

The camp appeared over the weekend. All winter rumours had circulated that the refugees out on the Rakovička Highway, halfway between Sarajevo and Kiseljak, would be moved after the last snowfall. The rumours could be reliably dated to October, when an early cold snap had brought an influx of Roma from Stolipinovo, swelling the camp's population to several hundred, so that the Albanian boys were forced to sleep in shifts, three or four bunking down under the white canvas of a UNHCR-issued tent, while the others waited their turn: standing around, sniffing at the cancerous fumes of burning tyres, or else off somewhere fighting, with fists and broken bottles and frightening intensity. Oh there was no doubt about it, the refugees were going stir-crazy, all crowded-in higgledy-piggledy on top of each other on a too-small parcel of land between the road and the river. Out there, where they'd been dumped, like so much bad rubbish, rumour and madness spread almost as fast as gastro and twice as deadly. By mid-winter it had travelled beyond the camp, hardening, over glasses of throat-burning plum brandy, into crystal truth. The refugees were coming. Sure and certain and nothing to be done about it.

Sure and certain, that's what they told each other, out at Prazno Polje. The refugees were coming. Sure and certain and sooner rather than later. Just as soon as winter is done with.

Just as soon as winter is done with, they said. But winter was done with and spring had come and gone, bringing driving rain and the flash-floods that every year were declared an unprecedented national emergency. The refugees, in the absence of any other options, had settled down into the mud, watching on with gloomy resignation as the river took one tent and then another, sweeping away in a coffee-coloured deluge, the small, precious mementoes that this family or that had managed to save from the wreckage of a previous life. The rain achieved what the snow hadn't and most of the folk from Stolipinovo cleared off. Nobody thought to ask them where they were going before it was too late and they'd gone. In the meantime, the feuding Albanian boys declared a ceasefire, disheartened by the evidence that even nature had turned against them.

With the change of season, the vacant land at Prazno Polje was transformed into a vast swamp. One morning, picking her way carefully up the slope, shopping bags in hand, Azra Halilović spotted half a dozen men in rubber boots and thin plastic raincoats trudging dejectedly back and forth across the field of mud. It was, to Azra's thinking, a strange, ungainly ballet. She watched them, humming an accompaniment at a volume that didn't quite count as being in her head, but wasn't so audible as a whisper. The men moved first this way, then that, measuring the land in wide, uneven strides and, at odd intervals, pressing wooden stakes into the soft ground. Azra saw that the men carried bundles of coloured cloth, knotting them carefully, so that the stakes—sporting scraps of green satin or pink velvet, rags torn from somebody's discarded living room curtains—came to resemble flags, each one laying claim to some small territory.

That was months earlier and now the mud had turned to dust and most of the stakes had been used, by this person or that, for firewood, or else reappropriated to hold up tomato plants in somebody or other's garden. The rumours too, had settled and finally dissipated. So Azra, returning home from three days' vigil at her sister's bedside at the University Hospital in Mostar, was at first surprised, and then dismayed, to discover a vast white tent—a sparse and colourless big top for some unlikely circus—located a mere three hundred metres from her front door. The tent was far larger than any house in the village. Larger even, than the half-built, Grecian-pillar-adorned monstrosity just back from the main road. The monstrosity, envious voices liked to claim, was financed with the proceeds of war-trafficking. Gentler souls, and the more forgiving, described the architectural aberration as a folly, not doubt brought on by the trauma suffered by Edin Bekić when he lost most of his family during the Serb assault on Jajce. Edin Bekić, bereaved *Mafioso*, had long since vanished, back to Jajce, or else onward in pursuit of the mirage of a Green Card and a new life, some place where he could jettison the more suspect elements of his past. Edin left without looking back, but the house remained, gradually falling into disrepair, until finally it came to resemble one of those other houses, with their caved in roofs or blown-apart walls or land-mined cellars, that dotted the bucolic landscape. Every time she passed one of those ruined casualties of battle, carefully skirting her way past teetering masonry, Azra was reminded again that, God help us, nothing in this world is solid and certain, not even the foundations of a house that you had watched your father build with his own two hands.

When Azra was ten her father took hold of her hands and pressed them down into wet cement, leaving an indent that remained for the next four decades on the doorstep of the family's home in Mihrivode, marking the passage of years. Sometimes, looking back, Azra thought that it might be the last happy memory she had of her father, the weight of his hands on hers, the scent of tobacco and linseed oil that seemed to her some mysterious trace of another, adult world that she couldn't quite inhabit, but caught glimpses of: behind the glass of the Viennese coffeehouse on Vase Miskina, for instance; or in the bathroom mirror, her mother's face a crumpled canvas of yellows and purples in the long minutes before she applied her makeup and plastered on a daytime smile.

Azra wasn't sorry to leave the house in Mihrivode. Marrying Fahim too young and only because he seemed to her everything her father wasn't, his bottom lip trembling when he asked her to marry him. On her wedding day she bent down and placed her hands against those prints. So small, she marvelled, believing she could leave her childhood behind just like that. Not knowing that it had left a mark on her as real and lasting as the handprints of ten-year-old Azra, fossilised in limestone and sand.

Azra's father built a house with his own two hands and then spent the next decade tearing it apart. Not the physical structure, which remained unchanged, even during the worst of the Serb shelling, but whatever else it is that makes a house a home. Her father was, Azra came to recognise, single-minded and methodical in his destruction. There was no frenetic cycle of drunken rampage, followed by tearful apology, of the kind that shaped the fourteen unhappy years of her marriage to

Fahim, but rather a steady dismantling, so that first one child and then the other fled the illusory fortress of the family home.

Azra fled. At speed, and without looking back. Oh it's true, Azra knows something about exile and the fragile dreams that might propel a person out into the world. In this, she is not so different from the refugees who arrive by the busload, dragging behind them bags and children and the small tattered remnants of hope, to which they cling in the absence of anything more substantial to hold on to. Azra thinks of her own hopes as a sort of life raft, a vessel made for one, in which she had been buoyed over rough waters, blown this way and that, until she washed up, quite by accident, here in Prazno Polje.

Four years earlier Azra had driven away from a city whose ruined streets she no longer recognised. On the highway the engine of her 1981 Yugo forty-five rattled asthmatically. She had bought the car when the first rumours of war rumbled over the Jahorina and along the narrow Sarajevo valley. Maybe she had hoped the car would give her a way of outpacing the monster that was bearing down on them all. Or maybe she just didn't believe that the war was coming, in the same way that few in the city believed it and still didn't believe it as the first shells rained down on them from the hills above. Hell, there was a small cohort still holding out in disbelief eight months later, as that most bitter of winters sunk its claws into the besieged residents of the city.

Not believing in the war was a way of staying sane when it seemed as if the whole world had descended into madness. It wasn't, however, an entirely sound strategy for staying alive. Azra knew that the refusal to concede to reality substantially increased the probability that you would be standing on a street corner contemplating the blueness of the summer sky at the precise moment a bullet arced its way toward you. She saw a man killed in just this way on a Sunday morning in the third month of the war. Azra had seen death before, of course. Her mother impossibly thin and drained of colour, in the morgue at Koševo; her father, hooked up to a ventilator, fighting, with every painful gasp against the inevitable; and once, when she was a child, a motorcyclist splayed out by the side of the road on a particularly treacherous stretch down the mountain towards Neum. But she had not seen death like this. Unannounced. An explosion of flesh or else a quiet puff of air, a slumping sideways and a sudden pooling of blood. In time, death became ordinary and unremarkable, so that Azra rarely gave any thought to it, except perhaps in sleep, when she heard again the hollow slap of a man's body hitting the pavement and felt the same nightmarish horror of being rooted in place, unable to intervene and forced to watch, as death unfolded before her. It was only very much later, after they had all emerged from the long siege, disoriented and blinking in the strange light of peace, that she wondered why she had capitulated so easily to a vision of the world imposed on her from the barrel of a gun. She felt guilty, then, as if she might have changed the course of the war in some small way, if only she had refused to surrender a belief in the noteworthiness of death. All of which is to say, peace was only ever relative: the transformation of the urban landscape, was mirrored by a psychological unsettling, so that Azra was no longer sure that she recognised herself.

The house in Prazno Polje was a kind of refuge. At least in those early days, when Azra felt as if she were held together by nothing more substantial than the clothes she put on in the morning and the mere habit of not falling apart. At first, she kept a packed suitcase just inside the front door, as if she expected disaster to befall her at any moment: an earthquake, or a missile strike, or an eviction order. But in time she found herself adapting to the pedestrian rhythms of life in the village and her fear of some impending apocalypse lessened. Nightmares, in which she was endlessly chased across ravaged landscapes, were replaced with less frenetic dreams, innocuous and mundane, so that on waking there remained in her mind only the most insubstantial fragments and even these seemed to melt and slip away in the light of day. Eventually, Azra packed the suitcase away in the sagging summer house at the back of the garden, where it slowly mouldered; splitting apart at the seams.

The camp appeared over the weekend. Azra, walking back home along the highway from the junction, where the 6:15 from Mostar had paused just long enough to spit her out into the long grass by the roadside, caught sight of the tent and was momentarily disoriented. It loomed, silent and empty over the village, and Azra scuffing her way along the same unpaved stretch of road that she had traversed hundreds of times before, felt herself made suddenly strange in this place.

“The refugees are coming,” she murmured. And it’s true. Right at that moment, out on the Rakovička Highway, the refugees are folding up blankets; pressing clothes and shoes and paperwork into plastic bags; telling children—who are half-crazed with anticipation and the general atmosphere of uncertainty—to hush and for God’s sake sit still or there will be a wallop.

At home, Azra switched on all the lights and closed the curtains, so she couldn’t see the camp at all. Sitting at her kitchen table, listening to the distant barking of dogs, she can believe that nothing has changed.

Azra had told the neighbours, even when they hadn’t asked, that the house in Prazno Polje belonged to her uncle. As if the mere assertion would make it so. The house did not belong to Azra’s uncle, who had disappeared inside the Vraca fortress at Trebević in August 1943. As a child, Azra had embellished what little she knew of her mother’s older brother, basking in the reflected glow of a real-life, missing-presumed-dead, anti-fascist war hero. In her head, she pictured her Uncle Alija creeping through the forest at Comrade Tito’s heels or else parachuted behind enemy lines with a knife in his boot and an L-Pill in his false tooth. Azra had created a whole fiction around a man she had never met and sustained it lovingly, until the day she made the mistake of sharing the fantasy with her mother. Her mother had laughed a little and then wept, showing Azra a photograph of a boy who was neither handsome nor particularly brave looking, but shifty-eyed and a slightly foppish look, his hands blurring as he moved them in emphasis of some long-forgotten point and in defiance of the photographer’s expressed instructions to “stand still.” It turned out Azra’s uncle wasn’t an anti-fascist war hero after all but only somebody who was in the wrong place at the wrong time and wasn’t nearly as quick-witted and cleverly-spoken as he had boasted to his younger sister. Azra, disappointed, had laid her uncle to rest after that and given him little thought, until necessity saw him resurrected: no

longer a communist partisan but a new-capitalist landlord and the owner of a house on a small plot of land twenty kilometres west of Sarajevo.

On Friday afternoons, Azra usually catches a lift into Sarajevo with one or the other of her neighbours. She hikes her way up from the tram line to Novi Grad and buys a coffee and a newspaper at the Caffe Bar opposite the apartment where she had lived out the war, only because it turned out that, surrounded by Serb troops and cut off from the city-proper, driving away to some safer place far from the frontline wasn't actually an option.

These days, the apartment is rented by a couple from Tuzla, but she gets the feeling it is not necessarily a long-term arrangement. The aggravation of church bells clamouring on a Sunday morning had seen off three tenants in as many years. It isn't so much the noise, which is considerable, but the insult to political sensibilities, which can only be partially mitigated by the low rent charged. The balcony, located at the back of the building and facing due-East, overlooks a patch of scraggly grass that had, when Azra first moved into the apartment—thirty-two years old and still feeling her way uncertainly through the ruined architecture of her failing marriage—boasted the name Jure Franko Park, but now had no name at all, being nothing more than a no mans wasteland marking the uneasy border with the Republika Srpska. Sometimes, on those lazy afternoons, inhaling the burnt coffee smell that rises up, mingling with the sharp tang of metal and woodsmoke, Azra thinks she could move back to the city, that whatever ghosts had chased her away have now been exorcised from this place.

The camp appeared over the weekend. By Thursday the last of the buses had disgorged its human cargo into the dust of Prazno Polje. From a distance, Azra saw the refugees moving, like people sleepwalking, feeling their way uncertainly. She takes to locking the front door, bolting it from the inside. But she can't keep out that creeping fear: the refugees remind Azra of her own fragile hold on peace and stability and a place to call home.

On one of those late summer days, when the air already seems to hold the promise of autumn, Azra makes her way to the summer house, thinking to retrieve the suitcase from where she had hidden it away years earlier. She hasn't decided to leave the village, doesn't know where she would go if she did, but the suitcase seems like the first tangible step towards something else, some life made over again.

As it is, when she goes to pick the suitcase up, the handle comes off in her hand. For a while she stands there, still, in the half-gloom of the summer house, contemplating the broken suitcase. Then she sighs and kicks it back into the corner, dislodging various precariously propped gardening tools that clatter noisily as she turns away. Back in the house she opens the curtains and pours a coffee from the pot on the stove. Tomorrow she will harvest the late apples from the trees in the garden that she calls hers, but over which she has no real claim. She will work hard, and at the end of the day, sore and aching, she will take a bag or two of apples down to the camp and offer them around. It's not much, but it's something.