Broken Records

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This myth, this lore, this tale that I (the omniscient narrator) am in charge of tells that you (the addressee) come from the Vendish matrilineal stock where all names begin with “Mi-”: great-grandmother Mika, grandma Milka, mama Mira. And then you, Lucija, broke the unwritten rule—or, rather, your dad did. It happened at the last moment: up until the day of your birth, your name was supposed to be Milena, your dad’s initial choice (since your mom let him choose the children’s names). But then he changed his mind and called you Lucija. And then he left. You still don’t know who he really was.

Along with the name, other unintended-by-you rule breaking began taking place. Consider the looks—Mika, Milka and Mira resemble one another quite a bit. They are all blond, their skin fair, their deep-set eyes blue. Their body shapes differ somewhat, but their faces unmistakably show the direct relation. You, on the other hand, don’t resemble any one them, as far as physical appearances go. Your hair is dark brown as are your eyes. Your complexion darker, olive. Now, on your dad’s side, which is also Vendish, literally everybody has jet black hair (straight or curly), dark brown eyes and year-round dark skin. So maybe you’re just a blend of those two sets of genetic materials, who knows? Or maybe you took after some forgotten ancestor whose own genes somehow got carried on to you practically intact? I may be an omniscient narrator, but I’m no geneticist.
Your mom’s ancestors believed that one’s name foreshadows one’s destiny: mama says that since you are her only daughter and since your name goes back in the alphabet and starts with an “L,” that means you will only give birth to sons. Thankfully your older sister Mihaela has a teenage daughter named Midonia who has a baby daughter named Mitkica. I can say with all certainty: you won’t have any daughters to pass on the feeble Vendsih tradition to. But your mom is wrong about the sons: you won’t have any male offspring either.

You’re childless and your friends pity you. You don’t even bring it up—they do—and you just tell them: the utter realization of a woman does not lie in motherhood. But clearly they think you’re just fooling yourself, comforting yourself, being in your forties, single, and poor. It’s okay. You also often think to yourself that they need comfort, caught in the domestic trap that they wish everybody would fall into. But it’s not that you really think that your friends have children just because they were taught that their adult femininity can culminate only in motherhood. They have children also in order to pass down the stories they heard from their mothers, as well as the stories they collected on their own. You too have the stories you got from your mother and her mother and her mother’s mother and also the ones you collected yourself. As one by one your friends get the urge to raise children of their own, the only urge you feel is to write.

Here’s a Vendish saying and I promise I’ll control myself in the rest of the text: “Where there’s a story, there’s a daughter.” If that’s true, who are writers’ daughters then? I don’t think it’s the critics, or scholars, or other kinds of professional readers. Maybe it’s those readers who stumble upon books and read entire volumes out of curiosity, page by page. You and I, the addressee and the omniscient narrator, we’ll never get to know our daughters, and that may be a little sad, but on the bright side, we don’t have to worry about them staying healthy and happy and safe. It’s not our job to think about those things!

Back to the myth tale and what it has to tell us.

Mika comes out of the darkness of history. Before her, before 1905, there is the unrecorded lineage of peasants who migrated across the Balkans. Before Mika’s time, the history noted the exact routes of all the sizable armies galloping on their horses up
and down the river valleys, shadowed by the deep green mountainous terrain, down to the Adriatic coast, and back to the hills and plains. The serfs fleeing and hiding—Mika’s displaced ancestors without a homeland—were nobody’s business. They called themselves Vendi. Croats and Serbs, the most numerous peoples in their part of Southeastern Europe, both claimed them, as neither Turkish nor Austrian rulers saw them as any different from the majority South Slavs. And they were all alike indeed. There the Vends were, for hundreds of years, mostly tucked away in the most insignificant part of the otherwise relatively prosperous Southeastern European land of Croatia, invisible to the half-blind eyes of old lady History. Mika’s ancestors came from Banija—a small region, a strip of land along the river Una. Banija, Ban’s land, “ban” being the Croatian prince; but no prince ever set foot in Banija, let alone came from there.

Vendi were nominally orthodox Christians, but quite out of touch with religion. The closest organized religion was that of the orthodox Serbs. Serbs were well-meaning, and they kept sending the Vends their Serbian priests who preached in the barely intelligible Old Church Slavonic to the illiterate Vends. Serbs believed that the Vendi were a Serbian tribe, uprooted during the Turkish conquest, but even if that were true, Vends carried little ethnic pride in their hearts. Serbia was far away, down the river Una, and then down the long course of the Sava, too far away to matter, except to provide priests and teachers, each one staying temporarily, and finally getting transferred to a better place. Often a decade would pass in-between two teachers or priests. The inhabitants of Banija went through the motions with all those religious rites and couldn’t find reason to believe much. Where was that, when was it that god was born and then died and then appeared again and then disappeared again? How long for the strongest person on the best horse to reach Nazareth or Jerusalem? One tried to take that trip—Mika’s great great-grandaunt tried that once, or so the myth story went, but only the horse returned, skinny and lame. And the ancient Serbian kings with their sainthood? Great grandma Mika used to say, if the priest’s chin is so greasy, belly so big, how insatiable must the kings have been to have all those palaces and monasteries? Who built those edifices, who fed the princes, knights and priests? And so on.
The Vendish language could have been classified as a dialect of Serbo-Croatian, or Macedonian, or Bulgarian, had anyone ever cared enough. No Vend cared, but non-Vendish linguists mapped out the Vendish language for their own pleasure. Vends spoke fluent Serbo-Croatian when they wanted and needed to. Often they would marry and have children with the Serbs from the surrounding villages (as poor and illiterate as them, for that matter) or with the town-dwelling Croats. The town was Kraljev Dvor—King’s Court in English—I guess to go with the royal theme in the province’s name. Dvor’s Croats were Roman Catholic, like Austrians and Germans and Hungarians, but almost as poor as the Vends and the Serbs. Croats were the town’s poorest people and, as a survival technique, they developed strong ties with Vends and Serbs: they traded, lived side by side and shared a language. Every once in a while, a Croat would come to the Vendish villages for a while and sometimes stay forever. Usually it was a man who needed to hide from someone—maybe after insulting a big wig from the town council on a drunken night, shouting obscenities in half-German, half-Serbo-Croatian. He would change his name and marry a Vendish girl.

Maybe that didn’t happen that often. But such a man did marry Mika’s mother. He was a poor Croat, a butcher’s son, who fled the town and married the Vendish peasant girl whose family used to sell live pigs and calves to the butcher. The butcher’s son waited till his baby girl was born, then fled the village again, even the country. The big wig he offended must have been really big, the insult matching the status of the target. But the myth story has never been told. When Mika was almost twenty, years after the Great War, her fugitive father returned to them. He stayed until Mika’s baby sister was born, then fled again, never to return. He couldn’t even stick around to meet his first grandchild—Mika’s firstborn Milka. There must have been other women and children waiting around the world, everybody thought. It didn’t matter. Mika’s mother managed to raise Mika on her own, and life went on.

You, Lucija, the addressee, might notice that this narrative bears strange resemblance to the family lore narrative of Snežana Žabić, the author of Broken Records. That is merely a coincidence. Maybe what happened to her family and yours is not at all unusual or unique. Millions of families get displaced due to
wars to this day. There’s a kid growing up, walking around with earbuds full of music and a head full of questions, and then the next thing you know, the kid is fleeing with her family or is wearing a uniform and following orders. Who does not have ancestors who fought wars or bummed around from place to place in the 20th century, and all the centuries beforehand, all the way back to unrecorded, but surely once real, time of peace, before states were formed? Before private property was invented, some would say, and I would agree—even omniscient narrators need a philosophical underpinning, and mine is supplied by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, thank you very much.

Speaking of Marx and Engels, Lucija, I know the question on your mind: “Omniscient narrator, who is my daddy?”

All you need to know for now, he’s not me.