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Vincent Czyz

## The Nameless Saint

It was the hour when the lamplighter, toting a ladder over his shoulder, made his tedious rounds; when workers slogged through the streets as though souls on their way to purgatory; when bones turning to dust in graveyards unexpectedly shifted like a heap of logs burning on the grate. This was not the quarter of Samirska lit by theaters and cafes, cabarets and fine restaurants—a quarter smiling like a crescent moon in the dusk—here the restaurants had bare wooden floors and for a *drima* offered a bowl of cabbage soup or, for a few more, greasy stew and

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a slice of black village bread. Here, mounted gendarmes patrolled the streets in pairs or not at all.

A woman leaned out of a narrow window and called for her child.

At the bar of the Blind Beggar, Brosnik Yelenich was trying to decide how likely it was that a man sitting at a corner table was his father. The tavern was smoky and the light poor, but the man looked about the right age. His hair was blond, as his father's had been, and he had the slim build Brosnik remembered.

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He hadn't seen Vanya Yelenich since he was 10.

Brosnik didn't have his father's height, but he was broad-shouldered, with short, muscular limbs that brought to mind a sturdy animal—an ox or a ram.

His conversations tended to begin and end with his good-for-nothing father—where Vanya Yelenich might have gotten to, how he managed to pay for his drinks, how hard he (Brosnik) was going to hit him when he found him, the questions he was going to put to his father while he sat, dazed, on a grimy floor or cold cobblestones.

*Do you know how many floors Yalana Yelenich had to scrub to support us?*

*Do you know how tired she was after a day that lasted 16 hours?*

*Do you know how years went by and still she believed that you'd show up one day and on that day, she would have the pleasure of forgiving you in front of her son no matter how much you didn't deserve it?*

"Revenge is a bitter drink, Brosnik Yelenich," his mother warned. "It will burn a hole in you faster than the strongest *ambruca*. Take pity on your father and empty your cup."

The man who looked like his father was glaring back at him. The other man at the table, his black beard untrimmed and coarse, his head oversized and shaggy (it could have belonged to a steppe buffalo if only there were a pair of horns), was the one Brosnik would have to worry about.

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Shrugging, Brosnik drank his beer. He'd been in countless fights in a dozen towns and cities and learned the vulnerable places: to render a man dizzy or unconscious, the punch should land just below his cheekbone or in the temple; to take the wind out of him, under the heart, in the solar plexus, the liver, or a kidney; merely to punish him, in the nose or ears.

Although he was only 20, he'd already been dishonorably discharged from the army after an argument had come to blows, and the men had had to revive their sergeant. He'd lost his job as a printer's apprentice in Brezhla for falling asleep behind the binding machine. He'd quit a butcher's shop in Tatavnia because he couldn't stand the stink of congealing pools of blood and the buckets of offal he was expected to carry. He'd worked the docks in two port cities, but the sea spits out such dregs, the sailors were so swift with their blades and the stevedores so handy with sharp words and their steel hooks, he probably wouldn't have lived out the year had he stayed.

Whenever possible, he traveled by train. Only then, watching the countryside go by through a window like a moving painting in a frame, listening to the rhythmic clicking of the wheels on the track, rocking with the wagon while he gazed dreamily out a window (ignoring the men complaining the rumbling gave them a headache), only then did he feel at peace.

"You were on too many trains as a boy," Yalana Yelenich said. "You slept on them too often while I chased after your father. It's my fault your soul is never at rest even when you're sleeping. I shouldn't have taken you with me, but I'd hoped Vanya Yelenich would come to his senses when he saw me with his blond-haired son and sometimes—may God forgive me—sometimes I needed the company even if you were only a child."

The man who put a friendly hand on Brosnik's back was short and spindly, his skin swarthy, his black mustache drooping. He wore boots with upturned tips, baggy shalwars and a colorful vest over his shirt. He was probably Tazta or maybe a Kurg who didn't observe the Muslim proscription of alcohol.

"Another beer, my friend?"

Brosnik didn't trust Taztas or Kurgs, but he shrugged. "Why not?"

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“Gebzen Grastinyeke of Zamoya.” He reached for his hat, but maybe because he’d been drinking, it fell.

Brosnik snatched the fur cap before it could land on the muddy, beer-soaked floor and handed it back.

“What do you expect for your beer, Gebzen Grastinyeke?”

Gebzen looked at the two men sitting in their dim corner and pointed. “There’s going to be trouble, I think.” The teeth in his smile were sharp. He was small, but Taztas were never without their knives and knew better than sailors how to skin an enemy. “Just a friendly warning.”

“I can handle them without paying for your blade.” Brosnik looked again. Could the blond one be his father?

Gebzen pointed at the men again and laughed loudly. “We’ll see.” He began backing away. “The big one’s getting up now.”

Brosnik looked at the shaggy man, at his leather vest worn to holes in places, at his bloodshot eyes.

“What’s this habit you have of staring?”

“Why don’t you go keep your *ambruca* company? Unless you can drink and talk at the same time, I won’t have to listen to you.”

His black eyebrows, as tangled as overgrown bracken, lowered. He brought his huge face closer to Brosnik’s. “I don’t like the way you’re looking at my friend.”

Brosnik tightened his grip on his beer mug. “Bad enough I have to listen to you, your stink is probably left over from the hole you slid out of when you were born.”

Gebzen Grastinyeke and another Tazta were between the two men even before Brosnik had finished uttering his insult.

“Gentlemen! Let the fight be fair, let no one interfere. Two *kroshten* on the boy! Tavern-keep! You’re the treasurer here. Ten percent to the house!”

“Ten percent plus any damage to the house!”

Chairs scraped noisily, voices rose suddenly like birds startled into flight, tables were shoved aside, and someone answered Gebzen’s bet: “Drugo has a head like a block of wood, he never goes down! Five *kroshten* on Drugo Luzja!”

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Coins clanged and glittered on the bar. The tavern-keep swept them into a pile, busily scratched names and amounts onto a bit of paper.

Brosnick bet two *kroshten*—all the money he had—on himself and began rolling his head to loosen his neck (better the head doesn't resist when caught by a punch).

Drugo Luzja didn't circle like most opponents, didn't look for a weakness or an opening, he lumbered in as though he were a sliding mountain slope. Brosnik avoided the bovine head, put shoulder, back, and hips into a right that landed between the flaps of Drugo Luzja's vest. The air came out of him like a musket ball. Stepping to the side, Brosnik planted a left hook in a kidney. Drugo Luzja took two punches to his unprotected face, which straightened him up, and two more under the rib cage.

He fell to his hands and knees.

Brosnik kicked him under an eye.

Wild screams of elation and strident cries of despair met and flattened each other out like colliding waves.

Brosnik's boot thumped into ribs and the fallen man groaned.

"He's finished." Brosnik pushed on his opponent with a heel. Drugo fell over on his side and moaned.

The tavern-keep, who was paid no matter the outcome and so was likely to be the only disinterested observer, nodded. "No reason to thrash him like a dog. Winners step up to the bar!"

Shouts rattled the plank walls, glasses jiggled on tables pounded by fists, hands slapped Brosnik on the back, and gap-toothed smiles lined the way to the bar.

The hand on his shoulder was Gebzen Grastinyeke's.

"What made you so sure I would win?"

"I put my hand on your back to see if you were as solid as you looked—you're like a pile of stones. When I pushed my hat off my head, I saw you weren't drunk, that you have quick reflexes. You have scars on your hands, so you're used to fighting, but only one on your face—you usually win. Your opponent was big, but he's drunk and clumsy as a steppe buffalo. There's nothing swift in his

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muscles. The look in his eye is dull—he fights out of boredom. But you ... you're seething, you have whitewater in your veins." Gebzen shrugged. "And, of course, there's gambler's instinct."

"Where's my beer?"

"Come with us to Zamoya!" Bedru Albiye said. "It's the beginning of the Festival of the Fourteen Clans, gaming wherever you turn. And the plum brandy the Gypsies distill is sweeter than any wine or *ambruca*. Only the Gypsy women, who will give you nothing more than a sly glance, are sweeter."

Brosnik shrugged. "I have work here in Samirska, in the stables."

"You're shoveling manure!" Gebzen laughed. "And how much do you earn in a month? Four? Five *kroshten*? My friend, come to Zamoya. You'll come back here with your pockets sagging with *kroshten*, and then you can load wheelbarrows of shit to your heart's content."

Brosnik finally got a good look at the blond man as he helped Drugo Luzja to his feet; he wasn't Vanya Yelenich.

**B**edru Albiye and Gebzen Grastinyek took turns sharing a horse with Brosnik Yelenich. The Taztas were like spiders in the saddle, somehow stuck to it without clinging, seeming never to tire. They even smelled like their horses.

Bounced up and down all day, Brosnik's bones ached, his haunches went numb, and the Taztas laughed at him in the morning when he said, "I'll walk, I'll catch up or get on the train at one of these stations. I'd rather fight two Drugo Luzjas than get back on a horse."

"Be thankful it's spring and the weather's warm. In Zamoya, the shadows of the Kaldovians are always premonitions of evening, and in winter, the cold settles in and even your dreams shiver."

Brosnik thought of Yalana Yelenich waiting for his father these 10 years, how her waist had thickened and disappeared, a Penelope without any suitors other than the janitor of the building, a consumptive drunk who had two teeth less after an argument with Brosnik—two teeth he rattled in a cup he carried with him up and down the

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stairs as a reminder of his poor judgment. Her samovar was always lit, and no matter how bitter the tea, she diluted it with forgiveness, dissolved prayer like sugar cubes, held the glass in hands as rough and cracked as old shoe leather but red and swollen as leather never is. Her knees had become bony knots, permanently darkened beyond any scrubbing. She fell to them naturally now as though a carpenter had made her to fold up and be put away under a sink or in a closet.

When they got to Zamoya, there were no Gypsies other than the owner of Zabalva's Tavern and two of her cousins. Brosnik had never seen a head of hair like Zabalva's, dark waves that could have been woven into sail rigging, that would have gleamed blue-black on the open sea, an abundance of hair like a strip of curdled night. Her eyebrows pointed haughtily upward and danced to their own music; her bracelets jingled with coins and charms; her many-layered skirts were lifted often to expose legs as firm and smooth as polished pine, promising equally muscular haunches. When she bent to wipe down a table, her breasts looked as though they would tumble impudently out of her blouse.

"Don't stare, Brosnick Yelenich. Zabalva will let anyone court her, but she gives herself to no one. Have some cabbage soup, drink some *ambruca*, take the stiffness out of your joints. The Gypsy caravans will be here soon enough."

Dark skin glistening with sweat, Zabalva brought *ambruca* and bowls, poured with a dazzling smile and was gone with a twirl of her skirts.

"My friend, the first drink in Zamoya is always to the dead." The Taztas held up their bowls. "May their wanderings in the underworld be at an end, may their souls be at peace."

"Unless my father is among them." Brosnik finished his bowl of *ambruca* in a gulp.

Both of the Taztas glowered at him.

"Remember, Brosnick Yelenich," Bedru said in a flat voice, "you're not in Samirska."

Brosnik held up his empty bowl. But when Zabalva returned in a chatter of dangling gold, Brosnik grabbed the ancient bottle by its cloudy neck to keep her from pouring. "I haven't seen my father in 10

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years. I sleep badly at night, I've never found work that suits me, I can't live east or west of the Kaldovians."

Zabalva reached down and scratched Brosnik under his stubbly chin as though he were a cat. "I'm a Gypsy but I don't tell fortunes or divine the whereabouts of fathers who've deserted their families. When the caravans come, don't go there either. They'll spread pretty lies at your feet, like carpets braided from false hopes and gaudy thread. They'll tell fantastic stories because they'll want to distract you from what they can't heal. And because they are always happy to take money from a *Gadjo*. But among the Taztas ... once there were Taztas who could read your face, your scars were as good as landmarks to them, they could whisper to your heart in its own monotonous language ... they're all gone now except for Ananatalya Nodravna. She's sitting over there smoking her pipe."

Brosnik thanked Zabalva for her advice and then lifted a bowl to the new friends who refused to let him pay.

"Go." Gebzen shooed him with a hand. "See what Ananatalya Nodravna has to say. But be respectful. She's a witch and her spells are strong."

Brosnik introduced himself to a grandmotherly woman whose hands rested on the table as though they were too heavy to carry. Her fingers, Brosnik noticed were nearly as thick as his own. A pipe between her teeth, she smiled at him, slitting her small eyes. Her face was dark, its folds too deep to call wrinkles.

"My mother insists my soul is spinning like a mad dervish, that it has no sense of direction."

Ananatalya Nodravna sent a cloud of pale blue smoke toward the ceiling. "In Tazta *soul* is always she. Language remembers the soul is a woman, but men forget. She's your mistress, and you must learn to understand her." Ananatalya Nodravna put down her pipe and placed four tall cards on the table. "Pick one."

Brosnik Yelenich was drawn first by the perfection of the circle, next by the elegance of the flat pyramid, then by the strength and fort-like quality of the square, finally by the beauty of the five-pointed star.

"I can't."

"Of course you can."



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“No, because then I give up the other three.”

Ananatalya Nodravna swept up her cards. “Most likely your mother is half right. Your soul has no sense of direction, and so she can’t choose one from among them, but I don’t think she’s whirling or restless, it’s because she’s blurry.”

“I don’t understand.”

Ananatalya Nodravna raised an index finger with the tip missing. “Every soul is as recognizable as a face, but yours is like smoke trapped under a jar.

“The Gypsies will tell you the soul has a face that belongs to the woman you’ll fall in love with, but that’s just the sort of romance they like to sell. In fact your face will age according to how well you get along with your soul—quickly and badly when you don’t, well and handsomely when you do. Yes, graying and old you can look better than you did as a youth if you’re in harmony with your body’s mistress.”

“And what’s to be done about it?”

Ananatalya Nodravna shrugged. “Some answers, Brosnik Yel-nich, you’ll have to find on your own.”

“What about my father? I’ve been looking for him for years.”

“Do you have anything that was his?”

Brosnik took off his cross, a cheap one made of nickel. “This wasn’t his, but he wears one exactly like it.”

Reaching for the cross, her stub of a finger looked as though it were begging back its missing piece. “Tomorrow, I’ll tell you something that will help you find your father.”

**T**he Gypsies came into the cobblestone square early the next morning in caravans with lanterns swinging from them. Some were covered by canvas, some had wooden roofs with carved eaves and diamond-shaped windows, all of them were painted red as background for twisting vines bristling with flowers of all sizes (colorful flames that warmed only the eye). The caravans made it seem as though spring were being trundled in on spoked, wooden wheels. Open carts followed close behind, then Gypsy women on foot, the Gypsy children, and last of all the Gypsy dogs, including a blue-eyed

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wolfhound who made a ruckus by dragging tin cans that had been tied to his tail.

Still half asleep, looking out on a hazy morning, Brosnik saw a girl of 16 or 17 whose head was bent with fatigue or maybe grief, who walked as though she had nowhere to go.

Downstairs, he found Bedru Albiye and Gebzen Grastinyeke already waiting for him.

“Look Brosnik Yelenich! They’ve come!”

Brosnik watched from the doorway.

“I know the one your eye follows. Remember, my friend, these are Gypsy girls. At 12 or 13 they’re already brides. She’s married to a man with white hair, a fiddler. She sings while he plays. She’ll bear him children and sing all her life until he’s dead before she’s even beyond her child-bearing years, and then she’ll secretly take someone into her bed, probably a boy, until she can’t hold his interest anymore.”

Her black eyes, the way her cheekbones undercut them, and, in morning light settling like mist, the curved seam of her lips, were like letters that might have formed a word, except that they were as indecipherable as the shape of a stone. He turned away from the procession, his ears ringing as though he’d run into a doorjamb.

Most of the shops closed down when the Gypsies arrived—the coppersmith and the tinsmith, the blacksmith, the shoemaker and the tailor, the carpenter and the basket weaver in particular, not because the owners wanted to gamble, but because the Gypsies always brought their own craftsmen and always undersold them. Taztas were already heading toward the caravans carrying damaged pots, broken tools, unmended furniture. In the cities, shopkeepers tried to stunt the competition by insisting it was a Gypsy who forged the nails with which Christ had been hammered to the cross. But Taztas had only the vaguest notion of who Christ might have been, considered

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him of no more account than rumors of unicorns or griffins, were sure that, if his flesh had been pierced by Gypsy nails, the nails had been, however unfortunately put to use, of fine quality that contradicted their modest price.

The games began almost immediately—cards, dice and backgammon on boards and tables set out by the Gypsies. Traditional events in riding, wrestling, knife-throwing, and archery were held outside of town. Centuries before, when the Tazta had ruled a small empire, a few Gypsy bands had gotten the idea of timing visits to coincide with these spring competitions, and the Tazta thrived on the carnival mood the Gypsies conjured with their music and dancing.

Brosnik had gotten the last empty room in Zamoya, which explained the tents that had sprung up like enormous overnight blooms on the outskirts of town. Fighting took place at night behind Rosto's Tavern. Only the men were allowed to compete, only men were allowed to watch. Brosnik saw herders with sheepskin vests, tall men who looked as impossible to subdue as the mountain crags among which they lived. "They're Azaks, they never get tired," Gebzen whispered. "They're used to the thin air of the mountains, their lungs are overfed down here." Shirtless Albanians in white breeches and orange sashes, their bodies all muscle and bone, stood in a circle, laughing and talking. "Thin but fast, very fast!" Most imposing were nomads wearing shalwars, red sashes, red turbans and jackets decorated with braids. Tall, like the Azaks, they had square shoulders, thick mustaches, cheekbones sharp as table corners, and were so alike they could all have been brothers. "Fierce fighters, some of them would rather die than give up."

Bedru held out something shiny to him. "Your cross. Ananatalya Nodravna thought you might want it for luck."

Brosnik took the cross while Gebzen's fingers roughly massaged his neck.

"There are rules, Brosnik Yelenich—we don't collect our money if we break them. No kicks are allowed, no blows below the navel, and an opponent who falls has to be given the chance to get up."

Brosnik stripped off his shirt like the other fighters (the nickel cross flashed in his hair like a coin in sunburned grass) and waited

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while lots were drawn to decide the matches. The onlookers formed a ring around the fighters, and boys held out lanterns on poles. Brosnik trembled from the chill night air, from fear mingling with his blood.

His first opponent, a drunken Slav with an enormous belly, seemed surprised when Brosnik hammered home a right hook that made him stagger back a few steps. He was more surprised when a trio of punches snapped his head from one side to the other and cracked a bone so loudly even the men watching moaned. The big Slav sat in the grass as though he were a child playing with dolls. Blood poured from his nose, which was grotesquely crooked and already swelling hideously. He screamed when three men who'd seen many such injuries held him down, and one of them pushed the bone back somewhere near where it belonged.

Gebzen leaned over his shoulder. "Six *kroshten* for the big Slav!"

Brosnik's second fight was a Gypsy with silver in his mustache and not a few missing teeth.

"Be careful," Gebzen warned. "They call him the Old Mongoose because you can throw a handful of sand at him and still miss!"

Brosnik's first punch cut nothing but air. A jab stung him under the eye in return, and he felt the little cross bounce against his chest. He swung again, but again the Gypsy slipped the blow, this time landing a hook to the ribs. Brosnik had never seen anyone move the way he moved; he ducked, leaned away from punches, his torso rolled on his hips as though his bones were rubber, and all the time he peppered Brosnik with counterpunches. His right eye almost swollen shut, Brosnik had only managed to graze the Old Mongoose a couple of times.

He was going to lose.

Thinking this, he got hit again. Enraged, Brosnik charged and hurled his fists, but the more experienced fighter danced around him, taunting him with a gap-toothed smile. As long as he followed that jeering mouth, Brosnik knew the fight would belong to the Old Mongoose.

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Lowering his eyes to the Gypsy's chest, just below the sternum, Brosnik began to aim his punches there. His left slid off sweaty skin, but his right fist thudded into ribs. His opponent shuffled out of range again, his smile probably gone now although Brosnik didn't know: he refused to so much as glance at that crenellated lure. Eyes fixed on a chest steely with gray hair, he pretended to throw a jab. When the Old Mongoose rolled away from it, Brosnik hit him in the kidney. The Gypsy was wheezing now. Brosnik threw a flurry of punches: some missed completely, one or two hit shoulders, but two landed solidly, and the Old Mongoose went down. Brosnik cocked a leg, but he heard the Taztas screaming "No kicks! *No-oh* kicks!"

When his opponent got to his feet, Brosnik strode forward with his hands at his waist. He got hit as he'd expected, but he barely felt the jab he took in order to land another kidney blow and then a hook to the head. The Gypsy went down again, and this time he began to cough. Blood speckled the hair on his chest, and the other Gypsies signaled the fight was over.

"You are stubborn like all the Slavs, Brosnik Yelenich, you outlasted him!"

Leading him across the cobblestone square, Bedru and Gebzen gave him 10 *kroshten*—more money than he'd ever held in his hands.

Zabalva's Tavern was smoky and hot, there were Gypsies dancing and singing, playing fiddles, *zurlas* and lutes, their shirts open, chests sweaty, jewelry trembling and shimmering, the long hair of the women spraying like seawater against rock or swaying in braids. The Tazta women were hardly less colorful in their red kerchiefs, their bright vests and long skirts embroidered with flowers. They clapped and sang although they didn't understand the words, jumped out of their seats and chose dancing partners from a crowd of Tazta men in pantaloons, tasseled sashes, and boots with up-curved tips.

Bedru waved to Zabalva. "Plum brandy for tonight's winner!"

Brosnik's right eye was a slit above the swelling and his lip had been split open, but there was no ice to be had that time of year. Out of his left eye he saw the Gypsy girl. The coins strung around her neck, the kerchief that covered only the back of her head announced that she was married. She raised her chin slight-

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ly, exposed a little more the curved seam of her lips but didn't avert her eyes.

Zabalva brought bowls and a bottle with bubbles in the murky brown glass, its uneven shape due either to poor workmanship or years of being passed from hand to hand.

"Ananatallya Nodravna has been waiting for you, Brosnik Yelenich."

Draining his bowl of plum brandy, he made his way to her table. She had to shout in his ear to be heard.

"Ah, look at your eye!" She put a thumb on the swelling and felt it lightly. "You have a blurry soul but a good heart. You remind me of my son. I haven't seen him for years now. You have his blue eyes, you're a handsome boy, like him. You shouldn't be set against other men behind Rosto's Tavern like a bunch of roosters."

Brosnik nodded. "What about my father?"

"In one of my dreams I was looking for a hairpin, a very old one made by Taztas. I searched through every drawer, emptied every chest and box, but I couldn't find it. I finally gave up, and it was only by accident, reaching up to adjust my hair, that I felt it. I understood then that I'd been looking for something that was there the whole time. Do you see? The pin is your father. He's here in Zamoya."

"Here? Impossible!"

"I thought so, too. I know everyone in this town and in the nearby villages, but I've never heard of Vanya Yelenich. Where did you last see your father?"

"A railway station. Ten years ago."

"Who knows where the trains took him? I'll try to dream again tonight."

When he returned to his table, Zabalva was talking with Bedru and Gebzen. Then she was gone with a glittery jingle.

Gebzen stood up and put an arm around Brosnik's neck as though in drunken camaraderie. "Someone wants to see you."

Gebzen took him through a room full of women who, wearing silk dresses that exposed their bosoms, their skin warmed by red light from candles burning in crimson holders, gazed at him expectantly; took him past the kitchen where a cook looked up like a

mouse that senses the presence of a cat; held a door open for him and motioned for him to go outside.

The Gypsy girl was standing there, her eyes like smoked glass. Her hair, which was straight and braided, was as black as soot. Her face was angular, a little bony. She didn't wear anything to brighten her lips, to shadow her eyes, to flush her cheeks. The brown of her skin was so striking he hoped the ground in which they buried him turned out to be the same color.

"The Old Mongoose is my father."

Brosnik's insides slid toward his feet. "I'm sorry—"

"He's a bastard. I hope you broke his ribs."

Brosnik nodded. "Some fathers deserve no better."

"He married me off two years ago to a man who is 46 years older than I am. He lost me in a card game. I'm 16 now and my husband's mind has gone to rot. He has to be tied to a tree at night or he wanders off, he speaks nonsense, he can't provide for me but still, I'm told, I have to honor the marriage. My mother takes my side but my father says, 'When your husband's dead, you can get a new one.'"

"And your new husband will be a Gypsy."

She nodded. "One of these nights you'll have to fight my brother. He's the way my father was 25 years ago—stronger, quicker, with fists like horse hooves."

"He's a bastard, too."

"Every year he wins here unless there's a giant like Rosto in the competition. I don't think you can beat him, but I'll promise my father that I'll be an obedient wife to my mad husband if you lose. If you win, I'll stay with you—I'll lose my home, my family, my husband in a single night." She smiled and shook her head. "But you won't win." She reached up and touched the swelling under his right eye. "It makes you more handsome, I think."

"If I lose, will you keep your word?"

"I'll stay with my husband until they bury him."

Before he could say anything else, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him. The taste of her mouth was like a pungent root.

"One other thing about my brother: he sees better out of his left eye than his right."

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She kissed him again with her spicy mouth. "Now get out of here before someone sees us."

Gebzen was waiting on the other side of the door.

"Be careful, Brosnik Yelenich. Gypsy girls are devils with pleasing faces and enticing bodies. You beat her father tonight, but Rosto is the only one who can beat her brother."

"His left eye is better than his right."

"Never trust a Gypsy!" He stroked his sparse mustache with two fingers. "Don't be offended, but I think it's better if we don't bet on you when you fight Nikusi The Smiling."

"Why do they call him that?"

"He smiles before the fight, while you're on your feet. He smiles after the fight, when you're on your back."

"Go ahead and bet."

"Didn't she tell you? He wins every year."

"I'm not fighting him for money."

"Don't be a fool Brosnik Yelenich. Rumanini doesn't want you, she wants to break her marriage to a man older than her father. If you aren't the horse who carries her across the river, she'll find another way. Probably she'll poison him. Even if you win her, she'll leave you the next day—she's a Gypsy."

Brosnik shrugged. "Make your bets."

Late in the afternoon, wrapped in a red kerchief and a Lshapeless dress, Ananatallya Nodravna found Brosnik in Zamoya's square among the Gypsy caravans, the shouts of winners and losers at the gaming tables, the smiling women whose offers of fortune-telling or trinkets he ignored.

"Your eye doesn't look so bad today." She reached up but instead of putting her thumb to the swelling, she brushed some of the hair off of his forehead. "You must be careful, the dogs behind Rosto's are vicious."

"And my father ...?"

"Talk to Vilim Tamash."

"You didn't have any dreams?"

"Vilim Tamash plays the *saz*. He had two loves ... one was an-



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other *saz*-player, who is dead. The other's gone. He betrayed them both, and now his soul is in a desolate place she can escape only when he sings. Every year his hair loses more color. In my dream, he was singing about your father."

"Where can I find him?"

"Rosto's."

Unlike Zabalva's, which had back rooms and parlors, Rosto's was a broad rectangular space, mostly empty. Brosnik recognized Vilim Tamash right away. His face was young, but his hair had paled like a heap of seasoned bones. Beneath equally faded eyebrows, he had eyes in which things seemed to have sunk or drowned.

Brosnik offered to buy him an *ambruca*, which Vilim Tamash accepted with a nod, and told him about his father.

"A great drinker you say? Blond like you, but thin like me? I never knew his name, but I met him."

"Here? He's *here*?"

Vilim picked up his *saz* and pushed back from the table. "You must listen ... from the beginning." Laying his fingers on the strings as though unknotting the laces of a wedding corset, he sang in Tazta.

Deluded by the music, deceived by Vilim's voice, Brosnik thought he was teetering on the edge of understanding the words. This was a song that inspired graveside manners in the Tazta, stirred the hairs on the backs of their necks, went before them like the lanterns they carried in funeral processions at dusk.

"The first drink is always to honor the dead ..." Vilim had switched to Slavic.

No one remembers his name, the Samirskan who rode into Zamoya on a peasant cart, the coming winter sharpening the wind to a keen edge, the wagon wheels crunching splinters of ice in the mud. A man with straw in his blond hair, on his coat, he looked as though he slept in barns. Not a *drima* in his pocket, he either moaned for his wife and son or mumbled about a pilgrimage to the monastery where he would pray on his knees before the tomb of Saint Mihayla.

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I, Brosnik realized, *am that son.*

If paint from the eyes of a saint's image could cure blindness, then maybe kissing the hand carved on the lid of the tomb, maybe inhaling the dust of the saint's bones would end his desire to drink.

The Taztas laughed at him. They said no one had a passion for *ambruca* like Mirosh the Drunk, and Mirosh had no desire to be cured.

"Who's this Mirosh?" demanded the Samirskan. "I've never been out-drunk."

"Neither has Mirosh! Not even by men who outweigh oxen!"

"Let's sit then, Mirosh and I, we'll drink until one of us can't lift another bowl. If I win, a ride to the train station and enough money for the train back to Samirska—that's all I ask."

Odds were laid heavily in favor of Mirosh to encourage bets, cheers went up as bowls were drained, bottles of *ambruca* were emptied, but neither showed any sign of passing out, throwing up, or giving in. More bets were laid on the Samirskan at lower odds—no one thought he could have made it this far—and the drinking went on while the Moon rose and the broad town square grew slippery with icy light. The breath of the Kaldovians, a mist that moves so slowly it seems drunk, smeared the Moon, shrouded judgment, lay thick and drowsy on Zamoya, and the bets—no one could have imagined it—were at even odds.

The Samirskan began to sing before he tipped back his bowl, some kind of magic converted it into blood in his veins, he was a witch it was whispered, no one could drink that much, even Mirosh looked sleepy. Gulping down another bowl, Mirosh leaned too far back in his chair, fell over and didn't get up. The foreigner had time to sing one more refrain, to claim victory, before he fell forward on the table and began to snore.

When he awoke the evening of the following day, he had a few coins in his pocket. He swore he'd drunk his last drop of *ambruca*, but he'd awakened, after all, in a tavern. With trembling hands he went downstairs and ordered another bowl of *ambruca* to taste one last time its aniseed vigor, its stinging sweetness, its poisonous warmth.

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The bowl shook in his hands, *ambruca* spilling over the rim as he drank it. Shattering the empty bowl against a wall, he ran out of the tavern.

Although Zamoya Square was covered with snow, although he'd left his coat in his room, he refused to stop running. He felt his breath cool to vapor, walked when he grew tired, ran again when he began to shiver, and so, hugging himself, made his way to the monastery.

No one thought to chase after him, and by the time curiosity set in, his tracks had been covered by snow. At last, a *saz*-player offered to ride to the monastery—

“Impossible! He'd never make it.”

“Yes, but he may have fallen along the way. Don't forget his pilgrimage. He misses his wife and child more than Samirska, more than he wants another drink of *ambruca*.”

The *shakar* saw no tracks, the Moon was utterly blotted out by swirling white as though the pale ashes of a razed city were returning to earth. After following the narrow path to the monastery, the *saz*-player tethered his horse in the courtyard and entered the old church.

He lit a candle and the flame carved features into the darkness, glossed black stone, gave life to the colors of wall paintings. The Samirskan lay on the floor beside the tomb of Saint Mihayla. His open eyelid resisted a gentle thumb.

“The first drink is always to the dead, to open a place for them ...”

Vilim Tamash stopped singing, let a few more notes of the *saz* escort the words to silence and then put his instrument down.

“You were the *shakar* who found him.”

Vilim nodded.

“Where is he now?”

“We're not Christians here in Zamoya.” Vilim shrugged. “I left him in a place he considered holy. His bones haven't been disturbed. Pilgrims come now and again. They light candles to both men. They call your father the Nameless Saint.”

Brosnik put a *kroshten* on the table. “It's not nearly enough, I know.” He stood up and left.

The square was full of clatterings on the cobbles, voices and shouts, was rife with Gypsies, men from distant tribes, the expectation of profit. In the throng, Brosnik saw a Tazta boy of

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13 or 14 leading a horse. He offered him 5 *drimas* to take him to the monastery.

On the way Brosnik was distracted by birdsong, by the scented breeze, by the porcelain sky. Passing a glade where overgrown grass and flowers with long stems topped by shaggy heads bowed to the wind, he wanted nothing more than to lie down and let the dragonflies skim over him as though he were a pond reflecting sky and clouds. He wanted to take in the day's warmth, give it back to the evening air. Lying on a crumpled bed of grass, weeds, and flowers, he wanted to taste whatever dripped from laziness. He remembered the long ride with Gebzen and Bedru, remembered how, tired and sore as he'd been, the land they'd passed through had soothed the ache in his limbs like a swig of brandy or *ambruca*.

"This land," he said, "burns with a green fire."

The boy, whom he held onto by the shoulders, said, "Shiloah gave the Taztas this country so that our souls won't lose their shape. That's why we'll never leave it."

The path to the monastery was as tortured by sharp twists and jutting stones as Christ's way to Calvary. The cupola of the church, reminiscent of an enormous egg, hovered above the trees. It was stained by bird droppings, its sheen gnawed dull by weather. Time seeped into the monastery's stone pores while dampness sweated out of them.

Brosnik stepped into the dusty gloom of the church while the boy grazed his horse in the neglected courtyard. He didn't admire the magnificently carved tomb of Saint Mihayla with its marble likeness of the priest, saw nothing of the workmanship and monkish patience that had gone into the stained glass windows, saw only the pile of bones and rags his father had become, the sparse bed of dried flowers well-wishers had tucked around him. A cheap nickel cross that matched the one Brosnik wore glinted in the heap.

"After all these years ..."

Brosnik used three fingers to trace, from forehead to sternum and shoulder to shoulder, the shape of Christ's punishment. He crouched down closer to the blond hair still rooted to the skull as though stubbornly loyal. There were no longer eyes to be respect-

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fully closed, no longer hands to be folded over the chest, no longer a chest.

He couldn't believe this was all that was left of his father.

"So," he said to the heap of bones, "you lost. But at least you fought." Brosnik nodded as though the gesture might get through to the spirit world, whereas his words settled like dust on the stone floor.

He reached toward the disintegrating rags that probably hid a beetle or two in their folds, took the chain in his fingers and gently lifted it up. The tarnished links pulled through neck vertebrae now hollow and light.

Brosnik kissed the cross, wrapped it in his fist, and left.

Sliding off the saddle in Zamoya, Brosnik paid half a *kroshten* for the ride instead of the promised five *drimas* and the boy yelped with glee.

"Where have you been, Brosnik Yelenich? You're late!" Gebzen rubbed Brosnik's shoulders vigorously to loosen them up while Bedru shouted for a match for their fighter.

"You look different tonight, Brosnik Yelenich, are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

"Nikusi The Smiling is fighting now. You should be watching."

Nikusi's arms were long and muscled like deer legs. He was taller than his father, though not as stocky. Faster, he was just as hard to hit. After his opponent, a brawny Kurg, went down from a straight right, Nikusi winked at Brosnik and snickered. Handsome in the same way Rumanini was beautiful, he somehow had managed to keep all of his teeth. Something in his grin made Brosnik believe that Rumanini and Gebzen were right: he couldn't beat Nikusi.

**N**ikusi the Smiling was his second fight the next evening. "You're the only two who haven't lost yet," Bedru said. "We'll get good odds, but we're not going to bet much."

Brosnik shrugged. "I'm not fighting for money."

"All the same, there's no point in losing it."

Just before he stepped into the circular patch of grass, trampled down and chewed up by bout after bout, Brosnik thought he saw,

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among the ring of spectators, a boy who looked like Rumanini. The boy, who wore a towering mountain herder's hat of black sheep's hide with a sharp peak, looked away from him.

Nikusi grinned as he moved in. "Even two crosses won't save you tonight."

The look in Brosnik's eyes might have recalled Jacob about to fling himself at the angel.

Lithe and quick, Nikusi landed the first punch. His fist felt as hard as a hoof, and the night quivered. Brosnik tried focusing on Nikusi's chest, the way he had with the Old Mongoose, but Nikusi had longer reach than Brosnik or his father, his jab uncoiled like a snake, and even when Brosnik thudded home a body blow, the Gypsy moved away before he could land a second.

He remembered Nikusi's right eye wasn't so good and threw his left hand often, but rarely hit his target. His own eye was swelling closed, and there was blood from a cut running into the other.

Nikusi laughed at him.

Brosnik tried gouging the left eye with his thumb, but Nikusi was too clever. His head darted too erratically. He tried butting him, but again the Gypsy knew what to expect and rolled his body, taking his head out of range—just like the Old Mongoose.

Swinging wildly for that elusive head, Brosnik planned to miss (and did), expected to get hit (the twist of his head wrenched his neck), but found Nikusi's ribs with a sweeping left hook—a blow that would have made an anvil sing. He heard a kind of sigh, the sound maybe of lungs bleeding air, and he knew Nikusi was hurt, knew in that moment that he could beat him.

He threw a right to the body, but an elbow blocked it, and Nikusi slipped to the side.

Brosnik never saw the punch that dropped him. The ground simply tilted suddenly and the stars were not where they should have been. He stayed down longer than he had to so he could think. Sweat stung both of his eyes, mingled with blood so that he tasted both.

He got to his feet, the two crosses jangling on his chest, and pretended to wobble. Nikusi sneered as he glided forward. Brosnik

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aimed a single punch with all of his weight, with shoulder and back and hip behind it, at Nikusi's throat. The Gypsy ducked at the last instant and took it on the jaw instead. The voice of the crowd surged as Nikusi staggered and fell.

Brosnik stood breathing hard, his heart rocking his frame.

Nikusi got up slowly, the smile gone. He and Brosnik each threw a great looping punch at the same time, but Nikusi was faster, his reach longer, and his fist hit its mark.

The barrage of blows that followed numbed Brosnik's face, made lights explode in his head, and this time, when he tried to get up, there were hands helping him.

Someone whispered in his ear. "The fight's over, Brosnik."

Nodding, he sank back against the arms that held him up.

**L**ight came in through a window, but it wasn't the window of Zabalva's Tavern. Brosnik had to sit up very slowly. His face was swollen; the skin felt as thick as a pumpkin shell. He could see only out of his left eye because the right one wouldn't open. Breathing was so painful he tried to do without it.

The room he was in wasn't large, but it was well cared for. Two handwoven carpets covered most of the wooden floor. Niches, which held pitchers and vases of flowers, had been gouged out of the thick walls. He remembered Bedru and Gebzen placing him in a cart and covering him with blankets, remembered the stars glaring down at him during a long bumpy ride. Ananatalya Nodravna had wiped his face with a hot, wet cloth, stitched the flesh above his eye, and spread a salve on his wound.

"Ah, you're awake." The creases in Ananatalya Nodravna's deepened to furrows when she smiled. "This was my son's room. He hasn't slept in it for years."

Did the room smell of absence? Of loneliness? Maybe it was only the odor peasant homes gave off east of the Kaldovians.

"You should take these off," Ananatalya Nodravna touched the crosses hanging from his neck. "You don't have to wear your faith like a fur cap, it'll be just as strong."

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He lifted the chains over his head and hung the crosses on a nail in the whitewashed wall.

Sliding off the bed, he stood up. His open eye couldn't focus properly, and his head throbbed mildly.

"Move slowly." Taking his arm, she led him to a door at the back of the house.

"I'll bring you tea."

The beauty of the countryside or the strength of the sun—he couldn't be sure which—made him squint. He saw hills groved with trees, fields in valleys rowed with crops, a few whitewashed houses with roofs of sunburnt tile. Mountains dwarfed the hills, their frozen peaks etching a hard, blue sky.

At first he didn't recognize the girl sitting at a table with a book in one hand and tea in the other, but when she smiled, he saw a younger, feminine version of Nikusi.

"You look awful. But cheer up—you broke two of my brother's ribs."

"What are you doing here?"

"My husband is dead, Brosnik. So you see, even though you lost, you won."

"Your family ...?"

"Disowned me as though I tried to steal from them. They put my chest on the side of the road and walked past me one by one to spit at my feet. My father said, 'If you give up your people, if you marry a *Gadjo*, Rumanini, it's almost as bad as being dead.'

"I told him I died when I married a man who could've been my grandfather. He spit at my feet, too."

"Did you ... poison him? Your husband?"

"Of course not. His spirit would never have left me in peace." She shrugged. "Maybe I would've run away. But the marriage was a corpse no one had buried. Now there's a body to go with it."

Carrying a copper tray, Ananatalya Nodravna brought more tea. Beside Brosnik's steaming bowl, she put a purse. "Gebzen and Bedru left this for you. It's the money you won, 39 *kroshten*."

"Thirty-nine!" It was more than he could have made in a year of cleaning out stables.



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“Are you sure? Thirty-nine?”

She nodded. “Will you stay?”

“Stay?”

“My son’s an army captain in Vodvisask, my daughter lives in Tatavnia. You’ve never been happy in your work, Rumanini has no family. The days here are long, sometimes they don’t get out from under the shadows of the mountains. Winter comes early, spring comes late.” She shrugged.

“My mother is still in Samirska.”

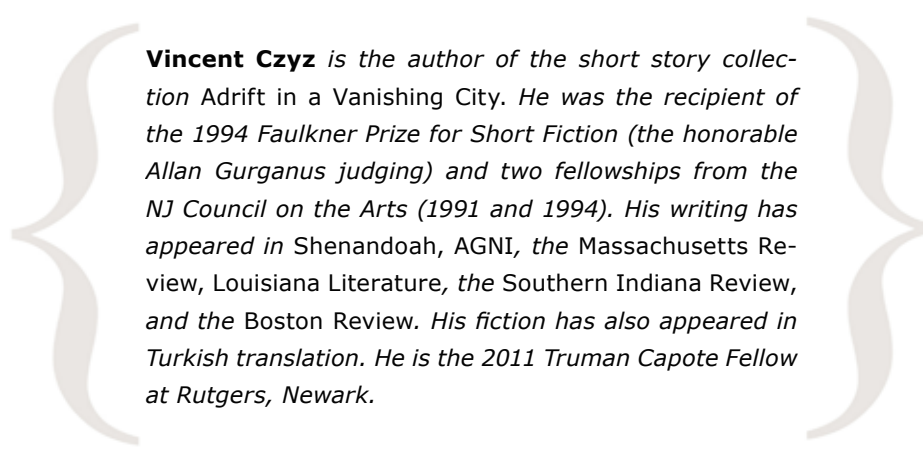
Anatalya Nodravna flicked a hand. “Bring her, too. Instead of a mother and father, you’ll have two mothers.”

Brosnik gazed through his single open eye at the distant mountain peaks and nodded absentmindedly.

Brosnik and Rumanini were married in Zamoya Square. The celebration was held in Zabalva’s Tavern (years ago, her clan had spit at her feet, too). Yalana Yelenich cried, but Mirosh, who had lost the legendary drinking contest to Vanya Yelenich a decade ago, made her laugh while her cheeks were still wet.

A fresh scar zigzagging through an eyebrow like pink lightning, Brosnik held up a bowl of *ambruca*. “To the dead ... may their wanderings be at an end.”

The Taztas who’d joined the celebration shouted drunkenly and emptied their bowls.



**Vincent Czyz** is the author of the short story collection *Adrift in a Vanishing City*. He was the recipient of the 1994 Faulkner Prize for Short Fiction (the honorable Allan Gurganus judging) and two fellowships from the NJ Council on the Arts (1991 and 1994). His writing has appeared in *Shenandoah*, *AGNI*, the *Massachusetts Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, the *Southern Indiana Review*, and the *Boston Review*. His fiction has also appeared in Turkish translation. He is the 2011 Truman Capote Fellow at Rutgers, Newark.