



TOTAL

BALKANS



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This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and the incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination.

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Designed by David Weil

O.S.N. – Jaroslav Čech,
Opravdu Skvělé Nakladatelství
Maiselova 3, Prague, 110 00

www.blankacechova.com

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I would never be able to finish it.

*For Agim of Little Bosnia,
in memoriam, for Bato from the Enclave,
and for all the ordinary, decent people of Kosovo.*

PROLOGUE

Since a certain time, I get goose bumps whenever I look at buildings with rows of flags in front of their gates. Tens of them hang from their poles, many have faded, some are tattered, but when the wind blows, all flutter in the same direction; each and every one of them soaks with water on a rainy day.

Yeah. The weather. The only thing that actually works in places like this one. And also the only authority that matters, because above it, there is nobody. Nobody to control it, to judge it—nobody it should fear.

Long ago, I looked at the flagpoles and thought they were aimed at the skies, because they carried pride and honour, compassion and courage to change the world. I thought they were conductors of righteous anger at epidemics and wars, that they wanted to fight the bastards and help the poor, to soften all the mourning of the world.

Long ago, I thought it all had some meaning.

That was before I found out that the poles, in fact, don't aim into the skies. They tower high so people can look up to them. *We* are the skies. Can't you see that?

I look up to make sure the heavens are still higher than the flags.

A man with a dog passes by. The dog sniffs the bottom of the poles for a while. Then he bends his spine and pushes out a hearty poop.

I love dogs with opinions.

A group of tourists stops a few yards away. The guide begins her emotional talk about the mission of international organizations such as this one, about the lessons learned from the Second World War, about the importance of solidarity among nations. It's beautiful. Heart-breaking. If someone composed music to match the lyrics, it would be the love song of the millennium.

Why will nobody tell those people the truth?

They pay for their guide and they also pay their dues into the budgets of organizations such as this one. Maybe they aren't bothered enough to wonder where the hell all that money goes. A hundred million here or half a billion there—most people have no energy to be curious. More-

over, how can you investigate what stinks when the smell has been hidden?

A cleaner walks out of the palace, shovels the dog shit into a bag, and disappears behind the mirrored gate.

I follow him. I came to hand in the Form. And the Attachment.

Form no. 05221/II-G

Final Evaluation of Your Mission Experience

Submit to the Section of Quality and Internal Audit. Fill out legibly.
In case of insufficient space, use an extra sheet, attach to the Form,
and clearly mark as Attachment.

Badge number: *05893*

Date: *2nd July 2008—World Day of the UFO*

What is the reason of your resignation from the function of democratization officer?

- ~~a) reassignment to another position within the Organization~~
- ~~b) job offer outside the Organization~~
- ~~c) personal reasons (health, family)~~
- d) insurmountable aversion to ticks*

What do you consider to be your greatest success as a mission member?

scoring a free shot from a pitch placed in the middle of a busy crossroads

How are the Organization and its staff perceived by the local population of both ethnicities?

- ~~very positively~~
- ~~rather positively~~
- ~~negatively~~
- ~~very negatively~~

Like total aliens who turned Kosovo into their training playground.

How would you evaluate the level of multi-ethnic dialogue on the scale of 1 (the worst) to 10 (the best)?

$$\frac{\sqrt{(\log 15 \times \pi^4)}}{{}^3/5 \cos 12 \times 6\infty} \quad (\text{average deviation: } 0,772)$$

How would you evaluate the efficiency of the Organization's activities? (Please provide any recommendations you would make to improve the Organization's operation.)

See Attachment. Recommendation: ban the Organisation.

What was the greatest enrichment of your mission experience?

I learnt about Total Balkans.

ATTACHMENT

JULY

THE EVACUATION BAG

12 JULY 2007

Report of the day: Huh. I got the job. The Kosovo job.

Hard to tell what it was about my telephone interview that charmed the panel so much. “What kind of minority protection laws apply in Kosovo?” I wasn’t nervous. First of all, it was clear to me that this would never work out, because Kosovo can declare its independence quite easily without me, and also—before they finally noticed my application and called back—I had decided to say farewell to all noble international clubs and alliances in order to sit down in my kitchen and stand up again only after I’d finished ten to fifteen novels, scripts, and theatre plays.

“Great answer! And now, if you would, tell us about the relationship between democracy and the rule of law.” Because an artist has a much better chance to move the world than an expert in the area of international human rights protection, doesn’t he?

“How would you deal with conflicts in your team?” Three hundred options pop to my mind, about half of them involving some form of violence. I take a deep breath and begin babbling about coaching and, ye know, gender-balanced motivation, even mentioning several examples from my own practice, so I’m lying continuously for about eight minutes.

Final question. “What is your opinion of the functionality of local self-administration in northern Kosovo?”

Now, Northern Kosovo is screwed. Unfortunately, that’s all that pops up to my mind. Screwed is screwed. “You understood the question?” asks one of the interviewers. Oh god, just say something so they don’t conclude that all Czechs are dolts without a single opinion on local self-administration in northern Kosovo!

I recall the news, when a (whatever) politician answers (any) complex question.

“The situation is disquieting and extremely complicated,” I say, worried. “It is important to regard the matter in all its

problematic context, and at the moment, I don't have the space to address the details in detail, so I will only say this: in view of the very diverse background of the development of the ethnic conflict in Kosovo and taking into account all economic, social, and political aspects, it seems evident that the level of functionality of local self-administration in northern Kosovo is a true reflection of the current situation of the community.”

I want to swallow the phone. For the rest of my life, I swear, I'll only comment on questions about the weather. End of report.



In the morning, a Mr. Smith calls from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Congratulations!” he bawls. “Could you start next week?”

The problem is that I totally could.

I write to my former colleague from the court. She now works for the UN mission in Bosnia. Say, what is it like over there? Is she happy? And is she making any—you know—difference?

“Happy?” she replies. “That would be an understatement, girl!” She is absolutely thrilled because, you know, Sarajevo is so totally cool. Parties all night, zero work. Ski slopes around one corner, beaches around the other. Most importantly, the proportion of guys to gals is, shall we say, more than favourable for us female singletons in their thirties. Trendy and cheap fashion in local markets, plus beyond the checkpoint in the UN staff store you will find the greatest selection of booze and perfume that you could ever imagine. And wait for it: all duty-free! Hey, what salary grade are you? P₂ or P₃?

I reply that I don’t know, although I do know. P₄. It’s more than the monthly earnings of an average senator. Who could decline that?

Dozens of calls. Congratulations! We’re so proud of you, darling! Do you have all your vaccinations? Let’s hope bulletproof jackets will be provided. And, if I may, how much are they going to pay you?

Everybody is thrilled.

They don’t know what I know.

In the afternoon, I feel like calling Smith to ask if all this can’t be revoked somehow, but I remember his euphoria as he informed me just what an honour this is for the

whole of the Czech Republic—a huge honour!—particularly considering that this is the first nomination of a Czech national in ages, and don't you doubt, Madam, there were queues of applicants!

How could I be so mean to my country?

If I decline, Smith might have me exiled.

It would be difficult to explain that I entered the competition long ago, when it seemed simpler to set out for Outer Mongolia or Kosovo and have my headshot off amid a humanitarian crisis than go on losing it at home, amid a crisis of identity. Four months later, I didn't find a shot-off head half as attractive anymore.

Recommendation to future mission members: Due to the large number of stray dogs, a rabies vaccine is highly desirable. We also recommend vaccination against diseases carried by certain parasites, especially ticks.

15 JULY 2007
DAY OF GUMMY BEARS

Question of the day: Balkans or balconies?

04:15 Minutes before the dawn. Silhouette of an African woman with a baby in her arms emerges from the dimness of the night. It's an awareness poster of a famous organization that promotes human rights in Congo. *If she goes to collect water, she will be raped. If she doesn't, her baby will die.* In a discreet, neat font below, it says: *You can make a difference. Donate to our account.* The poster has stalked me for many years. It upsets me every time I look at it: what the hell am I supposed to do? Pack up and set out to drill wells in Congo? Sit home and be ashamed that most people in this world suffer, while I've already got so much more than I'll ever need? Or shall I just contribute to the damned account and hope for goodness?

I get up and step onto the balcony. I watch my street, my house, my world.

It would be right, logical, and a relief not to care at all, to rip the poster into a thousand pieces and live my life the best I can. Ignore wars in Congo, landslides in China, and

ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and satisfy my eventual humanitarian instincts with a donation to the orphanage around the corner.

I open the email again: “We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted as mission member to the position HN442056—Section of Democratization and Rule of Law.”

I stare at the African woman, trying to find a reason why in the hell it should be me, here and now, to leave everything behind and hurry to the Balkans as an apostle of democracy. At four in the morning, I am unable to figure out how the rule of law relates to thirst. How does it relate to me? After years of service at an international court, I should know that. I should know everything.

10:00 On the way to the newsstand, I pass by a homeless man with a purple nose, his arm stretched forward. I drop a few coins into his palm. It is a deliberate, clearly defined charitable act directed at my fellow man, the alcoholic. And it is disarmingly easier than packing up for Kosovo and wondering whether I’ll be any good out there.

“I wouldn’t give him a penny.” Our curious neighbour stops me. “He will only buy beers with that,” she whispers

loudly. She carries a vacuum cleaner in a large bag. “You see, my Hoover is broken, so I took it to be serviced, but do you know how much they asked for the repair? Eight hundred! I told them, for that I could have a brand new Hoover.”

I nod. I feel sorry for the Hoover repairman. With such clientele, he’ll soon go bankrupt.

“But considering your position,” the neighbour continues, “if I were you, I’d rather support some humanitarian cause. A charity, for instance. Our Bill—and you know he can’t afford much at all—just yesterday he sent three thousand to the schools in Africa.”

The air swells up with a proletarian objection, the neighbour’s disapproval of people who carry three thousand in their pocket, but who like to think twice before they spare it.

“Where in Africa?” I ask.

The neighbour doesn’t know. It is a project of the UN, ye know—young enthusiastic people who rolled up their sleeves and raced off to construct schools. The whole world should support them. “It’s simply appalling what’s happening out there—the hungry babies, wars, and poverty. Whenever I see that in the news, it breaks my heart.”

It breaks mine, too, lady. But guess what: ten seconds later, your heart heals over and you are fine again. Just like me. Just like everybody else.

“Your Bill should have got your hoover fixed, instead,” I hear behind my back.

The homeless man spoke.



When I pass by him on the way back from the newsstand, he sips Coke and waves at me. I get a disturbing feeling that he knows more than I do.



At home, I stare at the African again. The poster is made of heavy parchment paper. High-end printing. The UN is certainly not ragged—it doesn't have a beggar's eyes, doesn't stretch out its hands. There are more elegant methods: artful photography and a reliable slogan that makes everyone feel ashamed. Sure-fire tricks to bring all of us to our knees before the icon of goodness and solidarity, so we do not dare

to wonder about the cause or consequence, about meaning, impact, photo-documentation, evidence, or annual report.

And if we dare to wonder, we keep it to ourselves. Who'd come out and question selfless young ones as they race off to save schools in Africa?

Just an intoxicated homeless man without undue respect for high-end printing.

18 JULY 2007

From the Guiding Instructions on What to Include in Your Evacuation Bag: Underwear and two sets of clothes, medication, mobile phone and radio, passport, diplomatic passport, badge, cash, Methodical Handbook on Democratic Field Operations, Guiding Instructions on What to Include in Your Evacuation Bag, tick repellent spray.

I scroll back to the job announcement and wonder what exactly it was that enthralled me so much:

The Section of Peace Operations and Democratization seeks a lawyer with expertise in human rights and minority protection.

Requirements:

- *Law degree*
- *Previous work experience in an international organization*
- *Orientation in human rights law*
- *Excellent knowledge of English*
- *Intercultural sensitivity for work in post-conflict multi-ethnic area*
- *Hard work, initiative, independence, flexibility, communication skills*
- *Objectivity, impartiality, political correctness*
- *Identification with the values of the Organization*
- *Valid driver's license, three years' driving experience*
- *Knowledge of Serbian or Albanian language*

Sure. Is it even possible not to identify with the values of a prominent international organization?

Job description. The chosen candidate:

- *Proactively monitors and builds capacity of local institutions in assigned Area of Responsibility (AoR)*

- *Conducts analysis and constant evaluation of progress in the domain of human rights, minority protection, and democratization*
- *Drafts reports on human rights standards*
- *Liaises with the representatives of local communities*
- *Contributes to the development of strategy in the area of increasing the capacity of local authorities and public officials*
- *Identifies key areas of HR protection in AoR, analyzes the situation, and formulates suitable recommendations*
- *Processes daily, periodic, and flash reports*
- *Implements projects*

I can't possibly manage all that.

I google current developments of the Kosovo mission.

“On 10 July 2007, a representative of the Organization attended the ceremonial opening of a multi-ethnic youth table-tennis tournament in the Serbian enclave of Zalužje/Zalluzhe. The Head of the Municipal Democratization Team, Dr. Stamatis Papadopoulos, noted: “We opted for the implementation of the project after carrying out a careful analysis and persistent evaluation of developments in the area of human rights, minority protection, and democ-

ratization. This is a true turning point in the cooperation of local communities—a union of different ethnic groups on the platform of a sports event. We aim to proactively monitor the development of multiculturalism among local youth even after the tournament is completed.”

Kids in the photo smash Ping-Pong balls and seem happy.



I am packed in an hour.

The evacuation bag that accompanies me out the door of my careless and comfortable life doesn't contain a single bit of courage. Its contents are mostly fear of how I'll feel if I don't even try and a confident assumption that in two weeks I'll be back on my balcony anyway.