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With Their Backs to the World

Asne Seierstad

Hunchbacks for Milosevic

'The early bird catches the worm.'

Serbian proverb

Each morning around six o'clock a whistle sounds between the houses of Borisav Vojnovic and Nikola Randelovic. This means that the coffee is ready. Strong Turkish coffee with three spoonfuls of sugar, and a quick shot of rakija. Already the workday is well under way in the village of Stanjinac, in the mountains of southern Serbia. Borisav has been up since five, feeding his two cows, the sheep, his lamb, the chickens and the rooster. By now he's already had a chat with Suba and Sredana as he fed them, fetched their water and carried out the droppings that are still steaming in the frosty morning air. He's taken care of Bonka the sheep and played with her lamb, which has no name because it will be butchered in June.

'The animals come first,' he says. So it's only after an hour's caring for them that it's finally time for coffee and rakija – one day at Borisav's, the next at Nikola's. Borisav has marked his days on his calendar. This morning it is Nikola who makes his way across the courtyard on two wooden canes. He struggles up the stairs to Borisav's house. The two men greet each other and sit down. The rakija is gone in one gulp. 'Nosegulp' is what Borisav calls it; having the aroma of the liquor burn through your nostrils is as important a part of it as to feel the effect in the rest of your body.

There's a pleasant exhalation following the strong drink – a travarita, from trava, Serbian for 'herbs'. Borisav has made it himself, from plums, and seasoned it with kantarion, gentian, yarrow and sage. Over coffee the men talk of the corn to be sown and the potatoes to be planted. And of course of the animals. At the beginning of May Suba will calve, and her calf has already been named Kompjuter, because that's what Borisav will buy for his grandson with the money he gets when he sells it. The old men talk of sowing times, and even if this April morning seems to promise

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lovely, sunny weather, Borisav recalls the freezing night of 14 May 1952, when the entire village lost its crop. 'Never let an early spring fool you,' he says, and asks me to call him Deda Bora – Grandpa Bora. 'Everyone your age does,' he explains.

His living room is furnished with the bare necessities: a table, a few chairs, a cabinet, a chest and a sofa. On the walls there's a calendar and a framed picture of Slobodan Milosevic. The picture is from the late 1980s and a bit faded – Milosevic looks young and energetic. Southern Serbia is Milosevic's stronghold and the majority of his supporters are, like Deda Bora and Nikola, well beyond the age of retirement. 'Milosevic is the best president for Serbia. He protects and defends us against those who want to sell us out,' says Deda Bora, referring to the political opposition in Serbia.

Like most Serbs, Deda Bora has seen his standard of living fall dramatically over the past ten years, the decade that Milosevic has been in power. Incomes are a fraction of what they were and savings vanished during the hyperinflation of 1993. Deda Bora knows the answer: 'You can't get rich and fight a war at the same time.'

'Perhaps Milosevic shouldn't have started all these wars?' I suggest.

The old man is crestfallen. 'Serbia never started any wars. We've been attacked; first by the Slovenes, then by the Croats, then by the Muslims – of course we had to defend ourselves,' he explains. 'But we will rise again, just like we rose up after the Second World War. Since when didn't the Serbs rise up when they've been down?'

Nikola nods. 'Nobody can beat us.'

Still, Deda Bora's greatest hero remains Tito. Not even Milosevic measures up here. 'Under Tito nobody dared touch us, nobody interfered in our affairs and we worked with other nations on an equal footing. We never lived so well, never before and never since,' he says and admits that Milosevic does have one flaw. 'Tito was a diplomat; Milosevic is not.'

Like any good Titoist, Deda Bora is an atheist. This makes the picture on the bedroom wall a bit of a mystery – it's Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper, with Jesus and the disciples.

'Jesus?' exclaims Deda Bora. 'That's not Jesus, that's Tsar Lazar, who perished on the field of Kosovo in 1389. The painting depicts the meal before the battle. That guy to the left, in yellow? That is Vuk Brankovic, who betrayed Tsar Lazar to the Turks. And that one who whispers in Lazar's ear, that's Milos Obilic. He said, "You have a traitor at your left knee." But Lazar didn't listen to him and lost the battle.'

There is no room for doubt in Deda Bora's account, despite the fact that this is indeed a reproduction of Leonardo's The Last Supper. But throughout this countryside devoted to Tito, the myth of Tsar Lazar's sacrifice replaced Jesus Christ. The Last Supper became the secret meal. Judas became Vuk Brankovic. The disciples became Serbian soldiers.

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In the bedroom another picture captures my attention. A half-naked woman lounges on a chaise longue in a baroque hall. Behind her the curtains flutter in a large window overlooking a beach with palm trees. Fat, naked babies hover around the woman. 'Verica put that one up. She was really fond of kids,' says Deda Bora and leaves the room. Borisav and Verica married when they were seventeen; their parents had proposed this when they were kids. And that's how it came to be, even if Verica's parents never lived to see it. They were killed by Bulgarian fascists when Verica was twelve. She watched them being shot in their own courtyard in 1942, accused of helping the Partisans. 'There was something special about Verica. I don't know what it was, but she was different from all the other girls. I just knew that it'd be us.'

Deda Bora sinks down by the kitchen table.

'We lost the first four ones,' he says, and the knuckles of his fists turn white. 'The doctors couldn't tell us why they never lived to see a month.' Verica was sure that she was cursed, and tried every cure there was. When her fifth child was born, on a cold day in December 1956, she wrapped it up, put the infant out on the road and hid behind some bushes. After a while a man came upon the child, picked it up and took it home with him. Verica followed him but didn't show herself until he had carried her son into his house. It was said that a curse like that would be broken when someone else brought the baby home. The boy grew up and was given the name Najden, which means 'found'. He is their only child, and today this grown man of more than a hundred kilos is a colonel in the Yugoslav army. 'It wasn't until it was clear that he would survive and grow up that we started living again,' says Deda Bora. 'By then we'd lived through seven years of babies dying.'

Verica went to her grave believing that the man on the road saved her son's life. Deda Bora is not so sure. 'I only believe in the things I can see,' he says. 'That's why I don't believe in God either.'

It's been three years since Verica died. She was in pain for a long time but never complained. By the time she got herself to a doctor it was too late. As Borisav talks about her tears form in his eyes. 'If it wasn't for the animals I'd be really lonely. I talk to them every day, and they talk back. Besides, I've got my neighbours, even if they keep disappearing on me – either they die or they go to some flat in the city. But having neighbours doesn't really help; I'm alone in my house, that's what's so hard. I don't like to eat by myself and I never drink coffee alone. Coffee alone isn't coffee.'

Borisav Vojnovic is (in 2000) in his seventieth year. His whole life he has lived in this village, Stanjinac, in the mountains near the border with Bulgaria. The village consists of three clusters of houses, a few kilometres apart, totalling a little more than a hundred small farms. The scenery is idyllic, with plains and rolling hills looking out over a deep, verdant valley. Violets grow by the side of the road. The cherry trees bloom and the apricot trees have large, pink buds. But this vision of paradise runs only so deep. Stanjinac is dying. Most of the fields are fallow now and the vines wither as nobody cares for them. Sometimes you still see someone in a field with a horse and plough, but it's heavy work in the clay earth. Most of the people in the village are over sixty. Every morning you see these sagging, hunched backs move

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towards the fields, each with a hoe in their hands. They straighten up as best they can when they stop and greet someone. 'It's as if the earth pulls them down itself,' Deda Bora says of the hunchbacks. 'It wants us back. The youngest man in the village is around forty, and a bachelor. It's too late for him,' says Deda Bora. 'He's already like an old man.'

There is one kid in the village, the grocer's. In the 1960s there were hundreds of kids running around the courtyards and fields here. When I ask how many people live in Stanjinac, Deda Bora begins to count: 'Smilja, Violeta, Milica, Bina, myself, Branka, Tihomir, Smira – that's eight – the other Tihomir, Nadica, Perica, Bogdana, Mara, Bora, and Nikola ...'

Deda Bora is who you talk to when something needs taking care of. Today it's Tihomir's harrow that won't work. We walk a bit down to his house. Deda Bora points and tells of trees, fields and houses. 'That tree is more than five hundred years old,' he'll say. 'Whenever someone gets married, they have to visit it – they believe it's good luck.'

Once at Tihomir's, Deda Bora sits down on a stool, his glasses balanced on the tip of his nose, wrenches ready at his side. Tihomir stands and watches while Bora fiddles with the engine. Grandpa Bora is one of the sprightliest people in these parts and looks like a young lad next to his neighbour, who's around eighty. Yet even he still works his own lands, hunched back or not.

Deda Bora gets the machine to work and proceeds to turn the entire piece of land for Tihomir, since he's there already. Tihomir's wife offers coffee and corn cakes and shows off pictures from her granddaughter's wedding. Her furrowed hand proudly displays a photo of her grandchild in a shining white wedding dress. The photo is kept in a clear plastic bag so it won't get dirty or dusty as it makes its way around the table. The sparkling granddaughter poses with her grandparents. They come up to her shoulders: the grandmother in a headscarf and best shoes, her grandfather in his suit. While the bride flirts with the camera, Baba and Deda – Grandma and Grandpa – simply stare into the lens, deadly serious. That their granddaughter, or any of Bina's and Tihomir's other grandchildren, would ever take over the farm is out of the question. 'There is no future for this village,' says Deda Bora. 'In twenty years there'll be nobody left.'

As we stroll home from Tihomir and Bina's, we pass several abandoned houses. We stop to watch a man who ploughs a field below the road. Both man and horse have to stop constantly, and sweat pours off their bodies. Deda Bora sighs and walks on. He was the second man in the village to buy a tractor, in 1980. 'That was one of the greatest days of my life,' he notes.

At two o'clock it's lunchtime. Pickled bell peppers, home-made cheese, beans and bread. Bora complains of his lack of appetite. 'You should have seen me back when Verica was alive – I was big and strong. Now I'm just fading away. I can't eat meat any more; I've lost too many teeth.'

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The food tastes of fresh air and sunshine. Deda Bora is famous for his cheese, which he sells in the village. 'You take ten litres of milk, add a tablespoon of salt for each litre, and let it boil for six minutes,' he explains, finding the clock he uses to measure the time. To show me how long six minutes is, he sets the clock. 'Then you add two tablespoons of eighty-proof vinegar and boil it for another six minutes. Then you pour it all into a cloth and put it under a large, flat stone for pressure. Then you just wait until it's done. Takes about a day and a night. You could do this yourself, when you get back to Norway,' he suggests.

After lunch it's time to feed the animals again. I offer to carry the heavy buckets of water, but the farmer refuses any assistance. 'Anyone who's gone to school doesn't have to work around here,' he says, as if this rule ought to be known far and wide. So I sink into the hay in the barn and let the April sun warm me while I listen to Bora talk to his animals downstairs.

When he was eight Borisav went to work as a shepherd. He's been a farmer, tailor, salesman, soldier, musician, Tito-propagandist and miner. As a newlywed seventeen-year-old he spent three years in the military, then worked a few years for Agitprop, the People's Front's department for agitation and propaganda under Tito. 'Anything that had to be done had to be done through Agitprop. I travelled around the countryside and taught; about Tito and his politics, and about how people could get more out of their fields. The last part was the most important because you didn't need to agitate much for Tito; everybody supported him anyway.' After his years with Agitprop Bora was appointed the local tax collector. He refused the job – how could he possibly collect tax from his neighbours? So he had to work in a mine instead. It took him a few years to dig himself out from the mine; he then started a travelling orchestra. Deda Bora played the clarinet at weddings, funerals and christenings. The money was good, but it was a hard life. 'Serbian parties tend to end in fights towards the morning. More than a few times the band had to run for cover to avoid getting involved,' he recalls. Deda Bora still has the scar on his leg from getting a wine bottle broken on it. 'Drunk Serbs are terrible people,' he says. But it wasn't the bottle throwing that turned him off the travelling roadshow. 'I started to lose my teeth about thirty years ago. You can't play the clarinet without teeth.'

After his stint as a musician Deda Bora set himself up as a tailor, all the while farming full time. He would sew until eleven o'clock at night, before it was time to go out and plough the fields.

The old sewing machine is still in the bedroom, and there are pieces of cloth, scissors and measuring tape on the table. Deda Bora was a tailor for twenty-five years, specialising in hats, aprons and skirts. His pleated skirts were renowned in the villages around here. 'I was the first one to add embroidery to everyday aprons. A lot of women in southern Serbia are still wearing my aprons and skirts,' he says proudly. At weekends he and Verica would travel around to various markets to sell his clothing. 'That's the best work I ever had in my life. There isn't a village in southern Serbia that I haven't been to, as a soldier, agitator, musician or salesman. When I was with the People's Front I walked everywhere. When I became a tailor I could afford a car.'

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Deda Bora was invited to join the Yugoslav Communist Party, which was a great honour out in the countryside. 'But I gave up on communism when everyone else did,' he says. 'When Tito died.'

He inherited his faith in Tito from his parents, who supported the Partisan resistance during the Second World War. Borisav was just a little boy when the war started. 'The Germans behaved well here, they were polite and decent. Things got a lot worse when the Bulgarian fascists occupied us. They are like us; they killed and raped and destroyed everything they came across,' he explains. During the war all schooling was conducted in Bulgarian and Deda Bora still shudders when he remembers how all the kids were given Bulgarian names. 'Boris Georgijev Vojnov, they called me. But for me, my name was still Borisav Vojnovic.'

Deda Bora remembers well how the Partisans and the Chetniks demanded lodging in the village. You had to open your door, no matter who you supported. Once, more than forty Partisan fighters slept in their tiny house. 'The Partisans only took food from people who had enough. We didn't have anything but polenta and grease to offer them. They only ate once they saw that we kids had got some, too. The Chetniks, on the other hand, helped themselves to anything in our cellar.'

The Partisans took part in the resistance to the Nazi occupation, under the command of Tito, and served as the army of the Communist Party, which in turn won the Yugoslav civil war. The Chetniks were a monarchist resistance movement, led by Colonel Draza Mihailovic. In the beginning they were allied with the Partisans, but later fought against them, occasionally even with Italian and German forces.

After the midday feeding of the animals it's time for coffee at a neighbour's house. It seems half the village is here. The theme today is the huge demonstration planned by Serbia's political opposition. 'They've been paid by the Americans to set it up, and if they gather a lot of people they get even more money,' explains Deda Bora. 'The Americans have bought a bunch of traitors who are willing to sell their own country. But we have a crafty intelligence agency, and they've uncovered their plans.'

'How do you know this?' I ask.

'They said so on TV. Luckily they've told us, so we all know what's going on.'

Deda Bora gets all his information from the state-controlled media. In this version Milosevic is the great saviour and anyone who is against him is a traitor. The USA is the main enemy. On TV there are repeated showings of footage of American KFOR (Kosovo Force) troops in Kosovo trying to calm down those whom the Serbs refer to as Albanian terrorists.

'The Americans have to get out of Serbia – look what they've done to Kosovo. They're stirring up the Albanians to make trouble. There are hardly any Serbs left in Kosovo, even if Kosovo is ours,' complains Deda Bora.

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'They're really all Serbs,' says a neighbour. 'But some of them are Serbs that had to convert to Islam to avoid getting killed by the Turks.'

'Why is Kosovo so important?' I ask.

'Because it's Serbian. If the KFOR leave, the Serbs will return,' says Deda Bora, and explains that the American goal is to occupy all of Serbia. 'They want our wealth. But the Americans will never reach Belgrade. Just like Hitler was never able to take Moscow,' he says, and looks at the clock on the wall. It's time for the evening shift in the barn.

Once the work is done we sit down to watch a documentary on TV. It's called America and Kosovo and explores the American conspiracy against Serbia. Deda Bora pays close attention and learns even more about the American scheme to conquer his country.

'The main problem now is that there are so many terrorists here,' Deda Bora sighs once the programme is over.

On my last day in Stanjinac we walk to the cemetery. Deda Bora lights a candle on Verica's grave. He stands there for a long time, looking at her headstone. Two serious faces look back at him. The names and images of both him and Verica have been carved into the stone, which reads: 'Verica Vojnovic 1930–1997' and 'Borisav Vojnovic 1931–'.

'She lies here and waits for me,' says the widower.

Next to the headstone stands a small cross of stone without any names. This is where their lost children lie.

'Some people say that hardship and loss make you stronger. That's not true – losing a child can't make you stronger, it only makes you weak. The mourning of the four children that never lived is something that is always with me. Whenever I visit the cemetery I can't do anything afterwards. I am all sorrow.'

But the animals need him. Deda Bora climbs the steep hills back to his house, a couple of kilometres from the cemetery. Halfway there we part. He is heading back for the midday feeding; I am going to Belgrade. Deda Bora presents me with an apron, brown with yellow and green flowers and along the bottom a string of black lace.

'You must give my regards to your parents. Take good care of them,' is the last thing he tells me before he continues to struggle up the steep hills.

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It's almost Christmas before I see Deda Bora again. Serbia has lived through a presidential election and a revolution, Milosevic has fallen from power and in a few days, on 23 December 2000, parliamentary elections will be held. The Democratic opposition is expected to win a large majority. I'm excited to see Deda Bora again, and curious to hear his thoughts on everything that has happened over the last few months. Has he, like so many others, turned his back on Milosevic, now that he has fallen from power?

Danijela, Bora's grandniece, gives me a ride from Belgrade. We drive along the curvy dirt road, over the hillside, past the church, continuing uphill. We turn left by the grocer's and drive by fields and abandoned farms. There's the sister's house, there's Nikola's – and then – here, here's Deda Bora's house.

He stands there in his courtyard in the bleak December sun and stirs, steady and immovable, a large iron cauldron. As handsome as he was last spring – icy blue eyes, hair as white as snow and a gaze that won't let go of you. He kisses me three times on the cheeks, as is the custom.

'How are your parents?' is the first thing he wants to know. 'And how is your book going?'

I answer as Deda Bora calmly stirs the huge cauldron, which is filled with boiling bacon.

'I butchered my pig yesterday,' he explains. 'Came to 130 kilos; now I'll be making sausages, smoked hams and boiled cvarak.'

The bubbling grease in front of us will become cvarak. The bacon will be cut into cubes, then boiled first in water, later in its own grease. After four hours it's browned, the excess grease is pressed out of it and it's put out to dry and turn crispy. 'A delicacy,' grins Deda Bora. The grease that's left over, he uses for cooking.

Deda Bora adds more firewood, and allows himself a break in the stirring. Najden, who has come home to help his father with the butchering, takes over. Deda Bora invites me to join him for home-made plum brandy and Turkish coffee.

I sneak a look into the living room to see if the picture is still there. It is.

Deda Bora carves a few slices of his famous cheese and serves us. 'All's well with both Suba and Sredana, and Bonka the sheep,' he tells us. 'And we've got really nice plums this year. But other than that, it's been a miserable autumn – the sun burned off half our crops.'

To Deda Bora, the autumn of 2000 has been miserable in more ways than that.

'A coup,' he states. 'Paid for by the Americans.'

He's not alone in the village in believing this. In Stanjinac, Milosevic got by far the most votes in September's presidential elections. The final count showed that, out of

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150 votes cast, Milosevic received 128. Twenty went to the candidate from Vojislav Seselj's Nationalist Party, while the Democratic candidate, Vojislav Kostunica, got all of two votes. Suffice it to say, the village was not at all in step with the rest of the country.

'In a while even more people will support the current government. In Serbia a lot of people always vote for the sitting president, just to be on the safe side,' Deda Bora explains. 'But the majority of us will still support Milosevic and his Socialist Party.

'And the picture I'll never take down,' he says, and points up at the young and energetic Slobodan Milosevic on the wall. 'He steered us through the toughest years Serbia has lived through since the occupation.'

Deda Bora has nothing but disgust for those in the Socialist Party who now want to replace Milosevic as the head of the party. 'They were behind him when he was in power and stab him in the back now that he's down.'

But the old Titoist will now admit to more of Milosevic's flaws. 'He was too tough and refused to listen to anyone else. He should have been more flexible. His biggest mistake was removing himself from the people. He stopped travelling around and only made a few speeches from his palace. He wasn't among us. That was his fatal mistake.'

Deda Bora gets angry when I bring up the Hague Tribunal and the accusations of war crimes. 'All the Serbs that have been arrested for war crimes are innocent. They only did their duty, and defended us when we were attacked by Croats and Muslims. But the Americans are trying to get us. They want to have their bases here. And what the Americans want they usually get, unless someone fights back. I hope the new President understands this, but maybe he's already been bought by the Americans. I can't say for sure.'

There's a lot Grandpa Bora can't say for sure any more. The news broadcasts on TV no longer help prop up his opinions. He used to devour anything that was said on the state-controlled channel, but now he's not so sure about Radio-televizija Srbije. It doesn't quite fit with his view of the world.

'Maybe I shouldn't be saying this out loud,' says Deda Bora. 'But Serbia is not ready for democracy. I don't think it's good for us. Look at the prices – they've quadrupled since the coup, and my pension has gone up by just ten per cent. Serbia needs a new Tito,' he reckons. 'A firm hand. Only then will we get any order in this country. We can't manage ourselves. We're just not ready for it.'

Outside it's growing dark. Time to take care of the animals. We go to fetch water from the stone well that Deda Bora's father dug during the Second World War. 'This is the best water there is,' he says, manoeuvring the heavy bucket up from the well. 'Only the best is good enough for my animals. Suba and Sredana's milk is so fat my daughter-in-law has to cut it with water,' he brags, as he hauls up bucket after bucket of the best water in the world. Then we go down to the animals. Deda Bora takes his time, chats with the cows, pats them, gives them water and hay.

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The courtyard is lit by the moon and a modest lamp. We can barely make out his son and daughter-in-law, draining the running fat off the bacon. They put the bacon between two wooden planks and salt it. We walk down to sample the first few bites. It tastes wonderful and melts on your tongue like a crispy Christmas rib.

Deda Bora says it needs more salt.

'You came here to get to know us,' he says. 'But to get to know a Serb you have to eat three hundred kilos of salt with him. Did you know that? It takes some time, eating three hundred kilos of salt.'

He fixes me with his eyes.

'Takes a lot of time,' he says.

Three winters go by, and another spring gets under way. Since I left Deda Bora by the greasy cauldron I've shared barely a gram of salt with a Serb. Nor have I spent much time pondering the mysteries of Homo balcanicus. I closed this door when I left here, a few days after the arrest of Milosevic, in April 2001, and didn't open it again until three years had passed, and it was April again. In the meantime other fates and other people's suffering had captured my attention. So the journey back to Deda Bora's is like travelling back in time; I brush the rust off the door, open it slowly; it squeaks as I step inside.

As a travelling companion I have brought Drago, a friend from my last visit. We're hurtling along at lethal speed on the road from Belgrade to Nis, until we turn off and head south-east. The road keeps getting smaller. It undulates over soft indentations and deep potholes. Eventually the white line in the middle of the road disappears, until all we're on is a one-lane country road again. The landscape is brown, the fields have not yet begun to sprout, but the cherry trees already have a soft, white veil. We pass picturesque villages, where the houses lean against one another in small groups and faded curtains wave from the windows. If you look a little closer you realise that the houses are dilapidated, that the fences have not been mended for generations. Some houses stand alone, sneaking a glance over at the other groups. Brown, poor, abandoned.

'They look angry,' says Drago.

'Who?'

'The houses.'

They do seem bitter.

'Look at them – they stand there with their windows boarded up, hating each other,' Drago goes on. 'And then people ask why there are wars ...'

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