

Two Boys And A Dog – Dr Judith Elizabeth Hampson

Up ahead there seems to be some sort of checkpoint. I stand up in the trailer I'm now riding on and crane my neck to see. There are vehicles blocking the road, soldiers walking about. The tractors at the front of our convoy have already stopped.

As we draw closer I see that people are being questioned, asked to show their papers. Some are being told to get off the vehicles. I start to shudder. I have dreaded this moment ever since we left home. We have no defence against these soldiers, out here on this lonely road. After what I have just heard, I know that anything could happen.

Uncle Bedri shouts across the trailer to our aunt and our mother, 'this is nothing to worry about. Just a routine checkpoint. They will want to check our papers. We can expect more of this as we get closer to the border. Just try to be polite and say as little as possible. It will be OK.'

Mother fumbles in her large canvas bag for our documents. I sit down on the end of the trailer and scowl at the Serbs who are now moving among the vehicles, probably looking for something worth taking – as if they haven't already taken everything we have. These are young men, all of them; nobody even looks old enough to be in charge. They are not regular Yugoslav army; they are – paramilitary, I guess – they're the same type that threw us out of our village only yesterday. One of them looks very familiar. I am struggling to understand why. Then I get it. He looks like the animal who roughed up my sisters, though I cannot be sure. It already seems so very long ago. And they all look alike to me. I eyeball a couple of them and they stare coldly back. All of them look mean. Extremely mean.

People are getting on and off the vehicles, some quietly, some waving their arms about, grumbling or shouting back at the soldiers. This is not a good idea, those who protest too much get pushed around; one young boy is hit in the head with a rifle butt. His mother is crying. Some of the other women are weeping silently. In the confusion, Syzana suddenly announces that she has to go to the toilet and before I can stop her she is off the trailer and disappearing behind a low stone wall. No one but me notices her go. The Serbs nearest to us have their backs to her. I curse her silently; this was a very stupid thing to do. I've told her a million times already that you do nothing at all when stopped unless you are forced to. But when did my sister ever listen to my advice, eh? I'm just a stupid boy to her. These guys can do anything they like. Anything at all. They could just wipe all of us out, right here at the side of the road and no one would know what happened to us. Who would even care? But I push this thought aside, maybe there are too many of us here for anything like that to happen.

My trail of thoughts stops when a young soldier with an ugly, pig-like face strides across and leans into the back of our trailer, saying something that I can't quite make out. His accent is local. He stretches out his hand, looking expectantly at all of us. Mother and one or two other women hand papers over to him. He takes them, turns and walks away. I am terrified that we will not get them back. I have just been hearing stories from the other travellers about papers being taken, about number plates being ripped off cars to stop us re-entering the Province later, about birth certificates and passports being burned in front of people as a joke. Imagine it, having to watch your whole life disappearing in front of you, your identity erased forever.

And then being laughed at. I do not think I would be able to contain myself, whatever they might do to me.

I am still watching pig-face. I do not take my eyes off him. He is leafing through the papers, laughing and joking with the guy who looks familiar. Eventually he saunters back, chucks the papers into the trailer in a jumbled heap and, giving all of us a hateful look, he spits on them. Then he utters a curse that I don't recognise. A young woman sitting next to me, a teacher, says he is telling us not to bother coming back. Ever.

He turns to walk away, and bumps straight into Syzana who is just about to climb back onto the trailer. He bars her way, looks her up and down, and grins. Syzana keeps her cool. She flashes a fleeting look at me, stands motionless in front of him, trying to give nothing away in her expression. For a moment I think that she has faced him down, that he is simply going to stand aside and let her get back on, but now he grabs her arm and drags her away from us, smirking.

'Well, just look who it is, Milan!' he says to the familiar-looking one. 'Shall I show you now, little brother, how you actually get what you want from a woman like this?' And he pushes Syzana hard towards the verge at the side of the road and shouts a single word at her, a word that I know means 'down!'

This filthy animal is telling my sister to lie down on the grass at the side of the road, in front of all of these people. I can hardly believe it, even of these scum balls. When she refuses to do it he pushes her again, a lot harder this time, so that she loses her balance and *falls* down.

Without warning, the tractor pulling our trailer begins to move away. Syzana looks up, a terrified expression twisting her beautiful face as she realizes she is being left behind. She scrambles to her feet and makes a run for it, pelting towards us as fast as she can, screaming my name. We are only going very slowly and I *know* she can make it. I lean right off the end of the trailer, stretching my arms out to her. Uncle Bedri lunges over next to me and hangs onto the side, grasping me around the waist to stop me from falling off – and also because he knows that I'm mad enough just to jump off and attack the guy.

'Grab it Syzana. Grab my hand now! Now!' I yell.

She is very close, almost on board, yet she cannot quite catch up with us, cannot quite grasp my reaching hand. Suddenly, every small detail of my sister comes into a vivid focus that fills my senses to bursting: the shrillness of her voice crying out to me, the sweet smell of her skin, like roses, the rain drops in her hair; the bright colours sparkling at her neck.

She is wearing a necklace made of glass beads: pretty glass beads of vivid blues and greens, of purple and orange, all strung along a leather thong, like marbles. I have seen her wear it often; she got it on a market stall in Morinë a few months ago. She told me that she swapped a whole chicken for it. Mother would have been pretty angry about that if she knew. The beads bounce and jangle as she runs, the colours dancing against her throat.

Everyone on the trailer is now screaming at the tractor driver to stop, some are standing up, shouting at the tops of their voices. He keeps on going; the soldiers are waving him on with their rifles and the driver cannot see what is going on behind us.

But I do. I see everything. I see something that I will never, ever forget. I see Syzana, my beautiful sister, running towards me, running for her life. I see the pig chasing after her, shouting; demanding that she stop running. And, just as Syzana's

hand reaches mine, just the moment that I grasp it, I see him stop behind her, take aim with his rifle, and fire.

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Has the world stopped? Or has it speeded up? I cannot make it out. My mother, sitting next to me, is like a statue: perfectly frozen, her face a chalk-white mask. Vlora's screams and sobs are muffled; her face is buried in the depths of mother's big coat. She did not actually see what happened: Mother pulled her face away and clasped it to her bosom. Aunt Luljeta has rammed her fist into her mouth, her eyes are bulging right out of her skinny face. Uncle Bedri just cannot move, even to comfort these women. But what would be the point? There can be no comfort now. Not after this.

Behind our trailer there is frantic movement. More rough shouting. More orders being screeched out. The big tractor following us is being ordered move forward; move forward right now. The driver cannot believe what he is being told to do. His eyes flash, steel-like and defiant, at the soldier screaming the order, but then he lifts his gun to the driver's head and grins. The driver knows that he will have to do it, for behind his tractor is a trailer packed with some fifty helpless people, and all they want to do is to get away from this. Anyway, there is another tractor behind him. What would be the point of refusing? I watch him as he moves forward towards us, his face twisted up with black rage, his unlit cigarette disappearing into the thick bush of his dark moustache as he chews it to shreds.

We are quite some distance up the road before I am able to see clearly what lies beyond the last vehicle in the convoy. The Serbs have simply moved off in their jeeps and I look hard through the drizzling rain into the fast-widening gap between them and us. But I can see nothing, nothing at all but a dark shape in the empty road, its hard surface glistening damp, silent now. And as a little gap appears in the thick blanket of cloud above, a quick flash catches my eye. Then another. Sharp, dancing coloured splashes of light. For a moment I am totally puzzled, then I realize what is causing them: little beams of late afternoon sunlight, catching in the broken glass beads.