

The Rightful Finder

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An extract

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I

Tristan couldn't say much more about it on the phone. He had a plan, tomorrow they'd carry it out, they needed Jimmy's help, so it would be handy if he could come and sleep over. Could he get there by two this afternoon?

Tristan hung up, Jimmy had no chance to ask questions. He just stood there for a bit, holding the receiver.

It was the first time anyone had invited him to sleep over, and Tristan wasn't just anyone. At the Ibrahimis they didn't sleep in separate beds, they all slept together on mattresses on the floor, Jimmy had seen it with his own eyes recently, while they were playing hide-and-seek and he had opened the bedroom door in search of a hiding place. The room was like a dream come true, a landing strip of pillows and blankets big enough to do a few backwards somersaults in a row, or cartwheels or handstands, without breaking your back.

When he visualized sleeping there tonight, in between Tristan and his seven brothers and sisters, something rose up in Jimmy's breast, something cheerful but dull too, as though someone had struck a musical triangle with a carrot.

Before the sleep-over could begin, Jimmy had to do his daily rounds. Or, as he himself called it, practice his profession, which consisted of being fair and alert. For in addition to being Tristan's best friend, he also remained a world-famous collector in the making. And what it was that distinguished the famous collector in the making from a most-likely mediocre collector was this: a famous collector never, under any circumstances, left his route. Neither by rain nor hail nor nervousness. Cap on, a double bow in the shoestrings, and his right pant leg tucked into his sock.

Jimmy biked out of the new neighborhood on his outsized BMX with fourteen gears and a headlamp on which he'd etched his initials in black marking pen. First a left on Herentalsebaan, then one kilometer straight on to the pull-off in front of the apple orchard in Broechem, where there was a paybox with a slot in it and where customers who paid without opening the car door sometimes dropped their change. Then along Liersebaan, past the Cool Down, the Beverage Arsenal, The Angel, The Patriot, past as many other watering holes as possible along the paved road to check the coin chutes of the cigarette machines, slot machines and the ones that made change for the billiard tables, then past the canteen at the soccer club to check all the coin chutes in the locker rooms. Keeping your eyes glued to the road surface to spot lost coins. Not being too lazy to stop at each and every bread, condom and candy dispenser, at every parking meter, and to bring back all the wayward

shopping carts in the parking lot of the Aldi, the Lidl, the GB, the nursery and the tile store – not only because it made him nervous when things weren't neatly in place, but also because he could often pick up an additional twenty Belgian francs there.

He was almost all the way to the square in front of town hall now, the farthest point on his route, after which he would turn and follow a slightly different path home. He'd had no luck so far. In the distance he could see the offices of the Cera credit union, which is where the cash dispenser was, the spot of theoretically greatest possibility, the point to which this whole journey was a build-up.

The weather was cloudy, tepid and windless, no cheerily flapping flags above the French fries stand. Middling summer weather that didn't quite match the excitement Jimmy felt, that didn't fit with the day on which, for the first time in his life, he was going to a slumber party.

He didn't see it right away. The glances he tossed at the cash dispenser from a distance were, out of pure habit, accompanied by phrases that downplayed the possibilities – after all, that would be too easy, wouldn't it, finding money right in front of a bank? But once he came close enough, he felt a shock that shivered him from head to toe. Today of all days, now that his daydreams were with Tristan and what was to come this evening, what he'd been hoping for for months actually happened: there were banknotes sticking out of the dispenser. The source of all currency, the treasury factory of the rich, had saved a bit for Jimmy!

He wanted to make this happiness last as long as he could, to stretch it into a gossamer strand that never ran out, he wanted to bring Tristan here to double the happiness, but out of fear that the dispenser would reconsider and slurp back the money, Jimmy raced for it. Dropping his BMX on the spot, he sprinted across the wide pavement to the slot. He had to count it first, he could only call himself the rightful finder if he knew exactly how much it was. It was a real pile, he had never held banknotes plentiful enough to weigh in his hand. On the front of the first five-hundred franc note was a picture of a stern-looking gentleman. Jimmy pressed the man on top of the bundle to his cheeks, first the right one – thank you! – then the left – thank you! Why hadn't anyone ever told him how smooth new banknotes felt, soft as a freshly-washed pillowcase?

He looked around. The equestrian statue in the middle of the square, the shuttered windows of the sandwich shop, the big gates of the fire station. This was no practical joke, there were no camera crews coming out of hiding, there weren't even any witnesses, the village center was deserted.

He counted the money all over again, afraid that the gentleman on the banknote had risen up in protest at being found by a boy with the surname Sluis, son of a bankrupt insurance agent, but no, these were the same ten blue bills, and that amounted to – a bit of addition here – five thousand francs.

Five thousand francs, meaning: more than two hundred and fifty bags of potato chips, if you bought them at the big supermarket. And more than two hundred and fifty big bags of chips meant: more than seven hundred and fifty Tazos, with the chance each time of finding a collectable he didn't already have.

He sniffed at the banknotes, they smelled remarkably bland, then he rolled them up, stuck the big fat cigar between his lips the way Mr. De Mesmaeker always did in the Gomer Goof strips, except he wasn't a rich businessman with a portfolio full of contracts; soon he would be something better than that: a world-famous collector.

Jimmy walked back to his bike. He had the whole ride home to think about how to go about this. He could stop at the nearest supermarket along the way and buy chips already, the maximum number he could lug on the BMX, a shopping bag full on each handlebar, then take the chips minus Tazos to Tristan's this afternoon, a different flavor for each Ibrahimi. Or no, wait, he had to use his head; better to spend the whole lump sum at one and the same store, seeing as the Tazos were added to the sacks rolling off the production line in numerical order, so if you bought an entire batch it

followed that your whole Tazos collection, numbers 1 through 295, would be complete. He'd show Uncle Kurt the roll of banknotes – Uncle Kurt was always friendly to people with lots of money in their pocket – and ask him to drive the trailer over to the Makro cash & carry later on. As far as he was aware, no one else in the province had a complete Tazos collection. The newspaper would be sure to report on it and send over a photographer, the way they did for the best pumpkin-grower in the region or the most successful pike fisherman in the angling club.

He could already see it in his mind's eye: the town square, the ceremony when the mayor would pay tribute to him as the first collector with two complete collections, the marching band with majorettes, including the two eldest Ibrahimi sisters, the town council would have the folding tables brought out, neatly set with paper tablecloths and bowls of chips, there would be applause, maybe his father would actually come for a look, and even then the best was yet to come: the presentation of the duplicate collectors albums to Tristan, whose jaw would drop in amazement as he became a top collector too at one fell swoop.

Jimmy looked at his watch, it was time to get going, he had to be at Tristan's by two. He had never been late.

Just as Jimmy was about to tuck the money into the fanny pack attached to his handlebars, a white sports car pulled up and braked abruptly in front of the bank. A smartly dressed woman in heels, wiry and slender as a whippet, climbed out. She marched right past Jimmy, heading straight for the cash machine. There she stopped and looked around, rattled the lid on the dispenser, and turned. Only then did she catch sight of Jimmy. She looked at the fanny pack, which was still unzipped. Fumblingly, Jimmy stuffed the bankroll into his pants pocket.

"Might you happen to have just taken some five-hundred franc notes out of this machine?" She was wearing open-toed shoes, her red toenails all squished together at the tips.

He should have biked off right away. Stupid of him not to count the money at a safe distance from the cash machine.

He shook his head, not quite emphatically enough.

She didn't budge. "Less than five minutes ago I withdrew a large sum of money to pay the contractor" – she sounded more determined now – "and apparently that damned machine dispenses it in two clumps, without telling you beforehand. My mind is such a mess, I didn't even wait for the second half. Five thousand francs, up in smoke."

She was keeping a close eye on every movement of his hand, which he pulled out of his pocket now without the money. "What was that you just stuffed in your pocket?"

"Oh, nothing really," Jimmy said as calmly as he could. A thousand triangles were tinkling at the same time in his stomach. He thought of ways he might escape. In theory, a great deal was possible.

She pointed. "Show me what you've got in your pocket."

He pulled his T-shirt out of his pants, it was a little too big for him and hung down over his pockets.

"That money belongs to me," the woman said. "If you don't believe me, we can ask them to show us the footage from the ATM camera." She pointed at the dispenser, waving her hand as though all this were being filmed as well.

He was an experienced Rightful Finder. If only he had his necktie and gloves with him now, then she'd see how serious he was about this, how he had made finding things his profession, then he would dare to repeat the phrase he'd heard his mother pronounce over and over again during the last few months, every time they'd brought his father's things to the thrift store or tossed them in the trash: "Finders keepers, losers weepers."

"But I know exactly how much it is," he stammered. "So how could it be yours?"

The woman held out her hand. "Because I just told you, Mr. Smarty-Pants. Now give me back my money, or I'll call the police."

Only moments before Jimmy had received his commendation on the village square, the applause hadn't even died down yet, and now he had to run it all back. Tristan closed his dropped jaw and handed the albums back to Jimmy, the mayor swallowed his homage, the municipal employees refolded the tables and rolled up the paper tablecloths, the whole ceremony was a mistake, all those Tazos went back into their bags, the bags back onto the trailer, the tarp was thrown over the whole thing and Jimmy sat atop the pile, singing songs in reverse all the way back to the Makro, where the bags were returned neatly to their boxes and the boxes back to their shelves. Uncle Kurt would want his gas money anyway, so in fact Jimmy was actually operating at a loss.

"That money isn't for me, it's for Tristan," he said. "Do you know him? Tristan Ibrahim? I'm sleeping over at his house tonight. He's deaf in one ear. And he's got zero Tazos, because his parents only buy generic-brand potato chips."

The woman seemed anything but impressed, she probably wasn't from around here. Who know, in her village maybe they had their own Kosovar family.

"They came all the way here on foot. And along the way the soldiers made them eat a fried fetus, and Tristan heard a grenade go off so close by that his eardrum broke."

The woman shook her head and held out her hand even further, closer to Jimmy's face now. Jimmy pulled his bike, which was in between them, closer towards him.

"Without this money, his eardrum can't be fixed."

She waved her hand impatiently.

Jimmy pulled the roll of banknotes out of his pocket and placed it in the palm of her hand. As he let go, he felt the tears welling up in his eyes.

"Thank you. Normally I'd give a reward to the finder, but you lied to me."

If only Tristan was here now, he'd survived a war, he slaughtered chickens on his own, he'd be sure to know how they should deal with her.

The woman climbed back in. Only when the car had disappeared from sight did Jimmy start moving. If he wanted to have time enough for his daily ritual before leaving for Tristan's, he needed to get going. However strange this day had been till now, a collector could never hang his head in defeat.

He walked the bike until his legs stopped shaking. Then he climbed on and took off in the highest gear.

A little over a year ago, one month after Jimmy's father left, Tristan came into Jimmy's life. It was on a Wednesday, right after swimming lessons. The evening before, Jimmy had planned to call the Tazos hotline to talk about his parents' divorce, and in the hope that they might send rare collectibles to pathetic children, but he'd changed his mind and hung up before anyone took his call; maybe the Tazos people had a database and could see what his father had been up to.

His hair still wet, Jimmy climbed that Wednesday out of the bus that had taken all the fourth and fifth graders to the municipal pool in Pulderbos. He shuffled out in front of the rest of the kids, back to the classroom, where they'd have a fifteen-minute cookie break before the reading comprehension lesson began. Jimmy hated reading comprehension, because the teacher would just call out the name of whoever had to continue reading, and there was no way Jimmy could concentrate with wet hair dripping down the back of his neck.

As he walked into the classroom, he saw a boy he didn't know standing beside the lady principal, waiting on the little podium up in front until all the fourth-graders had taken their seats. Jimmy tried to make eye contact with the boy, but it didn't work. From the way he stood there, you could tell he didn't speak the language. He was wearing a pair of high-water jeans with a dark sheen to them, as

though he'd been crawling on his knees through melted tallow. His hair was long, curly and tied back in a pony tail. He was gangly and at least a head taller than Jimmy, but then it didn't take much to be a lot taller than him.

"This is Tristan," Principal Virginie said, after telling the whole class to quiet down. "Tristan Abrahama." (That's the way she pronounced it, without batting an eye, only later would Tristan dare to correct the others. "Ibrahimi, with an 'i' like in fish!") He was eleven years old, he was from Kosovo and he'd been through a difficult period. He had come alllll the way to Belgium on foot, with his parents and his sisters and brothers, they had witnessed some horrible things and that's why the whole fourth grade was assigned the task of taking good care of him. Tristan's twelve-year-old sister Jetmira had been assigned to this school too, she was going to be placed in the fifth grade.

The principal led Tristan to his seat. With every step they came closer to his desk, Jimmy felt a stronger surge of happiness. Finally they stopped, right in front of the empty spot beside Jimmy.

"Sluis, our own private Einstein, will you keep an eye on things and make sure Jimmy feels at home here?"

Finally, Jimmy thought, the fact that he didn't belong to a clique had finally brought him something good. "Tristan, take good care of Jimmy too, he's been through a difficult period as well," she told Tristan, but her eyes were mostly on Jimmy's as she said that.

Tristan shook Jimmy's hand, so faintly that they could have passed off an insect between their palms without hurting it a bit.

The school had a part-time remedial teacher who came one hour a day to give extra Dutch lessons to Tristan and his sister. During all the remaining hours, Jimmy took Tristan under his wing. Jimmy, who was usually bored in class, whose grades were far above average, acted as messenger, passed along to Tristan as well he could all the teacher's explanations, so that Tristan's lack of knowledge wouldn't slow down the rest of the class. There were also privileges associated with this task: Jimmy and Tristan were the only ones allowed to draw pictures during class, to whisper and pass notes.

During those first weeks they communicated mostly in gestures, and played Pictionary in order to share information. Tristan was eager to learn, pointed sometimes with both hands at things for which Jimmy had to teach him the Dutch word. Jimmy's scratch-pad was covered in sketches, letters and arrows.

Besides the language, there were all kinds of other things Tristan needed to know if he wanted to remain at Jimmy's side in Belgium. For example, that when you were doing a test you had to put a four-leaf clover on the top corner of your desk – Jimmy had found one for Tristan too, dried it between the pages of the Yellow Pages and then laminated it as neatly as possible. Or that you could click a blue, green, black or red nib on the pen he'd given Tristan, but that it was forbidden to use red, that color was reserved for the teacher. Or how you were supposed to eat a dinosaur cookie: as soon as you opened the package you first had to put the three monsters out of circulation – by biting off their heads – and then gobble up the rest. That God didn't exist, but if you lost something you could still ask St. Anthony for help, but not too often, Anthony had to do it all by himself and you were definitely not the only one claiming his services. That you could buy tea tokens from the teacher before the lunch break, and that if you asked both the cafeteria monitors for sugar you could get four cubes in total, and then let them melt on your tongue one by one.

Everything Jimmy feared during those first weeks, that they would be separated in the class or that Tristan would want to work with someone else, proved unfounded: the teacher guaranteed him that they would keep their seating arrangement for the rest of the schoolyear – the only thing she asked was that they trade places, because Tristan was apparently hard of hearing in his right ear.

Jimmy had to be careful not to walk around the whole time wearing a broad grin, a grin he did his best to repress so that the fifth- and sixth-grade bullies wouldn't find out that he, Sluis Poop-Mouse, Sluis Brain-Louse, had finally found happiness. If they did, they'd come and ruin it right away, the way they'd used a thumb-tack to obliterate his smiling face on the big school picture in the hall.

Once Tristan could express himself with the help of a few catchwords, after a month or two, in a special geography lesson dedicated to him, the teacher put him in front of the big map and had him use the pointer to show everyone exactly where he was from and the route he'd taken to get here – from northwestern Kosovo, through Montenegro's national park, Albania, across the Adriatic to the Italian bootheel. They had wandered through the mountains for days with almost no food, the youngest children in the family rode on the backs on their elder siblings. Kosovo was about 2,000 kilometers from Belgium as the crow flies, but they were no crows, they'd had to pass border check posts, his pointer returned twice overland from Italy to Albania, twice they had risked their lives on the dangerous crossing only to be put on a bus back to Albania. The third time they'd made it, even though they were pushed out of the boat half a kilometer from the coast. They were no fish either; one of the children from a family in the boat with them never made it ashore.

The map was on a scale of one to six million, Jimmy calculated how many meters Tristan had walked in order to get here. It was a miracle that he still had both his feet, that they hadn't been worn off to above the ankles.

The teacher marked the route with stickers that stayed on the map for the rest of the schoolyear. Every time Jimmy saw the dotted, winding route and the sheer number of other directions not taken, he was struck with relief. Tristan could have ended up anywhere, in any country in the world, any village, any school, any classroom, but he had landed here in Belgium, in Bovenmeer, in the fourth grade of the public elementary school, right beside him. Jimmy had narrowly escaped a life without Tristan. The chance that Tristan would become his friend was even sligher than the chance that someone in Jimmy's family might have worked at the Smith's chips factory, received one of the ten-volume limited edition series as a Christmas gift and then given it to him. The same care he would have applied to handling a rare series like that Jimmy would now apply to Tristan. He wouldn't trade in his newfound friend for anything.

That the whole class could now see that escape route annoyed Jimmy, the same way it annoyed him when the remedial teacher came and stole Tristan from the class for an hour every morning. Letting other people borrow Tristan was as bothersome to him as letting someone else take a lick off his ice-cream cone.

Jimmy's house was the only modern one in the village. With its pointy prow and all the porthole windows it reminded you of a ship, as though it had once arrived here through some sluice and then, along with the whole waterway, turned to stone.

Jimmy was embarrassed by the shape of the house, in combination with his surname. He crossed the driveway hurriedly, the way he always did.

All the habitable space was on the ground floor, not only the living room and bedroom, but also the former insurance office that was once Jimmy's father's, a large added wing that had been cleared after the divorce and all its furnishings sold. All that was in there now were the doggy dishes and baskets of Kwik and Flupke, the two dachshunds his mother had recently taken in.

There was no barking in the house, no skittering of toenails on the tile floor. His mother must have taken the dogs out with her.

Jimmy was so bowled over by the sudden request to sleep over that he had forgotten to ask Tristan whether he should bring his own sheets, or whether anything else was needed to carry out his plan.

He knew Tristan's number by heart, he also knew exactly what the numbers sounded like when you dialed them. Short short, short long short, short long, long long – the number ended in three nines.

Tristan himself answered. Jimmy didn't have to bring anything at all. "We have everything." And, after a pause: "Jimmy, we're not allowed to stay."

"What do you mean, you're not allowed to stay?" Jimmy had just wrapped his forefinger in the coiled phone cord, a bandage of soft rubber, but yanked it loose right away.

"These morning we get a deportation order"

"This morning..."

That explained why Tristan was home now, on a Wednesday morning in the middle of the summer vacation. Normally speaking, Tristan had swimming lessons at this time, just like on Monday and Saturday mornings. Mr. Pieters saw to that himself, he brought Tristan to the Pulderbos pool three times a week in the vacation, after he'd heard what had happened to him during their class trip to the seaside.

"Yeah, this morning. Only Paolo is allowed to stay." That was all Tristan was willing to say on the phone. "But we came up with a plan. Do you still want to come and sleep over?"

"Sure," Jimmy said. He was so startled by this news that he felt like crying, but the calm, steady tone in which Tristan spoke of his plan kept him from it.

"Don't wear too heavy shoes. See you, at fourteen hours."

Jimmy nodded. His report card had been lying beside the phone for two weeks already, in case his father called. It was his best report ever, ninety-seven percent out of a hundred. That was thanks to Tristan.

Jimmy had grown used in most ways to his father's absence, only when he left the house did he still feel the reflex to go by way of the office and say goodbye to his father, who used to be in there on the phone all the time. Now the office door was locked and he had to leave through the back door, through the tall, unmown grass full of nettles. He wanted to give the two dogs a quick cuddle, but they were lying on his mother's lap as she read a magazine in her lounge chair. He told her as casually as he could about the slumber party at the Ibrahimis.

"Aren't there enough people there already?" she said.

Jimmy had never heard his mother say no, but then she never really said yes either, every permission came in the form of a reproach, which led you to either give up your request or just go ahead anyway and do what you wanted.

Quickly enough, Jimmy had got into the habit of going home with Tristan after school, to catch up on the backlog they'd accumulated during class. When there were things Tristan didn't understand at school, Jimmy would put an X beside the subject material or assignment. He made sure to collect at least five X's each day, so that he had enough reason to go along with Tristan.

From the very first day he visited, the Ibrahimis gave him a warm reception. Lavdi always offered him soda pop from the two-liter bottles and plates of long-life cake, and when Tristan's parents greeted him they did so with hands held to their heart.

It took a while for Jimmy to meet all ten members of the family, and then he still had to learn all their names. After a few weeks, to help him with that, the children had all lined up in the middle of the room, from young to old. Tristan was the one in the middle. Jimmy could always recall the order in which they stood, and to know their ages all he had to do was count. To Tristan's left were his three older sisters, Lavid, Svetlana and Jetmira. To his right were his three little brothers, Naim and the twins, Riad and Defrim. In Tristan's arms: the newborn Paola. The children were spread out over schools in the surrounding municipalities. Tristan and Jetmira were the only ones who'd ended up at school in Bovenmeer.

When Jimmy gave Tristan his lesson, everyone who was home at that moment came and sat around the big living room table. They never interrupted him, and Jimmy relished his spot at the head of the table, all those big eyes regarding him attentively, the witnesses who saw the friendship between him and Tristan growing deeper and deeper.

In the evening, after dinner with his mother at home, his work continued. He drew up lists of words and concepts the Ibrahimis needed in daily life, sometimes he added words they would need in order to understand *him*, and for Tristan he smuggled the professional jargon of Rightful Finders into his vocabulary, things like the names of the Looney Tune characters with their own Tazos. He came up with riddles, designed crossword puzzles and rebuses, made personalized worksheets for each of the children with pictures from catalogs and magazines glued to them, with dotted lines underneath on which they were to write down the words for what they saw. He used his cassette recorder to make tapes, enunciating sentences clearly, and loaned the family his Walkman so they could listen to them when he was gone. He corrected all their work, pressing down the red clip on his four-color pen by way of exception. They played counting games with the Cheetos 24 game Tazos. Tristan was very good at arithmetic; he'd been the best in his class back in Kosovo. He wanted to be a judge when he grew up, he said, or an astronaut.

The family had arrived halfway through the schoolyear, so Tristan was allowed to postpone until the fall the tests the other fourth-grade pupils took before the summer vacation. Last summer they had practiced fifty new words each day. They took long bike rides through the fields, during which they repeated the words they'd worked on earlier in the week. They played "the animals game" or "I see, I see, what you don't see". Jimmy had drawn up a whole series of practice tests, which were completed with fewer and fewer mistakes. He'd also written a letter to the teacher, to say that if Tristan didn't pass this year he would refuse to go to fifth grade either – they couldn't make him. In the end, Tristan had passed effortlessly.

The ugly details about the war and the difficult things Tristan experienced before arriving in Belgium only came out later, bit by bit. Jimmy made a booklet called *Tristan's war*, in which he wrote down the things he found out, as chronologically as he could. He tried not to fish for stories, he wasn't out for sensation, that didn't fit his profession as Rightful Finder.

Shocking rumors circulated in the village about what the family had gone through, but where those stories came from, and whether they were true, no one knew for sure.

Jimmy had noted only the facts he heard from Tristan, or things he saw with his own eyes: the war had started ten years ago, when Serbs took over the factory where Tristan's father had worked all his life and fired all the Albanians. It was forbidden for them to be schooled in their own language, to sing the Albanian national anthem or put out the Albanian flag. While she was pregnant with Tristan, his mother began having hemorrhages, but she was refused treatment in the government hospital.

They even pressured her to have an abortion, because no Albanian soldiers should be brought into the world.

Tristan talked about it indignantly, as though he was still wondering where help was supposed to come from.

The name Milošević came up almost daily, and that was what always ignited the greatest anger – that man had always wanted more and more and more and more.

First the Ibrahimis had taken shelter for two months with the priests at the abbey in Zandhoven. They had all slept in the same space there, even though there were rooms aplenty. Once they had their strength back, the social services center had gone looking for a dwelling big enough for a family of ten. Uncle Kurt's house had been vacant for years, and could be rented for a reasonable price.

The children always had to be inside before sundown, and in the dead of winter they sometimes came too late to school; they were only allowed to leave the house once it was light. They panicked at the sight of people in uniform; a few times they had taken off running when the postman rang the bell.

Tristan's father had scars from cuts on his hand and face, incurred when he had defended his eldest daughters against slave-runners. Tristan's mother was seven months' pregnant during their flight. She'd had the baby at the refugee center and named her daughter Paola, as thanks for the good care they'd received. The king of Belgium was informed and sent a certificate of appreciation, which stood in a prominent spot on the mantelpiece.

Tristan didn't usually talk about their own particular exodus, instead he told stories he'd heard from other refugees at the asylum-seekers center where they'd spent a few weeks. He told these stories to Jimmy as though they could have overcome him personally, and maybe that was so. What difference did it make if the Ibrahimis had seen people pushed overboard during their crossing, or been threatened by organ traffickers, or slept in Parisian metro stations, or if they'd had to watch as Serb soldiers cut open the belly of a pregnant woman, then fried the fetus in a pan and fed it to the rest of the family? Even from the horrors they'd escaped themselves they had in fact not really escaped, because their good fortune had come at the cost of others.

During lunch breaks, Jetmira, who was having trouble adjusting in the fifth grade, often sat staring in silence at the food that accumulated around her lunchbox: the miniature Edam cheeses in their red wax coats, the portions of cheese spread and animal crackers that mothers of other children sent along "for the Kosovar classmates". Sometimes she would run off to the girls' room and Tristan would follow to comfort her. Jimmy, in turn, would go after Tristan, then they would stand silently by the restrooms waiting for the end of what Jetmira called "the earthquake inside". Tristan told him later that his sister had those earthquakes at home sometimes too, and that one of the neighbor ladies, a nurse, would come by to talk about it.

The first time Jimmy witnessed one of Tristan's own earthquakes was during their class trip to the seaside, right before the family's first summer vacation in Belgium, when Tristan went into shock when he saw the waves. A few dozen meters from the surf he had stopped in his tracks, his arms and legs blocked in mid-stride, as though pickpockets had stolen his joints. A few seconds later he peed his pants.

Jimmy, who had gone with Tristan and one of the teachers to their home base atop the sea embankment to loan him the dry underpants he'd brought along with his spare clothes, watched as Tristan changed, his body looking much smaller than before. The door to Tristan's past stood wide open, one little push was all that was needed to walk right in and poke around at leisure, but something kept Jimmy from that. He had to wait for Tristan to invite him in.

Jimmy agreed to spend the rest of the week in the dormitory with Tristan, with a pile of books and a memory game that used pictures of the seaside, while the rest of the class went on scavenger hunts and survival trips in the dunes. He kept a respectable distance the whole time, yet never strayed far. He calmed Tristan, who got the shakes every time he heard the sound of the gulls or saw the cleaners come by in their uniforms, without asking about the ugly memories. He noted nothing of this in *Tristan's War*; he never picked up that booklet again.

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