**All It Takes Is a Microscopic Moment in Time**

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City of your birth, the city you long for in your dreams and occasionally when you are awake while watching television, usually during war news somewhere in the world… Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, the most recent ones in Ukraine.

You try to hide them, but the same dormant memories, deep-rooted in your subconscious, about the day you lost your childhood, keep crawling back to your cerebral cortex all these years later. Recollection of past events is the last place you wish to revisit, but the hippocampus in your brain doesn’t sleep, and you can’t stop watching the news.

All it really takes is a microscopic moment in time, a decision vetoed without your knowledge, after all, you are just a child. It happens on one of those excruciatingly cold European mornings when you feel your insides getting numb with every inhale of the frosty Balkan air.

On that day, over thirty years ago, at the crowded bus station, your life changed forever. You remember a sea of people crammed together like a living motionless fence—squeezing, pushing, arguing. Their polyphonic voices, an out-of-tune melody, crescendo and plummet alternately.

It’s hard to breathe, especially for a child surrounded by hovering chins and red nostrils, swaying in slow-motion. Shivery mists of icy exhale dance above your head, cracked lips of strangers uttering words you don’t understand. Sounds are muffled and distant. You feel disoriented, almost like a sleepwalker stuck in an eerie unilluminated forest. No one notices, you are invisible to the point of being an indiscernible speck floating on the waves of their breathing, drowning in a field of anguish and uncertainty.

Occasionally, this seemingly impenetrable fence fractures and you observe other children jammed inside this human canopy; some much smaller but equally terrified. At that moment, you sense the gravity of your situation. It’s a battle for survival. This unnatural siege of mainly women’s bodies who are there for the same reason your parents are, to save you—the children—from the war that’s started, augurs to crush you.

You hear a scream coming out of your mouth in an attempt to catch sparse atoms of oxygen, but it’s barely audible. The scrambling continues and after a while the human wall re-establishes itself. You are isolated again.

Realization strikes that getting a seat on that bus is of the utmost importance. As the thought manifests in your mind, you feel your tiny body wafting through the air. Out of the corner of your eye, you glimpse Mum who silently nods, her face a statue of artificial calmness, fear hidden deep behind the pale sunken eyes.

The next thing you know, you are inside, sitting and hugging, your younger siblings equally scared. You remember holding Mum’s hand with a searing ferocity, nails protruding the cold flesh, afraid to let go. Never since have you experienced such mindless desperation.

You avoid looking at the despondent faces left behind but one of them is your father’s. He disappears in the blur of tears running down your cheeks and when your vision finally clears, you notice a dark silhouette, taller than the others, waving from afar. A moment in time, frozen forever, like fossils preserved in petrified form, never to be resurrected again. Deep down you know this is an epitaph to your childhood (though you would get to realize the meaning of that word later in life), a scrubbed-off layer of life, indisputably forsaken.

You are only twelve.

Months later, you learn that you boarded the last convoy embarking on its final journey. Faces behind windows are forever bedimmed in the minds of survivors, in your mind. When you finally reunite with your father, many moons later, he is but a shadow of a man you once knew. The man you said goodbye to on that last morning of your nonage is never to be seen again.

No matter how hard you try, the stigma of ‘displaced people’ stays with you like an itch that can’t be scratched. It cripples your family and your soul. It had cost your father his inner peace, ultimately his life. His fragile body, a living shadow, wandering aimlessly through life, until he is no more.

All these years later, you are still unsure whether it’s a muscle memory or your hippocampus in overdrive but despite the damage you’ve sustained, you don’t lose hope. And you finally come to terms that what is lost, cannot be un-lost. After all, you get to live and having what’s left of your family scattered around the globe, is not the worst of possible outcomes.