

Daughter of the East (La hija del este)

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Excerpts translated from the Spanish by Charlotte Coombe

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I am intrigued by a video posted on YouTube, a clip of a Bosnian TV programme *60 minuta*. It opens with a shot of a man talking in Serbian on a cordless phone, one of those Motorola devices that were used in the last decade of the 20th century. With his free hand (the right one), he smooths his hair back and then gesticulates, punctuating what he is saying, although the person he is talking to cannot see him, and the emphasis is wasted. He is a stocky man with a broad face and thick neck. He is in his fifties, with grey hair, and dark bushy eyebrows. The image is grainy, ill-defined, a flaw that is aggravated by the intense sunlight filtering through the window, outlining the figure of a man standing in front of it, in profile. Then, the camera focuses on two women who are watching him from the middle distance. They look alike, perhaps because they are both wearing their brown hair cut in a formal, slightly outdated-looking long bob, but the one on the left, the taller one, dressed in a red sweater, is young. Her companion is not; she belongs to the same generation as the man, who is now out of sight although he can be heard talking loudly on his mobile, in an authoritative tone, ‘Yes, prepare a thank-you text for that amount, i.e. for the twenty thousand German marks, plus ten thousand Canadian dollars, on the stationery bearing the colours of the Serbian flag and my signature.’ The older woman smiles, moves her head in a gesture of approval and whispers to her companion. It can be assumed that this is a family: father, mother, and daughter. A superimposed caption explains that this scene takes place on 10th July 1993. The following scene takes place in October of the same year: a sunny morning, on the veranda of a country house surrounded by lush forest. Sitting on plastic chairs around a garden table, a group of friends and family talk in a relaxed way, joking around. Although the image is still not clear (the video must have been filmed using a home video camera), among the people there, I recognise the men and the two women from the previous footage. Again, they are very close together; the father and the mother (assuming that’s what they are), are sitting at the head of the table, the end furthest away from the camera; the daughter (who now has longer hair, which stirs in the breeze, and she no longer looks so tidy) sits at one corner, next to her father, at a right angle. They are all wearing sports clothing, appropriate for spending the day in the countryside. The father wears a green jacket over a shirt

of the same colour, and the young woman wears a pink baggy jumper, with the top of a navy-blue polo shirt peeping out of the neckline. The mother can barely be made out, her face obscured by another man's head. The father smokes and smiles contentedly, he lavishes cuddles on his daughter, kisses her on the cheek and shouts, 'I hope they see this in Canada!' which makes everyone laugh. A voice off-camera (perhaps the man holding it) asks: 'Bosa, move in closer, too.' There are the sounds of laughter, unintelligible objections from the mother, and someone saying 'God helps three times,' veiled allusions to the supposed womanising reputation of the father, clearly the protagonist of this video, who declares, 'I don't know, I trust only myself and my horse,' and immediately bursts out laughing, pleased with his own joke. His daughter laughs too, amused. Now the camera focuses solely on the girl, who is in profile. When she smiles, she resembles the father, who looks at her with affection (or is it admiration?). The young woman unexpectedly turns her head, offering her beaming face to the camera.

The next shot is of an obituary; the name of the dead woman is written in Cyrillic over a sepia portrait with blurred edges, and a black border. Then, the entrance to a cemetery; a hearse approaching; two men carrying a coffin. The camera moves inside a narrow nave with a mound in the centre of it, on top of which is an imposing casket strewn with a slightly vulgar excess of bouquets, wreaths of flowers and white ribbons. Next to the casket, candles flicker. I identify the father and mother from the previous, jovial scene, in mourning dress, their faces now serious, standing against a stone wall to the right of the coffin. In the next image, the mother leans over the end of the casket to straighten up a framed photograph resting among the wreaths covering the case and kisses it fervently. By her side, the father, moved, very grave, looks like he is about to do the same, but refrains. The portrait is of the girl who I presume is their daughter, the one who just moments ago was smiling animatedly. In the photo her expression is serious; she has her usual short bob, a (pearl?) necklace and a black sweater. She is very pretty, *was* very pretty, I realise suddenly, because as if responding to my curiosity, the camera gives me a clear view of her face for the first time. Her large dark eyes look pensively to the right, beyond the frame of the photo, of the flowers surrounding it, the coffin and the walls of that narrow nave, as if she finds the sad episode of her own funeral dull, and is longing escape and go out into the fresh air, into that morning filled with sunshine and splendid blue sky, so perfect for a stroll. I'd like to know what she was thinking about when they took the snapshot. Next to the father and mother I can make out a young man; he is tall, tanned, and slim. (The girl's boyfriend? The brother?) Propped up against the side wall, the father and the mother (there is now no doubt that's who they are) and the tanned boy, their eyes lowered and their faces grief-stricken, receive the condolences of friends and acquaintances, who approach them through the narrow

gap between the catafalque on the left, and the wall, on the right, and whispering words of consolation, they greet and kiss the family members of the deceased three times on the cheek, according to Serbian custom. The final images feature the father. Leaning over the coffin, he brings his face to the little window through which the face of the deceased can be seen. He presses his face against the glass and sobs, his head down, overcome. The mother, keeping it together more, takes him by the arm to lead him away. She whispers something in his ear that we cannot hear, and when he finally stands up, she silently caresses his face. The man repeatedly wipes a crumpled white handkerchief over his face, wet with tears, and then, using the same handkerchief, rubs urgently at the glass of the casket, to erase the signs of his sobbing, to demist it (on the ring finger of his left hand is a thick gold ring, set with a dark stone). The camera lingers for a few seconds on the recently cleaned glass, which frames the face of the young woman: the pale bulge of her forehead can just be made out, the careful line of her bob, the folds of a white shroud.

In the video, a fade-out separates the shot of the laughing girl from the scene of her funeral; the dark screen lasts less than a second, but in it there lies an enigma, and perhaps an explanation.

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‘Three hundred children are born in Moscow every day. In the phone book there are a hundred thousand entries for Ivanov, and ninety thousand for Kuznecov, the most common surnames in the Russian capital. Weather permitting, the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy receives up to a hundred and eighty thousand visitors. 8.5 million passengers travel on the Moscow transport network on working days; together, the bus routes, metros and trams cover an area of six thousand kilometres. Swans can be sighted (including the Australian black variety) in fourteen lakes in Moscow, as well as wild geese and ducks, not to mention sparrows and doves, which constantly fly over the city. Moscow locals are crazy about ice cream: they consume over a hundred and seventy thousand tonnes a day, both in summer and in winter...’

‘Pipe down, Zoran. I’ll be the one going crazy if you don’t shut up,’ said Martina, as she tried to cover her ears with her stylish (but thin) woollen hat, which she bought in Trieste before the embargo, and which might have been adequate for the Italian climate, but was inadequate protection against the cold of a Moscow winter.

'I was just trying to enlighten you,' Zoran retorted. 'To dispel your ignorance as foreigners, with the abundant and invaluable information contained in my guide to Moscow. Did you know, for example, that Moscow has eight thousand amateur art and theatre groups, including a thousand choirs, two thousand orchestras and six hundred dance companies...?'

He was unable to finish his sentence because Martina pounced on him and wrenched the guidebook out of his hands.

'That's enough,' she said. 'I'm going to throw this fucking book of Soviet propaganda in the next bin I find. Can you see any bins around here?' she asked Ana, who was waiting in line next to her, with her hat pulled right down to her neck and her nose frozen. She hopped from one foot to the other in an attempt to get her blood flow going again. Ana, gazing up at the trail of a plane cutting across the mauve sky, did not answer.

'There isn't a single bin in the whole of the Red Square, it's unbelievable,' huffed Martina, answering her own question. 'What are we doing here? We've been waiting half an hour to see a mummy! Outside, in this cold! Whose bright idea was it to bring us here? Whose idea was it to visit Lenin's Mausoleum?'

'I think it was yours, Martina,' Zoran teased. 'We just followed you. I figured you'd be interested in examining, with your very own eyes, the most famous mummy in the world – sorry Tutankhamun – and studying the astonishing embalming techniques used to preserve it. I'm telling you, the radical secret of an elixir made of glycerine and potassium acetate, water and chlorine quinine, which as an imminent specialist in aesthetic medicine, you can definitely use on your future patients when they come and ask to be mummified...'

Once again, his sentence was cut short because Martina started whacking him with the guidebook. With a terrified expression, Zoran pretended to defend himself against, failing his arms around. They were a real comedy duo, Martina and Zoran: she, slender and sophisticated, with the cosmopolitan look of someone from Paris or Rome (although this pure speculation on Ana's part, as she had been to Paris or Rome), while he was oafish and big as a bear, with a cultivated slovenliness, with his long mop of hair, a beer belly, and unshaven face. They never failed to amuse. Whenever they were together there was an instant spark, and without any apparent effort the back-and-forth would begin: the game of jokes and heckling, the retorts and comebacks. They made Ana laugh. When Martina grew tired of running rings around the plump Zoran, Petar admitted, in his low, earnest voice:

'It's my fault we're here, Martina. Here, I offer you my cheek; hit me with the book.' And he graciously leaned his head down towards his friend, who pretended to hit him on the right cheek with the edge of the book, a movement so gentle that it was more like a caress.

'My interest is purely anthropological,' Petar started to explain, fixing his large, dark eyes on Martina with feigned gravity. 'I wanted to seize this opportunity to see close up a historical figure, a visionary, one of those rare individuals whose ideas change the lives of others...'

'Yeah, he changed their lives radically, alright: he killed them,' interrupted Marko. 'Vladimir Ilich Lenin left us a long time ago to be reunited in communist heaven with his comrades Stalin, Trotsky and Marx. What's in there is nothing more than a carcass pumped full of formaldehyde,' he added, gesturing scornfully to the monumental ziggurat in red granite and porphyry which, flanked by two guards, rose up before them in the dim twilight. It was set against the background of the clay-coloured wall of the Kremlin and the pointed towers of the Senate and Saint Nicholas, which, from their imposing height, seemed like the guards keeping watch over Lenin's Mausoleum, the entrance to which they had been shivering outside for half an hour. Ana and Nadica exchanged sly smiles that seemed to say: Marko's getting jealous, he admires and unconditionally loves his buddy Petar, but he gets incredibly irritated when Petar flirts with Martina. In secret, (a very public, poorly kept secret), Martina swooned over Petar, the enigmatic intellectual, the dashing gent who looked like a Robert Redford (but darker skinned); Marko, on the other hand, was consumed by his longstanding, unwavering feelings for Martina; and Petar... Nobody know who the melancholic thinker was attracted to, it all was part of his air of mystery.

'Do we all agree that none of us, apart from Petar, are interested in seeing the remains of the great man?' Marko asked. 'Well then, let's go somewhere warm, I need a drink to thaw me out. The philosopher can stay in the queue with the other comrades.' Martina glanced at Petar, worried that he would do as Marko suggested, but he turned and gave everyone one of his beaming smiles like an American actor. He slung an arm good-naturedly around this friend's shoulders, patted him on the back warmly and declared, 'I'll come back and see the tomb of saint Vladimir another day. Right now I fancy a drink. Or two.'

They left the Red Square.

That was the moment when the trip went sour. And it was a shame, because up until then she had really enjoyed it. Ana didn't mind the cold that so infuriated Martina; in Belgrade it was also cold, and the streets were frozen, although the ice in Moscow was dirty, murky-coloured, the smell of cheap gasoline permeated everything and clung to clothes, to skin. She had been surprised to see such an abundance of beggars and drunks, many of them smooth-faced young men dressed as sailors; the hundreds of soldiers with disabilities, veterans of the war in Afghanistan, who asked for charity, shaking an empty sleeve or a crutch; the proliferation of flea markets and street stalls on every corner, at the metro stations and exits. Georgian,

Armenian or Azerbaijani vendors laid out their merchandise on newspaper or upturned wooden boxes: Levi's trousers or Adidas trainers (fakes), fruit (oranges, pears, apples... even avocados and mangos!), books without covers, Soviet-manufactured underpants and knickers, hats, scarves... It looked bad: how could the Russian authorities permit such a brazen display of chaos, of poverty? That was her first impression, until she remembered with a sudden pang of shame, or guilt, that the streets of Belgrade looked even worse; they didn't smell of cheap gasoline, because there was none (gasoline, expensive, scarce and – as Marko put it – psychedelic, because it often took on strange green, burgundy or lilac hues, was sold in plastic jerry cans out of bootleggers' cars) and there were beggars in Belgrade too now, and mutilated soldiers like those in Moscow. In a bizarre paradox, the shared misery, far from making her feel sad, made her proud; it confirmed that the Russians and the Serbians were brothers. They had been so well received by people in Moscow! When they realised their nationality, they showed them kindness, solidarity, they made the three-finger salute with their hand, called them Serbian heroes, enslaved brothers...

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Hearing a murmur of voices in the corridor, she thought her friends might be coming back; but whoever the women were, they walked on by, speaking in Russian. She got up from Martina's bed, where she had stretched out (it was the most comfortable; her friend had a special knack of ensuring such privileges), straightened out the duvet and put the pillow back in its place. She expected her friends to return at any moment, as it was already 8 pm. They had been out visiting monasteries for almost twelve hours. She decided not to tell them she had also been out; she didn't want to explain anything to them, or tell them about Sasha, or the horrible encounter with that Canadian journalist and his Turkish friend. I've spent all day in the room, she would tell them, this headache put me in a bad mood. And it was true, she felt the stabbing in her temples again, the excruciating pressure on her skull. When she'd arrived back at the hotel, the headache was waiting for her. She rummaged around in her backpack, looking for the painkiller that Nadica had given her (she was an expert in migraines) and came across Sasha's thick, bulky scarf. She had forgotten to give it back to him. She pulled it out, angrily and hurled it on the floor, where it lay coiled up on the beige carpet like a woollen snake. An irrational, stupid urge made her stamp on it. She hated that scarf, and its owner, and the Muslim woman from Sarajevo who flaunted her scars like they were medals, and the Canadian journalist who had bad-mouthed her father, insulted him... And she suddenly realised how reckless it had been

of her to agree to visit Sasha's house. She could see the headlines in the Canadian newspaper: 'My Encounter with the Butcher of Bosnia's Daughter' or 'An afternoon with Ana Mladić', a report by Ron McLaughlin. Other Western media outlets would echo the story, the news would reach her father... He would never forgive a betrayal like that, his socialising with a reporter from the enemy press. How would she explain to him that it was a set-up? He would blame her: I told you not to go to Moscow, I warned you. She had a sudden inkling and searched in her backpack again: her passport wasn't in there. She had left it in Sasha's apartment.

She was in such a hurry that she did not wait for the lift and instead hurtled down the stairs. She would take a taxi; she remembered the name of the street, Pretischenka, and that the building where Sasha lived was near the corner and had an arch in the middle of the façade; she would recognise it when she saw it. She hoped that he hadn't gone out; it was possible that the obnoxious Canadian reporter might open the door to her... She had to stop and catch her breath in the hallway of the second floor, where there was a Ukrainian bar. She heard a familiar guffaw. Peering through the glass panel into the bar, she saw Martina, – the source of the noise – as well as the rest of her fellow students. They were sitting at a rectangular table facing a window. She was glad to see them. She'd tell them about her predicament, and most likely, the gentlemanly Zoran would go with her to Sasha's house, so if he or his Canadian friend tried any funny business, he'd be able to get them to give her passport back. She went into the bar, which was decorated in an imitation Art Deco style, with elegant leather sofas and semi-circular windows draped with heavy curtains. The place was empty apart from her friends, who were being so rowdy that they didn't even notice her arrive. They could not see her either, as they had their backs to her.

'I'm telling you, I can't stand her,' said Petar. 'If I'd known she was coming to Moscow, I'd have stayed in Belgrade.'

'She wasn't going to come, that's why I didn't say anything to you...' replied Martina apologetically. 'She decided at the last minute, her dad wasn't going to let her.'

'Yesterday, in fucking McDonalds, you all left me there on my own talking to her. You lot don't have the balls to say what you think of her father, or his fucking war, because you're scared of Ratko Mladić...

'And you aren't, Petar?' replied Zoran, sarcastically. 'You were pretty careful to talk about her father in McDonald's, you've never said anything about it to her. You'd have to be mad not to be afraid of general Mladić, he's a real son of a bitch. But that's not why I didn't say anything to her. It's not Ana's fault her father's a murderer, she's great, a real nationalist, but a nice girl...'

‘A nice girl...?’ A cynical fucking Chetnik, that’s what Ana Mladić is, and she’s absolutely delighted and super proud of her father for bumping off tens of thousands of Muslims... and Serbians too, because there are tonnes of Serbians living in Sarajevo and general Mladić’s grenades and shells aren’t ethnically programmed yet to distinguish between them: he kills them all.’

‘That’s not true!’ Nadica interrupted indignantly. ‘Ana has no idea, that’s what’s going on, I didn’t know before either... She thinks her father’s a hero and everything he says is dogma to her. Try and understand it, he’s her father, she loves him...’

‘He’s her father, she loves him.’ Petar imitated Nadica’s little high-pitched voice. ‘If my father was a fucking murderer for real, I would kill him myself. For every life Doctor Anna Mladić saves, her father will have left a thousand dead bodies. You’re defending her because she’s your friend, but there’s nothing innocent about her. Of courses she knows, it’s impossible not to know everything when you’re the daughter of Ratko Mladić. She’s been to Bosnia to visit her father, she’s been at the front, cheering on the Serbian soldiers to kill loads of Muslims... If I were you, I wouldn’t be such good friends with her, Nadica. She and her father bumped off Dragan Stojković.’

‘That’s what Dragan’s brother Igor says, but I don’t believe it,’ said Marko, defending her. ‘Ana isn’t capable of killing anyone; that was her father’s thing.’

‘Didn’t Dragan voluntarily go to Bosnia?’

‘Voluntarily? Where did you get that idea from, Martina? What world do you live in? There’s no fucking way Dragan wanted to go and shoot at Sarajevo; he was perfectly happy living in Niš with his new girlfriend. That must’ve been what pissed Ana off, and she got her revenge alright: she and her daddy-o sent him to the Bosnian front to get killed.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Danilo Papo told me, he said that...’

The noise of the hotel’s PA system drowned Petar out. ‘Could Miss Ana Mladić please make her way to reception,’ demanded a woman’s voice over the loudspeaker, in Russian and in English. She did not hang around to hear more. She left the bar and took the stairs at a run. The thing she had feared most had happened; her father was dead, and now some brash Russian receptionist was going to inform her. She burst into the reception hall in such a frenzy that she nearly collided with a man who was heading for the exit. She was startled to see it was Sasha, who seemed even more flustered than her. He told her that he’d just left her passport, which she’d left at his house, in reception, hence the announcement over the loudspeaker. He didn’t want to hold her up or bother her, and he was in a hurry, he was just leaving. Ana thanked him

for coming all the way to her hotel to return the document. Without him she wouldn't have been able to go back to Serbia. The Russian didn't meet her eye: these words of thanks, this encounter which he no doubt would have liked to avoid, made him uncomfortable. But before she let him go, she asked him for one final favour, and he agreed. His friend Ron should never know the real identity of the young Andorran woman who he had spent the afternoon with.

'Do not worry,' he told her in English. *'I won't tell anybody. They're waiting for me, got to be going'* He didn't say goodbye with a kiss or handshake, but when he had taken a few steps, he turned round. Holding his arms out with his palms facing up, as if in apology, he mumbled, *'I'm sorry...I'm very sorry it had to end like this.'*

'I'm not sorry,' she said, and perhaps because her voice was trembling and she was on the verge of tears, she added for emphasis, *'I'm not sorry at all. I'm very proud of who I am. My father is a hero.'*