

Waters of the Green

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Prologue

The two friends were passing by a small church. While Marko was searching through his backpack, happy to have finally found some shade, Ismet looked at the graveyard. He remembered the day one of his childhood friends had provoked the priest of this church. He shivered as he recalled a dozen policemen chasing them, shots ringing out as they ran for their lives.

– Here you are, my friend, Marko said, giving him a notebook, smiling his usual captivating smile. – This is my gift to you.

Ismet also received a pen, with which he was to write about his childhood, as he was told, going back as far as he could.

– This is one of the most important things you will do on this journey you have undertaken, Marko also said to him. – Lots of tears will moisten these papers as you write, but this is necessary if you want to allow light to enter your heart.

Ismet opened the notebook with reverence, and on the first page found a handwritten poem, the words of which moved him:

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a man;

So be it when I shall grow old,

Or let me die!

The Child is father of the Man;

And I could wish my days to be

Bound each to each by natural piety.

– It's 'The Rainbow' by William Wordsworth, said Marko.

– What a poem! Ismet exclaimed. – So short, and yet so beautiful.

A strange silence followed his last words, during which he fought his rising emotions. Images sprang up in his mind, memories of his distant past. A warm tear hung on his lashes as he passed his fingertips over the line 'The Child is father of the Man'.

Part One

Chapter 1

Dark under the massive rocks that confined it from one side, this stretch of the river grew brighter towards the opposite bank, losing its green colour, lucid over the cobbles of the shallows. This place allowed a moment of silence and rest to the river. Sounds of gushing water preceded it, noise of impetuous pushing through the sturdy rocks that vanished suddenly once the riverbed dropped. Here, unlike anywhere else along this river, the surface of the water was smooth like that of a mirror. Seen from above, round and green, it looked like a surface of a beautiful tiny lake clenched between the cliffs.

But there was a time of year when silence and the impeccably still surface were not the distinguishing features of this place. On hot summer days, its surface would stir and the noise one could hear would echo louder than that of the water rushing further upstream. It was the locals – boys, but also young men – who would cause the noise and stir the waters. They would swim here, play many games, and devise new ones, laughing all the while, grateful that they could spend the hottest hours of the year so joyously. Some, the less patient ones, would find their way to this place as early as the end of April, but most would appear no sooner than July. And they would often spend a whole day here; a piece of bread with a slice of cheese in it, a bottle of water and perhaps a hard, round cake – this was all that was needed.

Many stories were brought back home from this place, many anecdotes and tales of adventure. A winner of a swimming contest would receive high praise from his peers, as would the one who could dive the longest, jump from the highest cliff or do a remarkable stunt – such as a flip – on the way down. And each year an improvement over what had already been seen. But the heroic stories would also be knitted from threads different than the contests or

acrobatic feats. The hearts of the listeners would stir as they heard about a clumsy swimmer who had wandered into deep waters, had fought fiercely the relentless grip of the depths, and was finally rescued. These were the real heroes, many would say, the rescuers, about whose courage and skill stories would be told for years to come. Yes, it was both with passion and with awe that the locals looked upon the silent deep waters of this place. And, as any other miracle of nature, any other beautiful, passion and awe-inspiring creation, this place too had a name. The Green – this was what they called it, this illustrious stretch of the river.

There were, of course, other places along the river where one could spend an amusing hour during hot days, but these places were almost exclusively visited by the younger boys. These shallows were places of their first encounter with this river. That they didn't know how to swim did not matter much. Racing through the water, searching for a stone someone would throw, diving, eyes and nose closed, trying to catch a tiny fish by hands, collecting those strange black fish that looked like tiny frying-pans to them – all these games brought much joy to their little hearts. Still, whenever the older boys would pass by them, heading upstream, they would often become aware of the shallow water around them and would feel a little embarrassed. The fable about a place residing deeper in the ravine was known to them. It was a mark of distinction to go to the Green, a privilege. To swim there, thought many among them, was far more than dabbling in the shallows, probably an altogether different experience. But how different was it? What kind of water filled the Green? Thicker, deeper, cooler water must be residing there, streams much harder to master, yet certainly giving much pleasure to those who succeeded. Would they too be able to do so one day? Oh, how proud and important they would be as they would pass by these shallows!

The heart of each of those younger boys would throb with warm excitement as they imagined themselves swimming, diving, playing in the Green. Some even dared to believe that they would be the admired ones one day, winners of a swimming or diving contest; that they would be those about whom legends would be told. And while most remained in the world of their imagination, never speaking about their ambitions, there were always a few impatient young souls for whom staying aside and waiting brought discomfort and prompted action.

This was how, on a hot summer day, Emir and Ismet, two best friends – boys not yet nine years old – decided to leave behind the shallows and go further upstream. True, the shallows had also brought them a great deal of joy and many enthusiastic stories had been brought back from this place, but curiosity combined with a dose of envy finally prevailed.

It was Emir who had first thought about going to the Green, and it didn't take him long to persuade the other to join him. Ismet had found himself feeling very uneasy lately, playing in the shallows, looking and listening to those who passed by them. He didn't like the noisy bragging of the older boys, and it appeared to him that a few had laughed at him, having seen him immersed in the water that did not reach beyond his knees. Yes, they would leave this place, the shallows, the two friends agreed; they would find enough courage to wade upstream and swim in those deep waters. Still, although the very thought of going further upstream excited him, Emir also worried a little. Aware of his lead and the trouble their parents may cause if they found about their adventure, he warned his friend, – This has to remain a secret, Ismet, our going to the Green. This is how *men* do it, they keep secrets; *boys* tell everything to their parents.

As they were walking along the riverbank, on a pathway that grew ever narrower and ever less lit by the sun, the two friends were rather quiet at first.

It was unknown territory to them, and with eyes wider than usual they looked around themselves. Tall cliffs were on their sides, with an abundance of rocks jutting out from the water that flew mightily beside them in noisy waterfalls of foamy white, while deep shadows hid dangerously silent stretches of dark water.

But as soon as the scenery became familiar – and also because of the enthusiasm they saw in other boys headed in the same direction – their imaginations flared up and the words began pouring out, all the cherished secret wishes that had to do with the Green. They began to tell each other the things they would try in the deep water, individually and together, how they would swim, as did the older boys, correctly alternating arms' and legs' strokes; how they would dive, eyes-open, try to stand on their hands while in the water, jump from the cliffs...

– I would definitely try a flip! Emir said at one point, carried away by excitement, measuring the grandeur of his announcement in the eyes of his more moderate friend.

It was with great anticipation that they advanced, talking happily. But they also listened carefully – especially when they judged they had most of the walk behind them – their hearts beating faster with a noise that resembled a laughter or an excited cry. Were they close to the Green? Had they finally reached it? Had they – oh so unfortunately! – missed one of those legendary contests?

It was a rather narrow corridor they were walking through after half an hour, noisy with the gushing water, and with such large rocks standing in their way that they had to wade into the shallows a few times in order to go round the barrier. This delayed their advance but was not something they worried about. The only thing that made them cautious were the holes in the wall of a

cliff to their side, the tiny caves filled with darkness, especially the openings close to their feet. It was with admiration that they looked upon two older boys who got ahead of them; how daringly they walked, as though certain that, even if danger existed, it would not spring upon them.

Soon, many voices began to echo much louder and Emir and Ismet immediately knew what this meant.

– The Green, Ismet, the Green!

Behind the massive boulders that held the water in the hollow, an imposing sight stretched before them. The cliffs were suddenly far apart, and the space between them filled with glaring light. Colours, a myriad of them, came into existence; suddenly they could see the wide blue sky, the dry greys of the cliffs, of the cobbles of the river bank; but what amazed and delighted them the most was the green colour of the water.

– How beautiful it is! Ismet said, enchanted, his eyes glistening with delight. He had heard about this place, had heard much, but what he had imagined was far behind what he was now seeing.

Emir waded into the river and plunged his empty bottle into the water. Once the bottle was full, he held it to the light.

– Weird, he said. – The water's not green.

The boy thought for a while, looking at the river and then back through the bottle. Ismet approached him, similarly stunned; he took the bottle in his hand and shook it.

– Still no colour, he said, looking at the disturbed tiny specks of dirt. – The water is green in the river; one can take the water out of it, but not the colour.

The two friends searched for a spot for a while, and then occupied one a bit further away from a group of older boys. This choice had been made on

purpose; the older boys were a little too loud and perky perhaps, and since they did not know any of them, it seemed better to maintain some distance. The spot they had chosen was not a bad one. To their delight, the water was lucid in front of them, only gradually becoming darker as one looked away, and they had a particularly good view. Indeed, they were surprised that no one had taken this spot already.

Ismet examined the place carefully from this position. There was no end to his surprise – the Green looked even more imposing viewed from this spot. How widely the cliffs were separated, how broad the river! He had never been at a seaside, but could it really be larger and more beautiful than this? Perhaps it was larger, this could be, but it was certainly not more beautiful! He would tell his friends about this marvellous place. He couldn't wait to see them, to tell them that he had visited the Green! He would do so today; his friends were still there, downstream, where they had left them a while ago.

He looked at the big boulder jutting from the middle of the Green. It was an island which no one approached. Nothing touched it except the tiny waves that slipped under its eroded walls or splashed against them. A transparent ring was visible around the boulder, but this transparency was lost almost immediately: dark green took its place, a thick nuance which was unlike the green he could see around himself. This was a kind of green he should avoid, he thought, the dangerous kind.

A rising noise caught his attention. He saw a group of older boys in the water and observed them for a while. They were swimming quickly, and passing considerable distances diving, even through the dark green. And whenever they emerged from the water or stopped swimming for a moment, loud, lively exclamations would come out of their mouths, reaching not only his ears but also any others who happened to be on the bank.

The boy became thoughtful. As moments passed, all the lightness and joy which he saw in others made him feel a little uncomfortable. He looked around and noticed that he was the youngest there. Was he also the only one who did not know how to swim? He most probably was. Emir knew that he was not skilful in water, and he would not laugh. But would it be the case with the others, with the older, more experienced boys; would they laugh at him?

He looked closer to himself, as though trying to run away from the thoughts that seemed to come to him from the deeper waters. What he saw in the shallows amused him. He noticed a few black blobs moving, turning this way and that, pressing forward, backward. The little creatures seemed to be captured in a tiny pond and were trying to free themselves, often running ashore and then vehemently flouncing, fierce with their tails. These were the tiny frying-pan-shaped fish that, someone had told him, would one day become frogs. Not true, he was certain; yet another tale told to little children; these strange, stupid little fish could grow perhaps, but would never become something different.

He watched the tiny black blobs until all, one by one, found a cleft and escaped, slipping under the dark green cover.

Emir was already preparing himself for his first dive into the Green. Seeing him, Ismet too started undressing. He had only removed his shirt when sudden, loud sounds reached him, giving him a start. He looked in the water and immediately felt immeasurable excitement: what he had been hearing about for so long – the celebrated swimming contests – was taking place in front of him.

– A race, Emir! Look! he exclaimed, pointing to the dark green water.

It was a fierce contest. The many arms were impetuously reaching forward through the water, stirring it wildly, white trails stretching behind the

swiftly moving feet. The swimmers moved evenly at the beginning, but then a figure began leading, separating himself from the line. It was at this moment that the noise of the supporters standing at the bank grew particularly loud, making Ismet's eyes glow with excitement.

The swimmers pressed harder, but no one could reach the leader. He seemed sure of his victory, even daring to look behind himself at one point, boldly challenging the others. And once he reached the cliff and let out a loud winner's roar, a shudder of admiration ran through Ismet. He was looking at a hero, at someone about whom stories would be told! How good, how thrilling it felt to be a witness to this all!

But while Ismet was very excited, Emir showed far less enthusiasm. As though offended by Ismet's reaction and the very contest itself, he said in an unfriendly voice:

– They are fourteen, no wonder they swim like this. And I would certainly be the winner if I were their age. I would be ahead of today's winner as much as he was ahead of the rest!

Ismet looked at him. The expression of Emir's face surprised him more than the words, and he decided not to reply. Indeed, he had sensed that his friend's bitterness might turn against him, as it soon happened.

– And they would all laugh at you because you don't know how to swim, Emir continued. – And what you do? You admire them!

Ismet shrugged his shoulders. He looked at the river, at a dark green spot in front of them, then back at his feet. His friend's remark worried him.

As the winner approached the bank, still laughing and shaking his fists, Ismet watched him with particular attention. He recognised him; it was one of the two older boys who had got ahead of them on their way to this place. As the boy came out of the river, Ismet noticed a mark on his body: a thick scar ran

over his belly, strangely apparent on his tanned skin. This was the first time he had seen such a scar. What had happened to this boy? Had he really been that sick that the doctors had to make such a cut? But that was not important now; he certainly is healthy today – a winner, a hero!

As the winner approached other boys, Ismet was eager to see how they would treat him. But even before his friends shook the winner's hand, congratulating him, Ismet could see that there was something special about this boy, something that separated him from others. He was not taller than his friends, but appeared taller, somehow more upright, and was walking in such a manner that all of his friends made space for him. Yes, there was something peculiar about this boy, apart from the scar.

– I will now go into the water, Ismet, said Emir. – Please hurry if you want to join me.

Ismet flinched lightly. He nervously averted his eyes, suddenly strangely discouraged.

– You go, he said. – I'll come in a minute.

Folding his T-shirt, Ismet looked at the dark green depths and thought about the boy who had won the contest, about himself. He felt small, embarrassed of himself; others were taking part in the swimming contests, were becoming heroes, and he didn't even know how to swim.

It took a while before Ismet waded into the water. Fearfully, he watched his steps over the slippery cobbles as though half frozen, convinced that the older boys had been looking at him since the moment his feet got wet. He looked around once the water reached his thighs and, to his great delight, saw that all the others were absorbed in their games. This realisation set fire to his blood. He started running through the water, as fast as he could, and fell forward once it touched his waistline. The water was a bit cold, and he stood up

immediately, but was stunned by the new experience; how strange this feeling was, this being completely immersed in the water!

The boy needed a few minutes to accommodate to the new, sweet sensation of lightness. The water supported him from all sides, lifted him, twisted, played with him as though he was feather thin. How grateful he was, for this day, for this water, for the Green. How good it felt that he could do far more here than he could do in the shallows. He would try all those things he had told Emir about, all of them.

There, where the water reached no further beyond his waistline, Ismet played many new games. He tried to embrace the water, and then pressed his arms backwards equally happily, experiencing a stronger opposition. And he fell into the water, forwards and backwards, sank his head beneath the surface, eyes closed, and emerged with excitement. Emir soon approached him, and they played together, the old games, but also those that only deeper water could make so exciting: wrestling, jumping from the stones feet first, standing on hands, racing.

– Look at me, Ismet, look!

– Now you look at me! Hey!

The calls changed places; their hearts laughed. This was, doubtless, the most joyous experience of their young lives.

While they were wading through the water on their way back, Emir said to his friend:

– I’ve examined the water at other places, even at those deep spots. But I could never grasp the green colour. It’s really strange – once one touches the water, its colour disappears. Otherwise, it is green!

The two friends sat by the bank, at their spot. And the stories about the Green began to unfold immediately, the fresh experiences. But this

conversation was far from ordered; each interrupted the other, and it happened frequently that they spoke simultaneously. While Emir was thrilled by the ability to stand on his hands, Ismet talked with excitement about the newly discovered possibility to float, to be feather thin; and neither Ismet heard that Emir would try to jump from a taller stone next time, nor did Emir hear that Ismet would try to open his eyes while diving, maybe even catch a tiny fish. Indeed, they were so absorbed in their stories that they didn't notice a presence of an older boy in their vicinity. But a loud smash piercing through the air made them painfully aware of the intruder.

Swiftly, Ismet turned and looked up. The shock kept his eyes riveted on the boy, but then he followed the direction of the boy's gaze. There, just beside him, split in half, he saw a snake. The two pieces were still moving, twisting vehemently, the animal's smooth, brownish skin sparkling strikingly against the greys of the rocks.

– Ach!

Letting out a loud cry, he sprang, not one, but three, four steps away, his heart pounding wildly. The snake was alive, twice alive, its mouth gaping madly. And it was not a small snake, not a short one – it was longer than his leg!

– Ismet! Emir called. – Have you been bitten?

Ismet could not answer. And it also seemed that he couldn't hear anything. Out of wide, horrified eyes, his face ghastly pale, the boy looked at his rescuer, then back at the snake. He didn't move but stood as though frozen. The older boy continued to throw rocks at the reptile, and only when just the stone-greys were visible did Ismet's body loosen a bit. He had to crouch; his shaking knees could hardly support the weight of his body. And he felt terribly, terribly cold.

– You were lucky I noticed it!

Ismet looked up, but his vision was somewhat blurred, and he could not clearly see the boy speaking to him. But a thick scar running over the boy's belly helped him recognise his rescuer.

– I actually had no business here, I just wanted to walk a little, the older boy continued. – But you'd be in a big trouble if I haven't been here, big trouble!

The rescuer's face assumed a rather serious expression as he repeated the words. Motionless, Ismet only looked at him.

Long minutes passed before Ismet came to his senses. It was by a miracle that his belly grew calmer, while the rest of his body needed more time, much more. The trembling of his limbs and the sensation of being cold persisted, both very unpleasant, but the most annoying was the tension that had seized him, the feeling of being under constant threat. Out of wide eyes he looked around, at the holes gaping out of the walls of the cliff, at the pile of stones. Danger now lurked from all sides, from a thousand corners, out of the tiniest hole, behind the smallest rock, everywhere was suddenly dangerous. And there was more than he could see that frightened him, much more; horrifying images flashed before his eyes: the snake's mouth, the rosy glow in its eyes, the glistening skin... How horrifying it would have been to be bitten by the snake!

They had long since left the place where they had been sitting. It was a cursed place, never again would they go past it, let alone sit there. And the thoughts about yet another dive seemed foolish now. No, they had seen enough of the Green, more than enough. All the good memories had been overcast by the shadow of the awful incident, and now they were only waiting for the strength to return to their legs in order to leave this place; firm steps were needed on the way downstream, firm steps and very watchful eyes.

As they waited, the two boys could not help but to look at Ismet's rescuer. He was swimming again in the water, laughing, as though nothing had happened.

– Let's have another contest! Let me now beat you at diving! he was calling to his friends.

Walking downstream took considerably more time than the two boys had imagined. The high cliffs and the absence of light made them feel trapped, and it was with great caution that they took each step. They discovered many new holes on their path this time, far more threats. How thoughtless they had been this morning, how stupid. Almost every protruding rock had something dangerous about it, every stone that happen to be on their way. And all those hissing sounds – had they heard them this morning?

They picked up speed once the sunlight reached them; the place where they had been yesterday was within their reach, one with no tall walls around it.

They felt relief as they sat on the embankment. In front of them, loud and very happy, a few boys enjoyed the shallow waters.

While Emir was starrng ahead, Ismet looked at the narrow gate out of which the river gushed before turning to a much calmer and broader stream. He had entered those gates today, for the first time in his life, and the world he had found beyond had shown him both its pretty and its ugly side. But he could only remember the latter, at least at this moment. He had been in this world today, and god only knew if he would go there ever again.

But as he looked at the shadows caught between the tall cliffs, images other than the awful memories began to appear in Ismet's mind. He remembered the face of the boy who had saved him, how courageous he had been, killing the snake, how upset he had been talking about what could have

happened. This boy was doubtless one of those heroes he had heard about, one of those whom everyone admired. And he had recognised that there was something special about this boy even before the incident, not only by the swimming skills, but also by his quite remarkable bearing.

– Emir... he turned to his friend after a moment of thought, – Do you know the name of the boy who rescued me, the one who killed the snake? His skin is darker; I wonder if he's a Gypsy.

– Ach! Emir replied, as though objecting. – I don't know his name, but I know that he's a Serb!

Ismet's eyes grew wider.

– A Serb? How do you know?

– I know, Emir said in a very assured voice. – And he didn't rescue you; a Serb would never do that.

Ismet gave him a curious look. Fighting the sudden confusion, he let his voice get a little louder:

– But it was he who killed the snake! It would've certainly bitten me if he wasn't there, certainly!

– No, Ismet! Emir cried, irritated by the way his friend spoke to him. – I would have noticed the snake, and I would have killed it! And this boy threw rocks at it only for his amusement, not because of you!

He shook his head; his face grew narrow with anger.

– Do you really think he came there to rescue you? Oh, Ismet, you are so dumb!

An awkward silence set in between the two friends. They were seated beside one another, but it was as though a wall stood between them. Emir shook his head from time to time and would sigh heavily, apparently still angry. And Ismet could hear those sighs very clearly.

It was guilt that weighed upon Ismet as he sat beside his friend. He now remembered how Emir had reproached him a few weeks ago because he had greeted Ivana, a Serbian girl with whom they were attending classes, remembered what his friend had then told him about the Serbs. For them, the Bosniaks, the Serbs were the enemies, as were all other Christians. The best one could do in their presence was to maintain a reserved attitude and keep alert; to trust them, to be a friend with them – this was dangerous, unacceptable, an unpardonable sin. Emir's words, those he had heard a while ago and those he had just heard, echoed in Ismet's ears as he sat beside his friend, motionless and guilty.

– Let's go now! Emir suddenly insisted, jumping to his feet. – I'm really hungry.

As their feet lead them away from the river, Ismet turned and looked back at the gates of the ravine. Something he saw there stirred his heart with conflicting emotions: a group of older boys was emerging from the gates, and it appeared to him that he saw his rescuer among them, the Serb.

The two walked together until they reached the main street of their town, where an imposing monument stood. There would be no meeting there tomorrow, and neither knew when their next trip to the river would be. But once again Emir reminded Ismet that their visit to the Green was not to be told to the parents, and, more importantly, that the incident with the snake was not to be told to anyone.

– From this day, he said in a very firm voice, – only the good about the Green should be told, and only to close friends. Understood? All right then, Ismet, see you later.

The two friends shook hands, and each went on his way.

Chapter 2

It was a hot summer afternoon. And Ismet soon observed that the warmth was not only coming from the sun, but also from the heated road. He slipped out of his sandals once he reached a neat stretch, letting the warmth embrace his wet, wrinkled soles. A horse drawn cart passed by him. He felt pity for the animal, seeing the effort with which it pulled the load. He remembered a legend about how this town had gotten its name, Tutin: it was by the sounds of thundering of the cavalry that had passed through it several hundred years ago. But how large was this cavalry? Very large probably; he would like to see a picture of it; perhaps the schools have it in their libraries.

Once the boy arrived at the street where his home was, a light, pleasant sound reached him, and he came to a standstill. It was a voice upon the notice of which he would turn to the east with his hands raised. It was a muezzin's call, and this time too he answered it with a humble prayer. But as he was about to express his gratitude, he found it extremely hard to utter the words. He thought about the boy who had rescued him, and about Emir; once again, conflicting emotions stirred his little heart.

Soon, Ismet was close to his home. Remembering his friend's last words, the boy approached the gate of his yard. No, he would not tell his parents that he had been to the Green; in fact, he wouldn't even tell them he had been swimming in the shallows with Emir, even though he had got their permission; no, it would be best if he did not tell them anything at all.

His mother met him in the yard; her name was Refida. She was busy with a stack of ćilims – small, traditional Bosnian carpets – but looked at her son

attentively as he approached. She noticed that his hair was still a little wet, and that his eyes were somewhat insecure as he looked at her.

– Where have you been, Ismet? she asked – Swimming with Emir?

Stepping a little closer to her son, she noticed that a whitish circle that had formed on the boy's face a while ago had become more pronounced.

– We have agreed that you wouldn't dive, haven't we?

Ismet nodded shamefacedly, averting his eyes.

– Now could you please help me? Refida said. – Take a ćilim, one from the top of the stack, and bring it to the house.

The boy approached the stack, relieved that his mother did not ask further questions. He was trying to understand why the pattern of this particular ćilim made it so distinct that only this one was to be brought home. But as he reached for it, a horridly loud sound cut through the air abruptly and with overwhelming violence, shaking the windows of the house. The boy felt pain in his ears, sharp stabbing that intensified with yet another blast of intense noise. He fell onto the ground and, as much as he could, pressed the palms of his hands against his ears.

– Ismet! Refida shouted. – Ismet!

The boy was horrified. Not knowing what was happening, he even resisted his mother's hands as she tried to lift him off the ground.

– Get up, Ismet! Get up! Refida cried in panic. – It's me, my son, it's your mother!

Through the haze that seemed to have covered his eyes, Ismet recognised his mother. He grasped her hand tightly, lifted himself off the ground and started to run, turning all the while, watching the sky, there where the danger came from.

His father, Sadik, took him in the arms just as he was about to enter the house. The man had run out, himself horrified by the noise, and was shaken to the bone when he saw the expression on his son's face: he had never seen him so pale, with such wide eyes, so scared. Quickly he brought the boy into the house, closing the door behind himself as yet another shrill tore the sky above their house.

The parents did their best to calm their son once the aircrafts left the sky. It was better now that he had his father and his mother beside him and he was no longer outside, but he still didn't feel completely safe. Out of wide eyes the boy looked through the window, twitching with the tiniest sound, clenching his teeth with the sight of a bird. His hands were still trembling, and his knees, echoes of the awful noise still in his ears. At times, as though lost, he looked around, searching for someone, a soothing hand, a word, an answer to questions that raced through his mind. What was it, the sound? Will it strike again, as violent as it had been, or even worse? Where would he hide himself? And images flashed before his eyes: his mother's hand, his run, the aircraft, his father's terrified face.

Later, around bedtime, once he was able to recollect all the details about the strange incident, Ismet was very confused. His father had told him that there was no reason to worry, that the aircrafts belonged to their country, to Yugoslavia, that it had been a military practise where the pilots were only testing the new wings. The boy did not ask further questions, but found it difficult to believe what he had been told. Alone, he thought about his father's explanation, word by word. No, there was much contradiction between what had been told and how it had been told. Why, if this had all been so harmless, why then had his father been so worried, and especially his mother, with her wide eyes and

the trembling voice? And why had they been so desperate, explaining this all a hundred times to him, as though they themselves needed to be consoled?

For an hour or more the boy fought the confusion. Unable to fall asleep, he got up and headed toward the living room, where his parents sat. But the conversation he overheard as he stepped into the hall froze his heart. He listened, trying not to make a sound.

– It was the Serbs, Sadik! Refida said, her voice fearful and desperate, as though trying to remind her husband of something important. – And it has all happened already, can't you see: Croatia burned in flames not long ago, Bosnia is in flames right now, and the Serbs would certainly not leave Sandžak out, their territory with non-Serbs as a majority!

Ismet listened very closely, feeling his mother's fear deeply within himself; he had never felt this way before, so helpless, so vulnerable.

– I think it will be different with us, Sadik said, forcing calm into his voice.
– We live in Serbia; Croatia and Bosnia are something different.

– But the Serbs cannot be trusted, Sadik! History taught us so – they simply cannot be trusted! And our people know that, they're already fleeing. Our neighbours from the end of the street, the Fejzovićs, fled to Turkey. Shouldn't we also flee?

Sadik waited for a while, thoughtful. Then he said:

– We should not make such decisions quickly, Refida. But we should certainly keep our eyes open. In any case, we should not discuss these matters in front of Ismet, and we shouldn't watch the news when he's in the room with us. You saw how scared he was today, poor kid.

The boy found it difficult to leave the hall without being heard. His whole body shook with the beating of his heart when he came back to his room; what he had heard was more than important to him, it was a secret revealed.

He stood still, letting the mighty beats pass through him. The words he had just heard echoed in his ears once again; now he knew the truth about the aircrafts and how his parents actually felt. How scared his mother had been, how trembling her voice! Even his father, whom he had rarely seen or heard upset, had difficulty maintaining his calm. And they had both tried and would continue to try to hide this from him and would lie to him if something similar happened. But now they were too late.

The darkness around the boy was complete. He looked through the window; surprised, he saw that the yard was not alight, and neither were those of the neighbours. Suddenly, a sense of seriousness enveloped him like a thick, heavy blanket. Perhaps his neighbours had also fled to Turkey, as did those Fejzovićs. But they were there, he and his parents, they had stayed; why wasn't their yard alight?

A shudder went through the boy as he realised how dangerously silent it was all around him. He was now aware of the enemy, of danger, aware that this was an old enemy, about whom he had incidentally learned just a moment ago. But wasn't this the second time today that he had heard about the Serbs, how bad they were? Emir's and his mother's words came together in his mind: *The Serbs cannot be trusted.*

The boy slept just a little that night, turning distrustfully in his bed. What he had heard his parents say repeated itself many times in his mind.

The following day Ismet spent alone in the yard. He was not allowed to go beyond the fence and was asked to stay close to the house. Refida would often come out of the house and watch him, a few times very upset when she couldn't spot him immediately.

– You stay near, Ismet, she would remind him. – Your father said so, remember?

As instructed, the boy played mostly in front of the house. Alone, bored and also annoyed by the old tricycle that no longer fit him, he tried to devise new games. He began to stack stones, trying to form a cube of them, and then destroyed his construction and built it again as he found larger, less rugged components. Then he tried to form something different, a pyramid, but with little success. It was with sadness in his eyes that he looked at his favourite playing spot, close to the fence, there by the plum tree in the shade. He had played there just recently, had formed shapes out of clay, a tiny man, a tiny cow, had ran after a ball, climbed the tree. But today he couldn't, and he understood why.

Again and again the boy thought about the aircrafts, his parents' fear, his mother's distrust, his father's reserve. Now, with a day's distance, it was all very strange to him, as though a dream. All had been well just the day before yesterday – the games, the friends, the parents – but then it all changed abruptly. It was as though he had awakened in a different land, unknown and unfriendly to him, a hostile land where he had to learn everything and everyone anew.

Many questions arose in his mind. Who were the Serbs, who the Croats, and who were they, the Bosniaks? Since when had these people began to hate each other; had it all started a hundred years ago, two hundred? And why have they been living together for so long, if they hated each other so much?

He couldn't answer a single question but was grateful that he knew someone who would help him, someone who, as it now turned out, was aware of all this. His friend Emir would clarify this for him – he knew who the Serbs were.

His father appeared at the gate after a while. Ismet didn't expect him that early – shortly after he had his daily piece of fruit – and it also surprised him

that he stayed with him much longer than usual before going into the house. The boy enjoyed the minutes they spent together, working at the stone-cube.

– Perhaps you could be an architect one day, his father praised him. –
Would you like to be one?

The boy smiled. He did not quite understand who an architect was, but he nodded his head; at least it sounded nice.

Somewhat insistently, Sadik then asked him to come with him into the house. But the boy needed a few more minutes to finish the cube, and the time was given him.

– But only ten minutes, agreed?

With his father's help, the stone cube now resembled a tiny apartment house, and Ismet let himself be carried away by the finishing touches. It felt good to place a chimney on top of the construction, to improvise the terraces, put the vehicles close to the entrance, put an unusually large clay housekeeper in front of the house. Had it not been for their neighbour, Ramo, entering the yard, the boy would have forgotten what he had promised to his father.

– Oh, Ismet is here! the man exclaimed happily, smiling at the boy. –
Ismet, the 'pure one', 'one with an infallible heart'.

Ismet also smiled. He liked the remark; this was what his name meant.

– Is your father at home? Good; I want to talk to him.

The neighbour's visit permitted a few more minutes to the boy, but even this was not enough for a perfect construction. He would finish it later, or tomorrow; now he had to go inside. But what would he do in his room, alone, for the time Ramo was in their house?

The boy walked carefully through the hall. The door of the living room was slightly open, and he could hear Ramo. There was something strangely serious in this man's voice, but this alone was not enough to make him stop and

listen. But when he heard the word “aircraft”, Ismet stepped closer toward the door.

– And this is not the first time such subtle elimination is taking place, Ramo was saying. – Even in the 1960’s the Serbs were heavily involved in such attempts. The government stood behind it even back then, as it does now in 1992. The Serbs have taken an oath to uproot us, and I’m afraid they will not stop until they achieve their goal.

Not unfamiliar words reached the boy; what was new were the details.

– I understand your concerns, Ramo, Sadik began, coughing a little, himself dissatisfied by his rather unconvincing tone. – But times are different now, and one cannot make a connection with what had happened decades ago so easily. No, I will not go to Turkey, and neither can I send my family there. I think this will all finish soon and finish well for us all.

– But, Sadik, please! Think about Ismet...

It appeared to the boy that he heard his mother’s voice at this point. No other words were spoken after his name had been mentioned, but a sound that followed shook him to the bone: it was the first time in his young life that he heard his mother crying.

Pressing his lips tighter together, Ismet resisted his need to move, to breathe more deeply. He continued to listen, motionless, enduring the pain in his throat. It took a while before Ramo’s equally serious, equally solid voice followed.

– You are too much of an optimist, Sadik. But remember all those Bosniaks who, just a few months ago, thought the Serbs would not attack them, that Bosnia would be left to live. If you watched the TV, you would know they are the victims of the most gruesome torture carried by the Serbs. And we, the

Bosniaks of Sandžak, are an easy target, Sadik, already on their territory. For the Serbs, we are just a bunch of dogs they should get rid of.

Ismet's hands began to tremble. The sounds of movement from within made him hurry back to his room, although his knees, too, were shaking.

He had never felt such a sensation before. Waves, hot and cold, changed rapidly as they passed through his body, his heart wildly stirred. He breathed more freely, alone in his room, and felt less pain, but could not detach himself from the grave, solemn conversation he had witnessed. No, he had not expected that; suddenly the situation grew far more serious than he had known it a moment ago, to a matter of life or death.

The shadow of confusion grew thicker over the boy. Words rang in his ears, Ramo's words, those of his father, his mother's crying. He desperately wanted to believe in what his father had said: that what once had been was no longer true, that this all would end soon and end well for everyone. But it was difficult to believe in those words; and the fact that both Ramo and his mother though differently was not the only reason for this. The very way his father had uttered his words did not permit trust.

How strange this all was, this new world. Just yesterday he had learned about the old, historical enemy, how the animosity between the Bosniaks and the Serbs was not something new. But while he had thought that centuries separated the two from their last conflict, today he learned that the Serbs had, just decades ago, been so determined to eliminate his people, to uproot them.

Once again, he shuddered, remembering Ramo's words. It felt terrible to know that being persecuted was a distinction of his people, something they had been known for, as victims, someone to be run after, chased away, dogs to be got rid of.

The boy couldn't sleep that night; his eyes closed for a couple of hours only shortly after the dawn. The room in which he was had never been so dark, and even the yard, the house, and all that was around him was suddenly alien to him, no longer close to his heart. A thousand questions raced through his mind. What was happening to the world – he could no longer recognise it. Would there be an attack, would he and his parents be banished, the house burned – what would happen to them? His mother's sobs rang in his ears. Nothing he had ever heard, nothing he had ever experienced in his life had made him feel so hopeless, so weak.

Chapter 3

A few days later, Ismet was allowed to play outside the yard. He had asked his mother for a permission first, but since she would not let him, he had turned to his father.

– Yes, you may go, his father had said. – But don't go far away and don't stay long. Because you won't be able play outside the yard the whole week if I or your mother have to come and look for you. All right?

Ismet used this opportunity to go a nearby field where the boys from his street would often gather and play soccer. Perhaps he would find Emir there; he wanted to talk to him more than anything else, to ask him questions about the aircrafts, the Serbs, fleeing to Turkey. Emir certainly knew the answers.

To his disappointment, only much older boys were playing in the field. He had to watch the game, because both of the teams had enough players, and had, in fact, just started playing. He had his favourite team, in which most of the players were neighbours from his street and with whom he was on good terms. He watched how they played with admiration, excited each time the ball came close to the goal of the other team, ready to cheer. He had said to his father that he would like to become an architect, but he would also like to become a soccer player, one whom everyone admired, one who scored the most. With excitement he watched how skilfully the older boys lead the ball, how obedient it was to their feet, and how the ball, as though alive, returned to the same player over and over again. Perhaps he would be able to lead the ball that way one day, have a special relationship with it, perhaps.

A known figure came walking toward Ismet as he stood, watching the game. He was happy to see Emir, but felt some discomfort seeing a less familiar face with him. He would ask the questions later, he decided, when Emir and he were alone. He would not ask anything in front of Ado; he didn't know him well enough.

The friends greeted and exchanged a few words about the soccer game, but the topic quickly changed. To Ismet's surprise, Emir and Ado seemed to have already been talking about the aircrafts and fleeing, and he immediately saw that they knew a great deal more than he did. He only listened to them. He was stunned to observe with what kind of excitement they talked about what they had seen and heard, a completely different reaction from his, without worry, without fear.

– And did you see the aircrafts? You did? Okay, Emir asked him at one point, speaking rapidly. – But do you know why the Serbs use the aircrafts, do you? They want to scare us with them, they want to make us go to Turkey, where other Muslims live. And we should, because we cannot live together with the Serbs!

Apparently wanting to add to the excitement of the moment, Ado told them he had actually seen the aircrafts; there were two of them, he reported enthusiastically, and they had made several passes, each of which he had observed.

Ismet listened, wide-eyed, and said nothing. He could not think while his friends were speaking, but only let his imagination fill the void of his own experience, let it put the missing images and sounds where they belonged. And there seemed to be no end to Emir and Ado's detailing.

When they finished with the aircrafts, his friends proceeded to tell him about the images of war they had seen on TV: military uniforms, machine guns, tanks, houses brought down, refugees, victims. But unlike his friends, for whom each of these sights and sounds meant excitement, they only brought unease to Ismet. He remembered what Ramo had told to his father. He knew very well that all those images had been captured in Bosnia, that the victims he was hearing about were Bosniaks. He found it difficult to understand how his friends had, as it seemed to him, missed such an important piece of information.

With sharp senses the boy drank in what had been served to his childish, innocent imagination, breathing ever more shallowly as the images piled up. He thought he had heard the worse when Ado spoke about a sniper victim – an already wounded man who had been calling for help but was murdered with the following bullet – but he was mistaken.

– But, apart from the TV, there are also far more terrible stories I’ve heard, Emir said in conclusion. – Did you know that the Serbs lock people in their houses and then burn them? And while the houses are burning, they are watching, laughing and singing.

– And there is worse still! Ado added quickly. – They also force the parents to put their babies in the ovens; and if the parents won’t do it, they skin them alive.

Ismet flinched, looking at Ado: with his last word, the boy had grabbed the skin of his cheek and pulled it to one side.

In the meantime, the soccer game finished and the three boys were invited to join the next one. While Emir and Ado, both skilful players, were selected by the captains of the teams, Ismet got a position as a goalkeeper only after Emir’s stubborn insistence. But Ismet was nevertheless grateful for this opportunity, and proudly stood between the two stones marking the goal. Perhaps he would be able to play later, once he had proven himself.

The game was interesting to him, but only at first. All the other boys flew through the field light as wind, following the ball as though their lives depended on it, shouting, calling one another, bursting with excitement when near the opposite goal. But Ismet felt strangely indifferent very quickly. Indeed, at one point, not long after the beginning of the game, he was more an observer who happened to be standing between those two stones, not a goalkeeper, not a participant in the game. A kind of clumsiness had sneaked under his skin, inattention, a strange lack of strength and interest that surprised even him. His

thoughts were racing. It was the previous hour that had cast a shadow over his vigour, all that he had heard from his friends. As vehement as they had first been, those words echoed in his ears constantly, obscuring his mind, tripping his legs, making him slow and unresponsive.

– You can no longer play with us! the captain of his team scolded him in the end. – Even a girl could strike that ball away! And what did you do? You just watched it!

That whole day Ismet struggled with what Emir and Ado had told him. Images – fire-filled, blood-filled – kept assailing him; tireless, relentless, they spoke to him with ghastly voices: screams of frenzied people locked in a burning house, the terrifying beating of their fists against the door, sounds of laughter savouring it all. Again and again he heard Ado's voice, saw his gesture, was sucked in by the gruesome world his mind had created around it. It was a shock to him, more than a shock, and he desperately tried to save himself from it. Perhaps Emir and Ado were wrong; perhaps this had happened once, years and years ago, when people had been very bad. Why would someone lock others in a house and then set fire to it? Bringing down an empty house – that he could somehow understand – but killing people, children, babies, being so cruel – this was not true, this cannot be true. No, this was not something that could happen in this world.

But the more fiercely his innocence fought the awful images, a part of him believed that this was all true, a harsh new reality whose grip around him would not grow any looser anytime soon.

A sense of fear and uncertainty had begun to take hold of the house where Ismet lived, some strange, cool silence, previously unknown, a hushed awareness of the horrors happening very close, yet with the possibility to spill over one's own threshold. A sickness of the heart had begun to take hold of the people of the Balkans. It was an old sickness – this wish to annihilate those of

another nation – that had subsided for half a century, had seemingly disappeared in fact, but was now awakened again.

Suddenly, with the weight of the whole world on her delicate heart, Ismet's mother began to change. Belonging to the generation whose grandfathers had fought against the same enemy a few decades ago, she was another victim of the countless rumours circling the town, each more horrifying than the last. Slowly, the boy got used to her changed eyes, lost in the world of unfavourable possibilities, to her low, fear-strangled voice. Many times, it appeared to him that she was very worried, not completely there with him, her gestures sometimes too restless, at other times too slow. He missed his old mother, her lively spirit, but felt that he could do nothing about it. It was an attitude of fear that she acquired, something that the boy could sense. She also showed a tendency toward seclusion. Previously, they would often visit someone together, a neighbour or a relative, would even go to the city, buy something – a sugar-coated apple, a stick with sugar wool on it, a roll – and return very happy. But this summer, the woman barely left the house. It was still true that she showed concern for her son, trying to be warm again, but it was a different kind of warmth, not the untainted one, not the one Ismet used to receive from her. There was something sad about it, something that made him feel helpless, hopeless, and weak.

Out of fear, now sensing danger in the very air she breathed, Refida imposed many limitations on her son. It was rare that she let him play with his friends. She demanded that Ismet should stay in the yard and would be very upset when Sadik would give him permission to play on a nearby field, often forcing her husband to impose an additional time-limit. And while the boy was absent, she would fall victim to countless alarming scenarios, all inspired by the awful stories she heard. Once, when Ismet arrived home a little late, she could not hold back her anxieties.

– I don't want him to play on the field anymore! she told her husband heatedly. – The war is about to start any moment, Sadik, and I don't want to have my son away from me!

The boy shuddered intensely. Hearing those words, he learned how dangerous the situation had become; and so directly, so openly, in his mother's voice.

But even though the shadow cast over Ismet's youthful vigour did not grow any thinner as the days passed, the robust nature of his childish playfulness continued to resist the new reality. As though nothing strange was happening, he carried on drinking in the joys of childhood as much as he could, the friends, the games, the escapades. True, largely because of the influence of his mother, the boy's spirit was made to surrender some of its liveliness, but enough room was left to improvise and make up for the lost. Alone, at home, in the yard or in his room, the boy would try to amuse himself, would play with stones and clay, would copy cartoon figures on half-transparent paper and fill the drawing with colour. Sometimes he would invite Emir, and together they would play with marbles, make use of his father's tools to build a tiny wooden birdhouse, then improve the making the next time.

Yet even though he retained the innocent vitality of his childhood, the boy did not remain indifferent to what was happening around him. In the evening, the wish to play would give way to something else, something that was becoming increasingly important to him. He would sneak behind the door of the living room and would secretly watch and listen, his glance persistent through the tobacco smoke. He understood where Bosnia was, what was happening there, understood that it was his people who, not far away, were being left at the mercy of the Serbian military. Many disturbing images flashed before his eyes from the TV screen: countless shells racing towards a burning city, minarets brought down, screams of woman in despair, and worst of all, bloody, lifeless

bodies lying on deserted streets. All this troubled him greatly inside, yet he never spoke about his burden, no one knew what he was going through. It all kept accumulating within him, grew heavier, sank deeper. And the immense pressure soon began to take hold of the little body. He started to have headaches, grew pale and ate much less. And when it happened that the aircrafts shrilled over their place once again – this time over the yard so that he could see them clearly – the violence of his anguish struck him with a kind of illness that kept him in bed for two days.

Under such circumstances – each day exposed to something new and terrible about the ongoing war and the suffering of the Bosniaks – the boy began to change some of his past convictions about the world and its people. The Serbs were the enemy, he was slowly being convinced, people with whom they had never been on good terms, with whom they could never be on good terms. During such reflections, it often happened that the memory of the incident with the snake came to him; guiltily, he looked back at this event, when he had mistakenly assumed he had been rescued by a Serb.

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The end of summer marked the end of the holiday for the children of this place. The first weeks at school meant cheer for most. It was good to see old friends after a few months, to play old and new games with them, to talk to them, laugh with them. Summer had been good, a time without obligations, but many had more friends at school, which meant difference, at least while the days were still warm.

No longer under the tight embrace of his mother and her intense surveillance, Ismet felt much better. He and Emir had many friends with whom they spent the hours at school. They played soccer in the schoolyard, chased

one another, and had many other small competitions, even those that involved numbers, the fast calculations, which was something new among them. How good it felt to be able to play with others again, away from home; to run freely, chase others, be chased, shout, laugh. True, reading was arduous, and so were the numbers, but being here, at school, was nevertheless much better than being at home, alone.

Ismet truly enjoyed the first days at school, the friends, the games. Yet there was something that made him forget this newly gained freedom for a while, made him thoughtful once more and strangely withdrawn. He was sitting close to Ivana, a Serbian girl. They had been friends only a couple of months ago, but now he stood beside her as though she was a complete stranger, at times even an enemy. No, there was no particular reason for his animosity toward her – indeed, they had not exchanged a word yet – but Ismet felt that she had the power to penetrate through his most joyous moments and ruin them for him. It was through the lens of his past months that he looked at her. She was a Serbian girl, and this made her far less a friend than she had once been.

Days passed and obligations came. The halls of the school resounded with much fainter noise now that homework was being given to the pupils, now that grading had begun. This introduced many worries to those for whom the reading and the numbers were something foreign still, a game they had not yet mastered. Emir and Ismet were among the troubled ones. True, Ismet did better than Emir, had better grades, was occasionally even praised by the teacher, but even he found it hard to swim through the sea of the unknown.

This was how, one morning when the homework was to be submitted to the teacher, the two friends had no choice but to rely on the work of others. The questions were indeed challenging, at least judging by the number of other pupils who were doing the same and copying the work of a few.

– Is that a two or a nine, Ismet?

The two friends were seated at their desk, their eyes swiftly moving across the lines inscribed on a piece of paper that lay in front of them. It was someone else's homework. Emir had taken it, and they were busy copying it. The class was about to begin.

Emir was the first to finish. He did not understand why Ismet spent so much time figuring out the exact numbers, but he decided he should wait.

– And whose homework is this? Ismet asked, close to finishing. – It's very neat, and all seems correct. I wonder who spends so much time studying the numbers.

– It's Ivana's, Emir replied. – Yes, she's very good with numbers; we should always copy from her.

– Ivana's? Ismet cried.

– Yes. Why?

Ismet gave him a very strange look, then his eyes dropped to the two papers. A sense of disappointment came over him. All this time, ten minutes perhaps, he had been copying something Ivana had written.

– Why didn't you tell me it was hers? he asked, offended. – She's a Serbian girl, Emir. Don't you remember what you said about them, that we should never be friends with them?

– Well... Emir paused. – It doesn't mean we're friends if we copy from her. Anyway, are you finished?

Ismet leaned back to his chair. As his friend returned the paper, he followed him out of the corner of his eye. Looking ahead, at the lines he had copied, he felt as though he had committed a very bad deed, something dangerous, unacceptable, an unpardonable sin.

That whole day Ismet didn't speak with Emir. He had a hard time even looking in his direction. With a bowed head, deeply ashamed, he waited as the teacher collected the homework. How badly he felt once he had taken his.

