

Ex.

About a Country Gone Missing

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An extract

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Gone

He'd appeared in her dreams before, but not like this. She awoke with a start, the nightmare's images fading immediately. What remained was fear: someone had killed him. But who and how?

A few days later it happened.

The day itself she remembers too: a mild, cloudy Sunday in February. Her mother had left the

house to buy some ingredients for a stew with minced meat and leeks. She was thirteen and had been hanging out on Morichar square with another girl. Around half past four they'd heard sirens, and her friend asked if they shouldn't see what was going on. Je m'en fous, she said. Not worth it. You could hear sirens all the time here.

Back at home the phone rang. She picked up, surprised to hear that same friend's mother on the

line. Was that the sound of a TV in the background?

"Teuta, your dad is on the news."

That'd happened before. She didn't know exactly what kinds of things her dad did professionally,

just that his actions had recently made the media more often. In the basement he typed his magazine.

His strident look had an element of Clint Eastwood, she thought. Clint Eastwood with a beard.

"What's he talking about?"

"He's not talking, Teuta. They're talking about him."

That's how she found out.

She never saw him again.

She didn't go visit his body. Even after the funeral in Charleroi, which attracted a whole bunch

of people from all over – some said it was almost the state funeral that he was supposed to have had – she has always had the sense that somehow he was still alive, just not here, not in Brussels. Only 20 years later, when she was allowed to view his files, did she see the autopsy photos. That was tough. Je comprends votre tristesse, Mademoiselle Hadri, the murderer's lawyer had said, in

measured words. This wasn't about understanding, she'd replied, but about closing a case, a case that had to be settled, go to trial; only that way would all the terrible mistakes made during the investigation be somewhat corrected, only that way would this world be somewhat reasonable again. Something along those lines was what she'd said, with the greatest sangfroid. No tristesse. But seeing those photos in that folder, that was brutal. As if she only then realized he wasn't just gone, but dead.

This was what Teuta told me on the market square in Sint-Gillis, Brussels, a few hundred meters from where the assassination took place and around the corner from where she lives. We sat in the shadow of the town hall amidst the merry activity of a Thursday market in July. Plastic chairs had been put out on the cobblestones for customers with bags of cold cuts and cheese. We sat there talking, people all around us. A farmer with a yellow truck sold duck ham and the stand next door served champagne.

"Outside the Albanian community here in Brussels few people know who my father was or what happened to him."

We took a sip from our glasses. Somewhere there was the sound of an accordion.

"Why don't you stop by at our house? I'll show you some pictures."

This is how a trip to the market could go in Brussels. You drank champagne, talked about a murder, and later came home without groceries but with the taste of duck ham in your mouth. You stared out the window as if you'd forgotten something out there, and however hard you tried, you couldn't remember what.

I went searching in newspaper archives. The Kosovar human rights activist Enver Hadri fled Yugoslavia in 1972, I read, and had lived in Brussels since then. Eighteen years later, on 25 February 1990, he was shot to death on the intersection of the Sint-Bernardusstraat and the Overwinningstraat in the neighborhood of Sint-Gillis. He was stopped at the traffic lights when a Volkswagen Golf pulled up next to him. The window came down. Had Hadri looked to his left, he could have possibly seen a flash of a 7.65mm gun with a silencer. Two shots. They hit him in the head. He was 49.

I went to look at the place where it had happened, a regular crossing in an ordinary part of Brussels, a neighborhood that I know well. From 1997 to 2005 I lived in this area – years that have given me good memories, and I often think back to this place, now that I live in another part of town. With my phone I took some pictures of the intersection, the houses that over the years I had walked by so many times, often lost in thought and blind for the city.

Back at home I heard Hadri himself speak in a TV-news snippet from 1989, a few months before his death, now on YouTube. The Albanians in Yugoslavia had been treated unjustly for decades, he said calmly but persistently. It wasn't just about their identity, but also about civil rights. Kosovar intellectuals were systematically silenced, arrested, or even worse. This had to be fought, especially now that Milošević had changed the Yugoslav constitution of 1974. The new powers that the province had gained that year were now retracted. Action was needed.

Hadri spoke in the name of the Kosovar Diaspora organization he had founded in Brussels, the Committee of Human Rights in Kosovo. He approached international organizations, published a magazine called *La Voix de Kosovo* and wrote patriotic poetry. He was passionate – he was a nationalist with communist sympathies, an Albanian eagle adorned his pamphlets – but not as radical as some of his fellow activists who were fighting for a Greater Albania. There was debate among Kosovar activists about their strategies and goals, and Hadri was on the pragmatic side. He didn't think Kosovo should join Albania. Even separation from Yugoslavia was no immediate goal: an independent Kosovo might sink even deeper into poverty, he said. What he demanded was the right to self-determination within a Yugoslavian union.

The year 1989 was key: his organization was more in the news than ever before. In a certain sense Milošević's helped him; the man's obsession with Kosovo drew more and more international attention. It became a story of two oppressions. The Albanian-speaking Kosovars accused Belgrade of human rights abuses, while Belgrade claimed that the Albanians were intent on killing or chasing away the Serbian-speaking population. After 1980 the situation had turned into a permanent state of war. In June 1989 Milošević spoke to the masses at the commemoration of the Battle of Kosovo and said that, now 600 years after that legendary battle, new violent conflict was becoming unavoidable. The Albanians responded forcefully. The miners of Trepça had gone on strike and locked themselves underground, protesters who threw stones had been faced with water cannons; there were riots, people died.

In Brussels Hadri found willing ears at indignant NGOs and governments. Amnesty International raised the alarm and journalists who came to ascertain just what was happening spoke of a Kosovo version of the intifada. The European Parliament prepared a resolution condemning the human rights violations, and Hadri felt supported. His pamphlets were being read, his poetry sounded more urgent than ever. Could he ever become the president of a new Kosovo? Perhaps. Did he know that he was in greater danger because of this increasing attention? Maybe not. Kosovar activism ran through underground networks and many international branches, but the fight against this activism did too. One branch reached to Brussels.

The assassination was carried out by a team of three contract killers, one of whom was the man with the gun: one Veselin Vukotic, a Serbian-Montenegrin ex-boxer, gangster, and casino boss who had craftily made his fortunes smuggling cigarettes in his younger years. For a while back in Novi Sad, Vukotic ran an underground gambling den called Casino Royal.

The assignment came from the Serbian department of the Yugoslavian intelligence services. They had killed before, but according to testimony at the Yugoslavia tribunal this was the first time the Serbian unit operated without the federal service knowing. You could easily say that the assassination was a prelude to the war: a secret service fell apart in a country that was about to crumble.

Vukotic was everything the destruction of Yugoslavia would be: cryptic, violent, and shamelessly entwined with the world of organized crime. He was on the run for years. Only in 2006 was there a breakthrough in the investigation: new information from a testimony in The Hague led to Spain, where they found him under an assumed name and with false documents. The two other killers had at that point been killed themselves. Vukotic was extradited to Belgium and placed in detention under remand in the prison of Sint-Gillis, a few hundred meters from the site of the crime, and thus also not far from Hadri's house. The fact that he was finally in jail was a relief to Hadri's widow and children. Him being so close, that was strange. Strange turned sour when they found out that the Brussels courts were putting off the trial. They shouldn't count on a conviction within the next four years, the lawyer said. They waited. Nothing happened. To be precise: nothing happened until 19 December 2008. This date marked the end of the 'reasonable time' he could be detained, and Vukotic was released on bail and put on a plane to Belgrade in response to an demand for extradition from the Serbian authorities also wanted the man extradited. The Hadri family was speechless. Didn't the Belgian authorities know what kind of a man they were dealing with? Did they not understand that he probably would have connections in Serbia? Vukotic was sentenced to 20 years in prison for a murder he committed in 1997 at a Montenegrin nightclub, where, in a blind fury, he had shot someone who'd spilled a drink on him. He served a few months and was released in 2010.

Medical grounds. Investigative reporters from the BIRN, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, claim that Vukotic passed Serbian investigators key information from the Montenegrin underworld and

was granted freedom in exchange. He had snatched his way out, to a new Serbia, a country that in many ways still looked like the old Serbia, to the netherworld of Novi Sad, where he was welcomed back.

I saw Teuta a few times over the summer. We'd talked about him, about loss, about what it was like to grow up without a father and how I couldn't imagine that, didn't want to. One night in late autumn I visited her family. It was chilly and humid, and the trees on the Sint-Gillis square were dark against the orange streetlight glow, and I thought of Kosovo, of rough black and white images of refugees, of the small of wet ground I always somehow associate with that war. That war: long time ago and still not so long ago. I had to think of that one picture of James Nachtwey, that white wall in a house in Pejë on which there are traces of small bleeding hands, but then in black and white so that you could mistake the blood for something else. Paint. You could perhaps mistake this for the paintwork of a toddler.

But was Kosovo still that sad now? In 2008 the country had declared independence with a big party, and the former leader of the KLA, Hashim Taçi, had re-educated himself to prime minister and was now sometimes called the George Washington of the Balkans. And in Pristina one could now visit a new and high-spirited monument, a message to the world: NEWBORN in big yellow letters. Maybe Kosovo did remind of a sprightly toddler?

I rang the doorbell.

"It's hard to believe you really live on the Albania Street," I said when Teuta opened the door. In this neighborhood were also Bosnia Street, Montenegro Street and Belgrade Street – it looked like mini-version of the Balkans. She explained that her father had bought this house back in the 1970s when he had discovered there was a special history associated with it.

Teuta laughed. I followed her through the hallway up the stairs. In 1897, Faik Konitza, the most important Albanian intellectual from the belle époque, a friend of Guillaume Apollinaire's, had lived here before he moved to America.

"Those were the kinds of things my dad got a kick out of."

In exile Hadri had organized his life around the symbols of his struggle. His house was Albanian heritage in the imaginary Balkans of Brussels. The name of his daughter was taken from queen Teuta of the Illyrians, a people that once ruled of a big part of the Balkans.

I was led into a stately home with high ceilings and a kitchen that extends back from the living room, the kind of enfilade so typical of Brussels homes from the end of the 19th century. There, in the kitchen, the table was set. It smelled delicious. Mrs. Hadri nodded to me cautiously. She was wearing an apron she was drying her hands on. I heard the sound of Brussels: multilingual chaos. Renoar, Teuta's older brother, with a bald-shaven head and little ring in his left earlobe, gave me a firm handshake.

"Like Renoir, the painter?"

He nodded. But then as it would be written in Albanian, he said in a soft voice: R-e-n-o-a-r. I wondered if Hadri also loved painting. Perhaps the name of his son reflected his artistic ambitions: his poems and his drawings. Renoar said he leaned more toward music. He played in a soul band. I was also introduced to a neighbor, Gilles, a young documentary filmmaker. Gilles from Sint-Gillis who is making

a film about Albanians in the Albania Straat, how crazy could it get? I told them and they smiled.

"That's our life," said Teuta.

Gilles and Renoar had been in Kosovo the previous summer and they were reminiscing. For Renoar this was a way to rediscover the country he lived in the first years of his life. How old was he when Stevie Wonder sounded from his radio in the Kosovo mountains? Superstition in

Kosov. That's when he decided: I'm going to be a musician. There were still some old friends of his over there, he said, particularly a girl he often thought about.

"You notice something about Renoar when he is in Kosovo," said Gilles. "He flourishes. It's as if the Kosovar soil is making him blossom. I mean: He reacts to the earth there." Renoar shyly laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Could it be that I'm sensitive to the vibrations a place gives off? Does the ground there have a specific frequency? After all, I'm a bass player. Perhaps I more precisely sense deeper vibrations." I listened to their stories while we were eating stuffed peppers. On each plate there were two: a red one from Belgium and a green one from Kosovo. Mrs. Hadri had just returned from her sister's in Pejë, the mountain city in the southeast of Kosovo, not far from the border with Montenegro. That's where the green peppers were from.

"Do you sometimes also say Pec instead of Pejë?"

Place names in Kosovo: a sensitive matter, often a code to talk about the conflict. Was it Priština or Prishtinë? Trepça or Trepca? Pec or Pejë? Pec is the Serbian name. The city traditionally was the seat of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate, and that connection is why Serbians attach great importance to the city. Now hardly any Serbians live there anymore, but the name is still in use and that's not illogical: Kosovo officially remains a multilingual country. Kosovo? Wait, maybe I should say Kosova, the Albanian version of the name? And is it actually a country? Serbia still officially considers it to be a Serbian province. A little less than half of the UN member states also do not recognize Kosovo as an independent republic. In the strictest terms, Kosovo is unnameable: The Kosovar government feels 'Kosovo' is too Serbian and for Serbia 'Kosova' is too Albanian. In 2012, the EU decided to use 'Kosovo*', a term with which the Serbian government has reconciled itself. The asterisk refers to a footnote that says: "This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence." This was the technique of diplomacy. With a little star you could solve a lot of things. It was better than a gunshot wound.

I thought that now a complicated conversation would unfold over the mixed peppers – Enver Hadri wouldn't have yielded on this matter – but the Hadri family seemed not to care either way. Pejë or Pec: Weren't Sint-Gillis and Saint-Gilles also the same in Brussels?

"There's one thing you should remember," noted Renoar. "If you end up in a Serbian enclave, you should probably not mention my father's name. In the rest of Kosovo he's a hero."

Teuta often thought back to her childhood, she said. She remembered an assignment from art class: Draw your country's flag! Teuta hadn't known which flag it was she should be drawing: the Belgian, the Yugoslavian, or the Albanian one. None of these three seemed right. Why don't you do the Yugoslavian one then, the teacher had said. After she brought the drawing home, Enver Hadri had promptly showed up at school to take the teacher to task, perhaps with a pamphlet on which he himself had stenciled a two-headed black eagle.

"OK," said Renoar, "let's just explain where exactly Enver-Hadri Street is in Pejë. And we should also talk about the statue. Too bad you're not going in summer, then I could join you. What exactly are you going to do there? Are you going to keep a diary?"

Mrs. Hadri said: "I would invite you to my house in Kosovo, but I really don't have a house in Kosovo, just a ruin."

"It's a beautiful old Ottoman building," said Teuta. "You could always go take a look. When are you leaving?"

I said that I didn't know yet what I'd be doing in Kosovo, that I'd probably just talk to people who'd cross my path. And that I'd be leaving in a week, flying to Pristina. I decided to pronounce the name of the capital in Dutch, and also to just write it like that, without an š or sh or

ë. In times of political confusion sometimes the best approach may be to confuse people even more.

"It'll be icy. You'll probably want to come back some time in summer."

"I'll just contact my old friend in Pejë," said Renoar as he was tapping on his iPhone. "And my cousin Mirgjin in Prishtinë. You should really talk to him."

Mrs. Hadri meanwhile served dessert: Baklava. Just like the green pepper this dish came from her sister. Mrs. Hadri had gotten on a plane in Brussels with a little bag of nuts. In Kosovo her sister had incorporated the nuts in the honey pastry. That pastry had travelled back with her and was now on our plates. The sweetest form of migration.

Monday night, the end of November. What would it be like to flee your country? What would it be like to return? The entire flight you just stare out in front of you as if you're trying to solve a hard puzzle. You're wearing your old black leather jacket that reeks of Camels and rakija. You study the bottles of perfume in the inflight magazine and read the first page of The Economist Guide to the EU, a well-thumbed copy, over and over again. You look at your rough hands, at that blue nail. You repair gutters for a company abroad. You're a young woman with a crying baby in your lap.

In line for passport control, I wait and stare at the ads on the wall. Seeing the Albanian language is disorienting: As if a cat had walked across the keyboard. Flags proudly displayed everywhere. I get my luggage off the carousel and stroll distractedly past customs.

The night porter of the hotel is waiting for me. His name is Dani. He shakes my hand firmly and squeezes my shoulder. We're already buddies. He's wearing a shiny blue suit and has a little circle beard. Kosovar night porters that work as drivers on the side are apparently allowed to drive the boss' spanking new SUV. With a grand gesture Dani tosses my suitcase on the backseat. I'm thinking of my notebook in my suitcase, consider for a second to pull it out, but I just let it be. An interview with a taxi driver? Stale genre. We drive away from the parking lot and in silence we sit next to each other.

"There are not always so many flags around here," he says after a few minutes.

On the way to the center of Pristina the flag fever persists. We already passed countless red banners with the black two-headed eagle. On cars too: The fabric strung tightly across the hood. In shop windows, hanging from streetlights, on unfinished buildings – constructions of reinforced concrete from which the steel bars stick out and look like the frayed fringe of some gigantic piece of embroidery.

"It's got to do with the hundredth anniversary of Albania's independence," Dani says. "That's the day after tomorrow. In 1912 our nation tore itself loose from the Ottoman Empire." Torn. Embroidery. Fringe. Maybe I should have kept my notebook at hand anyway.

Doesn't he want one of those flags on his car, I ask. He doesn't join in on that, he says, 'cause see, he also has to take a lot of Serbians and EU people to the hotel, so business comes first.

"You don't want to step on people's toes. I fought against the Serbians during the war, but just because you killed each other you shouldn't hate each other after. That's bad for business."

A bit later I navigate across the loose paving stones to the hotel. The woman at reception – bright-red lipstick, jet-black hair in a bun – looks at my passport and then addresses me in Dutch. Surprised, I look up and she proudly smiles. Her name is Mira and she lived in Antwerp for five years. She was an asylum seeker, but her cheery bearing has no trace of a refugee camp. She returned some time before and is now in police training. Working at the reception desk is a side job. In Kosovo unemployment is spectacularly high, she explains. Among young people the percentage is up to more than 70%. At the same time, many have a lot of different jobs here and there. That's not a contradiction.

You have to figure out how to keep your head above water. Without money from abroad it would in any case be much worse. How many languages she speaks? Five: Albanian, Turkish, Bosnian, English, and Dutch, although her Dutch must really be called Antwerpish, she says. After she has taken down my information and given me the plastic keycard for my room, she asks what I'm doing in Kosovo. I tell her I want to visit Pejë to see Enver Hadri's house. She nods. Yes, she believes she's heard of him, Hadri. But she's not absolutely sure.

Why am I in Kosovo? To see that house? Partly yes, of course. I've become fascinated by that murder committed in my neighborhood when it wasn't yet my neighborhood. It's an invisible scar in the city.

How many invisible scars are there in Brussels? Sometimes I try to see them. Sometimes I try to find out their history.

But I'm here too for academic research. What is the current relationship between Serbian and Albanians in Kosovo? What is the position of the Roma in this ethnopolitical landscape? Is it naïve to hope? These are the topics I want to discuss with key people in the world of politics and NGOs. These are important questions for Kosovo, a country not only with a recent past of violence but also state institutions that are new, and where much escapes the control of the authorities. They are also urgent topics for the rest of ex-Yugoslavia. And for the rest of Central and Eastern Europe.

For years now I've studied similar topics across the region. The Poles and Ukrainians, the Slovaks and Hungarians. Enduring anti-Semitism in Hungary, anti-Hungarian feelings in Romania. I continue to be perplexed by the casualness with which people seem to accept and believe that collective identity is something immutable, while nothing may be as fluid as their personal relations with friends and enemies. How stubborn are dividing lines? How malleable are the categories 'us' and 'them'? Eastern Europe is fascinating study terrain for this sort of questions. A melancholy study terrain, too, because wherever you go, you encounter the best and the worst of history. Everywhere there are traces of the fluid labyrinth that this part of the world once was, the self-evident multilingualism and cultural diversity that were once so common, but you also run into the desire for territory and the lust for borders that also applied, of the hate and mass graves.

The roots of a passion preferably remain unexplained, but when friends ask me where my interest in Eastern Europe comes from I always have that one clear answer: my teenage years. I was seventeen when the Berlin Wall fell. That meant something, at the time. I remember the images on television, that surprising press conference where DDR officials said that the borders would be open and the masses from Eastern Berlin who, on that cold evening in November in 1989, went out to take a breath of fresh air in the West. Later I watched in wonder at balcony scenes in Czechoslovakia and Romania. In Prague the people cheered a playwright who could finally speak freely; in Bucharest a dictator stammered. For the first time in my life I experienced something a crack in history – wasn't it incredible that one could be a contemporary of something so grand? I wanted to feel these shimmering changes more directly, so I studied Slavic languages and went to Eastern Europe. While I experience the slightly overwhelming sensation of my own independence I saw the mixed feelings of euphoria and confusing affecting the new Europe. The twentieth century had broken the continent in two. How long would one still be able to lay hands on the ground and feel the fissure.

A few years later I wrote a social science PhD thesis on a topic that had caught my attention during those trips in the east: the divisions, the Mauer im Kopf. This was not the dichotomy of the Cold War; these were divides that ran everywhere across the continent, between rich and poor, old and young, city and countryside, extremists and minorities. I was interested in particular by the position of the Roma. It was alarming how people could so universally be hated

because they were pushed to the margins of society, as if they needed to be pushed out even further. As if they themselves were responsible for the hatred towards them. About the Roma one could only hear people talk as an exceptional group, a collective of outcasts, not as individual persons with their own unique lives, and certainly not as fellow citizens. I got well acquainted with Roma activists, mostly very committed people who wanted to change things but know that in the new economic and political climate such change would be hard to achieve. The Roma would be further marginalized and demonized at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

I published my PhD thesis and after a stay at Harvard I continued studying Eastern Europe, went there to travel and always I found a mixture of cheerfulness and melancholy. There were wonderful nights with wonderful friends, but I knew about the tragedy in the background – the tragedy of now and the tragedy of then. I walked, for example, in the streets of Warsaw in the area that used to be the Jewish part of town, which is still a neighborhood that is shocking for what's not there anymore, for the silence that lingers between the buildings on slow summer Sundays. When you read the stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer in the Krochamlna Street, the place where some of his stories take place, you can look up and recognize absolutely nothing. Singer's Warsaw is buried under communist and postcommunist highrise, the past sits below the surface, the best and the worst of it, under a concrete skin.

By 2010 I began to travel more and more to the Balkans, a region where I had been several times before but so far hadn't published much about. Similar topics there caught my attention. If somewhere in Europe there was scar tissue, it was certainly there. There it was still new and frail. I decided that this was a good moment to give this region some more attention. Over the years much was published about the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990s. Detailed histories of the breakup could easily be found: journalists had travelled there, filmmakers had made documentaries, academics had done all sorts of research. And there was Srebrenica, the biggest European war trauma of the end of the twentieth century. And there was The Hague: war criminals had been arrested and brought before court, victims had spoken about their suffering. But how were things now? Now that people looked away, the headline news was made elsewhere and ex-Yugoslavia remained only a shred of a vague memory in the shadow of the rest of the world?

I had the feeling that the former Yugoslavia remained important, that it was important to write about it. I wanted to write about it not only as an academic researcher. I was drawn to all the things that happened in the margins of academic research. These are the side-path stories. I've always collected such stories, but often they get shattered in notebooks and diaries I lost, and every time I lost them I had the feeling of having been deprived of something essential. This time I wanted to keep them.

I wanted to write about the side-path of coincidence, and this in the form of a notebook that would contain a few years of traveling to all parts of the former Yugoslavia: Kosovo, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Slovenia. I hadn't been there when Yugoslavia fell apart, I wasn't present during the wars; perhaps I couldn't have done much there anyway, I'm not a war correspondent. But perhaps now I could be a different type of reporter: a correspondent of everyday life. Quickly I drew up a list of themes I wanted to know more about: loss and mourning, humor and laughter, work, friendship, love, hate, memories, God, food. I didn't only want to study ex-Yugoslavia but also smell, taste and live it.

And that's why I walk around in talk to people like Dani and Mira, and the soles of my shoes touch the pavement of the Balkans, and why I've felt the loose tiles and it makes me think of something James Joyce once wrote: "Chance furnishes me with what I need. I'm like a man who stumbles; my foot strikes something, I look down, and there is exactly when I'm in need of." Is this something one can hope for? The researcher as coincidental transient? Stumbling as method?

In the countryside of Kosovo a man may sit in silence on a stool next to a grazing cow as if for centuries he hasn't moved a bit, but Pristina is restless. Everywhere people walk and drive and build, and in the streets one can smell the dust of a city under construction. In between the buildings there are flags: artificially black eagles, the red of nail polish. My hotel is brand new. The corridors have been painted a globalized design beige and the doors of the rooms that universal dark brown. Behind those doors guests find bright white sheets, flashing flat screens, and the hum of the air conditioning.

Anthropologists would call it a non-lieu: an interchangeable place, outside of every concrete time and space, that visitors are allowed to occupy but are quickly forced to leave, as anonymity always wins.

The story of a friend of mine, Franklin – just about the greatest Belgian Kosovo expert I know – flashes through my head. On 10 June 1999, the morning of the end of the NATO bombings, the end of the 'Merciful Angel' campaign, he'd traveled from Belgrade to Kosovo looking for a friend of his, a Kosovar student leader. At night he'd stood on a balcony in Belgrade watching the flashes of the final bombs. Almost a thunderstorm, he'd thought. A few hours later, the war was over and he was heading south while the Serbian soldiers were coming from the other direction. He saw Milošević's retreating army: the troops trashed, drunk on war, soldiers pointing their middle and index fingers in the air as if they'd been victorious. Franklin made good time. He arrived in Pristina ahead of the NATO troops from Macedonia. The city he found belonged to nobody. No longer to the Serbian army, not yet to the international community. A hole in time, it was. A unique point in recent European history. At that moment, a moment you could perhaps only compare to those few beats of silence after an accident – those few seconds before bystanders rush up and yell and make phone calls and reanimate – Pristina truly was a non-place.

More than thirteen years have passed us by since then. Now there's muzak playing. The door closes behind me and I put down my suitcase on the folding luggage rack. I zip it open and gaze at the contents in surprise. I curse. Unfamiliar clothes, unfamiliar smells. A box of medication. Albanian stuff. Fuck. I look at the label. The bag looks like mine, but it belongs to someone else. Same color, same brand, but not my luggage. There's a name on the label, but no phone number. I run to reception and tell Mira: "Big disaster, I've robbed a Kosovar."

"Stay calm," she says.

A few seconds later she's already reached the airport authorities. What follows is a long story, which Mira hastily jots down. Tomorrow at 1pm I am to meet a certain Ymer at the airport. He'll give me back my luggage, then I hand over his. No worries about the medication. It's something against headaches. Communication should be minimal in any case, as he speaks nothing but Albanian.

"Mira, you're an angel. This really is a big relief. Now, how do you say thank you in Albanian?"

She writes it down on a piece of paper: faleminderit.

I look at it I wonder what the word for angel would be.

Pejë is maybe a one or two-hour drive from Pristina, and from the vacuum of my hotel room it looks gloriously sunny outside – with blue skies that make me think of vacations in the Pyrenees that were some 30 degrees Celsius warmer – and the conditions to travel to the mountain city are ideal, but I don't. Not just yet. I have to go to the airport to see Ymer today. I make an appointment with another night porter from the hotel, Oli, for him to take me there and back. The hours before I spend strolling through Pristina. At Qyteza Pejton (Peyton Place), not far from Bulevardi Bill

Klinton and Avenue George Bush, I go and have a macchiato as if I've never done anything else, and afterwards I run by the post office to buy a sim card for my phone.

Everything is politically charged in Pristina. Definitely the names of squares and streets. And consequently sim cards as well. Telecommunications companies fought a long and complex political battle to get Kosovo its own national cellular network, and its landlines still have the Serbian prefix. The country-code prefixes that are now in use for cellphones do differ from the Serbian ones, but they are the same as those of Slovenia and Monaco. So when you just make a phone call to your Serbian neighbor in Pristina then it's like calling from Monaco to Belgrade.

"Sim card?"

It takes a while to find a common language, but in a mixed German-English I learn that I've picked a great day to buy a sim card.

"This week free," says the woman behind the counter. A special offer due to Albania's centenary.

Just sign some papers and top it up with minutes. Welcome to this marvelous country.

It's not just the cell-phone companies that are participating in the celebratory spirit. The banks are temporarily offering insane interests. Chestnut vendors have their large buckets filled to the brink with chestnuts, and the spun-sugar seller is spinning extra large pink clouds. A pajama store with lingerie: red thongs, black fishnet tights, and behind them, artfully draped, a lusty eagle. The nation is in heat.

"Are you not going to hang any flags on your car?" I ask Oli when we're in his car on the way to the luggage transaction at the airport.

He's 32. He sighs like an old man.

"Oh right. Another thing I have to do today. It's too much. It's too busy."

He used to work as security at a club, he tells me somberly. That paid better but it was also more dangerous. Now he can bring in 350 Euro a month max. He doesn't want to complain, but still. He's tired. He was able to buy an apartment for his wife and his five-year-old daughter. I expect him to tell me more, but he's silent and squints through the windshield at the sun. The late autumn sun flickers on his flagless hood.

He turns on the radio.

"A lot of foreigners think Oli is short for Oliver," he says after a while. "It comes from Orfei, my real name. Apparently Orfei is the god of music. Yet I don't know shit about music."

We drive onto the airport's parking lot.

A little later we find Ymer, a quiet stay-at-home dad wearing a cap who's been shuttling between Brussels and Pristina for fourteen years and who knows all of four words of Dutch ("I don't speak Dutch"). As I speak even fewer than four words of Albanian our conversation is soon at an end. I try not to ask whether he's had many headaches in the past 24 hours. We exchange our bags and both apologize in all the possible ways our intuitive sign languages offer us. Oli meanwhile has run into a friend of his. A sturdy bloke with a reddish little beard. They greet each other by briefly tapping the sides of their foreheads together while shaking hands. Oli explains what I've come here to do. The friend bursts out laughing and says: "Now, that'd never happen to me, see, because I always put a sticker on my luggage. I had a sticker made and I put it on everything. My bag, my motorcycle, my backpack."

"Always the same sticker?"

"Wait, I'll show it to you."

He takes a cellphone the size of half a cutting board from his trouser pocket and strokes the

screen awake.

“Have a look.”

I see a drawing of a grey owl. The pattern of its feathers is distorted. The owl’s belly is round and

has two holes. It’s supposed to look like a skull. A bizarre and scary image.

“What’s that? A design for a tattoo?”

“It’s a Viking shield. But it’s also the logo we used in our unit when I was in the army in Croatia.”

“Croatia?”

“Yeah, the war, you know. From 1991 to 1995.”

“Sure, I know there was a war on then. But what was a Kosovar like you doing in that war?”

“I’m a Croatian soldier. I was with the Special Forces. We did the harder jobs. Not that we ever got any thanks for that, by the way. But ok, that’s the past. Now we still get together every year with the 35 men in our unit. We ride along the Croatian coast. It’s beautiful there. Our logo is everywhere then. I mean: This is no official logo. It’s just what we used amongst ourselves in that special unit. It connected us.”

War and tribal costumes. It’s the kind of thing that transcends the Balkans.

Now he’s an engineer, he says. Technical engineer. With his own company here in Kosovo.

In the brief amount of time I’m talking to the engineer, Oli has managed to snag a Polish EU consultant that lives in Dublin and two Scandinavian businessmen in the arrivals hall. This way he can make some cash from the ride back to the hotel. In the car a little later, they’re all withdrawn, tapping on their iPhones while the tired night porter is keeping his eyes closely on the road to Pristina. The light gets hazy. I sit at the window in back and stare at the landscape. On a stone in the field next to the highway I spot a bird of prey. Stately. Imperious. A buzzard. He’s spying across the plains. Meanwhile Madonna is on the car stereo: Holiday. Celebrate.

It’s in fact the founding of Albania that’s celebrated today, and not that of Kosovo, but such strict partitions are premature. Everyone joins in, a national rush spreads through the higher planes of the Albanian universe, and things as banal as national borders won’t affect that kind of ecstasy. Nowhere do I notice a drop of irony, not even on the profile page of the very hip Albanian culture reporter I’m friends with on Facebook. In the digital world the eagles flash as well. An intriguing holiday, for sure. I decide to hold off on going to Pejë for a bit. Not today. At breakfast I already notice the buoyant atmosphere in Pristina. The cars are honking through the streets. The television is showing images of the festivities in Tirana. Empty broad avenues that are screaming for parades and other collective lunacies. The capital of Kosovo cannot lag behind, and I’d like to see that from up close.

It isn’t very clear just what is celebrated today, by the way. I mean: Look it up in a history book, if you like, you’ll read that the Ottoman Empire was on the brink of falling apart and the Austro-Hungarian Empire wanted to at any cost prevent Serbia from running off with the Adriatic coast. That’s the reason Vienna did nothing when a collection of Albanian freedom fighters hoisted their flag at the Vlorë congress on 28 November 1912. But whatever followed in the months and years after, it was difficult to call it a state. A mess, that’s what it was. No one knew where the Albanian borders were drawn, nor how much of a say the Ottoman rulers had there. Montenegrins, Serbians, and Greeks claimed parts of the country and drew their weapons. An unknown Russian reporter named Leon Trotsky was traveling through the unstable area and wrote to his newspaper

that his 'political interest' and his 'moral curiosity' had faded somewhat after seeing so many rotting corpses. In short, it might have been called independence, but it looked a whole lot like war.

But perhaps this doesn't really matter today. National holidays are exercises in imagined history. Take the following: In 1913, Otto Witte, a German magician and lion tamer went to Albania with his friend Max Schlepsig, a sword swallower, and pretended to be a nephew of the Sultan's and hence the new king. Five days later, he assumed the throne, was given a harem, and casually declared war on Montenegro. At least that's what this circus performer claimed when he was back living in Hamburg. Suspicion arose when he also claimed he'd led a Pygmy tribe in Africa and once shanghaied the daughter of the Ethiopian Emperor. In short, Witte was a princely fabulist. But he understood what many inhabitants of Pristina seem to know today: independence is a circus.

The proprietors of the stalls on Mother Theresa Boulevard sell the weirdest caps and masks. I walk among the growing mass of partiers that are spending their little money on national knitwear or pots of honey with silhouettes of birds of prey on them. Somebody has laid out Gucci and Vuitton belts on a table covered with both the Albanian and the Kosovar flag: As if you could use counterfeit goods to pull the ties between the two countries a little tighter.

Nearby, a stall with a boxing ball is in high demand. Teenage boys roll up their sleeves and throw punches at the bag. The harder they hit, the more they stand a chance to win a teddy bear. A relief, this punching. I see it in their faces.

Night has fallen and on Mother Theresa Boulevard the party has now really kicked off. On the big stage a band is playing: Traditional music with synthesizers. Men with gray moustaches down to their jaws, all wearing a white plis – a felt cap that reminds me of Calimero's half eggshell – and singing what at first sounds like a sorrowful song. I eat something from a stand. Grilled meat. I try to move through the masses. Something pokes me and I choke a little on a bit of anonymous barbecue. The crowd moves in droves, the fireworks blast. From the stage, the Casio keyboards blare. Suddenly I feel very lonely. Eating a piece of undefined meat among a partying crowd in a country that is reaching for a foothold, that's all hard to withstand.

The lobby of the hotel is quiet. Mira is at reception. I smile at her. She sighs. Is she lonely too? No, those two jobs, it's a lot, she says. Later, after her shift, she still has to go on a police patrol, it's part of the training. During events like this she has to be on her feet all night. And it doesn't always go well. Recently, in May, when she was on duty during a demonstration, she broke her arm in three places. She points out the places through the delicate fabric of her blouse. Does she sometimes go back to Antwerp? No. She's said her final goodbyes to that city. She was 22 when she married another emigrated Kosovar there. He couldn't stay away from other women. Polish and Ukrainian girls. In 2008, she decided two things: To divorce him and to join the police force. That's the way to create order.

The meager comfort of flat screens in hotel rooms at night. I lie on the bed and press the rubber button on the remote. The only available images are a live transmission of everything that's going on 200 meters from where I'm lying. The crowd seems even bigger now, and more red. The folk-pop stars' singing is alternated with highly surreal videos of people in traditional costumes agonizingly slowly parading to Tirana on the new highway. The medieval hero Skënderbeu marches out in front. An eagle flies over the road in slow motion. The pink clouds split open. A choir rejoices. I see a row of men in togas – are they university professors? – bursting into song while young women in white gowns perform a spellbinding choreography on the asphalt. A mating

dance. The screen is feverish and delirious. Elderly men. Young women. Soon they might tear their clothes off.

I bolt awake from a strange dream. My cell rings. A call from Mirgjin, Renoar's cousin. A little later I'm in a coffee shop with him. He orders a small macchiato and I a big one. The waiter is a friend of Mirgjin's and offers him a cigarette.

It's snowing in the unnameable country. Not that much right now, but it's noticeable. Shavings that scatter and flurry, sometimes seeming to whirl upwards but ultimately coming down. Everything will get buried under it, even if it takes a while. Kosovo regenerated: Erased to a blank page. Whiter still. What in daylight seemed like tectonic plates crashed into each other or a pile of swept-up broken paving stones – the mountains on the edges of the plains – now present minimal color differences in the cold. Only the distant memory of something terrible remains – hard to say what it was, an earthquake? The black of the crows is hard as a rock. That light vibration is no aftershock, it's the trembling hand – wrinkly and with brown spots – of the woman sitting next me with a thin plastic bag of potatoes on her lap. I took a bus. It drives onto the highway, which doesn't look like a highway, more like an expressway, without visible lines, but the driver isn't holding back. He hits the gas pedal harder and harder, passionately into the vague distance.

The conversation with Mirgjin had lasted a couple of hours and is stuck in my head for the entire bus ride. While I look outside, I think of him. Of the first thing I noticed about him: His movie-star eyes. Joaquin Phoenix, that's who he reminded me of the most. A face with a rough kind of cast. Black hair, black jacket with the collar standing up straight. It was also due to the way he talked to me: lightly bent forward, intense. And the way he smoked, eyes narrowing to slits as he exhaled the smoke. Renoar had told me that I should talk to him, and soon I knew why. Mirgjin experienced the war not as a soldier, not in the UÇK, but as a prisoner.

"Man, we laughed so much," he said.

Irony? Cynicism?

"Like the time my buddy and I were tortured."

He explains how he and his friend were expertly beaten up during an interrogation. For years he had called his friend 'crook'. A Kosovar term of endearment of sorts, apparently, young guys among themselves. "Hey, you there, crook! Cigarette?" They'd both been beaten senseless. They were lying next to each other on the ground of the cell, their jaw on the tiles, amidst the blood and spit. Then the guard kicked his friend in the ribs and yelled 'crook'. With what strength remained in him Mirgjin whispered:

"See, I told you."

Then they'd fallen into a laughing fit. Weird. But that's how it went. And because of the laughing they got more kicks and more pain until they cried from pain and laughing at the same time.

"You're stronger than you realize, humans are stronger. But you're also more cruel than you think. Like those Serbian units that came in and killed children. Just like that, you know. Just like that."

Outside I see a quarry: granite, raw material for the monuments built along the road here and there. The KLA memorials we'd already driven past. Polished bas-reliefs of men with Kalashnikovs. We slow down. A shepherd in a dark-green, dirty jacket crosses the road with a herd of muddy sheep, white flakes falling down on them.

After a raid on Gjakovë, the city where he lived, on 8 May 1999, Mirgjin was picked up together with his father, some friends, and his older brother Burim. Only his father was released. The two sons were locked up for two years. First in an improvised camp, later at a prison in the

Serbian city of Niš. For years, their father had run a pharmacy, which they were planning to take over. Instead they'd become prisoners of war. Later, when it was allowed, Mirgjin wrote letters to his girlfriend from Niš. Maybe they'd reach her. Burim told him not to dream about the pharmacy. Who knew, they might be in jail for a decade, maybe longer. The pharmacy was dead, as far as he was concerned. Don't expect too much. They should be happy to have survived the attack on the camp, when weapons circulated within the walls of the prison, when paramilitaries had shot at the prisoners and they were told it was Albanians who wanted to shoot their own people to pieces, but they'd not believed that; it was Serbians pretending to be KLA, that's what they believed, no, that's what they knew. Keep your head down. Inconspicuous. Keep out of sight. You're no terrorist, you're a pharmacist. Burim had looked out for Mirgjin. Brothers. He'd held him when he was shivering.

After the war, things turned quieter in prison. Maybe at some point it'd get bearable, they thought. Habit is a powerful thing. You could hardly call it a three-star hotel, but they were fed, that was something, and they were allowed to circulate freely on their floor. They traded cigarettes or sometimes talked to a guard. Now and then letters or clothes came.

On 25 April 2001, they were released, as suddenly as they'd been picked up. Back to Gjakovë.

Freedom was wonderful. But they were also mourning: Their father had died, not even a month earlier. They'd not attended the funeral. Burim reopened the pharmacy, but it was no use. Lack of customers, medications, money. Kosovo might have been free from Serbia, but what next? Mirgjin pulled up stakes to Pristina to look for work with the international organizations there. Burim dreamed of Norway, of the time he had a Norwegian girlfriend, an exchange student in Belgrade back in the 1980s, when you could still go to medical school there as an Albanian Kosovar. These were truly different times. He'd recently contacted her through Facebook. He didn't know why, but he did a lot of things now without knowing why. She had grown-up children now. I imagine how he had clicked on the chat app and for a long time looked at a blinking cursor. Together with Afrim, whom he knew from Niš and who also could no longer find work as an electric motor technician, he set up an organization for ex-prisoners. The logo had a white and a black dove: Freedom and imprisonment.

That was another way to lose a father. A father and a past.

"Do you know Paul Hardcastle?" Migjin asked me, when he stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. The name sounded vaguely familiar to me.

"The musician," he clarified.

Mirgjin followed the music of Paul Hardcastle, still, after all those years. He was a teenager when he listened to "Nineteen," that bizarre electronic anti-Vietnam song. Na-na-na-na-nineteen. Vietnam, that sounded so far away. He used to learn English from pop songs at the time. Average age. Jungle combat. Posttraumatic stress disorder. That was in 1985. He'd looked it up.

The bus takes a curve, the driver switches gears. We're driving into the suburbs of a city. Abandoned factories. The snow melts as it falls. A brewery. I'm in Pejë, in the center of a provincial town that looks orderly at first sight, nothing like the images I remember from the internet, when the war had left large parts of town destroyed and abandoned.

Renoar's old friend is called Valbona. She has blond curls. We talk while we walk through the city, her city. She's never lived anywhere else. She took the afternoon off. The sky is white and completely overcast and the city is not at its best, she says. We enter a café and drink tea.

"It's strange that they didn't do a formal autopsy after his death."

She stirs her tea. I give her a questioning look.

"Don't you think?" she says. "That could have uncovered a lot. That could have sped up the investigation."

"Didn't they do an autopsy? Teuta told me she saw pictures. They were in the file, I believe."

Valbona is skeptical. She believes the investigation could have been better conducted.

"The first thing I always do is take pictures, even before I set foot on the crime scene. The surroundings are important, because you can't take in everything at once, and those pictures reveal a lot, more than you expect: who else was there, who was watching, what traces are left that we perhaps overlook now but will notice later. Then the standard procedure is next. Closing down the scene, taking samples, detecting fingerprints, those sorts of things. I love that stuff. Especially if it's a murder scene.

You have to be able to stand the blood though."

Valbona turns out to be the head of forensics with the police in the Pejë district. I'd expected a slightly melancholic visit, full of childhood memories from back when the Hadris still lived in Pejë and Valbona and Renoar still went to the same school. I already envisaged images of Pejë in the yellow colors of a 1970s filter. But now I'm talking to a criminal justice researcher about murder cases.

"Is it really like you see in TV shows, in CSI or Silent Witness?"

"Yes, those are actually surprisingly realistic."

She loves her work. Especially working with fingerprints, she loves that. She remembers her first case.

"A suicide."

Although. She briefly looks away. She to this day still doubts whether it was really a suicide.

"It was a woman. She'd shot herself. But the funny thing was, it'd been a Kalashnikov."

For twelve years she's been doing this.

"The first years were catastrophic. There was a lot of crime then. After 2004, things got quieter.

Now I think we're at a normal level."

We button up our coats and walk through the renovated parts of this small provincial city. The newly paved square. Valbona doesn't like it. It could all have been done a lot greener. It's as if they want to

cover the city with smooth-stoned squares.

"Did it used to be better?"

"The 1970s weren't so bad: There was a bicycle factory and a shoe factory. Now there's just the beer brewery at the edge of town."

She points in the distance and a melancholy shadow passes over her eyes. That color filter is still there then.

"What if you could choose which time to live in: Then or now?"

"Now," she says.

We walk to the new bust on the city square. It's set on a granite pedestal, of course. I don't recognize Hadri, at least not from the YouTube clip or the pictures. He looks more formal, more of a minister than an activist. He wears a tie and a cloak has been draped over his shoulders, a toga

perhaps. Silver letters spell out who he was: 'hero i kombit.' She knew him back when, but it's a long time ago, she doesn't remember much. We stand there looking at Hadri's stylized head for a moment, not really knowing what we should do. There's a long silence. Until I start up again about the renovations, and she eagerly repeats she doesn't like them.

A little later she shows me the house. We're standing in the "Rr. Ul. Str. ENVER HADRI," as a new blue street sign points out. But once we've pushed open the wooden gate and are standing in the front yard there's not much there that seems renovated. The street may be shiny, but behind it lurks decay. The back half of the house is not yet ruined, but the supporting beams are buckling and here and there the plaster is peeling off the walls. The windows are open. We poke our heads into the darkened space of the abandoned house: the smell of dust, of damp chimneys and peat. The furniture is still there. There are blankets on the ground and yellowed papers strewn around. I see an overturned oil lamp. On the couch there's an old broken Yugoslavian radio. Elektronska industrija. Is this the device that once played Stevie Wonder? The vapor of our breath floats ahead of us. In the doorway there's a pile of firewood with a discarded office chair on wheels next to it.

So this is it.

This is what I'm in Pejë for.

"I recently walked to the intersection of the Sint-Bernardusstraat and the Overwinningstraat," I say to Valbona. "There's nothing to see there either. Nothing reminds you of him. I know the neighborhood well. It doesn't remind you of crime scenes. You can live well there. There's a market not far from there with fresh vegetables, duck ham, those kinds of things. Every Thursday."

That time on the intersection. On the corner was the sign for Chez Cléo, where there used to be a patisserie and after that for a long time a fast-food place. Now it was for sale. On the other side of the street was a laundromat. A boy with pointy hair sat in a plastic cup chair listening to his headphones and moving his head on the beat of the music that I didn't hear. Now I realize better why I was there. I took snapshots as if I was a criminal justice inspector, one who has arrived on the scene of crime more than twenty years late and doesn't have to solve the mystery anymore. Like Valbona I wanted to photograph the details that I didn't see yet, that would later strike me when I would look again at the pictures. I investigated what happens after the facts, how normal life resumes and slowly eclipses all that was exceptional. I looked at the things that make us forget the past, or maybe the things that can never make it forget.

This is also the reason why I've travelled to Kosovo: to observe the moment when normal life resumes. Even though I know that this can only be the beginning of a further search. There are of course other versions of Kosovo, a shadowy presence elsewhere in the Balkans. The idea Kosovo. Kosovo im Kopf. How would that be noticeable in Belgrade? And in the rest of Yugoslavia?

And so I do this again: even when I'm still in this place, I think of another place. The problem of anticipation. In my mind I'm already booking tickets for another trip, while I'm still walking around in Pejë with Valbona and should look at how normal life resumes here, too. We walk by the police station and she says that she should be getting back to work. Evening shift. I have to move on, too, I say.

"Any murder cases today?" I ask her just before she crosses the street.

She looks at me with clear eyes and shakes her head briefly.

"No."

We say goodbye, I give her a kiss on the cheek and promise her that I'll tell Teuta and Renoar that she's thinking of them. Then she turns and looks around her at all the traffic. Any time now heavy snow will fall. Everything will falter.