

A Rough Guide To The Dark Side

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ZERO

I never really meant to join the underworld. I fell in. Fate proved far more powerful than me.

If our story began with a word, that word was lost, and the world appeared to have lost it more than me. I'd been asking people why for most of my life, but it struck me that this question might be pointless. The one that mattered more was how to change things. And I'd struggled with that for a while before meeting my partner.

Back then I didn't see him in those terms. Our earliest encounters came at random; or so I'd assumed as a skeptical journalist. I felt streetwise when I first set foot in Serbia. In a way, I was sure I'd seen it all before: another country stewing in self-pity, fiercely independent in character, while pimping itself around foreigners for cash. From afar, this sounded rather like a turn-off, with none of the furtive thrills of Balkan wars. The cartoon villains who started them were long gone, and they'd left behind a miserable pariah state. Who cared if it was festering in woe?

To my amazement, I found that I did. This was largely down to my partner's sense of purpose, and the visions it awakened in us both. Music had revolutionary potential, he said. Young Serbs could be the masters of their destiny, provided they organized ways to come together. The forces that oppressed them would be sidestepped.

There were so many reasons to think he had the answer. Being safe might not be one, but that didn't bother me. Although it was clear we'd face risks, they mostly seemed trivial. I was hot off the achievement conveyor belt from Cambridge, with boundless expectations for the future. I'd grown accustomed to getting my way if I put my mind to it, and was convinced that if I only kept talking, I'd summon the words to persuade other people of

anything.

But nothing's quite that simple in the Balkans. My partner said we'd need a cunning plan. And for the past few weeks, he'd supplied them in abundance, while puncturing my ignorant assumptions. Despite this affront to my pride, I felt inspired.

'You know, most stories are like parody of history,' he'd said one evening, plying us both with savage shots of firewater, in a bar at the foot of a tower block in Belgrade. 'What you tell me is grotesque hallucination. No one here believe those lies of West. Speak Serbian, fuck it, so whole world understands you.'

Although I didn't always understand him, G made sense. Most of what I was paid to write was bunk, especially the bits from politicians. As my partner said, they routinely spouted fiction. Serbia wasn't a nation in transition, as most of my articles implied. It was stuck in a rut and it needed urgent help. But since there wasn't a hope of any such thing arriving, our only option left was to intervene: we'd have to hijack its election for a president, and engineer the outcome that we wanted.

G wasn't the kind of guy you'd want to say no to. And whatever it was he came up with, he sounded for real. His English had a confident authority, with the captivating ring of a pie-eyed piper. It rattled out in blasts of manic brass, which bludgeoned you into surround-sound submission. He'd strut across the city like a battery bunny, while I trotted willingly to heel. Yet despite this perpetual performance, he seemed sincere. 'I don't give a *fuck!*' he'd exclaim, because he did. Though he was patently absurd, I couldn't help liking him. His recklessness was infectious, like his laughter.

When the bar had started spinning, he leaned closer. 'This place became laboratory for future,' he explained, gesticulating vaguely round the room. 'For centuries Balkans was battleground of empires, so now we show to world whole different model.'

What was there to say, except why not? G appeared to know what he was doing. Though he must have been twenty years

older than me, he looked ageless. Beneath the greying mop atop his head, the expression on his face was like a baby's, gurgling with unencumbered energy. He walked tall with his shoulders braced back, and he chortled through my ethical detachment. He appeared to believe almost anything was possible, and talked as if we'd already seen it was.

The morning of truth was upon us before I'd thought twice. There was nothing to fear, he assured me, as we zeroed in on our mission's first objective. Everything would be fine if we kept it casual. I couldn't help agreeing. Reporters aren't meant to be actively political. But I hadn't felt professional for months, and the October sun glossed over my objectivity. G slowed to a halt at my side, shielding his gaze with the morning's unread tabloid, and together we surveyed the square in which we found ourselves. Revived by autumn gold, its statue to a footnote of history gleamed with majesty.

I've always loved this time of year the most, perhaps because it's when I was born. The crisp bright light felt fresh with possibility, and the academic promise of renewal. I thought back to an afternoon just two years earlier, when I'd watched what looked like a televised revolution, beamed live to my sofa in Zurich from Belgrade. In those days, it wasn't a place I'd thought of visiting, and like most of the rest of the world I'd soon switched off. But now I was here, I was learning I'd been wrong.

Slouching on a bench, I let my partner's words blow over with the breeze. Beyond the gravel park that yawned before us, oppressive walls of tenements receded. Their rusting terrace irons oozed faded charm. It mightn't be the prettiest of cities, but Belgrade wasn't so dreadful, I decided, as long as you were squinting through shades. I lifted mine to my head and turned to G, who'd clutched two horny thumbs towards his lips, palms cupped as if to imitate an owl. Instead, he inhaled throatily, until a joint between his little fingers buckled. A murky cloud of dope smoke masked his face. Exhaling like a laryngitic dragon, he

flicked the spliff to the ground and pronounced it kicked.

‘Whoa, that shit is strong,’ he boomed through the haze. ‘I gotta be careful.’

Having already smoked myself senseless, I concurred. Although our rendezvous was nigh, we both sat still. The birds around my head cheeped frail excuses. That building didn’t look like a party headquarters. Its entrance was a residential stairwell. The sole distinguishing feature was a patchwork of plaques. But I knew one belonged to our quarry, whose logo was as clunking as its name: G17 Plus hadn’t fired up the public, and a chorus of foreign endorsements hadn’t helped. At his final rally, their candidate was egged. Now he was facing defeat in a run-off for president, against a populist with next to no charisma.

This was where we came in. Plan B was disguised as an interview with *The New York Times*, the most self-regarding paper on the planet. As cover for meddling outsiders, it was perfect. I was their correspondent in the region, and my interest would by nature sound tangential: the office up for grabs possessed no power.

Such was the zombie state of Yugoslavia, which staggered on in name if nothing else. At the start of the 1990s, it had six theoretically Communist republics. Now, in 2002, just two survived: Serbia, which attacked its neighbors in the name of ‘brotherhood and unity’, and Montenegro, which demanded independence. When it broke away like Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Bosnia, Yugoslavia would formally be dead. And at that point, the Serbian president would call the shots again, as he did when he was Slobodan Milosevic, who’d presided over crimes against humanity, before promoting himself to run the union he’d destroyed.

By the time I arrived in the city, he’d been sent to The Hague, deported to rant at a trial for coordinating genocide. Though some Serbs watched proceedings on TV, most preferred *Sex and the City*. Pigsty politicians made them queasy. All the mouths in

the trough talked democratic platitudes, yet no one seemed to benefit but gangsters, the wartime elite who became the nouveau riche. Popular anger had wilted into boredom. Voters were so downcast they stayed at home. Barely 50 percent, the legal minimum, turned out for the first round. The second looked a cert to be annulled.

We had to get our act together fast, before we got too twisted to care much either. As a properly accredited reporter, I had to convey some semblance of chasing the story. Against the better judgment of nausea, I stood up. 'Come on,' I urged my partner, who was puffing out his cheeks while walking in circles. 'Let's get to work.'

G strode ahead, bolt upright in a suit of bilious check, which appeared to be trying to emulate Highland tweeds. An impish grin topped off his gaudy aura, eyes glinting like costume gems in a Serbian moon face. G's burly frame clattered through the doorway as if he owned the place.

'We have appointment with Mr Labus,' he beamed at the receptionist, and any colleagues within earshot down the corridor. 'He is expecting us.'

I trudged demurely behind, unused to such a forthright translator. My regular assistant barely spoke when spoken to, which suited me just fine as an idle hack. But it wasn't what was called for today. An androgynous aide in jeans burst out of an antechamber, and told us in jaunty English to step inside. I'd scarcely lit a cigarette when the target joined us.

One thing was clear from the start: he wasn't a statesman. Bearded like an unassuming uncle, Miroljub Labus was patently a wonk. He'd have been happier drafting someone else's budget. That looked like his lot in opposition. But when Milosevic was toppled in 2000, people like Labus got chronic delusions of grandeur. Having formed their 'democratic' coalition, they duly gridlocked government with infighting. While Serbia stagnated in recession, politicians mostly jockeyed for position. And

stalemate suited most of them but Labus, which was why all his allies backed his bid for president. If no one bothered to vote, he'd be the fall guy.

Our interview got straight to the point. 'How are you going to rouse the electorate?' I asked, after navigating awkward small talk about harvests.

For all its metropolitan pretensions, Serbia was at heart a land of peasants. Politically, they split themselves quite neatly. A third still drooled over warlords and heirs to Milosevic. To them, Labus was a stooge of Western enemies, effectively an agent of The Empire. If they voted at all, they'd back his conservative rival, who also had a third of people's support. That left the Labus bloc of 'reformers'. The Western media labeled them 'pro-Western', which meant 'those least unlikely to do as they're told.' Though marginally less numerous than the others, their ranks included a wily prime minister, who used Milosevic's laws to cling to power. This made him as widely reviled as the former tyrant, and that gave Labus little hope of winning.

Not that he'd admit it to a journalist. 'Serbia is one big family that is voting for its future.' The contender smiled at us, as if addressing cameras. 'I am sure that it will make the best choice.'

'Perhaps,' I said.

'I started with nothing and received almost one million votes. This is a great success for me.'

'Perhaps,' I repeated. It was barely more than a quarter of the total, which was little more than half of what he needed. If Labus refused to see the problem, how could we solve it?

'What about the young?' I asked. 'They've all lost interest.'

For years, they'd been the vanguard of resistance, exposing the old regime's self-serving lies. Their parents were either jaded or co-opted, but younger people weren't so easily cowed. Activism became a rite of passage, until they saw how little they'd achieved. Democracy was rich in televised insults, but a poor source of hard currency, or work visas. Serbs with big

ambitions tried to emigrate. Their country's outcast status ruled out the only goal that most people shared: joining the European Union tomorrow. Labus knew in theory how to get them there. He was the closest thing in Serbia to a blueprint from Brussels. But he didn't know how to persuade disgruntled youngsters.

'You're their natural candidate,' I said. 'Can't you offer them something they believe in? Otherwise they'll carry on ignoring you.'

He didn't have a talking point for that. Nor did he mind much. We all sipped fizzy mineral water in silence. I opened a folder, and pulled out a sheaf of papers.

'We can help you,' G translated, as I pushed the printed bundle across the table. Labus looked baffled. My partner tried English. 'You know, this gentleman did write first positive story I read about our country in Western media.'

The dossier stayed unopened where I'd placed it.

'Presidential Campaign Phase II,' its cover announced. 'In which Miroljub Labus invites the young people of Serbia to a free party on October 5, in front of the Federal Parliament, to celebrate the second anniversary of the day Milosevic was driven out.'

I'd finished the text around dawn, after staying up all night. The concept was simple. A few weeks beforehand in England, a quarter of a million people had swamped a beach. They'd gone to hear a balding man spin records. Though he'd done the same thing for years, he seemed unique. Fatboy Slim was a festival personified: funk, soul and disco rolled into one, as big a hit on adverts as in nightclubs. If only we could bring him out to Serbia, he'd probably pull an even bigger crowd. Serbs wished the outside world would treat them normally, but no one remotely famous ever toured there. The last big act to visit was The Prodigy, who flouted Western sanctions in the war years. In return they'd been given the keys to Belgrade. Simply by virtue of being there, they were legends. Local counter-culture didn't

have much to shout about.

Of course, rocking the vote was a dismal cliché. And it might not change the country in itself. But what if it woke people up and got them active? That sort of movement builds momentum. Serbs were desperate for any kind of kicks. A fortnight earlier, they'd won the basketball world championship. A hundred and fifty thousand went on the rampage, smashing up cafes and shops in celebration. Surely there were better things to do. And who'd say no to a big free gig on Saturday? I reclined in my chair while my partner got into details.

We had seventy-two hours left to make the show happen. That was more than enough. G had already met the DJ's agent. A few calls and we'd have everything sewn up: TV promos, radio hype, and megaphone salvos fired from flatbed trucks. Posters could be pasted overnight, and the streets would be littered with flyers that afternoon. We'd rig up the stage the next day, if someone got a permit from the police. All Labus had to do was address the nation. We'd written his lines, and could film him within hours. The networks would screen our tape on constant loop. It was breaking news.

On and on G went, jabbing at the paperwork for emphasis. 'We have wasted time here because of what we've been through,' he read from the speech. 'But it is not too late. Now is the time for change. We need to be united again to make it happen.'

Cut to some footage of protests in 2000, then whack up a banging soundtrack, and wait for the hordes of punters to descend. Labus could tell them to vote if they liked the show.

'What have you got to lose?' our pitch concluded. 'Do you have any better ideas?'

Well? Do you? The candidate glanced from one of us to the other, then down at my *New York Times* business card.

'It's really very simple,' I said. 'If you give us fifty grand, we'll get you elected.'