

A Diagnosis

By Miljenko Jergovic (1966 –)

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No other place has threats and curses like the ones in Bosnia. They have been dreamed up over a long period of time, not in order to hurt or scare anybody, but to prove the value of imagination. The best curses and threats chart the development of a particular culture. For example, with the electrification of Bosnian villages came the following curse: “May your child be cut up with a chainsaw and stored in the cellar for winter!”

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Salih F. saw with his own eyes his wife and two daughters being cut up with an electric saw by the Chetniks. Later imprisoned in Manjača, he was expected to die there, but instead he was released in exchange for some other prisoners. He was transferred to Gradiška, then to Karlovac and finally to the Czech Republic, where he ended up in a refugee camp among unknown, but mostly Bosnian, people. Illiterate and a bit slow, he was the ideal figure of fun. Salih F. spent days trying not to rise to the bait. Sometimes he made the effort to come up with a quick retort or to think of an original reply, but it didn't really work. He only ended up looking even more stupid than before. It was as though he had been dropped into a machine for mincing his nerves. The only way to escape was to put the heat on the next sucker, or else to sort it out with his fists.

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One day Salih F. fought with half the camp. He had the shit beaten out of him, at first by the Bosnians and then by the Czech police guards. Afterwards, still bleeding and now tied up, he was presented with an official order banning him from all the refugee camps in the country. He packed up his things, swore at the Bosnians and the Czech guards and set off for Prague. After walking over fifty miles, he entered the city in triumph and was immediately arrested. He had no documents in his pockets except for the banning order.

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The police threw Salih F. into prison, but after keeping him locked up for a night, they couldn't think what to do with him. They wanted to expel the vagrant, but no country would take a Bosnian who was prone to fighting. The most straightforward thing to do would have been to send him back to Manjača, but this was impossible in practice, because such a move would have contravened the international declaration of human rights.

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In the end the problem was solved by a quick-witted bureaucrat from the Bosnian embassy in Prague. He recommended that the police dispatch

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Salih F. to a psychiatric hospital to be pronounced insane. That way, he couldn't be expelled from the country – it was again a matter of human rights. After listening to the prisoner's life story, the authorities decided that the psychiatric option was really quite a good idea.

5 In the hospital Salih F. was treated like a king. He was given his own room with a television, a tape recorder and a comfortable armchair. The doctors were thrilled to have such an opportunity to study a human guinea pig who had witnessed his next of kin being cut to pieces – legs first, then the arms, and finally the heads. At regular intervals the men in white coats used
10 to check on Salih F. by peering through the spyhole. Most of the time he sat quietly in the armchair, watching television, changing channels and munching grapes lazily. He looked no different from everybody else in the world who follows the latest news from Bosnia with a lack of interest.

 The doctors concluded that Salih F. was actually in a state of shock.
15 They drafted long and pedantic reports about him, wrote papers for psychiatric journals, discussed various prognostications and waited patiently for Salih F.'s battered and bloody soul to recover. But over the next few months his condition did not change. Salih F. lived from day to day without fuss, always replying politely to the doctors' questions but making no special
20 requests and apparently displaying no interest in the hospital's plans for his future. The doctors attempted to bring Salih F. out of shock by providing him with a hobby. They offered him singing lessons, drawing paper or a course in photography. Just choose which you'd prefer, they said, and he thanked the men in white coats, adding that he didn't need or like any of those
25 activities. But the doctors insisted – and so in the end Salih F. agreed to take up drawing. He couldn't sing and was scared of photographs.

 Salih F. used to draw obediently whenever it was time for his drawing practice, but at the end of a session he would go back to watching television and munching grapes. Predictably the doctors sat up late at night analyzing
30 his drawings. He used a brown wooden pencil to draw a hut, a green one for the grass and a yellow one for the sun. He drew eyes and a mouth on the sun; it was a copy, he said, of a picture he had seen as a child. Sometimes he had to explain to the doctors the nature of a particular drawing. The men in white coats used to smile as they listened to his explanations. But sometimes
35 they asked follow-up questions that were too confusing for the interpreter to translate.

 The day finally came when a decision had to be made about the future of Salih F. The doctors had prepared only one question. "What would you do," they said, "if you caught the murderers of your wife and daughters?"
40 Salih F. replied that such a thing was unlikely to happen. By now the

Chetniks responsible were far away, across many borders and barbed-wire fences and lines of battle. But the doctors insisted, assuring him that many things were possible even if they seemed unlikely at first. And so, recognizing that his questioners were like small children, and that it was necessary for them only to imagine a situation in order to make it a reality, 5 Salih F. replied, "I would kill them," adding, "or I would give them a pen and paper and tell them, as you tell me, to DRAW!"

The doctors' faces lit up. They took their pens and papers and pronounced Salih F. insane.