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CRIA CUERVOS

Translated by John K. Cox

IT'S MORNING AND, WITH FOG EVERYWHERE ON THE QUAY, Ivan wasn't sure if it was Milorad or someone else with similar features.

“Miša.”

The young man on the bicycle looked around, pressed his brakes, and then continued pedalling towards the gentle slope leading to the water's edge.

Encouraged, Ivan called out again, louder this time: “Miša!”

The cyclist braked hard, turned to face Ivan, and seemed to squint in his direction. Ivan waved, and Milorad slowly raised his arm and returned the greeting without knowing for sure who was hailing him. Ivan drew closer and closer, practically bounding towards him, and then Milorad finally understood who it was detaching himself from the morning fog. He smiled, leaned his bike on its kickstand, walked towards Ivan, and offered his hand. Ivan shook his hand but also hugged him. They stayed like that, clasped together; Ivan caught a whiff of Milorad's deodorant, and Milorad realized that Ivan had been drinking.

“Where are you coming from?”

“I'm going out to a village. To vaccinate the hogs.”

That answer elicited a throaty laugh from Ivan, to which Milorad smiled and shrugged, as if to say, “I know, right?”

“And you? Aren't you cold?”

Only then did Ivan take cognizance of the fact that that he was wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt and plaid shorts, that it was very chilly and dew had settled on the fluffy hairs of his forearms and calves, and that his canvas sneakers were wet through and through from walking in the tall grass.

“Just so you know—you are.”

Milorad had already pulled out a white coat out of the knapsack he was

carrying on his back. Ivan took the uniform and stared at it. Then he looked back at Milorad and laughed again.

“So what am I supposed to do with this?”

“That’s all I have. Aren’t you going home?”

Ivan looked around. All around them was mist, and somewhere in the distance, barking. The river was calm and getting greener by the minute.

“I’m not going home. Don’t feel like it.”

“Come with me to the village. You can be my assistant.”

“An apprentice, eh?”

“I won’t beat you if you get scared and poop your pants.”

They both chuckled for a second, and then Ivan quickly donned the veterinarian’s coat, buttoning it up while he shuddered from the cold and let out a “brrrrr.”

“Fuck, man. I didn’t even realize I was cold.”

Milorad went over to his bike, raised the kickstand, and switched his backpack around so it was on his chest. He got onto the seat and nodded toward the luggage rack atop the rear tire.

“Put your feet on the bolts. Here, on the back wheel. Like this. Be careful and don’t fall off. Don’t use your heels on the spokes to slow me down; I don’t have money for new ones. And hold onto me!”

There were a few more instructions, for the sake of safety and comfort, and then Milorad set off along the embankment.

They rode in silence and cut through the mist that was getting thinner and sparser. As it retreated, it revealed more and more objects and people in its midst: the old mill, the shipyard and overpass, the boats tied up on the opposite shore, fishermen, treetops, and finally the levee, from which wild animals timidly looked out towards the city and its people.

Soon they were up on the asphalt. Trucks with foreign licence plates roared past them, and there were ambulances, old nags harnessed to wagons, sport cyclists, and cars with people who were coming in to work from other cities or travelling from Bumblefuck to the surrounding area.

All of a sudden Milorad leaned forcefully into the pedals, which nearly made Ivan lose his balance and hurl them both into the traffic. He sped up, though, and came up close behind a cyclist wearing a multicoloured speed suit and helmet. The cyclist noticed them in his rearview mirror, turned around, and grinned from ear to ear (they couldn’t see his eyes on account of his dark glasses). Then he gave them the thumbs-up sign, sped up, and

easily pulled away from them, disappearing on the horizon.

By the time they got off the main road and reached the narrow lane full of ruts, the sun was all the way up. Around them were shelter belts of some kind or other, and behind the trees—the plains. Jutting up out of those fields in various places were the cylinders of three concrete silos, a handful of buildings, and a water tower. Then the trees vanished, the fields around them were replaced by tiny breast-shaped hills, and they soon came out onto a freshly paved section, as smooth as the signs that announce a populated area, reduced speed limits, or caution in a school zone.

Milorad stopped near a little house with the windows facing the street. In one of the windows, her elbows propped on a little pillow, blinked an old woman wrapped in a black sweater and brown scarf. Milorad waved at her, and she waved back before disappearing into the interior of the hovel. Milorad opened the little gate, entered the courtyard, leaned his bike on the wall, and went over to the old woman, who was standing on the steps of her house.

“Good morning.”

There were other greetings and introductions—Ivan to Justina and Justina to Ivan—and a session at a small wooden table with the sipping of bitter Turkish coffee underneath the spreading branches of a cherry tree.

“So what brings you here?”

“The Sebestyéns called me. Maybe somebody else will need it, too.”

Justina nodded with her wrinkled face and then swung her head like a pendulum, closed her eyes, and smacked her lips, which had only red gums to conceal.

“There aren’t any. I mean, who could need it? Who keeps them nowadays?”

And so it went, in that sense and that direction, the way conversations with old people always begin and end. Agenda item: the weather. Agenda item: deaths. Agenda item: tribulations.

Ivan said nothing the whole time. He couldn’t think of anything to say, but he also wasn’t in the mood. The alcohol had evaporated, and the coffee was gnawing at his stomach; he was hungry. When Milorad stood up and took his leave from the elderly lady, he was relieved. He shook hands with the *baba* too, took the three beefsteak tomatoes that she pressed into his hands, thanked her, and held the gate open for Milorad as he pushed the bike out into the street. Then they said goodbye again and departed.

They went down what seemed to Ivan to be the sole street in the village, which was empty and sunny. He offered Milorad a tomato, but he waved it off and kept pushing the bike, slow step after slow step. By the end of the street, Ivan had devoured all of his new produce. He wiped his moist lips and chin with his sleeve and sniffled from the cold he'd picked up on the banks of the Mirica.

“What’s this village?”

“Gršgrpci.”

Milorad pushed the bike to the end of the street, leaned it against a huge gate, and attempted to open the hatch on the inside of a door. Since it was locked, he moved to the mail slot, pressed his forehead onto the old wood of the post, and shouted through the hole: “Is anybody there?”

Ivan found this all amusing, and he grinned as he watched Milorad, who was being very serious, standing up straight and gaping at the door as if expecting a dragon to come out.

Soon the gate shook. An unintelligible curse was audible, and then the hatch, with a little more quaking, opened into the courtyard. A short man was standing there, wearing short pants but naked to the waist. He was old, but his body was still chiselled from labour. When he saw Milorad, a smile rejuvenated his wrinkled face, and he stuck out his hand. After they shook, he moved back so they could enter.

“This is Ivan, my cousin. He’s my aunt’s boy, and my assistant for today.”

“Hello.”

“I’m Lajoš.”

The man said this by way of a greeting.

The courtyard was extensive and ended in fields that stretched out to the gigantic power lines in the distance. There was a large house next to a barn as well as two or three sheds, which were used as storehouses or whatever. Around their legs curled a small mutt, wagging its tail and scratching their calves with its paws when it humped them or they failed to pet it.

Lajoš led them over to a plastic table surrounded by four plastic chairs. They sat down, and he offered them something to drink.

“Okay, but we had coffee with *baba* Tinka.”

“Do you want some *rakija*?”

“If it’s homemade.”

Ivan was very quick with the response, but from the look on Milorad’s

face he realized he shouldn't have accepted.

Lajoš went into the house and soon returned with three tall, traditional shot glasses and one bottle, half-empty.

"It's quince. Is that all right?"

"Of course."

"Thanks."

He poured, they clinked glasses, and . . . they drank. The visitors praised the brandy, because that's what propriety and sequence demanded, even though Milorad couldn't abide hard liquor. It also did not sit well on top of Ivan's tomatoes, and with his hangover he couldn't even tell what flavour it was.

"Want some more?"

Lajoš was already raising the bottle and tilting it over Ivan's little flask, but the boys objected by shaking their heads.

"No, thank you. No."

"We have to work."

Lajoš put away the bottle, wiped his nose with his thumb and index finger, and nodded. They sat there, silently; Milorad and Lajoš looked at one another, and it wasn't clear to Ivan what was happening or what was supposed to happen. Suddenly Lajoš surprised him by asking a question.

"How are you, Miša? I mean, how are you getting along?"

"It is what it is. How are you?"

"Eh. So-so."

"How's Vilma?"

"She's still there."

"But how is she?"

"The same. No progress."

Milorad clapped Lajoš on the shoulder, and the latter looked up, smiled, and winked back at him.

"At least you're doing all right."

He lowered his hand onto Milorad's knee, and they stayed like that, in a strange composition of intertwined limbs and interlocked glances. Ivan couldn't figure out what was going on, but he knew that nothing should be allowed to ruin this moment; even the dog knew as much and quieted down, going off to doze in the shade.

From somewhere, a modest-sized flock of chickens appeared, moving as one and rolling their eyes at the humans, but even they paused for the

duration of that moment that Milorad and Lajoš were sharing.

“The hogs.”

“Yes. That’s the reason you came.”

Abruptly, as if nothing had happened, Milorad and Lajoš got to their feet and started walking behind the barn, but Ivan was too taken aback to do anything. Plus, he was swaddled in the white coat. Milorad turned around and motioned for him to follow, and at that point Ivan managed to hop up and waddle over to them.

The sty was small and cobbled together with weathered, grey boards. The three pigs imprisoned in its space were moving back and forth, picking around in their feeder or grunting randomly into the air. Lajoš called to them, spoke in baby talk, and addressed each one by name—Ana, Lea, Ika. He patted their soiled bodies and stroked their heads. Two of the pigs had tags on their ears, and one had none.

Lajoš swatted the pigs gently again, and then he went back to the courtyard. Ivan and Milorad followed him, and the chickens who had been spying on them got agitated; they cackled and clucked five or six times and then ran off and spread out over the courtyard, pecking in the dust.

Milorad headed towards the gate, but Lajoš stopped by the table and called to him.

“Stay for breakfast.”

“We can’t. Have to be going.”

Lajoš blinked and pursed his lips. Then he nodded his head and mumbled something. He came over to the gate, too, shook hands with both young men, and wished them a safe journey. He closed the large door behind them.

Ivan and Milorad walked without speaking through the village, back to the paved road. The sun was glaring down. Ivan took off the coat and handed it back to Milorad, who absent-mindedly crumpled it up and shoved it into his bag so that one sleeve was still poking out.

Ivan finally got up the courage to ask: “And? What’s going on between the two of you?”

Milorad looked at Ivan, and it seemed like he was just seeing him for the first time, as if Milorad had just now realized that they’d been together this whole time.

Milorad kept pushing the bike and looking straight ahead, and Ivan kept his mouth shut and accepted that as an answer. They pushed until they

got to the road and then mounted the bicycle. Miša started pedalling, and they travelled along the lane, back towards Bumblefuck, barely maintaining their balance.

They rode for ten minutes, and then Milorad suddenly began to talk. Ivan couldn't hear him all that well, and he clung to him so he could rest his head on Milorad's shoulder and, staring at the road, listen to what he was saying.

"I was engaged to Lajoš' daughter, Ana. For a long time, we didn't tell anyone, so we wouldn't seem too hasty about it. One day I couldn't stand it anymore. I caught Ana in my arms, kissed her, and told them that we had gotten engaged. Her mom was furious. She was screaming about how it was out of the question—how I had no right to marry Ana. I thought that she'd simmer down and that Ana's dad would have a talk with her. They pleaded with us, saying all kinds of rubbish, but I could tell which way the wind was blowing. Ana knew, too. They threatened her so she would renounce me. I left home and slept rough for several days, and in the end I surrendered. Fuck it. I asked Ana if we could postpone everything. I had never seen her like that. I can't remember how much time passed. For at least half an hour she was in a trance, or whatever—I don't know what to call it exactly—but when she snapped out of it, she said I had to leave. Lajoš called me early the next morning. Ana had said that she was going to my place and left. Everybody thought she was with me, but she had actually taken a walk out to the barn. There wasn't a note or anything. Do you understand?"

Milorad kept talking about Ana's mother, Vilma, and about Lajoš, who was holding up better, and about how he visits him regularly, but Ivan couldn't hear him anymore. He pulled away from his cousin and stared silently at the back of his head and his two floppy ears.