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In My Mother's Country

The morning sun barely penetrates the grimy windows of the reception area in the modern high-rise in which I wait. Still, the grime is something of a blessing. It draws a veil over the view beyond so that I can barely see the damage the shells have wrought on the buildings surrounding the one I am in. Dust motes drift slowly in the stream of light eventually joining the others covering the surfaces in the room. Cleaning does not seem to be a priority right now. That will change—things are slowly returning to normal. The gaping wounds will somehow close, at least until the next time someone starts picking at the scabs.

All around me people are hurrying, phones are ringing. It is a rebirth and I have decided to become a part of it for a while. I study the eager, determined faces—these people are not easily broken. My thoughts drift to the ones I left behind. The latest reports say that most of them are slowly returning to their villages and towns. As I think of the devastation that awaits them, the devastation they carry within them, the bustling around me seems almost obscene.

Suddenly, I shiver, I can't remember being warm once in the five months I have spent in this country. I get up and change chairs so that I am sitting in the sunlight. It is the pallid, thin stuff of spring, but still it offers the illusion of warmth.

On my way to the bank this morning, I saw a few flowers poking their delicate petals through the rubble and the snow, the first signs of spring. The first soft green will soon be blanketing the ground and bursting from the branches of the trees. It reminds me of home, and I find it comforting to remember that I have a home outside of this maelstrom.

A woman's voice calls my name. She sees me, smiles, and gives me directions to the manager's office. As I near the open door, I am suddenly so nervous I can barely catch my breath.

The man behind the desk looks up at my approach. I am surprised by how young he looks. He has an air of authority and hardness, not at all the soft, balding, aging banker I was expecting. His clear, blue gaze is penetrating and cool. He motions me in, but does not stand as I enter. Gesturing me to a chair in front of his desk, he says "Hello" in English, and although I have been waiting over an hour to see him, he makes no mention of the fact.

"I have been looking over your résumé," he tells me with hardly a trace of an accent. "Very impressive. Six years with the Canadian bank. Stability, I like that. A pleasant contrast to" He makes a vague gesture encompassing the room, the building, the country. Somehow, I understand what he means. He continues, "Six years, a good job?"

"Yes, very."

"And a good salary, I see. I'm not sure we can compete with that."

"There's no need to compete, I'm already here."

"So I see, and just why have you come to our little corner of the world?"

"I'm still asking myself the same question." I smile at him in case he finds something offensive in these words. "This is my mother's country. I'd never visited before. She died six months ago, and it just seemed right to come." The explanation seems a little thin, even to me. It had made more sense in the shock following my mother's death when I took an indefinite leave of absence from my job and decided to leave Canada for a time.

"Your mother never returned for a visit?"

"No, she loved her country, but I don't think she had many happy memories."

"No one in this country has happy memories, just long ones. Your mother was a lucky woman to get out, and a wise one not to return. I wonder why her daughter felt the need to come in her place?"

"My mother used to tell me stories. It always sounded so beautiful. After the communists left, I offered to bring her. She said some things would never change no matter who was running the show. I thought she was being overly dramatic, but then we started hearing about what was happening ... Still, after she died, I thought there might be something I could do to help. I have no other family in Canada, my father died a couple of years ago. So, here I am."

"And in the nearly five months since you arrived, you've been doing what, exactly?"

"Working with one of the groups affiliated with the UN helping refugee."

"Handing out blankets and hot chocolate? Forgive me, you don't seem the type." His eyes mock me.

"I went as a translator, but, yes, there were times when I handed out blankets. Hot chocolate, however, was too much of a luxury for the refugee camps." As sometimes were water and shelter and all the other basics of life, I silently add.

Try as I might to remain in the here and now, my mind drifts back to the camp. There is an incredible amount of paperwork involved in finding new homes for refugees. Red tape can never be ignored, never washed away even by streams of red blood. My job

was to help process visa applications, immigration papers, financial documents, translating them into English. But gradually, as the horrors started coming to light, my duties changed. Evidence had to be gathered, indictments compiled. I began working with the war crimes commission.

The pieces of paper that started coming my way no longer bore proud official stamps. Now they were marked indelibly with tears and sweat, and carried the unmistakable odor of human suffering. There were sheets of cheap paper torn from children's copybooks, torn envelopes and paper bags, scraps of wrapping paper, as well as the occasional sheet of fine stationery. Notes written in ink from ball points and fountain pens, penciled words smudged from handling, a few scribbled with wax crayons, and even one or two written in what looked like blood.

These were the testaments of the persecuted, of those damned by an accident of birth; a legacy of condemnation; a mute testimony from those forever silenced. Some of the papers were found hidden in slits in mattresses, in the pockets of clothes thrown away by the killers or still worn by their unfortunate owners, wedged into spaces in walls and around windows, or sometimes even clutched in lifeless hands.

I worked in a makeshift office with a handful of others. We had quickly fallen into a camaraderie that came from a shared sense of purpose. We were an odd lot, but as we would all eventually go our separate ways and never see each again, it was easy to overlook the sort of quirks that would, under ordinary circumstances, have driven each of us crazy.

We worked long hours from the start. Afterwards, we would go and have a few drinks together either in the makeshift mess or in our quarters. But as the work started to change, we all seemed to withdraw deeper into ourselves. We sank slowly into despair, hardly able to meet each others' eyes. We were experiencing the horrors secondhand, but we were experiencing them, nonetheless. There were days when I felt shame for being human. Other days when I could barely be civil to any man who crossed my path.

I became frenzied in my work, turning the horrors into English so the newspapers could report them back home, so others could become as indignant as I was and justice could be done. I was determined that no one should live in ignorance of what was happening. What little food I was able to swallow, I ate at my desk, working until my eyes could no longer see and my fingers could no longer hit the keys. Then I would stumble to my quarters, fall into bed, and drink deeply from whatever bottle I had begged, borrowed, or stolen that day until I was sufficiently numbed to sleep a while.

One account kept on a flattened brown paper bag, the size that in more innocent days might have held a handful of penny candy, stands out vividly in my memory. Beside each date in the two weeks it covered was the entry "Tonight I was raped" written in a neat hand like a child's writing exercise. Nothing more, just a simple statement of fact.

It seemed that things could not get any worse, but of course they always can—and they did. Although the testimony of the dead was compelling, the testimony of the living was more important, especially to a court of law. The survivors had to be interviewed, their stories translated so that the bureaucrats could decide which of the crimes against humanity were heinous enough to merit prosecution, and which of the criminals were so beyond redemption they could be made a show of to satisfy the public's appetite for justice. Make no mistake, not all of the guilty would be punished, it just wasn't feasible, there was still a country to run. The nobler version being that the healing has to start somewhere, but, of course no one asked the victims.

It came to the attention of the camp authorities that I spoke the country's language with some fluency. Of course, I did. My mother was never comfortable in English even after all the years she had lived in Canada. There were even times when I had to interpret between her and my father. They had had me later in life, so I often wondered how they managed to communicate before I was born. Of course, maybe before my birth there had been less of a need for words.

At a brief meeting with my supervisors, I was asked to help interpret for some of the UN lawyers assigned to gather evidence of war crimes. How could I refuse?

Interpretation is very different from translation. The horrors became much more immediate. It is relatively easy to find an equivalent for a word; how do you find the equivalent for the unspeakable, how do you translate the horror and devastation locked within a pair of pleading eyes? Looking at words and imagining is so much easier than looking into eyes and seeing. The worst came when the victim was very young or very old, and some of the victims were so young, they were still clutching stuffed toys for comfort. There was so much pain, I had to numb myself as best I could. Sometimes I simply lost the words, I would hear but the connection wouldn't be made. I would sit in silence for a few seconds until someone cleared their throat or uncomfortably shuffled some papers to remind me they were waiting.

And sometimes I stopped because there was so much hatred. Eyes that brimmed with hatred. Hatred that flowed like tears, like blood. Hatred that waited to be born, to erupt into rage.

A Monday morning in early spring brought another change to my duties. For the first time, I was asked to interpret for a soldier arrested for war crimes. I walked into the tent and sat by the investigator's desk. After a few desultory comments on the weather, we sat in silence until the prisoner was brought in. A young man no more than twenty-five, he sat defiantly in the chair between his two captors. As I introduced myself and the investigator, his eyes raked me from head to foot, his gaze infecting my body.

Most of the questions were about the mass graves that had recently been found to the west of the camp where we were located. He denied nothing. He was proud of his actions, and spat disdainfully on the floor as he spoke of his victims' cries for mercy.

I called in sick the next day. There was a young sergeant in the UN forces who was trying to get friendly with me. He was also off-duty, so I asked him to take me for a drive. I didn't tell him our destination until he had agreed. He had spent the best part of the week digging out the bodies, so he was somewhat less than eager to go back. I told him he could wait by the jeep, I wouldn't be long, but I had to see.

In the end, he relented and walked with me. I stopped briefly and picked a few wildflowers growing along the way from where we had parked to the gravesite. Although, the area was still cordoned off, the bodies had been removed elsewhere for whatever further indignities were to be perpetrated upon them. I stood clutching my few paltry flowers. I think I had planned to toss them into the grave, but, poor innocents, there was such a sense of unspeakable evil about the place, I couldn't abandon them to it.

I stood a long moment looking down at the final resting place of so many men, young and old, rich and poor, the student, the baker, the doctor, the carpenter, the teacher, the would-be soldiers, every man in the village over the age of fifteen. The words from Thomas Gray's poem came unbidden to my mind and soured my mouth like bitter bile as I whispered them into the wind, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." But like Ivanhoe's Rebecca, I could see no glory in this.

By this time I was sobbing so hard that my young sergeant didn't know what to do with me. Our jeep fairly flew over the ground back to the camp. The vehicle was barely stopped before I jumped out and was off running to my supervisor's office. She accepted my resignation without comment, she had known it was coming. I packed that night and was ready to leave the next day with the trucks going into the city to pick up supplies.

And still I was loathe to leave my mother's country. I felt there must be something more I could do. A translator helps people communicate. Perhaps I could help them construct bridges back to the world; yes, I could help rebuild, surely there would be less sadness in that.

And so, I am here, looking for a job translating financial documents for this bank. The interview draws to an end. I rise. The bank manager stands with me, and extends his hand. I shake it, but it doesn't feel right. I look down. This is not a banker's hand. It is scarred and calloused. He grips my hand a little too tightly, I look up quickly, slightly panicked. The eyes gazing back at me are a soldier's eyes.

He thanks me for my time, and I manage a smile but I don't trust my voice, so I say nothing. I force myself to walk at a normal pace to the washroom I noticed on my way in. The soap is harsh and smells like disinfectant, but I scrub it into my hand under the hottest water I can stand until the feel and smell of him is off me. I avoid the elevator crammed with people and take the stairs.

Outside, the sun is still shining.