

The Hounds of Byzantium

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Rich couldn't tell if the dogs' eyes read malice or hunger. There looked to be about a dozen of them, though there was too much action for him to do a count. Not that precision was on his mind. Survival was.

He backed away. He had heard that's what you do when a bear confronts you. The dogs in this pack were a lot smaller than any bear. They were the tawny, leggy forty-pounders that Rich knew were the default pariah-dog model. Still, a pack of them could do for him.

What a way to go. He knew what the obituary in the *Dayton Daily News* would say: "Local man killed by dogs in Istanbul cemetery." A high school teacher or two would furnish some personal color. Rich just hoped they wouldn't say something as asinine as "We all thought he'd go far."

He might even make the local news. The co-anchors would trade rueful repartee over his meeting his end in a cemetery. No film at 11:00. Of course, that news report would mean word of his death had made it back to Centerville. Hell, maybe there wouldn't be enough left of him to find and identify.

Odd that his taste for visiting local cemeteries would do him in. And Christ, this one wasn't even that interesting. Lots of dust, no crosses (of course), and no inscriptions he could decipher. Still, it was a long, long way from Centerville. That offered the only satisfaction to what would be a toilsome end. Everything that led him *here* had the point of not being ... *there*.

He guessed it was true that time slowed down when you were facing your end. He had lots of time to think through the choices that brought him where he stood. He could blame the root choice on that German prof at Wooster who'd gotten him hooked on the language. It didn't hurt that she smoked, drank, and cussed like a sailor, and liked to invite her classes to her place

to do the same. Her telling about all the guest-workers the Germans employed had led him to drop out, get a visa, and try learning more of the language as a one of those “guests.”

It was, he had to concede in this moment that seemed to promote honesty with oneself, a dumbass plan. He’d wound up working in a plant in *Ostfriesland* -- practically Holland. He wanted to learn German, and he wound up in the region with an accent the rest of the country made fun of. Even wound up in a place Germans told jokes about, akin to the Kentuckian jokes he grew up telling:

How many East Frisians does it take to milk a cow?

Twenty-four. Four to hold the teats, and twenty to pump the legs up and down.

Well, at least he had found work with a noble purpose: making the beer coasters that no German drinking establishment could be without. His guest labor preserved the wood of German tables and bars.

But his vision of working side by side with *Hochdeutsch* speakers turned out to be fantasy. He worked with Yugoslavs and Turks. All of them, like him, had somehow made it to the town of Leer, a place with a name meaning “empty.” His German lair was *leer*.

The town had *wanted* them all, and it hadn’t wanted them *at all*. It wanted them for crap work like shoveling scrap paper into the baler, and trucking the bales to be “digested” into raw material for beer coasters. The rumor among the Turks was that a few years back, a Turkish worker had fallen into the digester, and the plant manager hadn’t bothered to fish out the remains. Knowing the manager, it seemed plausible, even though the Turks did exaggerate the animosity of the locals. But not hugely.

When Rich went out with his coworkers, the Turks seemed to get more than their share of the hate stares. He had gotten to like Attila, who let him know that he didn’t want to take part in

the after-work socializing, both because he didn't like the hate, and because he wanted to save his money as quickly as he could, to get back to Istanbul and marry. (The custom there was for the groom's family to pick up the wedding costs.) Attila also didn't like knowing that if something bad started, no Turk was going to come out well with the *Polizei* or a judge.

So Rich wound up having a lot of sweet tea at the flats where the Turks lived in foursomes and fivesomes to save cash. A year into Rich's stint in Leer, Attila had enough cash saved up to go back to be married. Six months 'later came Rich's invitation to the festivities.

Rich was starting to find the making of beer coasters less noble, so he gave notice, packed up what little he had, and started hitchhiking south. He had been shocked that hitching was legal in Germany. If he shaved and tried to look German (no jeans, no khakis), the rides came easy.

Drivers 'reactions to finding they'd picked up an American *Gastarbeiter* varied. The high-school English teacher was delighted. So were twenty-somethings who wanted a little English practice. The truck drivers seemed to feel they'd been hoodwinked, and Rich got long truck rides in steely silence. Still better than being out in the February rain and cold, so he kept his thumb out for the trucks, even after one of his trucker benefactors seemed to make fun of his German, stopping for gas and asking the attendant to "Please sir, fill it up, very, very full," like a satire on dialogue in a primary-school text. Still, a warm ride with an asshole was better than the cold.

The Yugoslavs at the plant had talked plenty about their hometowns, Beograd, Zagreb, Dubrovnik, and when Rich reached Munich, he figured out he could get a cheap train to Beograd to get him over the mountains, and keep thumbing from there.

Beograd hardly seemed like a European town, at least where the Soviet-style flats had gone up. The old town was better, although hanging out there, he'd heard "*Nemaski*" muttered by guys that passed in the streets. Usually, he didn't care to be taken as German, but it didn't come out

as a compliment. The bars in the old town, with murals commemorating battles with Turks about seven hundred years ago, were a reminder that these were people who knew how to hold a grudge, and he felt begrudged. Time to get out of town.

Another train took him to Dubrovnik, a tourist town where outsiders seemed a bit more welcome. He figured he might get a ride south along the Adriatic coast. And he hit the hitchhiker's jackpot when an old delivery truck, with a huge maple leaf painted on each side, pulled over.

Frank, Nish, and Sophie were a funny trio. Three from Toronto doing Europe in a truck that served as rolling hostel. A hostel without a shower, it was a ripe one. But they were headed to Istanbul, and the windows did open.

Crossing the Bulgarian border was without incident, but driving through Sofia around 1:00 AM on a Sunday morning, they were stopped by two cops holding a "stop" sign in the middle of the street. Rich was sitting the front left seat of the right-hand drive van. The cop came up to his side, and said "*Pass.*" Rich handed him his passport. Much discussion between the two cops followed. It took about half an hour before the four in the truck understood that a payment of 20 lev would get them back on their way. The Canadians were adamant. "We don't pay on-the-spot 'fines.'" Well, the cop didn't have *their* passports.

The night in the Bulgarian jail was not pleasant, though Rich was thankful that the place was less aromatic than the Canadians' van, despite having a "toilet" that was a hole in the floor. The drunks they shared space with were so drunk that they barely noticed their new cellmates.

Fortunately, the fellow from the Canadian embassy was more realistic than his countrymen when it came to fines. Two hundred lev got them back on the road.

Attila was happy to see his work comrade arrive in Istanbul, but his time was filled with wedding work. So Rich walked the city. Hagia Sofia was bright, cool, echoing, enormous. Men at prayer didn't seem to mind a gawking tourist – so long as he was shoeless, and quiet.

And he knew that what he would remember from a visit to the Topkapi museum: an exhibit holding what was described as the hand, and the top of the skull, of John the Baptist. Well, if a basilica can become a mosque, why not that, too?

In a later walk through the shaded midtown bazaar, he was often accosted with "*Alaman, alaman*" -- "German." Rich's reaction here: "Guess I'm a mixed-up guy, in a mixed up place."

The energy from all the sweet tea from the street vendors kept him walking. He headed toward sparser neighborhoods, and finally to the cemetery where he now kept backing away from the pack.

Rich's back reached the graveyard's enclosing wall. Two dogs moved in He heard his pants leg tear, and felt himself falling.