

DOUBLE ISSUE

JULY/AUGUST 2012

Commentary

**Born on the
Fourth of June**
by BRET STEPHENS

**Scoop
Jackson at 100**
by JOSHUA
MURAVCHIK

**Attacking Israel
Online**
by BEN COHEN

**'A Great
Compliment Paid
the Jews'**
by MICHAEL W.
SCHWARTZ

**John Irving's
Gender Splendor**
by D.G. MYERS

**Most Hyperbolic
Campaign Ever!**
by ANDREW
FERGUSON

The Last Witness
by JOSEPH POLAK

**AT YOUR
LAST GASP**

*by Zachary
Watterson*

**THE TOMB
OF HUNTING AND
FISHING**

A DEBUT STORY BY
Fernanda Moore

SUMMER FICTION

**LIGHT
GLEAMS AN
INSTANT**

by John J. Clayton

**STORY
HOUR**

by Kelly Cherry



At Your Last Gasp

BY ZACHARY WATTERSON

I

N VENICE, in 1998, some kids kicked a ball in front of Tintoretto's parish church, Chiesa della Madonna dell'Orto, where the 16th-century painter was buried. The honeymoon, which had been lovely in Guca Gora, now seemed somehow less lovely to Minka Saltagić. She and her new husband, Peter Bettelman,

had hosted a wedding reception for her family in Guca Gora. Several of her aunts and uncles and some of her cousins had come to the party, and she had loved seeing them and being home in Bosnia more than she had imagined she would. Perhaps what now seemed less lovely to Minka

about the honeymoon had to do with Venice. Peter wanted to see *everything*. There was a painting by Titian, for example, called Martyrdom of St. Lawrence,

that Peter insisted they see. But he did not pause at the Titian. He was then intent on seeing Veronese's God the Father over the Piazza San Marco. After more paintings, he wanted a drink.

Minka and Peter drank pinot grigio at the Florian. He asked her, "What other café has been open for almost three hundred years?"

"None I know." But she could think of some

ZACHARY WATTERSON is a writer in Seattle, Washington, whose essays and short stories have appeared in the Massachusetts Review, Post Road, River Styx, thestranger.com, and elsewhere.

SUMMER FICTION

cafés that old in Jajce before the war.

"Henry James drank here."

"And Byron, it says here."

"That's right, there are lesser wonders."

"There certainly are."

The waiter brought a basket of warm bread and some Camembert. Minka used a knife to spread the creamy cheese over the bread. She took a bite. It was divine. So she took another bite, and another. No reason to stop enjoying the Camembert and bread until she felt a pinch on her thigh. She looked up from her next bite to see Peter leaning over her, his expression a wince and a smile. He had pinched her, and he wanted her to know it.

"You're on your honeymoon." Peter watched her eat. He sat back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. "Don't think you can just let yourself go."

Minka said nothing in response. She just looked at him. Using her napkin, she dabbed her lips clean of crumbs.

After the Florian, they walked together alongside a canal. Peter's strides were longer than Minka's. He walked with his hands in his pockets. His mouth was neither tensed nor entirely relaxed, his thin lips pressed loosely shut in a blasé smile. He looked at the cobbles, and occasionally he glanced at the canal or at the women sitting at outdoor tables in the restaurants along the canal. Minka walked beside and a step or two behind Peter. Her legs were not as long as his, and she attempted to quicken her pace to stay even with him. As she walked, her chin was lifted high and her wedding ring sparkled. Ever since she had fled the war, she had been opening and closing her hands while she walked anywhere. She did that now. Her brown hair fell to just above her shoulders, and she wore a long sleeveless dress that nearly reached the ground.

From above Minka came the sound of shutters slapping closed. The sound startled her, and she restrained herself from diving to the ground. During Minka's first few years in New York, when her memories of the war were so recent that she would wake up from night terrors of shells whistling through the air, she had taught herself not to dive for cover every time a car backfired or a siren blared. As she walked alongside the Venetian canal, she silently told herself that she had nothing to worry about, that her life

was different now. They came upon a store that sold glass rings.

"Those rings are just like the one you wore the day I met you," Peter said.

"On the train."

"Yes, love, on the train."

Looking at the rings, she knew they were nothing like the one she wore on the train two years ago, only five years after escaping the Serbian pillaging of Bosnia for a life in America. But she smiled at Peter and said nothing.

A gondola ferried them to Cimitero di San Michele. A sign was posted at the cemetery's entrance. Minka read it aloud, for Peter to hear: "Any person behaving disrespectfully to the dead will be ordered to leave immediately. Specifically, it is prohibited to take photographs, walk about bare-chested, drop litter, lying on the ground, walk on the grass, pick flowers."

"Lying on the ground."

"Why don't they just forbid happiness?" Minka said.

They searched for the grave of Ezra Pound, though by the time they were ready to go, they had not yet found the poet's tombstone. Before leaving Venice, Minka was impressed by a Giorgione nude. The detached fresco—relocated in 1937 from the top story of the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, front facing onto the Grand Canal—featured a female figure: amber-colored eyes, nose, partly obscured mouth, breasts, arms, part of a knee, the rest left to the imagination. And the painting that moved her more than any other was Tintoretto's *Cain and Abel*, in which Cain held a dagger above his brother, poised to sink sharpened oak into his side and kill him. Looking at the Tintoretto, she recalled a family that lived in her building before the war. One of the family's two sons had killed his brother in the days before Minka fled. As Venice sank ever so slightly deeper into the Adriatic, she and Peter woke in the morning, and flew home.

IN JULY, two years after the honeymoon, Minka stepped out into the sultry air. She wore a sleeveless blouse and a skirt that fell just below her knees. When she had arrived at the party, she noticed that everyone there, including Peter, had dressed as though they owned only

clothes in red, white, and blue. Minka had noticed what the other women wore, and knew she was the only one among them who wore a green skirt and a slim-fitting black blouse. On the balcony a man stood smoking in the warm breeze. Minka held on to the railing that separated her from the sheer drop down to the street. She opened and closed her hands on the railing, and the man turned slightly and watched her mannerism. Below them glowed neon marquees. Above them, a starless wash of sky.

"May I?" she said.

He offered her a cigarette. She borrowed his and used it to light hers, a gin and tonic in one hand, the smoke in the other.

"What do you do?" The man looked at her as he asked the question.

"I am a sculptor," she said. "Are you an artist?"

"Yeah, a painter. With a day job."

The screen door slid open, and Peter stepped toward them. "Frank! How are you? You'll give us a moment alone, won't you?"

Frank smiled at Minka and stepped into the apartment.

Peter reached over and slid the glass door closed, and they stood facing each other. "What did you talk about with Frank?" he asked, trying to make it casual.

"Nothing."

"You didn't talk about *nothing*."

"Of course we did."

"You're not telling me something."

"That's crazy."

"Don't embarrass me like that again." The sour smell of his breath made her turn away. "I could throw you off this balcony."

"I suppose," she began, then stopped.

"Go on."

"I just don't think—"

"What?" he said, and grabbed her elbow, his fingers tight on her skin. "Tell me, what is it you don't think?"

"You won't do it."

"You think I won't?"

Pain shot through her elbow where he dug in his fingers. Her cigarette fell from her hand over the railing and swirled and pirouetted through the

air, its glowing ember vanishing into the city below.

Late that night, Noah fussed and squirmed and beat his tiny fists in the air. Minka gave him a spoonful of medicine for his asthma, then gingerly plucked him out of his crib, a red-faced flower craving the cooler air of the streets.

"Give him the medicine, then let him be," Peter said. "He'll cry himself to sleep."

"Just a little walk."

"It's wrong to spoil the baby."

"So you've said."

Around midnight she pushed the stroller north on Amsterdam Avenue past 110th and into Morning-side Heights. Thoughts of Jajce rose up in her mind. She had left her home city in October 1992, when she had been 22 years old. Walking in silence over paths through the mountains, she had closed her hands into fists, and opened them, and closed them. A man named Zulfo Emkic, who had lived on the ground floor of her family's building in Jajce, walked in front of her. Zulfo's wife had been murdered by a Serbian sniper. While Minka walked behind him, Zulfo pushed an old woman, his wife's mother, in a wheelbarrow. As Minka walked, she had tried not to look at the faces of the dead. Rather than look to the sides of the path, she had focused on Zulfo, his shoulders moving under his sweaty shirt. All through the day, the shells had been falling. When she hit the ground, dirt under her hands and the taste of dirt in her mouth, things got quiet. She coughed and stood and began walking again. Then she could hear the sound of the wheelbarrow Zulfo pushed. She could hear the old woman wheeze. After a time—the length of intervals varied—shells exploded nearby, and she dove to the ground. The path began to climb down the mountains, and it became a road.

They had arrived in a village partway to Travnik, a village called Karaula. A few villagers let them stay in their garage.

In the relative warmth of the garage, she leaned against Zulfo, listening to the shells. Her arms covered her ears and her head, and she slept to one side of Zulfo, her body curled into a ball for warmth. On the other side of Zulfo, the old woman lay supine. The one blanket they had covered the old woman. Sometime during the night, Zulfo whispered to Minka that

the old woman was dead. Zulfo slipped a glass ring off the dead woman's finger and gave it to Minka.

Something inside Minka made her think that the ring was a charm. If she wore it, she wanted to believe, she wouldn't be killed. So she slid it on her finger. The sky was still dark when they left the garage. After walking for three more nights, Minka at last came into Travnik. She was 40 miles from home, and a few miles to the far side of the Bosnian soldiers' new front line. The old woman's glass ring, she still believed, had been a talisman that had helped her escape alive. Of course, she thought, the old woman's ring was nothing like those rings in the Venetian shop she had perused. She had thought that marrying an American would be different from marrying a Bosnian, or a Croat or a Serb.

Some years had passed since she'd been a girl in Bosnia, and her aunt Adela had written her that some of the gates and castle walls of Jajce had been restored. It would be impossible for them to repair all the gates and castle walls of Jajce. Knowing repairs were still underway made Minka feel aglow. Her son had never been to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Noah was too young to know anything of how Minka had escaped Jajce via the paths she and the others called the Ho Chi Minh Trail, under siege and dodging exploding shells and sniper fire. She would someday tell Noah. She had given her son a biblical name. Though she loved her son and had grown to love the name she had given him, she sometimes wished that she had named him Juka. Her grandfather had been named Juka, but her husband had disliked the name. Noah was too young to know that his mother had fled Jajce among 30,000 other refugees. Minka wanted to see the Pliva and the Vrbas rivers again. Before the war, her father went fishing on the Pliva and brought home garpike. The fish were long-bodied, with a pointed snout and large teeth, and the fishy smell lingered in the kitchen for days after her father cleaned them.

She had come to this country to be far from the war. But nights such as this one, when the city hummed around her, made her miss the natural beauty of Jajce. On the steps of St. John the Divine, the soaring Episcopal cathedral in Morningside Heights, a man inhaled sharply, his cigarette flaring,

the smoke rising into the air. Floridian tangerines glowed under lights in a Korean grocery that was open all night. A Puerto Rican girl chased a smaller boy, who squealed as he ran. The girl quit running and skipped, chewed her gum, hollered at the boy.

In their bedroom, Minka undressed and slid quietly between the sheets. One thing had never changed about Peter—he was a light sleeper. She lay awake beside him thinking of something Seneca wrote. Hours later, she woke before her husband and went to the living room, the passage from Seneca still on her mind. She plucked a book off a shelf and, after riffling pages, found Seneca's essay "Asthma." *With this you're constantly at your last gasp.* This one line described her son's asthma and her marriage.

It occurred to her for the thousandth time that she should put her sculptures in the living room, against the south wall. They were small, human figures she had fashioned from aluminum foil. Many of the figures were dancing, while others walked, one foot suspended in front of the other. Early on, she had told Peter she wanted to move her sculptures there. But he had demurred, and she left her sculptures wrapped in Styrofoam in a box. In the living room, she stood quite still, when Peter came in and pointed at her with his toothbrush.

"What are you doing?"

"Reading."

"At six o'clock in the morning?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"I remembered something."

"Ah."

"I want to put my sculptures in here."

He sucked at his toothbrush. "It isn't a good idea."

"Why not?"

"We've been over this."

"I don't understand." She bit the inside of her cheek.

"They would clutter the space. Put them in the kitchen, like we talked about."

He paused, as if waiting for her to speak, then shrugged, and retreated down the corridor to the bathroom. Minka tiptoed to the kitchen and wondered why she was tiptoeing. *I know*, she thought,

agreeing with something inside her she could not yet give words to.

On a Sunday, they ate scones and then bought fresh flowers: dahlias, irises, and birds of paradise. Minka put them in a vase on a table in the hallway, then sat at her desk in Noah's bedroom, folding aluminum foil into the shape of a bird. Outside the window, the glow of the afternoon sun on red bricks, green ivy. Air that smelled of rain blew in with its hint of green and living things. Crows and rock doves took flight, their wings black and silver in the sun.

Without telling a soul, she bought a ticket for a flight back to Bosnia. Noah was still little enough that she could take him on her lap. One ticket would be enough. On a late July morning, while Peter was at his firm, she carried her son down the lift, and stepped into a waiting taxi. As the taxi went toward John F. Kennedy Airport, she held Noah against her chest. He slept soundly. At the airport, they had to wait through long lines and dour security checks. Goose bumps kept rising on her bare arms. She wore a sleeveless blouse, an ankle-length skirt, and her most comfortable flats. While they waited to go through the full-body scan-

ner, Noah woke up and cried a little. She waited to feed him until she found a bench on the other side of security, and by then Noah was famished and crying louder than the voice over the loudspeakers. The voice warned passengers to guard their belongings.

In her carry-on bag, which was large and zippered shut, her sculptures were carefully wrapped in Styrofoam. As she boarded the plane, took her seat, and held her son to her breast, she breathed more deeply than she had since before the war. After too long on the runway, she felt the plane rise into the clouds. She had a window seat, from which she peered out the tiny window at America, its roads and lights, and she knew that Peter would send someone after them. He had the money, and it was his right. Yet to Minka this felt like a new beginning. She wrapped her arms more snugly around her son, the old woman's ring on her finger, where her wedding ring had been. First they would go to Istanbul, and then they would board a plane to Sarajevo. By midafternoon tomorrow, she and her son would be home in Jajce. Minka tilted back her head and closed her eyes as the plane rose higher.