

Broken lifelines

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Inhoud

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Foreword

War is profitable deception. It always has been. It is probably the oldest, the most profitable and certainly the most cruel form of deception. It is the only one of its kind on an international scale. It is the only one in which the profits are calculated in money and the losses in human lives. (American former general S. Butler, 1935)

Lifelines connect past, present and future. They form an invisible alliance between generations, in which lives are shared, stories are passed on, people are not forgotten through the stories that outlive us and we continue to live beyond our death anniversary in the memories and the new stories that are created about us.

Lifelines are threatened by life itself, things that happen, beautiful but also ugly ones such as war, violence, a crisis that turns everything upside down. War, in particular, is cruel, destructive, disruptive. Lifelines that should flow smoothly are abruptly broken off, there is loss, grief, sorrow and pain. The American psychologist John Dewey wrote as early as 1940 that one of humanity's greatest threats is not the existence of totalitarian regimes or failing leadership. According to him, it is the existence of our personal attitudes and the institutions that are the result of the ideas we have and allow us to partly give up our free will. They give space to uniformity and the dependence on a figure we see as the leader. The struggle we fight to get rid of this idea — the thought that we are dependent on others who determine our fate and our life course — is the greatest personal battle we have to fight throughout our existence. That is what freedom means, that we do not hand over our souls to others who decide about us, but uphold our principles, act upon the things we believe in and are important and valuable.

These are epic words from John Dewey. More and more, under the influence of industrialization, we have come to believe in the malleability of society and people have become instruments to achieve that. Whoever does not participate becomes a pariah, a leper who is repelled by the majority because the yoke of uniformity is the most important condition for getting masses on board and smothering the voice of the individual. More and more we stray from who we are in essence, conforming to what is expected of us. Don Quixote is the archetype of the loner who is foolish and fights windmills together with his squire and symbolizes the idealist who pursues unattainable goals. But is he the foolish one and is fighting for our individual

freedom and that of others, a utopia, impossible, a dream that just doesn't come true?

Peace is the ultimate form of freedom, because the differences that exist between people no longer matter. As human beings, we are allowed to be who we want to be, and in a community or country that diversity is cherished, celebrated and embraced. Is peace the goal we have all longed for since humanity has existed, but the unattainable dream of loners fighting for a better world? The world wars and other wars that followed have shown us where mass psychosis can lead. The loner always remains the outsider it seems, loses; his lifelines are broken, like a porcelain vase they slip out of his hands and falls into a thousand pieces. People's lives burst like a bubble when their dream falls apart, their long-cherished wish is not fulfilled, they are cut off by events outside themselves that force them to give up everything they ever hoped to achieve.

Freedom and peace can only exist if we welcome the voice of the dissident, allow ourselves to let go of our entrenched ideas, which are solidified in the inability to think beyond our own self-interest. If we do not let expectations dictate what should and may be, but always use our own compass, our own principles and dreams, as a sounding board to make choices. In this way, lifelines become a series of people who do not merge into the grey matter of uniformity, but who stand for something, give something back to the world, leave a footprint that is meaningful.

Lifelines may break, but people remain unbroken. This story bears witness to that. Svetlana symbolizes many people who fight for their freedom, to be themselves, to keep their dreams alive for themselves and generations after them. Are they a Don Quixote? Or are they the real heroes never written about, because it makes us feel uneasy and we don't know them, because they are not interested in power and fame, but are fighting for something bigger than themselves? This story is their story, an ode to those who live in the shadows and keep the idea of freedom alive.

Prologue

She is eight years old, shaved bald, she is wearing a beautiful white cotton dress with puff sleeves and a big bow at the back, because it is Sunday. She lies in the tall grass on a field near her house, gazing at the ants. When she strokes her head, which she does not like to do, it feels like a porcupine, the spines sting a little against her hand. How she misses her beautiful locks that she was so proud of.

In the south of Macedonia, near the Greek border, lies the village of Gevgelija, where she lives with her parents and sister. A small town in a small country, which nobody knows, a dot on the world map in a remote corner of Europe, but her home. Her house is located on a cul-de-sac in the middle of the town, wedged between the houses of neighbors, with a piece of land at the rear where her parents grow flowers. From the window of her room she looks out on Kozuf, the mighty and beautiful mountain that looks down on the village like a wise old man.

As she lies there and feels the squawking of the blades of grass against her legs, she watches intently a group of ants walking by. Ants intrigue her. As she thinks of this, she observes how they walk disciplined with small crumbs of bread on their backs, in column to the hollow where they apparently live. One after the other in a neat row with their tiny legs, they walk purposefully with their heavy load. It fascinates her. Those little animals with black crow eyes, which don't seem to be distracted by anything. Forward, march! Apparently it's all so peaceful, so orderly. They don't bump into each other, they walk in step without getting in each other's way, in a peaceful march to keep their supply of food up to date. They are also so preoccupied with what they do – there is nothing that disturbs them; the rustling of the wind, the twittering of birds, even her presence does not bother them.

She tries to imagine what it would be like to be an ant and walk between them, with no other concern on her mind than that crumb of bread and her fellow ants walking in front of and behind her. In nature, everything seems so in harmony with each other. She thinks that's so beautiful, it calms her down. At home there is no harmony, there is poverty, sometimes hunger. She always wears discarded clothes from other children. Her grandmother made this dress especially for her, to wear on Sundays. She feels like a princess for a moment. Just for a moment.

She wakes up from her predation and realizes that her life is miles away from that of the little creatures she watches with so much attention. Her life is far from quiet and is overshadowed by the war and its consequences for all the people in her life who were part of it. The wars she means – plural – the First and Second World Wars. She heard the stories of her grandparents as she secretly listened while her parents thought

she was asleep. She would crawl out of bed very quietly so as not to wake her sister up, open the door and listen carefully to the voices of the adults who were talking to each other. They were horrific stories that frightened her. She heard about one Venci who was riddled with bullets because he resisted during the war. She didn't understand that people could be so cruel. Little did she know then that a third war – the one in Yugoslavia – would kick her life out from under her.

She is only eight years old and her name is Svetlana. Why she is bald? Because the adults around her told her that she would get more beautiful hair back. She looked at them with pity as her beautiful locks fell to the ground one by one. She tries not to think about it and certainly not to feel how bad she feels about their decision. She doesn't want to be bald, her head like a billiard ball is reason for her classmates to laugh at and taunt her. But contradicting is not an option – she has learned to keep her mouth shut and always do what she is told.

She is a child of war and she feels as puny as the ants, though. Puny and small.

First meeting with the Balkans

My name is not important. I am the narrator. Give me a random name, or no, let me give myself a name that I like. My name is Esperanza; it means hope in Spanish. It's a name that suits me, it doesn't rub shoulders with who I am. Names can be so meaningless and meaningful at the same time. The name Esperanza contains everything that is important to tell this story. It is a hopeful story, it is about war, loss, loss, pain, grief, but above all about love and hope. Hope gives perspective, it is an exit, a side road that suddenly looms and brings new possibilities with it. War is a dead end, hope never is. I have not experienced war myself, but I am a child of parents who grew up during the Second World War. It kept coming back in their stories, which they passed on to their children so we wouldn't forget what it was like. The hunger winter that forced my mother to flee to the countryside and eat flower bulbs to survive. My grandfather who fought against the nazis, and as an act of rebellion hid a family hid in his basement. My mother's stepfather who was murdered by the Germans just before the end of the war.

Death is the main character in war. He sows destruction, ruins everything, massacres not only lives, but also the places where lives take place. Nothing remains of what a home is, of people who live next to and with each other and take care of each other, connect with each other. No, with an imaginary scythe, lives and lifelines that intertwine people invisibly are irrevocably cut, they stand face to face, they start to hate each other and the breeding ground for conflict and war is laid.

In this story, Svetlana is the main character. Svetlana means 'light'- she also gives light, through who she is, what she does, and what she stands for. Small in stature, big in heart, determined and courageous, she holds up a mirror to us, that peace as the antithesis of war is not self-evident, but also not unattainable. On the contrary, it gives us hope.

I look out of the Austrian Airways plane window, after a transfer in Vienna from Amsterdam, to the approaching runway of Pristina airport, the capital of Kosovo. Kosovo, the flashpoint in the Balkans, where the hatred between ethnic groups has been simmering for decades. I am on my way to Mitrovica, a city with around 80,000 people to teach Albanian and Serbian youth. The curtain that serves as a partition for the first class, flutters back and forth as we start the landing. It's a pointless curtain and I wonder how old the airplane is I'm in. Better not to think about it, I think when I look outside and see a large fallen wooden shack that serves as a reception hall and some planes in a deserted landscape.

With curiosity, I look outside and wonder how far the city is where I go to teach. Mitrovica is located near the Serbian border, an hour from Pristina. I have read that it is a conflict zone claimed by both the Serbs and Albanians.

I pick up my luggage from the only baggage claim area in the arrivals hall, and walk out with my two suitcases, where a taxi is waiting for me. I stuff my suitcases in the too small trunk of the white Peugeot that has had its best time. The trunk does not close and the taxi driver takes a piece of rope to hold the whole thing together. In silence we drive towards Mitrovica. I have no idea what to expect.

'How long is the drive to Mitrovica?' I try to have a chat with the taxi driver, who I hope speaks a little English.

'Just over an hour. I have to change my number plate before the bridge that connects the north side with the south side, otherwise I will not be able to take you to the hotel'.

I don't understand what he means and leave it there because I'm too tired to ask. Curious, I look around at the landscape that glides by. It all looks pretty shabby and the roads are bad too.

It is dusk when we arrive at a bridge that separates the city in two. Soldiers dressed in black order us to a standstill and the taxi driver opens his window and exchanges some words with one of them. I can see that it is Italian carabinieri who have apparently been called in to keep the peace in this conflict zone.

In unintelligible English, one of them bites me: 'Who are you and what are you coming to do here?'

I take some papers that I have received from the organization that invited me and hand them over to the carabinieri who look at me sternly and suspiciously.

We are allowed to drive on and I end up in another world. Broken streets lead to the hotel which is located in a side street of what is probably the main street of this part of Mitrovica. The cement planters with some faded flowers that crave for a little water give a sad look. Closed shops with closed shutters that with their rustiness tell that this has been the case for a long time.

They have told us that agreements have been made with the local opposition group, which is regularly guilty of violent incidents against the Albanians, soldiers or foreigners. It is hard to imagine what an opposition group means in this area. A bunch of criminals claiming what they see as their country? Nationalists? Resistance heroes? Terrorists? We have been given the green light to come and they will leave us alone, they have promised, because we come to teach young people and our

political neutrality is emphatically guaranteed. I command my thoughts to silence and hope that they will keep their word.

It is my first meeting with the Balkans and I realize that it is miles away from the European dream that was born on the ruins of war. I am curious about this forgotten part of Europe, which was the scene of one of the bloodiest conflicts after the Second World War. The common man and woman, the families, the children; how do they live in the shadow of violence, the smoldering hatred that has plagued this continent for generations and scourged people? It feels like a volcano that people live on. For years it keeps quiet, but then suddenly there is the inevitable and powerful eruption of all the compressed heat and energy that knows no other way out than to explode.

How do people maintain their dignity, their pride, their humanity, if they are constantly trampled and overrun by forces outside themselves that make them pawns, runners on a chessboard who are arbitrarily moved by people, to outsmart the other and checkmate them?

When it's evening, after checking in at the hotel and seeing my room, I walk through the deserted streets of Mitrovica, where cars are parked haphazardly on sidewalks, across the road, next to each other – after all, there is no authority, no order and then people have no reason to behave, they just do whatever they like, after all, it does not matter. An old man comes up to me and timidly asks if I speak English and if he can have a chat with me. His shoes catch my eyes. The noses are worn out, they were once brown, now they barely give a grip to the feet of the old man. After my approval, he asks me to sit next to him on the bench where he quietly smokes a cigar.

'Where are you from?' I hear him ask with curiosity.

'From the Netherlands.'

He falls silent for a moment. 'The Netherlands,' I hear him say with longing in his voice. 'I once saw a film about the Netherlands. Beautiful country, very green, you also have a lot of water I saw, and flowers of course. The Netherlands is nowhere near Mitrovica,' he says as he has started to speak more and more softly. He looks around with pity. The bench stands on a piece of land that is supposed to look like a park but consists of a few containers without flowers, trees that have thrown down the hatchet, tiles that are broken everywhere and a lot of litter.

'We used to have a good life, but since the war this has become a no man's land. We don't actually exist. The Serbs want to annex us and the Albanians want that too. Europe is fighting over our heads, but no one is asking us what we want.'

I tell him that I have just arrived and come to teach and look forward to meeting young people who live here.

'How special that you come all the way from the Netherlands to teach our young people,' he says with elation and with wonder in his voice. 'Young people have no future here, they all leave when they get the chance. I am an undertaker, we have a family business that has been around for over a hundred years. Enough dead people, that is not the problem, so it won't be because of that. But that is not a profession for a young person, to see the dead every day, the victims of feuds, quarrels and conflicts between people who used to be neighbors.'

What should I say to this man, I ask myself in silence. Silently we sit next to each other for a while. We say goodbye to each other after a few minutes and I continue my way on the poorly lit paths. Who cares about them, it haunts my mind, in this godforsaken part of Europe where the spirits of the deceased seem to wander like shadows in the desolate streets where only a few streetlights work.

When I'm back in my hotel room, I think of Svetlana whom I met a year earlier. A young woman born under the Macedonian sun not far from here. That is her luck and misfortune at the same time. The small country in the Balkans, the center of regional disputes, the pearl that is a sought-after, object of gold miners and prospectors, rich but poor, weighed down by the yoke of a hostile neighbor, the center of the refugee crisis in 2015. She left for the Netherlands in 2002, because she could not stay in her native village, where a future is a dead end without an exit. Europe should have given her a home base. Instead, her life became the story of the loner, that of a hero as portrayed in cartoon characters and novels. The hero who must defeat dragons, overcome obstacles, receives a call for adventure to finally emerge triumphantly as a victor. Is she the hero? Or will the dragon defeat her anyway? With that question, I end up falling into a restless sleep.

My visit to Mitrovica is my first encounter with the conflicts in the Balkans, which abound. The city is located on the river Ibar, which separates the northern and southern parts. In the north live the Serbs and in the south the Albanians. Not only people are divided, but also streets, squares, cemeteries. There are four bridges guarded by the Kosovo Force and a NATO-LED peacekeeping force responsible for security in Kosovo. At night, Italian carabinieri man and guard the bridge. Although there is no official border, everyone continues to live on their own side of the river and the bridge is only crossed for business. To be on the safe side, license plates are then replaced, to prevent cars from being destroyed by the youth.

There is a riot called the "license plate riot", as an absurd testimony to the hatred and envy between the two camps. An agreement had been made that Serbian license plates could simply enter Kosovo. Serbia, however, did not allow cars with the regular Kosovar registration RKS (Republic of Kosovo), arguing that Belgrade sees Kosovo as a province, and not as an independent republic, despite the declaration of independence in 2008.

Drivers from Kosovo must therefore replace the number plates at the border with Serbian ones at their own expense. When the arrangement ended, the flame hit the pan. The Kosovar prime minister stipulated that if the Kosovars have to wear license plates at the border, the Serbs must do the same when they come to Kosovo. This led to great tensions in Mitrovica. Kosovar authorities sent heavily armed police units to the two border posts in the area. Serbs, in turn, blocked the transition and set up roadblocks, and Belgrade showed the army its muscles with much fanfare.

The EU had to be involved to appease the tempers. Serbia accepts the regular Kosovar license plates, but has the letters RKS taped off; the Kosovars put a sticker over the Serbian national coat of arms.

And so everyone who crosses the border from Mitrovica has a second license plate in his trunk. The absurdity of all this shows how Europe is divided to the bone.

There is a university in Mitrovica, which has barely stood the test of time. A dilapidated building, with old-fashioned school desks, blackboards that have also had their best time, curtains that have to block the sun and are worn and pale. We are with a group of eight teachers from different countries and come to teach a group of local and foreign young people.

I want to understand what it is like to live in a no-man's-land, where no public service seems to function, and people seem to be at the mercy of the elements and authorities at European level who do not seem to be able to bring the parties together. On the contrary, society is divided to the bone. There are countless incidents of violence and conflict between the two population groups that are opposed to each other.

The group I teach is a mixed group. The majority young people from Mitrovica and a number of students from Belarus, Germany, Hungary and Poland. It has not been possible to recruit Albanian youth, the hatred is too deep, and is thus passed on to the next generation. I visit a local entrepreneur with my students, to better understand what it is like to build a business in such an area. The man's name is Costas and he has built a large facility with his own hands, with a restaurant, guest houses and he breeds trout. Costas is small in stature, has beautiful brown, soft eyes, a weathered face from the sun and deep grooves next to his mouth that tell he does

not smile often. They walk like silent witnesses past his mouth which has forgotten to laugh. His teeth betray that he is a heavy smoker, which is not uncommon in the Balkans. While I'm sitting there drinking coffee we get talking.

'What a wonderful stay you have here,' I say sincerely and in an inviting tone.

Costas looks at me hesitantly and takes a seat in a chair opposite me. There is no one else in the restaurant.

'Yes, this is my life's dream. As a boy I already fantasized that I would build something like this,' I hear him say with pride and melancholy.

'But there are hardly any tourists anymore. There was heavy fighting here during the war. We live in a no man's land. This part of Kosovo is claimed by the Serbs on the north side and the Albanians on the south side. We have nowhere to go. Sandwiched between groups that hate each other and a Europe that does not make a decision about our status, we do not actually exist.'

There is despair and quiet anger in his voice. The betrayal is palpable and I look around with pity in the room that has arisen from his hands with so much love. The dusty and empty chairs and tables that tacitly confirm that his life's work has fallen apart and he has only them as memento of his bygone dream.

Costas talks scornfully about Europe when we talk about it: 'Ha! Europe. The lie rules when it comes to Europe. The unification is an illusion, I don't notice it at all. This small piece of no man's land shows how the proportions are. The Americans support the Albanians and the Russians support the Serbs. It is about geopolitical interests. Nothing but that.'

His voice gets louder and louder as he vents his displeasure with Europe. With waving hands, he confirms his anger at what has been done to him.

'My best friend lives on the other side of the river. He is an Albanian and we have known each other for fifty years. I hardly ever see him again. We can only secretly meet when it is evening. If we were to be seen together, we would be regarded as traitors. It's ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous. Political leaders are playing a game with us. I miss my friend, I don't care that he's Albanian.'

Costas falls silent. He also breeds trout, the basins are in the middle of his restaurant and they quietly swim in the crystal clear water that flows gently. The silence is deafening, the restaurant should be full of people talking loudly and enjoying the delicious meals made by Costas.

I ask him how he survives. He gets up and walks to another room, and arrives after five minutes with a large file in his hands. His eyes begin to glisten.

'I am a real entrepreneur, but also an artist. I wanted to be a pastry chef and when I opened my restaurant I saw my chance to also specialize in making cakes and pastry. But not just cakes, no, works of art for special occasions such as weddings, birthdays or anniversaries.'

Proudly he flips through his file and shows me his beautiful creations. The cakes stare at me and confirm the love and artistry of the master pastry chef who made them. Delicious cakes with lots of whipped cream, and colorful scenes that are a feast for the eyes.

'Everyone knows me and orders cakes from me. With that I can keep my dream and hope for better times. One day a decision will have to be made about this piece of territory,' I hear him say questioningly and somewhat gloomy.

His wife arrives with slow pace on slippers that are a little too big and sway around her feet a bit. The soft velvet is slightly bare here and there. Wordlessly, she joins us at the table. She lovingly grabs Costas' hand and smiles faintly at me. She has nothing to add to his story, her eyes speak volumes, there is a veil of sadness that she cannot mask.

These two hardworking people, their dream, everything is in shambles, I realize as I look at them. What good is a divided Europe that is failing to stand on its own two feet? I realize that I have to go back in time, dig deep, read in, talk to people, to understand what happened here. Costas has a picture of Tito hanging in his restaurant. I ask him about it.

'Tito has tried to solve things, to bring people together, to form unity in this region. He really tried. But he didn't succeed either.'

While the architects of Europe worked steadily towards a Union, Tito built his dream: the Yugoslav Federation to end fragmentation in the region and become a significant power base and restore balance in divided Europe. There under the Macedonian sun, Svetlana is born in Gevgelija.