



blackbirds

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a short story

based on actual testimonies from
“I want to be heard”, a memory
book with stories of women
survivors of torture during
the last war in Kosova.

by **Gazmend Bërlajolli**
translated by **Robert Wilton**



*Pack up all my care and woe,
Here I go, singing low,
Bye-bye, blackbird...*



We was at home, having our tea. Then it was just 'They're going in all the houses. They're going in and they're taking all the men and the boys.' We didn't know nothing, then suddenly they was in ours. My husband went for the window, to get out. They killed him. Four of them, just spraying with machine guns. And that way they killed my little girl too. She was just too near her Dad. They took me - grabbed me by the hair. Grabbed and grabbed, dragging me along the ground. They threw me in a jeep and took me to the police station...



We were at home, and suddenly we heard the shots: bang-bang-bang-bang. We were petrified. We didn't have a clue what was happening, where it was coming from. My husband, with my girls, he hit the floor. I was still thinking someone's getting married, but the shooting just wouldn't stop. And it was getting really close to our windows...



That's where they started. In the station. After a while, when... when they was finished... after four hours they let me go. But where was I supposed to go? where could I stay? How was I supposed to go back home, which had turned into my husband's grave and my daughter's? So, I set off for Mum's. When I get there, all our women are there.

Mum sees me, and she's:

- Jesus! What's with you? What's happened?



Maybe three or four days, we all stayed together with a neighbour. He had this cellar and he stashed us there, our whole street together. After two days I've run out of nappies. I needed to get back home, get some sheets or something. It wasn't far. But they were shooting at us, from up the hill. Soon as they saw something moving, they'd shoot. But I went back, and I grabbed five or six sheets, because my girl was still little. I made it back alright, to my husband and my daughters, back in the cellar there.

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First off, I didn't want to say a thing about what had happened. Not at home, and not... in the station. What's the point of terrifying everyone else even more? But Mum goes:

- What was with all the shooting over near yours? That's when I blacked out. My brother got to me, brought me round. And I started to tell them, slowly: my husband, my little girl, how they killed them.

And we still didn't know what was going on, and then suddenly they're there at Mum's too. They tied my brother up, and dragged him out beating him up all the time. I never saw him again, didn't hear anything about him again. Not till after the war. Then they came and they started to grab us women. They... they did it to my Mum. Right in front of us, just like that.

- Hey dollies! Keep watching, keep watching,
cos you're gonna get the same!

- they were saying to us in Serbian.

They loaded us on a lorry, and then - my sister-in-law, my aunts, all of us who was there - they drove off with us; first one way, and then the other.



They'd spotted we were in that cellar. From the hill, they could see us getting in and out.

They hammered on the doors:

- Oi! Outside! Everybody out! Get out now, and scam, wherever you like, long as it's not here!

They shoved us into buses. We'd drive for a bit, and then the police would get on and check who we were, what was going on. We drove a good three or four hours.

My Mum had come out to wait for me. They were all waiting for us, like we'd come from the ends of the earth, just because we were alive. The phones were out; we didn't have any way of contacting anyone. We made ourselves comfortable at Mum's, calmed down a bit.

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At some point my sister turns up, just her on her own. Christ! They'd got into her house, and they'd killed her husband and her five year-old girl. And she, she was all scratched all over, and her face was purple, and her clothes were all torn.

And then they came for us there, busted their way in at Mum's. Mum, there was no way she was letting them take us, and she tried standing up to them. They kept punching my Mum; punching, punching. And they stabbed her with a knife - here, on her leg. Then... Christ, what they did to her. Right in front of our eyes.

Then they took us to this place, it was a... it was a school, but they'd made it into a police station. Sometimes they called it the school, sometimes they called it the station. They took us all in there. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was like this crowd of women. All there, and all over there, and all over there. All of us. Those women who tried to fight back the most, they took out knives and went for them.

I've got knife marks all over my body. All over. Until I couldn't fight them anymore. I'd see my sister, my sister-in-law, my aunt, my nieces, and I'd think: God almighty, let them kill us instead of do what they're doing to us now.

There, it was one out and one in, one out and one in, like they was insane. One calls himself Jovan, and he calls the next one Jovan, and then he calls another Jovan.



They loaded us onto lorries.

- Where are they taking us?

They took seventeen of us, all women. When they got us out again, we were at some big school building. They shoved us inside it, roughly. It was a terrible sight. All these miserable, desperate women; all bleeding, and battered.

We asked one woman:

- Where are we?

- I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry! - she was crying, she couldn't stop - They've got you too?

Anyone who got into their clutches, never came out the same again. They'd pull out our teeth with pliers, because we tried not to get intimate with them. Look what I've got here: where they cut me with a knife. Another on my leg, another on my... vagina. They stubbed out their cigarettes on our arms. They kept us there three days and three nights. They forced bottles down our throats, to make us drink *raki*. They beat us up so badly; they tortured us, they jabbed needles in our tummies, our fronts, our backs.

They forced raki down us, they forced water down us, and they stuck needles in us... Now I know what they was. I didn't then. One of the Jovans says:

- This'll make you stronger! - cos we hadn't eaten anything, hadn't drunk anything, nothing at all.

When they finished their business, they shoved bottles of water down our necks, cos otherwise we were fainting from what they'd done to us.

Then they threw us on the lorry again. A few days later. They tied our legs and hands up, and we're all covered in blood. It took two of them to sling us in the lorry, cos we were that weak we couldn't move anymore. I lost fifteen kilos.

While they was loading us in, these others came and asked:

- Where's these lot going, then?

- We're sending them to Zvecan!



After three days, they took us and they put us in another lorry. They weren't taking all of us, just ones they'd chosen. When they came for me, one of them grabs me, and another was trying to pull my baby girl out of my arms. She was screaming, because he was squeezing her so hard. They ripped her away from me. They were taking me to the lorry, but thank God this woman reached out for my daughter, and she was our neighbour, from right next door at my husband's place. I calmed down a bit, because I thought that if I got out of this alive at least I'd know where to look for my girl. And my other daughters were there too, watching as we were dragged on to the lorry. No-one dared say a word, none of us.

We'd no idea why they were splitting us up.

- We're taking them to Zvecan, because Arkan wants them. - I hear one of them say.

While we were on the road, my sister managed to smash a bottle they'd left in there. And she started to get our hands free. Me, my sister-in-law, the others there, we used the bottle to cut our hands and feet loose.

They'd put others in the lorry ahead of me; I was at the end. I was at the end with my sister, my sister-in-law, and two cousins. There was a raki bottle next to me.

- Don't break it! Or they'll do what they did before.

- You know what I'm going to do? When the lorry starts moving, they won't hear what's going on back here, and I'll break it.

So I started to kick it. Kicked it, with my foot, kick kick, until - thank God - they hit some kind of bump, and I caught the bottle properly, and I broke it. I got it over to me slowly, with my foot, and I got hold of it, and I started sawing, snick-snick-snick, up and down... the scars are still there look, cos while I was trying to saw I cut my wrists. But I got there in the end. Then I untied the others, hands and feet.

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Some of them were saying 'I won't risk it!' and some were saying 'I'm gonna risk it'. Half of us jumped. My sister first, me right after. The rest, I don't know whether they jumped or not.

Further on we saw a guy on cart with a white horse.

- What the hell's happened to you?

- We got scratched running through the thorns. –
my sister didn't want him to know.

He goes:

- Where are you off to? Jump in, I'll take you!
We got in the cart, and set off, but we were trying to cover ourselves, because we were scared the lorry might come back.

I'd forgot my own legs. Forgot they was tied. I go:

- Jump then girls!

And these women were:

- No, I won't risk it! They'll see me.

- So d'you want me to jump first? If they get me, you stay put. If I get away, you come after!

I jumped. I beckoned to my sister and sister-in-law. They jumped, one of them twenty metres after me, then the other another ten. I had to crawl, cos my legs were still tied, quite a way to see if there was others.

Then sometime we got to this village, don't know the name, on the way to Zvecan.

Then suddenly there was a gypo with a horse and cart.

We jumped on, and he asks me:

- What are you, then?

- I'm a Turk!

Then I spoke Turkish to the others, so he couldn't tell who we really were. Soon as we got back, we spread out as best we could, because there was a checkpoint nearby so we had to hide.



*Where somebody waits for me,
Sugar's sweet and so is she,
Bye-bye, blackbird...*



I'd lost all my girls, no idea where they were. They'd all gone to hide at Mum's. Soon as we were together again there:

- Mum what's happened to you?

- Nothing, love.

- But we saw you.

From then on they knew, but after that they never mention it. Like they accepted it.

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Soon as I could I went back home. Thought I'd go back once, anyway, clean myself up a bit, change my clothes, cos everything was just blood and mud. My sister was off to look for her girls.

The neighbours, the ones who'd managed to get away somehow, they'd come back too. Their places were just turned to ash. Our house they hadn't burned, thank God. Well, you could see they'd try to set light to it, but it only burned the hall.

It stank in there. The corpses was right there in the lounge where they'd been killed. I buried them myself, in the yard; two graves one beside the other. I can't thank my neighbours enough for how they helped. And my brother-in-law, I'll never forget that either. Sometime after the war we moved them to the graveyard.



Then the police came back again. Back into the lorries. Just counting the women we was fifteen hundred, then there was the old folks, and the kiddies. They picked all the young women, girls, and some a bit older. Some of those, even today we don't know what's happened to them. Some must have survived, some they killed cos they tried to get away early on; some are just missing.



Our troubles just went on: we were forced out to leave, in columns. It was the 9th of April when we joined the column. With Mum, with my sister-in-law, all the kids. What went on in that column was just horrific; we were wiping our faces with nappies, making ourselves disgusting if we could, but it didn't make any difference. Three times on that journey they got us and... The paramilitaries or whoever they were. All of them with smeared faces, smeared black, and black clothes. You couldn't tell who the hell they were. They used nicknames, short ones like fish, and lion, and wolf. As in, the wolf's gonna eat you. What that wolf did to us... I hope God makes him suffer for it, every single thing he did, and his family too. It's like they ripped us in pieces. God, the things we went through...

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Five days we walked without stopping, this way, that way, me with my little girl, in all that horror, all that blood, so hungry, desperate for water.

And when they got their hands on us:

- You've asked for this, trying to protect your honour!

- I'll do your Mummy the same way I'm doing you!

- Now I'm gonna do you from behind!

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They'd just grab you by the arm and drag you into a house. This village where they'd brought us, on a hill, it was deserted. All the houses was empty. They filled up one with us, then another, then another, then another... They nicked all the stuff they wanted, tellies, fridges, anything. There was police coming and going all the time, in cars and jeeps. Along with me there was my uncle's daughter, another cousin... loads of us knew each other.

They kept me locked in this room for twenty-two days. Twenty-two days, didn't get out once. I'd know them if I ever saw them again, but I dunno their names; they made sure not to use them around us. They had these red ribbons round their arms, black hats, black uniforms. And guns of course... they had these little machine guns.

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People had come from all different places, so they gathered in the mosque: so many men, so many women, so many kids; so many been beaten up. They carried old people on cement carts. Everything was caked in mud, so the carts couldn't hardly move.

They were getting all the men together. We thought they were gonna kill them, right there in front of us. They loaded them all onto lorries. Turns out they sent them to some prison.

Someone gave us two loaves of bread... The regular soldiers, who wouldn't do anything too bad to women and children, they gave us some food too. They gave us powdered milk - you know, to mix with water - they gave us bread, and they gave us this... it's like you squeeze it like toothpaste, onto the bread.

I had my little girl in my arms the whole time.

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- Stop! - this solder says to me.

I stopped. And my sister-in-law stopped too, a short way off with my Mum. He pulled his knife out. I just thought he was going to murder my daughter. Then he levers the star off his hat, and he uses it to pin some plastic round her so she wouldn't get wet from the rain. He fixed it tight, with the star, so the wind wouldn't blow it off. And thank God for it, because it meant I could keep my little girl warmer after that. It had come on to rain really hard just then, and I was worried she'd get sick.

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He came in the evenings, and he'd stay all night till morning, twenty-two days. Same one, same guy every night. The stuff he did to me... I don't have words for it. Horrific; terrifying. It's like you're seeing death all the time, death right in front of you, but you don't die. No clothes now, totally naked, he's beaten me everywhere so my whole body is all just bruises. At the start, I was always trying to fight him off, but then, after, I just gave up totally. I dunno how many times I'd black out in one night.

He was giving me these IV shots, and something to eat... In the evenings, he'd get on the radio to someone, to come and fix up the IV for me.



These men in tents, they stopped us three times on the way; I hope they rot in hell. Three times over, of... being back in their hands, the kicking, fists. Where they wounded us with cigarettes, or knives, we could try to wash and bandage it, but the wounds inside...

After the NATO bombing started, when it started to get really heavy, this Albanian doctor started to come and look after us. He did first aid, stitches, and he gave us some ointments to help heal the... the rectum. And he gave us pills for the shock, after we told everything that had happened. He took our names, surnames, all the details. Week after week he came to see how we were getting on, if we needed anything. It was really dangerous for him too. What he did, lots of people wouldn't have dared. He belongs in heaven for it.

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A room. A guest room. There were others, locked in other rooms. Lots of them. I heard screams, all night, all day long.

You gave in, you just had to give in to them, till God decided to bring the day to free you. Only God could hear us.

This one night, the man finishes with someone on the radio and goes out of the room and says to some others in the corridor:

- Quick, quick! - I heard it.

Then he comes back and he starts to get all his stuff together from round the room. Doesn't say a word to me. Picks up his clothes, shoes, rushes out of the room, leaves me locked in.



Then all the tanks, the jeeps, was gone... It was silent. No-one came back, no more screams from the other rooms. About then, bit before dawn, everything went silent.

Very slowly I opened the window, and I jumped out. And I started to walk, and I walked, and I walked, till I couldn't walk no more, so I stopped in this field, and hid myself and rested. I couldn't hardly breathe.

These two guys came past, and I knew them.

- What's up, are you hurt?
- Yes - I said - I'm hurt and I'm sick!
- How'd you end up here?
- Water, you got any water?



*No one here can love and
understand me,
Oh what hard-luck stories they all
hand me,
Bye-bye, blackbird...*



Ten times I tried to kill myself, afterwards. But God always warned my Mum. She'd come, and:

- Are you there?

- Yes.

- Where were you before? By the well?

Ten times I'd gone to jump in the well. What was the point of living anymore? But then... when I heard my Mum's voice, I'd go back. At night, I'd go out to the well and cry. I was filling the well with tears. I'd say to myself, tonight I'll wash it with crying and tomorrow I'll chuck myself in. Then Mum's voice would stop me.

My brother decided to close up the well. They didn't leave me on my own anymore, they kept an eye on me. Lots of times they tied me so I couldn't get out at night. In the morning I'd see they'd tied me up.



I was eight weeks in hospital. After they let me go, the day I got home, my husband comes to me. He grabs me, right in front of my daughters, and he throws me on the bed. And he starts to rip off my clothes.

- You like this, huh? Was it good with the paramilitaries? Enjoy this, do you? - do you this, do you that, he's yelling at me.

My girls, they're screaming, and crying. I was crying myself.

I wave to my eldest to go and get help to get him off me. My girls ran and got the neighbour. He came and got my husband off me.

Two months later I went for a check-up, and they say:

- Lady, you're pregnant!

- What? I want an abortion. I want this out!

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One day my brother says to Mum:

- I'm gonna get a divorce.

Mum says to him:

- You remember what you told us? About what they did to you in Smrekonica prison? When you came out, you remember how damaged your backside was? She got the same... by force, sure as hell didn't want it.

But my brother says:

- I can't take it anymore, Mum,

knowing a Serb has had my wife.

- You have to be tough, my lad! You have to look after your sisters, and your wife!

- I just can't face it! It's better if I leave her.

And Mum goes:

- You wanna hear something else, from your mother?

He says:

- What?

- You know that... even your mother, also... No! No, long as I live I won't tell you...



He'd argue:

- It's better to leave her!

And Mum would say no, you can't, how could you?

And he'd say yes, I want to.

And then Mum started up, she wanted to tell him what happened to her, but... she got stuck. She just couldn't. She starts crying, tears pouring down her face. And then... my brother understood why she'd stopped. And he goes silent for a bit. Doesn't say a word.

He buries his face in his hands. He falls down like in a faint, and he cries, and he cries, cries hard. We went to him, Mum, and us sisters, trying to calm him down. Mum hugs him, she kisses his tears.

When... eventually he got up, and he hugged all of us tight. We were all crying, just dripping with tears.

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No, he didn't leave his wife. They're getting on alright now, cos well, here we all are, I've been living with them umpteen years now. My sister too. And we're doing alright together thank God, us sisters and our sister-in-law. Just my sister though, she's unhappy still, because... her husband left her. She's got four girls. They're all with their Dad.



*Make my bed, light the light,
I'll arrive late tonight,
Bye-bye blackbird.*







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