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Ylena

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YLENA

Benjamin Stein

North

Morning, and the sun has layers to burn through. Propane light still, for now. Ylena keeps it low, conserves the gas and the wick and what it takes to replace them.

She scrapes up a red-gray pile, a sifted ridge of dust. The same pile in the same place, every day. Where the walls don't come together all the way, just inside the corner. Her house is this: two patched-together rooms on a concrete platform; plywood leaning, for a door; a bucket for plumbing; folded rugs and blankets for a bed; one window, nearly opaque; one pile of clothes neatly folded, another bundled in a sheet. Nothing brought up from the South, nothing to make her think of it. In the past, she's told herself, *Forget*. Now she has.

The whole shack slanted there at the north end of the Mitrovica camp, 200 yards from the slagheaps left behind when the smelter closed. Mountainous, they flex and bulge like red muscles and she can see them from her window; everyone in the camp can see them from everywhere. Mountainous, but they shift. Wind throws their lead and arsenic and cadmium against everything, all the time. Brushing sounds on the outside of her walls. Dust gathers in the furrows of corrugated metal, dissolves in runnels above the river. And the water runs.

South

For years, it's her brothers leaving at dawn for early foot races in the street. Sometimes they pretend to forget to wake her. Sometimes their mother keeps her home, a widow's lonesome pull. Ylena makes it out, though, more and more.

Of the neighborhood children, they are the pivotal family. Four boys valuable in every sport. Ylena the only girl with sneakers. Even at ten, a good throwing arm. Her oldest brother, Raim, chooses the races, the games. Hard sprints or middle

distance. Or flinging pebbles against each other's heads. Ylena stands at the edge when a scrum breaks out, jabs a toe into the ribs of any boy not her brother who happens to roll from the pile. She stomps off, though, after too much tussling. Says she'll find someone else to race. Ends up home with Mother, watching the street from a window.

When her legs get long she is as tall as Raim, taller. When the boys race, she wins. She taunts them, sashays. The only girl.

The tallest boy, a young Muslim with soft yellow hair smooth above his lip, always wants to race her once more, won't take the taunting. Raim decides a lap around the block, just the two. He chucks her on the shoulder when she lines up alongside the Muslim boy. Hard brown lips mouth, "Win." Then, "One, two, three."

Ylena cuts hard into afternoon, a hallway of wind. The Muslim boy lags for the first straightaway, trails at the corner. Ylena gauges him, paces herself. He passes her at the second turn. But when she kicks, when she reaches. She's thickened wind. Alongside, their knuckles rap against each other's. They both breathe high and thick. There is something, though, not in her lungs but close. A flutter beneath her ribs. Just after halfway they turn together, slip into a bus terminal bathroom. Ylena folds her long legs around him.

North

Ylena walks to the river with the bundle of laundry for washing. The sun high enough now, peering down. Her sneakerprints on the road like tracks in red flour. Grit scratches between her teeth. Her throat burns, but less than other days.

Two children, yellow-skinned and frail, take small steps in the opening between two shacks. Ylena waves. The small one, almost a baby, lurches then sits hard, leaves buttock prints. The other, an older sister maybe, lifts under his shoulders and he goes limp, lolls his tongue, plays.

The children here are asleep all the time. On birthdays, on festivals, they sleep or they sit on the ground, sift the dust in

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their hands, sway. Soupy lethargy and swollen eyes. Every few weeks, another drops away.

Once, as the camp first settled, a British doctor. Children are more susceptible, she said. Skin gone yellow is a signal, but it's the whites of the eyes you have to watch. It's anemia. It's nerve damage. Later, it's coma and renal failure. Ylena wondered about this failure. When she thought of it, she felt every organ sliding inside her. She imagined them drying out, seizing.

South

A park's grassy slope, air collecting damply on her arms. An afternoon, for once, without mother or brothers. Ylena, with her skirt smoothed beneath her. The Muslim boy, Khalid, his beard coalescing now. News of a war coming back from before they were born. Wrongness unearthed, holy duty and valor.

Ylena spins a leaf between her fingers, its veins firm and green. She scores them with her thumbnail. Khalid runs one hand through the grass, his fingers as small as hers.

A glancing kiss. A pulling away. A quarrel about third sides. A quarrel when she points out, "Islam doesn't seem to matter to you when we are naked together, and hidden." A disquieting twist behind the beard.

The fast onset of rain in summer. Those first heavy drops. The relief of a good drench, and running.

North

At the place where the other road comes in, there is a lot filled with garbage. A few low firebrick chimneys. Those men with wet rags tied over their faces, dark foreheads, dark hair. These are the ones who have always been here, who worked in the smelter, before the evacuees from the South. They hardly look at anyone anymore. They stand by the ovens, liquefy car batteries, sprinkle slaked lime from rubber-gloved hands. Soon, the choking smoke, oily and yellow. If the wind shifts, if a person takes the smoke for more than a breath, even with the wet rags, there will be another call to the doctor. The tree on the edge of the lot has

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black leaves. Ylena steps over a narrow ditch, three more batteries at the bottom, holes hammered in either side, draining acid.

She stops, kicks through a pile of garbage—mostly wet paper and the bundled red HazMat bags, heavy with the scum skimmed from melted lead. She looks to the slagheaps, their sprawl. She considers the HazMat bags, wonders how many it would take.

The lead melting men watch her over the tops of their rags. They squint in the sun. One wipes his nose on the cuff of a canvas coat.

Ylena finds a square of hard plastic, tucks it in the waist of her jeans. When she gets home, she will tack it over the space where dust comes through.

South

Ylena's mother has been waning for a long time, since before winter. This morning, there are banks of lilacs in rows along the streets. The city was famous for them before. Now, only this quarter. On the other side of the razorwire fences and barricades, every tree has been removed. A clearing of sightlines.

When her mother's eyes open, they don't fix on things. They slide across the far wall. She knows the objects there: the row of official photographs, four brothers with the same knot in their jaws. And the row of urns, each below each, ceramic and sky-blue and small. She said once, before her sons were dead, "A war scatters people like wind scatters dust."

It's hot water with onions and brown powdered cubes stirred in. A change of blankets, a hoist now and then onto a pan.

It is the last morning her mother has and Ylena sits in a chair. In a room with a blue-sheeted bed, with electric light. She'll practice her reading aloud: words on packages from the kitchen, warning labels. Mostly only sounds. She'll run her hand for hours along the linen of her mother's arm, the wax of her forehead.

That evening the light is orange and Ylena slides the window. Lilac scent like sun and forgetfulness. The pock of small arms fire; an explosion. These are like the sound of dogs, or a car starting.

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Television in an adjacent room. They are familiar.

That evening, though, something new to bring nightmares: that viscous last rattle. *This*, she thinks, *this is a sound*.

North

The River Ibar runs low between hills, at the far edge of camp. Springs open around it, roll among leaves and sparse grasses. By the time they converge, at the bottom of this gully, there is a thick rope of water and it cuts knee deep. This is the early river. Follow it a few miles, as far as the edge of the second camp, and it spreads, it surges.

Ylena unbundles the laundry, wets a bed sheet, empties powder from a bright box of soap. Michika the witch is upstream, shaking out her underthings. She is the camp's closest thing to a doctor, strips bark and boils roots. Takes anything as pay. Anything but not nothing: once, she mashed weeds and powder down into a salve, for a woman with a rash blossoming along her arms and back. The woman took the salve, gave nothing in exchange. Michika poured a pan of oil into the road outside the woman's home. In the months since, both of the woman's children have turned yellow and died.

Ylena agitates slowly, her head down, fixed on the gathering lather. The witch's soap slides down to her, eddies at the edge of the stream. Ylena steps into clearer water.

South

When summer starts, the war crosses town. Two days in the room with the bed and now, a wall fallen away. Two days in a leeward corner. Slow crawls to the bathroom, or to the sink for a quick sip. An attempt at lighting the stove; the gas lines, though, were blown out early: a bowl hollowed from the road. A lump of metal knocks a divot in the refrigerator.

Two days until a swarm of blue helmets comes shouting through the hole in the wall. Thick and lumpy and gas-masked—one for her and it bruises her forehead when they help her yank it on. A run between houses, crouched. A night of blue helmets

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and fogged-glass eyes.

She is stowed with the rest. In trucks with black-tarped beds. Ten or twelve refugees, down on the floor. They jostle amid bedding and clothing and cookware. Ten hours, more. Trundling detours when the road is cratered. No one knows how to keep a child quiet. A caravan of five trucks with machine gun Jeeps bookending. Insect-masked neighbors. Here is a grandmother who remembers songs. Here is a man; his shoulders smell like leeks. Here is Ylena, against the tailgate. She bends her neck, finds an opening in the tarp. The truck behind them is close and mossy. Its headlights are muted blue.

North

Ylena's jeans are rolled and soaked to the knees; the air on her ankles makes her remember the Muslim boy, the way she hooked her feet at his back. His soft smile like a curl of hair in sun. *There are days*, she thinks, *when my throat burns less. There are days when the dust is mostly settled.* The laundry a wet nest collected under her arm, the open afternoon. The road home, thin and straight, from this end of camp to the other.

The rag-faced men crouch in a distant bunch in the road, away from the garbage lot. The witch crouches among them. The ovens churn smoke untended.

Ylena tucks the laundry closer, feels the wet at her ribs. Steps quicker.

The three men and the witch are in a circle around the girl. She is on the ground, in the street. Before, she was yellow but now she is blue. Jerking limbs, dogfroth mouth. Her little brother, frog-cheeked and dim-eyed, sits in the dust next to her, turns his head. Twists his mouth.

The witch wraps the girl in a black sheet, lifts her body, still twitching and taut. She carries her to the door of her shack.

The smelters' rags are pulled down around their necks. Here are yellow faces too. Here is shouting. Here is one of them lifting the boy from the ground. One of them running, the phone in the next camp, the doctor at the other end of the phone. But it's

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a dozen strides and Ylena knows he's slow; he's gasping, lungs like cured meat.

She unfolds her legs again. That heavy pouch of laundry thumps against her side. Releases it. It settles, unnestles.

It's those morning races again, that hallway of wind, close at her ears.