**Memento**

In a world shredded by guns and missiles, the survivors were left to pick up the scraps.

Independence. Cultural freedom. I had been a child too young for this world where war had become the norm; now I saw ghosts peering at me from shadowy corners, awaiting their long-overdue peace.

I drifted through Vukovar, as aimlessly now as I had after the war. The city stood tall, robust, a symbol of unity that dwarfed me in its proud shadow. Croatia had moved on after being rendered to dust. And me…

“Coward,” I whispered, the word hollow in the stillness of the night. “I’m a coward.”

I scuffed my shoe along the pavement. I had not walked these streets for almost three decades – it felt odd to not clamber over fallen buildings and bloated bodies, to not choke on the dust that hung in the air like a film.

A shiver crawled over my body as I recalled the day Serbia ripped us from Vukovar. Memories of the deportation washed over me – the lull of the bus, the restless whispers, the disquiet when we arrived.

“Remember Deda’s stories of World War II?” I had asked my younger brother. “We’re tough. We’ll pull through.”

Ilija didn’t respond, casting his anxious gaze around our surroundings. Interwoven among those deported from Vukovar were Serbian soldiers, their expressions cold and unfeeling. As I took in the greenery and tin sheds, recognition flickered beneath the fear clouding my mind: Ovčara Farm.

“I want Ćaća,” Ilija finally said. In the watery light, his skin was pallid, his empty eyes shadowed by purple.

“Ćaća will be here soon,” I promised, though the words sounded hollow to my ears.

The man hovering nearby sent me a sidelong glance, an empty laugh escaping his lips. “We’re done for,” he said, spitting on the ground. “Why else would we be here? They’re already taking people away.”

“Ignore him,” I said, turning Ilija away. *Be calm, Jakov,* I told myself, swallowing away the bitter taste left by the man’s words. *For Ilija*. Desperately, I drew teluke slippers from within my pocket, pressing them into Ilija’s hands. “Remember these?” I asked. “We always fought over them.”

“Yeah,” Ilija responded, his voice small.

“We used to tease the Serbs because they were *our* family teluke.”

“Yeah,” he repeated, the shadow of a smile now touching his lips.

“You take that half,” I said, taking back a slipper, “and I’ll—”

“You!”

I jolted, terror spearing my chest. A Serbian soldier towered over us, his fingers whitening around the cruel metal of his gun. “You,” the soldier repeated in broken Croatian, his cold eyes fixed on Ilija, “with me.”

“‘With me’?” I echoed, watching uncomprehendingly as the soldier seized Ilija’s arm and dragged him through the crush of bodies. “Wait— Ilija!”

In that moment of hesitation, I had lost him. I lunged forward, his name on my lips, before the man from earlier wrenched me back.

“Save yourself,” he hissed, his grip tightening.

*Save myself?* Terror prickled over my skin, my cries dying on my tongue.

“No,” I whispered.

Time slipped away like sand between our fingers as those familiar and unfamiliar were led away. It was night when wails and gunshots echoed throughout the farm, agonisingly clear amidst the quiet. As Ilija died, I had sat there, cowardly and small, clutching the single teluka slipper between my fingers.

I roused from the memory, jolted into the present as the icy wind stung the tear tracks upon my face.

“Ilija,” I mumbled. In my peripheral vision, his ghost hovered mutely, summoned by the memories that so often plagued me. Were he not a ghost, I wondered if I would see bruises clouding his skin and bullet holes weeping blood.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice catching. “I should’ve followed you. I should’ve died with you.”

Besides Ilija, another spectre materialised, his face flushed with youth. I averted my gaze. It always stung, seeing the ghost of my younger self. In his eyes, I saw family paprikaš dinners, tamburica lessons, knitting teluke with Ilija. I couldn’t bear to look at him.

Sighing, I turned away. The ghosts would find me again; they always did.

~~~

The Ovčara Memorial had many ghosts. They crouched in swaying shadows, watching and waiting. Two-hundred and sixty-one men had died here, beaten, shot and entombed beneath the bloody earth.

My limbs seemed burdened by phantom chains as I entered the graveyard. Behind me, Silvija Lukić, my Serbian neighbour and family in all but blood, rested a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “You’re okay,” she whispered, her breath warming my ear.

I barely registered her words. Luminescent under the half-moon, the ghosts of my family stood solemnly by the memorial’s polished headstone. Thirty years, they had waited, to be set free.

I slid to my knees, a marionette with severed strings. It wasn’t easy, seeing the empty faces of those you loved most.

Silvija’s hand upon my shoulder spasmed, tightening so painfully that I met her gaze. A familiar guilt had settled behind her eyes, reflecting the very emotions that gripped me.

How had she felt, raising a child haunted by the ghosts of those slaughtered by her people? She’d held me during my darkest moments yet could do nothing as I lost myself to a sorrowful madness. Shame stirred within me as I stood, taking her aged hands within my own.

“Ko ćeš ti pomoć, ako ne svoj svome?” I told her, echoing the proverb my family had so often repeated to one another. *Who will you help, if not your own?* “You saved me.”

*In more ways than one*, I silently added.

“Thank you,” Silvija whispered. Without her, who would I be? Another ghost, tethered to the world of the living?

Shivering, I pulled out of her grasp. My family awaited me, silent and pale against the hues of the night.

The grief that so often consumed me abated as I knelt. These men whose corpses lay beneath this earth… they had died alone, buried without solace and lost without light.

I picked up the matchbox laying at my knees, clutching it like a lifeline. Silvija set down a lantern, before backing away with a silence that spoke volumes: *this is yours to do, but… I am here*.

With a crackle, fire blossomed. Inhaling the icy air of the night, I lowered the flickering flame to the wick.

“Let the fire light your way,” I said, placing the lantern at the base of the memorial with trembling hands. My mother and father simply held my gaze, fading into the wind that carried them down the river and beyond. Ilija lingered, a faint smile brightening his features as his lips formed the word *teluka*.

The slipper still lay deep within my coat pocket, a lingering memory of our carefree childhood. As I withdrew it with trembling hands, Ilija offered me a final smile before melting into the night.

Only my ghost remained.

Twelve-year-old Jakov stood in front of me, his gaze unblinking, unwavering. I clutched the teluka, looking him in the eye. “For you,” I said. As I laid the teluka upon the grave, he disappeared into the star-speckled sky above.