

## The cutting

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“Delicious” declared the american, and the old man smiled and hoped for a good tip. “Are you from croatia ?” asked the visitor. “Of course” replied the owner, chef and waiter of the *croatian cellar*, “a small village called selci in the krajina, which I was forced to leave three years ago”, which he hoped would be enough. “And here I am”. Inquisition was bearable if it helped him live.

Living left little to spare though. Friends had helped him set up when he had first arrived, and they still took what little he had by way of repayment. Mafia some might have called them, but when he had nothing, they got him over the border, brought him to budapest, found him a business and then helped him get his granddaughter here too, that he fed and kept healthy. He knew he would pay what they asked for the rest of his life: everyone has to pay taxes. Anyway, what to call the guards they’d bribed to get him across the border, the officials at the municipality they persuaded to let him renovate the small cellar or his good friend the policeman who said nothing, but enjoyed his hospitality several times a week. Though dragan would happily have left behind his ties with his great uncle’s clan, which had ruled croatia, albeit as the puppet “ustasha” state during the second world war, these people were at least *his mafia*.

What the ustasha had done to gypsies, jews and above all serbs, dragan feared being revisited on them as yugoslavia bloodily fell apart in the new europe of the 1990s. A massacre on the other side of the border was enough for him to leave, and he was tragically proved right, as from his family of 14, just young irena survived, though her blissful ignorance of history and her immunity to the balkan disease of nostalgia was no inoculation against terror as she hid beneath the floorboards for over twelve hours, her mother’s blood dripping in tickling distance of her nose. As there was food they had stayed, and not burnt down the house. In the middle of the night she crept out and ran, her six year old brain fixed with instructions about reaching her grandpa. Up to the mountain, crying silently, the night air chilling her fear to panic. She dodged the trees a hundred times but one root sprang from nowhere, she tripped and was knocked unconscious. That was why when they delivered her to dragan just over the border, though her face was no longer caked in blood his beloved irene was deaf in one ear. She also brought news of his daughter, which from the silence he already knew.

Two years later, dragan reflected, he had done a pretty good job of bringing her up, on the most meagre financial and emotional means. With detached love, care and devotion he had somehow enabled her to forget what went before, learn hungarian, thrive at school and imagine no other life than the one she led, inseparable from her friend judit with whom a strong bond had developed even though she lived in a big house in the buda hills. A testament to the hungarian people dragan had told himself when she often ate and stayed over there, suppressing his suspicions about how her family could allow and even foster such a friendship, as without it many more long evenings in the beer-soaked cellar would have been irene’s lot. Asking her to join them on holiday in america though was a step too far, and after a firm but rather incoherent phone call, he was not so surprised to hear a knock of his door.

Whilst such an emotion was happily beyond his granddaughter, dragan was rather ashamed at the sparse quarters milan and esther visited him at. I’ll bet they haven’t been to the fifteenth district too often he thought. Actually he was wrong, as milan had lived just off karoly utca as a child, brought up in a poor family, though he had married into a rather wealthier one. Face to face they refused to take no for answer, even when confronted with dragan’s truth-telling.

Even as he relayed their situation though, the case for letting her go seemed to strengthen. He could see their concern about the child and that a bond of more than philanthropy had developed.

He had the space of their small-talk for a momentous decision. Though war was still ravaging bosnia, there was peace between croatia and serbia and he knew the imperative of their return. Still occupied by the serbs, krajina would be handed back within the year under the dayton agreement. He knew enough about life to know that the only way to reclaim what was his, and irena's, was to follow the soldiers, and for months he had been planning hard, though doing little, to break off irena's new life. The fantasy pictures of disneyland that had spread around the lounge that was also her bedroom had not made it easier. His health was another reason, as it was only in zagreb he had enough acquaintances and remote relatives to craft a dowry-laden option. Apart from irena's life, he wasn't leaving much in budapest.

With no-one to talk to but himself, he carried out the conversation from sorozo, the local beer cellar, to sorozo. Culture and history had weighed little against a safe life here, but he felt a traitor for it and for cutting irena off from her roots and heritage, which was surely against what her mother, such a strong and proud woman, would have wanted. Even alone though he doubted whether he really had the strength for the return, yet with her in tow, to fail would have been not just another stumble but a catastrophe, a gambit she would pay for all her life with misery. He was proud too though, and he knew what he, the last member of the family, had lost. By the early hours, his thoughts still wandering between welfare and war, he was drunker than in years, his novel freedom from responsibility unshackling his repressed sorrows, for his wife, for his family, for his failures, for his sad little life in exile. He knew in his soul he wanted to go home to die, yet even this was denied him.

The dark streets seemed almost to assault him, a strange language occupying every sign on every street. "Who are you?" he shouted in serbo-croat at people in the street he passed, bottle in hand as they swerved to avoid him. One couple didn't, a burly man with a small mousy woman. Just as they approached he felt dizzy and wandered from the wall that was supporting him, almost knocking her over. The man pushed him away and he fell, smashing his beer bottle. With strength and speed unusual for a man his age he sprang straight back up, but his balance was not equal to his instinct and he stumbled backwards into the road - to be met head on by one of the city's few chevrolats. Though cleared of any wrongdoing, the woman who ran him over, a resident of seven years, returned soon afterwards to chicago. At least his death was instant.

There was no-one then to reclaim the house in selic, but the soldiers evicted the serbs there anyway, giving it to a croatian family evicted from bosnia, the finest home they'd ever lived in. They quickly tidied up, nailing down the floorboards and fixing the broken table. Some old villagers did return, and one friend of dragan's daughter gathered together some of the photographs the new residents left neatly outside, in case anyone wanted them. She knew dragan had gone, but not where, so thought she'd keep them safe, in case he came back. They were still there though, stained and faded, when her only daughter came down from zagreb to clean out the house and put in on the market after she died at the ripe old age of 86. She didn't recognise anyone, and though at the back of her mind she might have suspected a story, she put them all in a blue bag and loaded it in the car, destined for the recycling bins. Some of the frames though were nice wooden ones, so maybe she'd use them, probably leaving the old photos underneath, just in case.