

Yugo Pop

1. Djevojka/Girl

If there was one thing Ana was particularly resentful about when it came to Tomislav, then it was the fact that their interests were so closely aligned that she found the company of most other people to be lacking. The ease with which the two slipped into and out of silences was infuriating. It also meant that Tomislav knew how to push her buttons, and tonight he pushed them with the confidence of a pianist playing a sonata. That is to say, Tomislav was steadfastly ignoring her.

“You are ignoring me.”

No reaction. Tomislav knew she knew he was pretending not to be able to hear her.

“What is it I did this time around?” At this, Tomislav turned the music up and took another large sip of beer. In front of him was a collage of newspaper cut outs. The smell of glue penetrated the air in the small room.

“Are you angry I talked to Jacob? The way his *bovine* eyes delighted in my feminine features?” Tomislav forcefully applied glue to the black and white image of a vintage car printed on yellowing paper. Alas, Ana sighed. She truly didn’t know what else to say to rile him up. Usually talking about whatever idiotic boy took an interest in her was enough to provoke a reaction. It seemed, however, that what she had done this time around had crossed the line that separated his irritation from anger.

“One: I didn’t borrow any of your money without asking you. Two: I didn’t play any of your precious records without your permission. Three: I didn’t wear your silk blouse and put it back into your closet without washing it first. In fact, I’m still wearing it: look!” The short glance Tomislav threw her way would’ve been enough to shut up the naughtiest of children, but Ana was well acquainted with the way his dark brows formed a thunderous frown.

“Tomi, I dunno. I just dunno. Hand me a cigarette, will you, *srce*, you’re stressing me out.”

With a resounding smack an empty pack of cigarettes hit Ana in the face.

“What the fuck?”

Tomislav arose: “Go ahead, have one.

Ana gaped, fish like. Tomislav grabbed the pack. “You smoked the lot of them, Ana. *Moje Drine*. Do you realise how expensive it was to get these imported?”

“Oh, darling.” Forlorn, Ana ruffled her bangs. “Oh, darling, *srce*, forgive me. I hadn’t realised.”

Tomislav sank to the floor, rubbing his eyes aggressively. “It was supposed to be for our perfect fantasy. *Za nasu perfektnu fantaziju, razumijes, Ana?*”

Tomislav reached for her hand while Ana picked up the empty pack of cigarettes. Its pristine white packaging carelessly opened by her just yesterday. DRINA, was proudly emblazoned on its front, produced in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina by FABRIKA DUHANA SARAJEVO. *Such a long way from home to ruin my lungs*, Ana thought. Its namesake, a swirling river cutting through the mountainous landscapes demarking the border to Serbia. “Drina” she spoke into the room – what was her colour? Were her waters clear and luminous? Was she a treacherous river whose appearance belied her depths? Or one of peaceful calm? Ana did not know. She remembered the outline printed on a map. With so little to feed her imagination, there was just a vague rising and falling of waves– blue, green, brackish, muddy – to accompany the name. The cigarette pack was Drina’s calling card:

Remember me, if you please.

“Do you think these would taste any different if we knew their namesake?” Ana wondered aloud. Ana tried to focus on each syllable of the name, DRI-NA, and she felt as though they rang with meaning beyond those five letters. The sensation, vague as it was, slipped away, lost to a stream of associations.

“One day, Tomi, we’ll smoke these while looking at her.”

Tomislav hummed, his face twitching with a nostalgic pain that people less familiar with his idiosyncrasies confused with anger. *Then again, pain and anger are related, aren’t they*, Ana thought. “The family on my father’s side used to grow the tobacco in these cigarettes. It was very hard work.”

“I didn’t know that.”, Tomi murmured.

“Yes. Dad said he’d hardly had any time to study for exams when the time came to harvest the tobacco. Hours and hours of work in the fields. Then it had to dry in the sun. Then you had to cut it up. Then you had to sell it. Its taste was harsher than the American stuff. Because it contained more tar. In fact, Dad used to smoke it to quit smoking. He said it was so strong you’d take a few puffs, any more, you’d fall over backwards. Ha! Can you imagine?”

Both laughed.

The room had grown colder with the setting of the sun; soon they’d have to turn on the heating. So they huddled closer, covering themselves with a comforter and rubbing their socked feet across the carpet.

“What do you imagine the smell of a tobacco field is like? With the summer heat pressing down so feverishly?”

They both closed their eyes in contemplation. Thoughts arose, but were drawn down by the leaden cool of the air around them. No, the reality of Northern European winter was too stark

to permit ideas of any abundance of warmth. Oh, how striking the cold felt all of the sudden.

“No idea.”

They opened their eyes.

“Hardly anybody’s growing that bitter old tobacco anymore.” Tomislav mumbled blankly.

Ana couldn’t react. She was too caught up in her own feelings.

He rose and left the room.

The silence that he left behind swirled around Ana like stale smoke, so oppressive was the sensation of loss and absence that their retrospection had left – memories not their own, of a time and place so many years ago and kilometres away. Ana shivered, the pristine white packaging in her hands unnaturally heavy.

Remember me, if you please.

2. Djecak/Boy

The leaves had lost their colour. Instead, with the onslaught of December rains, they had begun to rot and turned into an incongruous brown mass covering the sidewalks. The icy wind that came blowing from the waterfront had Tomislav hugging himself.

“I’d told you to put on more clothes, Tomi”, his mother fussed next to him, reaching up to fix his collar.

“No, it’s alright, Mum. I’m fine.”

“Do you want my scarf? It’s no trouble at all.”

“I’m fine.”

“Tomislav, *prehladit ces se*. You’ll catch a cold. Here-“

Tomislav danced outside of the reach of her glove-covered hands. His mother tutted.

“Have it your way.”

Tomislav shuddered at the forlorn cry of a seagull overhead and followed his mother’s lead.

The stout woman was wrapped in layers of wool and a coat fit for a polar expedition.

“I really don’t understand why you wouldn’t want to meet over coffee at home. I have made stew and your father has made cake. It’s freezing.”

“I prefer being outside.”

Mother sighed, shaking her head a little. Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks. “I bought you something.” Before Tomislav could even begin to protest, she pressed a pair of bright red pyjama bottoms into his hands.

“That flat of yours is always so cold. These are thick. Feel the fabric.” And she looked at him expectantly until Tomislav rubbed the fabric between his index finger and his thumb. The tacky cartoon frogs that covered the fleece looked up at him with broad grins. *This will go*

well with my thrift store silk robe, Tomislav thought to himself.

“You know I’d never buy this myself, right, Mum?”

“Well, yes, you don’t take care of yourself. You never wear socks either.”

Tomislav sighed, absentmindedly stroking the piece of clothing in his hands.

“Well, won’t you say thank you?”

Seeing his little mother puffed up like a bird in winter, in her little coat and with her hat drawn down to her eyelashes – it broke his heart. He shifted closer and hugged her tight and breathed in the smell of her perfume and home that clung to her clothes.

“Oh, Tomislav. It is so good to see you.”

He hid his face near her shoulder and nodded, his breath dampening the fabric of her coat.

“You know, your grandmother has asked about you. She is so sad that you haven’t visited your cousins in years. You should call. And Petar, he keeps talking about how you should learn Croatian properly. But I told him that he could keep his opinions to himself, that we will call him if we need an uneducated idiot to help jumpstart our car.”

He slipped out of her embrace and shrugged. “Let’s walk down to the riverbank.”

He stumbled ahead, his mother ambled along. The path led them through bare shrubbery. Abandoned birds’ nests sat atop bushes like crowns and rose hips gleamed bauble-red in the twilight of this gray winter afternoon. The growing sound of waves rolling in and out and in and out rushed all clear thought out of his mind. He continued to stare down at his boots. Only once he could hear pebbles scrunching underneath his soles, he stopped in his track and raised his eyes. The tumultuously grey river and ashen sky mirrored each other perfectly.

“If you squint, it looks just like the sea at home”, his mother said.

Tomislav’s eyes strained to blur the view ahead, but it was no more than an abstract mass that sparked nothing within him. This was a moving body of water. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Why don’t you spend the summer holidays with us, Tomi?”

“I think grandmother would drop dead if she had to face my veganism. I can’t do that to her.”

“But you always go on about the language, the culture - for God’s sake, Ana and you idolise Yugoslavia more than your father does.”

Tomislav dropped down to his knees, uncaring of mud, picked up a handful of pebbles and chucked them into the water. Down they went, plop, plop, plop. His hands were stained with dirt and stiff from the cold.

“Do you remember Pula? You would wade into the sea and pick up the biggest rock you could find!”, his mother made a heaving motion, “-And you’d throw it into the sea, the bigger the splash! The happier you would be!” She laughed and ruffled his hair fondly. Tomislav

sniffed and wiped his nose on his coat sleeve. “It doesn’t make sense to me, Mum.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Why’d you never return home?”

His mother turned pensive, her gaze losing itself in the waves.

“With the years, home has become here and there. Not just one thing, but many.”

Tomislav shrugged. “One home would be enough for me. Not here and there, but feeling whole.”

“Oh darling. Come with us this summer. Bring Ana with you.”

He took a shuddering breath. “Maybe. I’ll have to speak Croatian fluently by then, I suppose.”

She took a hold of his shoulder and rubbed it with her gloved hand.

“You’re fine. Don’t you worry about what Petar or anyone else says.”

Together, they glanced at the ebb and flow of the water, and Tomislav realised that that grand grey mass of droplets now carried with it the echoes of their conversation, and that at some point further upstream, these waters would enter the vastness of the sea.