquish even after someone had stolen a stack of CDs at one party, and, on another occasion, his electric shaver, and a pair of binoculars, the loss of which he much rued.

The calculator lad moped. They'd neglected him. He was glancing about, preying on a signal from afar. After a couple of minutes he went towards the river. His embarkment was witnessed only by Erol: taking more drinks from the crate submerged in the Una, he cheerfully waved to him and invited him to pop down again. From the way the neighbour paddled towards his property, swiftly and with determination, it looked as if he were driven by an obligation.

The culprit of his marginalisation sat on the bench. He wasn't even thinking of extracting square roots, nor did he endeavour to show any extraordinary abilities. He only sat his girlfriend in his lap and put his chin on her shoulder. He put his arms around her, and the tiny girl, Sunčica – Sunny, as they called her – all but disappeared in his embrace. One could only see her eyes, brow and tresses of black hair. An hour later he went to play with the daughter of the young couple.

He first paid attention to the little girl after a small incident: the Frisbee she was tossing all over the meadow had landed in the river. She ran over to Mum and Dad crying, to deliver the horrible news. Dad went to the bank – the red Frisbee was nowhere in sight. When her mother finally consoled her with empty promises, the girl went towards the meadow again. She stopped in her tracks when she saw Kornelius, the ginger giant who winked at her with his expressive eyes and wiggled his ears like a cat. She eyed this large creature in a Hawaiian shirt, inquisitively stared at his face, rocked back and forth, hesitating to move on. Kornelius asked all the standard questions. She wasn't shy, she divulged her name and age without reticence. Then she sneaked over to her brother in the pram. She rocked the pram, with more and more force, as her brother squealed in terror. Infuriated, her mother told her off, telling her to find some other way to amuse herself. The girl marched off, zigzagged across the meadow. "Oi, you!" shouted Kornelius. She went over to him. He pretended not to recognise her. "Who's she?" he said to her parents. "Who's this bairn? Where'd you find her? Where's Azra, why didn't you bring Azra? A-haaa! I knooow her – this is Asmira. I saw her playing by t' market. Asmira, how's it going?"

“Cu’ i’ ou!” She swung to hit him. She couldn’t get her scampish smile off her face. “I *am* Azra!”

“If you hit me, you’re gonna grow a beard, like me.” He ran his palm across his cheeks. They were rough with several days’ stubble.

Azra lowered her arms. She eyed his beard, the hair on his chest, his hairy forearms. “What’s this?” she pointed to a birthmark near his elbow.

“That’s a nice little button. When you touch it, I switch off.”

The girl carefully touched the mysterious circle. The giant froze. Her exhilaration was all the greater when he, after another touch to the birthmark, came alive again. Getting used to the magic, she slowly switched Kornelius on and off, cutting him out mid-sentence, mid-movement. He immersed himself in his role: the moment Azra reactivated him, he’d continue exactly where he’d stopped, he’d finish a motion, a thought ... The child was bewitched by the power granted to her – she could lord it over a grown man. She pressed the birthmark in short intervals, and Kornelius, his speech and movements jerky, looked like an android the worse for wear. At some point she switched him off, and he fell into a make-believe state of unconsciousness, his gaze empty, his muscles stiff. Thus petrified, he had to suffer her pushing his fingertips into his mouth. When she turned him on he pretended to be surprised at the position of his hand. The girl was ripping with laughter.

Mirela soon got bored with the show. It had lost its initial appeal as the child started to conduct moderately sadistic experiments, shoving Kornelius’s fingers into his mouth. What was happening on the Una was more interesting: a small wooden boat, manned by Selver, Šefik and the two workers of Erol’s, was rocking

on the choppy waves at the foot of the waterfall. On several occasions it leaned ominously. When they reached the slow water, one of the workers stood up, jutted his chest and spread his legs, pressing his feet to the sides. The boat rocked in an ever-increasing amplitude. The water was coming in over the sides, but that only thrilled him further and he dismissed the warnings his colleague gave him. He rocked the boat more and more furiously, until it finally tipped over, sending the four adventurers flying and splashing into the breathtakingly cold water. The other worker, the one who'd quailed, emerged first, his eyes bewildered. He immediately swam towards the land, leading the party. Selver and the culprit of the shipwreck followed. They were pushing the boat, filled with water, screaming with excitement. Šefik was closing the rear. He finally managed to wriggle his way out of a spiral stream which held in its embrace Tetra Pak cartons, bottles, pieces of Styrofoam and other such rubbish. He silently followed the others, fumbling with the paddles.

The blue-lipped castaways made their way to the land. To Šefik, who seemed exhausted, Mirela offered a long knotty stick. He grabbed it with some sort of revulsion, held on to it just as tightly as was necessary to keep his balance as he stepped ashore. The other three men used buckets and paddles to get the water out of the boat. When it was light enough they pulled it up the bank. Then they tilted it slowly, till they emptied it. Finally, they sat on the grass to rest.

“Look at that.” Mirela nodded towards the shoal in the shade. A plastic bottle, its neck cut off, jutted out of the silt, surrounded by rocks. “Must be some angler’s.” She stooped and picked it up, held it up above her head. The sun illuminated the vessel: a couple

of loaches were swimming inside. “I’ll take responsibility for this”, she said. “I don’t like killing for a hobby.” She spilt the content in the river.

Indifferent, Selver continued to swipe sand and soil off his shorts. However, that worker of Erol’s (the dafter one) didn’t like the piscine liberation ritual. He greeted it with a scornful grimace, making sure Mirela noticed.

She played his pedagogue: squatting beside him, she kept silent for a while. “I know. What I’ve just done means nothing to you.” (He startled, probably not because of what she said, but rather because of the way she said it. He disliked her style: she always made sure her enunciation was correct and refined.) “When you were little, you too stunned cockchafers, the most torpid, most harmless insects on the planet. You’d tap them on the head, put them in a jar and watch them expire without air. Or you ripped the heads off fireflies, and stuck the rest, the glowing body, to your forehead, with spittle, didn’t you?”

“We all did that.”

“I didn’t.”

“And I butchered ants”, Selver joined in. “With a safety razor.”

At that, the worker added how he used to like nothing better than to catch a pigeon with a cardboard box trap. One pigeon, live, he slammed with all his might against the garage door, killing it.

“But why?” asked Mirela. “You are a lunatic!”

“T’ see wha’ would ‘appen ...” He wasn’t very talkative, and was in no mood for further discussion. “I’m off to fetch a beer.”

“Get me one, will yer?” said Selver. Then he addressed Mirela: “You keep a bird in a cage at yours. Why don’t you release him, too?”

“My monk parakeet couldn’t make it in these parts. He would end up eaten by crows.”

“So you torture him by keeping him in t’ cage instead.” He climbed up a willow tree. “’Cause they were simple. That’s why I killed ‘em. Or I thought they were simple. Ants, grasshoppers, lob worms...”

She expected more words, but her best friend provided no further explanations. Leaping from the branch, he hugged his knees and, with a thunderous meow, dove into the green of the water.

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Erol turned down his radio, which had been blasting R&B and rap chants since the early morning. Those who weren’t dozing in the caravan or ruminating by the Una had opted for some other form of inactivity. Šefik stared at the inshore vegetation. The rippling of the water cast reflections on the tree tops. Observed for a while, the glaring foliage looked like a jacket of most wondrous material, a bed of flowers, a jaguar hide, a suit of chain mail... The American lolled in a hammock strung between two trees. His hanging bed could barely withstand his weight, the two young trees bent towards each other, as if to confer on what to undertake. Had Erol and his guests had more mental energy at their disposal, they would’ve surely caused all the picnic-goers, from Račić to Ripač, to attain the bliss of immobility. They would’ve tranquilised the

forests of Lohovo hills, which undulated under the blasts of curmudgeonly wind.

But the tranquillity was disturbed by the arrival of a familiar figure. This time, Erol's neighbour came by foot, down the trail which snaked along the river. A white dog pranced about him: he wanted to seize something which glistened in the young man's hand. That something the lad waved like a flag. Not for long: he felt shame as soon as he read disgust on Mirela's face. The young blond mother regarded him reproachfully, too. He threw the raw fish, found god knows where with its belly bitten off, far from where he stood. The dog ran for it and found it with ease, but he hesitated to take a bite. He looked round, cowered, he had to make sure no one was endangering him. Finally, he crunched his May Day treat. That his muzzle was lupine spoke nothing of his nature. Frightened, shy, dumb, ownerless, he was wont to hang about humans or observe them longingly from a distance. All it took was a quiet "shoo!" and he'd retreat immediately.

The lad reimposed himself on the company, entertaining them with his infantilism. He even seemed flattered by their teasing. In a fit of self-confidence, he mustered up the courage to guess Sunny's, Mirela's and the young mother's ethnic background, on the basis of their physiognomy. "You're a Croat" he guessed, "and you a Muslim..." They refused to reveal correct answers, taking pleasure in letting him infer. And even if they had said what they were, ethnic categorisation, rigid as it is, would have summoned topics from hell.

About that time, the blond wife announced she and her family would soon be going home, and the young man, pretending to shiver, repeated that it was a good idea to go now rather than

later, because... one should be wary of the dark, especially after midnight. Then he mumbled, as if to himself: "I'm afraid of female vampires."

She said nothing.

"Wha', you don't believe in vampires?"

She waved her head: no.

"Vampires! They jump on yer and suck yer blood. Hence the folk expression 'bloodsucker'. That's *symbolical*, like. You don't think they exist? Summat's not..." He frowned and fell silent. He then claimed he encountered female vampires from time to time, that the wardrobe in his room was home to not one but two of them, and that he dared not open it, lest they should suck his blood.

"Well, what do they look like, these female vampires of yours?" the blonde interrupted.

Mirela was restlessly tracing shapes on the table with the palm of her hand. "He frightens me. Stop interrogating him, please."

"They've go' gowns, long, white gowns, like bed sheets. They visit me at night. Oooooo, I don't wanna talk abou' 'em." A smile flashed underneath his flat nose. He revealed a row of healthy teeth, separated like those of a comb.

Erol stepped in and asked him how he cultivated his teeth, and if there were any women in his life. The youth answered readily, but this only served him as an excuse to start yammering about some fixations and phobias of his. Sunny took him up on it, but he couldn't listen to her, he covered his ears, got up and paced round the table in circles. Then he took his seat again and rejoined the conversation. An elderly man, accompanied by a woman of his

age, was leaning on the property fence. He listened to their small talk. "Is 'e boring you?" he said.

"No. Let him stay with us." The tone Erol used was exceedingly familial, the kind of tone one often hears in loud neighbourly exchanges. He didn't know much about the young man's mother and father. They were refugees from Bosanska Dubica, working in Germany, in Neu-Ulm, where their only son earned his living as a lawn mower driver.

The man, bright-faced, wondered how come they didn't spit-roast a lamb.

"Some other time, neighbour!" Erol laughed, too lazy to be more inventive.

The *Gastarbeiter* wearily said: "Go on, son, go home" and he went on walking with his wife.

As his parents were going out of sight, the lad withdrew into himself. He didn't utter a single word after they were gone. When he caught an opportune moment, he sneaked away from the company. In the ensuing minutes he patrolled round the parked cars, eyeing them, seemingly curious. The couple was getting into a small car with their children. The youth neglected to say good bye. As they were leaving, he circled round the foundation of Erol's future (permitless) holiday home, his gait stern, hand holding hand on his back, like a building inspector. Then he suddenly hastened down the meadow. It took him a couple of moments to scamper off from the property.

Mirela had been watching him the whole time. "Did you see what he did?" she said to Selver. "What do you think, why did he go to the cars? Why did he pretend there was something interesting about them? He didn't leave immediately, when his father asked

him to. What do you think, why? He didn't want us to think that he obeys his father. Obeys him without question."

"Yeh." Selver took a draught of beer and snorted. After a few seconds he spoke again, told her what Erol had told him about the lad. Father had married his son to a girl from the village of Konjodor, but as soon as she realised whom she'd married, the bride ran away to her parents and filed for a divorce. The lad tried to justify himself, said that wife of his minded everything under the sun, like his hairs in the basin, from shaving, and she'd left him because of that.

"I don't believe he was married at all" said Mirela. "Doesn't matter... I've noticed he likes to evoke scenes from horror films. He said: 'In one film a husband got fed up with marriage, so he grabs a knife, and bam! Stabs the wife in the back.' Horrible. He interrupted Sunny when she was retelling that vampire film. It would appear he can't stand that kind of horror films. He was afraid to listen, said 'Stop it, don't talk about that!' and covered his ears. He's begging her to stop, and his face is still happy. That gave me the creeps – frightened, but happy. He made a circle round the table, to calm down. And that bit about nocturnal female vampire attacks... Isn't it telling? It's not vampires, but female vampires."

Selver emptied his god knows which bottle. "I can't think any more." He stood up to walk a little.

"Why are you drinking so much?"

"Well, it's a holiday, luv."