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FORTUNE'S BRIDE

BY JOZEFINA CUCURA

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By the time she reached her late thirties, Mira had consulted every fortuneteller in the municipality of Jajce, paid countless fees to gypsy fortunetellers and sought answers in beans, coffee residue, and from Muslim *hodjas* on the subject of her future marriage. But the only visible outcome of this effort were the substantial sums missing from her monthly salary and a series of confusing, often hope-inducing and ultimately disappointing clues regarding a future husband or a marriage date. She was still single in 1992.

Her younger sister Biljana had married about a decade ago. Most of her friends had also settled into marriage and government subsidized apartments. Of the group of about half dozen girlfriends that used to make a stir whenever they entered through the doors of a nightclub, Mira was the only one who remained alone. But just one look at the aging bachelors who hung out at cafés along the Josip Broz Tito square and whistled after her proved how bleak her prospects were. Most of the men that were still an option for a woman her age were bald and incorrigible bachelors, with bad reputations and lovers in each surrounding municipality.

In her early twenties, Mira did not worry about settling down. "Just give me a pack of cigarettes, and I'm good to go," she used to say, or "I'd rather sit here alone and read a magazine than wash some man's dirty underwear." Her mother, Rosa Stanisic, would cross herself three times. "God forbid, Mira. Don't put a curse on yourself."

"Who are you to tell me this? You've been picking up after Dad like a slave all these years. I'm not going to end up like you."

"You'll be happy to end up with anyone at all. Mark my words," Rosa would say, cursing under her breath.

Mira liked to spend hours in front of the magnifying glass examining pores on her face and deciding what angle made her nose, which was long and freckled, stand out the least. She would turn her face sideways and pout her lips. "Really, that's funny," she would practice a potential conversation with the latest crush. "Why don't you get back to me when you have something serious to tell me," she would say into the mirror. This put her in the mood for going out. She would take a hot shower and apply red nail polish while smoking a cigarette. She made her way to the town's hottest bars with her head held high.

Mira met her first serious love at her high school graduation party at Hotel Turist. She considered the coincidence of meeting him on one of the most important nights in her life as a sign from Fate. Zoran Peskić was standing in a corner of the dance floor with a cigarette in hand when she first noticed him. Mira was hoping he'd look her way and ask her for a dance. But Zoran, like most Yugoslav men, preferred to stand immobile and stern at the fringes of the dance floor.

"Who's that guy over there? The one with long hair and the green jacket," Mira shouted in her friend's ear.

"The one by the loudspeakers? It's Zoran Peskić. He went to middle school with my brother."

He did not seem to notice her until the end of the night, when he appeared in front of her at the exit of Hotel Turist. "Nice dress," he said. She smiled and opened her mouth to respond. But he pushed his way past her and walked out. The following day she asked her friends about him. "He lives by the old hospital," said Marija. "He's always at Café Milano, talking to women at the bar. I hear he's bad news. Everyone knows he goes to the park by the river with a different girl every other week."

The next evening, Mira, confident in her new red boots, stepped into Café Milano just as Zoran was turning away from the girl next to him. "Look who it is," he said and smiled at her. "Sit here next to me. Do you want a drink?"

"A vodka tonic," she said and lighted a cigarette.

He walked her home that night. They kissed in the alley by her entrance, in the unlit corner where tenants kept winter firewood. Zoran's hands moved to her breasts quickly. She fought him off. "Don't be so coy," Zoran said when she brushed him away. When Mira climbed into bed that night she tallied up her night's score. So far being out of school was just fine. She did not have a job yet but she had found a man.

But Zoran preferred to pretend like they did not know each other in public. "It's better this way," he told her. "You don't want people around town to talk, do you? You know how long gossip tongues are? And before you know it, they'll be calling you the town's whore."

It was on a Wednesday morning in early spring that Mira for the first time consulted a fortuneteller about her romantic fate. Wednesday in Jajce was market day when peasants from surrounding villages sold eggs, cheese, hens, and smoked ham. On Wednesdays the town's square was flooded with gypsies. Gypsy children with missing limbs or burnt skin begged at street corners. Gypsy men passed through town with dancing bears on the leash. And Gypsy fortunetellers stretched out their wrinkled hands to the passing women for a hand reading.

It had been a bad night for Mira. After months of pleading and threats that he would "go to a woman who wasn't a nun in disguise," Mira relented and slept with Zoran. She had planned to make him wait longer. It was, after all, going to be her first time. The night she gave in she undressed herself with resignation and lay down on his basement couch. As he hurriedly thrust inside her, she watched the cracks on his ceiling and reminded herself that this would bring them closer. Afterwards she listened to his snoring and tried to understand why everyone was making a big deal about sex. It was nothing special for her.

Mira left Zoran's apartment in the morning unsure if she had done the right thing. The wind blew the smoke from the *Elektrobosna* factory into her face and the peasants, fresh off the buses, rushed past her carrying bundles of produce to the marketplace. She was walking across the bridge when a hand grabbed her skirt. "Let me tell you what's wrong. Let me take a look at your hand," said an old gypsy. She was wearing a long skirt with red ruffles and an orange handkerchief over her head. Her gold front tooth flashed when she spoke. "I can see it in your eyes. You have a heavy burden on your mind."

"Really, you see that?"

"Yes, and I see a dark male shadow. He is a wolf in disguise. Give me 20 *dinars* and I'll tell you all

about it."

Mira quickly pulled out a handful of *dinars* and handed them over. "The wolf must be Zoran. What else do you see?"

"This wolf in disguise circles around you. Beware of him. You have enemies that say they are friends. The enemies smile at you, but they stab you behind your back. Watch out for them, too."

After Mira slept with Zoran, he became too busy to see her. She began to fear that she should have listened to her mother's advice to hold out longer. "But you can't cry over it anymore," her mother tried to console her. "What's done is done. So get up from the sofa and chop up some onions for this cabbage stew."

About three months after her first palm reading with the gypsy, Mira was passing by Café Milano in the faint hope that Zoran would be there. She looked up to the café terrace and saw him at a corner table with her friend Marija. He looked straight into Mira's eyes, smiled, and whispered something into Marija's ear. Mira suddenly understood that the fortuneteller had been right about enemies and false friends. This incident cemented fortunetelling as a crucial component of all Mira's future relationships.

Mira's view of men as brooding saviors, which was solidified by reading romance novels, changed after Zoran. Now to her men became disposable, not to be trusted. Her twenties became a blur of boyfriends, cigarettes and fortunetelling sessions, all of which she consumed in large quantities and with abandon. The arrivals of future boyfriends were foretold by old gypsy women bent over Mira's hand. "Let me tell you about this mysterious man that is just about to come into your life. He has the eyes of an eagle and the hands of a welder," the gypsy would say.

"When am I going to meet him?"

"Soon, very soon. When your curse has been lifted."

Lifting the curse required special almond oil treatments and dried grass from the mountains. Mira paid for the potions without a second thought. She put the treatments designed to ward off evil spells under her bed pillow, as instructed by the gypsies. This made her sleep better at night.

She also started spreading beans. She would take two handfuls of raw beans, make a wish, and spread the beans over a handkerchief. A grouping of three beans told her trouble was looming. Two beans in a straight line were a sign she'd meet a new man. Mira was a good storyteller, and she acquired a reputation for bean spreading in her neighborhood. Over time, girlfriends started to come over just to have their fortune read in beans.

Mira also placed faith in coffee residue. Coffee readings were easy to pursue either at home or at work, and she did them daily. She took frequent breaks at the bauxite mine site on the outskirts of town where she was a lab technician. After her morning cup of black Turkish coffee, she overturned the cup and let the residue drain over a napkin for a few minutes. She knew that coffee residue in the shape of a bird indicated an upcoming trip or that a large eye shape in the corner of the cup meant that someone desired her from afar. Whenever a new breakup was about to happen, Mira would desperately alternate between the coffee residue, beans, and fortunetellers, taking in up to 10 sessions per day. The mountain of clues and guidelines on how to act could be maddening.

Amidst the relationship whirlwinds and breakups, the three straight lines on the side of Mira's palm gave her some reassurance. According to all the gypsies that had ever read her hand, the lines were a sign that she would have three children. Mira felt comforted to know this and looked at the lines with affection. "It does not matter that I am not married yet. The lines clearly show that I will be a mother," she told herself.

The three lines also gave her the strength to defy her mother's warning that she would become an old hag that no man wants and to pursue short affairs with men she did not intend to marry. During the spring season Mira flirted with German tourists who camped by the lake in Jajce. In the

summer she vacationed on the Adriatic Coast, where she suntanned in her zebra-striped bikini during the day and strolled along the beach with her latest fling. She always returned to Jajce with a tan, trinkets for relatives, and stories of boat rides with men from Italy.

Once, during a coffee residue reading session, her sister's daughter asked how many boyfriends she'd had and Mira made a list. Some of these men were summer flings, others high school crushes, a work supervisor, and a friend's boyfriend. Mira had to confess to herself that there were some men in her past whose names she no longer remembered. To account for those men, she wrote on the list "guy from the bus," or "the singer."

"You've had so many boyfriends, aunt. What happened to them all?" the girl asked.

"They went this way or that. It doesn't matter."

It was in her thirties that panic started to set in. The anxiety became obvious during her relationship with Brko, the man with whiskers, as she and her girlfriends called him because of his long, groomed black whiskers that he stroked absentmindedly while talking. They started dating soon after she met him at Café Eureka, where he was having a beer alone in his policeman uniform. Mira always had a soft spot for men in uniforms and men with whiskers, so she was immediately attracted. He was in many ways like her first boyfriend, Zoran. Both men preferred to hide their relationship from the public and liked to call her drunk at dawn, requesting to see her right away. But she was determined to make this work. The fact that she used to occasionally run into Zoran on the street, walking hand in hand with his wife and daughter, only increased the urgency to make this relationship a success. She dropped hints to Brko with statements such as, "You must be looking to settle down, aren't you?" and "Your new house is too big for you. You need a family to bring life to these rooms."

But they parted ways before matters got more serious. It was quick and unexpected. After all, the war snuck upon them all. Brko left town in April of 1992, just days after the Bosnian leadership declared independence from Yugoslavia. "I am not sure how long I'll be gone," he said when he called her to say goodbye. Mira did not hear from him until the summer of 1993, when he returned home with the news that he had gotten married months earlier to Biljana Svetozarević, his next-door neighbor.

It was a hard blow for Mira. "Why didn't he want to marry me?" she asked herself. "Am I not good enough?" She cried on her balcony overlooking the Catholic graveyard while eating seemingly endless supplies of peanuts from the emergency packets that the Red Cross was distributing. The summer of 1993 had started off poorly. The war in Bosnia was coming into its second year, Mira was turning 40, and she was still single. Until Miloš showed up.

Miloš knocked on her neighbor's door just as Mira was turning over a coffee cup for a reading. She looked up and left the cup in mid air while Danijela greeted the visitor. "Come in, Miloš," Danijela said. He was a slim and quiet man with large brown eyes that never quite settled down. He was in the army but was on an extended break for two months. He wanted to meet with Mira soon again, he said, as she was leaving Danijela's home. She served him chicken with potatoes for their dinner date. Meat was a luxury in 1993, but Mira found a package of chicken in the freezer that her mother had been saving for a birthday celebration. Though cooking was not one of her strengths, Miloš proclaimed the dinner excellent. Afterwards, they watched a bootlegged videotape of *Top Gun*. Even though she'd been on a dry spell, she decided not to sleep with him and to let him wait and respect her first.

He continued to come to her house every night. They sat in the garden underneath the shade of the cherry tree and joked about the good old days before the war when they could vacation on the Adriatic Sea. She still made dinner, but over time stopped trying to impress him and started serving sandwiches or leftovers that her mother had sent. They read old magazines she had picked up from the neighbor's abandoned house. Being with him was comfortable. She thought she could love him.

The two months of Miloš' extended break flew by. For his last night at home, Mira made pizza with ham and Swiss cheese from her Red Cross emergency packets. After he ate his last bite, he wiped his mouth and let out a sigh. She looked up from her plate and met his eyes, which were fixed at

her. "Why don't we just get married?" he then asked slowly, letting the weight of each word sink in. "What do you think?" It was a question she had been waiting to hear for nearly a decade.

When Miloš put on his uniform and left the next morning there were no fortunetellers that Mira could consult to make sure that this was the right man for her. The gypsies had fled as soon as the first gunshots pierced the night silence of Jajce in 1992. The marketplace entrance was empty, and old gypsy fortunetellers no longer cluttered the alleys by the city center. The large ground on the outskirts of town, where the traveling gypsies used to set up their tents every spring, was abandoned.

Mira satisfied her craving for supernatural guidance about her romantic fate with beans and coffee residue. The coffee residue gave her mixed messages. In one reading she saw a black eagle that signaled improvements in life. In another she saw a bear facing away from her cup handle. This sign meant that she was about to go to an important journey. She also thought she saw in several readings a cat's claw, which was an unambiguous and unsettling sign that she had an enemy.

Still, she married Miloš in a quiet ceremony three months later, during his one-week break from army duty. Only the couple's parents, the best man and the maid of honor attended the ceremony. Mira wore a long, off-white dress that her sister had sent to her in a care packet from Germany, which she decorated with a dry, pink rose and her mother's gold brooch. When it came her turn to say "I do," she said the words with relief. She then kissed her husband.

They celebrated the wedding at her parent's apartment. Rosa served hard-to-procure war-time luxuries such as pitas with cheese and spinach and cooked cabbage rolls with meat. At the best man's toast to the new couple, Miloš downed his third *rakija* in one gulp. It occurred to Mira that this was the first time she was seeing Miloš drink alcohol. By the time dinner was over, he had drunk most of the bottle. They walked to their house underneath a full moon. Miloš sang the Yugoslav national anthem while holding on to Mira's arm to steady his wobbly legs. His drunken voice rang through the deserted streets and the bomb-shelled houses. He passed out at home on top of her.

There was no honeymoon. When Miloš packed his bags to return to his army post, Mira sent him off with the leftovers from the wedding meal. Alone again, she turned to coffee and cigarettes. She mentioned the wedding night to Danijela over their afternoon coffee. "It wasn't much of anything, really," Mira said, exhaling a puff of cigarette smoke. "I guess he had too much to drink."

"Well, it wouldn't be his first time." Danijela said. "He has a reputation in town for his drinking. Everyone knows that he always sings the national anthem when he gets drunk. Didn't you know that?"

This was news for Mira. But she just nodded. She had been feeling nauseous all morning. She ran to the bathroom and threw up for the second time that day. Her period was almost a month late. *I must be pregnant*, she thought and smiled at her image in the bathroom mirror.

Mira did not tell anyone about the pregnancy. She wanted to keep the news to herself for a while. She was daydreaming about her baby on a sofa and holding her warm, slightly protruding belly when the city emergency siren sounded. The telephone rang seconds later. It was her mother. "Get ready and come to our apartment," Rosa said. "We're all leaving together."

"What is going on?" Mira asked.

"We don't know. We've been just told to leave the city. Everyone is leaving. If you turn on the radio, you'll hear the instructions."

"I'll be right there," Mira said.

"Don't pack too much. And hurry up."

Mira hung up the phone. A wave of nausea swept over her and she bent over. She threw up on the

carpet. She wiped her mouth, stood up, and grabbed her bag.

The refugees from Jajce crossed the 70-kilometer road to Banja Luka by foot. They arrived in Banja Luka on the evening of the third day of their journey, with crazed eyes and clothes that smelled of damp earth. After days of marching through the mountains and sleeping on the moist ground underneath pine trees, Mira was worried about her baby. *I hope this isn't too much for the little one*, she thought.

The city authorities put the refugees in an abandoned high school gym on the outskirts of Banja Luka. Mira and her parents spread their blankets by the basketball court. They passed out almost instantly, huddled next to each other on the linoleum floor. A sharp cramp woke Mira up in the middle of the night. The pressure in her lower stomach was so unbearable that she thought she would pee in her pants. She bolted to the bathroom, stumbling in darkness over the outstretched bodies of former neighbors, classmates and coworkers. "Watch where you're going," an old man said when she stepped on his hand. In the bathroom, she ran inside a stall and pulled down her jeans. When she sat down, huge hard blood clots started coming out of her. It felt like her insides were spilling out. Afterwards she looked down at the pool of blood. Her baby was gone, the possible life reduced to a bloody mess. She curled down inside the stall and wept.

The streets of Banja Luka transformed almost overnight that fall. The Jajce refugees awoke one morning from their shock-induced stupor to the splendor of orange, red and brown leaves. When Mira and Rosa walked to the city hall to check on their resettlement status, the fallen leaves that cluttered the walkways crunched under their feet. All along the side of the road, from the high school gym to the city center, refugees were selling the contents of their emergency Red Cross packets on cardboard stalls. Mira and Rosa waved to their former neighbor, an internal medicine doctor selling Marlboro cigarettes by the roadside. "Times are hard. Look at him," Rosa said and crossed herself. "But this will soon be over, God willing."

Mira sighted and looked at the empty grounds by the gym, where the gypsies used to set up their tents every March. She realized that she had not read her fortune in coffee residue or beans in days. She had not even thought of it. "I wonder where they'll send us next," she said to her mother. She then clutched her empty stomach and thought of her husband as she stepped aside to let a group of soldiers march past her.

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Originally from Bosnia-Herzegovina, **Jozefina Cutura** lived as a refugee in Serbia and Germany during her country's civil war before immigrating to the United States in 1997. She works on women's rights globally for the World Bank, and has lived and worked in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific islands. Cutura's short stories have appeared in the *Apple Valley Review*, *Firstwriter Magazine*, *Insolent Rudder*, *Inscribed*, *joyfull*, *Skive*, and *Long Story Short*. She is currently working on a novel centered around a small town in Bosnia. Cutura holds a BA from Stanford University and a Master in Public Policy from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.