

Gone for a song

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It was the week after New Year's Eve, strings of fairy lights still dangling from the trees and silver stars decorating the windows, when they discovered the dead birds. Dozens, at first. Then more. Four thousand, six hundred and twenty-eight in total. Goldfinches, greenfinches, bullfinches, skylarks, reed buntings, yellowhammers, grey wagtails and red-throated pipits — those long-distance migrants with their rusty breasts and high-pitched songs, cut short.

The Slovenian officer who made the discovery was a wisp of a man with soft brown eyes and a halo of grey-white hair. His name was Marko. He had been working at this post for the past five years, this border that was no longer a real border, just a formality of paperwork and protocol, but in Europe you never knew what the future might hold — old frontiers could be drawn afresh, new frontiers could shift unexpectedly, he always thought, because on this continent the past was never simply the past. Around here, history resembled an annoying relative you could avoid visiting but never fully disown.

His eyesight had deteriorated recently, which he mentioned to no one. Not to his colleagues, not to his wife. He had no trouble reading the number plates of trucks coming and going; it was the shorter distances that strained his vision. So when he first saw the tiny lifeless bodies, lined row upon row, he mistook them for ornaments. He had seized a similar contraband many moons ago, back when he was young enough to believe he could make a difference in this world. Inside a wooden crate, he had discovered antique brooches and Fabergé eggs, neatly arrayed in secret departments, gleaming like fireflies in the dark. It had quickly become apparent that they belonged to the wife of a Central Asian ruler



notorious for incarcerating potential rivals, silencing the media and crushing the opposition, but feted in the West for being a reliable ally. The case had been closed as soon as it had been opened. Marko had been neither rewarded nor punished, and that perhaps had been the most frustrating aspect of the whole episode, the realisation that whether you did your job well or not at all, things remained more or less the same.

Then five years ago, following a heart attack that had left him weakened, he was sent to this station on the border between Slovenia and Italy. An easier job, he had been told. One that wouldn't overtax his heart. He knew what that meant: he was being forced to retire, gradually. He might have resented it, had he been even half the man he used to be, but he no longer had either the time or the energy for anger. Like so much else in life, anger was an art. In order to become better at it, you had to keep practising.

Besides, he had a daughter. Suzana. His only child. The sparkle in his eye. He and his wife had wanted to have more kids but it hadn't worked out. Thankfully people had stopped asking questions, and that was the one good thing about getting old. No one was curious about your sex life anymore. They preferred to think you didn't have one.

Suzana lived in London. A student at Imperial College. Marko loved to say that aloud and he did so at every opportunity.

'My daughter is studying in England,' he would say to friends and strangers alike. 'Such a clever girl!'

He would wait for them to ask questions. And whether they did or not, he would carry on. 'My Suzana is at the School of Medicine.

Yes, sir, that's where she is.' How sweet the words tasted on his tongue. Imperial... Medicine... London...

In the photos that she sent home, Suzana smiled in front of brick walls or rose gardens and sometimes on a bleak street with a group of friends. As much as he treasured these snaps, Marko would rather she posed next to Big Ben or Tower Bridge or the Queen's Palace or at least a red double-decker bus. Solid, clear symbols he could show to others.

So when a coach from Bucharest destined for London arrived at this border station near midnight, Marko instantly leapt to his feet, ready to inspect its cargo but also chat to the driver, who might know about life in the UK.

Under the anaemic light from a street lamp, Marko walked towards the sage-green bus, studying the faces of the passengers. Pale, tired, sleepy, each in their separate world. Men working in restaurants, hotels, dry cleaners. A few construction workers. And women, too. Waitresses, au pairs, pole

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dancers. Women who had learned not to judge one another's differences, women who would take bullshit from no one, women who had entrusted their children, some of them as young as babies, to neighbours or elderly relatives, promising to send money every month, women who had left their hearts behind. Not every passenger on the bus was going to England. Many would get off at stops along the way. Europe could be small and big that way. A pole dancer could earn



€900 a night in Germany, though some nights were tougher than others. With that money she could provide for half a dozen relatives — parents, siblings, nephews. Each of these passengers supported an entire ecosystem.

At the back of the bus Marko noticed a young, lean woman, her chestnut hair braided neatly across the top of her head. She must have been about Suzana's age. Perhaps she was a student too, Marko thought, though he knew how unlikely that was. And that's what Suzana did not seem to understand. That she was lucky.

Last Sunday when his daughter called home, just like she did every weekend, her voice had sounded troubled. She said it was harder than she thought. London was too expensive, demanding.

'Maybe I should come back. I know money is short, Dad. I heard you sold Grandma's necklace.'

There was a long pause when none of them seemed able to say a word. Then she added softly, 'I don't want to be a burden on you, Dad.'

That call had so upset Marko that he still felt a tightening in his chest as he thought about it now. How could she ever be a burden? The light of his life. Yes, he was sorry that the necklace had to be sold. It belonged to his wife's great-grandmother originally, passed from one generation to the next on wedding nights. He knew his wife was heartbroken that he had taken it to the pawnbroker and she would never be able to fully forgive him. It was a beautiful piece, a pendant necklace the like of which Marko had never seen. A dragonfly with a sapphire body, diamond eyes and aquamarine wings so fine and delicate you half expected the insect to take to the air and glide in front of your eyes. A family heirloom that had survived massacres, dislocations, world wars, the Nazis, hunger, poverty ... and was now no longer theirs.

But Suzana should not worry about any of this. Did she not realise that medicine was her mission in life, that she was different from her parents, destined for something bigger and better than the people in her village or the passengers on this bus? Some day — and not far off — Suzana would find the cure for an infectious disease or heart failure or cancer. Her name would be written in textbooks, mentioned in newspapers, honoured in lectures. And when that day came, Marko would know that it was worth it, all his hard work, and his wife's hard work, and a joy he had not felt in a long time would flare in his soul like fireworks against the night sky, glowing diamond, aquamarine, sapphire.

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When Marko stepped into the bus he noticed a smell in the air — of boiled

eggs and cured ham, chewing gums and cabbage rolls; a smell he knew would only intensify. The journey from Bucharest to London lasted 44 hours. That's what companies claimed on their websites. In reality it could take longer, depending on the road, the weather and what transpired at borders.

Sometimes passengers collected money among them to hand the officials. Bribery, though not as easy as it used to be in the past, was not uncommon. All these years Marko had never accepted backhanders but he knew his colleagues, especially young ones, thought differently.

'So are you going to stay in London for a while?' Marko asked the driver. 'You lucky man. My daughter Suzana is there. She's studying at Imperial College.'

The driver — a balding, heavy-set man in his fifties — lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He responded with a curt nod that showed he had absolutely no interest in the subject or in making small talk. Marko tried not to feel offended.

When the trunk was opened Marko expected to give the luggage piled inside no more than a cursory glance. He would quickly check the driver's papers and then the bus could get back on the road, the passengers returning to their fitful sleep, one by one.

Something stopped him. A funny feeling inside his gut. A sense of alarm.

He squinted suspiciously at the suitcases. Now and again they received tip-offs but not this time. Nothing had reached his ears. There was no apparent reason for him to spot a large brown leather bag and ask for it to be taken out. But he did. His heart quickened as though it could see something his eyes could not. He took a step forward, guided by an intuition that hadn't yet blunted.

'Open this!'

The driver blew out two streams of smoke through his nostrils. He seemed to hesitate but only momentarily. Quietly,



slowly, he did as told. There was nothing unusual inside the suitcase at first glance. Shirts and sweaters. All neatly folded. A bit too neatly perhaps.

'Can I close it now?' asked the driver, a tinge of nervousness in his voice.

But Marko had already put on his gloves. It didn't take him long to find the secret compartment. That was where the birds

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were. Caught by glue-covered lime-sticks and mist nets, they had died painful deaths, trapped and listless, waiting until there was only waiting left.

Marko picked a willow warbler, glued upside down, and touched its beak, open as though halfway through its final song. So this was what they called 'gourmet food'. Served in glitzy restaurants and grimy kitchens alike. There were enough people willing to pay extra money for a delicacy that was rarely ever written on the menu and reserved only for special customers. Millions of songbirds were killed every year. There was a black market for it, a fast-growing one. Mafia gangs made vast profits so long as there was a clientele that never questioned where the food on their plate came from. Bird-killing also had its own tourism,

however illegal. Hunters met and socialised on Facebook, communicated on WhatsApp, flew in groups to Cyprus and Malta and Romania, countries at the crossroads of bird migration flyways. They travelled with empty suitcases that would soon be filled with dead little bodies. The rifles and automatic

shotguns were provided upon their arrival, included in their holiday package. There were loopholes in the laws that no one paid any attention, differences of regulation from country to country; and frankly, these days the world was busy with so much that was dark and depressing — who had the time or the freedom of mind to focus on a few avian deaths?

'Um, officer ... Can we talk?' asked the driver, leaning in close. His smile was forced. He took out a silver cigarette case and offered Marko one.

Marko shook his head. 'No, thank you. Nothing to talk about. I want you to open all the suitcases.'

'But that would delay us. A lot. Please don't do that. Look, these people have job interviews. Have pity on them. They're going to lose their jobs if they don't get there on time.'

'Open them!'

In a few minutes a pile of suitcases rose on the pavement, haphazardly stacked. The passengers, huddled like sheep in a storm, >

lined up on the pavement, watching the spectacle with worried eyes. Each time a bag was selected, its owner would step forward and then backward in an odd dance. A few suitcases were wrapped in plastic like mummies and these had to be cut open with scis-

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sors. Their owners were not happy at all, and kept mumbling under their breath, cursing. Out came personal belongings — photos of loved ones, family mementoes, food in Tupperware, amulets and magic charms, lacy underwear and porn magazines...

And then the songbirds. Hundreds and hundreds of them.

After so many years in this line of work, Marko had come to believe that people who crossed borders against all odds harboured a strong, secret desire to be like birds — free, uninhibited. If that was true, what about people who killed birds just because they could? What did they aspire to be?



'All right. We have a problem here. So whose suitcases are these?'

'I don't know, sir.' The driver averted his eyes. 'Look, I get busy with other stuff. People put their own luggage in the trunk sometimes. And if they are not here, they are not here. How am I going to keep track of everyone?'

Marko stood still, biting his lower lip. He knew the man would never reveal his connections. But he also knew the courier was on the bus, one of the passengers, maybe the young woman with the innocent smile. It could be anyone. His or her mission was to make sure the suitcases reached their destinations safely. All nicely coordinated. Whoever had placed these birds in this trunk was not some solitary hunter but part of a network. Marko could threaten to keep the passengers here for a while and try to force them to talk, but he didn't expect much from that approach. No one would want to mess with mafia gangs killing songbirds inside EU territory.

'Sir...' said the driver, a film of perspiration forming on his forehead. 'I apologise for this inconvenience. I'll make sure it will never happen again. Please, for your trouble.'

The man produced an envelope and gently pushed it into Marko's hands.

Marko held his breath, feeling the heft of the money between his palms. He thought about Suzana. Imperial... Medicine... London.... Her smile in the photos, looking somewhat older than her years. *I don't want to be a burden on you.*

He thought about his wife. They were both so young when they got married, it had taken them quite a while to smooth out each other's rough edges. It was too late for

love now, but a more comfortable life could spread out before them.

Suddenly he was upset at himself. Why be sentimental about birds when there was so much misery and pain and injustice everywhere? Why should he, an officer in a sleepy border station, trouble himself? Of course he was sorry about the songbirds, but what good did that do to them? They were gone already. Singing in a bird paradise. It wasn't his fault. If he accepted the money, he would put it in good use. Nothing for himself, only for others — for his daughter and his wife. Maybe he could help some old friends too.

Although he had quit smoking years ago he regretted refusing that cigarette now. Meanwhile the driver was watching his every move, trying to read his expression.

Marko crossed his arms over his chest, the envelope disappearing behind his left hand. Almost instantly a thin, smug smile appeared on the driver's face, a smile that said, there was no one in this world that could not be bought with a bit of money. Marko froze. It took every effort in his body not to slap the man. Instead he slowly uncrossed his arms and handed back the envelope.

'You dropped this,' Marko said.

The driver's face closed. His eyebrows met in a frown. 'You want more?'

'I'll tell you what we are going to do,' said Marko, pretending not to hear that. 'We'll write a report. This cannot go unreported. That means I'm going to keep you here for a while. We'll need to question you — and the passengers as well.'

Stiffly, the driver held himself ramrod straight, a hard gleam in his eyes. Then he half turned his head and spat on the ground, saying nothing.

Marko didn't mind. He felt a tug in his heart that reminded him of another moonless night just like this one, when he had found the contraband belonging to the wife of the Central Asian ruler. For the first time in many years, he felt compassion for his younger self.

He signalled to his colleagues. As they strode towards the bus, Marko sat down on the sidewalk. Maybe there were no big decisions in life, no grand theories, no majestic personalities. Not really. There were only fleeting instances in which one could easily go this way or that, take the left path or the right path or the one in the middle. It was in those brief moments that our personalities and our destinies were shaped. They made us who we were and the world what it was. And that's all that mattered in the end. Decisions that were as tiny and simple and humble but ultimately as forceful as songbirds.

Elif Shafak's latest novel, 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and is published by Viking.

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— Peter Jones