

Talking with the Dead

Prologue

Tomašića, October 2013

Twelve thirty, the lunch break is over. The team wrap up the remains of the meal which has been served on the hood of a car, for lack of a table. "Something sweet", she had said to me in English, offering me a square of chocolate for a dessert, adding: "we all need some of that here." Senem puts back on her mask, slips on a pair of clean gloves over the cuffs of her white coveralls and adjusts her navy blue hard hat. I climb the mound of earth bordering the pit as big as a football pitch. Senem is already down below, far beyond the police cordon which I am not allowed to cross. The Bobcat gets going, the pickaxes are raised and the work begins again.

I did not know what to expect arriving here. Nothing had prepared me for the sight of a mass grave. Nothing, save a few archive images that I had come across in news reports here and there: the stories of survivors who could have ended up in the depths of this pit. But when it came to what happened when the earth opened and surrendered its past, I had had no idea. I was expecting horror, the unspeakable, the unrepresentable. The *idea* of a mass grave.

But a mass grave is not an idea, a mass grave is hard work. There was no place for ideas when confronted with this gaping hole, out of which the bodies had to be dragged before the winter came.

In the immense pit below, Senem is digging away with the rest of the team. Like her, they are forensic anthropologists or archaeologists and osteologists. They all wear the same white coveralls, stark against the dark orange of the clay soil. The autumn rains have turned this into a sticky mud that clings to the investigators' boots and gloves when they abandon their shovel and dig with their hands, in movements that become increasingly deft as they get closer to the remains emerging from the bottom of the pit.

The man who had confessed to the police spoke about a number: 900. It was his estimation of the number of bodies buried here. He had driven one of the trucks used to transport the victims killed a few dozen kilometres away during the first weeks of the war. It was the summer of 1992 and as is often the case here and as the survivors remember, it was hot. In village after village, they executed Bosnian and Croatian inhabitants or imprisoned them in camps as part of the ethnic cleansing conceived and organised by Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić. It cleared the region of Bosnia-Herzegovina well before the Srebrenica massacres to come, three years later. The bodies that come out of the earth are surprisingly intact today. Senem usually handles skeletons, not bodies like these. The majority are complete, the flesh still attached to the

bone. In this area, the clay soil delays the decomposition that will begin again rapidly in the fresh air, twenty one years after death. This smell of this death lingers everywhere, reaches deep into the naval cavity, impregnating it for hours. At night, I can still smell it all around me in my room at the hostel.

Below, by the two red marquees that serve as shelters when the rain comes down too hard, a row of horizontal white forms contrast sharply with the dark colour of the earth. They are body bags, on planks of wood laid directly on the ground. The bodies are numbered according to their order of appearance from the mass grave. The last one for today is numbered 109. The team have been digging for a month.

Each day, at 4pm, the bags are loaded into the hearse, a little navy blue van. They are taken to the identification centre of Krajinia, a morgue for the missing people of the war. It was here, one day at the end of September that I had first met Senem three years earlier.

CHAPTER ONE

2010

“As a kid, I wanted to be an archaeologist”

“See, these ones fit together.” Senem grabs hold of some vertebrae, “Look, the bones tell us about themselves”. She assembles the skeleton like a puzzle, her hands rapid and precise, using practised movements: large leg bones arranged next to a pelvis, ribs around vertebrae, a lower jaw by a skull. I have never seen a dead person in my life. At the feet of the body that Senem is putting back together, a bright wool jumper has been carefully folded with shoes placed atop it, the leather stiff from years underground.

Lined up next to each other, the remains of seven bodies exhumed three days earlier are sitting on white body bags on the concrete. The clearing up continues, other remains, other bones and vertebrae, to go into sealed body bags to be organised. “There are 22 of them, all from the same mass grave”, Senem tells me. Around me, trolleys with 5 shelves are lined up for several metres against the wall. On each shelf sits a body bag. How many in total are there in this immense industrial hangar?

I had landed in Sarajevo a week ago. It is the second time that I am visiting Bosnia-Herzegovina. I don't know much about this country's history, save its war which ended in 1995, a war with a 110 000 dead, 30,000 of whom are still missing. They continue to look for a third of these, meaning they are still searching for 10,000 people. They are the ones who interest me, the ghosts whose return families await, so they can bury them. I had listened to relatives speak about the pain of this wait, the impossibility of grief. Yet the work required to identify bodies was not really something that I had considered. In Sarajevo, one of my contacts had mentioned the name of Senem. She is a forensic anthropologist running the identification centre in Krajina, a region in the country's North East. When I had called her, she had explained to me how to come and see her: I had to get off the bus at the petrol station, follow the little road that passes through a residential neighbourhood of the town of Sanski Most then arrives at the Šejkovaća industrial zone. A morgue here? With my Colleague, Zabou, we had walked along the road, doubtful in the early morning autumn fog and eventually calling Senem, convinced that we were lost when in fact the building was just there in front of us.

I simply had not pictured it like this, a nondescript large-windowed warehouse opposite a cement factory.

To warm us up, Senem had made us instant coffee in the prefab that served as her office. I had barely swallowed a mouthful before she picked up her cup and suggested that we follow her into the hangar. In trainers and a leather jacket, hair hidden beneath a black woolly hat and only just thirty, she too did not fit my idea of someone running a morgue.

It was as if life should have left its mark on a person before they came to confront death, or at the very least, clothed them in a white overcoat. Senem, however, entered the hangar like she was arriving for a day at the office, coffee in hand. When she opened the doors of the large hall and I saw all the body bags on the ground and on the trolleys, I hesitated. I wanted to protest and say surely you don't go into a morgue like this? Shouldn't you...well, I wasn't sure what, but Senem was already over the threshold, holding the door open and waiting for me.

And so I said nothing and went in.

"Before the war, there was a factory here. Then it became a morgue." She points to some photos sellotaped to the wall. What sort of factory? I don't have the time to ask her, she has already launched into an explanation of the images printed on A4 sheets. One of them has the small, numbered yellow cones that you see at crime scenes, spread out across a pit strewn with bones. At the point of exhumation, everything must be photographed and recorded, she tells me. The position of the bones helps them to deduce if the bones belong to the same person and must be stored in a single body bag. Once at the morgue, the bag is opened, its contents washed and a second examination takes place.

"Sometimes the torso doesn't match the legs, or the age of the skull is not that of the pelvis. If you have any doubts, it is down to the DNA to determine which of the bones belong to the same person."

I listen to her, I try and retain it all, the bags on the ground, the trolleys, the bones and the DNA. The hangar seems huge to me. The roof is as high as several dozen metres, steel beams trace out the graphic lines of its ceiling. The light enters a row of windows very high up, feeble this morning because of the drizzle shrouding the neighbourhood.

"The DNA allows us to determine a person's identity. Senem continues. "The deceased's genetic profile will be compared to others, obtained from blood samples from the missing person's family, which are all held in a database. And from this, we hope to get a match."

She runs through things as if she was running through a presentation that she has done dozens of times to visitors like me, who have only ever heard the word "DNA" in a cop show. Senem actually looks like someone from a crime novel, with her leather jacket, fag in mouth, the piercing gaze and her serious manner, along with the striking contrast between her almost baby face and the cadavers all around. She patiently explains to me what a 'match' means: a genetic link proving a family relationship and hence an identity.

"The problem comes, Senem adds, pointing to another photo taped to the wall, with the secondary graves."

In the photo, one can see ribs, part of the spinal cord and pieces of skull. A second photo by its side features vertebrae, a pelvis and femur bones.

“The upper part of this body was found at Kakarina Kosa in 2001. And here, in 2004, we have the lower part, exhumed at Tomasica, thirty kilometres away.”

Near the end of the war, the perpetrators of the crimes set about moving the bodies in order to hide the evidence. Fifteen years later, the work of identification is now considerably more complex, the bodies rarely complete.

“Sometimes we have just a finger or a femur bone.”

On the two-metre tall partition dividing the hangar in two, tiny faces - stuck onto a strip of brown paper - watch us. They are the size of a passport-photo, sometimes even just cut from a larger image, from family collections spared by the war and exile, showing serious faces or laughing ones, ones lost in thought, or with a cigarette in their mouth, a toothless smile, a military uniform, a childhood pout, wrinkles, a school photo and those hairstyles that take me back to my school years in the 90s. They are the faces of all those who have disappeared in the Krajina region. They number more than 5000.

“If we only have an arm, the pathologist cannot conclude a cause of death or create a death certificate. In which case, we advise the family to wait. But the final decision belongs to them.

- And what happens if the family decide to organise a funeral and the bones are found later on?
- Then we have to exhume an already-buried body so it can be made complete.”

How many times can you bury a relative? I had never dreamt of such a question. I have no reference point for this world of the dead and certainly not this one, of violent deaths, executions and torture and the traces all this leaves on anonymous bones spread out on body bags, or in the memory of families living in the hope of finding their loved ones.

“The bodies here were practically complete”, Senem says, pointing out white body bags lined up on the ground from the most recently discovered mass grave. “These 22 bodies were not all mixed up together, they were laid out carefully in the grave.” The exhumation took five days, which is a lot, “for such a small mass grave”, she explains. “It meant we could take all the necessary precautions so I know that we will only need one DNA sample for each body, which is also better for the families.” In her voice, you can hear her pride in a mission accomplished, a job well done. In fact, she says how much it annoys her when an exhumation is done any which how, by untrained people. It means an increased time spent in examination and analysis and a longer wait for families just because people had wanted to rush the process of getting the bodies out of the earth.

“Identification is like the full stop that a family can put at the end of a 15-year-long sentence”, she says. All the more reason, if possible, to not replace it with an ellipsis.

“I know all about the waiting, she adds. Before coming to Šejkovaća, I worked for a team collecting blood samples.”

Her voice has changed, as if the official presentation is henceforth over. She tells me back then, when she began, she was just looking for a job, not a vocation. It was in this area that you could find the work, in this search for the missing. As a result, Senem spent four years travelling across Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Croatia and Sweden, looking for relatives scattered across Europe by the war. At 21, she found herself on the frontline of dealing with bereaved families. I ask her what it was like and she replies with an anecdote.

“One day, I had to question a woman who had lost her husband and six sons. Her DNA could have enabled the identification of seven people. Seven people, that is huge. I explained why myself and a colleague had come. The woman remained prostrate and mute for three hours. We couldn’t do anything for her.”

When, in 2005, the then-coroner at Šejkovaća suggested she become his assistant, Senem did not hesitate. It was easier than listening to the families. She tells me that she prefers conversing with bones. She obtained a grant permitting her to complete her training in England at the University of Central Lancaster and which made her, in 2008, the first qualified forensic anthropologist in her country. She was very quickly appointed director of the centre.

“I am good here, she says. I would never have imagined myself doing this job but it has become a passion. As a kid, I wanted to be an archaeologist. In a sense, it’s what I have ended up doing.”

Around us, the hangar is silent, the light has begun to penetrate through the windows, the fog must have cleared outside. I imagine Senem as a little girl, dreaming of archaeology. She was 12 when the war exploded. She never left her home, apart from two months in 1992 spent with her mother and 10-year old brother in Croatia, near Split. Worried for his family, her father had sent them there. “It was nice, we swam all day long, Senem says. In the July, we were told we either had to return to Bosnia or leave for another country. They suggested Finland, Denmark or the US to us. My father came to get us and we returned to Novi Travnik, to our home. The next day, it erupted. It was hell for four years.”

Standing amidst the rows of trolleys, she tells me about the years of war in Novi Travnik, split into two neighbourhoods, one Bosnian and one Croatian, who battled each other for four years. Her family, Bosnians who were settled in the Croatian part, watched the fighting for weeks before accepting that they had to flee to the other side of town.

“One day, some of my father’s former Croatian students came to tell us that they could no longer protect us. We had to leave our house.”

What stuck in her memory the most from those years was the birth of her little sister. It made her so angry that she refused to speak to her mother for two weeks.

“I was mortified! I was 14 years old, we were in a war with barely enough to eat and here they were having a baby!” She bursts into laughter, saying it is all fine now and that she adores her sister, who she lives with, at their mother’s home. Senem is single and has no children, a consequence, perhaps, of this complicated work, she says. She puts her own memories aside when she works but sometimes they surge forth unprompted, like the week before, when she had examined the body of an adolescent. She thought about the fear that he must have felt at the moment of death, facing his would-be executors in the middle of the forest.

“I was thinking about that and my own fears came up. You think you are strong, that it won’t get to you, but it’s not true.” Once, driving alone to Banja Luka to see a friend, Senem saw a cat that had been hit by a car on the road. She burst into tears, had to stop and couldn’t calm down for what felt like an age. When she got to her destination, her friend had wanted to reassure her, having experienced the same thing, working as well with the missing. She had been the one who had accompanied Senem to see the woman who had lost seven people and could not utter a word.

“You just snap”, Senem tells me.

The sound of a machine comes from outside the building. “It’s Zlatan starting his day”, explains Senem. A man is getting busy with a hosepipe and a pressure washer. He is wearing a plastic apron on his clothes with the logo ICMP, the International Commission on Missing Persons. This is the international body, created by Bill Clinton in 1996, which undertakes research work on the missing in Bosnia in collaboration with the country’s authorities. It is also Senem’s employer.

Zlatan’s work consists of washing exhumed bodies, cleaning off the earth that sticks to their bones and clothes. He opens the body bag, deposits its contents into a large metal basket installed under a large awning in front of the hangar, then turns on the pressure washer. The machine’s hum fills the air, the water spurts against the metal edges of the wire container, pours from the grating at the bottom and streams onto the tiles of the floor, all mixed up with the black earth. Under the jet, the dark form scrunched into a ball opens out, the colours become visible and a blue wool jumper appears. Fine roots are woven through the knit, impossible to be removed without damaging the garment. The 22 bodies were buried in a forest, placed into a natural cavity on their backs, eyes towards the sky, several layers deep and covered in stones and large branches which took root over time.

Senem sees a respect for the dead in this configuration, “good intentions”, she explains, concluding that the gravediggers could not have been the killers.

“You don’t see this kind of attention to detail for the dead when you have murdered them. They are tossed in, not lined up like this. Bodies are not always buried immediately, although when a body decomposes it smells bad and is hard to bear. Why would you go to so much trouble when you’ve just killed someone? Nobody does that.”

Zlatan carefully lays out the sweater, places it on a drying rack, next to a pair of torn black underpants and white shoes. The clothes seem more human than the bones. They have been arranged on the large sheet of brown paper, on the ground on a body bag, a second one. A young woman is climbing a stepladder, holding a small camera in order to photograph them. She is called Bejsa, she is Senem’s assistant. Zlatan takes a break, pulls out a plastic chair to sit and lights a cigarette. Senem gets one out as well. Her cigarettes are long and slender. She keeps them in the pocket of her black leather jacket. She offers me one. I don’t smoke.

“More than anything, the mass graves that we find today, are largely down to confessions. It doesn’t happen often though, she says, as she takes a drag on her cigarette. We have been able to exhume these bodies because a man confessed to a policeman that he used to have coffee with. One day, the man told him about the mass grave and gave him the names of the people who had buried the bodies. The day after, he committed suicide. The policeman thinks that he had nothing to do with these particular deaths but probably had other crimes on his conscience. It seemed his daughter had big problems with drugs and alcohol.”

This often happens, a personal drama prompts people to talk. Senem remembers a war criminal who came forward to confess after his daughter’s suicide, another who started talking after his wife and children were killed in a car crash.

“Something haunts them. In a sense, they need to redeem themselves.”

Zlatan gets up after his fag, Senem stubs her one out. We go into the hangar again and she takes me to the examination room, filled with tables covered in brown paper. This is where the bodies come after they have been washed, for a detailed analysis in which each measurement, each fracture and each distinctive mark is noted. On the walls and windows, hang diagrams of skeletons, tables indicating the size of a femur according to age range. On one of the tables, pieces of skull have been glued back together. Senem takes out an A4 sheet, the form to be filled in for each case, designated by a code made up of letters and numbers referring to the exhumation site and the order in which the body came out of the mass grave. For Senem, replacing that code with a name is a relief, giving her “great personal satisfaction”. She talks about an adolescent of 16, whose body she handled. For years the mother had gone around each mass grave opened in her region, in the hope of locating him. “She was searching for peace and now, at last, she will find it.”

I ask, in her opinion, how much longer her work will continue, where is the full stop that will complete her own work? When everyone is found and identified? Senem sighs, I can hear the tiredness in her voice when replies.

“DNA is a powerful tool but it is not the answer to everything. At this time, we have 450 cases. For 72 of them, the process has been completed and we can bury the bodies. For a further 104, we have an identity but we are now waiting for new pieces of bone from their bodies. Of the 274 remaining, we have cases where we know that we will never be able to identify their bones. They have been too damaged by time, bad weather and animals. And in each of the mass graves opened, we have bodies that we cannot find any matches for in our database, because either all the relatives died during the war or they haven't given a blood sample. For the time being, we are keeping them all here. But for how long, I don't know. And then you have the errors.”

The errors?

“Yes, in the beginning, just after the war, when the mass graves were opened, the families managed things on their own. They would identify bodies by clothes or personal effects and for instance, while we generally know the site of opened graves, we don't know the number of bodies exhumed. Mistakes were made. We realised this with the DNA samples requested by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The justice system required scientific proof of the identity of the dead – but clearly it was also proof that a deceased belonged to this or that community and therefore useful information in their investigations on crimes against humanity. And so today, it can happen that the database gives you a match for a body that has just recently been exhumed, although the family has buried another body many years before. It's very difficult for the family but we must put right any errors that have been committed.”

My question earlier about when her mission might end suddenly seems very naïve, Senem decides to answer it all the same. She does explain, concerned, that it is a 'completely personal' opinion and not to be confused with any official positions that her employer or authorities might take.

“Honestly, as time has gone by, I have taken the view that the objective of having everything identified doesn't make sense. The NGOs, the authorities, the ICMP, they all have good intentions but sometimes all we do is cause pain to families when we request a new sample from them or because we have located a new piece of bone...We could come up with something else. It could be an ossuary, a memorial at the site of each mass grave with a list of people killed there, so that families could have a place to gather. Because what happens in five years? There will still be families searching and hangars filled with bodies impossible to identify. If we cannot satisfy the families or the justice system, what are we doing all this work for?”

But who would take on the task of telling families that the search would be drawing to a close? Fifteen years after the end of the war, the question is still too sensitive a one to answer.

“Come, I will introduce you to my colleagues, Ajša and Asmir. They are both case managers. They are the ones who manage the relationships with the families and receive them here to sign documents once identification is over.” Senem leads me outside, where the sun has fully risen and makes me squint as I exit the hangar to go the prefabricated building where Ajša and Asmir work. I turn back to look at the white building, its details previously hidden by the fog at my arrival: the corrugated iron roof, the rust on the door and the large windows. Opposite, stand the prefab, the dog kennel and the hut for the police to guard the site. “A cigarette first”, Senem says. She gets out a plastic chair from the entrance and lights her cigarette. I don’t know it yet but I too will become part of this place.