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TEXT prose

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Not A Story But An Exchange

I have thought a long time about how to begin, and also how it began. My story with Farah Tahirbegović, the late Bosnian punk folk song singer.

Was it the morning I arrived in Sarajevo? The sky was grey. At the international bus station there were pigeons pecking at concrete. I got a 20 Euro fine for not having a ticket on the tram to the city, even though the driver had waved me on himself, not having been bothered to change my large note. Of course, he didn't know anything about it when the inspector came on board. And when I gave her the money, I swore – in English. But no, no, that shouldn't be in my frame.

How about how the café I went to later, after I'd checked into my Booking.com room? It was a kitsch place – Yugoslavia nostalgia hanging on the walls – and the three other patrons, all middle-aged men, were sitting at their own individual tables conversing, talking. Across the space, they didn't really need to project their voices because the room was so small, but I still had the sensation that they – we – were all islands unto ourselves. As it turned out, the three men were writers. A novelist, a journalist and a poet. There must be a joke that starts like that. It could be my beginning, too, but it's not.

One more try. The reason I had come to Sarajevo, a side trip from my Macedonian language studies course, was the film festival. Every day after

that first day, from my room I would walk down the hill, have my coffee at the writers' kitsch café, and then make my way to the cinema, go until midnight, like watching films was my job. There were some great films, too. Films that broke my heart; films that broke my idea of what a film should look like; films that made me see old things like they were new. But that is not what I want to remember. What I want to remember is that on my way to the cinema, on my way down the hill, after the café and just before the marketplace, on my left, there was an apartment building, Austro-Hungarian in style. From one of its windows, the only one that was open, I would always hear the sound of someone playing a piano. A beautiful sound, a sound that poured out onto the street. Pouring, pouring, pouring. Now. That's closer.

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The trouble is that when I think of the story of Farah Tahirbegović and me, there really is no story. No this-happened, then that-happened; no string of correlating cause-and-effect events. But there are some facts. Or rather, an actual web of communications and connections over time. Though not in any linear or chronological order, each piece, each part, holds onto all the others with fishing wire, a spider's silk, a tangle of invisible hands.

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Ferida was the director of the Farah Tahirbegović Foundation for over ten years, a fund for young Bosnian artists of various disciplines, which she set up herself though recently, sadly, she tells me, she's had to give it up. Over our two long Messenger conversations in the space of a year, I also learn that Farah was not predominantly a musician or singer, as I'd imagined, but a writer (and editor and publisher) which I like very much. They met at a refugee centre, writes Ferida in her text bubbles, in Slovenia during the 1990s, during the early days of the Yugoslav Wars. At the time, Ferida was trying to get back home to Sarajevo, back to her parents and the love of her life, after a badly-timed poetry residency in the US; Farah, who was much younger, only nineteen, organised a reading for her in their temporary country of exile. That night, the night of the reading, Ferida told Farah that if she did make it back, and if she survived, and if she had a child, and if that child was a girl, she would call her Farah. And that is what she did. As well as establishing a foundation in her name. This doesn't surprise me at all – that Farah made such a huge impression, and so quickly, on someone else.

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Gena is my aunt – a distant aunt on paper, on our family tree. One of the links we share is that my paternal grandfather and her uncle spent five years together in the same prison cell in Greece during World War 2 after deserting the Communist cause and the idea of Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia before it was born – something I didn’t know until Gena told me in her Logan lounge room a few months ago. (Though I knew my grandfather was a refugee, and that this is partly why I am here. In Australia, I mean.) In the same lounge room, on the same weekend, Gena translates Farah’s memoir, *Letter to Parents 1993*, about her refugee years and the circumstances right before it, a book which Ferida had her husband post to me from Sarajevo the year before last – as a gift. Gena translates the whole thing, this gift, from Bosnian to Macedonian and Macedon-lish, orally – I cannot read Bosnian (or Serbo-Croatian) but Gena does, having grown up in the former Yugoslavia – but only, of course, after she has fed me homemade baklava, freshly baked bread and a hearty bean stew. Because we’re both so full and sleepy, I’m sure she must be skimming and skipping a little, and so I interrupt with my questions, my main concerns. Does she say anything about music, about *sevdalinka*, about the old folk songs? No, not much, a sentence here and there. There are also some expressions, some words I don’t understand. Like: *zhivee zhurka*. Gena says, using her own memories of her own university days back in Yugoslavia, it’s the feeling you have when you are young and living with friends; you’re close, you’re having a good time, and because you have no worries you sleep wherever your head falls, like a cat. And an *index*? It’s a written report, a card that your department keeps of everything you have studied, and all the exams you have taken and passed (or failed); it is the thing that Farah did not have time to get before she had to get on a bus and leave her city under siege. And that is why when she arrives in Slovenia, she is not allowed to continue with her studies in literature. There is no proof. But there is love, and unity, and friendship, says Gena. Friendship, above all else.

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I am in the departure lounge at Melbourne domestic airport, returning home after visiting my own old university friends – or, at least, I’m trying to return. Because we’d been laughing so much, having such a good time, I’d forgotten my worries – *zhivee zhurka* – and missed my flight. It will be hours now before the next one arrives. And so, I have some time to search out Farah on my iPhone, knowing that I won’t find her – not the actual Farah. She’s no longer alive, and not directly because of the war but a more commonplace illness, which, I learned some time ago, took her fast. Still, I try. This is what I do, and have been doing for already seven years, when I can. Am I obsessed? Am I lonely? What I tell Ferida and Gena is that I am writing a story, but

really all I want to do is talk about her, hear about her, bring her close. This is what makes me type her name into the search engine, this time an academic one, and I'm surprised when something actually comes up. It's a cultural anthropology paper about gender and music-making in exile, specifically about young, female Bosnian refugee musicians in Slovenia during the '90s who found ways to reinvent themselves and their situation, to deal with their collective grief and bring people together, rather than separate and destroy. In part, it's about Farah. It's about Room 135C at the Šmartinska Street refugee centre, Ljubljana, where she invited new friends to fill the empty hours of no school or university, to play, to make music. It's about the *sevdalinka* she suggested to them, these displaced and largely urbane youths in jeans and Converse sneakers who had no previous interest in traditional Macedonian and Bosnian folk songs whatsoever. Eventually though, under her loose leadership, they came around and, as a makeshift group of shifting members, ended up performing their DIY, punk-like interpretations, not only at the refugee centre but at Slovenian bars, rock clubs, the city squat, and achieved what the authors describe as an unintentional underground cult status. The authors – Alenka and Miha – were, after all, there to see, as the footnotes tell me. On stage and in the audience, they also heard the visceral hoots and shouts and cries of those present; heard the way Farah sang was like it was food. As did Marina, Vesna, Damir; and they are made mention of, too. But I already 'know' them from the documentary film I must've watched a hundred times, the one by which I was originally introduced to Farah. And so together I tie them all, the people and pieces, old to new, words to image to sound. I read and reread, and as I do I have the feeling that I am standing in a tight circle of friends of friends of friends in which Farah, and what she gave – what she gives – is at its centre. And then there's the call. My plane is boarding now.

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It wasn't actually at the Sarajevo Film Festival that I first saw the documentary by which I first learned about Farah Tahirbegović but a few months later at home, in Brisbane, where I was having a film festival of my own, using the online archives as a guide. The Sarajevo Film Festival Audience Prize, 2009. Winner: *Sevdah*. Short for *sevdalinka*. Short for the sorrows of the heart transformed into art. It got me right away, too, this film. Pierced me in just the way I like. The shuffle of images seemed so familiar, as well as the Sarajevo cityscape. The corner kiosk. Wasn't that where I eventually bought a prepaid tram card? The elderly, stooped woman confidently crossing a busy road. I saw that, too. And the pair of woman's hands, just like my grandmother's, swollen and knuckly from work, rolling the pastry dough so very, very thin that if she were to lift it up you could see right through it, like a membrane, a

memory, a portal to the past. The past. The film is not really about Farah at all on its surface – it’s about a tangle of things like loss, grief, roots, heritage, honour, musical tradition and change, starting again, legacy, the return, tracing the fine lines of personal and larger histories – but Farah’s presence, and absence, imbue it from beginning to end. She’s the impetus, the inspiration, the subtext and the object of the impossible search, though she is never seen, not until the very end in a still photograph dedication. Neither is she heard, and only briefly heard about. In one of the opening scenes, the filmmaker, Marina, and one of her main protagonists, Damir, sit together closely and listen to a recording of a *sevdalinka* song on a laptop, a song he and Farah used to listen to together; and they speak to each other about what Farah meant to them, and the ways she had and still imprints their lives. Their faces are in closeup. Warm smiles, the spray of lines around eyes. The way the filmmaker’s hand tenderly caresses her own arm. This is what moved so much. The gift of being granted witness to an intimate but platonic, almost familial love.

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Of course, after watching the documentary, I googled the name ‘Farah Tahirbegović’ right away. Who was she? The first substantial thing I found – and there wasn’t much – was a live audio recording of an old song called *Uchi Me Majko* (Teach Me Mother) from the Ljubljana days, which an original member of the band, Benjamin, had uploaded on YouTube. I have to admit, like the young people in Room 135C at Šmartinska Street refugee centre, I had always found these old folk songs slightly ridiculous. I’d half-heard and dismissed them at the large weddings that we, as an extended family, went to in Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong; and on the Macedonian-language radio programs my aunties played on Sunday afternoons. I believed they had nothing to offer except the conservative values and gender-corning I sought to tear myself from – and I did, I had, I had estranged myself almost entirely and it was a cause of grief. Still, I must’ve retained something of them, the old songs, because I did recognise, at least vaguely, the melody to *Uchi Me Majko* and the oddly mystifying lyrics depicting a dialogue between a mother and son, one in which he asks his mother how to love a girl; and she replies that he should build a fountain. A fountain. Not a show-offy thing spraying fancy jets and fans of water, but a fountain for living: drinking, bathing, washing, sustaining. A fountain connected to a spring, ever-flowing; when it’s done it should gush, unstoppable, inexhaustible, indestructibly. But how to love? How to love deeply? That is the question, and the object in Farah’s rendition is not ‘the girl’, not a romantic attachment but her roots, her culture from which she has been removed. And the way she sings! She provides an answer, pouring, pouring, pouring as if from the very source so that I, too, feel a coming back to

life; an integrating of parts previously severed. As her friends say of her in the *Sevdah*, Farah had a gift: she could take a song and, like a teacher, underline the most significant phrase and then sing it back so that something very, very important could be understood.

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Build a fountain. That's what I have done. After Farah, that's what I realise I have done. How did I do it? I relearned the Macedonian language; I studied at university part-time for five years. Then I went to Macedonia and studied there. I read a lot of books. I talked to a lot of people. I went to seminars, went to the Sarajevo Film Festival, a poetry festival in Ohrid; I learned my people's history. I learned my grandparents' histories, too, rebuilt my relationships with them and let others, less life-giving, fall away again. Later, I wrote a few stories of my own, taking care to refashion the old into the new. Like Farah, who took out the traditional and rather patriarchal last line of 'Teach Me Mother' – *the bitch didn't come* (to the fountain the son built) – I found a way to not simply reiterate but reconfigure what I didn't like and to underline the best of what I'd long ago discarded. In short, I found a way to love.

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Maybe in the end – and maybe all along – it has been the love that I have loved. Farah's love for the old songs; her friends love for her and each other; hers for them; mine for them all and their circle of giving and receiving, receiving and giving, with no one really at the centre, each one filling the others' cups.

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In the end, maybe there is no end, just as there is no real beginning. There's only me in my lounge room, alone but not alone, Bluetooth speaker connected to my computer, listening to Farah Tahirbegović and dancing, dancing.

Tamara Lazaroff is a Macedonian-Australian writer of fiction and creative nonfiction. Her autofiction collection In My Father's Village & Other Freedom Stories (Pollitecon Publications) was shortlisted for the 2020 Woollahra Digital Literary Award; and her novella Husk, Root, Bone was published, also in 2020, by Big Fiction Magazine (USA).