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AN AFFAIR

by J.A. Bernstein

Like most men who head abroad after college, at least in the early 21st Century, Jared Heine was far less interested in wealth than he was in getting laid. The two go hand in hand, though, as any well-heeled traveler must know.

He had studied Croatian at Duke, more on a whim than anything, although his mother's father was German and had evidently been stationed in the region during the Second World War (his exact role was not expounded upon in conversations). Through a friend of his adviser, Jared managed to procure a job in Zagreb with Nestlé, the Swiss conglomerate, which was looking to penetrate the Balkans. His job was to size up the potential for yogurt, of which the Croatians ate a lot.

Too much, in fact, he now realized, sipping his gin at the Space Electronic Disco. The lacquered dance floor was spotted by hot fuchsia lights and featured an actual plastic spaceship, inside of which a helmeted DJ spun. A few meaty girls lingered by it, most with crude dye jobs, bright velvet tops, and jewelry that did not respond well to the steam.

Ten years ago, Croatia had been a western's man dream. The influx of McDonald's hadn't helped, but it was really the dairy, he realized, with the BGH-injected cows. The women were heartier than any Eastern European should be. Certainly post-Tito.

Yet, one caught his eye to the left. She was talking to a man in a suit, which was actually somewhat tasteful by Croatian standards—that is, it didn't have pin stripes or tails—and what struck him about her was her hair. It was cut short in a finger wave, such that one bang pressed to her cheek. She looked like a flapper, except she was wearing tight jeans and vaquero boots of red hide.

Jared eyed her through the rim of his glass. The man she was talking to was obviously mob. He was accompanied by two stubbly-cheeked, iron-necked men, neither of whom seemed

terribly interested in her.

She was phenomenally gorgeous, and he knew he had to approach her, though a man could get killed in this region for provocations far less severe. He waited twenty minutes for her to hit the restroom, then he followed her out.

Parting a sea of colognes, Jared swallowed a Valium and retucked his shirt. Outside in the hall, he found her waiting in line, angrily clutching her purse. To say his heart was beating at this point would probably exaggerate the ordeal, since he had already sniffed half a gram of cocaine outside in a cab, forty minutes prior, with a colleague from work, who had left.

“Hi,” he said to her, stupidly. He was aware that the eight other women in line, all of whom had been raised in good communist schools, spoke enough English to listen. “I just wanted to say—and I know this sounds corny, but it’s true—that you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve seen.”

She watched him with hazel-gray eyes. A few other women stirred, expressing discomfort, but she didn’t move. And neither did he.

“I’m Jared.”

“I’m Jelka,” she said. “And I think you should go away.”

Our story does not end there, however, because well before his divorce, before the crippling affair that would cost him the bulk of his post-college savings, two BMWs, a house, and his soul, before his father died and pensively told him that he was not a disappointment, in spite of what everyone thought, before his two daughters would give him a parting kiss on the cheek, Jared found himself taking her hand. “You don’t have to call me,” he said, handing her his card, which had his name inscribed in a carton of yogurt. “It’s just enough for me to look at your face.”

She smiled, and she would obviously throw away the card, but not before noting his name.

Properly fearing for his life, Jared immediately returned to his apartment, which was in a nondescript Soviet tenement in an upscale section of town. He made himself a White Russian, which usually put him to sleep. When that didn’t work, he gulped

another Valium and strummed his guitar. Still feeling wide awake, he powered up his industrial-strength deep-fryer, which he had had shipped from Japan, and made himself fries.

The next morning, his maid, a grave-looking Bosniak shrew, found him passed out at his desk with his pants to his knees and his laptop open to some lurid cowgirl images. Most people would have been shocked by this encounter, but Amila had seen far worse.

Kicking his chair (the two were fairly close), she asked about his appointment in Split, where he was scheduled to be in two hours. Then she made him coffee as he hurriedly showered and shaved.

Jared nervously drove along the coast, eyeing the bright Adriatic, anticipating a meeting with his boss at some beachside resort where he lived. Jared thought he'd be fired, but it turned out he had been promoted. As the two sat under a grape-leaved arbor, sipping rakija, smoking imported cloves, the young German said that Jared had unusual skills and they needed him back in Geneva.

Of course, Jared thought. "Starting when?"

"Next week."

"Is it possible I could extend..."

The white smoke wafted up through the vines.

"No."

Seven weeks later, Jared resigned and groggily returned to the States. It turned out he was of little use to the Croatians, despite his strong marketing skills, because they were ceding the market to Kraft. He also thought he should go back for his dad, who had just been diagnosed with lymphoma.

On his final night in Croatia, he called up some friends—more like passing acquaintances, and all cokeheads, like him, from abroad—and swayed them to return to the Space Electronic.

Naturally, she wasn't there. He asked around the bar. Apparently, she had gone overseas. "By the way, if you're looking to kill yourself," said a server, "I can think of some easier ways."

The next morning, Amila drove him to the airport. He gave her a parting hug, along with a generous check, and he promised

to return in a couple of years, after he'd done his MBA.

Two summers later, Jared met his bride-to-be in a course on Operations Management. Cambridge didn't suit him, nor did Harvard's name, but he needed to pay back his bills.

He would marry up. His wife's father had not been a senator, but he was aspiring to it and seemed to run half of Whirlpool. Jared also appreciated her Midwestern charm: the way she said "please" to her professors, cheered for the Cubs, and constantly worked on her tan.

After graduation, he followed her home to St. Joseph, Michigan and took a job as an assistant VP overseeing divisional strategy. His hours were long, and he consoled himself by living on the lake—in a majestic, gabled Victorian that his father-in-law had bequeathed. Most evenings he'd run along the beach, and it was his only forty minutes of solace, given the screaming kids, not to mention the wife he was expected without effort to love. She wasn't a bad woman, he thought.

Like most small Midwestern towns, St. Joseph harbored some ambitions. A new country club had been built where Catholics and Jews were not allowed (at least until Whirlpool stepped in). There were also two upscale restaurants, both Northern Italian and deeply overpriced, yet cheap compared to Chicago's, where they'd drive to find decent fare. On more than a few weekends, Jared even indulged himself by calling up his old college friends—a few lived in the area—and smoking up at concerts, which his wife didn't mind, provided she was informed. He never cheated on her, either, though this was less by choice than fate. The women of the region were simply too trashy. They wore too much liner to the bars, donned tight-fitting spandex at gyms, and generally leered at him during symphony performances—like iguanas trapped in a cage. To another man, this might have held some appeal.

"Do you love me," his wife asked him one evening, pulling back the duvet.

"I do."

"You always look scared when we're in bed."

“Yeah, well, I haven’t been the same since Cambridge.” It wasn’t Cambridge, he knew, but he settled in for the chore.

Then one evening, when he was picking up his daughter from grade school, waiting for her dress rehearsal to get out, his smartphone showed a couple new emails. One was the predictable penile enlarger, but another was an invitation from a professional networking site. He almost deleted it, but then he noticed the sender’s name. *Jelka*.

Suddenly, a metal glove smacked his windshield. “Dad, why the hell didn’t you come around?” His daughter was dressed as Joan of Arc and hugging her chainmail suit. “I’m freezing my buns off in this.”

It was petrifyingly cold out, and his wife must have known something was wrong when he decided to go for a run. At 4 a.m. He was not a morning person. He had dragged himself out to a couple of marathons, which had painfully early starts, but he had never voluntarily run at this hour, much less with a phone. Sure, he could have waited until work, or even snuck off to the toilet. But he wanted to be by Lake Michigan. It had a certain charm. The Adriatic it was not: no shoals of fish glittered by him, the footing was sand, not rock, and the wind, when it came, resembled not an eastern sirocco, nor even a foamy gregale. No, this wind was cold, hard, and biting. Much like his life. And himself.

He sat along the dune and clicked OFF, sticking his phone in his sweatshirt, trying not to think. For 19 years, he had nurtured an obsession for a girl he didn’t even know, hadn’t even spoken to properly, and whose face he could barely recall. And yet here was the name on the phone. Maybe it was a different Jelka.

He clicked on the link to the website and found himself forced to sign up. It turned out no picture was included, though her name was listed as Jelka Babić, Notary Public, Zagreb, Croatia, and the note she had sent him said, “Hi.”

That’s all. After 17 years of making love to his wife with another woman in mind, that’s all he encountered: hi.

He watched the far, iced cliffs, which sludged their way through Lake Michigan. A yellow light broke on the shore.

Are u the same woman? he wrote.

Her reply came a couple days later, when he was driving on I-94. He almost swerved across traffic.

What do u think?

Can we meet?

The difficulty came not in scheduling the trip, but in finding an excuse for his wife.

Whirlpool Europe was headquartered outside Milan (which was only a short train-ride away). And it was important, he explained to his wife, to keep abreast of their affairs.

“Don’t they have people for that?” She was whisking the eggs for his omelet.

“Yeah, but I’m dying to get back to Croatia, as well.”

“Well, that’s fine. But I think we should hit up the Ritz.” They had honeymooned in Paris.

“Actually, I was thinking I would do this alone.”

“What?”

“It’s just a short stint, couple days.”

“I see.”

He tightened his bathrobe.

“What’s her name?” his wife said.

“Amila.”

“The woman who cleaned your house?” Her Teflon was steaming. “Really?”

“Why not?”

“You’re lying to me.”

“No, I’m not. And she’s really getting up there in years.” In fact, Amila had been dead for six years. He had stayed in touch with her son.

Eventually his wife acceded to the trip after he promised to meet her for a whirlwind tour of Provence.

For the next two weeks, Jared ran daily, trying to flatten his abs. His wife became impressed with his regimen. She said it would help their sex.

On the flight over, he practiced his Croatian, seated alone in first class. His knees began to swell, and he counted the hours till he’d land.

“I’m sorry, I think you have me confused with someone else,” she said, the first time he saw her standing beneath an awning, where they’d agreed to meet, on the corner of Ban Jelačić Square. A clattering tram was passing beside them, and she looked at him confusedly. Then, she said, “I’m just kidding.”

He watched her in silence. It was definitely the same girl. She was twenty years older, but the same. Everything he had feared about her came true in this one central visage: the soft yellow face, the hazel-gray eyes, the sparkling lips, the tressed hair. She was like a dream, only real.

“I’m Jelka,” she said, extending a hand. “I don’t believe we’ve formally met.” Her English was incredibly good. She was wearing a black silken dress, the exact opposite of what she had worn in the club. Her arms were a little fleshier, her hair a little long, but she was otherwise exactly the same.

“I’m Amila ... Jared.” Why the name had come out, he didn’t know.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Jared,” she said in Croatian.

He couldn’t remember how to reply. Finally, he said, “Good evening,” which were the only words he recalled. He knew he should have studied better on the plane, but the Halcion pills put him out. He buttoned his suit—a white linen three-piece that made him look like Mark Twain. He wasn’t sure what else he should wear: a concert t-shirt, a dress suit, a scarf? The whole meeting was confusing.

“Would you like to sit down,” she said, noticing his discomfort.

He re-hitched his shoulder-bag. It wasn’t a fanny pack, as he had been tempted to wear (the gypsies were rampant in Croatia, at least twenty years back) but the bag was distracting, all the same. He’d even packed a condom inside—one of two he’d purchased at the airport. Why else was he alive? “Yeah, well, I was thinking we might get a drink.”

“I got a better idea,” she said, eyeing the far, passing tram.

“What’s that?”

“Would you like to go to Rome?”

“I don’t even know you.”

“What’s there to know?”

“Are you a prostitute or something?”

She laughed. It was the first time he’d heard her do it—it wouldn’t be the last—and the pitch was a little higher than he would have liked. It was awkward, even. And yet beautiful to him. Somehow it complemented her dress. “Would you like me to be a prostitute?”

“Is that what you are?”

“Are you a jerk?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to offend you ... Ja ne znam ništa,” he told her in Croatian, meaning, “I don’t know anything.”

She smiled. “Are you married?”

“Are you?”

“I am.”

“To the mafia?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Then I am, as well.”

“So let’s go.”

Her full name was Jelka Babić Đokić, and she had been married twenty years back—about seven months after he’d left—to a businessman in Sweden, who was originally Serb. They hadn’t yet filed for a divorce, but they hadn’t been in touch for over a decade, and he was recently sentenced to jail. Jared asked her little else about him as they rode on the train in first class.

“Do you have kids?”

“Yes, I do. And what about you?”

“Two daughters,” he said.

“Do they know where you are now?”

“I guess.”

Later, as she slept along his shoulder and he inhaled the scent of her hair—something like thyme and rosemary, he figured, along with the smell of people as they age—he recalled the mountains he had seen in his youth, the sharp alpine valleys, the conifers springing from cliffs. He watched the sun baking the water, far beyond the tracks, and the spread of the fields as he rose. He had

never been as happy as he was now. And he knew he never would be again.

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