

I *It is not easy
being dead.
My father has
been dead for so
many years that
he has forgotten
how to be alive.*

True, he breathes, eats, reads, works, but I don't remember the last time I saw him laugh. Often he sits on a wooden chair in front of his house. His elbows are resting on his knees, his head is bent forward, his eyes are fixed on the patch of earth in front of him. Occasionally he rolls a cigarette with a steady hand. I watch him from the small hill to the right of the house.

Every few months, when I arrive for a visit, I find him sitting in the same place. I stop the car, get out, walk towards him, say hello. He doesn't look up, just nods. I bring another chair from the house and sit down. I tell him the news about

my family and about my journey to his home, which used to be mine as well. Some time later, when he is ready, he will say something completely disconnected with what I have been telling him.

"He was here the other day. He took them to the village in his big Mercedes, and they were sitting like two peacocks. Afterwards, they brought me a packet of coffee. I refused. Shame on you."

I sigh, and go back to my small car to bring out all my gifts. I take them to the house, with my father not even looking up once, as I make several trips to and fro. I then go to sit behind this oak tree, look at my father and try to work out why he doesn't love me. Why he can't love anyone.

When I was a child, his eyes were warm. I knew he loved me, and he loved everyone. What happened?

Eventually I walk back to sit next to him. He doesn't acknowledge my presence.

"I don't see why you should resent them so much," I say.

"You wouldn't. You seem to have forgotten that they used to be my servants. That's your communism. Everybody is equal. And I remember when they didn't have enough to eat and walked barefoot. Look at them now. And then, if you please, look at me."

I do. And I see an old resentful man who happens to be my father. Useless to point out that he was responsible for his servants not having enough to eat and walking barefoot.

"You could have moved to live with us, or near us. You didn't have to live alone, without having anyone to help you. These are different times..."

"Mmm... I don't know where you get these ideas from. Do you see those hills, and all that land up to and across the lake, and then to your left, do you see that mountain? Don't you know that all that used to be mine?"

"Of course I do, father."

"Well, your communists took most of it away from me, and you want me to take off my hat to them, and say, take the rest, take it all, and I'll go to live with my son in a town where you can't breathe, everything stinks so. No, I am going to live

and die where I belong."

My father rarely changes the tone of his voice. He doesn't shout, he doesn't get angry.

"It's been too long, father, since everything changed. Perhaps you should have changed as well. And you must admit that people, generally speaking, live much better than before the war."

"Everything with communists is 'generally speaking'. Never mind about my land going to waste. Never mind about everyone being so greedy to become rich as fast as possible, never mind how. All this, and many other things, are not important as long as, generally speaking, we live better. Do you really think that that is possible?"

"For most people, yes. No one is hungry. People are educated. We can travel abroad. We have electricity, telephones, water and lavatories in our houses..."

I stop, because my father is shaking his head.

"What's the good of having a lavatory in a house when a peasant still prefers to do it in the open space? A wolf doesn't change just because someone tells him that he's a dog. The same goes for this education of yours. If everyone is so educated why don't they decide to do something about all this land going to waste?"

My father reaches behind him and brings out a bottle of plum brandy with two small glasses. He pours and offers me a glass. I take a sip and nod with a smile - he always made a good plum brandy.

"Good stuff, thanks..."

"Oh, you still like it, do you? I thought all of you preferred some foreign muck..."

"No, I am still fond of your plum brandy... And it takes time, father, we'll get round to working the land."

"That's what I've been saying, it does take time... for everything... The change was too fast, stupid. Now they tell me democracy is here, well, not if you happen to be a Serb in Croatia, or a democratic Croat in Croatia. And I hear it's not too pleasant for the democrats in Serbia, either."

He gets up, picks his chair and walks in to the house.

The sun is coming down and the wind is bringing the smell of sea across the mountain some kilometres away. I breathe in deeply and follow him inside. He is sitting at the kitchen table, hands folded, staring again. I sit opposite him.

"I went to the borough the other day," he says, "I walked seven kilometres there and seven back. If I had horses, like before... Anyway, the Farming Director won't see me without an appointment. I ask his secretary, how does one make an appointment? By telephone, she tells me. I haven't got a telephone, I reply. Then by letter, she says, and I explain that every year for the past twenty I have written a letter and have never got a reply. She looks at me as if I landed from Mars, and says that they are very busy."

Father stops. The tone of his voice is still flat, but his hands are clenched into fists.

"If you have been busy for so many years, I tell her, you can unbusy yourselves, because I am not moving from this spot until I see him. They make me wait for two hours. When I get in, I see that the director is the son of one of my hands, Croat and a good man... In the war, he became ustasha not because he wanted to exterminate Serbs, Jews and Gypsies, but because he thought it would be a way to survive the war. He was killed right at the beginning, the poor bugger."

My father turns around and points at one of the framed photographs on the wall.

"That's him, the first on the right..."

I stand up and walk to look at it closer. The photograph shows my father, relaxed and smiling, sitting in the chair, surrounded by a group of his workers, all of whom are standing stiffly and smiling as well. The man on the right of him is taller than anyone else, with broad shoulders and peculiarly thin legs. He is the only one with a smile directed at my father rather than the camera. I return to my seat. Father continues.

"His son recognises me too. I also see that he is my enemy. He asks me what I want. I explain that I understand they are organising seasonal workers, and could I have some this year. He listens to me, shuffling pieces of paper on his desk. When I finish, he asks, why? I tell him that I am too old

and my land is going to ruin. He then tells me that it serves me right."

My father swallows heavily. I pour us some more plum brandy. We drink it silently and he continues.

"I had to get these workers, and I know how the pen-pushers think, regardless of their political persuasion, communists or fascists, you are all the same, so I say to him, maybe it serves me right, but is there *any* way that he can help me? He laughs, and extends his hand. I pass over my envelope full of money. This is half, I say, the other half upon delivery. He laughs again and says no wonder I used to be stinking rich before the war."

"I am sorry about that, father. You should have told me."

"And what would you have done? Phoned, called in some favours, maybe even threatened from your mighty position as a party-official? You don't seem to understand anything. For you, and all your comrades, or now, gentlemen, corruption has become a way of life. You no longer know what's right or wrong. Besides, you carry no clout around here."

"I don't know exactly what I would have done, but I would have done something. I don't think it's true, however, about corruption being a way of life. Believe it or not, many of us are honest people, seriously trying to improve the situation."

Father waves with his hand.

"This is not a party meeting, so you don't have to impress me with meaningless slogans. Your brother was here last month and he tried to tell me that he knows more about land and crops than I do, because after all, he is a qualified agronomist. Fine, I said, prove it to me, let's go out to any field and I'll ask questions and you answer them. Within fifteen minutes he was a stammering idiot, so I told him what he could do with his diploma. And I'm telling you to do the same with your little red book. Or is it some other colour now?"

I get up to look out of the window. It is almost dark, and I don't know how to talk to him. I turn to look at him.

"You're our father. Why do you dislike us so much?"

His half-smile does not reach his eyes.

"Is it one of the communist rules, or should I say, socialist rules, for that's what you call yourselves now, isn't it?, that fathers have to like their children?"

"No, but in the animal kingdom, I start to say, but he interrupts."

"Mmm... In the animal kingdom, generally speaking, you forgot to say, the parent looks after his young. Interesting creatures, animals... They reject the weak, the ill... The mother-cat knows exactly which one of her litter is sub-normal and that if she feeds it, it will only suffer pain. So, while it is still half-blind, she takes the little one in her jaws to some deserted spot, away from her healthy family, and leaves it there to die. Now, unfortunately, people are not that clever, so we are unable to detect at birth which one of our children will become dishonest, corrupt or simply a fool. Does that answer your question?"

I look at him, wide-eyed, hoping that I have misunderstood his words.

"You can't mean these things! We are not dishonest! We are not corrupt and we are not fools! Why is your judgment of us so harsh? What have we done to you?"

"It's not my judgment which is harsh, but yours which is too soft. That is partly why you can't see your dishonesty, corruption and folly. As to what you have done to me, well, to start with, you have made me ashamed of you. I don't know why you keep coming back..."

"Because, regardless of your feelings for us, we happen to love you. And we feel a duty to help you. But ever since mother died, you are becoming more and more resentful and... objectionable. You sit in your small world and pronounce judgments on us, on the whole country and the system, and you have no right to do so!"

I am shouting and he is looking at me with cold interest.

"So, why don't you have me arrested? And why don't I have the right? I thought you communists, pardon me, socialists, guaranteed freedom of speech, except it doesn't work that way, does it?"

He smiles at me. I empty my glass, trying to do it without my hand shaking. I must calm down. He is amused by my anger, I can see that, so I must calm down, I do not wish to amuse him!

"Look, father, I 'm not going to persuade you that you should change your political or social views, but don't you think it's about time, after forty years in the socialist system, that you at least considered belonging in some way? With certain changes, democratic changes, the system is here to stay, and you have to be careful about all your accusations... People have long memories and they remember who you were..."

"Oh, leave it alone. I've been threatened by better men than you."

"For Christ's sake, father, it's not a threat, it's advice!"

My father laughs and helps himself to one of my cigarettes. He lights it, inhales slowly, blows the smoke high towards the ceiling.

"I told you that you are a fool. Tell me, how do you explain that after all this time of your so-called communism, out of twenty two million people, there are less than two million registered communists? Now even less."

"You don't have to be a party member to believe in the system. In any case, long gone are the times when you had to be a party member in order to get on."

"Really? Things must be different in big towns. Until very recently, in this part of the world you had to be a party member to get on anything. Now, of course, you have to be a Croat nationalist, to get on anything. Did you know that your brother lost his job?"

"Yes, he phoned me..."

"Oh, right, I forgot. You're all into sophisticated machinery: telephones replacing letters, television replacing conversation, computers replacing thinking..."

"Father, please... Anyway, he'll be coming to Belgrade... There is no life for him in Zagreb. I told him to move in the 1970s, remember, at the first outbreak of the nationalism?"

He gives me a short nod and I continue.

"He said that I was paranoid and unreasonable. We had a huge argument. I reminded him about Croatia being a puppet fascist state in the war, about the hundreds of thousands of Serbs killed, and so on, but he claimed that Croatia cannot survive on nationalism, since it has such a bloody recent history, and no independent history to speak of, before it. He said that the Croats and Slovans had the mentality of the servant and that their history was a proof of that. I told him that even if he were right, he shouldn't underestimate the mentality of the servant, since the ustashas were an example of servants going berserk. Anyhow, I couldn't persuade him that he, a Serb, would not survive in Zagreb, that sooner or later they would give him the push."

I stop and meet my father's cold gaze. By hurrying to change and depart from one unpleasant topic of conversation, I may have sailed straight into another, more troublesome. I shall find out soon enough, so I avert my eyes to look at the almost unfamiliar kitchen, since this one has never been a part of my life. The old, familiar house, with its vast kitchen and many rooms with the window shutters light, with the smell of wax on its mirror-like furniture, and all the memories of warmth, singing and laughter, had burnt to the ground in 1944. We never could discover who carried the torch in one hand and knife in the other: the latter to kill my two sisters and the former to set the house on fire. They might have been ustashas, since my parents were Serbs, or chetnicks, whom my parents had refused to help against the partisans, (they would only assist the chetnicks when they were going for ustasha, German or Italian targets), or they might have been partisans, whom my parents refused to help against the chetnicks, but would for the same reasons they helped chetnicks. I don't think my mother ever forgave herself for not insisting that my two sisters join them for the Easter Service.

"Well, I think it's time for bed. Help yourself to some food." Father speaks and goes out of the kitchen.

I rub my eyes and sigh. It has been a long day, but then each day spent with my father seems to grow longer. I can hear him moving upstairs. I know that there is a way to his heart,

but I'm unable to tread it. My mother knew it, and if my sisters were alive perhaps they would have as well. Who am I? And why am I here? And who is this cantankerous old man who thinks me a fool? Am I?

I enter my father's bedroom without knocking. Propped by many pillows, he's reading. I sit on the edge of his bed. He looks up.

"What do you suggest I should do?" I ask. He takes off his glasses.

"Do? Why do you think I should be able to answer that?"

"Well, you're certainly full of opinions, so you must have one about me and my life."

I know that I sound bitter. There is nothing I can or wish to do about it. I glare at him, willing him to speak, to show me his old generosity, his approval, his love.

"You're very tiresome, you know... Fine, I'll tell you what you should do. You should stop being an *accident*. Somehow, everything is happening to you. You became a partisan and a communist by accident. You learn your speeches and represent the communist point of view like a brainless slag. Nothing belongs to you, everything is borrowed. I may be opinionated, but it's because I think. You do not. You repeat, copy, imitate. So now you're a party official in a Socialist Party. Big deal! I don't think I would mind that if I saw that you knew what you were talking about, that you understand and believe, but you do not. You lie to yourself and then you lie to people. As a communist or a socialist, or a nationalist, you sit on the committees discussing unworkable strategies, inventing new con-games, blackmailing, stealing, all the time extremely comfortable in your chairs of power, determined to live and die in them. You are all the same. You look at your first great leader, whom you followed like blind sheep and while he was building palaces for himself, glittering like a Christmas tree, and borrowing money from anybody for whom it was convenient to believe in his lies, the people, the people, my son, were being pushed into an abyss. Of course, the best of you out of the blind sheep survived, because your third eye was firmly set on those same comforts the future,

unconditional power would offer. And you all have it, haven't you: Milosevic, Tudjman, Kucan, except that this time you knew that you couldn't get us out of your mess, so you're calling on people to kill each other. And I'll tell you why you're able to do all that: because you don't love this country, or any part of this country, or this planet. You love power, my son, and you have conned yourself into thinking that you are doing it because you love the country. But I think it's too late for you to see any of this. You're too much inside the lie."

Father finishes his speech. His eyes are tired but challenging. I, however, have nothing to say to him. I stand up to leave the room, but his mocking voice stops me,

"You know, what I would really like to know, and you, as an important official can find out, I am sure, is the following: while all this innocent blood is flowing, are any of your big wigs' sons spilling it as well, or are they mainly, conveniently but unavoidably, studying, researching, or simply visiting night clubs, abroad?"

"Are you serious?" I exclaim.

"Deadly so." he answers in the same mocking manner. I shake my head as if to clear it, or is it in denial of his accusation? I am not at all sure.

"Good bye, father." I say firmly. He nods and picks up his book.

I go downstairs and open the front door. There is a full moon hanging above the mountain. I start the car and drive towards it. I turn to look, for the last time, at my father's house, which used to be mine, and my heart does not skip. I shall remember him as he used to be. No, it doesn't say anywhere that sons have to like their fathers.

When, some weeks later, a telegram arrived informing me of his death, I stared at the piece of paper as if expecting the letters to rearrange themselves into something less final, perhaps a joke, although my father had stopped being humorous a long time ago. As I stared at it, something shifted inside me, and like in trance, but being conscious about everything around me, I understood the offensive truth of my father's words. I saw how smug, complacent, opportunistic and

foolish I had been. Indeed, I was an accident. I then wept: for my father, who never betrayed anybody, including himself, and whose pride and morality eluded me; then, for myself, for there were no roads out of guilt and self-loathing.

I was stuck within a gigantic lie.