Assimilation

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Veshko screws his ear closer to the television as the excited talk show guest erupts in phrases that are obviously offensive and perhaps even obscene. Veshko looks from Tyrone, excited guest, to Jerry Springer, wondering when Jerry might take matters in hand, but he only stands mute in the aisle with his arms crossed, cradling his microphone the way some men cradle a bottle. Jimmy, the brother of Tyrone, shrugs at the camera, basking in the attention as the crowd hisses and shouts. There is some trouble having to do with the fat woman seated between the brothers, but Veshko can find neither *bonin*' nor *ho* in the Webster's pried open on his knee.

While watching television has only slightly improved Veshko's English, an abstract sense of his new country is clipping into focus.

Much livelier than those on *Ellen*, certainly more so than those on *Oprah* – many of Jerry's guests are distraught, angry, and often related. They argue using words Veshko cannot look up fast enough – full sentences slip past his ear as if greased.

Now they are trying to hit each other, these two brothers who have dressed in matching shirts for the occasion, but bald men in jackets emblazoned *SECURITY* press them back to their chairs. Tyrone and Jimmy glare at each other over the head of the woman, whose name is Anita. Anita is the colour of a sacher torte, with great painted lips and metallic moons of eye shadow that shimmer like her outfit. Nowhere in his new home of Squaw Inlet, Minnesota, has Veshko seen women wear such abbreviated clothing. Anita's cleavage forms a holster of flesh deep enough to conceal a weapon. Ethnic Americans sometimes carry guns, Veshko knows, although the characters he has met on *The Cosby Show* would never. Or should he say would *not*?

There are no black people this small Minnesota resort community, which makes Veshko suspect they must live in other places, like Chicago, where many talk shows are taped – a place he visited for several hours during his last layover at the airport of O'Hare, where Veshko saw many different sorts of people, many colors. Still, America seems less like the melting pot he'd imagined it would be, and more like his own country, where people settle near their own and stick to their own. In America, immigrant groups even have villages tucked inside cities, such as the Chinese. This he has seen on cable reruns of *The Streets of San Francisco,* the program about two detectives, one handsome and young, and the other grandfatherly, with a nose resembling a penis. Veshko is amused by this program's portrayal of uncorrupt police.

Flipping pages he is pleased to recognize *ska,* a musical term he knows in English. Then his finger lands on what he is looking for, *skank,* which amid the many bleeps is the word Tyrone repeatedly shouts at the woman. He reads the entry and sighs, "Of course. A whore – a *kurva.*" He puts the book down and rises from the sofa, crossing through the

dining room into the kitchen, where his footsteps land on linoleum squares in sync in with the chant, *Jer-ry, Jer-ry*. Yellow-green, yellow-green. He opens the fridge and lifts a can of Budweiser from the door – a beverage that somehow shares an identity with the real Budweiser. The beer is as pale and subtle as the people of his new home.

He heaps cold meatballs and potato dumplings onto a plate, leftovers from his dinner at the Tuomala's. Since coming to Squaw Inlet, Veshko has dinner each Sunday with a different family, alternating between the two churches that sponsor him. St. Heikki's tiny congregation did not have the resources to get their own refugee, so they teamed with St. Birgitta's to pay Veshko's airfare and provide him a home. One Sunday Veshko has dinner with a family of Finns, the following week he is fed by Swedes. Oddly, the parishioners of both churches are so similar-looking he can barely tell them apart. They seem to make no distinctions themselves and greet each other mildly, as if any history between them is forgotten, though they are only a few generations removed from brutality. Veshko has observed that in America the past can be just water under some bridge, as they say. Squaw Inlet's citizens mingle peacefully and have many bumper-sticker sentiments in common – many are pro-life *and* pro-war. They share other similarities; the housewives, for example, seem to have an aversion to spice yet embrace salt. He reaches for the paprika just as the microwave beeps.

After his meal, Veshko returns to the couch, but *Jerry Springer* is over. He switches channels to a program about a small town sheriff in a place called Mayberry where a woman named Aunt Bea is acting out matronly hysterics in black and white.

Veshko fiddles with the rabbit ears, but no color emerges. Assuming there must be some problem with the dish, he climbs to the second floor, then takes the rickety steps to the attic where he forces open a dormer window.

The satellite dish is anchored next to the chimney. He climbs out, clinging to the window sash and immediately experiences a wave of vertigo that tugs from diaphragm to scrotum. He attempts to get better footing, and once secure, hunkers down, breathes and looks out over the town. Spread before him is quite a view of the north part of the town. He can count seventy-seven houses, five bars, and three churches. There are two canoe outfitters, a bait shop, the IGA supermarket, three motels, the food coop, post office, and a windowless library that looks like a power station. A new Pump&Munch sits directly across from the Holiday Station on the piney road that leads south to the interstate that leads to the rest of America.

Just as the freeway sign promises, much of what a person needs in life can be found in Squaw Inlet – *Gas Food Lodging.* But if Veshko wanted to buy a parakeet, or see an ophthalmologist, he would have to travel thirty-seven miles to the first large town. He looks down to the T of the clothesline pole where the red bicycle leans, his only form of transportation.

Many roofs in Squaw Inlet have satellite dishes. Many yards have dogs, but the owners are either inside or gone, so that the animals pace yards fenced with metal mesh, or lay in hard hollows of dirt. The house next door has no dog, no dish, and a closed air, though Veshko knows his neighbor Pete is home because the back end of his Suburban sticks out from the garage not deep enough to house it. Pete works long days, and when he's not out tending sled dogs, inseminating cows, or stitching up one or the other after a

wolf tears them, he sits in what he calls his rumpus room, reading Larry McMurtry novels and drinking Dewer's from a coffee mug that says *# 1 Dad*. Pete is divorced, and dislikes two things, one is his job. When Veshko politely asks how was his day, Pete sometimes makes a certain gesture, wriggling his fingers and saying, "Up to my elbows in cow, buddy, up to my *elbows*." Often he repeats himself for Veshko's benefit. After a particularly harsh day he might say, "Mud, shit and blood, pal, *that* is how was my day. Mud, shit and blood."

If Veshko peers past the trailer park and its slope of spangled poplars, he can squint across the expanse of the lake and the horizon of water, where, if he had binoculars, he might glimpse the Province of Ontario. Balancing on his heels, Veshko feels the house shift minutely under him. Wind from the north scours his ears. He has taken in the highlights of Squaw Inlet, but has nearly forgotten his mission to check the satellite dish. The wires are connected and nothing appears to be broken, so he eases back through the window, shivering.

Downstairs he watches the screen as black and white switches abruptly to color the moment *The Andy Griffith Show* breaks for a commercial. "I understand," he says, understanding.

After the commercial, a new episode begins. Now not only is Aunt Bea afflicted with some brand of anguish, so too is Floyd the barber.

Ready to begin his practice, Veshko kneels near the coffee table, shrugs deeply and shakes his arms like a swimmer before a competition. He rhythmically shakes his wrists and quickly rubs and squeezes each finger before setting his hands on the torso lying on the coffee table. He presses his palms to the sternum and begins.

He would prefer a living body, of course, but Jessica will have to do. It is no good for a masseur to let his hands to forget their trade. Soon after Veshko moved into the tall yellow house, he and his good neighbor Pete made the Jessica together. As they sewed and stuffed her, Pete pointed to the crotch and jokingly growled, "*Est ist verboten!"* and they discovered they had a language in common. While Pete's German is an old dialect learned from his grandmother, it is adequate.

Veshko is shamed by his own poor English, in spite of Pete's encouragement. Besides German and his own language, Veshko can speak a few Serb and Croat dialects, Italian, and some Polish. Pete knows some Finnish from his father, and teaches Veshko words that are hills of vowels interrupted by the occasional brusque consonant. He learns a few unsavory phrases, mostly regarding sexual intercourse with ones mother or sister.

The German conversations become more fluent as empty Bud cans accumulate on the carpet of Mrs. Kubich.

Mrs. Kubich had abruptly passed the week before Veshko came to Squaw Inlet. Stroked out, he was told, but since both church committees had planned he would live with her, the family offered the use of the house until they could settle the estate and sell. On the day of Veshko's arrival the old woman's belongings were as they had been when she was removed by the ambulance – a load of delicates in the dryer and a saucepan in the sink. Veshko gently moved the support hose and cardigans and lavender sachets from enough drawers to put away his own things, then shut the doors of several rooms and settled in to live under the watchful stares of Mrs. Kubich's people. They gaze from gilt frames hung high on walls or set on bookshelves that hold no books – dozens of sepia

eyes watch over as he practices his massage, eats, and sleeps. They are Slavic faces with wide cheekbones and high foreheads, and he doesn't much mind them, even feels an odd kinship, sometimes acknowledging them in no particular language at all.

Veshko has not placed any of his own family photographs out for display, assuming they would only elicit curiosity from his few well-meaning visitors.

He works over Jessica, kneading outward from imaginary ribs, his concentration breaking only when commercials blare and blast colour into the dim room. The dummy, which Pete has named, is fashioned from a leotard and several pairs of tights filled with flax seed. She has comically large breasts formed by bags of millet, with the knots centered to suggest nipples. As Pete sutured Jessica's torso, Veshko confessed that Jessica Simpson was not known in his home country. Pete only shrugged and told Veshko his own wife, The Ex, had small breasts. The Ex lives in Duluth with his two children, and her new husband, Needle Dick.

On the screen, Floyd the barber is now in full flummox. It turns out he has lost money Aunt Bea had entrusted him with. Aunt Bea won the money playing bingo, and feels guilt about gambling so has vowed to give her winnings to charity before her family finds out. But Floyd is weak and confesses to the men of Mayberry, who rally to help him. Floyd slumps dejectedly near an open cell in the sheriff's office. The police in this program don't even close the cell doors – they play checkers with their prisoners and serve them homemade meals with linen napkins.

Veshko repeats what the big-eared sheriff says to the troubled barber,

"Now, think, Floyd, *think*. Where's the money?"

"Sink, Flood, sink. Veriz za mawney?"

"I uh uh . . ." Floyd hangs his head, "Oh, d-d-darn it, Andy!"

The other actors speak in slow drawls he mimics as he massages Jessica's calves and legs. She has no hands or feet. Veshko has considered filling pairs of Mrs. Kubich's gloves and socks with flax to make her whole. Seeds in Jessica's midsection make a faint *scritch* when he presses with his fists.

Aunt Bea's money is found and there are sly smiles all around, including a rodent-like grin from Aunt Bea herself, who had known all along that her money had been misplaced. When the program is over, Veshko changes the station and flips Jessica face down for her second hour. Her spine is length of plastic chain stitched into the back of the leotard – his hands move upward from imaginary coccyx to imaginary shoulder blades and to the wobbly neck and occipital ridge.

Nova has a special on dingoes.

At midnight Vesko turns off the lights goes to his bed, where the sheets smell of bleach and dust.

Pastor Dan, the Swedish minister, was the first and so far the only person in Squaw Inlet to try to engage Veshko in a political conversation. At the counter of Pavola's Cafe, Veshko was deep in his textbook, conjugating verbs, and Pastor Dan was reading his newspaper. The pastor rattled his page, then poked it with a finger, asking Veshko,

"In your opinion, Veshko, where do you think Slobodan Milosovic should be buried?"

Opinion. He was almost certain he understood the meaning of the word. Rising from his stool and closing his English book, Veshko slowly annunciated each syllable of his response, "I have not an opinion in this matter." He smiled and left a tip for the young woman who'd brought his eggs and so much bad coffee. Once outside, he glanced back through the window to see Pastor Dan reach into his pocket and push several more coins across the counter to join Veshko's.

In the afternoon he finds a package in his doorway. It's a video from Mrs. Jorge, the town librarian. There is a note, easy to translate. *I haven't seen this myself, but thought you might like it!* The video is *Welcome to Sarajevo*. The incongruity of the title puzzles him. A travelogue? From before the siege, surely. He will watch it once he's figured out what's wrong with the VCR.

Pete comes after work with a twelve-pack and examines the machine, which turns out to be not broken. He demonstrates to Veshko how he need only switch the input cables, explaining that Mrs. Kubich must have let her grandchildren play Nintendo on the television. Pete begins to describe Nintendo but Veshko excitedly interjects,

"I know this Nintendo! My nephews back home has it…*had* it." Veshko repeats, "I know this video game." He forgets *Welcome to Sarajevo* and goes to rummage through cupboards and closets, searching for the Nintendo, as if a child might leave such a thing behind.

On Saturday Pete takes Veshko fishing.

On a trailer coupled to the Suburban they pull an aluminum boat far out of town to a closed-up resort called Naledi, where, Pete explains, he once had a girl – in another life.

Veshko asks if he believes in … the word takes a minute – *reincarnation*?

He doesn't.

Pete expertly backs his boat trailer down to a narrow beach between two docks. Next to the dock is an old building for boats only, a water garage built on cribs. Pete takes a key hung under an eave and lets himself in. He comes out lugging an outboard motor.

"This is not trespassing?"

Pete snorts, "Hardly."

With the motor sputtering blue, they zoom from the dock and travel halfway across the lake at full speed. Veshko closes his eyes against the wind and feels his hair part, first one way then another. When the boat stops, it lowers itself like a big animal sitting. Veshko nearly asks Pete to do it again.

They reach an island Pete knows, one large enough to have it's own inlets and bays. Skirting the shore they turn into a narrow channel that leads to a marshy bay. Pete explains the water here will be choked with tall weeds by August, but for now, the bass swim under the boat in the new growth, begging to be caught.

Pete teaches him to cast. At first Veshko holds the rod too tightly, certain he will fling it from the boat, but after a while he is able to relax and the reel buzzes and the balsawood lure flies through the air. Veshko is a quick learner, and once he comprehends Pete's phrase *all in the wrist* and makes a few practice casts, he can throw his line and swat black flies at the same time.

He catches two fish, one resisting so wildly he expects some giant by the time it's pulled to the boat, but it is only a slender pike. Such fight in only an average fish, he marvels, asking Pete, "This is an American fish?"

"I guess. You don't fish back home?"

"Sometime, in rivers. Not like this."

Pete catches many perch and three bass too small to bother with.

They troll near the reeds for several hours, not saying much. Pete makes a few jokes about Veshko's fishing hat, borrowed from the closet of Mrs. Kubich, a straw cloche, at least freed of its silk flowers.

"I wouldn't wear that on the street, pal…" Pete advises, "…that faggot down at the B&B might just ask you out dancing."

"Faggot?"

"You know." Pete flops his wrist. "Homo."

"Ah, yes."

Pete offers some history of the area, telling of the fur-toting Voyageurs, tough little bastards who were not always French; some were native Indians, some Russians and Brits and even Bohunks like Veshko. "The lot of them were called Pork-Eaters, *manageurs de lard*, so probably there weren't many Jew paddlers."

He urges Veshko to guess what the leading cause of death among the Voyageur bastards was. Since Pete has described them paddling rapids and portaging for miles, shouldering loads weighing more than themselves, Veshko guesses drowning, and hernias.

"Nope. Constipation."

Since Veshko doesn't know the word, Pete pantomimes, scooting his bottom over the edge of his seat to grunt and clutch his stomach before falling dead against the oar.

By early evening the beers are warm, but taste better. Veshko discovers he can urinate off the bow while still fishing, simply by trapping the rod in his armpit.

"You got the hang of it now," Pete says to his back, "We call that double-poling."

Hoping for one last fish, they troll the entire way back to Naledi. Approaching the land so slowly like this makes it feel like a real voyage. Veshko leans and watches the pines sway above the log cabins, and sees how late sun bounces from the lake to spray the resort windows with gem-coloured reflections, making even the saddest little buildings glow.

In English, Veshko sighs, "This is one beautiful country, my friend."

Pete glances to where Veshko is looking and shrugs, "I 'spose."

* * *

Veshko realizes the networks that broadcast talk shows knowingly exploit personal dramas and anguish to sell commercial slots. Such commercials have expanded his vocabulary to include pattern baldness, incontinence, vaginal dryness, and erectile dysfunction, as well as names of major pharmaceutical companies and the attending cornucopia of alarming side effects.

Still, he is drawn to the talk shows and has his favorite hosts. He knows instinctively not to trust small-eyed Doctor Phil, the propagandist, and half of the women on The View. He likes Ellen very much, an open-faced, seemingly humble person who Pete calls a carpet muncher.

Pete has suggested Veshko should get out more, away from the idiot box. He invites him along to inseminations and sheep castrations.

He politely declines, but takes the advice to heart. Veshko packs lunches and takes long bicycle rides. He recognizes the roads Pete had steered them over to reach Naledi. One day he made it the entire way. Though the bicycle is sturdy enough, the going seems more difficult the closer he got to the resort. When he arrives, finally, Veshko realizes the tires have leaked, one nearly to flatness. Huffing, he shrugs out of his Spiderman backpack and soaked shirt. Down the hill from the lodge is a little beach where Veshko wades in to wash his face and underarms. Splashing in the shallows he looks up at the few old buildings. Perhaps in one of them is a bicycle pump. He takes the key from the eave and opens the boathouse, where there are only boats and oars and cans of gas and a cupboard full of fishing gear.

Other buildings also have keys in their eaves – one is a garage with a rusty truck and snow plow. There are a number of tires leaning against a wall, but no pump to fill them. He eventually finds one in the shed nearest the road, hanging from the rafters next to an old red Schwinn with no seat.

After inflating his tires, Veshko goes back to the boathouse, where he borrows a rod. The two bass he catches from the dock are enough for a meal. He pierces his fish with long metal stakes that are perhaps from a tent and toasts them over a fire of smoking birch.

He settles on the warm sand and closes his eyes, only for a moment. But his sleep is so instant and deep the moment stretches to hours and he wakes to see the sun in a different place, feeling the tight scorch of sunburn across his brow.

Now he will have to hurry to get home before The Price is Right, which Pete sometimes comes over to watch with him. He carefully returns the few things he's used – the rod, and pliers he used to unhook the fish, the tackle jig. In the dark boathouse, he imagines a voice and freezes in mid step. It is only water muttering against the metal walls, speaking in the same caressing tone as water everywhere does. He reluctantly backs out and locks the boathouse door.

Next time he will bring worms.

Once home, he abandons Jessica to massage his own calves and to spread butter across his pink shoulders. Veshko lowers his aching thighs to the couch cushions and is asleep before the anticlimax of the Streets Of San Francisco. He doesn't hear Pete's tap on the door or his footsteps retreating.

By July, Veshko is stealing away to Naledi several times a week. He sometimes fishes from the dock, but more often will liberate the wooden skiff from its slip in the boathouse and row nearly to the island – never landing, only skirting.

Pete ribs him about the new definition in his arms and legs, asks if he's training for the *Tour de France*.

"Only getting exercise," he lies.

By the end of August he knows the shoreline of Naledi and the islands well. A mile south is the Catholic summer convent, St. Gummarus. The bell that sounds for vespers is Vesho's cue to row back and pedal home, which places him on Mrs. Kubich's couch ten minutes before *The Price Is Right*.

A Saturday in September is set for the annual Swedish church supper. In the afternoon Veshko shaves and dresses with extra care. When Pete backs his Suburban into the driveway Veshko is waiting with Jessica under one arm and his portable massage table under the other. Pete makes room in the back, moving ropes and harnesses and cylindrical metal coolers that hold semen. They strap the dummy upright into a seat and Pete places mirrored sunglasses on her flat, drawn-on face. Veshko climbs into the cab, still vaguely uneasy in the vehicle which is the height of a military transport.

On the way to the church, Pete sings along to Willie Nelson, thumping the steering wheel to the tune of *Don't Get Around Much Anymore.*

Heads turn when Veshko and Pete enter the church basement. Several young men hoot at the dummy and there is a ripple of laughter when Veshko reaches to readjust her blond wig. They leave Jessica slumped on the stage and line up for the buffet. After pirogues and wild rice hot-dish, Veshko nervously gulps his coffee. While people pour sugar and some sort of powder into their cups, he climbs to the makeshift stage and unfolds his massage table. When he sees Pete nod, Veshko clears his throat and waits for Pastor Dan to join him. After the pastor introduces him, Veshko announces to the crowd that he would like to show the generous people of this good American village what was his profession back home.

The demonstration is the idea of Pete and Mrs. Jorge. When he and the Jorge family begin clapping, others join in a trickle. Pete unfolds the massage table.

As Veshko arranges Jessica's limbs it is quiet enough to hear plastic spoons scrape Styrofoam. He begins by rubbing the dummy's lumpy calves and explaining the large

muscle groups, base anatomy and the many health benefits of massage. This is a speech he has written in English and practiced aloud several times while sitting in the borrowed boat.

He rubs and kneads while he talks, looking up at the crowd often. There are sniggers from the back of the room where several teens are gathered, but under Pete's glare those quickly cease. Veshko explains that many male athletes have sports massage, such as the Vikings that play American football for this very state. Veshko eases Jessica from the table and faces the crowd, offering, "I can do this to you. Who would like?"

The parishioners grow still. Men at the long tables are faceless in the shadows cast by their billed caps. Since he can read nothing on these male faces, he looks hopefully to the women of Squaw Inlet. As his eyes travel the crowd, girls giggle and women shake their heads or look suddenly to their hands. One old woman points at him and laughs out loud.

Only after it is apparent no one will volunteer, Pete steps up and bows brusquely to the crowd. There is relieved laughter as Pete approaches the table, peeling off his jacket. His face is red, as if he's swallowing something too large.

Back in his home, Veshko's spa was adjacent to the national gymnasium and natatorium. There, he'd directed seven masseurs, a hydro-therapist, a physical therapist, and a nurse specializing in sports injury. He thinks of these old colleagues while he identifies Pete's pressure points for the audience. The nurse, Magda, now teaches land-mine victims to balance on artificial legs and hold spoons in their hooks. One masseur, Goran, lives in Sarasota with a distant relative.

Paper casings for straws shoot across the tables where younger people are seated, and some women stand and begin to clear away dishes.

The fates of three of his coworkers – his friends – he does not know, and the rest are dead. Stepan. Vanja. Zdenek, Carl.

He is glad they will never know of this moment.

Pete coughs and turns his head away from the audience, "Hey, Buddy. Not so hard." Veshko eases his thumb from under Pete's scapula.

The crowd is the color of lake reeds, moving as stiffly, craning their necks in unison. Pete's name is wrapped in words of joking encouragement as Veshko finishes his upper back. When he kneads his way down either side of Pete's spine to his sacrum, guffaws ring.

Veshko shakes his head and mutters so only Pete can hear, "Fuck you people."

"Yeah…" Pete whispers in agreement, "…fuck 'em."

He suddenly hates each face in the church basement. Hates these people who have been so kind and giving to him.

"Fuck *you* as well." Veshko says to Pete. He backs quickly away from the massage table to face the parish, takes a short bow and smiles, saying in his own language, "You are not my people."

He heads for home on foot.

After fleeing Sarajevo Veshko spent a year looking after his brother's children in the country at the farm, the *majur* of his uncle. His days there were purposeful, taken up with finding fuel and growing enough food. At night he attended his orphaned nephews,

whose dreams were perforated with city memories; bursts of smoke and people scurrying under the weight of water jugs, trying to avoid snipers. To add to the boys' confusion, they had been told that those lying in the streets were asleep. Veshko had been more forthright. Often he woke to cries from their beds, wet with urine and sweat. He would cradle their small skulls and rub their temples and foreheads, hoping to lull them to a sleep with better dreams. Veshko traded vegetables and well water for enough gasoline to run a small generator so that Gregor and Milan could have Nintendo. They could play a few hours each day, happily exiled into the screen.

Just when it seemed they might all go back, that things had settled in the city, he was contacted by the family of Veshko's dead sister-in-law. The nephews were taken from the farm with only a few days notice so that good family might promptly adopt them.

He'd returned to the city alone, but there was nothing left for him. The couple who'd taken his nephews emigrated to Canada, but Veshko was unable to determine what town or even what province they had gone to. He applied for emigration himself. Now he is here, in the United States of America.

Just as he arrives at the tall yellow house, Pete is pulling into his driveway.

When Veshko opens the porch door, Pete calls out, his voice gruff, "Hey!" pointing to the dummy sitting upright in the back seat.

Veshko shakes his head. "You made her. You keep."

He places the six-pack of Bud within reach, opens a can and crosses his ankles on the coffee table Jessica once occupied. He watches Jerry Springer. By the commercial he

has gleaned the theme of the hour – mother-daughter team strippers. There is more breast-shaking and cat-calling than he is comfortable with, and he's about to turn the television off when he spies the boxed videotape fallen wedged next to the console. He slips *Welcome to Sarajevo* into the machine, thinking he will be viewing tourist sights and vistas of that city as it was. Instead, it is a drama about foreign journalists who come to report on the siege. There are a few British and an American, holed up in a damaged hotel lobby, arguing and drinking between missions out to gather stories. The drama unfolds into a moral dilemma about whether or not one of them should rescue a young orphan from her current hell.

Laced through the film are bits of actual news footage, some he recognizes. One he does not shows a victim being helped from a bombed storefront – an elderly woman carried by two men whose arms form a chair under her bottom. She is in shock, looking down to where her foot sways loosely from bone and mangled flesh, the ankle destroyed.

Veshko stops the tape, re-winds it and watches the bloody dance of the woman's foot in slow motion. He looks at her face. He plays the scene over.

The only light in the house glows blue from the screen. More news footage shows heads of state and politicians making speeches about The Problem. When the face of Milosovic appears on the screen, Veshko launches forward so that his knees burn upon meeting the carpet. He ejects the video tape and reaches around the set. The cord is yanked with such force the television moves several inches.

"Opinion," he says, breathing hard. *Opinion*. "Yes. I know this word."

There are no lights on in the hall, so he moves by feel along the paneling to the foyer. Climbing, he counts the stairs to the second floor, and then to the attic, taking one breath for each riser. There are forty-two – his own number of years.

Once in the attic, he pries at the window, stubborn and swelled from a recent rain. He digs at the casement with his fingernails. Suddenly it is urgent he escape the stale air. He slams the video cassette at the glass until the pane shatters. He reaches through and tugs the sash from the outside until it gives.

He climbs to the crest of the roof in three strides and disengages the satellite disc by kicking it from its mooring. It spins along the slope and bounces at the gutter to sail to the grass below. After hitting the lawn, it rolls a few yards, connecting with the cyclone fence, where it dings to a halt.

A light comes on in Pete's kitchen. A curtain lifts, then drops. The light snaps off.

Vaguely aware of the blood running between his fingers, Veshko sits hard on the rough shingles. *Welcome to Sarajevo* is still in his hand, the cassette now cracked to expose its guts. He opens the plastic case like a book and brown tape loops to pool in his lap.

Veshko pulls metre after metre of the tape, offering fistfuls to the wind. Tape billows and he watches it flicker and reflect streaks of moonlight, fluttering farther lakeward – farther north – with each gust.

North. He thinks of Naledi – the quiet of the boathouse, where he will often sit in the rowboat that is neither red nor orange but somehow both – where light floats in on ripples and pricks through the corrugated tin skirting that is rusted like brown lace at the hem.

When he closes his eyes he can imagine the slight motion of the boat and the lapping echo of water softly patting the hull. There is a small door on the lake side which offers Veshko the view of the outdoors as a room – a ceiling painted in blue daylight and clouds, walls papered in trees. The room is carpeted with water, like some Magritte painting.

The end of the videotape requires a firm tug. Freed from the reel it sails up and away – he cannot tell how far in the darkness. Surely it will tangle on a tree branch or fall to some road or yard, but Veshko chooses to imagine gravity defeated; that the tape might be carried high over Squaw Inlet, over the bays and winking whitecaps to Naledi – perhaps even farther – beyond the wild shore of the Province of Ontario, where begins yet another country.

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