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THE QUEUE

(Word count: 2156)

Dogs are everywhere.

During hot afternoons, I lie in bed and listen to them barking. They bark at the children riding their bikes, at the pensioners sitting on plastic chairs in front of apartment blocks, trying to cool down. They bark at the sporadic cars driving by. They bark at each other, as they attack the rubbish bins.

#

The queue stretches from the door of the post office, past the iron stalls of the small farmers' market nestled between the buildings, past the rubbish container full of rotting vegetables and pungent fruit discarded in the sunshine, past the boarded up shop which once sold fresh bread and ice creams from a big chest freezer. It ends in the car park adjacent to the traffic lights. The car park is uneven, the concrete has split open in places, ruptured from rain and heat and cold. The cars are parked around these open gashes, haphazardly arranged. It looks more like a child's play mat than a car park.

I'm maybe sixtieth from the front of the queue, and only second from the end. I can't count properly as some people are hidden from my view where the queue curves around the corner, but counting and guessing helps to pass the time.

The man in front of me fidgets, tapping his foot rapidly, like from a nervous twitch. Finally he turns around and his eyes settle on me.

You a bit young for this queue, he says.

I'm waiting on my Nan's behalf, I say. I try not to meet his eyes.

A dog, which has been wandering through the parking lot, pushing its nose into empty plastic bags discarded here and there, approaches and sits next to me. I scratch him behind the ear but then I take a proper look at him. I pull my hand away and wipe it on my jeans. I tell myself not to touch my face with that hand and not to chew my nails, which is going to be hard.

On the very corner of the parking lot, a woman, sitting on a small fishing chair, waves at me and smiles. I squint in the sun and recognise Mrs Rada. Around her stool there's an arrangement of two-litre plastic Coca Cola bottles, filled with dark green liquid. I wonder if the liquid is so flammable that it could catch fire in the blazing afternoon sun.

I wipe sweat from my forehead and wave back.

You okay? she mouths.

I nod.

Mother okay? she mouths again.

I say yes out loud and, although she can't hear me, the man in front of me does.

Talking to me? he asks.

I nod in the direction of Mrs Rada.

Robbing bastards, he says.

I flinch.

They come here, he says, and make money out of us. Just because we need a litre here and there. A man's got to keep a litre in his car in case he's got to rush his kids to the hospital or something. Robbing bastards.

I notice the sky is almost white in places as if the sun has burnt away some of its colour.

She's a university professor, I say. Born here, actually.

My voice shakes a little and I wish I had brought some water with me. The queue is never shorter than this, never takes less than a couple of hours, so what was I thinking? The air is thick and humid, breathing feels like pouring hot liquid down my throat. I wish I was lying down in the shade of the oak tree growing behind my Nan's country house. A whole world lives in that tree, armies of ants, spiders in secret holes, caterpillars and slugs, all under one leafy roof. I hope the people who live there now won't cut it down.

The man wipes sweat from his forehead and I notice how deep the lines are in his skin: the very dark skin and the very deep lines of a man who works in the fields.

My father says it's actually the farmers, I say. Who are, you know. Robbing us.

The man swivels in my direction.

Because they spill milk rather than sell it cheaply to townsfolk, I say. And they sell eggs for gold.

The man frowns, eyes me up and down, then smiles. Is that so? he says. Your father knows a lot about farmers, then.

He goes to the market when he's home from work, I say. Checks the prices.

Must have some money in his pocket, if he's checking the prices, the man says, not taking his eyes off me. Where does he work? I want to hear about this place, which is still paying salaries. So? he repeats.

The queue moves forward a few yards.

I feel a little dizzy, but I steady myself when the queue stops again. The dog is still next to me; occasionally he looks up, his eyes pleading. I tell myself not to touch him again but my hand keeps moving towards his mangled fur. He's a large dog, some sort of Alsatian, one of those breeds which in good times eat a lot of meat and in bad times get turfed out by the family.

So? the man says again.

His voice startles me and I notice the queue's moving forward.

So what? I say.

He exposes his teeth and runs his tongue over them, making a sucking noise.

Your father, he says. Where does he work?

I look away from him, across the car park, down the scorched avenue, towards the city which sprawls in the distance. I can see almost as far as the Danube; I imagine how cool the water is, even if all the fish have been caught and eaten by now.

Germany, I lie. He works in Germany. He brings back Deutchmarks.

The man laughs, then squints at me.

You little bullshitter. What you doing in the pensioners' queue then?

I shrug and look somewhere over his shoulder. Money shouldn't go to waste, I say.

He laughs again. Money, he says. We'll see if there's any left.

The queue is moving faster now, and soon we're past the corner shop. I can now see the straight line of people between me and the post office door. It's only a local post office, no bigger than a butcher's. I can almost smell it. The air inside will be already thick with heat and sweat and cigarette smoke.

The man in front is still staring at me, his eyes measuring something.

How old are you? he asks.

Too young for you, I reply.

Mmm, he says, eyeing me up and down. Sixteen? Eighteen? When you gonna start wearing a bra?

I think about cold showers, scoops of ice cream piled high in a cone, the frozen cakes my mother used to love making before the war came and everything stopped.

A few spaces in front, a man and a woman start arguing.

You forgot it, the woman shouts.

It's your bloody mother, the man says. You should have remembered.

Okay, okay, there's time, the woman says. She opens her hands and places them on an invisible table in front of her, as if to steady herself.

There's time. I'll run home and get it, she says.

The queue's almost there, the man shouts.

I'll run, the woman says again and then reluctantly steps out of the queue.

The other people stare at her, some with pity, some with indifference. When she walks past me, something must catch her eye as she says to me, almost apologetically: Forgot the damn cheque book.

I nod in sympathy.

The queue moves forward again and soon I'm standing next to the rubbish container. Flies buzz around the rotting fruit. I put my hand over my mouth and nose, then remember

the dog, which has wandered off in the meantime. I swap hands and think about soap, about washing clothes in a mountain stream.

People go inside the post office and come out quickly, some still counting the money, some hurriedly putting it away. Women carry purses, men stuff it in their trouser pockets. Hurry up, my mother said to me. If you're really quick on your way back, we can run over to the shop and buy oil and flour before the price goes up again.

I'm now counting minutes and starting to plan the quickest route back. I always feel elated when I'm near the entrance. Finally I am almost the next one in. The man in front of me gives me one last look before walking inside the post office. I nearly rush in behind him; I feel my fists tighten at the thought of the semi-darkness inside, in which you could harm a man unseen. But I remember the rule, the one-out-one-in rule. I have to wait.

A moment later he walks out. I'm looking at my feet but he stands right in front of me, not moving, until I look up.

All gone now, he says.

I shake my head.

Oh yes, he says. All gone. I told you so.

I push past him and walk inside. The shutters are down but the heat is no better for it. The semi-darkness is airless, the odour of everyone who came in before me still lingering in the corners of the room.

Sorry, the woman behind the counter says. That's all the money we had for today. You can try tomorrow.

I open my mouth to say something, but no words come to me. I rub my eye lids and feel drops of sweat rolling down my back.

You can wait until someone comes in to pay postage, the other woman says. I'll give you whatever they've paid. You can get the rest next time, she adds, nodding as if we were already in agreement. Her face is tired and empty save for the fake smile.

I look around the room for something I could smash at least in my imagination; I can see myself hurling a vase at the wall, lifting a chair and smashing a window so that air and sunlight pour violently in.

But the room is bare.

I walk outside and find the man standing only a few feet away, as I knew he would be.

He looks at me and raises an eyebrow. I look straight at him and nod.

We walk briskly away from the parking lot. I don't turn around to check who might notice us but I keep a few feet behind him just in case. I hope everyone is too hot and too worn out to worry about me. We exchange just a few words: where; how much.

When we finally reach the grounds of an old, unused hospital and find a narrow alleyway, so tight that even in the middle of the day it's dark and abandoned, I realise he's been here before.

You know this place, I say.

Now you know it too, he says, biting hard into the skin around his fingernail, then puts a hand on my breast.

No, I say.

No? He leans towards me, blinking away the sweat that's rolling into his eyes. His face is so close to mine that I can see each dirty bead making its way downwards, towards my skin.

Money first, I say.

He laughs.

So you don't trust me, he says, and bursts out laughing again.

As soon as he gives me the money he pushes me against the wall and starts pressing his hips into my body, his hands everywhere, his breath panting into my ear. I close my eyes and wait.

When my knee slams into his groin, it feels much softer than I expected. The human flesh yields, gives way under the force of my blow. I've never hit a man before but I'm stronger than I could have hoped for. The man exhales suddenly, loudly; he groans and lets go of me, both hands clasping his groin. I know I only have a moment so I push him as hard as I can, then start running.

#

I come home around seven. When I walk in, the smell of cooked cabbage hits me and I'm no longer hungry, just tired. I put down the bag with the oil and flour and remove my shoes.

From behind the large bookshelf, which separates my Nan's sleeping area from the rest of our living space, I can hear the raspy sound of her breathing.

My parents are sitting around the coffee table, talking in hushed voices.

Inflation has reached three quadrillion percent, says the smartly dressed man on the television.

How big is a quadrillion? I ask.

My father is silent for a moment. Then he gets up and switches off the television set.

You're too young to understand, mother says to me.

The night is approaching, dark and humid. I can hear the dogs barking outside.

The End