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Big shadows in Mostar

The fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina isn't yet a member of the European Union should be filed under "things I already know" when I pull into the desolate Mostar bus station at 2 a.m. But it isn't, so I'm cursing my EU-specific digital SIM card for failing to deliver directions to my hostel as I emerge into the humid August night.

I look up from my phone to find my fellow passengers have dispersed alarmingly fast, like a magic trick performed just for me. I'm alone. I have no idea how to get where I'm going and no way to find out.

The city streets are utterly devoid of life. There is no sound, no movement. Just darkness. Stillness. Shuttered storefronts. The dimly lit domes and spires of Ottoman-era mosques. Even the river is sleeping. It would be a beautifully peaceful scene if it weren't for the panicked realization that I have royally messed up.

Roughly three hours until sunrise. Worry takes over, and my mind fast-forwards through a collage of potential actions and outcomes. Walking in circles. Hiding in shadows. Hard benches, wet grass, cold cement. Maybe some tears. Definitely some bad words.

Out of nowhere, a voice startles me: "Behöver du hjälp?" My heart leaps from my chest and scurries for the shelter of a nearby Oleander bush.

"Do you need help?" he repeats in a thick Swedish accent.

It's split-second decision time. Half of my brain tells me I'm in imminent danger of being murdered by the one other person on Earth walking around Old Town Mostar in the middle of the night, probably hunting for morons rendered useless by lack of connectivity. The other half says, Eh, probably not.

"Yeah," I hear myself say, as my heart slinks over and stuffs itself back down my throat. "I'm trying to find Hostel Nina, but my phone isn't working."

"I know that place. I'll show you the way." With that, I set off into the unfamiliar darkness with (Probably Not) Swedish Ted Bundy.

We walk for more than a mile along winding cobblestone streets, over 16th-century bridges, and past more than one bombed-out building—stark reminders of the civil war that ravaged the region just a few decades ago. We make the idle chit chat of travelers: where have you been, where are you going, where are you from. My worries slowly retreat to the shadows.

I learn he's an architecture student who's been in Mostar for three weeks studying its eclectic display of Eastern and Western influences. His favorite time to stroll and reflect is at night, when it's just him and history's silent lessons.

At last, we're standing in the driveway leading to my hostel. "Are you staying near here?" I ask.

"No, I'm at the campground across town."

"So, you walked an hour out of your way to make sure I got here okay?"

"Of course. Oro ger små saker en stor skugga. It means no worries."

Then he's gone, back into the Mostar night and the company of its ancient, inanimate residents.

It's nearly 3 a.m. when I tiptoe into my pitch-black dorm, trying desperately not to disturb my seven already-sleeping roommates. I climb into a creaking top bunk, still fully dressed and dripping with sweat. I'm so grateful to be there and not on a park bench (or murdered) that my discomfort doesn't even register. All I can think about is how different a course my night could have taken if it weren't for the kindness of a stranger and my willingness to give him the benefit of the doubt.

The next day, as I sip thick Turkish coffee under a glittering sun, I use my newly purchased eSIM for Bosnia and Herzegovina to Google "No worries" in Swedish. I smile at the literal translation of my kind Swede's parting words: "Worry often gives a small thing a big shadow."